

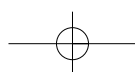
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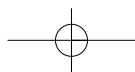
An evening mist, salted by the western sea, was gathering on the low hills – reed-spattered rises running up from the rocks then back into the gorse- and bracken-covered country – and on to the roads that joined the villages, where lamps and candles flickered behind the shutters of the grey stone houses. It was poor country – so poor, remarked the Curé, who had recently arrived from Angers, that the stones of the shore called out for God’s mercy. With the mist came sputtering rain, made invisible by the extinguished light, as it exploded like flung gravel at the windows, while stronger gusts made the shivering pine trees shed their needles on the dark, sanded earth.

Jacques Rebière listened to the sounds from outside as he looked through the window of his bedroom; for a moment, a dim moon allowed him to see clouds foaming in the darkness. The weather reminded him, often, that it was not just he, at sixteen years old, who was young, but all mankind: a species that took infant steps on the drifts and faults of the earth.

Between the ends of his dirtied fingers, Jacques held a small blade which, over the course of several days, he had whetted to surgical sharpness. He pulled a candle closer. From downstairs he could hear the sound of his father’s voice in reluctant negotiation.

The house was at the top of a narrow street that ran off the main square of Sainte Agnès. Behind it, the village ended and there were thick woods – Monsieur Rebière’s own property – where Jacques was meant to trap birds and rabbits and prevent other villagers from doing likewise. The garden had an orchard of pear and apple trees whose fruits were collected and set to keep in one of the outbuildings. Rebière’s was a house of many stores: of sheds with beaten earth underfoot and slatted wooden shelves; of brick-floored cellars with stone bins on which the cobwebs closed the access to the bottles; of barred pantry and latched larder with trays of nuts and





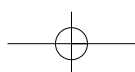
preserved fruits. The keys were on a ring in the pocket of Rebière's waistcoat. Although born no more than sixty years earlier, he was known as 'old Rebière', perhaps for the arthritic movement of his knees, when he heaved himself up from his chair and straightened the joints beneath his breeches. He preferred to do business standing up; it gave the transaction a temporary air, helping to convince the other party that bargaining time was short.

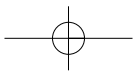
Old Rebière was a forester who worked as the agent for a landowner from Lorient. Over the years he had done some business on his own account, acquiring some parcels of land, three cottages that the heirs did not want to keep, some fields and woodland. Most of his work was no more than that of bailiff or rent collector, but he liked to try to negotiate private deals with a view to becoming a businessman in his own right. Born in the year after Waterloo, he had lived under a republic, three kings and an emperor; twice mayor of the local town, he had found it made little difference which government was in Paris, since so few edicts devolved from the distant centre to his own Breton world.

The parlour of the house had smoke-stained wooden panelling and a white stone chimneypiece decorated with the carved head of a wild boar. A small fire was smouldering in the grate as Rebière attempted to conclude his meeting with the notary who had come to see him. He never invited guests into his study but preferred to speak to them in this public room, as though he might later need witnesses to what had passed between them. His second wife sat in her accustomed chair by the door, sewing and listening. Rebière's tactic was to say as little as possible; he had found that silence, accompanied by pained inhalation, often induced nervousness in the other side. His contributions, when they were unavoidable, were delivered in a reluctant murmur, melancholy, full of weariness at a world that had obliged him to agree terms so self-wounding.

'I am not a peasant,' he told his son. 'I am not one of those men you see portrayed at the theatre in Paris, who buries his gold in a sock and never buys a bonnet for his wife. I am a businessman who understands the modern world.'

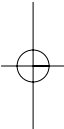
From upstairs, Jacques could still hear his father's business murmur. It was true that he was not a peasant, though his parents had been; true too, that he was not the miser of the popular imagination, though partly because the amount of gold he had to hoard was not great enough: forty years of dealing had brought him a modest





return, and perhaps, thought Jacques, this was why his father had forbidden him to study any further. From the age of thirteen, he had been set to work, looking after the properties, mending roofs and fences, clearing trees while his father travelled to Quimper and Vannes to cultivate new acquaintances.

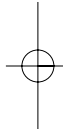
Jacques looked back to his table, not wanting to waste the light of the wax candle he had begged from Tante Mathilde in place of the dingy ox-tallow which was all his father would allow him. He took the blade and began, very carefully, to make a shallow incision in the neck of a frog he had pinned, through its splayed feet, to the untreated wood. He had never attempted the operation before and was anxious not to damage what lay beneath the green skin, moist from the saline in which he had kept it. The frog was on its front, and Jacques's blade travelled smoothly up over the top of its head and stopped between the bulging eyes. He then cut two semicircular flaps to join at the nape of the neck and pushed back the pouches of peeled skin, with their pearls of eyes. Beneath his delicate touch he could see now that there was little in the way of protection for the exposed brain. He took out a magnifying glass.

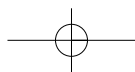


What is a frog's fury? he thought, as he gazed at the tiny thinking organ his knife had exposed. It was beautiful. What does it feel for its spawn or its mate or the flash of water over its skin? The brain of an amphibian is a poor thing, the Curé had warned him; he promised that soon he would acquire the head of a cow from the slaughterhouse, and then they would have a more instructive time. Yet Jacques was happy with his frog's brain. From the side of the table he took two copper wires attached at the other end to a brass rod that ran through a cork which was in turn used to seal a glass bottle coated inside and out with foil.

'Jacques! Jacques! It's time for dinner. Come to the table!'

It was Tante Mathilde's voice; clearly Jacques had not heard the notary depart. He set down the electrodes and blew out the candle, then crossed the landing to the top of the almost-vertical wooden staircase and groped his way down by the familiar indentations of the plaster wall. His grandmother came into the parlour carrying a tureen of soup, which she placed on the table. Rebière and his wife, known to Jacques as Tante Mathilde, were already sitting down. Rebière drummed his knife impatiently on the wood while Grand-mère ladled the soup out with her shaking hand.





‘Take a bowl out to . . .’ Rebière jerked his head in the direction of the door.

‘Wait,’ said Grand-mère. ‘There’s some rabbit, too.’

Rebière rolled his eyes with impatience as the old woman went out to the scullery again and returned with a second bowl that she handed to Jacques. He carried both dishes carefully to the door and took a lantern to light his way out into the darkness, watching his feet on the shiny cobbles of the yard. At the stable, he set down the food and pulled back the top half of the door; he peered in by the light of the flame and felt his nostrils fill with a familiar sensation.

‘Olivier? Are you there? I’ve brought dinner. There’s no bread again, but there’s soup and some rabbit. Olivier?’

There was a sudden noise from the horse, like the rumbling clatter of a laden table being overturned, as she shifted in the stall.

‘Olivier? Please. It’s raining. Where are you?’

Wary of the horse, who lashed out with her hind legs if frightened, Jacques freed the bolt of the door himself and made his way into the ripe darkness of the stable.

