ENGLISH TITLE:
The Pale Skin Of Dreams

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Larrutik ordaindua

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HISTORICAL FOREWORD

France lost the war against Prussia in September, 1870, and, as a result of that defeat, the Prussians held the French emperor Napoleon III and one hundred thousand of his soldiers prisoner. King William I of Prussia's victorious army set off for Paris immediately, and set siege to the capital. In that short space of time the French did away with their Empire, declare the Third Republic, and named a Government of National Defence. During the four dark months the siege lasted, the Parisians went through hunger, cold and the horrific destruction caused by the Prussians' ceaseless bombardments. At the same time, William I was named Emperor of all the Germans in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, to the shame of all the French; the emperor had demanded France's unconditional surrender from the very start and, on signing the armistice, he imposed hard terms on the losers in payment for the many expenses incurred during the war: Alsace and Lorraine, five thousand million Francs…

At that time there were nearly two hundred thousand Parisians in the so-called National Guard. Although that citizens' militia had been formed in times of peace to protect civil order, it had worked obstinately to defend the city from the Prussian army's attacks since the start of the siege in September. On the 8th of February, 1871, there were elections throughout France in order to replace the temporary defence government with another government. After the voting, the monarchists and conservative republicans made up the majority in the new Assembly – and all of them were in favour of seeking peace by accepting the Germans' conditions. In Paris, however, the election results had been very different. Radical republicans had won in the capital, where most people thought that having to bow down to the enemy's army was a complete insult. Louis-Adolphe Thiers, the head of the new French government, was concerned about that contradiction. He was, indeed, the official

authority – but he was not in control of the Paris National Guard, and that huge armed group was turning into an alternative centre of power as every day went by. Forced to by the grave situation, Thiers and his conservative government left Paris and reconvened at Versailles. The National Guard had numerous cannons, and other types of arms, which the citizens had paid for, and the French conservatives saw that citizens' army as a serious threat, even more serious than the foreign army besieging the city.

In those circumstances, on March the 18th, at three in the morning, Thiers ordered his soldiers to take strategic areas of Paris, confiscate the National Guard's cannons, and arrest its highest leaders. By that time the city was already a powder keg, and that order set light to the fuse. Thiers and some of his ministers went there to follow the operation from as nearby as possible. The Government's soldiers occupied the most important districts of Paris without any difficulty under cover of the night; however, they had not properly foreseen how many horses they were going to need to move all the cannons down from the hills of Montmartre and Belleville. At seven in the morning the bells in those districts rang out to warn that the army was there. On hearing the chimes, the people there rushed out onto the streets, men and women, and stood between the soldiers of the 88th infantry, which the Government had sent, and the cannons. The soldiers, having lost the war against the Prussians, were unable to summon the strength to attack their fellow countrymen and, instead of obeying their officers' orders, behaved towards the members of the National Guard and the other citizens in a friendly manner. Seeing that, General Lecomte ordered his men to fire at the citizens; the soldiers, however, rather than firing at the unarmed people, pulled the general off his horse, arrested him, and then shot him, along with General Clement Thomas.

The uprising spread throughout Paris faster than the south wind, and the National Guard took the most strategic places in an instant: the national press, Napoleon's barracks... At half past seven in the evening there was an enormous number of people surrounding the city hall. The whole area was like a tin of sardines. As things were going wrong for him, Thiers ordered the soldiers, the police and civil servants who were still loyal to him to leave the city. Many of them were swift to

leave that powder keg with the help of conservative friends; from there they went to Versailles, where they took refuge. The state's old apparatus was completely out of place and, at that moment, the National Guard's Head Committee was the only true government of Paris. At ten that night the Committee finally entered the city hall. It quickly denounced the authorities, and called fresh elections. The following Sunday, on March the 26th, there were elections in Paris and workers, craftsmen, shop keepers and republicans of all colours were voted in.

The Paris Commune was founded on March the 28th, and right from the start several decisions which were going to be of great importance were taken: The separation of church and state, a guarantee that all citizens would be given basic public education, the removal of military service, the National Guard replacing the usual army, the removal of interest on debts, making night work at bakeries illegal, abolishing the guillotine, giving pensions to the widows of National Guards who had died in service, giving work tools in pawn shops back to workers, giving workers control of companies abandoned by their owners...

While all of that was going on, the city was under a double siege: to the north and the east, the Prussian army, looking on at the new conflict between the French, not favouring either side, but ready to make sure that the peace conditions from the signed armistice were fulfilled; to the south and the west, on the other hand, the French soldiers of the Versailles Government, more and more of them because they were leaving Kaiser William quite unattended. When it came down to it, the Kaiser was afraid that the revolutionary experience of the Paris Commune might spread all over Europe like a thick mist.

The fighting began after March the 27th. At first there were just a few shots between Thiers's army and the National Guards on the walls of Paris. On April the 2nd, Palm Sunday, the Government soldiers began a real attack, firing at the walls time and again with heavy artillery howitzers. Unable to resist the warm weather, the wave of citizens, women and children included, walked up and down the Champs-Élysées, from where the cannon shots could be clearly heard. At the same time, a detachment of Communards (also known as Federals) on its way to Courbevoie was attacked, and the ones who survived had to run back to Paris; the revolutionaries

who Thiers's soldiers captured were shot immediately at the foot of Mont-Valérien. The following day, under pressure from the National Guard, the Commune counter-attacked against Versailles, aiming to finish with the conservative Government once and for all. It was a passionate attack they made, but equally one without any military training…

