

# The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron

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**JANET LEWIS**

*Introduction by Kevin Haworth*

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## Introduction

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In *The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron* Janet Lewis returns to her beloved France, the setting of her best-known novel, *The Wife of Martin Guerre*. But whereas *Martin Guerre* is set in the provincial countryside, in the relative quiet of the sixteenth century, *Monsieur Scarron* takes the reader right into the center of Paris in 1694, during the reign of Louis XIV. And the tumultuous reign of the Sun King, as he was known, lends *Monsieur Scarron* a political element not seen in either *The Wife of Martin Guerre* or *The Trial of Sören Qvist*, Lewis's previous novels inspired by Samuel March Phillips's legal history, *Famous Cases of Circumstantial Evidence*.<sup>1</sup>

*The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron* begins with Lewis's characteristically precise prose: "Jean Larcher, bookbinder, was at supper with his wife and son. The day was Easter Sunday, which in that year of Grace, 1694, the fifty-first year of the reign of Louis XIV, fell upon the eleventh of April." These opening sentences root the reader in a fascinating time and place, one that grows only more interesting as characters are added, from an itinerant bookbinder getting by on scraps in the Paris streets, to an elderly lamplighter most comfortable in the semidarkness in which he has worked his whole life, to the courtiers and servants who move in the reflected glory of the king. Lewis's ability to create so many fascinating personalities, often in the space of a mere paragraph, and the painstaking research that lends them such verisimilitude lead

critic Donald Davie to call *Monsieur Scarron* a “consummate performance.”<sup>2</sup> He asks,

How did Miss Lewis know, what pains did she take to learn, how often lentils were served in the household of a modest but independent tradesman, and how they were prepared? Or what a Parisian of that class did when she had a toothache? What medicines was she used to taking? On these and a thousand other matters the common reader has no way of checking on Miss Lewis; but where we can check on her she shows herself so scrupulous that we know we can trust her safely.<sup>3</sup>

*Monsieur Scarron* focuses most closely on one shop on the modest rue des Lions, that of the bookbinder Jean Larcher, who takes on an apprentice, and in doing so unwittingly allows an element of chaos into his carefully maintained bourgeois household. But this is not Lewis’s only concern. As always, she pays particular attention to the women of her fictional world, especially Marianne Larcher, Jean’s sensible wife, who, like other women of her time, is supposed to put the needs of men first, be they husband, son, or lover; and who, like all great female characters, inevitably pushes against those assumptions.

This domestic drama plays out against the larger backdrop of political unease; the court of Louis XIV is always mistrustful, always alert to the possibility of rebellion on the edges of France or sedition within the palace walls. In this environment, bookbinding is no mere trade; rather, in a lovely, self-referential touch, we are reminded that words have the potential for immense power, the capacity to alter the course of individual lives in surprising ways. A pamphlet agitating against the king is found, and, as in all of the *Cases of Circumstantial Evidence*, the law is brought to bear in ways that feel capricious, or insufficient. To say more would spoil some of the pleasures of this novel, Lewis’s longest, her most intricate, and—just perhaps—her best.

## The Life and Legacy of Janet Lewis

Janet Lewis was born in Chicago in 1898 and attended high school in Oak Park, where she and schoolmate Ernest Hemingway both contributed to the school literary magazine. Like Hemingway, she spent many youthful summers “up in Michigan,” a place that figures prominently in her short stories, much as it does in his. But whereas her more famous classmate is associated with hard living, literary stardom, and an early, self-inflicted death, Janet Lewis embodies a very different path.

She attended the University of Chicago, where she majored in French, and after her graduation left for Paris (“without waiting to pick up her diploma,” one biographer notes), residing there for six months, not quite long enough to become enmeshed in the expatriate literary scene with which the city is so strongly associated.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after returning home she contracted tuberculosis, the disease that felled so many artists and nearly killed her as well. (Many years later, she told an interviewer, “There was a moment, be cheerful or die. You take your choice.”)<sup>5</sup>

Despite the life-threatening illness in her youth, she went on to live an impressive ninety-nine years, most of those years in the same house in the hills of Northern California where she and her husband, the poet Yvor Winters, raised their two children. Her ability to balance her domestic life—by all accounts, she enjoyed a remarkably happy marriage—with decades of literary output gives her an image that is simultaneously traditional and feminist. In her book *Silences*, Tillie Olsen cites Lewis as a clear example of a talented woman writer whose literary production was inhibited by her obligations to family and to a more famous husband. Lewis acknowledged the challenges of balancing her familial responsibilities with her writing. “I do think those women who have turned out an enormous amount of work were generally not women

who had children,” she allowed in an early interview.<sup>6</sup> But at the same time she publicly and explicitly rejected Olsen’s characterization of her, perhaps unwilling to see her family and her writing in conflict. “Being a writer has meant nearly everything to me beyond my marriage and children,” she told an interviewer in 1983.<sup>7</sup> The remark is Lewis distilled. She foregrounds her marriage and her family. Beyond that, everything is about her writing.

