



VINTAGE

LIFE:
A USER'S MANUAL
GEORGES PEREC

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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About the Author

Georges Perec (1936–82) won the Prix Renaudot in 1965 for his first novel *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, and went on to exercise his unrivalled mastery of language in almost every imaginable kind of writing, from the apparently trivial to the deeply personal. He composed acrostics, anagrams, autobiography, criticism, crosswords, descriptions of dreams, film scripts, heterograms, lipograms, memories, palindromes, plays, poetry, radio plays, recipes, riddles, stories short and long, travel notes, univocalics, and, of course, novels. *Life A User's Manual*, which draws on many of Perec's other works, appeared in 1978 after nine years in the making and was acclaimed a masterpiece to put beside Joyce's *Ulysses*. It won the Prix Médicis and established Perec's international reputation.

David Bellos, the translator, is Professor of French Studies at the University of Manchester. He is the author of several works on Balzac, and also of the prize-winning biography *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*.

ALSO BY GEORGES PEREC
IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

W or the Memory of Childhood

Things: A Story of the Sixties

A Man Asleep

'53 Days'

A Void

Three

Chronology

- 1833 Birth of James Sherwood.
- 1856 Birth of the Countess of Beaumont.
Birth of Corinne Marcion.
- 1870 Birth of Grace Twinker.
Sherwoods Cough Pastilles boom.
- 1871 Corinne Marcion enters service in Paris.
- 1875 Rue Simon-Crubellier parcelled out for building.
- 1876 Birth of Fernand de Beaumont.
- 1885 Lubin Auzère completes the construction of the apartment house at No. 11.
- 1887 IIIrd Congress of the International Union of Historical Sciences.
- 1891 Theft of the “Vase of the Passion” from the Museum of Antiquities at Utrecht.
- 1892 Birth of Marie-Thérèse Moreau.
- 1896 James Sherwood buys the “Vase of the Passion”.
- 1898 Arrest of a ring of counterfeiters in Argentina.
- 1900 Corinne and Honoré Marcion meet at the Universal Exhibition.
Death of James Sherwood.
Birth of Véra Orlova.
Birth of Cinoc.
Birth of Percival Bartlebooth.
- 1902 Birth of Léon Marcia.
- 1903 Caruso makes his debut at the Metropolitan.
- 1904 June 16: Bloom’s Day.
Birth of Albert Massy.
- 1909 Birth of Marcel Appenzzell.
- 1910 Birth of Gaspard Winckler.
- 1911 Birth of Marguerite.
21 January: arrest of Panarchist leaders.

- 1914 26 September: Death of Olivier Gratiolet at Perthès-lez-Hurlus.
- 1916 Birth of Hervé Nochère.
- 1917 Birth of Clara Lichtenfeld.
Death of Juste Gratiolet.
19 May: Augustus B. Clifford and Bernard Lehameau lose their right arms when their HQ is shelled.
- 1918 Summary execution of all the males of the Orlov family; Véra Orlova and her mother flee to Crimea and then to Vienna.
- 1919 Under various names, Rémi Rorschach attempts to make a career in music hall.
Monsieur Hardy opens a restaurant in Paris and takes on Henri Fresnel as chef.
October: Serge Valène moves into Rue Simon-Crubellier.
- 1920 Birth of Olivier Gratiolet.
Birth of Cyrille Altamont.
Work starts on the Upper Boubandjida mines.
- 1922 Gaspard Winckler begins his apprenticeship with Monsieur Gouttman.
- 1923 8 May: Ferdinand Gratiolet reaches Garoua.
Léon Marcia falls ill.
- 1924 Henri Fresnel marries Alice.
Albert Massy rides in the Giro d'Italia, then in the Tour de France.
July: Adrien Jérôme sits the *agrégation* examination in history; in October, he is appointed to the Lycée Pasteur at Neuilly and moves into Rue Simon-Crubellier.
- 1925 Birth of Paul Hébert.
Lift installed.
Bartlebooth begins taking watercolour lessons.
15 October: Massy beats the world record for the one-hour motor-paced time trial, but his performance is not officially recognised; on 14 November, his second attempt fails.
24 December: fire in the Danglars's flat.
- 1926 3 January: sudden disappearance of the Danglars. One week later, they are arrested at the Swiss border.
Ferdinand Gratiolet returns from Africa and founds an

