

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

'A MASTERPIECE'
SUNDAY TIMES

A romantic couple in a military setting. A man in a dark military uniform is kissing a woman on the cheek. She has blonde, curly hair and is wearing a floral patterned jacket. The background is a dramatic sky with several military aircraft flying. The scene is lit with a warm, golden light from behind the couple.

SUITE
FRANÇAISE
IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY



VINTAGE

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About the Book

In June 1940 France fell to the Nazis. The effects of this momentous event on the lives of ordinary Parisians and the inhabitants of a small rural community under occupation are brilliantly explored in Irène Némirovsky's gripping and heartbreaking novel. Némirovsky herself was a tragic victim of the Nazi regime but she left behind her this exceptional masterpiece. In *Suite Française* she conjures up a vivid cast of wonderful characters who find themselves thrown together in ways they never expected. Amidst the mess of defeat, true nobility and love exist, but often in surprising places.

About the Author

Irène Némirovsky was born in Kiev in 1903, the daughter of a successful Jewish banker. In 1918 her family fled the Russian Revolution for France where she became a bestselling novelist, author of *David Golder*, *Le Bal*, *The Courilof Affair*, *All Our Worldly Goods* and other works published in her lifetime or afterwards, such as *Suite Française* and *Fire in the Blood*.

Némirovsky was prevented from publishing when the Germans occupied France and moved with her husband and two small daughters from Paris to the safety of the small village of Issy-l'Evêque (in German occupied territory). She died in Auschwitz in 1942.

Sandra Smith is a fellow of Robinson College, Cambridge, and has translated ten of Irène Némirovsky's novels into English.