Sitting with his back to the wall, his legs spread wide apart on the dung-strewn ground, was his brother.

‘I’ve brought your dinner. How are you?’

Jacques squatted down next to him.

Olivier stared straight ahead, as though unaware that anyone was there. Jacques took his brother’s hand and wrapped the fingers round the edge of the soup bowl, noticing what could be smears of excrement on the nails. Olivier moved his head from side to side, thrusting it back hard against the stable wall. He muttered something Jacques could not make out and began to scrape at his inner forearm as if trying to rid himself of a bothersome insect.

Jacques took a spoonful of the soup and held it up to Olivier’s face. Gently, he prised open his lips and pushed the metal inwards. It was too dark to see how much went into his mouth and how much trickled down his tangled beard.

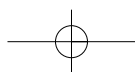
‘They want me to come, they keep telling me. But why should I go, when they know everything already?’

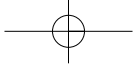
‘Who, Olivier? Who does?’

Their eyes met. Jacques felt himself summed up and dismissed from Olivier’s mental presence.

‘Are you cold? Do you want more blankets?’

Olivier became earnest. ‘Yes, yes, that’s it, you’ve got to keep warm,





you've to wrap up now the winter's coming. Look. Look at this.' He held up the frayed horse blanket beneath which he slept and examined it closely, as though he had not seen it before or had suddenly been struck by its workmanship.

Then his vigour was quenched again and his gaze became still.

Jacques took his hand. 'Listen, Olivier. It's nearly a year now that you've been in here. Do you think you could try again? Why don't you come out for a few minutes? I could help.'

'They don't want me.'

'You always say that. But perhaps they'd be happy to have you back in the house.'

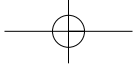
'They won't let me go.'

Jacques nodded. Olivier was clearly talking of a different 'they', and he was too frightened to contradict or to press him. He had been a child when Olivier, four years the older, started to drift away from his family; it began when, previously a lively and sociable youth, he took to passing the evenings alone in his room studying the Bible and drawing up a chart of 'astral influences'. Jacques was fascinated by the diagrams, which Olivier had done in his clever draughtsman's hand, using pens he had taken from the hôtel de ville, where he worked as a clerk.

Most of Jacques's experiences had come to him first through the descriptions of Olivier, who naturally anticipated all of them. Mathematics at school were a jumble of pointless signs, he said, that made you want to cry out; being beaten by the master's ruler on the knuckles hurt more than being kicked on the shin by the broody mare. Olivier had never been to Paris, but Vannes, he told Jacques, was so huge that you got lost the moment you let your concentration go; and it was full of women who looked at you in a strange way. When changes came to your body, Olivier said, you noticed nothing, no hairs bursting the skin, no wrench in your voice; the only difference was that you felt urgent, tense, all the time, as though about to leap a stream or jump from a high rock.

Olivier's chart of astral influences therefore looked to Jacques like another early glimpse of a universal human experience granted to him by his elder brother. Olivier had been right about everything else: in Vannes, Jacques kept himself orientated at all times, like a dog sniffing the wind; he liked mathematics, though he saw what Olivier had meant. He avoided the master's beatings.

'Where is God in this plan?' he had said, pointing with his finger.



'I see the planets and their influence and this character, here, whatever his name is. But in the Bible, it says that—'

'God is here, in your head. And here.' Olivier pointed to the chart. 'But it's a secret.'

'I don't understand,' said Jacques. 'If this is Earth here, this is Saturn, and here are the rings of Jupiter and this is the body you've discovered, the one that regulates the movements of people, then what are these lines here? Are these the souls of the dead going up to Heaven?'

'Those are the rays of influence. They emanate from space, far beyond anything we can see. These are what control you.'

'Rays?'

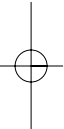
'Of course. Like rays of light, or invisible waves of sound. The universe is bombarded with them. You can't hear them. You can't see them.'

'Does everyone know about them? All grown-ups?'

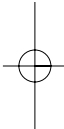
'No.'

'How do you know about them? Who told you?'

'I have been told.'



Jacques looked away. Over the weeks, he discovered that Olivier's system of cosmic laws and influences was invulnerably cogent; there was in fact something of the weary sage in his manner when he answered yet another of Jacques's immature questions about it, while its ability to adapt made it impermeable to doubt. Olivier was always right, and his rightness was in the detail. Jacques was not sure that this next phase of his education, these rays and planets into which Olivier was inducting him, was one he welcomed. He believed in what he learned at church and in what the Curé told him later in their walks through the woods and down to the sea. At least, he thought he did; he believed that he believed.



'Would you like some of the rabbit? Grand-mère cooked it.'

Jacques wanted the company of his brother but shrank from sitting in the fouled straw.

'Don't you want a bath, Olivier? Would you like to wash?'

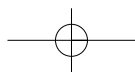
'I take my bath in the sea.'

'You haven't been to the sea for—'

'The water runs clear . . . Always clear.'

'What do you do all day, Olivier? When I go out to work for Papa?'

He felt Olivier's breath on his cheek. 'That's the trouble with the



army. No time to yourself. You're up at six, and it's stand-to at six fifteen. They've sent all my clothes back to Rennes . . . But you shouldn't stand there, that's not your place.'

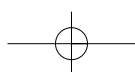
Jacques said nothing. He had the feeling that, although there was no one else in the stable, it was not to him that Olivier was addressing his remarks. He became impatient when Jacques tried to break in; he seemed frightened of displeasing the absent person by failing to pay full attention to their shared conversation.

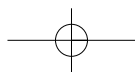
Olivier grew agitated. 'Don't stand there. That's his place. You're always in the way. Why don't you learn to do what you're told?' He stood up and grabbed a metal bucket from the ground next to the horse's stall. Jacques thought he was going to throw it, but the strength seemed to leave him again, and he dropped the bucket as he slumped back into his original position, with his back to the wall. He was silent, though his limbs were still agitated as he moved his head from side to side.

It was not, Jacques thought, that he had lost his brother; he had not woken up one day to find him gone. Rather, Olivier had stolen away, little by little, like smoke beneath the door; and it had happened so slowly that there seemed no moment at which Jacques could have said, 'He's gone.' It was still occasionally possible to talk to him and feel that something was transmitted and received, though more often Olivier's ear seemed tuned to other tones, the commandments of ancestral voices. Jacques did not know what had happened. He wanted to believe in the universe his brother described; he wanted to see the logic or the plan – to share and understand them so that he could have his confidant again: he was lonely without Olivier and he no longer had a guide to what lay ahead of him. Other people of his own age did not interest him; compared to the intimacy he had shared with Olivier, their offered friendship was useless.

'I must go back to dinner now,' he said. 'I'll come back for the plates tomorrow.'