As a poet, she met early success, publishing a four-poem sequence called “Cold Hills” in *Poetry* in 1920, before she had even finished college. A couple of years later, she moved into prose as well, publishing her first story in another influential magazine, *The Bookman*. Her first book of poems, *The Indian in the Woods*, was published in 1922 by the short-lived imprint Manikin, whose entire publishing history consists of three books: one by Lewis, one by William Carlos Williams, and one by Marianne Moore. It was just the beginning of a lifetime of close association with literary greatness, both personally and professionally.

A decade after her first book of poems, a period during which she got married and she and Winters both recovered from tuberculosis, she published her first novel, *The Invasion*, her first foray into historical fiction. Subtitled *A Narrative of Events Concerning the Johnston Family of St. Mary’s*, it is set in the Great Lakes region and tells the story of an Irish immigrant who marries an Ojibway woman.

Almost ten years after that, she published her acknowledged masterpiece, *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, marrying her eye for history with the peculiarities of the legal system that would give her the platform from which to explore powerful questions of morality and personal responsibility that fuel the three *Cases of Circumstantial Evidence*.

To European critics, Lewis seems quintessentially American. To American critics, her fondness for European settings leads to comparisons as expected as Flaubert and as unusual

as the Provençal writer Jean Giono. The *New York Times* compared her to Melville and to Stendhal. Another critic sees her, based on *The Invasion* and some of her short stories, as a definitive voice in Western regional writing. In some ways, Lewis's writing remains elastic, allowing other writers to see in her a powerful reflection of their own interests. Novelists claim her novels as her best work. Poets are drawn again and again to her diverse body of poetry, which attracts new requests for reprinting in anthologies every year. In short, as with all the best writers, her work and her decades-long career defy simple categorization or comparisons.

Despite Lewis's resistance to easy definitions, her many literary admirers, including Theodore Roethke, Wallace Stegner, and so many more, agree on two things: that her writing, particularly the poems and the historical novels, is first-class; and that she deserves a much wider readership. It is for exactly this reason that Swallow Press has created the present edition.

But if Lewis herself felt neglected as an author, there is no evidence of it. In person and in published comments, she championed graciousness. She sent thank-you notes to our publishing offices here in Ohio upon receiving her yearly royalty check. Late into her nineties, she charmed literary pilgrims who found their way to her house in Los Altos, serving them tea and apologizing for the self-described "laziness" that led her to sleep until the late hour of 8:30 in the morning, and for the periods of quiet introspection that meant she would sometimes go for many years without publishing new work, only to pick up again in startling new directions, be it in writing opera libretti (she wrote six, including adaptations of her own *Wife of Martin Guerre* and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*), or in poems quite different from the Imagist work with which she began her career.

Her disarming modesty, about her own character as well as her writing, is the most constant theme in interviews and profiles. This exchange, in the *Southern Review*, is characteristic:

Interviewers: Many writers and critics—Evan Connell and Donald Davie, to name a couple—admire your work greatly. Yet, you are not widely known. What is your reaction to this?

Lewis: I think I've had as much recognition as I need and probably as much as I deserve.<sup>8</sup>

She stated that her goal in writing her *Cases of Circumstantial Evidence* was equally modest: to stay as close to the history as possible and to let the characters and the facts speak for themselves. She demonstrated a similar sense of duty to her husband, the man who gave her the book that made these novels possible. For the thirty years that she outlived him, she kept their home in Los Altos much the way that it had been when he was alive, with his name on the mailbox and his writing shed maintained as if he might return, any moment, to use it.

It would have been impossible to predict the success of this modest professor's daughter, born at the very end of the nineteenth century. But her first poem in *Poetry*, which appeared at the height of modernism and when she was only twenty years old, seems to anticipate both her long life and the way her work stands on its own, just outside the literary canon. She writes,

I have lived so long  
On the cold hills alone . . .  
I loved the rock  
And the lean pine trees,  
Hated the life in the turfy meadow,  
Hated the heavy, sensuous bees.  
I have lived so long  
Under the high monotony of starry skies,  
I am so cased about  
With the clean wind and the cold nights,  
People will not let me in  
To their warm gardens  
Full of bees.

## INTRODUCTION

Swallow Press is honored to be the bearer of Lewis's literary legacy, not just the three great novels but her collection of short stories and her books of poems—a lifetime of close witness to the public and the private, and a deep appreciation for the human condition.

