

THE BLOOD OF TOULOUSE

Glory to the sunlit soil that extends to the sea where Moorish galleys sail all the way to the land where pines grow and all the way to the endless ocean! Glory to Toulouse, the city of the twenty-nine gates, which Tholus, grandson of Japhet, founded, the city built in red stones, stones as unshakable as the hearts of heretics!

Glory to the Garonne that springs from the Pyrenean mountains, which keeps a little of the light of Aran in its ensorcelled waves, gives the cep of the vine its appearance of a drunken dwarf, and to the poplar its power of meditation!

Glory to the men of Oc who, in the first years of the thirteenth century of Jesus Christ, knew the truth about the three aspects of God, and the course of souls under the successive doors of the dead, and perished for having known it.¹

I want to transmit to you orally the unusual scenes to which I was a witness, the joyous or criminal deeds that I accomplished, the laudable prowess in which I glory, and the desolation and beauty that I have contemplated without dying.

In those days the women were more beautiful than they are today, with an impulse of the loins that gave fortunate liberty, the Garonne ran wider in its bed of sand and pink pebbles, and the sun outlined more clearly the other Saracen towers on the hills. Toulouse was full of poets and literate men. There was a school of Jewish medicine and a college of Arabic philosophy. The great commercial route of the Midi put Saint-Gilles and Fréjus in communication, by means of winged galleys, with the multiform Orient. Caravans brought perfumes and spices from Damascus, carpets from Samarkand and musical instruments that no one knew how to play from mysterious China.

Now, there are no more marvelous silks, there are no more Occitan singers, there are no more Arab philosophers. And by virtue of a just law, nature becomes less magnificent in the profusion of her trees and the color of her suns as men become more wicked.

The things that I am going to say will make you weep, for nothing provokes tears like beauty that is irremediably lost, like intelligence that is extinguished. But tears are more useful to humans than joy, and the salt they contain is an aliment of virility.

If you are astonished that I have been able to traverse such great calamities and have survived, know that I was chosen to transmit this story. My task is to recognize, to the wonder of their eyes, the men who ought to hear me, those who will keep the memory and transmit it in their turn. The accounts written on parchment have been destroyed by those who want to maintain ignorance, but words fall into souls like doves that come from afar and only alight in order to depart again. And that is a form of justice. Evil and hatred cannot look one another in the face, and speech dissolves by virtue of the light it emits, as the sharp blade of a necromancer reduces to nothing the cloud of evil spirits.

I too am going to evoke the dead. They do not sleep in peace, in accordance with the prayer of the Church. There are no sung psalms, there is no ceremony, that can prevent dead creatures from haunting the places where they have done evil.

Montfort, the evil one, is here, more hermetically sealed in hatred than in his breastplate. Foulque, the hypocrite, is here, and it is necessary that he raise eternally to his eyes the fingernails in which he hides pepper in order to shed false tears. Raymond, the uncertain, is here, and he continues to toss a coin in the air to put an end to his absence of decision by heads or tails. Here is the execrable Tancred, with his donkey's ears and his owl's eyes, who had a taste for causing suffering and was proud of having

¹ Author's note: "At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the south of France was ravaged by a crusade that Innocent III preached against the Albigensian heretics, and whose goal was to dispossess Raymond VI, Comte de Toulouse. The Comte de Toulouse was then the most powerful lord of Christianity after the King of France, and his Estates enjoyed an exceptional liberty and a great civilization."

invented an instrument of torture. Here is Dominic, the bald, and Innocent, with his tiara of peacock plumes. I show the faces that were hidden under the hoods and the leprosy that erupted behind the velvet doublets. The majority among the strong of old are only shivering shades, and come running meekly when I make a sign.

Behold, too, the innumerable victims, those who have suffered patiently, those who have become yellow with rage, those who have fought for their right. The desire to see the punishment enchains them as much as the sin. My memory summons them all with the swords of their wars, the genitalia of their desires and the books of their dead studies. And if there are Perfecti who are liberated by forgiveness and who have escaped the terrestrial circle, may they give measure to my thought, metal to my voice, and breath to my lungs, in order that, in the magical world of syllables, I shall pour the gold of truth.