He went to the door and picked up the lantern where he had left it on the floor because Olivier was not allowed a flame. He turned in the rain outside and bent his hand over the half-door to slide the bolt. In the light of the lantern he could just make out the shape of his brother in the darkness. He sat with his back to the wall, his legs spread wide in front of him, his head nodding expressively as he reasoned with an unseen companion. Two hens fluttered on the rafter above him. Between the flame outside and





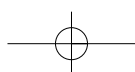
the square of darkness within, were the pinpoints of the tumbling drizzle. Beyond them, Olivier looked like a prophet from the Old Testament, his hair uncut for more than a year, his dark beard reaching almost to his chest. The piled bales of straw behind him made a ragged arch of steps, like the burial place of a minor potentate, hoping to be gathered up more easily to heaven. Two bridles dangled from a wooden post like effigies in the church of an obscure religion; and the function of such things seemed altered, thought Jacques, as though Olivier's experience had somehow reset the surroundings in the light of its own integrity.

On the other side of the stable wall, the pig grunted and moaned in its sty; Jacques turned from the door, his eyes wet, aware of something absent from his understanding of the world as he hurried back towards his father's house.

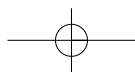
I want my brother back, he thought, as he scraped up the remains of the rabbit gravy from his plate. Tante Mathilde was sitting by the door again, intent on her sewing, while Grand-mère, the mother of Jacques's own mother, who had died of childbed fever in the week of his birth, cleared the plates from the table and took them out with heavy steps to the parlour. Beyond it, she had a small room of her own with a bed and a chair and a washstand, which Rebière allowed her in return for her unpaid services as housekeeper.

She was a person of few words in an almost silent household. Since Jacques had no memory of his mother, he could not revive her in the eyes or manner of Grand-mère; there was not so much as a drawing or daguerreotype of the first Madame Rebière, Isabelle, who had been twenty-seven years old when she died. Jacques loyally pictured her as slight, dark-haired, elegant in a white summer dress and with eyes full of laughter, though there was no reason to think she was any of these things; when he did ask Grand-mère about her she replied only that she was 'a good girl'. Jacques had somehow, from glances or words exchanged between Grand-mère and his father, gained what people called an 'impression' that she had also been moody or in some way difficult, but it was less of an impression, Jacques thought, than an uncertain glimpse.

He liked to make such distinctions, not because he was verbally precise, but because he was interested in the way things worked. An 'impression', on wax or metal, was draughtsmanship from which







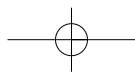
accurate images, unlimited in number, could be taken. His mother was something much vaguer, beyond even the abstract grasp of memory, yet still present, still an entity in his mind, a glimpse of a life withheld.

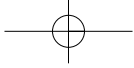
He stood up and took his plate and the empty pewter mug out to the scullery to wash. The candles in their iron sconces threw shadows up the wainscoting and onto the discoloured ceiling, which showed in stripes between the grey-painted beams. Rebière's parlour was furnished with unmatching pieces taken in part-payment from tenants who could not find their rent. There was a high-backed armchair, in which Tante Mathilde sat to catch the light from the candlesticks above the fire; a glass-fronted corner cupboard with some dusty crystal glasses, unused, reserved for a future occasion of unspecified grandeur. On the back wall, near the foot of the steep, unbanistered stairs, was a gilded mirror, whose glass was cracked, showing greenish-silver runs and shards incapable of reflecting the light of the dim candles back into the room. A framed painting in oil of an eighteenth-century nobleman of unknown family – certainly not a Rebière – gazed from the centre of the other wall on to his adopted home.

Jacques had made a chair for the table in his room, using wood he found in the stables and tools he borrowed from the joiner in Sainte Agnès. The way things worked and fitted together was a joy to him, his passion in the quiet world. The joints of his chair were glued and fixed firm; the surface of the wood lapped up the oil and polishes he worked into it; the result was no work of art, but there was a pleasing concavity to the seat and it did not squeak or rock beneath his weight.

With eagerness, he settled himself back into it, relit the candle and prepared to continue his experiment. He did not mind working at the jobs his father set him in the woods and fields because in the course of his day he had the opportunity to observe a good deal in the natural world that intrigued him. He collected birds' eggs; he knew the names of every tree and plant; he was content to spend hours alone contemplating different kinds of moss. He had been – Tante Mathilde reminded him – an inexhaustibly curious child, and although he could no longer remember the questions that had irritated her, he recognised a feeling that continued from that time: his amazement that anyone could be so lacking in curiosity as his step-mother.

He told her that the tides flowed and ebbed at the calling of the

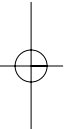




moon – a piece of information that seemed to him so exotic when he first heard it that he felt compelled to share it with everyone he knew; he described how plants used the energy of light to build new compounds and to grow; he assured her that even in deepest space all objects were in motion, following fixed laws of oddly simple mathematics.

‘And who’s going to pay for your new boots?’ said Tante Mathilde.

There was a space of two or three years in which he was able to share his enthusiasm with his elder brother before other matters occupied Olivier’s mind. Old Rebière seldom spoke to his sons. He had never been a talkative man, but after his first wife died he became almost mute with them. Five years later, he married Mathilde, a woman of almost his own age, a person of no wealth and little charm, whose own family had long resigned themselves to seeing her die single in the village where she had been born.



In Sainte Agnès, it was assumed that Rebière had hidden reasons for marrying again, and that Mathilde was expected to inherit money or would at least be set to work hard at home or in the business. Yet in the event, Rebière invited Grand-mère, his first mother-in-law, to keep house and refused to let Mathilde anywhere close to his own affairs; all he asked was that she make sure Olivier and Jacques went to the village school on time, properly dressed, and found no trouble on their way home. At night, in their shared room, the boys sometimes wondered out loud why he had married again.

‘Perhaps he was lonely,’ said Olivier.

‘He doesn’t seem lonely,’ said Jacques. ‘If he wanted company you’d think he’d talk to her.’

Olivier laughed. “‘This is not the time to talk,’” he said in imitation of his father.

“‘Perhaps next month would be more appropriate. After All Saints.’”

“‘After quarter day. When the rents are in.’”

“‘Perhaps when we’re both safely dead. It would be improper to rush it.’”

‘But perhaps he really was lonely,’ said Jacques. ‘Why else would he have done it?’

Olivier peered across the darkness at him. ‘Perhaps that’s it. Lonely.’

There was silence in the room, and Jacques could feel a question rising up in him that he fought with all his strength to batten down.

‘Olivier?’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you remember our mother?’

‘Yes . . . Not very well.’

‘Do you remember what she looked like?’

‘She was . . . pretty.’

‘Was she really pretty or do you think it was just that you loved her? Was she . . . Dark or fair? Short or tall?’ Jacques could barely speak for the jealousy he felt of Olivier; he had to drag out the word ‘loved’. He hesitated even to use the phrase ‘our mother’ because he had never known her; she was only Olivier’s mother, really. He launched the words, then lay shuddering at his audacity.