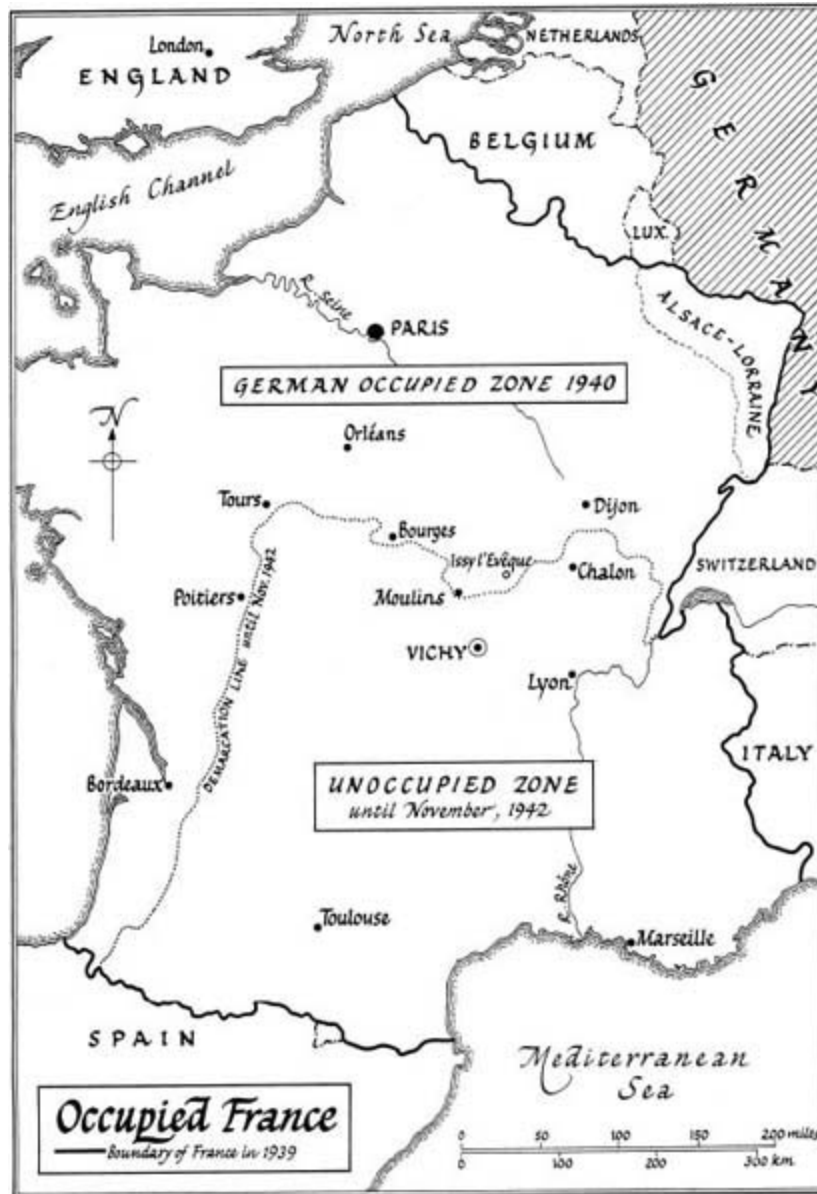
Also by Irène Némirovsky

David Golder

Le Bal

The Courilof Affair

Fire in the Blood



I dedicate this novel to the memory of my mother and father, to my sister Elisabeth Gille, to my children and grandchildren, and to everyone who has felt and continues to feel the tragedy of intolerance.

Denise Epstein

IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

Suite Française

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
Sandra Smith

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Translator's Note

Irène Némirovsky wrote the two books that form *Suite Française* under extraordinary circumstances. While they may seem remarkably polished and complete, 'Storm in June' and 'Dolce' were actually part of a work-in-progress. Had she survived, Irène Némirovsky would certainly have made corrections to these two books and completed the cycle she envisaged as her literary equivalent to a musical composition.

Translation is always a daunting task, especially when the translator has so much respect and affection for the author. It is also a creative task that often requires 'leaps of faith': a feeling for tone, sensing the author's intention, taking the liberty to interpret and, sometimes, to correct. With *Suite Française*, I have made slight changes in order to correct a few minor errors that appear in the novel. In particular, I have altered characters' names when they were inconsistent and could prove confusing. However, I have retained other anomalies that pose no real problem to the reader, such as the incorrect proximity of Tours to Paray-le-Monial. Perhaps the most striking error for the English reader is the misquotation of Keats, when Némirovsky writes: 'This thing of Beauty is a *guilt* for ever'. I have deliberately retained this mistake in the text as a poignant reminder that Némirovsky was writing *Suite Française* in the depths of the French countryside, with a sense of urgent foreboding and nothing but her memory as a source.

The Appendices in this edition provide important details regarding Némirovsky's plans for the remaining three

books, along with poignant correspondence that reveals her own family's terrible situation.

This translation would not have been possible without the support, advice and encouragement of many people. I am very grateful to my husband Peter, my son Harry, Rebecca Carter at Chatto & Windus, Anne Garvey, Patricia Freestone, Philippe Savary, Paul Micio, Jacques Beauroy and my friends and colleagues at Robinson College, Cambridge. It has been a privilege to translate *Suite Française*. I am sure Irène Némirovsky would have been happy that so many years after her tragic murder, so many thousands world wide can once again hear her voice. I hope I have done her justice.

I wish to dedicate this translation to my family: the Steins, Lantzes, Beckers and Hofstetters, and to all the countless others who fought, and continue to fight, prejudice and persecution.

Sandra Smith, Cambridge, March 2006

ONE

Storm in June

1

War

HOT, THOUGHT THE Parisians. The warm air of spring. It was night, they were at war and there was an air raid. But dawn was near and the war far away. The first to hear the hum of the siren were those who couldn't sleep - the ill and bedridden, mothers with sons at the front, women crying for the men they loved. To them it began as a long breath, like air being forced into a deep sigh. It wasn't long before its wailing filled the sky. It came from afar, from beyond the horizon, slowly, almost lazily. Those still asleep dreamed of waves breaking over pebbles, a March storm whipping the woods, a herd of cows trampling the ground with their hooves, until finally sleep was shaken off and they struggled to open their eyes, murmuring, 'Is it an air raid?'

The women, more anxious, more alert, were already up, although some of them, after closing the windows and shutters, went back to bed. The night before - Monday 3 June - bombs had fallen on Paris for the first time since the beginning of the war. Yet everyone remained calm. Even though the reports were terrible, no one believed them. No more so than if victory had been announced. 'We don't understand what's happening,' people said.

