

**CLASSICS TO GO**  
**THE STORY OF  
ANDRÉ CORNÉLIS**



**PAUL BOURGET**

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# I

When a child, I went to confession. How often have I wished that I were still the lad who came at five o'clock into the chapel of our school, the cold empty chapel, with its white-washed walls, its benches on which our places were numbered, its harmonium, its Holy Family, its blue ceiling dotted with stars. We were taken to this chapel in tens. When it came to my turn to kneel in one of the two spaces on either side of the central seat of the priest, my heart would beat violently, and a feeling of oppression would come upon me, produced by the gloom and silence, and the murmur of the confessor's voice as he questioned the boy on the opposite side, to whom I was to succeed. These sensations, and the shame inspired by sins which I was to confess, made me start with dread when the sound of the sliding panel announced that the moment had come, and I could distinguish the priest's profile, and note the keenness of his glance. What a moment of pain to endure, and then what a sense of relief! What a feeling of liberty, alleviation, pardon—nay, effacement of wrong-doing; what conviction that a spotless page was now offered to me, and it was mine to fill it with good deeds. I am too far removed now from the faith of my early years to imagine that there was a phenomenon in all this. Whence then came the sense of deliverance that renewed the youth of my soul? It came from the fact that I had told my sins, that I had thrown over the burden of conscience that oppresses us all. Confession was the lancet-stroke that empties the abscess. Alas! I have now no confessional at which to kneel, no prayer to murmur, no God in whom to hope! Nevertheless, I must get rid of these intolerable recollections. The tragedy of my life presses too heavily upon my memory, and I have no friend to speak to, no echo to take up my plaint. There are things

which cannot be uttered, since they ought not to find a hearer; and so I have resolved, in order to cheat my pain, to make my confession here, to myself alone, on this white paper, as I might make it to a priest. I will write down all the details of my terrible history as each comes to my remembrance, and when this confession is finished, I shall see whether I am to be rid of the anguish also. Ah! if it could even be diminished! If it were but lessened, so that I might have my share of youth and life! I have suffered so much, and yet I love life, in spite of my sufferings. A full glass of the black drug, the laudanum that I always keep at hand for nights when I cannot sleep, and the slow torture of my remorse would cease at once. But I cannot, I will not. The instinctive animal desire *to live on* stirs me more strongly than all the moral reasons which urge me to make an end. Live then, poor wretch, since Nature bids you tremble at the thought of death. Nature? And besides, I do not want to go down there—no, not yet—into that dark world where it may be we should meet. No, no, not that terror, not that! See now, I had promised myself that I would be self-possessed, and I am already losing control over my thoughts; but I will resume it. The following is my project:

On these sheets of paper I will draw a true picture of my destiny, for I can catch only glimpses of it in the blurred mirror of my thoughts. And when the pages are covered with my scrawl I will burn them. But the thing will have taken form, and existed before my eyes, like a living being. I shall have thrown a light upon the chaos of horrible recollections which bewilder me. I shall know what my strength really is. Here, in this room where I came to the final resolution, it is only too easy for me to remember. To work, then! I pass my word to myself that I will set down the whole.

## II

Let me remember? I have the sense of having trodden a sorrowing way during many years, but what was my first step in the blood-spotted pathway of pain? Where ought I to take up the tale of the slow martyrdom, whose last stage of torture I have reached to-day? I know not, for my feelings are like those lagoon-worn shores on which one cannot tell where sea begins or ends; vague places, sand and water, whose uncertain outline is constantly changing and being formed anew; regions without bounds. Nevertheless these places are drawn upon the map, and we may depict our feelings also by reflection, and after the manner of analysis. The reality is ever shifting about. How intangible it is, always escaping our eager grasp! The enigma of enigmas is to know the exact moment at which a wound gapes in the heart, one of those wounds which in mine have never closed. In order to simplify everything, and to keep myself from sinking into that torpor of reverie which steals over me like the influence of opium, I will divide my task into events, marking first the precise fact which was the primal and determining cause of all the rest—the tragic and mysterious death of my father. Let me endeavour to recall the emotion by which I was overwhelmed at that time, without mixing with it anything of what I have since understood and felt.