‘She was gentle. There was a feeling . . . of kindness.’

‘But I want to know about her in particular. Her voice. What did she smell of? Anything?’

‘I . . . I don’t . . . I just remember a feeling, a sense of someone. I’m sorry, Jacques. I never thought I’d have to remember – to store it up. I was only four. I feel I should have been warned.’

‘But at least you knew her. At least she touched your head. She kissed you goodnight. She held you.’

‘I’m sure she prayed for you, too. I’m sure she held you before she died.’

Perhaps she did, thought Jacques, holding up the twin electrodes; or perhaps she was too feverish to know.

Hold me before you die. Just once before you die. That was all he would have asked of her if he had been conscious at the time. Now, as Olivier travelled further into his own world, he took with him Jacques’s last chance of ever making contact with his mother’s memory.

Jacques removed the pins from the splayed feet of the frog and touched the electrodes to the part of the thigh where he could see the femoral nerve, as thick as a piece of fishing line.

‘Good God!’ he said out loud, as the creature leapt off the table and landed on the floor beside him. It was as though the frog was alive. Jacques bent down to pick it up again. His face was illuminated, even in the gloom of his bedroom, by the light of discovery.

‘This is more like it,’ said the Curé, as they left the sanded path between the pine trees and went down on to the stony beach. ‘Do you like the curlews? You see? There.’

‘Have you always been interested in animals?’ said Jacques.

‘For me,’ said the Curé, Abbé Henri, ‘the natural world is part of the love of God. But I was a naturalist even before I was a priest.’

A gust from the sea made him reach up to clamp his wide-brimmed hat down on to his head, as a smile broke over his smooth and eager face. ‘It would be a sort of blasphemy to be indifferent to such a miracle of design.’

‘You don’t know my Tante Mathilde.’

‘Of course I do. She was at mass this morning.’

Jacques bent down to the shore and picked up a stone. ‘But you don’t know what she’s like. She has no interest in anything beyond her sewing. I don’t even think she’s interested in money, or the other things you warned us about.’

‘What does she do all day, your Tante Mathilde?’

‘I don’t know. I go out to work so I don’t see her. She used to get us ready for school and cook dinner in the evening. But now Grand-mère does the cooking.’

‘But she must at least enjoy books?’

Jacques laughed. ‘Tante Mathilde? She can’t read!’

The Curé looked shocked, as though he had never heard of such a thing, though Jacques knew that most of his congregation was illiterate. Perhaps the Curé still needed time to grow used to the countryside.

‘And how did you manage with the electrical bottle I lent you?’

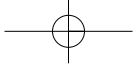
‘It was marvellous! I made my frog jump up and down as though he was alive. He jumped once right over . . .’ Jacques became suddenly aware that he was sounding like a child and not the man of science he aspired to be; he felt himself blush a little beneath the wind. ‘I must let you have it back.’

‘Ah yes, the nervous system. I used to think the knee joint one of the finest anatomical creations, but now I think this system of minute signals, far too small for us to see, may be the masterpiece.’

The velvet ribbons of the Curé’s hat were whipping across his face as they walked on towards the headland. ‘And what did you learn from your jumping frog?’

Jacques was unsure. ‘That an electric current joins the nerves to the muscles . . . That this current can be reproduced by static electricity stored in a b-bottle.’ He was inclined to stammer when he was nervous.

The Curé smiled. ‘It is almost a hundred years since frogs were



first made to twitch. An Italian gentleman had laid out a specimen for dissection and noticed that sparks from an electrostatic machine nearby were making the dead creature dance. Such effects could also be produced during thunderstorms, so he naturally assumed it was the result of electricity in the atmosphere. But then, later on, he discovered that some movements would also occur if he joined the nerve and the muscle with a piece of metal. And what do you think he concluded from that?’

Jacques was anxious not to disappoint. ‘I suppose . . . you must conclude that the metal was conducting a force that existed in the animal.’

‘Exactly!’ said the Curé. ‘Animal electricity.’

Jacques allowed himself a smile at having reached the right conclusion.

‘But he was wrong,’ said the Curé. ‘Signor Galvani – that was the name of our frog man – had a friend called Volta. Signor Volta used to make electricity pass through his tongue. He was sure that it was the charge in his own flesh that was the source of the current that flowed between two coins above and below his tongue. Then he had a clever idea. In place of his tongue he tried a piece of cardboard soaked in seawater – and the current still flowed. No flesh, no tongue, no frog! What do you think of that, Jacques?’

‘The source of the current must be . . . elsewhere,’ said Jacques, non-committally.

Abbé Henri stopped and took his arm. ‘Well. Galvani had one more trick up his sleeve. He made a frog’s muscle contract by touching it with the nerve of another frog. So he showed that animal tissue does contain electrical forces.’

‘Does that include human tissue?’ said Jacques.

‘I imagine so, my dear Jacques. It would be sad to think that we lacked such dynamic forces as God has granted to the animal world.’

‘So . . . Galvani was right. If nerve cells do carry electrical charges, then—’

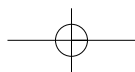
‘Not in the way that Galvani suggested,’ said the Curé. ‘Volta was right that there was no such thing as animal electricity.’

‘No. Galvani was right.’

‘Really, Jacques, you must try to calm yourself. If you are too passionate and too hasty, you will never become a true scientist.’

‘I am sorry, Father.’

They had reached the end of the beach, where rocks ran down



from the headland into the sea; above them was a single larch tree, stripped and beating in the wind.

‘Do you ever think how long these rocks have been here?’ said Jacques sullenly.

‘These ones?’ said the Curé. ‘I am not familiar enough yet with your terrain. Weren’t they placed here by a curse or a witch or some angry king when his lover plunged beneath the waves?’

‘We are not all ignorant and superstitious here, Father. Not all Bretons are like that.’

‘Forgive me.’ He looked at the boy with wary indulgence.

‘I want to understand, Father.’

‘I know. Let us walk back along the beach. It’ll be getting dark soon. If you like, you can come and have supper at my house, after vespers. Will your parents allow that?’

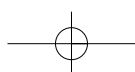
‘My father locks the door at nine. I must be back by then.’

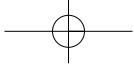
Abbé Henri’s housekeeper left some extra food out at his request for the young visitor: some pieces of ham given by a parishioner for whose late father the Curé had said a special mass; soup she made by crushing potatoes and leeks into liquid spooned from the Curé’s meagre stockpot and some ewe’s milk cheese from the market.

Back from vespers, Abbé Henri loosened the top button of his soutane, unbuttoned his boots and put on a pair of slippers that his housekeeper had left by the fire. He prodded at the embers and threw on a couple more logs; then he straightened the knives and forks on the table and sat down to wait for his guest.