Kevin Haworth  
*Executive Editor*  
*Swallow Press*

## Notes

1. Samuel March Phillips, *Famous Cases of Circumstantial Evidence: With an Introduction on the Theory of Presumptive Proof* (Boston: Estes & Lauriat, 1874).
2. Donald Davie, "The Historical Narratives of Janet Lewis," *Southern Review* 2, no. 4 (1966): 53.
3. *Ibid.*, 55–56.
4. Charles L. Crow, *Janet Lewis* (Boise, ID: Boise State University, 1980), 9.
5. Mitzi Berger Hamovitch, "My Life I Will Not Let Thee Go Except Thou Bless Me: An Interview with Janet Lewis," *Southern Review* 18, no. 4 (1982): 307.
6. Crow, 11.
7. Marilyn Yalom, *Women Writers of the West Coast: Speaking of Their Lives and Careers* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1983), 21.
8. Roger Hofheins and Dan Tooker, "A Conversation with Janet Lewis," *Southern Review* 10, no. 4 (1974): 341.

## The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron

# One

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Jean Larcher, bookbinder, was at supper with his wife and son. The day was Easter Sunday, which in that year of Grace, 1694, the fifty-first year of the reign of Louis XIV, fell upon the eleventh of April. They sat about a table spread with white linen in one of the four rooms which he rented in an old building in the rue des Lions, in Paris, a building which was old even then. The room served as kitchen, living room, and salesroom, and it was very small. It had a certain elegance, however, in spite of the stone floor and huge old-fashioned hearth, the elegance of the past generation. The proportions were good.

Beyond the window, still unshuttered, the spring twilight held the air, fading slowly from the cloudy sky. In the kitchen the air darkened imperceptibly, while the Larcher family broke their bread and ate their soup. Jean, laying down his spoon at last by his empty bowl, leaned back in his chair and observed with surprise that the faces of his companions, although near to him, had grown indistinct. The corners of the kitchen were dark. Even the glow of coals on the hearth had faded to a dull red. But through the barred, unshuttered window he could see the street still luminous in comparison with the interior and, being so reminded of the lengthening of the days, felt a sense of reassurance. Spring had returned; winter lay behind them.

It had been a winter more difficult than most, with deprivations and disasters far beyond the ordinary. The Seine had frozen, the cold had been so great. The city, provisioned largely by the river traffic, had been for days as if in a state of siege, and this extreme deprivation, coming at a time when there had already been for long a lack of grain and bread, had caused great suffering for the general populace. When the cold relaxed and the ice began to break up, boats and barges were flung together, or forced by the rush of water against the piers of the bridges, and so were broken and sunk. Jean Larcher had seen this havoc. The rue des Lions was near the river. The streets had been full of the homeless, the sick and the hungry, all winter long. There had been violence in the markets where bread was sold; and though the rich seemed to live as well as ever, marrying their daughters with feasting and display, business such as his own had not been good. The King economized, and it had become the fashion to economize, if not in weddings, at least in the collection of well-bound books. Nevertheless, the winter was over, and the Larcher family had survived.

They had even survived with a small profit. They had “made their Easter,” as the saying went. They had been shriven, and had taken communion, and further, in honor of the day, they had eaten well. There was a white cloth on the table, and there had also been white bread, and a boiled fowl and leeks, and for dessert, walnuts and raisins.

He was a devout man, this Jean Larcher. He made his springtime penitence soberly and thoroughly, as he audited his business, and feeling that all was in order, he took his hour of contentment quietly, and still in the fear of God. Physically, he was well built, broad-shouldered, with a face more square than round, with blunt but pleasant features, his hair

grey about the temples, a few deep lines about the mouth. He filled his chair completely. As for the small profit from the business, it was in the form of two pistoles, in one of the pockets of his long vest. He reassured himself from time to time of its existence with the tip of a forefinger.

His wife, seated across from him, had laid both arms on the table, and her head, in its white linen coif, drooped toward them. She clasped both elbows in her hands for warmth, and for warmth also leaned her bosom against her arms. The deep ruffles of her Sunday blouse fell over her hands like a muff, and all this whiteness of her cap and her sleeves showed much more clearly than her face. A fluted, fan-shaped ruffle on her cap tilted forward as her head drooped.

Jean did not need to see her face to know her features, the round chin, the heavy-lidded, heavily lashed grey eyes, the lips which had always showed, since he had first seen her, a delicate pink in the even pallor of her face. He knew this face by touch also, smooth, firm, and cool. The skin had never been marred by any illness.