I was nine years old. It was in 1864, in the month of June, at the close of a warm afternoon. I was at my studies in my room as usual, having come in from the Lycée Bonaparte, and the outer shutters were closed. We lived in the Rue Tronchet, in the seventh house on the left, coming from the church. Three highly-polished steps led to the little room, prettily furnished in blue, within whose walls I passed the last happy days of my life. Everything comes back to me. I was seated at my table, dressed in a black overall, and

engaged in writing out the tenses of a Latin verb. All of a sudden I heard a cry, followed by a clamour of voices; then rapid steps trod the corridor outside my room. Instinctively I rushed to the door and came against a servant, who was pale, and had a roll of linen in his hand. I understood the use of this afterwards. At the sight of me he exclaimed:

"Ah! M. André, what an awful misfortune!"

Then, regaining his presence of mind, he said:

"Go back into your room—go back at once!"

Before I could answer, he caught me up in his arms, placed me on the upper step of my staircase, locked the door of the corridor, and walked rapidly away.

"No, no," I cried, flinging myself against the door, "tell me all; I will, I must know." No answer. I shook the lock, I struck the panel with my clenched fists, I dashed my shoulder against the door. Then, sitting upon the lowest step, I listened, in an agony of fear, to the coming and going of people outside, who knew of "the awful misfortune," but what was it they knew? Child as I was, I understood the terrible signification which the servant's exclamation bore under the actual circumstances. Two days previously, my father had gone out after breakfast, according to custom, to the place of business which he had occupied for over four years, in the Rue de la Victoire. He had been thoughtful during breakfast, indeed for some months past he had lost his accustomed cheerfulness. When he rose to go, my mother, myself, and one of the frequenters of our house, M. Jacques Termonde, a fellow student of my father's at the École de Droit, were at table. My father left his seat before breakfast was over, having looked at the clock, and inquired whether it was right.

"Are you in such a hurry, Cornélis?" asked Termonde.

"Yes," answered my father, "I have an appointment with a client who is ill—a foreigner—I have to call on him at his hotel to procure important papers. He is an odd sort of man, and I shall not be sorry to see something of him at closer quarters. I have taken certain steps on his behalf and I am almost tempted to regret them."

And, since then, no news! In the evening of that day, when dinner, which had been put off for one quarter of an hour after another, was over, and my father, always so methodical, so punctual, had not come in, mother began to betray her uneasiness, and could not conceal from me that his last words dwelt in her mind. It was a rare occurrence for him to speak with misgiving of his undertakings! The night passed, then the next morning and afternoon, and once more it was evening. My mother and I were once more seated at the square table, where the cover laid for my father in front of his empty chair, gave, as it were, form to our nameless dread. My mother had written to M. Jacques Termonde, and he came—after dinner. I was sent away immediately, but not without my having had time to remark the extraordinary brightness of M. Termonde's blue eyes, and usually shone coldly in his thin face. He had fair hair and a light beard. So children take note of small details, which are speedily effaced from their minds, but afterwards reappear, at the contact of life, just as certain invisible marks come out upon paper held to the fire. While begging to be allowed to remain I was mechanically observing the hurried and agitated turning and returning of a light cane—I had long coveted it—held behind his back in his beautiful hands. If I had not admired the cane so much, and the fighting Centaurs on its handle—a fine piece of work—this symptom of extreme disturbance might have escaped me. But, how could M. Termonde fail to be disturbed by the disappearance of his best friend? Nevertheless, his voice, which made all his phrases melodious, was calm.

"To-morrow," he said, "I will have every inquiry made, if Cornélis has not returned; but he will come back, and all will be explained. Depend on it, he went away somewhere on business he told you of, and left a letter for you to be sent by a commissionaire who has not delivered it."

"Ah!" said my mother, "you think that is possible?"

