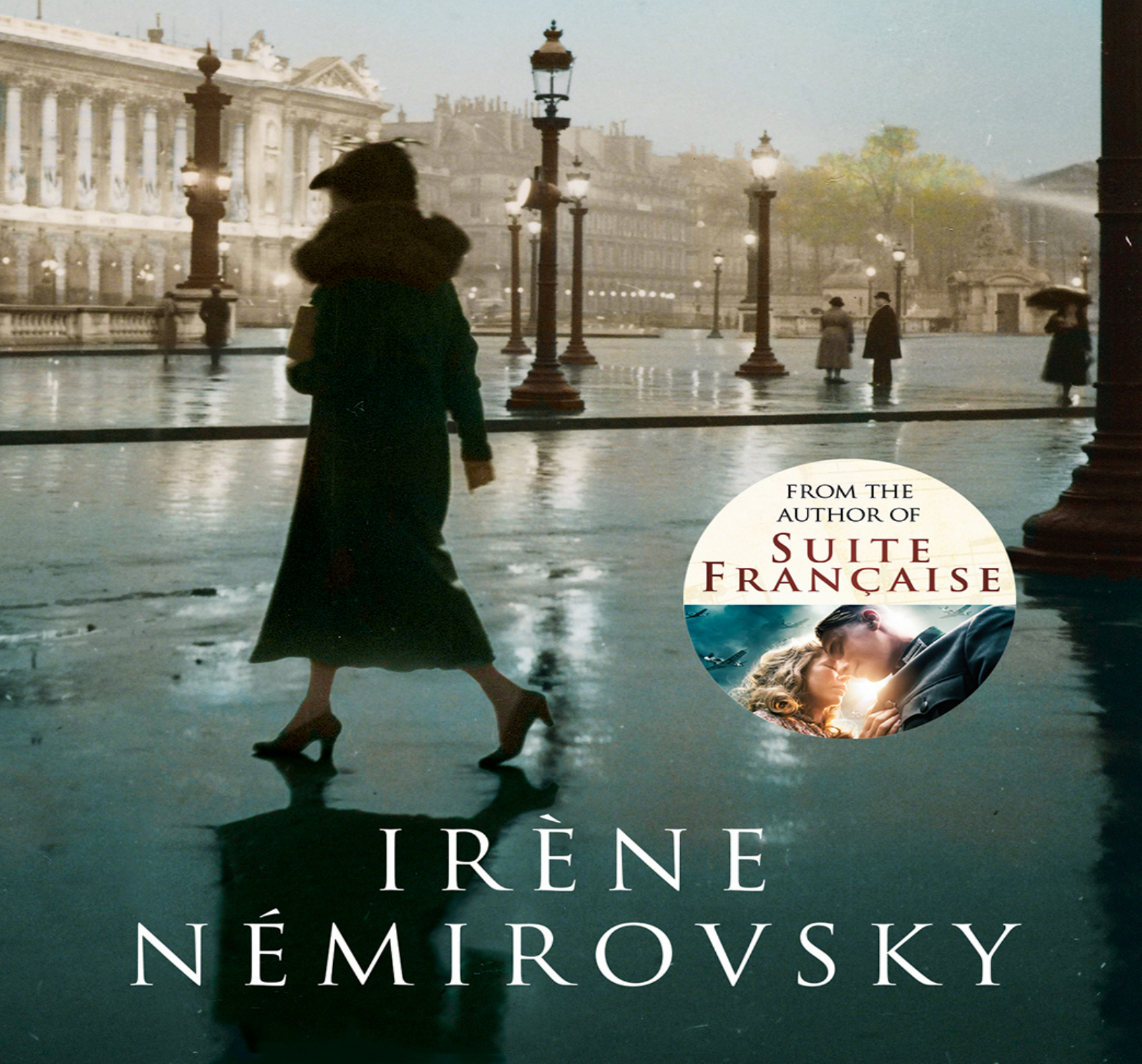


'Beautiful... Powerful... Poignant'  
*Independent*

# THE FIRES OF AUTUMN



FROM THE  
AUTHOR OF  
**SUITE  
FRANÇAISE**



IRÈNE  
NÉMIROVSKY

## **Contents**

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Irène Némirovsky

Dedication

Title Page

Translator's Introduction

### Part One: 1912-1918

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

### Part Two: 1920-1936

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10

Part Three: 1936-1941

Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10

Copyright

## About the Book

*The Fires of Autumn* was written in the last two years of Irène Némirovsky's life, after she fled Paris in 1940. The prequel to her masterpiece, *Suite Française*, it is a panoramic exploration of French life and a witness to the greatest horrors of the twentieth century.

After four years of bloody warfare Bernard Jacquelain returns from the trenches a changed man. No more the naïve hopes and dreams of the teenager who went to war. Attracted by the lure of money and success, Bernard embarks on a life of luxuriant delinquency supported by suspect financial dealings and easy virtue.

Yet when his lover throws him off, he turns to a wholesome childhood friend for comfort. For ten years he lives the good bourgeois life, but as another war threatens everything Bernard had clung to starts to crumble, and the future for his marriage and for France looks terribly uncertain.

First published posthumously in France in 1957, *The Fires of Autumn* is a coruscating, tragic evocation of the reality of war and its dirty aftermath, and the ugly colour it can turn a man's soul.

## 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*, *All Our Worldly Goods*, *The Dogs and the Wolves* and other works published in her lifetime or soon after, such as the posthumously published *Suite Française* and *Fire in the Blood*. She 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). It was here that Irène began writing *Suite Française*. She died in Auschwitz in 1942.

Also by Irène Némirovsky

*Suite Française*

*David Golder*

*Le Bal (including Snow in Autumn)*

*Fire in the Blood*

*The Courilof Affair*

*All Our Worldly Goods*