The face of his son nearer to him, more nearly visible through the twilight, was more difficult to decipher. He knew the mask well enough, the features so like his own, the young, downy skin, the single pock mark between the smooth thick brows—he knew it was there although he could not see it. He knew it was there because he had sat for hours beside the bed of a little boy, a feverish little boy, holding his hands, trying to keep him from scratching himself. But of what went on now behind that mask, what itching ideas, urging the young man to actions of which his father could not approve, he had a less clear knowledge. The boy seemed half a stranger to him now. He could not place the change, but his awareness of it dated, most naturally, from the day of the boy's return from

his apprenticeship. The boy worked now as a full-fledged journeyman in his father's shop, but without the contentment which his father had anticipated. Jean had apprenticed his son in one of the best shops in the city, not only that the boy might learn to become a better craftsman than his father, but that he might learn under a discipline more strict than his father in his affection would know how to enforce. He had not explained the second reason to the boy, nor had he spoken of it to his wife, being unwilling to acknowledge such a weakness.

The boy, intent upon cracking a nut, frowned slightly. His father saw the frown and was aware that it had nothing to do with the nut. It brought a return of his uneasiness regarding Nicolas, and to dispel this feeling which had plagued him too often of late, he drew a deep breath and said:

“Life is good.”

He said it firmly, as if the firmness helped to make it true. His wife looked up and gave him a quick smile.

“Life is hard,” she corrected him. “The soup was good.”

“Well,” he agreed, “the soup was not bad.”

“I do no more than give you back your own saying, Jean. Life is hard. But I would not mind being praised for the soup.”

“I praise you for the soup, Maman,” said Nicolas.

Marianne smiled at her son, and Jean said nothing, thinking that he had praised her sufficiently over the years for her cooking, her thrift, and for other good qualities. It would have been a waste of words to tell her what she knew quite well. Instead, he drew from his vest pocket the two pistoles. A passer-by in the street stopped at the window as he still held them in his closed hand, and stood a moment to look at the display of books arranged there, to attract custom to the shop. When he turned away Jean waited still until it was quite clear

that he did not mean to enter the shop. Then he laid his coins on the table, covering them still with his hand.

“What have you there?” said Marianne. “Silver?”

“Gold,” said Jean, and lifted his hand. “Are you pleased?”

“Naturally, I am pleased.”

“Take them,” said Jean. “Sew them into the rouleau in blue silk.”

“But the rent?” said Marianne.

“Paid.”

“And the account for leather, at Pincourt?”

“Paid also.” He permitted himself a slow smile. “It’s a pleasure to be able to put away a little money now and then.”

Nicolas remarked abruptly, “It would be a pleasure to spend it, too.”

“Nicolas!” exclaimed his mother in quick reproach. His father, astonished, rebuffed, nevertheless said reasonably:

“But we do not need to spend it. Is there pleasure in spending money one does not need to spend?”

“Yes,” said Nicolas defiantly, and then, to modify the bluntness of his defiance, and making matters worse, added, “At least I think there might be. I have never had the experience.”

“It’s an experience you can well do without,” said Jean. “Another experience,” he continued, “which you have not known is that of needing money when there was none to spend.”

Nicolas stared sullenly into his empty bowl. Jean looked from his son to his wife, who bent her head again and considered her ruffles. No help from her. He swept a few scattered nutshells from the cloth with his broad hand, rather clumsily, and tossed them into his own bowl. The two golden pistoles lay on the white cloth, untouched. He studied them, trying to recapture the satisfaction with which he had laid them there. He said, with a change of tone:

“My little Colas, what would you do with two pistoles?”

“I would travel. You know that I would travel.”

“You could not travel far on two pistoles.”

“I could get to Lyon. Or to Rouen. Then I could work. I could learn a great deal.”

“And what could you learn in Rouen that you could not learn better in Paris?”

Nicolas did not reply. He looked at his mother, who met his glance, smiled slightly, and shook her head. Jean, excluded, knew that the discussion was over. There should not have been a discussion in the first place. He stretched out his hand toward the coins, thought better of it, folded his big linen napkin and laid it by his place, his motions deliberate, careful, slightly fumbling, and rose to his feet. The contentment was drained from his evening. He walked to the fireplace, groped in the semi-darkness for his tobacco and his pipe, dropped them into his coat pocket, and then, passing behind his wife, took his hat from its peg near the door. Hand on the latch, he looked back at the two people seated at the table. Neither of them had stirred, and neither looked up. They knew where he was going.