April the 3rd, Monday

Four in the morning. Before sunrise a long National Guard column of six thousand men and eight cannons was on the road west, heading towards Rueil. A thick, wide fog covered everything. They were soaked, but also enthusiastic as they pushed forward, keen, without any scouts in front of them, at the orders of generals with no military experience or training, no carts, no ambulances, no food… It was like a parade. The cold of the night turned the soldiers' breath into steam, making the fog even thicker. The darkness let them see little more than a metre forward The odd word was heard, a few funny comments, and, then, the officers' terse commands to be silent passed from ear to mouth along the line. They marched like that for a long while, their packs and rifles on their backs, and, splashing into puddles, their muddy boots pressed through that flat meadow. And then some half oranges lit up in the middle of the fog, out in the distance, like lightning. For a second they all stood still and silent; after that second, it was hell – roaring noise, explosions and flames everywhere. The enemy was firing heavy howitzers at them from the fortress on Mont-Valérien. The first shells fell to one side of the column, making large holes in the ground and spitting shrapnel out in every direction. One of the shells split the revolutionary red flag a young guard was carrying in two. Shouts… The sound of lead… Chaos… Most of them had never even fired a shot, fear took over, and they all screamed as they started to flee. Some of them went backwards and bumped into each other, and others scrambled for some type of shelter.

One of those explosions threw National Guard Fabian Rochefort to the ground. The blast shook his whole body, as if it wanted to tear his innards out, and the crash left him deaf and dizzy. As there was nowhere to hide, he crawled

to a large hole which one of the howitzers had opened up, slid into it, and put his head between his knees. That was the first time he had fought. But although the fear of death had shaken him, he was still ashamed and exasperated to have to retreat back to Paris as everybody else was doing. He had joined the National Guard to fight for the revolution, and he was ready to die for the cause... in theory, at least. In fact, though, when they had set off that morning he had thought he was not going to have a chance to fight. He had wanted to believe that the soldiers would refuse to fire at citizens in the same way they had at Montmartre a few days earlier. He had wanted to believe that they would embrace in brotherhood once more. But he had been wrong about that. The explosions were still in full fury around him.

His heart was boiling over. A few more blasts. The earth was shaking. His body was too, from head to his toes. Pebbles and tree root like a wave going over his head. Pain in his ears. His brain full of rioting insects. The bitter taste of bile in his mouth. He stayed like that for a long time, huddled up under the barrage of fire, the earth beneath him shaking. He held onto his *Chasspot*, the single-shot, bolt-action rifle they had given him when he joined the National Guard. With the bayonet fitted to the muzzle, Fabian knew only too well that he was still at risk. From the same side as the other cannons, there were new howitzers firing their shells higher, reaching their targets easily, even if targets sheltering behind ridges of earth. Unable to summon up the courage to lift his head up, Fabian stayed there, his eyes and teeth clenched tight, getting through the fire-storm the best he could. Bullets and shrapnel whistled from one side to another, and he pulled his *kepi*, his National Guard cap, tighter onto his head. Day was breaking and, suddenly, unexpectedly, the explosions stopped. There was silence. Deep silence. His ears were humming. He opened his eyes, and looked over the top of the hole. Although the fog was still clinging to everything, he could make out his surroundings. The earth was peppered with craters, it was like smallpox, and there were about twenty corpses scattered around him, all of them covered in blood. He could see dozens of boots and shoes stuck into the ground, and backpacks and rifles, left behind in the panic. There was a bearded National Guard sitting next to a tree trunk with smoke coming out of

his clothes; his arm, which had come off at the joint, was in his hand, as if he were thinking how to put it back on his shoulder. Above him, hanging from a branch, was a man's head, the eyes open as if in surprise. Pitiful screams broke the morning's deep silence from time to time. It all seemed unreal to Fabian, a nightmare. And that was what it was: even though he was awake, a nightmare.

And then everything started shaking again. A slight vibration at first, but it was getting bigger. Fabian's eyes saw through the thick black mist and there, in the distance, he made out the enemy: a squadron wearing cuirasses was galloping unbridled towards him, the cavalrymen with a pistol in one hand and sword in the other, their rifles on their backs. And then another National Guard, who he had not seen until then, came out from his hiding place and, there being no way of fleeing, he stood up in front of the cavalry, his rifle pointing downwards in one hand, his other arm in the air to say he was surrendering. He was fifty metres from Fabian, to his right, and he was old, his beard well kept, dressed in the National Guard's blue uniform, a blanket crossed over his chest, his white leggings fairly muddy. The troopers, around a hundred of them, thinking that man was the only living being there, trotted up to him, their horses neighing and nostrils ablaze, and stopped in front of him. A captain with a moustache, a cheroot between his lips, dug his spurs into his mount, went up to the man with disdain, the white mane of hair at the back of his helmet sticking out. He twisted the ends of his moustache first, then put one hand on his hip, took his sword out of its scabbard, stood up on his stirrups, and brought his sword down on the poor wretch's head with such force that it went right through to his chest.

Fabian felt a shiver go down his spine as if they had rubbed his innards with stinging nettles, and he hid down in the hole again. He took stock of his unfortunate circumstances: he was absolutely on his own, and, by that time, most of his comrades in arms would be safe in Paris; if he stayed there, he was lost, sooner or later they were going to find him; surrendering would inevitably lead to his death; and there was no way he could face up to that number of enemies. He broke out in a cold sweat; but, all of a sudden, thick fog spread out from the river and crawled between him and the horsemen. That was his only

chance. Although he felt as if his legs were tied down by heavy iron chains, he took a gulp of air, jumped out of the hole, and started running without knowing where he was heading. He was moving faster than a hunting dog, the mist on his side. It must have been less than five minutes before he reached the protection of the huge poplars on the banks of the wide river Seine. He was breathless, his heart in his throat. He sat down on the wet grass, lent against an ash tree, and weighed up his options. The stress he was under has his blood on the boil, his nerves on edge, and his muscles tensed. He took his water bottle out of his backpack with his trembling hands and brought it to his lips: but he was so shaken up that every gulp of water went down the wrong way. His trousers were in shreds, his legs aching and covered in scratches. There was the sound of cannon-fire once more. The red circles of the enemy's artillery tore open the mist's grey cloth from time to time. If he managed to get to Roueile, perhaps he could get back to Paris across the Asnieres bridge. All of that, of course, if that area was still under the Commune's control. He walked up and down the river looking for a way out to the north between the trees and bushes. The sound of rifles got louder and louder as he got closer to the bridge. The two armies were on full fire-power, and he was on the wrong side.