*Jezebel*

*The Dogs and the Wolves*

*The Wine of Solitude*

*The Misunderstanding*

This book is dedicated to the memory of Denise Epstein, Irène Némirovsky's daughter, who passed away in 2013 at the age of 83. From 2004, when *Suite Française* was first published in France, until her death, Denise travelled the world, working tirelessly to promote her mother's canon and re-establish her as one of the most respected writers in twentieth-century France. It was my privilege to meet her in 2006, when *Suite Française* was first published in English. She told me, 'I could not accept my mother had died until I saw her re-born.' We became great friends and shared many happy memories of travelling and speaking together at events. Denise was an extraordinary woman who is greatly missed.

# The Fires of Autumn

Translated from the French by Sandra  
Smith

Irène Némirovsky

Chatto & Windus  
LONDON



## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Irène Némirovsky was born in Kiev in 1903, the only child of a wealthy Jewish banker and his adulterous wife. At the time, upper-class Russian families spoke French, and since her mother had no interest in raising a child, a French governess was engaged for Irène. The family also spent most holidays on the French Riviera, so Irène considered French her first language. The Némirovskys were forced to flee their home after the Russian Revolution and finally settled in Paris where Irène attended the Sorbonne, studying French and Russian literature.

Irène married Michel Epstein, another Russian Jewish immigrant, in 1926 and had her first daughter, Denise, in 1929, the year that her first published novel, *David Golder*, made the writer an instant commercial success. Their second child, Élisabeth, was born in 1937. Irène continued writing at least one novel and several short stories every year until she was deported to Auschwitz in 1942, where she died soon afterwards.

*The Fires of Autumn* is the eleventh novel to be translated into English by this prolific author who was almost entirely forgotten before the publication of her unfinished masterpiece, *Suite Française*, written in a small village in Vichy France as the Second World War raged all around.