How often, in my dark hours, have I recalled this dialogue, and the room in which it took place—a little salon, much liked by my mother, with hangings and furniture of some foreign stuff striped in red and white, black and yellow, that my father had brought from Morocco; and how plainly have I seen my mother in my mind's eyes, with her black hair, brown eyes, and quivering lips. She was as white as the summer gown she wore that evening. M. Termonde was dressed with his usual correctness, and I remember well his elegant figure. It makes me smile when people talk of presentiments. I went off perfectly satisfied with what he had said. I had a childish admiration for this man, and hitherto he had represented nothing to me but treats and indulgence. I attended the two classes at the Lycée with a relieved heart. But, while I was sitting upon the lower step of my little staircase, all my uneasiness revived. I hammered at the door again, I called as loudly as I could; but no one answered me, until the good woman who had been my nurse came into my room.

"My father!" I cried, "where is my father?"

"Poor child, poor child," said nurse, and took me in her arms.

She had been sent to tell me the truth, but her strength failed her. I escaped from her, ran out into the corridor, and reached my father's bedroom before any one could stop me. Ah! upon the bed lay a form covered by a white sheet, upon the pillow a bloodless, motionless face, with fixed, wide-



open eyes, for the lids had not been closed; the chin was supported by a bandage, a napkin was bound around the forehead; at the bed's foot knelt a woman, still dressed in her white summer gown, crushed, helpless with grief. These were my father and my mother. I flung myself upon her, and she clasped me passionately, with the piercing cry, "My Andre, my André!" In that cry there was much intense grief, in that embrace there was such frenzied tenderness, her heart was then so big, that it warms my own even now to think of it. The next moment she rose and carried me out of the room, that I might see the dreadful sight no more. She did this easily, her terrible excitement had doubled her strength. "God punishes me!" she said over and over again. She had always been given, by fits and starts, to mystical piety. Then she covered my face, my neck, and my hair with kisses and tears. May all that we suffered, the dead and I, be forgiven you, poor mother, for the sincerity of those tears at that moment. In my darkest hours, and when the phantom was there, beckoning to me, your grief pleaded with me more strongly than his plaint. Because of the kisses of that moment I have always been able to believe in you, for those kisses and tears were not meant to conceal anything. Your whole heart revolted against the deed that bereaved me of my father. I swear by the anguish which we shared in that moment, that you had no part in the hideous plot. Ah, forgive me, that I have felt the need even now of affirming this. If you only knew how one sometimes hungers and thirsts for certainty—ay, even to the point of agony.

### III

When I asked my mother to tell me all about the awful event, she said that my father had been seized with a fit in a hackney carriage, and that as no papers were found upon him, he had not been recognised for two days. Grownup people are too ready to think it is equally easy to tell lies to all children. Now, I was a child who pondered long in my thoughts over things that were said to me, and by means of putting a number of small facts together, I came to the conviction that I did not know the whole truth. If my father's death had occurred in the manner stated to me, why should the man-servant have asked me, one day when he took me out to walk, what had been said to me about it? And when I answered him, why did he say no more, and, being a very talkative person, why had he kept silence ever since? Why, too, did I feel the same silence all around me, sitting on every lip, hidden in every look? Why was the subject of conversation constantly changed whenever I drew near? I guessed this by many trifling signs. Why was not a single newspaper left lying about, whereas, during my father's lifetime, the three journals to which we subscribed were always to be found on a table in the salon? Above all, why did both the masters and my schoolfellows look at me so curiously, when I went back to school early in October, four months after our great misfortune? Alas! it was their curiosity which revealed the full extent of the catastrophe to me. It was only a fortnight after the reopening of the school, when I happened to be playing one morning with two new boys; I remember their names, Rastonaix and Servoin, now, and I can see the fat cheeks of Rastonaix and the ferret face of Servoin. Although we were outdoor pupils, we were allowed a quarter of an hour's recreation indoors, between the Latin and English lessons. The two boys had engaged

me on the previous days for a game of ninepins, and when it was over, they came close to me, and looking at each other to keep up their courage, they put to me the following questions, point-blank:

"Is it true that the murderer of your father has been arrested?"

"And that he is to be guillotined?"