While he was doing that he saw an enemy patrol approach. For the moment there were two infantry scouts. Like him, they were wearing blue jackets; but, unlike the National Guard, the soldiers were wearing French army red trousers. They were making a thorough search of the river banks, sticking their sharp bayonets into the undergrowth to find missing, solitary Federals like himself. He could not leave the protection of the tree trunk. The only thing left for him to do was to face the pair of soldiers. But as they were so close, after he shot the single bullet in his rifle he would not have time to reload. Fabian slid to the ground as quietly as possible; he got his rifle ready and rested his elbows on the ground. Looking upwards, he aimed at the young soldier nearest to him. He had used to go hunting, and everyone had said he had very sharp eyes. But now he was going to have to shoot a human rather than a deer or a grouse. He saw the bayonet at the end of his rifle was dancing all over the place, but he could not afford to miss. As the soldier drew closer, his heart began beating so fast he

thought his enemies were going to hear it. Finally, when the soldiers were about forty paces away, he pulled the trigger. An explosion.

Feeling the impact of the bullet right in the middle of his chest, the soldier went down on his knees and, before falling over, had time to look at the hole in his chest with curiosity. Hearing the shot, the second soldier instinctively lowered his head. He had no idea what was happening; he looked from one side to the other… until he saw Fabian, who was just a few metres away, lying on the grass and completely alone. The soldier, instead of fleeing, took his rifle, aimed, and shot at Fabian. Many images from his life came to him in that second, all of them mixed up together, which is apparently what happens when death closes in on us; but, at the last moment, Fabian spun over in the undergrowth and hid behind the tree trunk again. Then the soldier attacked him straight on, his bayonet raised and with a terrifying scream, like a wounded lion. Fabian opened the bolt on his rifle, put his hand into the leather pouch on his waist, and took the second bullet out… But, nervous as he was, it fell to the ground as he was trying to put it into the breech. But that time the enemy soldier was on top of him, trying to cut him up with his bayonet in vengeance for his fallen comrade. In spite of his fear, Fabian was able to see his enemy's face: his eyes were shining bright; his nostrils were flared; and his teeth were bared. Seeing him above him, Fabian lifted his rifle up and, with a quick movement, managed to fend off his lunge at the last moment.

Without thinking twice, he knocked his weapon to the ground and, as quickly as possible, ran back the way he had come, with the soldier shouting insults and threats behind him. As he ran, he heard some shouting in front of him, and he was able to make out four cavalrymen in the disappearing mist: a patrol of dragoons on the banks of the Seine that looked like the horsemen of the Apocalypse. Having no way to escape, he ran towards the river, down the craggy slope, falling down and getting up again as he did. Although the river was in full flow, he jumped into the chocolate-coloured water and swam towards the other side, flailing his arms around as if possessed. A bullet missed his head by a few centimetres and disappeared into the water.

April the 5th, Wednesday

The man stuck two fingers into the woman's vagina. She was lying on a metal bed, her legs wide open, tied onto the bed with leather straps. Even so, she kept on moving, arching and bending her body, trying to loosen the straps; to prevent her from doing that, two people, a nurse and a porter, were holding her down by her arms, forcing her back down onto the bed. After finishing his examination, doctor Jean Martin Charcot took his fingers out of her vagina, calmly looked at the shining liquid on her stomach, and lowered his nose to smell it from closer to.

"Plentiful; normal consistency and smell; pale coloured..."

For about half a minute he dictated a full description of the woman's discharge to Sophie, his assistant. Sophie was on the other side of the bed with a pencil between her fingers, writing down everything the doctor was saying in her red notebook, not missing a word, in her beautiful rounded handwriting. At the same time, the doctor went up to the patient again. She must have been around thirty, had curly black hair, and was wearing a white night-shirt, raised up to her waist; she was moving her head from side to side, swearing and sweating as she did so. Without saying a word, Charcot started stroking her clitoris, slowly at first. The woman fell silent then, her swearing became deep breathing, and, taking advantage of her calmness, he put a thermometer between her thighs. She let him, her breathing getting deeper and deeper. With the skill of somebody who had done it hundreds of times, Charcot speeded the massage up.

"Not long 'till she climaxes", he forecast, looking at his assistant. "It's the best cure for hysteria". Shortly after that, the woman felt a great wave of pleasure, her muscles tightened, and she felt goosebumps all over her body. Then was as still as a scarecrow, exhausted. Charcot lifted the thermometer to his eye-level.

"No fever".

Sophie recorded that information too in her red notebook, with her small, round handwriting. The doctor cleaned his hands in the basin the nurse passed him. Jean Martin Charcot was a small, strong man of fifty-six years of age; his long hair was swept backwards with pomade, specks of grey in it; his forehead was wide; his eyes deep-set and brown; his eyebrows thick; his nose wide; his gaze sad yet bright at the same time…

Although he worked calmly, he also moved swiftly from one place to another.