*The Fires of Autumn*, written at about the same time, was no doubt inspired by the reminiscences of many French soldiers and their families who had suffered through the First World War and were once again re-living those horrible experiences. As the Editor's Note to the new French edition

(2011), which I have used for my translation of the novel, explains:

*Irène Némirovsky completed The Fires of Autumn in the spring of 1942. It was published posthumously in 1957 by Albin Michel.*

*L'Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC) - a French association that archives literature of the twentieth century - is in possession of two copies of the typescript of this novel, one of which contains handwritten corrections by Irène Némirovsky. The first was used as the basis for the 1957 publication. The current edition is based on the second typescript, the result of the author's revision in which she made cuts, additions and modifications that were sometimes quite significant.*

*Olivier Philipponnat, Irène Némirovsky's biographer, and Teresa M. Lussone, who wrote her philology dissertation on Némirovsky, worked together to produce this new edition, retaining nonetheless three chapters from Part I of the novel - the fifth, sixth and ninth chapters - that the author wanted to remove but which allow the contemporary reader better to understand the ravages of the 1914-18 war.*

Like *Suite Française*, this novel follows the fate of several families, whose paths intertwine. It is a riveting study of French, especially Parisian, life from the eve of the First World War right through to the outbreak and early years of the Second World War, depicting the terrible human cost of war as well as the corruption, greed and political expediency that were factors leading to a breakdown of morality in inter-war France.

*The Fires of Autumn* provides us with insight into the minds of ordinary people, their lives and loves in the midst of war, and the scars that remain when war ends. Through Némirovsky's beautiful, lyrical writing, this novel works as a prequel to *Suite Française*, offering a panoramic exploration of French life between 1913 and 1942. It is both an important historical document and a sensitive depiction of both the best and worst of human emotions.

I would like to express my gratitude to Alison Samuel for her invaluable help in editing this book.

Sandra Smith

Robinson College, Cambridge

# Part One

1912-1918

# 1

THERE WAS A bunch of fresh violets on the table, a yellow pitcher with a spout that opened with a little clicking sound to let the water pour out, a pink glass salt cellar decorated with the inscription: 'Souvenir of the World Fair 1900'. (The letters had faded over twelve years and were hard to make out.) There was an enormous loaf of golden bread, some wine and - the *pièce de résistance*, the main course - a wonderful blanquette of veal, each tender morsel hiding shyly beneath the creamy sauce, served with aromatic baby mushrooms and new potatoes. No first course, nothing to whet the appetite: food was a serious business. In the Brun household, they always started with the main course; they were not averse to roasts - when properly cooked according to simple, strict rules, these were akin to classics of the culinary art - but here, the woman of the house put all her effort and loving care into the skilled creation of dishes simmered slowly for a long time. In the Brun household, it was the elderly Madame Pain, the mother-in-law, who did the cooking.

The Bruns were Parisians of some small private means. Since the death of his wife, Adolphe Brun presided over the table and served the meal. He was still a handsome man; bald and with a large forehead, he had a small upturned nose, full cheeks and a long, red moustache that he twisted and turned in his fingers until its slender tips nearly poked his eyes. Sitting opposite him was his mother-in-law: round, petite, with a rosy complexion crowned with fine, flyaway white hair that looked like sea foam; when she smiled, you could see she still had all her teeth. With a wave of her

chubby little hand, she would brush aside everyone's compliments: 'Exquisite . . . You've never made anything better, dear Mother-in-law . . . This is just delicious, Madame Pain!' She would put on a falsely modest little face and, just as a prima donna pretends to offer her partner the flowers presented to her on stage, she would murmur:

'Yes, the butcher did me proud today. It's a very nice cut of veal.'

To his right sat Adolphe Brun's guests - the three Jacquelains - and to his left, his nephew Martial and Brun's young daughter, Thérèse. Since Thérèse had just turned fifteen a few days ago, she had put her curls up in a chignon, but her silky hair was not yet used to the style she tried to hold in place with hairpins, so it was escaping all over the place, which made Thérèse unhappy, in spite of the compliment her shy cousin Martial had whispered to her:

'It's very pretty, Thérèse,' he said, blushing quite a bit. 'Your hair I mean . . . it's like a cloud of gold.'