In the quiet which followed his departure some coals in the dying fire clicked as they broke and fell apart, and a small tongue of flame sprang into being and burned gaily for a minute or two. Marianne began slowly to clear the supper table. The two pistoles she slipped into the pocket of her skirt beneath her apron. When she had removed the cloth, and folded it, and put it away, she brought an iron candlestick furnished with a tallow dip and set it in the center of the table, and lighted it from the hearth with a paper spill. The flame on the hearth died away. The sooty yellow flame of the candle took over the duty of illuminating the room.

Marianne closed the wooden shutters and saw through the glass where her figure blocked the reflection of the flame that a wind was rising. Dust flew along the street, and bits of straw. The sky was darker. She thought, "It will rain soon." She returned to her place, leaning her arms upon the table, her bosom upon her arms, as before. To the handsome sullen young face beside her she said:

"You spoiled his pleasure."

"He is like the miser in the play," said Nicolas.

"No, the miser is unreasonable. Your father is not unreasonable. He knows"—she paused, searching for a phrase—"the reality of want."

"I believe you are on his side."

"No," she replied again. "But I am not happy at the thought of your leaving us."

"You agreed once that I should go."

"And you agreed to wait a little."

"Waiting is hard. When I was a prentice I thought how fine it would be to get my papers, and be a free man. Now I'm a journeyman, and I'm no more my own master than when I was bound out."

"A child is naturally bound to his father."

"I'm not a child."

"You agreed to let me choose my own time to speak to him."

"The money set me off," he said. "I forgot. Perhaps he is not like the miser in the play, but when he speaks of money it's as if there were nothing in the world so important."

"He has a great fear of illness, of age."

The young man interrupted her impatiently.

"I know, I know. He's always talking of disaster, of illness, of his old age. Illness in him is unimaginable. He's as solid as an oak."

“Nevertheless, he’s no longer young.”

“He’s not old.”

“He’s the same age as the King. The King, I think, is old.”

“The King is fifty-five,” said Nicolas precisely.

The wick of the tallow dip had burned to a long black crook which drooped against the side of the candle and made the flame uneven. The boy took a knife from his pocket, unsheathed it, and with it straightened and trimmed the wick. His face, as he employed himself in this small business, lost much of its resentment. It became softer, so that his mother ventured:

“You might try to understand him.”

“Why?” said the boy calmly. “He doesn’t try to understand me.”

“You don’t know.”

“Was he ever young?”

Marianne did not reply at once. She looked into the soft round yellow flame for a long moment, and then she said with a sigh, “He was a man grown when I first met him.”

“He is older than you?” said the boy curiously.

“Much older. I was your age when I married.”

“And yet you think me too young to leave Paris by myself.”

“That’s not the question,” said Marianne. “He’s looked forward a long time to having you with him in the shop. He’s doing for you what his father could never do for him, and he thinks you don’t appreciate it. That’s what he can’t understand.”

Nicolas laid down his knife, having cleaned the blade with his fingers, and began to play with it, rolling it gently this way and that. It was a curious knife, meant for paring leather, with a very fine blade and a handle of ivory or bone, carved in the shape of a crocodile, the snout closed over the haft of the blade, tail curled under the belly, so that the entire

animal became a good shape to fit the palm of the hand. His mother, observing, said:

“He gave you his best knife. He loves you.”

“He prefers a curved blade,” said the boy ungraciously.

“His father gave him nothing that I know of.”

“Oh, I know he loves me,” Nicolas said, but with exasperation. “I don’t say he’s not good to me. I only say I need to get away from here for a while, a very little while—six months at the most. I could learn so much, working in other places—perhaps not always about books. What do I know of the world? The Quartier St.-Jacques and the Quartier St.-Paul, the rue des Lions, this building.”

He stopped abruptly, checked by the impossibility of explaining or even expressing the full force of the unrest within him. The wind had dropped for the moment. The street was quiet as the room in which they sat. Marianne, as if to change the subject, began:

“Do you remember when you were little, before you were apprenticed, your brother, your grandparents, all of us living together?”

Nicolas wrinkled his forehead. “I remember a lot of funerals. Why?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I thought it might help you understand.” It was the wrong approach. She should have known better than to mention his childhood at this time. Besides, she thought, even if he were willing to remember, what memory could he have that would resemble his father’s memories of those years, or mine?

The boy said, “I understand quite enough. He’s taught me my trade—or had me taught. Now I’m to work with him—whether as apprentice or journeyman, it makes no difference, because he will always be the master.”

“In the end, you will be the master. All his work is for you, in the end.”

“I don’t wish to hurry him to his end,” said the young man.

He stood up, walked to the hearth and back, unable in the vehemence of his feeling to remain still. Finally he stopped beside his mother. “I see the good of his plan,” he said, his voice controlled and reasonable. “I’m willing to help him. But don’t you see, if I’m to do this, spend all the rest of my life here in the shop, I must first move around a little on my own? Why can’t he give me his blessing and let me go? I would be home the sooner.”