They had to dress their children by torchlight. Mothers lifted small, warm, heavy bodies into their arms: 'Come on, don't be afraid, don't cry.' An air raid. All the lights were out, but beneath the clear, golden June sky, every house, every street was visible. As for the Seine, the river seemed to absorb even the faintest glimmers of light and reflect

them back a hundred times brighter, like some multifaceted mirror. Badly blacked-out windows, glistening rooftops, the metal hinges of doors all shone in the water. There were a few red lights that stayed on longer than the others, no one knew why, and the Seine drew them in, capturing them and bouncing them playfully on its waves. From above, it could be seen flowing along, as white as a river of milk. It guided the enemy planes, some people thought. Others said that couldn't be so. In truth, no one really knew anything. 'I'm staying in bed,' sleepy voices murmured, 'I'm not scared.' 'All the same, it just takes one ...' the more sensible replied.

Through the windows that ran along the service stairs in new apartment blocks, little flashes of light could be seen descending: the people living on the sixth floor were fleeing the upper storeys; they held their torches in front of them, in spite of the regulations. 'Do you think I want to fall on my face on the stairs! Are you coming, Emile?' Everyone instinctively lowered their voices as if the enemy's eyes and ears were everywhere. One after another, doors slammed shut. In the poorer neighbourhoods there was always a crowd in the Métro, or the foul-smelling shelters. The wealthy simply went to sit with the concierge, straining to hear the shells bursting and the explosions that meant bombs were falling, their bodies as tense as frightened animals in dark woods as the hunter gets closer. Though the poor were just as afraid as the rich, and valued their lives just as much, they were more sheeplike: they needed each other, needed to link arms, to groan or laugh together.

Day was breaking. A silvery blue light slid over the cobblestones, over the parapets along the quayside, over the towers of Notre-Dame. Bags of sand were piled halfway up all the important monuments, encircling Carpeaux's dancers on the façade of the Opera House, silencing the Marseillaise on the Arc de Triomphe.

Still at some distance, great guns were firing; they drew nearer, and every window shuddered in reply. In hot rooms

with blacked-out windows, children were born, and their cries made the women forget the sound of sirens and war. To the dying, the barrage of gunfire seemed far away, without any meaning whatsoever, just one more element in that vague, menacing whisper that washes over those on the brink of death. Children slept peacefully, held tight against their mothers' sides, their lips making sucking noises, like little lambs. Street sellers' carts lay abandoned, full of fresh flowers.

The sun came up, fiery red, in a cloudless sky. A shell was fired, now so close to Paris that from the top of every monument birds rose into the sky. Great black birds, rarely seen at other times, stretched out their pink-tinged wings. Beautiful fat pigeons cooed; swallows wheeled; sparrows hopped peacefully in the deserted streets. Along the Seine each poplar tree held a cluster of little brown birds who sang as loudly as they could. Deep beneath the ground they heard the sound everyone had been waiting for, a muffled, faraway call, like a three-tone fanfare. The air raid was over.

IN THE PÉRICAND household they listened in shocked silence to the evening news on the radio, but no one passed comment on the latest developments. The Péricands were a cultivated family: their traditions, their way of thinking, their middle-class, Catholic background, their ties with the Church (their eldest son, Philippe Péricand, was a priest), all these things made them mistrustful of the government of France. On the other hand, Monsieur Péricand's position as curator of one of the country's national museums bound them to an administration that showered its faithful with honours and financial rewards.

A cat held a little piece of bony fish tentatively between its sharp teeth. He was afraid to swallow it, but he couldn't bring himself to spit it out either.

Madame Péricand finally decided that only a male mind could explain with clarity such strange, serious events. Neither her husband nor her eldest son was at home: her husband was dining with friends, her son was not in Paris. Charlotte Péricand, who ruled the family's daily life with an iron hand (whether it was managing the household, her children's education or her husband's career), was not in the habit of seeking anyone's opinion. But this was of a different order. She needed a voice of authority to tell her what to believe. Once pointed in the right direction, there would be no stopping her. Even if given absolute proof she was mistaken, she would reply with a cold, condescending smile, 'My father said so ... My husband is very well-

informed.' And she would make a dismissive little gesture with her gloved hand.