This occurred sixteen years ago, but I cannot now recall the beating of my heart at those words without horror. I must have turned pale, for the two boys, who had struck me this blow with the carelessness of their age—of our age—stood there disconcerted. A blind fury seized upon me, urging me to command them to be silent, and to hit them if they spoke again; but at the same time I felt a wild impulse of curiosity—what if this were the explanation of the silence by which I felt myself surrounded?—and also a pang of fear, the fear of the unknown. The blood rushed into my face, and I stammered out:

"I do not know."

The drum-tap, summoning us back to the schoolroom, separated us. What a day I passed, bewildered by my trouble, turning the two terrible sentences over and over again.

It would have been natural for me to question my mother; but the truth is, I felt quite unable to repeat to her what my unconscious tormentors had said. It was strange but true, that henceforth my mother, whom nevertheless I loved with all my heart, exercised a paralysing influence over me. She was so beautiful in her pallor, so beautiful and proud. No, I should never have ventured to reveal to her that an irresistible doubt of the story she had told me was implanted in my mind merely by the two questions of my schoolfellows; but, as I could not keep silence entirely and

live, I resolved to have recourse to Julie, my former nurse. She was a little woman, fifty years of age, an old maid too, with a flat wrinkled face; but her eyes were full of kindness, and indeed so was her whole face, although her lips were drawn in by the loss of her front teeth, and this gave her a witch-like mouth. She had deeply mourned my father in my company, for she had been in his service before his marriage. Julie was retained specially on my account, and in addition to her the household consisted of the cook, the man-servant, and the chamber-maid. Julie put me to bed and tucked me in, heard me say my prayers, and listened to my little troubles. "Oh! the wretches!" she exclaimed, when I opened my heart to her and repeated the words that had agitated me so terribly. "And yet it could not have been hidden from you for ever." Then it was that she told me all the truth, there in my little room, speaking very low and bending over me, while I lay sobbing in my bed. She suffered in the telling of that truth as much as I in the hearing of it, and the touch of her dry old hand, with fingers scarred by the needle, fell softly on my curly head.

That ghastly story, which bore down my youth with the weight of an impenetrable mystery, I have found written in the newspapers of the day, but not more clearly than it was narrated by my dear old Julie. Here it is, plainly set forth, as I have turned and re-turned it over and over again in my thoughts, day after day, with the vain hope of penetrating it.

My father, who was a distinguished advocate, had resigned his practice in court some years previously, and set up as a financial agent, hoping by that means to make a fortune more rapidly than by the law. His good official connection, his scrupulous probity, his extensive knowledge of the most important questions, and his great capacity for work, had speedily secured him an exceptional position. He employed ten secretaries, and the million and a half francs which my mother and I inherited formed only the beginnings

of the wealth to which he aspired, partly for his own sake, much more for his son's, but, above all, for his wife's—he was passionately attached to her. Notes and letters found among his papers proved that at the time of his death he had been for a month previously in correspondence with a certain person named, or calling himself, William Henry Rochdale, who was commissioned by the firm of Crawford, in San Francisco, to obtain a railway concession in Cochin China, then recently conquered, from the French Government. It was with Rochdale that my father had the appointment of which he spoke before he left my mother, M. Termonde, and myself, after breakfast, on the last fatal morning. The *Instruction* had no difficulty in establishing this fact. The appointed place of meeting was the Imperial Hotel, a large building, with a long façade, in the Rue de Rivoli, not far from the Ministère de la Marine. The entire block of houses was destroyed by fire in the Commune; but during my childhood I frequently begged Julie to take me to the spot, that I might gaze, with an aching heart, upon the handsome courtyard adorned with green shrubs, the wide, carpeted staircase, and the slab of black marble, encrusted with gold, that marked the entrance to the place whither my father wended his way, while my mother was talking with M. Termonde, and I was playing in the room with them. My father had left us at a quarter-past twelve, and he must have taken a quarter of an hour to walk to the Imperial Hotel, for the concierge, having seen the corpse, recognised it, and remembered that it was just about half-past twelve when my father inquired of him what was the number of Mr. Rochdale's rooms. This gentleman had arrived on the previous day, and had fixed, after some hesitation, upon an apartment situated on the second floor, and composed of a salon and a bedroom, with a small anteroom, which separated the apartment from the landing outside. From that moment he had not gone out, and he dined the same evening and breakfasted the next morning in his salon. The

concierge also remembered that Rochdale came down alone, at about two o'clock on the second day; but he was too much accustomed to the continual coming and going to notice whether the visitor who arrived at half-past twelve had or had not gone away again. Rochdale handed the key of his apartment to the concierge, with directions that anybody who came, wanting to see him, should be asked to wait in his salon. After this he walked away in a leisurely manner, with a business-like portfolio under his arm, smoking a cigar, and he did not reappear.