'The little angel has my hair,' said Madame Pain. She was born in Nice, and even though she left at the age of sixteen to marry a ribbon and veil merchant from Paris, she still had the accent of her native city, as sonorous and sweet as a song. She had very beautiful dark eyes and a lively expression. Her husband had left her destitute; she had lost a daughter who was only twenty - Thérèse's mother - and was supported by her son-in-law; but nothing had affected her cheerful disposition. With dessert, she happily drank a little glass of sweet liqueur as she hummed a song:

*Joyful tambourines, lead the dance . . .*

The Bruns and their guests sat in a very small dining room flooded with sunlight. The furniture - a Henry II sideboard, cane chairs with fluted legs, a chaise longue upholstered in a dark fabric with flowers - bouquets of roses against a black background - an upright piano - everything huddled

together as best it could in this small space. The walls were decorated with drawings bought in the large department stores near the Louvre: young girls playing with kittens, Neapolitan shepherds (with a view of Mount Vesuvius in the background) and a copy of *The Abandoned Woman*, a touching work depicting a woman who is obviously pregnant sitting on a marble bench in autumn, weeping as a Hussar of Napoleon's Army disappears in the distance among the dead leaves.

The Bruns lived in the heart of a working-class area near the Gare de Lyon. They heard the long, wistful whistles of the trains, full of resonance, that passed them by. But at certain times of the day, they could feel the faint, rhythmic, metallic vibrations coming from the large iron bridge the metro passed over as it emerged from deep beneath the city, appearing for a moment under the sky before fleeing underground again with a muffled roar. The windows shook as it passed.

On the balcony, canaries sang in a cage and, in another, turtledoves cooed softly. The typical sounds of Sunday rose up through the open windows: the clinking of glasses and dishes from every floor, and the happy sound of children from the street below. The brilliant sunlight cast a rosy hue over the grey stonework of the houses. Even the windows of the apartment opposite, dark and grimy all winter long, had recently been washed and sparkled like shimmering water in the bright light. There was a little alcove where the man selling roasted chestnuts had been since October; but he was gone now, and a young girl with red hair selling violets had materialised to take his place. Even this dark little recess was filled with a golden mist: the sun lit up the dust particles, the kind you get in Paris in the spring, that joyful season, dust that seems to be made of face powder and pollen from flowers (until you realise that it smells of dung).

It was a beautiful Sunday. Martial Brun had brought in the dessert, a coffee cake with cream that made Bernard

Jacquelain's eyes light up with joy. They ate it in silence; nothing was heard but the clinking of teaspoons against the plates and the crunching of the little coffee beans hidden in the cream, full of heady liqueur. After this brief moment of silence, the conversation started up again, just as peaceful and devoid of passion as a kettle simmering gently on a stove. Martial Brun was a young man of twenty-seven with beautiful doe eyes, a long, pointy nose that was always a bit red at the tip, a long neck he kept tilted to one side in a funny way, as if he were trying to hear some secret; he was studying medicine and talked about the exams he was soon to take.

'Men have to work so hard,' said Blanche Jacquelain with a sigh, looking over at her son Bernard. She loved him so much that she felt everything applied to him; she couldn't read about an epidemic of typhoid that had broken out in Paris without imagining him sick, even dying, and if she heard any military music, she immediately imagined him a soldier. She looked darkly, sadly, at Martial Brun, replacing in her imagination his nondescript features with those of her adored son, and thinking that one day Bernard would graduate from one of the great universities, showered with prizes.

With a certain sense of complacency, Martial described his studies and how he sometimes had to stay up all night. He was overly modest, but a thimbleful of wine made him suddenly eager to talk, to impress others. As he was bragging, he ran his index finger along the back of his collar - it was a bit tight and irritating him - and he puffed his chest out like a rooster, until the doorbell rang and interrupted him. Thérèse started to get up to answer it, but little Bernard got there first and soon came back accompanied by a plumpish, bearded young man, a friend of Martial, a law student named Raymond Détang. Because of his liveliness, his eloquence, his beautiful baritone voice and his effortless success with women, Raymond Détang



inspired feelings of envy and gloomy admiration in Martial. He stopped talking the moment he saw him and nervously began brushing up all the breadcrumbs scattered around his plate.