She took pride in her husband's position (she herself would have preferred a more domestic lifestyle, but following the example of our Dear Saviour, each of us has his cross to bear). She had come home between appointments to oversee her children's studies, the baby's bottles and the servants' work, but she didn't have time to take off her hat and coat. For as long as the Péricand children could remember, their mother was always ready to go out, armed with hat and white gloves. (Since she was thrifty, her mended gloves had the faint smell of stain remover, a reminder of their passage through the dry-cleaners.)

As soon as she had come in this evening, she had gone to stand in front of the radio in the drawing room. Her clothes were black, her hat a divine little creation in fashion that season, decorated with three flowers and topped with a silk pom-pom. Beneath it, her face was pale and anguished, emphasising the marks of age and fatigue. She was forty-seven years old and had five children. You would have thought, to look at her, that God had intended her to be a redhead. Her skin was extremely delicate, lined by the passing years. Freckles were dotted over her strong, majestic nose. The expression in her green eyes was as sharp as a cat's. At the last minute, however, it seemed that Providence had wavered, or decided that a shock of red hair would not be appropriate, neither to Madame Péricand's irreproachable morals nor to her social status, so she had been given mousy brown hair, which she was losing by the handful since she'd had her last child. Monsieur Péricand was a man of great discipline: his religious scruples prohibited a number of pleasures and his concern for his reputation kept him away from places of ill repute. The youngest Péricand child was only two, and between Father Philippe and the baby, there were three

other children, not counting the ones Madame Péricand discreetly referred to as the 'three accidents': babies she had carried almost to term before losing them, so that three times their mother had been on the verge of death.

The drawing room, where the radio was now playing, was enormous and well-proportioned, with four windows overlooking the Boulevard Delessert. It was furnished in traditional style, with large armchairs and settees upholstered in golden yellow. Next to the balcony, the elder Monsieur Péricand sat in his wheelchair. He was an invalid whose advancing age meant that he sometimes lapsed back into childhood and only truly returned to his right mind when discussing his fortune, which was considerable (he was a Péricand-Maltête, heir of the Maltête family of Lyon). But the war, with its trials and tribulations, no longer affected him. He listened, indifferent, steadily nodding his beautiful silvery beard. The children stood in a semi-circle behind their mother, the youngest in his nanny's arms. Nanny had three sons of her own at the front. She had brought the little boy downstairs to say goodnight to his family and took advantage of her brief entry into the drawing room to listen anxiously to what they were saying on the radio.

The door was slightly ajar and Madame Péricand could sense the presence of the other servants outside. Madeleine, the maid, was so beside herself with worry that she came right up to the doorway. To Madame Péricand, such a breach of the normal rules seemed a frightening indication of things to come. It was in just this manner that the different social classes all ended up on the top deck during a shipwreck. But working-class people were highly strung. 'How they do get carried away,' Madame Péricand thought reproachfully. She was one of those middle-class women who generally trust the lower classes. 'They're not so bad if you know how to deal with them,' she would say in the same condescending and slightly sad tone she used to

talk of a caged animal. She was proud that she kept her servants for a long time. She insisted on looking after them when they were ill. When Madeleine had had a sore throat, Madame Péricand herself had prepared her gargle. Since she had no time to administer it during the day, she had waited until she got back from the theatre in the evening. Madeleine had woken up with a start and had only expressed her gratitude afterwards, and even then, rather coldly in Madame Péricand's opinion. Well, that's the lower classes for you, never satisfied, and the more you go out of your way to help them, the more ungrateful and moody they are. But Madame Péricand expected no reward except from God.

She turned towards the shadowy figures in the hallway and said with great kindness, 'You may come and listen to the news if you like.'

'Thank you, Madame,' the servants murmured respectfully and slipped into the room on tiptoe.