- exotic-hides business.
Jean Richepin lectures at the Pfisterhof.
26 November: Fernand de Beaumont marries Véra Orlova.
- 1927 The Pfisterhof patients subscribe to a scholarship to allow Léon Marcia to pursue his studies.
- 1928 Rémi Rorschach begins his African adventure.
- 1929 Death of Gouttman.
Birth of Blanche Gardel.
Birth of Elizabeth de Beaumont; Véra Orlova tours North America.
Cat Spade wins the Combined Forces' boxing tournament.
Bartlebooth buys a flat at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier.
March: Gaspard Winckler arrives in Paris; in October, he enlists and leaves for Morocco.
October: Henri Fresnel abandons his restaurant.
- 1930 Fernand de Beaumont begins excavating at Oviedo.
Léon Marcia begins to publish.
January: birth of Ghislain Fresnel.
Birth of Madame Nochère.
Birth of Olivia Norvell.
November: Gaspard Winckler, discharged from military service, meets Marguerite at Marseilles.
- 1931 April: fire at Ferdinand Gratiolet's exotic-hides warehouse.
May: Marc Gratiolet passes the *agrégation* in philosophy.
- 1932 Marcel Appenzell leaves for Sumatra.
Rémi Rorschach's novel, *African Gold*, is published.
Death of Ferdinand Gratiolet in Argentina.
Gaspard and Marguerite Winckler move into 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier.
Henri Fresnel's troupe breaks up.
- 1934 Mme Hourcade makes 500 black boxes for Bartlebooth's future jigsaw puzzles.
Birth of Joseph Nieto.
March: Death of Emile Gratiolet.
3 September: Death of Gérard Gratiolet.
- 1935 Death of Madame Hébert.
January: Bartlebooth paints his first watercolour at Gijón.

- August: end of excavations at Oviedo.
- 11 September: murder of Antoine Brodin in Florida; in the following weeks, Hélène Brodin tracks down and executes his three murderers.
- 12 November: suicide of Fernand de Beaumont; he is buried on 16 Nov. at Lédignan, in the presence of Bartlebooth, who returns specially from Corsica.
- 1936 Bartlebooth in Europe; in March, Scotland (Isle of Skye).
Birth of Michel Claveau.
Birth of Célia Crespi's son.
- 1937 Bartlebooth in Europe; in July, on board his yacht *The Halcyon*, he follows the Yugoslav coast from Trieste to Dubrovnik, with Serge Valène, Marguerite and Gaspard Winckler as his guests; in December, he is at Cap São Vicente (Portugal).
April: Henri Fresnel sets off for Brazil.
Lino Margay marries Josette Massy.
- 1938 Bartlebooth in Africa; in February, Hammamet; in June, Alexandria.
15 March: Anschluss.
Death of Henri Gratiolet.
Marcel Appenzell arrives in Paris.
- 1939 January: Smautf buys a tricephalous crucifix in the Agadir *souk*.
March: Marcel Appenzell returns to Sumatra.
April: Josette Margay returns to live with her brother; Lino Margay meets Ferri the Eyetie en route to South America.
August: Bartlebooth reaches Kenya; on the 10th, Smautf dines at Mr Macklin's.
- 1940 Bartlebooth in Africa.
François-Pierre LaJoie struck off the medical register.
April: Henri Fresnel reaches New York, where he is taken on as cook by Grace Twinker.
20 May: Olivier Gratiolet taken prisoner.
6 June: Death of Marie-Thérèse Moreau's husband.
- 1941 Bartlebooth in Africa.
7 December: Pearl Harbor attacked.
- 1942 Bartlebooth in Africa.