PART ONE

I

The resonance of a bell is at the origin of my life. I woke up one night with the joyful desire to hear the bronze resound. In those days, my blood flowed with such great force beneath my carnal envelope that I could not prevent myself from realizing that which animated me. I looked at the opening in the form of a cross that cut through the wall of my monastic cell. There was nothing but darkness outside. I could scarcely distinguish the contours of the Roc de Sédour. The waves of the Ariège were beating the stones of the abbey gently. I glimpsed the door that opened to the cloister and cocked an ear. The convent was silent. The file of pillars extended before me, with the regularity of a nocturnal obsession. I took two or three steps and I started to laugh noisily, so much was my soul filled with an uncaused delight.

I had not formed any plan. It would have been easy for me to procure a secular garment and a bag with some nourishment inside, if I had had the least foresight of what I was about to accomplish. I have always thought that the soul meditates during sleep and makes irrevocable decisions that the waking man must obey. I felt so light that I started to run.

Above the porch of the cloister, like a red eye, a window was illuminated. It was that of the chamber of honor, the chamber of frescos, where the papal legate, Pierre de Castelnau,² who had arrived at the convent the day before, was lodged. He was already awake, or perhaps had not yet gone to sleep. I judged that insomnia was the portion of the wicked, those tormented by some remorse. Was the slumber of my innocent soul not as profound as a night charged with clouds? I remembered the anguish that I had experienced before the limpid gaze of that face of wax turned toward me, the scorn with which I had suddenly been enveloped, and that memory redoubled my ardor. I seized the flap of my robe with my left hand in order to traverse the cloister more rapidly and reach the tower where the bell was, with its power of sound.

For almost exactly a year I had been a novice in that abbey of the Order of Cîteaux, founded by a holy man by the name of Martial near the little village of Mercus in the valley of the Ariège. In vain, my father, the celebrated Rochemaure—the cathedral man, as he was commonly called—had begged me not to put on the somber cowl that, according to him, I would rapidly throw into the nettles. He had always given evidence of a profound intuition in speaking of my character and my future. He always punctuated what he said with a gesture that he had retained from his profession as a builder. It seemed to be pointing at the spire of a tower cleaving the sky.

“You never do anything reasonable,” he said. And he struck his forehead to make it understood that my intelligence lacked equilibrium.

“It’s necessary to construct one’s soul,” he also said, “as one constructs a cathedral. The spire can only be high if the foundations are deeply sunk in the ground, like roots.”

He had wanted me to enter as an apprentice the lay brotherhood of which he was the master, but the ecclesiastical fraternities had just obtained an ordinance from the Comte de Toulouse to prevent laic construction. Then he had made me learn the use of weapons with a Florentine master who taught in the open air in the Place des Carmes. I acquired a taste for handling a sword, and rapidly excellent in that, but it did not last. I linked myself in amity with Samuel Manasses, the son of the physician, and was initiated by him into poetry and Greek philosophy. I then perfected my knowledge of that language, and I also

² Author’s note: “A monk of the Abbey of Fontfroide, whom the Pope sent to repress heresy in the Midi. He rapidly rendered himself odious by the violence of his repressions. Raymond VI, Comte de Toulouse, was the principal object of his hatred. He had undertaken a personal campaign in Provence to detach his vassals from him.”

learned Arabic in order to read Plato, for the only texts by that great sage that could be found in Toulouse were translations into Arabic brought from Seville by literate Jews.

It was then that I encountered the monk Petrus. He lived by begging and he lived in abundance, thanks to the method that consists of addressing insults in jest to the man from whom one wants to obtain a meal or money. He preached at crossroads against the wealth of bishops and the debauchery of great lords. He pleased me initially because of his thinness, for plumpness in a man has always inspired disgust in me. We debated under the florid arbors that existed in those days near the Tour de Bazacle, but which the wars have caused to disappear, like all beautiful and pleasant things. I was much the more eloquent because of the admirable gift of speech that I had received from nature.