They all came in: Madeleine, Marie, Auguste the valet, and finally Maria the cook, embarrassed because her hands smelled of fish. But the news was over. Now came the commentaries on the situation: 'Serious, of course, but not alarming,' the speaker assured everyone. He spoke in a voice so full, so calm, so effortless, and used such a resonant tone each time he said the words 'France', 'Homeland' and 'Army', that he instilled hope in the hearts of his listeners. He had a particular way of reading such communiqués as 'The enemy is continuing relentless attacks on our positions but is encountering the most valiant resistance from our troops.' He said the first part of the sentence in a soft, ironic, scornful tone of voice, as if to imply, 'At least that's what they'd like us to think.' But in the second part he stressed each syllable, hammering home the adjective 'valiant' and the words 'our troops' with such confidence that people couldn't help thinking, 'Surely there's no reason to worry so much!'

Madame Péricand saw the questioning, hopeful stares directed towards her. 'It doesn't seem absolutely awful to me!' she said confidently. Not that she believed it; she just felt it was her duty to keep up morale.

Maria and Madeleine let out a sigh.

'You think so, Madame?'

Hubert, the second-eldest son, a boy of seventeen with chubby pink cheeks, seemed the only one struck with despair and amazement. He dabbed nervously at his neck with a crumpled-up handkerchief and shouted in a voice that was so piercing it made him hoarse, 'It isn't possible! It isn't possible that it's come to this! But, Mummy, what has to happen before they call everyone up? Right away - every man between sixteen and sixty! That's what they should do, don't you think so, Mummy?'

He ran into the study and came back with a large map, which he spread out on the table, frantically measuring the distances. 'We're finished, I'm telling you, finished, unless ...'

Hope was restored. '*I see what they're going to do,*' he finally announced, with a big happy smile that revealed his white teeth. 'I can see it very well. We'll let them advance, advance, and then we'll be waiting for them there and there, look, see, Mummy! Or even ...'

'Yes, yes,' said his mother. 'Go and wash your hands now, and push back that bit of hair that keeps falling into your eyes. Just look at you.'

Fury in his heart, Hubert folded up his map. Only Philippe took him seriously, only Philippe spoke to him as an equal. 'How I hate this family,' he said to himself and kicked violently at his little brother's toys as he left the drawing room. Bernard began to cry. 'That'll teach him about life,' Hubert thought.

The nanny hurried to take Bernard and Jacqueline out of the room; the baby, Emmanuel, was already asleep over her shoulder. Holding Bernard's hand, she strode through the

door, crying for her three sons whom she imagined already dead, all of them. 'Misery and misfortune, misery and misfortune!' she said quietly, over and over again, shaking her grey head. She continued muttering as she started running the bath and warmed the children's pyjamas: 'Misery and misfortune.' To her, those words embodied not only the political situation but, more particularly, her own life: working on the farm in her youth, her widowhood, her unpleasant daughters-in-law, living in other people's houses since she was sixteen.

Auguste, the valet, shuffled back into the kitchen. On his solemn face was an expression of great contempt that was aimed at many things.

The energetic Madame Péricand went to her rooms and used the available fifteen minutes between the children's bath time and dinner to listen to Jacqueline and Bernard recite their school lessons. Bright little voices rose up: 'The earth is a sphere which sits on absolutely nothing.'

Only the elder Monsieur Péricand and Albert the cat remained in the drawing room. It had been a lovely day. The evening light softly illuminated the thick chestnut trees; Albert, a small grey tomcat who belonged to the children, seemed ecstatic. He rolled around on his back on the carpet. He jumped up on to the mantelpiece, nibbled at the edge of a peony in a large midnight-blue vase, delicately pawed at a snapdragon etched into the bronze corner-mount of a console table, then in one leap perched on the old man's wheelchair and miaowed in his ear. The elder Monsieur Péricand stretched a hand towards him; his hand was always freezing cold, purple and shaking. The cat was afraid and ran off. Dinner was about to be served. Auguste appeared and pushed the invalid into the dining room.

They were just sitting down at the table when the mistress of the house stopped suddenly, Jacqueline's spoon

of tonic suspended in mid-air. 'It's your father, children,' she said as the key turned in the lock.