“He says he needs your help.”

“Let him hire an assistant.”

“He wants a son.”

“If he had no son he’d hire an assistant, and that would be an end to it. But he’s got a son. Oh yes. He’s too stingy to hire an assistant.” The words were spoken with such scorn and violence that Marianne was suddenly as angry as was the boy.

“You have no right to speak like that!” she cried, rising to her feet so that he could no longer look down on her.

“It seems I have no rights at all while I’m at home,” he returned, as passionately. “Well, I can go. I don’t need to ask his leave. In that case, I won’t come back.”

His face had flushed, and she saw that there were tears in his eyes, tears of rage, but still tears in the eyes of this great lad who was as tall if not as heavy as his father. Then all at once they were neither of them angry. “I’ll find him an assistant. That should be easy. Then will he let me go?”

“I can ask him,” said Marianne.

“All I want is six little months of liberty,” said the boy, and then, unable, as earlier in the evening, to explain why he wanted that liberty so desperately, he turned away and, like

his father, with almost the same gesture, took his hat from the peg on the wall. His mother made no attempt to stop him. When he opened the door upon the porte-cochère a great gust of fresh, damp air invaded the kitchen, but there was no sound of rain. Nicolas stood a moment in the shadow of the tunnel, long enough to turn up the collar of his coat. Then he thrust his hands into his pockets, and stepped into the street. He was out of sight at once. His mother, looking after him, thought, "It could be a relief to have him out of the shop if he's going to behave like this," and then, "It's extraordinary that he can look so like his father, and behave so unlike him."

Jean had gone to the Golden Harrow. It was an inn much favored by the country folk who brought their produce to sell in the city markets, either by road or by the river. It was situated at the corner of the great rue St.-Antoine in the shadow of the Bastille, and of the rue du Petit-Musc, which led from St.-Antoine to the river. Jean had but to turn from the rue des Lions into the rue du Petit-Musc to find himself almost at the Harrow.

He had his favorite seat there, in the tavern of the inn. He could buy a dram of brandy and, for a sol, rent a copy of one of the gazettes which printed, under *privilège du Roi*, something of the news from abroad and a great deal of news about the court. He could read, and smoke his pipe in peace. And although he paid more for the brandy than when he drank it at home, the renting of the gazette was an economy.

The sign of the Golden Harrow creaked in the rising wind as he passed under it and entered the courtyard. He thought, as his wife had thought, that the wind presaged a rain, and this would be a good thing. The country badly needed a thorough drenching. He found his place in the corner and ordered his brandy. The host brought him the *Gazette de France*, without

his needing to call for it, and he opened the brochure at once, even before he filled his pipe. It was a way of signifying to his host and to those at the table beside him that he did not care to converse.

He read, as he drew his twist of tobacco from his pocket and cut a few slices, that in Hungary the Turks were massing an army of a hundred thousand men, without counting the Tartars. There had been disastrous floods in Austria. He ground the tobacco in the palm of his hand with his broad thumb, turned a page or so and read that in England new and severe taxes had been imposed upon salt, soap, and leather. The herring fishers had protested the tax on salt. He filled his pipe and lighted it, and when it was drawing smoothly, read further in the news from England that the Prince of Orange would soon be on his way to Flanders, and that the English were arming a fleet with extreme diligence. Furthermore, to man their fleet they were impressing boatmen from the Thames. The war, which had been quiescent during the winter, would soon begin again with force on all the fronts, in Flanders, in Catalonia, in Savoy, and on the seas. The English, he reflected, must be as tired of the war as were the French.

He could not imagine the King descending to the impressment of boatmen from the Seine. However, he remembered having heard talk of a conscription for the King's army from among the peasants, and in the cities, from the young artisans and the healthy unemployed. He thought of Nicolas wandering through the provinces without work; he would be among the first to be conscripted. Or if the boy were without funds, he might be tempted by the salary and the thought of adventure, and enlist of his own free will. Nicolas had no idea of what it meant to fight as a foot soldier. His father had little faith that he would be able to find continued employment

outside Paris. The times were not fortunate. The sense of depression deepened in Jean. The taste of tobacco was no longer sweet. He reached for his brandy, which he usually made last him for the entire evening, and emptied the glass in one swallow.

He could not reconcile himself to the boy's attitude. The boy had no sense of reality. He did not know the meaning of danger nor even, as his father had tried to tell him at the supper table, the meaning of want.