My aptitude in debate was such that at the age of seven I harangued children of my own age at the corner of the Rue de Taur and the Place Saint-Sernin. During our discussions I surprised in Petrus' eyes flashes of an admiration that he disguised with ignorant bluster and sometimes even stammering. He had little knowledge, but his faith was communicative. I thought that I would vanquish him easily in the metaphysical combat that we recommenced every evening, but not at all. It was him who triumphed. This is how.

He thought that by means of an intelligent manner of prayer one could communicate directly with Jesus Christ. It required patience and method, but if one had both, one could have an almost quotidian commerce with him. In spite of his humility, he, Petrus, lived under the surveillance of Jesus. Several times, when he was in the process of drinking too much in ill-famed taverns, a slightly hunchbacked peasant, bearded and simple in appearance, had come to sit down facing him and had gently taken the glass out of his hand.

"Who is that unknown peasant?" he had asked his companions.

They had contented themselves with laughing, because they did not see anyone; and Petrus had known, via the certainty of the heart, that Jesus had appeared to him in person. He continued to drink, but slightly less, because, he said, it is only excess that is reprehensible.

He made me promises of prompt vision if I prayed as he indicated to me and with the desirable fervor. I had the naivety to ask him to set a date and he said, tranquilly: "About a month." And he added: "On condition that you put an end to the insanity of your discourse"—words that he only pronounced with the pious goal of diminishing my pride, for he did not know envy.

There was a great deal of talk in Toulouse about Martial and a vow of silence that he had respected for five years. I immediately set out to walk to his abbey, where I knew that the rule of Saint Benedict was applied rigorously.

That rule required that the vocation of a candidate be tested as soon as he arrived. The door had to close three times before him, with an interval of one day each time. I remained in prayer for three days under the July sun, which was more ardent than usual and under the clear night that became malignly cold when the mountains began to be outlined against the azure. But I did not complain, because hope was resident in my heart. However, as I thought I remarked a certain irony on the doorkeeper's face, I was determined to draw him outside and correct him with my staff.

On the fourth morning, the two battens of the door opened solemnly and it was the prior who came to welcome me, as is customary. I forgot the doorkeeper's punishment and fell to my knees. But it was not the sandal of the revered Martial that I kissed in the dust. He had died some time ago without my having any knowledge of it. I found myself in the presence of a fat abbot from the North sent by the mother abbey, who spoke to me in the harsh and discordant patois that people speak in Paris.

Sympathy and antipathy circulate among men by means of currents almost visible to the eyes. Behind the abbot's smile I perceived a kind of mocking scorn when I told him, albeit with modesty, that I was a resident of Toulouse. And when I added, lowering my eyes, that I was the son of the Rochemaure who was the celebrated master of a fraternity of cathedral-builders, he made a semblance of not knowing the name and he lifted me up in his soft hands, with an unctuous touch, affecting a feigned kindness.

I enclosed myself in my silence as if behind a mute wall, and it was averred by everyone that I kept quiet because I had nothing to say. The most vulgar chores were given to me. I did not complain at being employed in emptying chamber-pots, looking after pigs in the sty or being posted in the fields with

weapons in order to fight bands of marauders, but I suffered from not finding silence favorable to the divine presence. In the midst of talkative and argumentative monks I was transported into a world of speech devoid of beauty.

The abbey was at odds with all the local jurisdictions and no one there was occupied with anything but law. Instead of prayers, the novices learned by heart and recited the laws of Justinian, to the rhythm of a ballad. The customs and usages of all times and all lands were copied on parchment. Parliamentary edicts, royal ordinances and the judgments of consular tribunals were discussed.

I took refuge in the interior convent of the thousand cloisters and the thousand sanctuaries of my soul, and I waited for the apparition promised by Petrus. But the only peasants I saw were vulgar mountain men who came to sell their vegetables and fruits, and their form, devoid of all transparency, was made of dense matter visible to all. And I suffered above all from the pitying smile that I saw on the lips of the prior when he considered me, for one becomes stupid among those who consider you to be stupid, and one is only elevated among those who believe you susceptible of elevation.