‘We were just talking about you young men and your studies,’ said Adolphe Brun. ‘You see what’s in store for you,’ he added, turning towards Bernard.

Bernard did not reply because at the age of fifteen, the company of adults still intimidated him. He was still in short trousers. (‘But this is the last year . . . Soon he will be too big,’ his mother said, sounding regretful but proud.) After this hearty meal, his cheeks were fiery red and his tie kept slipping. He gave it a hard tug and pushed his blond curls off his forehead.

‘He must graduate from the Polytechnique, the most prestigious Engineering School, among the top of his class,’ his father said in a booming voice. ‘I would do anything in the world to give him a good education: the best tutors, anything; but he knows what I expect of him: he must graduate from the Polytechnique among the top of his class. He’s a hard worker though. He’s first in his class.’

Everyone looked at Bernard; a wave of pride rushed through his heart. It was a feeling of almost unbearable sweetness. He blushed even more and finally spoke in a voice that was breaking, sometimes shrill and almost heart-rending, sometimes soft and deep:

‘Oh, that, it’s nothing really . . .’

He raised his chin in a gesture of defiance and pulled at the knot in his tie so hard it nearly ripped, as if to say:

‘We’ll see about that!’

He was excited by the dream of one day seeing himself become an important engineer, a mathematician, an inventor, or perhaps an explorer or a soldier, having encounters with a string of beautiful women along the way, surrounded by devoted friends and disciples. But at the same time, he glanced furtively at the bit of cake sitting on

his plate and wondered how he could manage to eat it with all those eyes staring at him; fortunately his father spoke to Martial and diverted everyone's attention, leaving him in obscurity once more. He took advantage of the moment by wolfing down a quarter of his cake in one mouthful.

'What branch of medicine are you planning to specialise in?' Monsieur Jacquelain asked Martial. Monsieur Jacquelain suffered from terrible stomach problems. He had a blond moustache, as pale as hay, and a face like grey sand; he was covered in wrinkles like dunes furrowed by the sea breeze. He looked at Martial with a sad, eager expression, as if the very fact of speaking to a future doctor might be enough to discover some secret cure, but one that wouldn't work on him. He instinctively placed his hand on the spot where the illness made him suffer, just below his sunken chest, and repeated several times:

'It's a shame you haven't got your qualifications yet, my dear boy. A shame. I would have come to you for a consultation. A shame . . .'

Then he sat there, deep in anguished thought.

'In two years,' Martial said shyly.

Urged on by their questions, he admitted he had his eye on an apartment, on the Rue Monge. A doctor he knew wanted to retire so would pass it on to him. As he spoke, he could picture all the pleasant days ahead . . .

'You should get married, Martial,' said the elderly Madame Pain with a mischievous smile.

Martial nervously rolled the soft part of the bread into a ball, pulled at it so it took the shape of a man, stabbed at it with his dessert fork and raised his doe eyes to look at Thérèse.

'I'm thinking about it,' he said, his voice full of emotion. 'Believe me, I'm thinking about it.'

For a fleeting moment, Thérèse thought his remarks were directed at her; she wanted to laugh but at the same time felt embarrassed, as if she'd been left standing naked in

public. So it was true then, what her father, her grandmother and her friends at school were saying: ever since she had started putting up her hair, she looked like a woman? But to marry this kind Martial . . . She lowered her eyes and watched him with curiosity. She'd known him since she was a child; she liked him very much; she could live with him as her mother and father had lived until the day the young woman died. 'The poor boy,' she suddenly thought. 'He's an orphan.' She already felt a kind of affection and concern that was almost maternal. 'But he's not handsome,' she continued thinking. 'He looks like the llama at the zoo in the Botanical Gardens: gentle and slightly offended.'