After drying his hands on a cloth, the doctor and his team left the room and walked along one of the wide Salpêtrière corridors. Salpêtrière hospital, specialised in mental illnesses, was in the 13th arrondisement of Paris, quite close to the Seine and to Austerlitz station. It was a huge hospital: there were more than forty wards, with small patios and gardens between buildings; there was also a church, Baroque in style, with space for a thousand people. When they entered the next ward, they saw lines of beds on both sides, and dozens of women lying in them: some of them had their hair loose; others were stroking their hair, or pulling at it; or they were breast-feeding invisible babies; or they were talking to themselves aloud, making gestures with their arms… Through the ward's large windows you could see the wide gardens and the few trees there were with their delicate new leaves. The nurse assisting the doctor was wearing a light blue dress, a white bonnet and a white apron; the porter too, with his symmetrical double chin, had a white apron on. Sophie Blanchet, the doctor's personal assistant, was with them too: twenty-three years old, a little taller than Charcot, wearing a long grey skirt without pockets, and a white shirt which was tight around her waist. She had plentiful chestnut-coloured hair tucked back into a bun with an ivory hair-pin; she has a black patch over her left eye, but it did not spoil the harmony of her face. At the top of the patch you could see a pink scar which, after crossing all her forehead, disappeared into her hair. Her right eye, though, was large, honey-coloured, with long eyelashes; her face was very white, soft and smooth; her nose was small; her shiny teeth were all in line; and she had thick red lips. In any case, the patch and scar made her beauty rather unsettling. She had been sixteen when she had reached the

hospital. Sophie's father, a lecturer in Physics at Paris University, had long been a widower, and in poor health too; all of that made him worry that his daughter would become an unprotected orphan if he were to die. Being a close friend of Charcot's, he asked him to be the girl's guardian if something were to happen to him. And it did happen. When her father died, she went to the hospital and started working as the doctor's secretary, organising his diary. She soon stood out for her good judgement, common sense and hard work. Charcot trusted her completely, and soon appointed her his assistant; it was, without question, a great honour for a woman of that time. She had been interested in medical subjects from the start, but she soon specialised in mental illnesses. To such an extent that without ever having studied at university she began by curing wounds, going on to carrying out trepanations, and identifying signs of hysteria.

Doctor Charcot's group left the ward, leaving all those ill women behind them, and, crossing a black and white cobbled landing, the four of them went into one of the men's wards. The ward took up a whole side of the main building, and there were two types of patients there: Communards, not many of them yet, all of them wounded by bullets or shrapnel, a few of them being brought in every day as a result of fighting against the Government; and numerous soldiers who had fought against the Prussians in the war, all of them with traumas of one sort or another. Revolutionaries and soldiers in the same hospital, apparently having forgotten that they were enemies, or should have been.

"Don't forget you're invited to supper at the Girardons' tonight", the doctor reminded the girl as they walked into the ward.

Sophie raised her eyebrows in resignation. The Girardons' eldest son, Eugéne, a lawyer with a great future in his father's practice, had been running after her for a long time now. He was not, by any means, the only pretender she managed to keep off her with difficulty, and with pleasure she would have told him, too, to get lost if Charcot had not been telling her several times every day that it was about time for her to grow up. He thought that one day she would have to stop working at the hospital, marry the first-born of some illustrious family, and form her own family. So each time Sophie turned a pretender down,

the doctor always managed to come up with a fresh candidate. The black patch over her eye did not reduce the deep fascination men felt about Sophie; her intelligence, her independent character and that 'special' beauty of hers made most men she met fall in love with her.

Once in the ward, the group went towards the soldiers' area. At first sight it looked like a place which had been left behind, with the beds crammed up against each other; but the soldiers' silence and sobbing was very different from the women for the previous ward's shouting and screaming. Some of them were paralysed; others were silent, listless, unable to close their eyes, their bodies shaking or in a cold sweat; three or four of them could not move at all, their nervous systems destroyed and useless. And not all of those symptoms were linked to physical injuries, they were caused by mental or psychological problems, although most officers thought their real illness was cowardice.

"I know you've been practising hypnosis recently, Sophie", the doctor said all of a sudden. "Why don't you give me a demonstration?"

Doctor Charcot used hypnosis with patients who suffered from certain types of hysteria, and that involved different types of techniques: the blinding light from a calcium lamp; a sudden note given off by a large tuning fork; the sound of a gong...

"Well", he went on. "In that corner there's a soldier who hasn't closed his mouth since he got here. Apparently he spends the whole day looking at the ceiling."

Sophie looked in that direction. The soldier was lying on the bed, a bandage around his forehead, and staring up at nothing. He was young, around twenty, and had not shaved for some days; his long body could be made out from under the sheets. Just then the slow sound of a howitzer firing in the distance came in through the window; hearing the echo of the explosion, the soldier next to the young man jumped out of his bed and hid beneath it, his hands over his ears. It took two porters at least five minutes to take him out from his hiding place

and, lying him on the bed, tie him to the headboard. In spite of all the noise, the young soldier kept on looking at the ceiling, his eyelids immobile, far away from everything around him. When it was peaceful once again, Sophie nodded to one of the porters to isolate the young soldier's bed from the others. He took a screen and put it to one side of the bed. Sophie picked up the metronome the nurse had brought her, moved a chair towards the bed and sat down on it. She could feel Charcot behind her. She had no wish to disappoint the master. She took a long, hard look at the soldier, and put the device into motion: sixty strokes per minute, something like the human heartbeat, which Sophie thought right for producing hypnotic suggestion. The young soldier closed his eyes, put one of his hands over them, and everyone there remained in peaceful silence. For a whole minute the only thing heard in the ward was the tedious clicking sound of the metronome. All the while Charcot stared at his assistant with great curiosity. He had one hand on his stomach and between the buttons of his waistcoat, just like Napoleon. After a minute Sophie started stroking the soldier and speaking to him in a soft voice:

"Take a deep breath and calm down. You can only hear my voice. You are very tired, and you want to sleep."