That lasted until the night of the bell.

The day before, the arrival of Pierre de Castelnau had taken place, with great ostentation. He came from Toulouse, where he had repressed heresy, and before going to Foix he had wanted to converse with his friend, the abbot of Mercus. I had heard such horrible things said about the repressions ordered by him that I had not wanted to believe them. Since I had known that he was in the convent I had experienced a sort of apprehension.

I had been charged with taking care of the horses of his escort in the tables and I had not seen him. As I was traversing the cloister to go to the refectory I suddenly found myself in the presence of the abbot and an imposing individual, albeit of meager stature. He was wearing a crimson dalmatic over a red silk tunic.³ His belt had a ruby clasp. His gloves and hose were the color of fire. From a broad triangular bonnet a crimson hood fell back over his shoulders that made his dull waxen face and the petrified blue of his extinct eyes stand out.

Was it a presentiment of what was going to happen? My heart began to beat forcefully in my breast. Pierre de Castelnau had stopped and I saw his eyes examining my hands with curiosity, which were soiled up to the elbow by the dung I had just been shifting. He asked me a question, but as he expressed himself in his shrill northern language, I did not understand it. The tone indicated that he was saying no matter what, without attaching any importance to it, with an objective of scornful benevolence.

Neither of us knew, at that solemn moment, that the first link was being sealed of an unparalleled chain of woes. Between the Pope's envoy in the red costume and that wretched domestic of monks, an occult link was established that was only to be broken by death. And on that link was to depend an inconceivable drama, the destruction of southern cities, the rape of beautiful young women, the death of knights and the silence of singers.

Dusk was descending placidly, and neither the legate nor I had the slightest presentiment of the future events that would be elaborated around us. I blushed, I opened my mouth, and I sensed an expression of stupidity covering my features, while I tried awkwardly to hide my hands behind my back.

Pierre de Castelnau turned to the abbot and said that I was doubtless the monk especially devoted in the kitchen garden to planting and picking the parsley. He was making allusion to an absurd superstition claiming that parsley grows almost visibly if it is sown by someone simple-minded.

The abbot started to laugh in a servile and acquiescent manner, and they both resumed their stroll.

I was saying that I started to run along the cloister. I went past the chapel without stopping. A murmur of prayers emerged from it, because the force of the rule had the chapters relayed there in spite of

³ Author's note: "The papal legates were monks, but to reinforce their authority, they traveled in lay vestments and magnificent apparel. It was the man who was to become Saint Dominic who first had the idea of fighting the Albigensians with their own arms, simplicity and poverty, and going to preach barefoot, as mendicants."

the juridical preoccupations. The one that had begun at the eighth hour of the night would only be relieved at sunrise.

The bell was in an ancient tower against which the church was built. I crossed its threshold and I climbed the spiral staircase like a shadow deprived of substance, whose passage causes no sound.

A joyful dilatation inflated my breast when I began to ring. I had not premeditated anything, but it was the tocsin that I rang, with hurried, redoubled thrusts, at full tilt.

Fear is the animating element that is the most rapid in propagation. Immediately, doors began banging in all directions. Through a loophole level with my head I distinguished by starlight forms with necks extended in interrogation. There were footfalls in the chapel, and all the monks who were there, those who were praying as well as those who had the faculty of sleeping standing up with their hands joined, rushed outside. They collided with a group that was running into it in search of a refuge. The paved courtyard, the cloister and the corridors filled with clamors. I heard the voice of the bursar crying: "The treasure! Save the treasure! A certain Laurent, of sickly temperament, who was subject to crises, fell to the ground howling. I recognized Brother Robert by his ridiculous obesity; he had found a huge cross, I know not where, and was raising it with a gesture of importance, as if everyone's salvation were subordinate to his gesture.

Suddenly, a voice rang out: a peremptory voice, that of someone who knew.

"It's the Seigneur d'Ussat's soldiers."

The Seigneur d'Ussat, a violent man and a convert to the heresy,⁴ had had long quarrels with the jurists of Mercus, and he had recently threatened the abbey with pillage. Now, he had a habit of keeping his promises. A clink of weapons followed. Somewhere, monks were doubtless arming themselves. But those who were distributed in the courtyard and along the cloister believed that Ussat's soldiers had forced the doors.