He thought of his own childhood, now so remote. He had not talked of it, not even to Marianne during the first days of their marriage. It had been something to forget. His father had not been a bookbinder, nothing so fine. His father had been a cobbler, and an honest man. There was no good reason why he should not have made a decent living. People always need shoes. Perhaps it was as his mother said: his father's shop was two flights up from the street—the best he could manage—but who, she had asked, is going to climb two flights of stairs to have his shoes mended when he could have the same work done and for the same price without climbing any stairs at all?

When his father had died, his mother had spent all that she owned to bury him. She had sold all but the clothes off their backs. Then she had bound her son to a master in the rue St.-Jacques, to make certain that he should know a better trade than his father's. He thought sometimes that it was a mistake, that he would have been better as a cobbler than as a bookbinder; but that had become his *métier*, and his son's *métier*, and they did not do too badly with it.

It had been a hard life, however, for a little boy. Since his mother could pay less than the usual fee for an apprentice, more was demanded of him and less was given to him than

to the other boys in the shop. He slept in the attic under the slates on a straw pallet, winter and summer. He was always up before daylight to sweep out the shop. He saw his mother seldom. She did her best, poor soul. She worked long hours to keep him where he could be taught, and she starved herself. Then one day, not being very quick on her feet from fatigue, or perhaps dizzy from lack of food, she was struck down by the wheel of a cart and then caught under the wheel. Jean was taken to see her before they buried her. He had been less than ten years old.

In time he earned his papers and was employed by Bourdon as a journeyman. Bourdon, not then Beadle of the Corporation of Binders and Gilders as he was now, had proved to be a kind employer. Jean had worked, and when he had one sol that he did not need to spend, he had put it away. Eventually the day came when the parents of Marianne offered him a dowry for their daughter which was equal to the sum he needed to purchase his master's papers and open a shop of his own. It had been a great honor. In turn, he had done justly by them. He had lodged them in their old age; Marianne had nursed them through their last illness; and he had buried them with decency. It was a fair exchange, and such as they had wished for. As for Marianne, he had loved her, and still did. She had brought to the business not only her dowry, but her presence in the shop, a gay and easy way of meeting people in the salesroom, and she had given him the warmth of a home.

They had sorrows. Nicolas was the only child to survive, Nicolas who did not appreciate all that had been done for him. A deep sense of injury grew in Jean along with a great fear of what might befall his son away from home in these unsettled days. He should not need to forbid his son to leave

him. His son should wish to stay. He called for another brandy and refilled his pipe.

Sometime later he caught his name spoken and looked up. The voice of the hostess, nasal and high, carried easily above the rumble of the general conversation.

“I met your son the other day, Mademoiselle Larcher. I hardly recognized him. If he had not spoken first I would have passed him like a stranger. We see each other too seldom, for such near neighbors. As for me, I am a grandmother for the second time, did you not know? Ah, it’s the children make us feel our age.”

Jean saw his wife beyond the shoulder of the hostess in its bright green bodice, a small trim figure clothed in dull blue and brown, unwinding the shawl about her head and shoulders. Her attention was on the hostess.

“Is it raining yet?” continued the innwife.

“A few drops only.”

“Likely it will blow over. There’s a pity. The folk who come here talk of nothing but the need of rain. Your good man is in his corner.”

Marianne looked toward Jean. He dropped his eyes and would not watch her as she approached. When she sat down beside him, her garments smelling of the evening air, he glanced at her briefly in recognition of her presence, and went on with his reading. He knew why she had come. He was resolved not to open the conversation.

He felt her lean against him slightly, and then withdraw. He saw her hand stretched forward to the table. He did not need to lift his eyes from his reading to see it. The hand flicked a few crumbs of tobacco with the thumb and forefinger, the thumb releasing the finger like a spring. The hand gathered the crumbs together and pressed them into a pill, and let it

fall, then took possession of his glass of brandy, not lifting it from the table, but turning it by its stem, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. At last the hand withdrew from his range of vision, and presently his wife murmured:

“You heard what she said? How they change!”

Larcher turned a page and pressed down the central fold. The hum of voices surrounded them. They could not have been more private in their own kitchen. The privacy left him without protection from her. Then she said, as he had half expected her to:

“Could we afford an assistant for a few months?”

“You should know,” he answered without looking up. “You keep the books.”

“I say we could.”

“I should not like it.” He had employed an assistant before, on more than one occasion, and things had never gone well. She should remember that. She said:

“I’m afraid to have him go without your consent.” He heard the fear in her voice, although she tried to speak lightly, and it echoed the fear which he himself had felt. However, he answered without sympathy.

“He would go?”

“Not——” She hesitated. “Not with a plan. He would just suddenly find himself on the road. And then he would be afraid to come back. Or too proud.”

“In that case, he would be a fool.”

“Yes. But that would not prevent him from going.”