- Operation "Cyclops" in Normandy.
Battle of the Coral Sea.
Death of Anne Voltimand, Gaspard Winckler's sister.
18 April: Marc Gratiolet appointed to the staff of Fernand de Brinon; in May, takes steps to have Olivier released.
June: Lino Margay leaves prison.
- 1943 Bartlebooth in South America.
Death of Louis Gratiolet.
23 June: assassination of Ordnance General Pferdleichter.
14 July: imaginary birth of the five Trévins sisters.
7 October: arrest of Paul Hébert.
November: death of Marguerite Winckler.
- 1944 Bartlebooth in South America.
May: death of Grégoire Voltimand on the Garigliano.
June: Mme Appenzzell killed near Vassieux-en-Vercors.
June: Marc Gratiolet murdered in Lyons.
July: Albert Massy returns from Compulsory Labour Service.
August: Liberation of Paris; death of Célia Crespi's son.
September: Trojan returns to Paris.
- 1945 Bartlebooth in Central America.
Elizabeth de Beaumont runs away from her mother.
Birth of Elzbieta Orlowska.
Paul Hébert liberated.
Anti-French riots in Damascus; death of René Albin.
The chemist Wehsal turned around by the US as part of Operation Paperclip.
Lino Margay, transfigured, comes back for Josette.
Léon and Clara Marcia move into Rue Simon-Crubellier;
Clara buys Massy's saddlery and turns it into a curio shop.
- 1946 Bartlebooth in North America.
Birth of David Marcia.
Birth of Caroline Echard.
Flora Albin repatriated.
26 January: Olivia Norvell marries Jeremy Bishop; on 7 February, she leaves him, and Australia, for the US.

- 1947 Death of Hélène Brodin.
Cinoc moves into Rue Simon-Crubellier.
- 1948 Bartlebooth in North America; November, Santa Catalina Island (California).
Fire at the Rueil Palace cinema: François and Marthe Gratiolet amongst those killed.
Ingeborg Skrifter and Blunt Stanley meet.
- 1949 Bartlebooth in Asia.
Birth of Ethel Rogers.
November: death of the Honorés.
November: Count Della Marsa commissions the Ballets Frère; in December, Blanche Gardel goes to London to have an abortion; suicide of Maximilien Riccetti.
- 1950 Bartlebooth in Asia.
Birth of Valentin Collot, called Young Riri.
Olivia Norvell makes her last two feature films.
July: Blunt Stanley leaves for Korea; a few weeks later, he deserts.
- 1951 Bartlebooth in Asia; October, Okinawa.
Death of Grace Twinker.
April: marriage of Cyrille Altamont and Blanche Gardel; in May, they move into 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier; almost simultaneously, Cyrille Altamont joins BIDREM and leaves for Geneva.
- 1952 Bartlebooth in Oceania; February, Solomon Islands; October, Tasmania.
Ingeborg, Blunt, and Carlos arrive in Paris.
Paul Hébert returns to Rue Simon-Crubellier after treatment in a sanatorium and meets Laetizia Grifalconi.
- 1953 Bartlebooth in the Indian Ocean; in the Seychelles, Smautf swaps his crucifix for a statue of the tricephalous Mother-Goddess.
11 June: accidental (or intentional) death of Erik Ericsson; flight of Elizabeth de Beaumont; suicide of Ewa Ericsson; on 13 June, Sven Ericsson finds the two corpses; at the same period, François Breidel leaves Arlon.
- 1954 Bartlebooth and Smautf cross Turkey, the Black Sea, the USSR up as far as the Arctic Circle, then follow the