It was indeed Monsieur Péricand, a short, stocky man with a gentle and slightly awkward manner. His normally well-fed, relaxed and rosy-cheeked face looked, not frightened or worried, but extraordinarily shocked. He wore the expression found on people who have died in an accident, in a matter of seconds, without having had time to be afraid or suffer. They would be reading a book or looking out of a car window, thinking about things, or making their way along a train to the restaurant car when, all of a sudden, there they were in hell.

Madame Péricand rose quietly from her chair. 'Adrien?' she called out, her voice anguished.

'It's nothing. Nothing,' he muttered hastily, glancing furtively at the children, his father and the servants.

Madame Péricand understood. She nodded at the servants to continue serving dinner. She forced herself to swallow her food, but each mouthful seemed as hard and bland as a stone and stuck in her throat. Nevertheless, she repeated the phrases that had become ritual at mealtimes for the past thirty years. 'Don't drink before starting your soup,' she told the children. 'Darling, your knife ...'

She cut the elderly Monsieur Péricand's filet of sole into small strips. He was on a complicated diet that allowed him to eat only the lightest food and Madame Péricand always served him herself, pouring his water, buttering his bread, tying his napkin round his neck, for he always started drooling when he saw food he liked. 'I don't think poor elderly invalids can bear to be touched by servants,' she would say to her friends.

'We must show grandfather how much we love him, my darlings,' she instructed the children, looking at the old man with terrifying tenderness.

In his later years, Monsieur Péricand had endowed various philanthropic projects, one of which was especially

dear to his heart: the Penitent Children of the 16th Arrondissement, a venerable institution whose goal was to instil morals in delinquent minors. It had always been understood that the elder Monsieur Péricand would leave a certain sum of money to this organisation, but he had a rather irritating way of never revealing exactly how much. If he hadn't enjoyed his meal, or if the children made too much noise, he would suddenly emerge from his stupor and say in a weak but clear voice, 'I'm going to leave them five million.'

A painful silence would follow.

On the other hand, if he'd had a lovely meal and a good sleep in his chair by the window, in the sunshine, he would look up at his daughter-in-law with the pale, distant eyes of a small child, or a newborn puppy.

Charlotte was very tactful. She never replied, as others might, 'You're absolutely right, Father.' Instead, she would say sweetly, 'Good Lord, you have plenty of time to think about that!'

The Péricand fortune was considerable, but it would be unjust to accuse them of coveting the elder Monsieur Péricand's inheritance. They didn't care about money, not at all, but money cared about them, so to speak! There were certain things that they deserved, including the Maltête-Lyonnais millions; they would never manage to spend it all but they would save it for their children's children. As for the Penitent Children of the 16th Arrondissement, they were so involved with this charity that, twice a year, Madame Péricand organised classical music concerts for the unfortunate children; she would play the harp and was gratified to notice that, at certain passages, sobbing could be heard in the darkened concert hall.

Monsieur Péricand followed his daughter-in-law's hands attentively. She was so distracted and upset that she forgot his sauce. His white beard waved about alarmingly.

Madame Péricand came back to reality and quickly poured the parsley butter over the ivory flesh of the fish, but it was only after she placed a slice of lemon at the side of his plate that the old man was calm again.

Hubert leaned towards his brother and muttered, 'It's not going well, is it?'

'No,' he replied with a gesture and a look. Hubert dropped his trembling hands on to his lap. He was lost in thought, vividly imagining scenes of battle and victory. He was a Boy Scout. He and his friends would form a group of volunteers, sharpshooters who would defend their country to the end. In a flash, his mind raced through time and space. He and his friends: a small group bound by honour and loyalty. They would fight, they would fight all night long; they would save their bombed-out, burning Paris. What an exciting, wonderful life! His heart leapt. And yet, war was such a savage and horrifying thing. He was intoxicated by his imaginings. He clutched his knife so tightly in his hand that the piece of roast beef he was cutting fell on to the floor.