I was still ringing. And then, far away to the north, a bell responded to mine, and then another to the south, and gradually, I heard them from all sides of the horizon. They were all sounding the tocsin, and their repercussion was profound and infinite, crossing the valleys and the mountains.

I quickly realized, however, that those bells were not sounding in reality. I knew to which crenellated tower and which church belfry they belonged. One was ringing in the tower of San Salvi in Albi, another in the advanced barbican in an easterly direction, on the ramparts of Carcassonne, another was the bell of the church of Saint-Nazaire in Béziers. There were more distant ones, those of Maguelonne, those of Beaucaire, others that were agitating in towers made of marine stone and had broken Saracen arrows. All of them had a desperate tone, announcing calamities, the sorrow of peoples, and the death of beauty.

Thus, the tocsin that I had set in motion without knowing why was a kind of signal, awakening in all the bells of the south a mysterious life of bronze, whose music was in my heart.

I did not have time to be astonished or sad. I felt myself seized violently around the body and a face almost stuck itself against mine. I respired a noxious odor, by means of which I recognized the brother responsible for ringing the bell. He had a frightful habit, by virtue of malignity or unconsciousness, of exhaling his bad breath in your face at close range.

"Why are you ringing? Who ordered you to ring?"

There was indignation in his voice because of his usurped function. I shoved him away with all my strength, and doubtless something in my gaze frightened him, for he ran down the stairs uttering cries.

I went down behind him, lending an ear to bells that were fading away over silent rivers and unknown landscapes. At the foot of the tower was a group of monks who must have interrogated the ringer and were waiting for an explanation. On seeing me they all cried out together, wanting to know what the danger was that was threatening the convent.

"Why? What's happened?" they said, surrounding me.

Then I started howling: "God has withdrawn from you! God has withdrawn from you!" And at the same time, I wrenched myself out of their hands.

⁴ Author's note: "The Albigensian heresy taught that life is evil, that a man is condemned to live again incessantly through successive reincarnations, until he is detached from desire by absolute disinterest."

It only took a second for their terror to change into anger and a desire for vengeance. While I ran hither and yon, trying to escape those monks seized by rage, a hundred voices cried that Brother Dalmas had gone mad and that it was necessary to seize him. My loss of reason was announced from cell to cell and proclaimed from the windows, and one monk, who had hoisted himself up as far as the steeple of the chapel in order to escape the peril, even announced that the stars had begun to pale in the sky.

I bumped into Brother Robert's belly and, seizing the cross that he was holding, I threw it at the legs of those who were pursuing me. I launched myself into a corridor, closing the door behind me, traversed the deserted refectory at a run and emerged into the kitchen garden. I suddenly remembered that there was a ladder at the back, standing against the wall.

I scaled it and let myself down gently on to the body of the odorous, vast and indulgent earth. In the distance, in the clover and in the vines, matinal crickets were responding to one another. I saw the Roc de Sédour outlined to my right in the pallor of the dawn. I knew that by following the Ariège I would find a little higher up a fordable place, and would then have only a few steps to take to plunge into the forest, where it would be impossible to catch me. I started to run.

As I ran, I bumped into a hillock that I had not perceived and fell on the ground. My open arms embraced a sort of mound covered with earth, at the summit of which was a little stone cross. Lord! I pressed against myself the clay soil beneath which Martial had wanted to repose without a coffin, in order to become stems, roots and the juice of sap more rapidly.

And during the second in which I made an effort with my hands and knees to get up again, I heard his voice, which said to me:

“Go, my child, into the forest, where you will no longer hear human speech vibrate. Instruct yourself with the howling of wolves, the creaking of branches, the sound of water running over pebbles. For the living speech is born of human silence. Those who, like you, are marked for the perpetuation of the truth with the aid of fleeting words must prepare in solitude the nascence of the Word.”

I resumed my course, but I had a power of delight that lifted me up. I knew from then on what my law was.