- Norwegian coast; on 21 December, Bartlebooth paints his last seascape at Brouwershaven; on the 24th, he is back in Paris.
- Sven Ericsson identifies Elizabeth de Beaumont.
- April: Ingeborg Stanley and Aurelio Lopez murdered.
- 1955 Bartlebooth begins to assemble the puzzles made by Gaspard Winckler.
- Death of Michel Claveau.
- Kléber enters service with Bartlebooth.
- Elizabeth de Beaumont hides in the Cévennes.
- Hervé Nochère dies in Algeria.
- October: Paul Hébert transferred to Mazamet.
- 1956 The Claveaus leave the concierge's office, which is taken over by Mme Nochère.
- Lise and Charles Berger meet at a recital by Gilbert Bécaud. Olivier Gratiolet is recalled to Algeria and is blown up by a land mine.
- July: publication of Pirandello's *In the Abyss* in No. 40 of *Les Lettres nouvelles*.
- July: Elzbieta Orlowska meets Boubaker at a summer camp at Parçay-les-Pins.
- 1957 February: Countess of Beaumont dies at the age of 101.
- June: Elizabeth de Beaumont meets François Breidel; they marry in August, at Valence.
- 1958 Olivia Norvell and Rémi Rorschach meet at Davos.
- Bernard Dinteville begins his research.
- 27 July: birth of Anne Breidel; 8 August: first letter from Elizabeth Breidel to Sven Ericsson.
- 1959 7 September: birth of Béatrice Breidel; second letter from Elizabeth to Sven Ericsson; 14 September, murder of Elizabeth and François Breidel; 17 September, suicide of Sven Ericsson.
- October: birth of Véronique Altamont.
- 1960 Foundation of the sect of The Three Free Men.
- Rémi Rorschach buys from Olivier the last two flats still owned by the Gratiolet family at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier.
- Birth of Gilbert Berger.
- Olivier Gratiolet marries his nurse, Arlette Criolat.

- February: Morellet loses three fingers from his left hand.
 May: Grégoire Simpson loses his job at the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra.
 May: Private view of Hutting's "Hazes" at Gallery 22.
 7 May: Léon Salini concludes his investigation of the death of the Breidel couple.
 19 December: première of Schmetterling's *Malakhitès*.
- 1961 Disappearance of Grégoire Simpson.
 The Bergers move into 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier.
 Dinteville ends his research.
- 1962 The Plassaerts move into 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier.
 Birth of Isabelle Gratiolet.
 First of Professor LeBran-Chastel's "stolen" publications.
- 1963 Birth of Rémi Plassaert.
- 1964 Caroline Echard breaks with David Marcia.
- 1965 Winckler begins to make Witches' Mirrors.
 24 December: Arlette Criolat's father strangles her, then commits suicide.
- 1966 Caroline Echard marries Philippe Marquiseaux.
 Elzbieta Orłowska gets to Tunis at last.
- 1967 *The Silver Glen of Alva* goes down.
 Birth of Mahmoud Orłowski.
- 1968 Death of Mme Echard.
 Death of M. Marquiseaux.
 May: Elzbieta Orłowska flees from Tunisia and reaches Paris; Bartlebooth's seamstress, Gervaise, retires; Elzbieta moves into her room.
- 1969 Hutting sells a "Barricade" from Rue Gay-Lussac to an American collector.
- 1970 "Young Riri" bumps into Paul Hébert at Bar-le-Duc.
 Mme Hourcade retires; the Réols move into the flat vacated by her; an imprudent purchase of a luxurious bedroom suite forces them to marry a few months later.
 Henri Fresnel comes back to see Alice, who then leaves almost straight away to stay with her son in New Caledonia.
 February: first joint meeting of Marvel Houses Incorporated and International Hostellerie; in November,

- foundation of Marvel Houses International and Incorporated Hostellerie.
- 1971 Alice Fresnel writes to Mlle Crespi.
4 June: David Marcia's motorcycle accident in the 35th Gold Cup.
December: the Rorschachs stay at St Moritz.
- 1972 Beyssandre hired by Marvel Houses International.
Mme Adèle retires.
Death of Emilio Grifalconi.
Serge Valène sees Bartlebooth for the last time.
- 1973 Bartlebooth has an operation for a double cataract.
Sam Horton changes sex.
Beyssandre discovers Bartlebooth's project.
29 October: death of Gaspard Winckler.
- 1974 Publication of *Memories of a Struggler*, by Rémi Rorschach.
April: Beyssandre's first letter to Bartlebooth; 11 July: Beyssandre calls on Smautf and challenges Bartlebooth.
August: ruined by the Kerkennah Festival, David Marcia returns to live at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier.
November: Morellet is put away.
- 1975 25 April: Bartlebooth learns of the death of the cameramen entrusted with the destruction of the 438th jigsaw.
May: Marvel Houses abandon their plans.
23 June: death of Percival Bartlebooth.
15 August: death of Serge Valène.