In an effort to stifle a scornful laugh, two dimples appeared on her rather pale cheeks; all the children of Paris had pale faces. She was a slim, graceful girl with a soft, serious face, grey eyes and hair as fine as mist. 'What kind of husband would I like?' she wondered. Her thoughts grew sweet and vague, full of handsome young men who looked like the Hussar from Napoleon's Army on the print opposite her. A handsome, golden Hussar, a soldier covered in gunpowder and blood, dragging his sword behind him through the dead leaves . . . She leapt up to help her grandmother clear the table. She felt a jolt that brought her back from her dreams to reality; it was a unique and rather painful feeling: someone seemed to be forcing her to open her eyes while shining a very bright light in front of her.

'Growing up is so tedious,' she thought. 'If only I could stay the way I am . . . .' She sighed rather hypocritically: it was flattering to inspire admiration in a young man, even if it was only the well-mannered Martial. Bernard Jacquelain had gone out on to the balcony and she joined him among the cages of canaries and turtledoves. The steel bridge vibrated: the metro had just passed by. A few moments later, Adolphe Brun came out to the children.

'The Humbert ladies are here,' he said.

They were friends of the Brun family, a widow and her daughter Renée, who was fifteen.

Madame Humbert had lost her brilliant, charming husband early on. It was a sad story, but a good lesson for the youngsters, or so they said. Poor Monsieur Humbert (a talented lawyer), had died at the age of twenty-nine for having too great a fondness for both work and pleasure, which do not go together, as Adolphe Brun remarked. 'He was a Don Juan,' he would say, shaking his head, but with an expression of admiration, mixed with condemnation and a tiny bit of envy. Twirling his moustache and looking pensive, he would continue: 'He had become very conscious of his appearance. He had thirty-six ties' (thirty-six stood for an exaggerated number). 'He had started to indulge in luxuries: a bath every week. He caught the chill that killed him coming out of one of the public baths.'

His widow, left with no money, had been forced to open a milliner's shop to earn a living. In the Avenue des Gobelins stood a boutique painted in sky blue; high up on the roof was a plaque bearing the inscription: '*FASHIONS by GERMAINE*' finished with a gold flourish. Madame Humbert launched her creations on her own head and her daughter's. She was a beautiful brunette; she carried herself with majestic dignity, showing off one of the first new straw hats to come out this spring, trimmed with a burst of artificial poppies. Her daughter wore a modest creation of tulle and ribbons: a stiff bonnet but as light as a lampshade.

They had been waiting for these ladies before going out to finish their Sunday in the fresh air. And so they all headed for the metro at the Gare de Lyon. The children walked in front, Bernard between the two girls. Bernard was painfully aware of his short trousers and looked with anxiety and shame at the golden hair that shone on his sturdy legs, but he consoled himself by thinking: 'This is the last year . . .' Besides, his mother, who spoiled him, had bought him a cane with a gold knob and he played with this nonchalantly.

Unfortunately, Adolphe noticed it and muttered: 'He looks like a dandy with that cane in his hand . . .,' which spoiled all his pleasure. Lively, always on the go, slim with beautiful eyes, to his mother he was the personification of masculine beauty, and with a jealous pang in her heart, she thought: 'He'll have so many conquests by the time he's twenty,' for she intended to keep him at home until then.

The young women wore black cotton stockings with nice tailored suits that modestly covered their knees. Madame Humbert had made a hat for Thérèse just like Renée's, an impressive creation decorated with chiffon and little bows. 'You look like sisters,' but what she really thought was: 'My daughter, my Renée, is prettier. She's a little doll, a kitten with her blond hair and green eyes. Older men are already starting to notice her,' she continued thinking, for she was an ambitious mother who could foresee the future.