The soldier's breathing was getting heavier and heavier, and his body seemed to be sinking into the woollen mattress. They stayed there for another minute listening to the metronome ticking away.

"Now tell me what is worrying you", she started once more. "Tell me what happened to you in the war."

All of them were astonished when the soldier started speaking. He spoke in a broken voice, as people do when they have not opened their mouths for a long time.

"The artillery shelled us from the morning onwards, and many of us were killed or wounded. Those of us who were still up to fighting got into the ditch on the other side of the railway, and we stood up to the enemy from there the best

we could. We had the Prussian infantry opposite us, and the Bavarian cavalry to our left. Our comrades in arms were falling left and right around us. We couldn't hold the Prussians' charge, and we had to retreat. There was a small wood behind us, two hundred metres away, and we set off for that as fast as we could without stopping firing. Those of us who got there alive set ourselves up at the edge of the wood, we put up a barrier with some bits of cannon which had been left there, and, behind that protection, we carried on fighting against the enemy. There was only one man left in command – a sergeant with one of his arms tied back, and who was using the other one to give us all the last bullets. He shouted at us to save our ammunition, to make sure of our shots. The standard-carrier, a boy of sixteen, didn't want to hide behind the fortification, and he stood up…"

The soldier swallowed, took a deep breath, and carried on talking, in a lower voice now.

"They all jumped, one after another, and, finally, I jumped in with them too. My cadaver became one with theirs, with their blood, with their entrails, their amputated limbs, their smell, the black smell of death…"

The young soldier started sobbing then, and he went on doing so for a long time as if he were pouring out all his sorrows with those tears. When he seemed to have shed all the tears he had inside him, Sophie affectionately stroked his cheeks until he was quite calm.

"You've done really well", she said to him. "I'm going to stop the metronome now, and tell you to wake up. When you wake up, you're going to feel better. All your suffering will be behind you, like in a nightmare. You're going to start speaking again, and, little by little, get your life back…"

To one side, Charcot was smiling and nodding his head.

April the 6th, Maundy Thursday

People came from all over to crowd outside the iron railings around Beuajon poorhouse. Inside the bodies of one hundred and five National Guards had been

laid out; they had all died that week defending the Republic and the Commune. Around the coffins there were mothers and wives giving the corpses a last caress, screaming and shouting for vengeance.

At two in the afternoon the funeral procession started, followed by thousands of Parisians. Under the spring sun, a huge crowd filled the boulevard all the way to Père-Lachaise cemetery, which was where those Guards who had given their lives for the revolution were going to be buried. Six representatives from the Commune led the procession; following them were the relatives of the dead, several battalions of the National Guard, and the citizens.

Amongst them all, three eight-horse carriages, each of them bearing thirty-five coffins. There were black-edged red flags at each corner of the carriages and, above the flags, yellow and black wreaths. Everyone was walking in a slow, measured way towards the cemetery, in silence, to the sound of the drums dressed in mourning. On the pavements, all the men were bareheaded as the procession went by, their caps in their hands and their heads lowered.

On that sad day from the Commune, the weather was beautiful: the sky looked like cotton, and the sun was reflected in shop windows.

Sitting on one of the three carriages, Leo Morel looked at the women in the procession from the corner of his eyes. Many of them were crying, and their sobbing mixed with the metallic breathing of the horses. He saw a women faint at the front of the procession, and a shop-keeper holding vinegar to her nose to bring her round.

All along the way, they heard the frightening echo of the sound of firearms; they were guns being fired at Porte Maillot right then, just to the other side of the Arc de Triumph. During the previous days howitzers fired from Mont Valérien had hit the Champs-Élysées, and they had destroyed the area. The destruction had been terrible: the walls and roofs of many houses had holes in them, the Arc of Triumph itself had been damaged, pavements had been ripped open... The façade of one elegant house had fallen over, and the different storeys could be seen from outside, the stairs and all the rooms as if it were a giant dolls' house.

The streets to the west of the areas where there was fighting had been destroyed, shattered – columns, eaves, roof tiles, chimney stacks, glass and broken trees were piled up, shrouded in smoke and dust. Seeing the gravity of the situation, the Commune decided to brick the Arc up to stop the howitzers from reaching the Champs-Élysées through its central arch.

When they reached the cemetery, everyone in the procession went straight to the common grave which had been dug the night before. As soon as his carriage stopped, Leo jumped down from the drivers' seat, and ordered a group of previously chosen National Guards to take the coffins off and put them into the grave one by one.

He was a chubby, muscular man with a strong neck, a large round head; it was impossible to tell his age, whether he was forty or sixty. He was bald, and wore a small cap which was too small for his large head; his eyebrows stood out, condemning his tiny black eyes to dive down into the back of his face. His nose was flat, like a champagne cork; his lips were thick, and made his otherwise normal face ugly. On the few occasions he smiled, a golden front tooth stood out. As he had spent his whole life on horseback, he had bow-legs.

He took a small packet of tobacco from one of his pockets, and rolled himself a cigarette. As he supervised the coffins going back and forth, he remembered when he had been a grave-digger; that had been his previous job. But the Commune Committee had asked him to do "other" types of work.

He was not wearing a blue National Guard uniform but, rather, a brown checked pattern, quite worn out, which clashed with the bright orange neck-tie he had on. That was the smartest clothing a poor grave-digger could get hold of, and he had bought it when he had come back to Paris, his home town, after spending nearly ten years abroad.