She had said what she had come to say. He wished she would leave him now. He needed to think, and he could not think freely while she sat beside him, no matter how quiet she kept. And she kept very quiet for several minutes. Then she said, with the emphasis on her third word:

“Would you consider hiring an assistant?”

“I would consider,” he said, repeating the emphasis, but he knew he was defeated.

Marianne stood up. Then she stooped quickly, and lifted Jean’s thimbleful of brandy, and finished it. He saw the hand as she set down the glass precisely; he had never once lifted his eyes to her face during the conversation. As she left him, he watched her, still without lifting his head, from under his lowered brows. Her step was springy, and the motion of her waist, as she threaded her way between the crowded tables, was supple and quick.

He stayed on alone long after his usual hour for quitting the Harrow. When he left the inn he was still filled with gloom. He still considered his son’s choice of action imprudent, irresponsible, and his attitude ungrateful. He felt betrayed also by his wife. However, his gloom was infused with tenderness for his son and for his wife. He thought that if any one of the three of them was to be made unhappy by the boy’s unreasonable desire it might as well be himself. It had best be himself, in fact, for was he not the father?

The wind had fallen. He trudged the familiar way in darkness. It was past curfew. Not a gleam of light showed through any shutter. Only the street light, hanging above the intersection of the rue des Lions and the rue du Petit-Musc, was haloed with mist. Jean walked with his head bowed, his hands in the pockets of his long-skirted coat, and heard only the beat of his shoes upon the cobbles. The mist intruded coldly beneath the brim of his hat, beneath the collar of his coat.

The great doors to the porte-cochère were closed. He halted to unlock them and lock them again, and went on into the courtyard of the building where he rented two rooms on the ground floor for kitchen and workroom, and two on the

first floor directly above them. Feeling very tired, very solitary, he mounted the stairway, his hand upon the cold narrow iron of the railing. He knew the slow lift and curve of the steps by heart. At the first landing there was another door to be unlocked. Nicolas slept here, and here were stored materials for the shop. The windows, from which by daylight one could look down into the court, were duly closed and shuttered. The room was as dark as the inside of his pocket. He passed through the room to the door to his own bedroom, where he paused, his hand on the latch, and listened. He thought he heard a quiet breathing. He waited until a deeper breath assured him that he did not imagine what he heard. Nicolas was at home this night, he thanked God, and went on into the next room.

He removed his shoes and his cloth stockings, and hung his coat, damp with the river fog, on the back of a chair. The window of this room, which, like that of the kitchen below, opened upon the street, was shuttered also. He was in complete darkness, but he did not need to see. He knew where everything stood and exactly how it looked. Beneath his feet were the smooth uncarpeted boards of the parquet, laid in a herringbone pattern, for the house had been built, and well built, in the lifetime of the last generation. In three steps he could reach the bed. The curtains were of serge, once a deep red, now faded on the outer folds to the color of dried blood. Across from the bed was a fireplace with a high mantel, the opening closed now by a neatly painted wooden cover. Beside the fireplace was an oak chest with a good stout lock, covered with a piece of tapestry, faded like verdigris, and above the chest, encircling a white porcelain shell filled with holy water, was a rosary of dark beads, each as big as a rose haw. Above the shell was a sprig of fresh green, blessed a week ago

that day and fastened there by his own hand. In the chest was his money, sewn into rolls in scraps of silk, of old brocade, of heavy white canvas. The key to this chest he himself carried. All this was security, for this life and for the life beyond. The porcelain shell and the rosary stood between him and the pangs of hell, and so did the square scapular which his fingers touched as he changed his shirt for his nightshirt; but the golden pistoles, the écus, even the humble livres, stood between him and the lazarhouse. He tied his nightcap under his chin, parted the serge curtains, and climbed into bed, stretching himself cautiously between the cold rough linen sheets, beneath the heavy woolen covers, and turned his head upon his pillow toward that of his wife.

Marianne was there; he heard her breathing, measured and light, as if she were asleep. If she slept he would not waken her, but he hoped that she was still awake. He lay for a while, staring into the darkness, waiting for some motion from his wife, but she did not stir. By and by he turned on his side and reached a hand carefully toward her head. He found her cap, crisp with starch. He moved his hand gently down to her face and encircled it, gently, and then ran his forefinger beneath her chin, between the moist, smooth skin and the harsh twist of the bonnet strings. If she felt the caress, she gave no sign. He withdrew his hand regretfully, and turned away to sleep. His last thought, as consciousness faded, was of the two pistoles which he had laid on the supper table, and he felt a rush of alarm. What had become of them? Then he remembered that Marianne would doubtless have taken charge of them, and he relaxed, and fell asleep.

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