'Clumsy oaf,' whispered Bernard. He and Jacqueline were eight and nine years old respectively and were both thin, blond and stuck-up. The two of them were sent to bed after dessert and the elder Monsieur Péricand fell asleep at his usual place by the open window. The tender June day persisted, refusing to die. Each pulse of light was fainter and more exquisite than the last, as if bidding farewell to the earth, full of love and regret. The cat sat on the window ledge and looked nostalgically towards an horizon that was the colour of green crystal.

Monsieur Péricand paced up and down the room. 'In a few days, maybe even tomorrow, the Germans will be on our doorstep. I've heard the High Command has decided to fight outside Paris, in Paris, beyond Paris. No one knows it yet, thank goodness, because after tomorrow there will be a stampede on the roads and at the train stations. You must

leave for your mother's house in Burgundy as early as possible tomorrow morning, Charlotte. As for me,' Monsieur Péricand said rather proudly, 'I will share the fate of the treasures entrusted to my care.'

'I thought everything in the museum had been moved out in September,' said Hubert.

'Yes, but the temporary hiding place they chose in Brittany isn't suitable; it turns out it's as damp as a cellar. I just don't understand it. A Committee was organised to safeguard national treasures. It had three sections and seven subsections, each of which was supposed to appoint a panel of experts responsible for hiding works of art during the war, yet just last month an attendant in the provisional museum points out that suspicious stains are appearing on the canvases. Yes, a wonderful portrait of Mignard with his hands rotting away from a kind of green leprosy. They quickly sent the valuable packing cases back to Paris and now I'm waiting for an order to rush them off to somewhere even further away.'

'But what about us? How will we travel? By ourselves?'

'You'll leave tomorrow morning, calmly, with the children and the two cars, and any furniture and luggage you can carry, of course. We can't pretend that, by the end of the week, Paris might not be destroyed, burned down and thoroughly pillaged.'

'You are amazing!' exclaimed Charlotte. 'You talk about it so calmly!'

Monsieur Péricand turned towards his wife, his face gradually returning to its normal pinkish colour - a matte pink, the colour of pigs who have been recently slaughtered. 'That's because I can't really believe it,' he explained quietly. 'Here I am, speaking to you, listening to you; we've decided to flee, to leave our home, yet I cannot believe that it is all *real*. Do you understand? Now go and get everything ready, Charlotte. Everything must be ready

by tomorrow morning; you could be at your mother's in time for dinner. I'll join you as soon as I can.'

Madame Péricand's face wore the same resigned, bitter look as when the children were ill and she was forced to put on an apron and nurse them; they all usually managed to be ill at the same time, though with different maladies. When this happened, Madame Péricand would come out of the children's rooms with a thermometer in her hand, as if she were brandishing the crown of martyrdom, and everything in her bearing seemed to cry out: 'You will reward your servants on Judgement Day, kind Jesus!'

'What about Philippe?' was all she asked.

'Philippe cannot leave Paris.'

Madame Péricand left the room, head held high. She refused to bow beneath the burden. She would see to it that the entire household was ready to leave in the morning: the elderly invalid, four children, the servants, the cat, plus the silver, the most valuable pieces of china, the fur coats, food and medicine in case of emergencies. She shuddered.

In the sitting room, Hubert was pleading with his father. 'Please let me stay. I can stay here with Philippe. And ... don't make fun of me! Can't you see that if I went and got my friends we could form a company of volunteers; we're young, strong, ready for anything ... We could ...'

Monsieur Péricand looked at him. 'My poor boy!' was all he said.

'It's all over? We've lost the war?' stammered Hubert. 'Is ... is it true?'

And suddenly, to his horror, he felt himself burst into tears. He cried like a baby, like Bernard would have cried, his large mouth twisted, tears streaming down his face. Night was falling, soft and peaceful. A swallow flew by, lightly brushing against the balcony in the dark night air. The cat let out a frustrated little cry of desire.