Delescluze, a member of the Commune Committee, and a strong, passionate speaker, gave the eulogy, with his cap in his hand. All the people had come to call for justice for the families of the dead, and justice for the city of Paris too.

“Let us not cry for our brothers and sisters who have fallen as heroes”, he raised his voice, and moved one arm up and down. “To the contrary: let us take an oath to carry on going forward because that’s what will save Freedom, the Commune, and the Republic!”

While he was saying those words, they put the coffins into the grave in lines.

A few hours earlier Leo had been sitting in the seat of another carriage. That very morning, at around nine, he had gone with the 139th battalion of the National Guard to Folie-Méricourt Street; they had been going to fetch the guillotine, that being the most representative symbol of repression, the first symbol of tyranny that had to do away with.

Then, too, he had driven the carriage, with two horses pulling it, and they had taken away that macabre instrument and all its components broken down into pieces. There, amongst other things, was the basket; there, too, the platform and the two long arms… And in the centre of that dark wood, the shining iron triangle: the huge blade which, over the previous century, had cut thousands of men’s and women’s heads off.

As soon as the carriage carrying the guillotine stopped, some National Guards and volunteers went up to it, piled all the parts up on the stone-paved street, and set fire to it in front of the many Parisians who had gathered there; they cheered and clapped all the time, throwing their caps into the air in joy. “Long Live the Commune!”, “Down with the Death Penalty!”

Shortly afterwards, there was a outburst of anger in the square, and the people moved backwards. Along with the flames, a long trail of smoke rose up into the sky, as dark as a raven’s wing. And another trail of smoke. At the moment there was smoke coming from the west of the city, a sign that that the fighting was growing fiercer.

April the 7th, Good Friday

The man with the green glasses was in front of the mirror. The mirror looked as if it had leprosy, with dirty, black stains in its corners caused by humidity. An oil lamp threw a misleading light over the squalid room. It was just four cracked walls under a suffocating low ceiling; a broken wooden chair, a dirty basin, and wardrobe. He looked at the image in the mirror. His face was getting thinner and thinner, as sharp as a blade, poisonous, with almost no lips, something like a corpse.

He took his glasses off. Light hurt him since he had caught syphilis, but there was hardly any light in that room. His eyes. A curse since childhood: the right one black, the left one almost transparent. Yes, buying dark glasses had been a good decision. As well as protecting him from the rays of light, they hid his eyes, and that way people were less afraid of him. Once again, his hands were shaking. He put them into his pockets, and said The Lord's Prayer under his breath.

Then he put his shaking hands into the water in the basin, and held them there for ten long minutes, cleaning them all the time, finger nail by finger nail, until they were cleaner than silver. Good. Just as he liked it. Then he picked up a small sponge, and did the same thing with his teeth. Incisors, canines, wisdom teeth... Repeatedly. Perfectly organized. He was falling over with tiredness, but he could not go to sleep before doing that. Time is there for a purpose. Everything has its place.

His bed was more like a pile of leaves, the type shepherds use. Covered with a worn-out blanket. Enough. Poverty cleanses a man's soul. The love of God rules out luxury. He sat down on the chair, his head firmly between his hands. Fear. Out of control. He felt a stab of fear between his ribs, all the way to his heart. As he did every night. When he closed his eyes he never knew whether he was asleep or awake.

Whether he was deep in his dreams or in his reflections. He heard the bells every quarter of an hour. Or that was what it seemed like to him, at least. When he was lying down, the eyes of the dead attacked him, images of blood, the bitter smell of torn-up bodies, the terrible sound of the death rattle…

That night was going to be like all the others. Moving to and from a cold sweat and shaking. But he had to go on. He could not stop now. He had something to do. And he had to do it. But if he did not sleep a little, he would fall ill. And he could not get ill. Not, at least, until he finished.

He got up from the bed, limped over to the wardrobe, and opened it. Inside there was a priest's habit, the one he had worn at the seminary. He took it out, straightened it out with one hand, and spread it out on the bed. Then he lay down on top of it, and wrapped it around himself. Tightly. The smell. And then he started to calm down. Calming down. And, little by little, almost without realising it, he fell asleep.

April the 7th, Good Friday

Late afternoon. Sophie was walking through the Tuileries Garden on her way to the Rue de Rivoli, which was where the Girardons lived in their elegant house. Although Charcot kept on telling her that she should take a carriage every time she went out, that day she preferred to walk. She used to spend day after day without leaving Salpêtrière, working hard, and those strolls gave her the chance to ventilate her thoughts a bit, and get direct information about what was happening in Paris.

When her father had died, Charcot had told her to move into his house, but she preferred to live in the hospital, and that was where she was, in a room on the top floor.

A strong, sharp west wind brought the sound of the cannons to her ears. She shook her head. She had no political affiliation, and would have even less so with anything with violence behind it. The afternoon had put on a mourning

dress, and there were less and less people around. A group of National Guards hurried through the middle of the Garden pushing a couple of cannons. They were going towards Porte de Maillot, which was where the bloodiest fighting was taking place. Sophie stood still and watched them for a moment, and then started walking again. She had been invited to supper, and, although she was not much looking forward to it, she had to be on time.

The tin Sacred Heart of Jesus the Girardons had in the centre of their front door bade Sophie a silent welcome. She rang the small bell hanging there, and an aged butler opened the door to her, an oil lamp in his hand, and the bitter expression of a judge on his face; he had thin sideboards, but no beard. He ushered Sophie into a room next to the door, and asked her to wait there by lowering his head for a moment. The room had a very high ceiling, there was green wallpaper with flowers on it, and a collection of beautiful Chinese vases in the corners. After she had waited for a moment, Eugéne Girardon himself appeared with a smile on his face, and greeted her with a kiss on her hand.