In Memory of
RAYMOND QUENEAU

Georges Perec

LIFE

A USER'S MANUAL

Fictions

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
David Bellos


V I N T A G E

Friendship, history, and literature have supplied me with some of the characters of this book. All other resemblances to living persons or to people having lived in reality or fiction can only be coincidental.

G. P.

Look with all your eyes, look
(Jules Verne, *Michael Strogoff*)

Preamble

The eye follows the paths that have been laid down
for it in the work
(Paul Klee, *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch*)

To begin with, the art of jigsaw puzzles seems of little substance, easily exhausted, wholly dealt with by a basic introduction to Gestalt: the perceived object – we may be dealing with a perceptual act, the acquisition of a skill, a physiological system, or, as in the present case, a wooden jigsaw puzzle – is not a sum of elements to be distinguished from each other and analysed discretely, but a pattern, that is to say a form, a structure: the element's existence does not precede the existence of the whole, it comes neither before nor after it, for the parts do not determine the pattern, but the pattern determines the parts: knowledge of the pattern and of its laws, of the set and its structure, could not possibly be derived from discrete knowledge of the elements that compose it. That means that you can look at a piece of a puzzle for three whole days, you can believe that you know all there is to know about its colouring and shape, and be no further on than when you started. The only thing that counts is the ability to link this piece to other pieces, and in that sense the art of the jigsaw puzzle has something in common with the art of go. The pieces are readable, take on a sense, only when assembled; in isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing – just an impossible question, an opaque challenge. But as soon as you have succeeded, after minutes of trial and error, or after a prodigious half-second flash of inspiration, in fitting it into

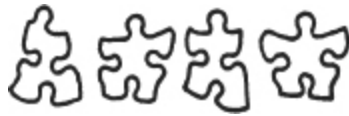
one of its neighbours, the piece disappears, ceases to exist as a piece. The intense difficulty preceding this link-up – which the English word *puzzle* indicates so well – not only loses its *raison d'être*, it seems never to have had any reason, so obvious does the solution appear. The two pieces so miraculously conjoined are henceforth one, which in its turn will be a source of error, hesitation, dismay, and expectation.

The role of the puzzle-maker is hard to define. In most cases – and in particular in all cardboard jigsaws – the puzzles are machine-made, and the lines of cutting are entirely arbitrary: a blanking die, set up once and for all, cuts the sheets of cardboard along identical lines every time. But such jigsaws are eschewed by the true puzzle-lover, not just because they are made of cardboard instead of wood, nor because the solutions are printed on the boxes they come in, but because this type of cut destroys the specific nature of jigsaw puzzles. Contrary to a widely and firmly held belief, it does not really matter whether the initial image is easy (or something taken to be easy – a genre scene in the style of Vermeer, for example, or a colour photograph of an Austrian castle) or difficult (a Jackson Pollock, a Pissarro, or the poor paradox of a blank puzzle). It's not the subject of the picture, or the painter's technique, which makes a puzzle more or less difficult, but the greater or lesser subtlety of the way it has been cut; and an arbitrary cutting pattern will necessarily produce an arbitrary degree of difficulty, ranging from the extreme of easiness – for edge pieces, patches of light, well-defined objects, lines, transitions – to the tiresome awkwardness of all the other pieces (cloudless skies, sand, meadow, ploughed land, shaded areas, etc.). and once the edges have been put together, the detail pieces put in place – the very light, almost whitish yellow fringe on the carpet on the table holding a lectern with an open book, the rich edging of the mirror, the lute, the woman's red dress – and the

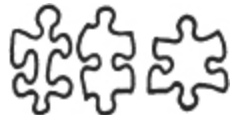
bulk of the background pieces parcelled out according to their shade of grey, brown, white, or sky blue, then solving the puzzle consists simply of trying all the plausible combinations one by one.