Emerging from the depths of the underground, the little group came out of the metro at the Place de la Concorde and walked down the Champs-Élysées. The women carefully lifted the hem of their skirts a bit as they walked; you could see a respectable ruffle of grey poplin under Madame Jacquelain's dress, a reddish-brown sateen for the elderly Madame Pain, while Madame Humbert, who had an ample bosom and made the most of her 'Italian eyes', was accidentally showing off a dapple grey taffeta ruffle that rustled silkily. The ladies were talking about love. Madame Humbert let it be known that she had driven a man wild with her strict morals; in order to forget her, he had to run away to the colonies, and from there he had written to tell her that he had trained one of the little natives to come into his tent at bedtime and say: 'Germaine loves you and is thinking of you.'

'Men are often more sensitive than we are,' sighed Madame Humbert.

'Oh, do you think so?' exclaimed Blanche Jacquelain. She had been listening with the same haughty, sharp expression

as a cat eagerly eyeing a saucepan of hot milk (she stretches out her paw then pulls it back with a brief, offended miaow): 'Do you really think so? It's only we women who know how to sacrifice ourselves without any ulterior motive.'

'What do you mean by ulterior motive?' asked Madame Humbert; she lifted her chin and flared her nostrils as if she were about to whinny like a mare.

'My dear, you know very well what she means,' replied Madame Jacquelain in disgust.

'But that's human nature, my dear . . .'

'Yes, yes,' said the elderly Madame Pain, nodding her head and jiggling her jet-black hat covered in artificial violets, but she wasn't really listening. She was thinking of the bit of veal (left over from the blanquette) that she would serve that evening. Just as it was or with a tomato sauce?

Behind them walked the men, holding forth and gesturing grandly.

The peaceful Sunday crowds walked down the Champs-Élysées. Everyone strolled slowly, no doubt feeling heavier because they were digesting their meals, because of the heat - early for the time of year - or simply because they felt no need to rush. It was an amiable, cheerful, modest group of ordinary middle-class people; the working classes didn't venture there, and the upper classes only sent the very youngest members of their families to the Champs-Élysées, supervised by nannies wearing beautiful ribbons in their hair. Along the avenue, they could see students from the Military Academy of Saint Cyr walking arm in arm with their lovely grandmothers, or pale students in pince-nez, from the prestigious Polytechnique whose anxious families gazed lovingly at them, high school students in double-breasted jackets and school uniform caps, gentlemen with moustaches, young girls in white dresses walking down to the Arc de Triomphe between a double row of chairs where other students from Saint Cyr and the Polytechnique sat,

with other gentlemen and ladies and children identical to the first group, wearing the same clothes, the same expression, the same smile, a look that was cordial, curious and benevolent, to such an extent that each passer-by seemed to see his own brother by his side. All these faces looked alike: pale-skinned, dull-eyed, and nose in the air.

They walked even further, right down to the Arc de Triomphe, then to the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, to the Boni de Castellane Villa whose lilac silk curtains fluttered out on to the balconies in the light breeze. And then, at last, the horse-drawn carriages arrived in a glorious cloud of dust, returning from the races.

The families sat on their little metal chairs. They studied the foreign princes, the millionaires, the famous courtesans. Madame Humbert feverishly sketched their hats into a notebook she took out of her handbag. The children watched in admiration. The adults felt contented, satisfied, without envy but full of pride: 'For the pittance we paid for our chairs and the price of the metro, we can see all of this,' the Parisians thought, 'and we can enjoy it. Not only are we spectators at a performance, we are also actors (though with the most minor of roles), with our daughters so beautifully decked out in their brand-new hats, and our chatter and legendary gaiety. We could have been born somewhere else, after all,' thought the Parisians, 'in a place where even seeing the Champs-Élysées on a postcard would have made everyone's heart beat faster!'

And they settled back comfortably in their chairs.

'Did you see that pink parasol trimmed with lace roses?' they said, slightly critically, as if they owned the place. 'It's too much; I don't like that sort of thing.'

They recognised the celebrities that passed by:

'Look, there's the actress Monna Delza. Who's she with?'

The fathers told their children stories from the past:

'Five years ago I saw Lina Cavalieri having lunch with Caruso over there,' they said, pointing towards the windows