“You’re more beautiful than ever today, Sophie.”

In fact, she was dressed as usual, comfortably, and far from the torments facing women who were expected to wear clothes in line with fine manners.

She looked at Eugéne. He was a delicate man, too tall, thinner than a rake, something like an embalmer. He had a very thin, shadow-like moustache, and, in full youth, he already had a receding hairline. He was wearing a white, silver-embroidered waistcoat, a grey dinner jacket, a pearl on his tie, and a golden watch-chain led to the expensive watch hidden in his inner pocket.

He had met Sophie at Christmas at the Duclos’s house and, since then, had been after her like a man possessed. He took her arm and calmly led her to the living-room, showing her all the works of art they passed on the way.

When they reached the living-room, everyone there turned to look at the couple. Eugéne’s parents were there: Arnaud Girardon, a well-known lawyer,

and Clémence, his wife. Their both being short and stout made their son's long body even more eye-catching. Standing next to them, under a huge chandelier, was another couple, quite advanced in age: Bernadette and Constantin Marchant, life-long friends of the Girardons. Constantin was a famous Jewish jeweller in Paris; short-sighted and fairly deaf, he often missed the point of the conversation. His wife, on the other hand, was quite different. Although she had once been a beautiful actress, she had long ago lost her slender figure; she was loaded down with gold and shiny jewels of all colours and sizes, and looked at Sophie with her narrow eagle-eyes with no shame or subtlety. She had a spice-scented cigarette at the end of a long holder, which she took long drags from once in a while as if she were kissing it. She was clearly there to give her assessment of Sophie.

The last guest was Balthasar Eluchans, a well-known journalist and scourge to writers and other artists in the barbed criticisms he published. Although he had been a clever man in his day, he had weakened since his wife had died. He was wearing out-of-fashion clothes with olive and silver-coloured buttons, a little white beard on his chin, and a monocle in his right eye.

The women's dresses smelt of moth-balls, and, when they moved, they crackled with starch.

Eugéne introduced Sophie to his parents first, and then to the other guests, and by the way they were looking at her, she felt as if she was being put through a test.

After a few polite, anodyne sentences, the lady of the house invited them to go through to the dining-room. There was a long table in the middle of it decorated with candlesticks and numerous pieces of cutlery and crockery; around the room there were large, red Utrecht velvet curtains, gold-coloured mirrors, and many portraits of the family's forebears, most of whom were frowning.

The elderly butler served at table and, helping him, there was a young maid who seemed rather dim.

“Tonight’s supper is onion soup, Escargot Bourguignon, and rainbow trout. I am very sorry that I cannot offer you anything better”, Clémence Girardon excused herself in her clavichord-like voice. “Our servants have searched in all the shops, but with this wretched siege…”

Everyone said together that she had done very well to get hold of such delicious food in that situation, and they enjoyed their food more than they had for a long time. The main subject over supper was the revolution. Except for Sophie, everyone there was a loyal monarchist, enemies of the Commune who were waiting for Thiers’ army to arrive and take things back to the way they had been before.

“Disgusting beggars” Arnaud Girardon said with deep conviction. “When Thiers gets back, we’ll have to set *Madame Guillotine* to work once again. Then that filth will see what severity is.”

Everyone around the table nodded in agreement with the exception of Constantin Marchant who, being deaf, was living in his own silence world. Sophie, meanwhile, was picking the bones from her fish, seemingly far from the conversation.

“Aren’t you interested in politics, dear?” was the question Bernadette Marchant launched at her, and which fell in the middle of the dining-room like a stone into a pond.

“I worry about other things”, was the girl’s response, her single eye looking up from her plate. “Even so, I don’t think looking for revenge is the right starting point. Apparently Seneca once said that cruelty and vengeance were the fruit of cowardice, and I agree with that. From the beginning of history, wars have always brought hunger, hate, tears and rivers of blood behind them.”

The expressions on all of the guests' faces froze. Eugéne had something like a smile on his lips, as if to ask forgiveness on Sophie's behalf, and he changed subject.

"Mother has a surprise for us after supper."

"A surprise!" Constantin Marchant sounded as if she had just woken up. "I love surprises. What have you got for us today, Clémence?"

"Don't expect too much, my friends. You'll soon see what it is… when we've finished", the lady of the house answered mysteriously.

After supper, Eugéne's mother took the guests into another room. There was a Persian rug in the middle with a round table covered with a black cloth on top of it; around the table there were eight gold-coloured chairs with red upholstery, sitting on one of which was a lady with a sort of turban on her head.

"Madame Mystére can speak with the dead" was how Mrs. Girardon introduced her.

Everyone looked at the unknown lady with attention; she was wrinkled, dryer than a roast potato, she had a slight hunch, and her face was covered with deep crevices. She was wearing a long, dark blue tunic with silver embroidery at the bottom. Her thin veined hands were on the table and holding each other, and she was looking at the single candle on the table without paying any attention to the people approaching her, looking at the flickering candle as if it held some secret message. Its light painted all of their faces orange.

Nobody moved until the woman looked away from the candle and made a movement with her head inviting everyone to sit down. Sophie ended up sitting next to the medium; to her left sat Constantin Marchant, and, to her right, as a matter of inevitability, Eugéne. The light of the candle barely made all of their faces visible and, beyond that, there was darkness.

“Madame Mystére has come to us from Russia”, Mrs. Girardon went on, “and she does not speak our language well. However, she has explained to me what today’s séance is going to be like, even if only in outline. It seems she was a priestess at a temple in Atlantis in a previous life, and that’s why she is able to speak with the deceased. First of all we have to decide who we want to bring from the land of the dead; then Madame Mystére will call the dead person’s soul and ask them to come here to us. If we manage to bring them here, we will be able to ask them questions, but with two conditions: you can ask a single question, and it has to be possible to answer them with a yes or a no. If it’s yes, we will hear a single sound; if it’s no, two sounds. Is that clear?”