Pieces in puzzles of this kind come in classes of which the best-known are

the little chaps



the double crosses



and the crossbars



The art of jigsaw puzzling begins with wooden puzzles cut by hand, whose maker undertakes to ask himself all the questions the player will have to solve, and, instead of allowing chance to cover his tracks, aims to replace it with cunning, trickery, and subterfuge. All the elements occurring in the image to be reassembled – this armchair covered in gold brocade, that three-pointed black hat with its rather ruined black plume, or that silver-braided bright yellow livery – serve by design as points of departure for trails that lead to false information. The organised, coherent, structured signifying space of the picture is cut up not only into inert, formless elements containing little information or signifying power, but also into falsified elements, carrying false information; two fragments of cornice made to fit each other perfectly when they belong in fact to two quite separate sections of the ceiling, the belt buckle of a uniform which turns out *in extremis* to be a metal clasp holding the chandelier, several almost identically cut pieces belonging, for one part, to a dwarf orange tree placed on a mantelpiece and, for the other

part, to its scarcely attenuated reflection in a mirror, are classic examples of the types of traps puzzle-lovers come across.

From this, one can make a deduction which is quite certainly the ultimate truth of jigsaw puzzles: despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game: every move the puzzler makes, the puzzle-maker has made before; every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every combination he tries, and tries a second time, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated, and decided by the other.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

On the Stairs, 1

YES, IT COULD begin this way, right here, just like that, in a rather slow and ponderous way, in this neutral place that belongs to all and to none, where people pass by almost without seeing each other, where the life of the building regularly and distantly resounds. What happens behind the flats' heavy doors can most often be perceived only through those fragmented echoes, those splinters, remnants, shadows, those first moves or incidents or accidents that happen in what are called the "common areas", soft little sounds damped by the red woollen carpet, embryos of communal life which never go further than the landing. The inhabitants of a single building live a few inches from each other, they are separated by a mere partition wall, they share the same spaces repeated along each corridor, they perform the same movements at the same times, turning on a tap, flushing the water closet, switching on a light, laying the table, a few dozen simultaneous existences repeated from storey to storey, from building to building, from street to street. They entrench themselves in their domestic dwelling space - since that is what it is called - and they would prefer nothing to emerge from it; but the little that they do let out - the dog on a lead, the child off to fetch the bread, someone brought back, someone sent away - comes out by way of the landing. For all that passes, passes by the stairs, and all that comes, comes by the stairs: letters, announcements of births, marriages, and deaths, furniture brought in or taken out by removers, the doctor called in an emergency, the traveller returning from a long voyage. It's because of that that the staircase remains an anonymous, cold, and almost hostile place. In old buildings there used

to be stone steps, wrought-iron handrails, sculptures, lamp-holders, sometimes a bench to allow old folk to rest between floors. In modern buildings there are lifts with walls covered in would-be obscene graffiti, and so-called “emergency” staircases in unrendered concrete, dirty and echoing. In this block of flats, where there is an old lift almost always out of order, the staircase is an old-fashioned place of questionable cleanliness, which declines in terms of middle-class respectability as it rises from floor to floor: two thicknesses of carpet as far as the third floor, thereafter only one, and none at all for the two attic floors.

Yes, it will begin here: between the third and fourth storey at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier. A woman of about forty is climbing the stairs; she is wearing a long imitation-leather raincoat and on her head a kind of felt hat shaped like a sugar-loaf, something like what one imagines a goblin’s hat to be, divided into red and grey squares. A big dun canvas hold-all, a case of the sort commonly called overnight bags, hangs on her right shoulder. A small cambric handkerchief is knotted through one of the chromed metal rings which attach the bag to its strap. Three motifs, which look as if they had been printed with a stencil, are regularly repeated over the whole fabric of the bag: a large pendulum clock, a round loaf cut through the middle, and a kind of copper receptacle without handles.