3

THE WRITER GABRIEL Corte was working on his terrace, between the dark, swaying woods and the golden green setting sun fading over the Seine. How peaceful everything was around him! Beside him were his well-trained faithful friends, great white dogs who were awake yet motionless, their noses pressed against the cool paving stones, their eyes half closed. At his feet his mistress silently picked up the sheets of paper he dropped. His servants, the secretary, were all invisible behind the shimmering windows; they were hidden somewhere in the background of the house, in the wings of his life, a life he desired to be as brilliant, luxurious and disciplined as a ballet. He was fifty years old and had his favourite games. Depending on the day, he was either Lord of the Heavens or a miserable writer crushed by hard work and labouring in vain. On his desk he had had engraved, 'To lift such a heavy weight, Sisyphus, you will need all your courage.' His fellow writers were jealous of him because he was rich. He himself bitterly told the story of his first candidature to the Académie Française: one of the electors implored to vote for him had sarcastically replied, 'He has three telephone lines!'

He was handsome, with the cruel, languid movements of a cat, expressive soft hands and a slightly full Roman face. Only Florence, his official mistress, was allowed to remain in his bed until morning (the others never spent the night with him). Only she knew how many masks he could put on,

this old flirt with dark circles under his eyes and thin arched eyebrows, too thin, like a woman's.

That evening he was working as he normally did, half-naked. His house in Saint-Cloud had been specially built to be hidden away from prying eyes, right down to the vast, wonderful terrace, planted with blue cinerarias. Blue was Gabriel Corte's favourite colour. He could only write if he had a small glass bowl of deep lapis lazuli beside him. He would look at it now and again, and caress it like a mistress. What he liked best in Florence, as he often told her, were her clear blue eyes, which gave him the same feeling of coolness as his glass bowl. 'Your eyes quench my thirst,' he would murmur. She had a soft, slightly flabby chin, a contralto voice that was still beautiful and, Gabriel Corte confided to his friends, something cow-like in her expression. I like that. A woman should look like a heifer: sweet, trusting and generous, with a body as white as cream. You know, like those old actresses whose skin has been softened by massage, make-up and powder.

He stretched his delicate fingers in the air and clicked them like castanets. Florence handed him a lemon, then an orange and some glacé strawberries; he consumed an enormous amount of fruit. She gazed at him, almost kneeling before him on a suede pouffe, in that attitude of adoration that pleased him so much (though he couldn't have imagined any other). He was tired, but it was that good tiredness which comes from doing enjoyable work. Sometimes he said it was better than the tiredness that comes after making love.

He looked benevolently at his mistress. 'Well, that's not gone too badly, I think. And you know, the midpoint.' (He drew a triangle in the air indicating its top.) 'I've got past it.'

She knew what he meant. Inspiration flagged in the middle of a novel. At those moments, Corte struggled like a horse trying in vain to pull a carriage out of the mud. She

brought her hands together in a gracious gesture of admiration and surprise. 'Already! I congratulate you, my dear. Now it will go smoothly, I'm sure.'

'God willing!' he murmured. 'But Lucienne worries me.'

'Lucienne?'

He looked at her scornfully, his eyes hard and cold. When he was in a good mood, Florence would say, 'You still have that killer look in your eye ...' and he would laugh, flattered. But he hated being teased when in the throes of creativity.

She couldn't even remember who Lucienne was.

'Of course,' she lied. 'I don't know what I was thinking!'

'I don't know either,' he said in a wounded voice.

But she seemed so sad and humble that he took pity on her and softened. 'I keep telling you, you don't pay enough attention to the minor characters. A novel should be like a street full of strangers, where no more than two or three people are known to us in depth. Look at writers like Proust. They knew how to use minor characters to humiliate, to belittle their protagonists. In a novel, there is nothing more valuable than teaching the lesson of humility to the heroes. Remember, in *War and Peace*, the little peasant girls who cross the road, laughing, in front of Prince Andrei's carriage? He speaks to them, directly, and the reader's imagination is at once lifted; now there is not just one face, not just one soul. He portrays the many faces of the crowd. Wait, I'll read you that passage, it's remarkable. Put the light on,' he said, for night had fallen.

'Planes,' Florence replied, looking up at the sky.

'Won't they leave me the hell alone?' he thundered.

He hated the war; it threatened much more than his lifestyle or peace of mind. It continually destroyed the world of the imagination, the only world where he felt happy. It was like a shrill, brutal trumpet shattering the fragile crystal walls he'd taken such pains to build in order to shut out the rest of the world.