The day passed on, and towards night two housemaids entered the apartment of the foreign gentleman to prepare his bed. They passed through the salon without observing anything unusual. The traveller's luggage, composed of a large and much-used trunk and a quite new dressing-bag, were there. His dressing-things were arranged on the top of a cabinet. The next day, towards noon, the same housemaids entered the apartment, and finding that the traveller had slept out, they merely replaced the day-covering upon the bed, and paid no attention to the salon. Precisely the same thing occurred in the evening; but on the following day, one of the women having come into the apartment early, and again finding everything intact, began to wonder what this meant. She searched about, and speedily discovered a body, lying at full length underneath the sofa, with the head wrapped in towels. She uttered a scream which brought other servants to the spot, and the corpse of my father was removed from the hiding-place in which the assassin had concealed it. It was not difficult to reconstruct the scene of the murder. A wound in the back of the neck indicated that the unfortunate man had been shot from behind, while seated at the table examining papers, by a person standing close beside him. The report had not been heard, on account of the proximity of the weapon, and also because of the constant noise in the street, and the

position of the salon at the back of the anteroom. Besides, the precautions taken by the murderer rendered it reasonable to believe that he had carefully chosen a weapon which would produce but little sound. The ball had penetrated the spinal marrow and death had been instantaneous. The assassin had placed new unmarked towels in readiness, and in these he wrapped up the head and neck of his victim, so that there were no traces of blood. He had dried his hands on a similar towel, after rinsing them with water taken from the carafe; this water he had poured back into the same bottle, which was found concealed behind the drapery of the mantelpiece. Was the robbery real or pretended? My father's watch was gone, and neither his letter-case nor any paper by which his identity could be proved was found upon his body. An accidental indication led, however, to his immediate recognition. Inside the pocket of his waistcoat was a little band of tape, bearing the address of the tailor's establishment. Inquiry was made there, in the afternoon the sad discovery ensued, and after the necessary legal formalities, the body was brought home.

And the murderer? The only data on which the police could proceed were soon exhausted. The trunk left by the mysterious stranger, whose name was certainly not Rochdale, was opened. It was full of things bought haphazard, like the trunk itself, from a bric-à-brac seller who was found, but who gave a totally different description of the purchaser from that which had been obtained from the concierge of the Imperial Hotel. The latter declared that Rochdale was a dark, sunburnt man with a long thick beard; the former described him as of fair complexion and beardless. The cab on which the trunk had been placed immediately after the purchase, was traced, and the deposition of the driver coincided exactly with that of the bric-à-brac seller. The assassin had been taken in the cab, first to a shop, where he bought a dressing-bag, next to a

linendraper's, where he bought the towels, thence to the Lyons railway station, and there he had deposited the trunk and the dressing-bag at the parcels office. Then the other cab which had taken him, three weeks afterwards, to the Imperial Hotel, was traced, and the description given by the second driver agreed with the deposition of the concierge. From this it was concluded that in the interval formed by these three weeks, the assassin had dyed his skin and his hair, for all the depositions were in agreement with respect to the stature, figure, bearing, and tone of voice of the individual. This hypothesis was confirmed by one Jullien, a hairdresser, who came forward of his own accord to make the following statement:

On a day in the preceding month, a man who answered to the description of Rochdale given by the first driver and the bric-à-brac seller, being fair-haired, pale, tall, and broad-shouldered, came to his shop to order a wig and a beard; these were to be so well constructed that no one could recognise him, and were intended, he said, to be worn at a fancy ball. The unknown person was accordingly supplied with a black wig and a black beard, and he provided himself with all the necessary ingredients for disguising himself as a native of South America, purchasing kohl for blackening his eyebrows, and a composition of Sienna earth for colouring his complexion. He applied these so skilfully, that when he returned to the hairdresser's shop, Jullien did not recognise him. The unusualness of a fancy ball given in the middle of summer, and the perfection to which his customer carried the art of disguise, astonished the hairdresser so much that his attention was immediately attracted by the newspaper articles upon "The Mystery of the Imperial Hotel," as the affair was called. At my father's house two letters were found; both bore the signature of Rochdale, and were dated from London, but without envelopes, and were written in a reversed hand, pronounced by experts to be disguised. He



would have had to forward a certain document on receipt of these letters; probably that document was in the letter-case which the assassin carried off after his crime. The firm of Crawford had a real existence at San Francisco, but had never formed the project of making a railroad in Cochin China. The authorities were confronted by one of those criminal problems which set imagination at defiance. It was probably not for the purpose of theft that the assassin had resorted to such numerous and clever devices; he would hardly have led a man of business into so skilfully laid a trap merely to rob him of a few thousand francs and a watch. Was the murder committed for revenge? A search into the record of my father revealed nothing whatever that could render such a theory tenable. Every suspicion, every supposition, was routed by the indisputable and inexplicable fact that Rochdale was a reality whose existence could not be contested, that he had been at the Imperial Hotel from seven o'clock in the evening of one day until two o'clock in the afternoon of the next, and that he had then vanished, like a phantom, leaving one only trace behind—*one only*. This man had come there, other men had spoken to him; the manner in which he had passed the night and the morning before the crime was known. He had done his deed of murder, and then—nothing. "All Paris" was full of this affair, and when I made a collection, long afterwards, of newspapers which referred to it, I found that for six whole weeks it occupied a place in the chronicle of every day. At length the fatal heading, "The Mystery of the Imperial Hotel," disappeared from the columns of the newspapers, as the remembrance of that ghastly enigma faded from the minds of their readers, and solicitude about it ceased to occupy the police. The tide of life, rolling that poor waif amid its waters, had swept on. Yes; but I, the son? How should I ever forget the old woman's story that had filled my childhood with tragic horror? How should I ever cease to see the pale face of the murdered man, with its fixed, open

eyes? How should I not say: "I will avenge thee, thou poor ghost?" Poor ghost! When I read *Hamlet* for the first time, with that passionate avidity which comes from an analogy between the moral situation depicted in a work of art and some crisis of our own life, I remember that I regarded the Prince of Denmark with horror. Ah! if the ghost of my father had come to relate the drama of his death to me, with his unbreathing lips, would I have hesitated one instant? No! I protested to myself; and then? I learned all, and yet I hesitated, like him, though less than he, to dare the terrible deed. Silence! Let me return to facts.

## IV

I remember little of succeeding events. All was so trivial, insignificant, between that first vision of horror and the vision of woe which came to me two years later, that, with one exception, I hardly recall the intervening time. In 1864 my father died; in 1866 my mother married M. Jacques Termonde. The exceptional period of the interval was the only one during which my mother bestowed constant attention upon me. Before the fatal date my father was the only person who had cared for me; at a later period there was no one at all to do so. Our apartment in the Rue Tronchet became unbearable to us; there we could not escape from the remembrance of the terrible event, and we removed to a small hotel in the Boulevard de Latour-Maubourg. The house had belonged to a painter, and stood in a small garden which seemed larger than it was because other gardens adjoined it, and overshadowed its boundary wall with greenery. The centre of the house was a kind of hall, in the English style, which the former occupant had used as a studio; my mother made this her ordinary sitting-room. Now, at this distance of time, I can understand my mother's character, and recognise that there was something unreal and slightly theatrical about her, which, although it was very harmless, led her to exaggerate the outward expression of all her feelings. While she occupied herself in studying the attitudes by which her emotions were to be fittingly expressed, the sentiments themselves were fading away. For instance, she chose to condemn herself to voluntary exile and seclusion after her bereavement, receiving only a very few friends, of whom M. Jacques Termonde was one; but she very soon began to adorn herself and everything around her with the fine and subtle tastefulness that was innate in her. My mother was a very