Jacques Rebière was not the kind of young man he had expected to find in this remote country parish, where most of his congregants, though pleasingly devout, confined their speculations to the likelihood of rain or the size of the fishermen’s catch. He was aware, only a few weeks after arriving from Angers, of being scrutinised one day in church as he preached. He allowed his own gaze to wander down the pews until it met two large brown eyes, unblinking beneath black brows, set in a thin, chalky face. The boy immediately looked down, embarrassed to have attracted the Curé’s attention by his stare, but Abbé Henri was amused and sought him out after the service.

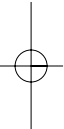
He quickly established from the stammering boy that he had finished early with his education in order to work for his father – a peasant, it seemed, with bourgeois longings, who had had neither



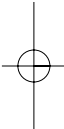


the wit nor the good fortune to realise them. Old Rebière had apparently failed to see that encouraging his son at his studies might have provided a swifter route to respectability and wealth than pressing him into work.

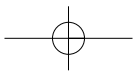
The Curé's own education had been interrupted at a later stage, just before he was able to complete his medical studies. He had been driving in a coach late at night, on his way back from a dinner given for a departing professor in Orléans, when he received the call of God. He was looking through the window at the darkened countryside, thinking idly of when he might next see his father in order to ask him for more funds, when a fellow-passenger, sitting next to him, began to speak. She was a coarse woman in plump middle age with a greasy bonnet who told a story of how she had been abandoned by her husband, taken up by another man, for whom she had borne a child, then deserted once more. It was not an unusual or particularly interesting story, and young Jules Henri found himself wondering what he might tell of the woman's health by daylight; he imagined a high colour to go with her obesity and her whining voice and presumed she would shortly ask him for money, which he was not in a position to supply. He edged away a little, able to follow her story with half an ear. The following week he would hear the last of his lectures on physiology, and shortly after that would begin to search for a place as a hospital resident. Life was a challenge, a hill he felt vigorous enough to climb.



He looked back to the woman in her dark corner of the coach and felt a profound and disabling emotion pour through him. He had lost his sense of her as a second person, a source of minor irritation, and experienced a sudden and irresistible feeling of identity with her. It was more than sympathy, something far less polite; it seemed as though his blood was in her veins and that her despair was the charge that animated his perception of the world. Her position was hopeless; he was obliged to bear her pain; both of them were connected in some universal, though unseen, pattern of humanity. His obligation was not to diagnose her but to love her; while his greater duty was to the larger reality, that place outside time where their connection had been made, the common ground of existence into which he had been granted a privileged glimpse.



He hitched up his scarf and closed his eyes as the power of the feeling ran down his spine. When the woman reached her destination and climbed out into the snow, Henri did no more than wish



her goodnight. She was not, in herself, the point; she was the sign, she was the doorway through which he would enter a grander life. He sold his medical instruments and took himself off to a seminary, having no doubt that the call had come from the God of his childhood. His father, at first appalled by his perversity, was gradually convinced of the sincerity of his feelings and was persuaded to continue a financial allowance which became, on his death, an inheritance that allowed Abbé Henri to indulge the occasional hobby, such as Jacques Rebière.

The boy sat at his dinner table, his big eyes locked on the Curé's, as he ate another slice of the smoky ham.

'I want you to understand,' said the Curé, 'that the experiments I have given you are of the most elementary kind. You do know that, don't you? These are the first steps that a child is taught to take in this subject.'

'Yes, I understand,' said Jacques, a little reluctantly, it seemed. 'But you must admit, they are exciting. And the principles are quite new, aren't they? And are not some of the greatest truths in the universe quite simple? The laws that describe the movements of the planets, for instance?'

'They may be capable of being expressed in simple formulae, I suppose. But for how many millions of years did men gaze at the stars before they began to understand what they were? And how many false systems did they invent along the way?'

'Like the ancient world with its many gods,' said Jacques.

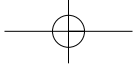
'Precisely. Before Christ was born and the truth was shown to us.'

There was a moment of silence in the Curé's parlour; then they heard the wind start up again outside. The candles on the oak table flickered as a draught was driven through the closed wooden shutters.

Abbé Henri narrowed his eyes. Jacques was a regular attender at mass, but he noticed how in their discussions he went quiet when the subject of God came up, regaining his animation only when the natural world became once more the subject of the conversation. The Curé was reluctant to let him off too lightly: piety was a small price for the boy to pay for his free schooling.

He doubted whether Jacques could ever make a student, still less a scientist or doctor. Not only did he come from the peasantry, with no signs of intelligence in his family, but the disadvantages of his poor education were too great to overcome. And when Jacques did, through whatever untutored mechanism of mind, understand a





scientific principle, he did not soberly examine it, but at once used it as a base from which to vault higher, to make further, unjustified connections. Abbé Henri thought his temperament would hold him back more surely than his intellect; but sometimes the boy really did seem to have insight; and in any case his passion, though unscientific, made him a congenial companion.

‘Would you like some wine? There. Pass me your glass. I’ll just give you a little. You look puzzled, Jacques.’

‘I was thinking of my frog. Do you think if I had touched a different part of him that he might have moved differently?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the Curé, who had had enough of frogs. ‘However, I read in a newspaper the other day that a clever young German called – if I remember rightly – Wernicke had found the part of the human brain that manages the faculty of speech. It seems curious that small regions of the brain should be held responsible for particular functions of the mind.’

The Curé laughed, and Jacques looked at him quizzically.

‘A gentleman named Broca has already had the honour of having a part named after him for much the same purpose!’ said the Curé.

‘Have you seen a human brain?’ said Jacques.

‘Yes,’ said Abbé Henri. ‘As students we were required to study all aspects of anatomy. Corpses were regularly sent from the poorhouse.’

Jacques put down his knife and fork at last, his hunger for food satisfied. His eyes burned, unblinking. ‘Were you frightened?’ he said, his stammer causing him to reiterate the beginning of the word.

‘Frightened? My dear boy. What of?’

‘Didn’t it feel as though you had this person’s life in your hands? Their thoughts?’

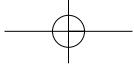
‘The corpse had no thoughts. It was dead. In any event, God teaches us that the body is distinct from the soul. The spirit had departed, only the flesh was left. “Non cogito, ergo non sum,” as Descartes might have said. Do you know about Descartes?’

Jacques nodded eagerly. ‘You told me before. He insisted on the dual nature of mind and body. He believed the soul was lodged in a gland at the base of the brain. The . . . I forget its name.’

‘Pineal gland.’

‘He was wrong about that, was he not?’

‘It was not a bad speculation. He had at least observed that it was the only part of the brain without a duplicate on the other side. It



was fair to assume its singularity and its central position gave it some special function. All scientists and philosophers are men of their age. Descartes was also a very imperfect Christian. But he was lucid, and he was probably right in the essentials.'

'But suppose he wasn't,' said Jacques. 'Suppose there is no difference between flesh and spirit.'

'You know that can't be true,' said the Curé gently.

'Father, there's something I want to do. When I am grown up and when I know more.'

'What is that?'