The woman is looking at a plan held in her left hand. It’s just a sheet of paper, whose still visible creases attest to its having been folded in four, fixed by a paperclip to a thick cyclostyled volume – the terms of co-ownership relating to the flat this woman is about to visit. On the sheet there are in fact not one but three sketch-plans: the first, at the top right-hand corner, shows where the building is, roughly halfway along Rue Simon-Crubellier, which cuts at an angle across the quadrilateral formed by Rue Médéric, Rue Jadin, Rue de Chazelles, and Rue Léon Jost, in the Plaine Monceau district of the XVIIth *arrondissement* of Paris; the

second, at the top left-hand corner, is a vertical cross-section of the building giving a diagrammatic picture of the layout of the flats and the names of some of the residents: Madame Nochère, concierge; Madame de Beaumont, second floor right; Bartlebooth, third floor left; Rémi Rorschach, television producer, fourth floor left; Dr Dinteville, sixth floor left, as well as the empty flat, sixth floor right, occupied by Gaspard Winckler, craftsman, until his death; the third plan, in the lower half of the sheet, is of Winckler's flat: three rooms facing the street, kitchen and bathroom on the courtyard side, and a boxroom without natural light.

The woman carries in her right hand a bulky set of keys, no doubt the keys of all the flats she has inspected that day; some are fixed to novelty key-rings: a miniature bottle of Marie Brizard *apéritif*, a golf tee and a wasp, a double-six domino, and a plastic octagonal token in which is set a tuberosé flower.

It is almost two years since Gaspard Winckler died. He had no child. He was not known to have any surviving family. Bartlebooth entrusted a notary with the task of finding any heirs he might have. His only sister, Madame Anne Voltimand, died in 1942. His nephew, Grégoire Voltimand, had been killed on the Garigliano in May 1944, at the breakthrough on the Gustav line. The notary took many months to unearth a third cousin of Winckler's called Antoine Rameau, who worked for a manufacturer of knockdown divans. The taxes on the inheritance, added to the legal costs of the search for heirs, turned out to be so high that Antoine Rameau had to auction off everything. It is already a few months since the furniture was dispersed at the Sale Rooms, and a few weeks since the flat was bought by a property agency.

The woman climbing the stairs is not the director of the property agency, but his assistant; she doesn't deal with the commercial side, nor with customer relations, but only with the technical problems. From the property angle, the deal is a good one, the area is decent, the façade is of ashlar, the staircase is OK despite the agedness of the lift, and the woman is now coming to inspect in greater detail the condition of the flat itself, to draw up a more detailed plan of the accommodation with, for instance, thicker lines to distinguish structural walls from partitions and arrowheaded semicircles to show which way the doors open, and to decide on the work needed, to make a preliminary costing for complete refurbishment: the partition wall between the toilet and the boxroom to be knocked down, allowing the installation of a bathroom with a slipper-bath and WC; the kitchen tiles to be renewed; a wall-mounted gas-fired boiler (giving both central heating and hot water) to replace the old coal-fired boiler; the woodblock floor with its zigzag moulding to be lifted and replaced by a layer of cement, a felt underlay, and a fitted carpet.

Not much is left of these three small rooms in which Gaspard Winckler lived and worked for nearly forty years. His few pieces of furniture, his small workbench, his jigsaw, his minute files have gone. On the bedroom wall, opposite his bed, beside the window, that square picture he loved so much is no longer: it showed an antechamber with three men in it. Two were standing, pale and fat, dressed in frock-coats and wearing top hats which seemed screwed to their heads. The third, similarly dressed in black, was sitting by the door in the attitude of a man expecting visitors, slowly putting a pair of tight-fitting new gloves on over his fingers.

The woman is going up the stairs. Soon, the old flat will become a charming pied-à-terre, two recept. + bedr., all mod. cons., open outlook, quiet. Gaspard Winckler is dead,