They all said yes, ready to believe; Sophie sighed. When it came to choosing the spirit to call, there was no discussion: they all chose Balthasar Eluchans’ late wife. A cruel case of pleurisy had taken Marie Blanchet nearly a year before and, except for Sophie, everybody there had known her. After they had told her the name, Madame Mystére began her work.

“Close your eyes and hold hands”.

As soon as she spoke her strong Slavic accent was apparent, along with her cavernous voice, but she was easy to understand, and everyone around the table obeyed her orders. Sophie, caught in the middle of the circle, decided to follow along.

“Take a deep breath, and relax; otherwise, Marie Blanchet will not come.”

Silence fell over them like a tombstone, and Sophie took advantage of that to open her eyes. Madame Mystére was still looking at the floor, her eyes white as white could be and looking upwards, like an abbot in the middle of a sermon. Everybody else was waiting and well-behaved; Balthasar Eluchans, on the other hand, was nervous at seeing the chance to speak with his late wife so close-by.

“Marie Blanchet”, the medium continued: “Leave your world and, following this candle’s light, come into ours.”

There was an icy silence once more; you could have heard a pin drop. Sophie felt cold and sweat in the palms of the two men to her side, a sign that they were nervous.

“Marie Blanchet”, the medium called out once more: “Leave your world and, following this candle’s light, come into ours.”

Her curiosity awakened, Sophie opened her eyes wide and pricked up her ears... But there was no sound to be heard. Suddenly, a dry sound broke the silence, and they all gave a little jump from the fright.

“She is here”, Madame Mystére said between her teeth. “Marie Blanchet has come to us: ask your questions.”

She made a gesture for them to ask their questions clockwise, and it was Mrs. Girardon’s turn first:

“Marie, it’s Clémence, your great friend, and I want to know something: have you come from heaven?”

There was a crunching sound, clear as day, which meant a yes. It seemed that she had come from there. As the spirit had come to talk, Arnaud Girardon asked her the second question right away:

“And is heaven the wonderful place they say it is?” The answer was quick: a single sound, and, of course, when they heard that heaven was a wonderful place, everyone was mad with joy. Then it was Eugéne’s turn. He cleared his throat and, after waiting a moment, dared to ask his question:

“Should we be afraid of death?”

There was a moment’s silence; a cracking sound, and, three seconds later, a second sound, quieter than the first: no. There was even greater joy at this. It was Sophie’s turn, but she did not open her mouth.

"The next person", the medium reminded them in her thick accent.

Everything pointed to Sophie being the only person there who did not believe in the whole show; but, not wanting to spoil the hopes of the people there, she took a breath and went along with things.

"As you live in heaven, can you foresee the future?"

A single sound; yes, apparently. It was Constantin Marchant's turn.

"Who is going to win this war?"

His wife elbowed him when she heard the question.

"Don't forget that Marie's spirit can only answer yes or no", Mrs. Girardon reminded him.

"Then I'll ask it another way", the jeweller excused himself. "Will the Commune defeat Thiers's legitimate government in this rising?"

To everyone's joy, the two crunches they heard meant that the Commune was going to lose. Encouraged by the news, Bernadette asked the next question:

"Does that mean we're going to get our old way of life back?"

A crunch, full of the hope that they would see better days.

There was just one question left, the one which the deceased's husband, the journalist Balthasar Eluchans, had to ask. He looked moved, moved to his core; it was going to be the first chance he had had to speak to his late wife for a long time. He took one of Marie Blanchet's necklaces from his pocket and started to stroke it; the dead lady's face was engraved on it, and he looked at that before he asked his question:

“My dear Marie”, he started with a broken voice and tears in his eyes. “You left all of a sudden, and I had no time to ask you this question: Do you forgive me for everything I did wrong?”

There was a single sound, and then the man’s sobs of happiness. After the last question, Madame Mystére slumped flat onto the table, apparently exhausted by her work to bring the soul of the dead person there.

Seeing the woman’s tiredness, Mrs. Girardon said they should leave here there to recover, and, in the meantime, they would all go back to the living-room. So they walked out, amazed by what they had seen and talking about what they had heard, caressing Balthasar Eluchans with affection. But Sophie and Eugéne stayed behind a little.

“That was quite something, wasn’t it?” Eugéne was still open-mouthed from the miracle he had seen.

“Yes, quite something”, Sophie answered maliciously. “It’s quite something how easy it is to take people in so close to the 20th century.”

“Take people in? What do you mean? We heard the spirit’s answers quite clearly”.

“We heard what doctors call crepitus”.

“Crepitus?”

“Some parts of the body make sounds when they move: knees, ankles, elbows, fingers… Sometimes it’s because of the cartilage between the bones, and that’s called osteoarthritis; other times it’s ligaments and tendons, mostly when they’ve hardened, but sinovial joints are the most interesting.”

“Sinovial joints…”

“Yes. There are sinovial capsules between the bones. When those bones separate from each other and stretch the capsules out, they grow in volume. As

that volume increases, the pressure goes down and, because of that, the gasses dissolved in the liquid in the capsules make bubbles. When those bubbles burst, that peculiar sound comes out."

"So the crunching sounds we've heard, all of that..."

"By moving her ankles and knees, Madame Mystére made those sounds herself."

"So if you knew that, why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you uncover the trick?"

"What for? She answered what they wanted to hear, and made them believe what they wanted to believe: she deserves her fee!"