'I want to bring my brother back.'

'Back from where?'

'From wherever he is . . . travelling. You have never met Olivier, have you?'

'No.' The Curé shook his head. He looked at Jacques's imploring face.

'People say terrible things about him. They call him a lunatic. But I know him. I remember him from when he was young. I remember our talks together. He used to laugh. He used to be reasonable. He did well in his lessons at school and he worked at the hôtel de ville. He was my friend. And he remembers.'

'What does he remember?'

'He remembers . . . Things from the time before I was born.' Abbé Henri saw Jacques look down to the table where he was rubbing his hands together coarsely, as though to scour them. 'Things I would g-give my life to find again.'

'These illnesses are desperate things,' said the Curé. 'I know. I have visited the asylums. Perhaps your Olivier is better off at home.'

'That's what we thought. He was in the asylum for a time, but we brought him home. A man from the Department comes to see him every few months.'

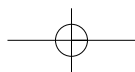
'Perhaps he is better like that.'

'With the horse? He lives with the horse! My father won't let him in the house so he lies down in his own excrement while the chickens shit on him from the rafters. Forgive me, Father.'

Abbé Henri raised his hand. 'If you had seen what I have seen in the asylums you might not think it so bad.' He shook his head. 'These are places where you feel the absence of God.'

'We must not despair, Father.'

The Curé smiled at the way the boy had assumed the priestly



role. 'I do not despair, Jacques. But the only way I can keep from that sin is by never visiting one of those places again.'

'Surely there are doctors,' said Jacques.

'There are doctors, alienists, in charge of the attendants, but they are powerless. And do you know what the strangest thing is?'

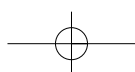
'What?'

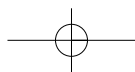
'You would think these places could only exist after death – in hell, or in another world. Yet when you leave them, you rejoin the ordinary life of the town with its streets. It doesn't seem right that you walk from one to the other. It doesn't feel like a short journey you make with your feet. It feels as though you've passed into a different existence.'

The next morning, Jacques woke early in his silent house. He retrieved his shirt and trousers from the floor, where he had left them the night before when he hurriedly blew out the candle on hearing his father's footsteps on the stairs.

His boots were harder to find among the debris. On the bed that used to be Olivier's were two boards on which he had pinned a collection of moths and butterflies; along the windowsill were some glass jars in which he had pickled the viscera of animals he had trapped: a rabbit's heart, the lungs of a hare. The table was covered with pieces of copper wire, screws, clamps, two rusty sawblades and pieces of paper on which he had done anatomical drawings of mice and frogs in his careful hand (neat enough, but lacking, in his eyes, the flair of Olivier's lovely astral diagrams).

Jacques found his missing boot behind some books the Curé had lent him and which, for want of a shelf, he had piled on the floor. He took a leather waistcoat from a peg and tied a scarf round his neck, then pushed open the shutters on to the grey morning. His window looked over the orchard at the back of the house, beyond which he could see the soft rise of the field that led to his father's wood. There was fencing to be done today, a task he would have enjoyed more had he been allowed a companion to hold the post as he hammered it into the ground. There was a light rain over the dense, distant trees, and a glance at the sky told him it was unlikely either to remit or grow worse. He went downstairs softly, carrying the boots, but in the parlour he found Tante Mathilde already at the table with a bowl of tea and some bread.





He took two slices and put them in the pocket of a woollen jacket; from an outside store he took an apple and as many walnuts as he could find room for.

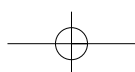
Then he was in the cold, damp silence of the morning, with the misty rain on his cheeks, and he felt less alone. He walked to the point on the perimeter where he had left his fencing and set to work with his hands, though his mind was elsewhere. Abbé Henri said, 'We'll make a scientist of you yet', but Jacques felt too diffident to inquire whether he was being playful or whether he had in mind some actual scheme.

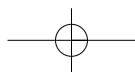
The smell from the wood was strong in his nostrils as he worked – the rain-washed earth, wet bark, and the suggestion on the slight breeze of something hot-blooded, feral, at its business. The earth fell from his clogged fingernails as he packed it in round the base of a fence post. Some days, at evening, he saw a badger on the other side of the wood, a big, self-conscious beast that rolled off to its sett like a round-bellied alderman after a council dinner.

In the middle of the day, he allowed himself time off from his father's business to go and inspect his traps. He found a weasel with dried blood round its gums; he poked it with a small stick, unwilling to put his fingers near the sharp teeth until he was sure it was dead. His stomach was rumbling. It seemed to be a condition of his life that he was hungry, all day, and that no amount of food that he could lay his hands on ever satisfied him. In the afternoon, it began to rain more persistently and he had a long walk to the house of a tenant whose barn roof needed mending. At least he was offered some preserved pork – skin and pieces of foot in a clear jelly – for his services. By the time he finished, the light was starting to go and he felt tired by his work. The rain had soaked through his clothes to the skin of his chest and shoulders, but he was so used to it that he felt no discomfort.

In fact, he found a sort of contentment, he thought, or why else would his step be quickening as he saw the narrow line of smoke rise from the chimney of his father's house in the distance? The light was receding into the frayed, indistinct clouds over Sainte Agnès, draining down into the dunes and low hills beyond the village, reducing the world rapidly to the sound of his feet on wet paths and the consciousness of his body's movement.

This is the kind of choice I have, thought Jacques, touching the bark of a dripping tree with his hand as he passed. To look down



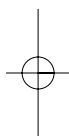


to my feet, to sense my heart's murmur, my muscles' damp ache or raise my eyes and see the shape of the almost invisible village and to know where it lies in the world.

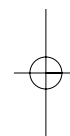
The difference between Tante Mathilde and Abbé Henri is great – like that between a woodlouse that lives beneath its log and a fox that goes over hills and fields, with eyes to see and to compare.

But suppose that there is more to it than that. Just as Abbé Henri, with his God and his Descartes and his medical training, is the fox to poor Tante Mathilde's woodlouse, could there not be someone who is a man to the Curé's fox?

And how would one become such a man? Must we wait to develop as a species, just as we have all moved on from the achievements of our naked forebears, or could it be done now, by force of will and intellect alone? Do we already possess all we need to stop feeling the world as the sound of footsteps and the ache of our backs and to look up – to the woods and the hills and the oceans that stretch out in their immensity, just waiting to be seen?

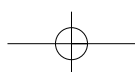


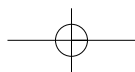
In bed that night, Jacques pulled the blankets up round his shoulders. There was no fat on his body, where the first muscles of manhood were packed firm and taken carelessly for granted. As he lay, he knew what Olivier meant by the feeling that came into the body at this age, the sensation of permanent excitement, as though he was continually crouched at the starting line, waiting for a race to begin. He gripped the blanket in both hands and vowed never to give in to compromise and fatigue. However rocky the path, he would not look down at his feet and allow his life to contract within that view: he would keep his gaze fixed on the widest horizon. The words of the psalm they had sung in church came back to him: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills . . .' That line would be his reminder, his coat of arms.



He relaxed his grip on the blanket and allowed himself a silent smile. He was a practical youth who made tables and had taught himself to dissect rats; as such, he knew that there was a much more immediate problem to be solved: he must find a way to study and a means of support.

His smile broadened in the darkness. I am too young, he thought. I am, perhaps, absurd. Now I shall sleep, and think about the fence, the roof, my mother and the chance of goose rillettes from the market.





But then he thought again. Dear God, make me great. Make me good. Amen.

The following evening, when Jacques returned from the woods, he heard the unusual sound of voices coming from his father's house. They reached him as he opened the gate into the orchard and there was something in them that made him hurry. He ran round to the front of the house and let himself into the parlour.

Grand-mère stood with her back to the scullery door, rigid, with her arms at her sides; Tante Mathilde was screaming, red-faced and tearful in the middle of the room, and at the foot of the stairs was the encrusted, tangled figure of Olivier. He held in his right hand one of the sawblades from Jacques's table, with which he appeared to have gouged a hole in his left forearm. Blood ran in narrow streams down over his open palm and onto the floor.

Tante Mathilde screamed incoherent abuse. 'You madman. You wretched lunatic! What have you done to your father's house? Kill yourself for all I care. Go on. Take the blade and cut your throat. Why don't you? You wicked, wicked man!'

Olivier took two paces towards her, still sawing at his arm.

'Don't bring that thing near me! Did you see that, Grand-mère? He's trying to attack me. He wants to kill me! Jacques, do something. Get the blade off him.'

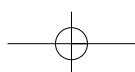
'It's all right,' said Jacques. 'He doesn't want to hurt anyone, do you, Olivier?' He did not want to touch his brother, but tried to catch his eye. Olivier's gaze was turned wholly inward; Jacques had never seen him so far away.

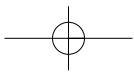
'What happened?' said Jacques.

Grand-mère at last gave voice. It was thin, but firm, with a strong local accent. 'I heard a noise from my room. Upstairs. I went to look and found . . .' She seemed to struggle for a name, ' . . . Him . . . Olivier. He was in your room. He'd smashed everything. All the jars and everything. He'd written words on the walls. It was a mess. I told him to go back to his stable. Then he came down here and started shouting at Mathilde.'

'That's right,' said Mathilde. 'He wants to kill me, I know it. He's always hated me. We should send him away somewhere. Get rid of him. But your father's too kind-hearted.'

Jacques cautiously put his hand on Olivier's arm. 'What is it,





Olivier? What's the matter? You can tell me. No one's going to hurt you. Tell me. Like old times. Like the old days when we used to talk.'

Olivier turned to face Jacques. His tongue emerged from the hair that covered his mouth; it moved along a line where the lips must be. He swallowed and said, 'I had to kill the spiders that were in me. They were laying eggs in my arm, under the skin. I was told to kill them.'

'Where are they now, Olivier?'

'I killed them, I killed them.'

'I'm going to get the gendarme,' said Tante Mathilde.

'No,' said Jacques. 'There is no gendarme in Sainte Agnès. Anyway, Olivier is all right. You'll be all right, won't you, Olivier? Shall we go to the stable? And I'll bring you something to eat. Would you like a glass of water?'

'Put him in with the pig,' said Tante Mathilde. 'Until your father gets home. Look at him. He doesn't know his own name.'

'Olivier?' said Jacques.

'You see. He didn't answer. And who's this?' She poked Jacques in the ribs. 'Go on. Tell me. Who's this? See! He doesn't know his own brother.'

'Leave him alone,' said Jacques. 'I can manage him.' He took a pace towards Olivier, who thrust the blade out towards Jacques's chest.

'These are my instructions,' Olivier said.

Grand-mère edged back towards the scullery, then turned and scuttled out. They heard the door of her room slam shut and a bolt being drawn.

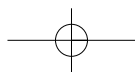
'I'm going to get help,' said Tante Mathilde. 'I'm going to get him taken away from here. I'm going—'

'I have an idea,' said Jacques. 'Why don't we go and get the Curé? He'll know what to do. He's a man of God and he was a doctor before that. He knows what—'

'Doctor! He doesn't need a doctor, he needs to be in prison. As for saying his prayers, it's a bit late for that, isn't it?'

Jacques looked at his stepmother. For the first time in his life, he had the intoxicating certainty that he knew more than a superior.

'Tante Mathilde, if I stay with Olivier, I can make sure he does no more damage. And if you go to the Curé, you'll be safe. He'll know what to do. He knows people, the kind of people we don't.'



And my father would be pleased, would he not, that you had turned to the right person for help?’

Grumbling, Tante Mathilde went to fetch her bonnet and coat.

‘Please tell him it’s urgent. Say I asked him to come as quickly as possible.’

When Tante Mathilde had gone, Jacques took Olivier to the scullery, took the blade from him, pumped some water into a bucket and washed his arm over the stone sink. In the drawer of an old dresser, Jacques found a white cloth which he tore into pieces; he packed the wound with them and tied one strip tightly round the forearm. While he had him there, he took the opportunity to wash his brother’s filth-encrusted hands in the bucket.

‘Do you want to come up to your room? Would you like to sit on your old bed?’ It occurred to him that, until help came, his brother had a short spell of freedom that he might enjoy.

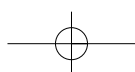
Olivier made no reply; he had started the head-rolling with which Jacques had become anxiously familiar. Jacques led the way upstairs and Olivier, after hesitating for a moment, followed him along the landing.

Jacques turned in horror to Olivier when he saw the inside of his room. The jars along the windowsill had been smashed on the floor, leaving their contents where the vinegar ate into the bare wood of the boards. His collection of moths and butterflies had been ripped from their mounts; his notes and exercise books were torn up or disfigured by Olivier’s scrawl, hastily done with the pen Jacques had left on the table. The pieces of machinery were scattered on the floor, while on the wall Olivier had written with his finger in black ink. The words were unfamiliar to Jacques, though the drag of flesh through ink on the white plaster gave them a fearful look, like the words at Belshazzar’s feast.

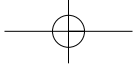
‘Come,’ said Jacques. He took Olivier’s arm awkwardly, a young man with no experience of tenderness towards another. ‘Come and sit here. Why don’t you lie down and rest if you’d like to? It’s your old bed.’ He swept some moth wings from the cover.

Olivier perched on the edge of the mattress, rocked his head back and forth and scraped at the hair on his cheek.

It was the first time Jacques had seen his face in full daylight for a year, and he was surprised by how much of the boy he remembered was still visible behind the matted beard. The blue eyes with their hazel flecks, the soft, unmarked skin beneath the eyes, with a







handful of childish freckles. Was it possible that his invisible mouth was twitching into its old half-smile? What was missing, he thought, was Olivier. Some invader had taken control of his body and had assumed his voice; it was not an impersonation, it was an inhabitation. He was possessed. How fragile had he been, how slight his own character that it had been so utterly displaced?

Jacques sat down next to Olivier and took his washed hands between his own. The surge of adult confidence he had felt with Tante Mathilde had now deserted him; he was like a child again.

‘I don’t mind about the room. I can do the drawings again.’

Olivier began to moan and move his head up and down; his eyes moved rapidly from side to side.

Jacques held his brother’s hands tight between his own. ‘Olivier, I will do everything I can for you. I will try to make you well. I swear to you.’

‘I forbid you,’ said Olivier.

‘I’ll ask the Curé if he knows where—’

‘The Curé does what I tell him.’

Olivier stood up and pulled his hands away. He stood among the debris of his brother’s endeavours, bits of animal and glass about his feet.

Jacques said, ‘If I can just get away from here, Olivier . . . Someone will help me. Perhaps the Curé. I will come for you. I will return.’

He made his way across to Olivier and held out his hand. ‘I will make it the mission of my life,’ he said.

He offered his hand again, palm up, to his brother. Very slowly, Olivier moved towards him, half a step at a time. When they were almost touching, Olivier looked straight past him and laughed.

From downstairs, they heard voices.

Old Rebière had returned from work to find the new Curé in his parlour and his wife in tears.

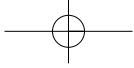
‘He tried to kill me!’ said Tante Mathilde. ‘He was waving his knife at me.’

‘What’s he doing here?’ Rebière gestured towards Abbé Henri.

‘Oh,’ said Tante Mathilde, ‘Jacques said I should go and get help. I don’t know why. I was just glad to be out of harm’s way.’

‘I am a friend of your son’s,’ said Abbé Henri. ‘It is natural that he should turn to me at a difficult moment.’

‘Yes, Father,’ said Rebière, as though remembering himself. ‘Where is the boy?’



‘Upstairs,’ said Jacques from the doorway. ‘He’s all right. He is quite calm.’

Rebière went and stood with his back to the stone chimneypiece while the others waited for him to speak.

‘We shall have to get rid of him. There are places where they can be locked up. I know. He has been in one before.’

‘They are not the kind of thing you would want for your son,’ said Abbé Henri. ‘In the countryside we have always looked after our own. It is God’s way.’

‘And is it God’s choice that he should be a lunatic?’

‘All such afflictions are part of the divine plan. God in the end is merciful.’

‘And is it God’s way that he should live with the horse?’

‘No, Monsieur. I understand that was your decision.’

Rebière snorted. ‘I shall see what I can arrange when I next go to Vannes. He can’t stay here any more.’

Jacques said, ‘Father, couldn’t Olivier come and sleep in my room? Perhaps he would feel safer if he was back in the house.’

Rebière shook his head. ‘He had his chance. You can all go about your business now. Leave this to me.’

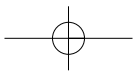
Olivier had silently descended the stairs and was now standing in the doorway next to Jacques.

Abbé Henri took a step forward into the smoky gloom of old Rebière’s parlour. His hair, prematurely grey and worn long at the back, covered the square white collar and touched the shoulders of the soutane; his unbearded face appeared anxious in the candlelight.

‘Here is your son, Monsieur, a fine-looking young man who needs only a bath and visit to the barber. You cannot wish for him to live among the lunatics at the mad-hospital. I have visited such places and I would not send my dog there to die, Monsieur. I beg you to find some accommodation for the boy at home. One day such poor unfortunates will be cured, as modern medicine has cured so many illnesses that baffled our ancestors. It is Olivier’s misfortune to have been born too soon for our medical knowledge. Have pity on him, Monsieur. I beg you.’

‘Chains,’ said Rebière. ‘I suppose that might be an answer. If we kept him chained he couldn’t run out and attack my wife.’

Everyone looked at Olivier, who was now still, almost serene, like a John the Baptist whose message had been delivered, waiting for another voice to call him in the wilderness.



‘Father,’ said Rebière. ‘You may go. Jacques, take Olivier to the stable and make sure the door is bolted. Mathilde, tell Grand-mère to put dinner on the table. Goodnight, Father. This way, please.’

Rebière held the door open for the priest, who, with a glance back to Jacques and Olivier, stepped out reluctantly into the night.

The blacksmith lived at the bottom of the main street in Sainte Agnès; the open top half of his door revealed a scruffy parlour through which his wife led Jacques out into a yard, on the other side of which was the forge.

The blacksmith was working a horseshoe on the anvil when Jacques, against his will, went and stood opposite him. When he had finished hammering the metal into shape, he tossed it casually into a stone water-trough where it hissed for a moment, then was still. Only then did he look up to Jacques.

‘What do you want?’

‘Some chains, a ring that can be fixed and two . . . circular pieces that can be closed.’

‘Manacles?’ The blacksmith, a slight man with a greyish face, was known as someone who spoke little.

‘Well,’ said Jacques. ‘Like manacles, I suppose. That shape.’

‘What’s it for?’

‘I don’t know. My father . . . Something for his employer. A tenant wanted them.’

‘How big?’


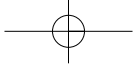
‘About . . . I suppose . . .’ Jacques made a circle with his hands, roughly wrist-sized.

‘How much chain?’

Jacques spread both his arms out wide. ‘About twice that much.’

‘You can come tomorrow evening, at the same time.’

Two days later Jacques was excused work by his father and sent to the stable. First, he took out the mare and tethered her outside; then he shovelled up the old straw and excrement and dumped them in the midden on the far side of the yard. Under Olivier’s uninterested gaze, he swept the stone floor with water, then took the hefty ring he had collected from the blacksmith and hammered it by its attached point through the back wall of the stable. The point had screw threads that went through a horizontal plate, so that when the nut was tightened, it was braced against the outside wall.



Inside, Jacques ran the chain through the loop and attached it at each end, as instructed, to the manacles.

He filled the stable with fresh straw and led the horse back into her stall. He looked at Olivier. Thus far, he had managed without difficulty: something about the large hammer, the weight and swing of it in his hand, the wood on the soft skin of his palm, was reassuringly mundane. It was like putting up a fence.

When it came to asking Olivier to go back inside, however, he began to falter. His brother was so docile. In the morning, he had helped Olivier to wash beneath the pump and change his clothes; now when he put his arm round him, he felt his soft hair and it reminded him of when they had been children and had wrestled together on the floor: a memory from before he was even fully conscious, of a blessed time. Olivier sat on the fresh straw and allowed Jacques to close the manacles round his wrist and to lock them as the blacksmith had showed him.

Olivier said nothing until it was done, then he looked up at Jacques with his eyes full of bewilderment, and Jacques knelt down beside him, sobbing, smelling Olivier's special sweet smell, feeling his brother's heart against his ribs.

