

IV. Brute!

A long way away, between Josselin and Ploërmel in the département of Morbihan, Chrétien Joulou's parents were known as Monsieur le Comte and Madame la Comtesse Joulou Plesguen du Bréhut. They had the best private pew in the parish, to the left of the lectern. They were as noble as the king, but had less money than many shepherds. They were gentlefolk with an annual income of 1000 *écus*—one sees poorer ones still, in these happy regions—and they rode in a carriage without springs through the by-roads of their ancient fiefs.

Do you think that's a laughing matter? The household had six domestics and three horses, only two of them one-eyed; the third, admittedly, was blind. Balls and wedding receptions were held at the Château du Bréhut. The two daughters were in no hurry to get married, and that was why so much rested on Chrétien, who was the hope of the family. Things were going from bad to worse. With an income of 1000 *écus*, 50 years ago, one could crack one's whip at will between Ploërmel and Josselin, the location of the marvelous palace of the Rohans, Princes of Léon, who spend 150,000 *pistoles* a year in Paris. A thousand *écus*! You have no idea how much an *écu* is worth on the heath! Even so, Monsieur le Comte and Madame la Comtesse gave an allowance of 1200 francs to Joulou, the heir, the hope and the hero of the family. With those 100 francs, Chrétien Joulou was to become an advocate and be able to earn money.

To earn money! To plead in court! To be a *lawyer*! A Joulou Plesguen du Bréhut! A relative of Rohans, on the right side of the blanket! A cousin of Rieux! A nephew of Goulaines! Relate by marriage to the Fitroys de Clare! For Joulou was all of that, abundantly and authentically. To plead in court! To scratch paper! To graze money! Alas! Alas! What are things coming to? The Comte and Comtesse—the gentleman and his good wife, as they were called—had thought long and hard about it, but in 1832, on the heath, the *écus*, the fine and lovely *écus* of yesteryear, had already lost their patriarchal value.

Of the 1000 *écus*, setting aside 1200 francs, there remained 600 *écus* for the father, the mother, the two daughters, the six domestics and the three horses. They were tightening their belts somewhat.

But what hopes! Joulou an advocate! That was no longer a foolish profession. Who talks about lowering yourself? And the elections! Chrétien Joulou is practically a député by birthright. No ironmaster would ever be able to call him an "uneducated country squire." By God! Uneducated! 1200 francs a year, in "the capital." For three years! 3600 francs' worth of science, glibness and omelette! Watch out, ironmasters! Joulou had a great future. The pen has replaced the lance. Open up the double doors of the modern arena for Joulou!

What are we saying? 3600 francs! And the eight years at college in Vannes at 700 francs a year, count them! And the 1000 francs squandered in one go on the fellow who impersonated Joulou to pass the baccalaureat! And the law school fees, religiously drunk by Joulou! And the examinations devoured! And all the money secretly sent by Madame la Comtesse! Shut up! Joulou was an animal beyond price, a 15,000 franc donkey, at the lowest estimate. For 15,000 francs they could have married off the two daughters, bought a farm or entered a tontine. All things considered, though, they preferred to have Joulou, whatever it cost, because of his future—and they good reason, you see.

He was no prouder for all that. When he came back to the château, he made love with blows of the fist to servant girls in clogs and borrowed money from Yaumie, the stable-master—who was, I swear, on a salary of 30 francs a year.

But this was the other side of the coin: at the end of the third year of law, Chrétien, who was to have returned as an advocate, did not return at all. It was realized, with alarm, at the Château de Bréhut that the 15,000 francs was a total loss. In Paris, Joulou had lived the life of Polchinelle. He played billiards quite well; that was his only talent. He had debts.

His poor mother wept all the tears in her body; the two daughters cooed the female refrain that families dread so terribly: "We told you so." And the young man, from whom money was demanded, sent curses, without even paying the postage.

Such was the history of Chrétien Joulou, the dazzling Marguerite's "brute." We do not claim that there is anything new in the story. The Latin Quarter furnishes dozens of exemplars every year. A cheerful region! It is the story that makes 15th-year students one of the social classes most useful to vaudevillians. When vaudeville tells the story, people die laughing.

Except that Joulou did not resemble all students without courses. He was Joulou the peasant, Joulou the gentleman, Joulou the combatant of pilgrims from Brittany, Joulou the cider-drinker and the gallant with the short arms. He would have bedded down comfortably in the mud of a ditch; he would have gone to sleep there, drunk and stupid, like so many others. In the mud of Paris, these wolves cannot sleep; drunkenness is something different here. They sometimes catch a fever and see red.

Strange to relate, Joulou had retained, somewhere beneath his thick envelope, a vague memory of his blood and his native land. He had been seen to protect the weak, on a whim; he raised his hat as he went past churches; and his eyes moistened at the thought of his mother. If some strong hand had taken a firm grip on the fur of this wolf, he might perhaps have become an honest dog—a worthy dog, even, for he had breeding—but he had

already put his hand on his dagger, for a puerile and fatuous reward. He had not put his hand on it for a serious wage—yet.

One night, for 100 oysters and whatever truffles the belly of a fattened pullet might contain, Chrétien Joulou-Plesguen, Vicomte de Bréhat, had fought more bravely than a lion against a naval ensign in a merry mood in Paris. The ensign was a Breton like him, headstrong like him, and brave like him; the weapons of choice were naval officers' poniards; épées would have been too long. Indeed, they squared up—to employ the phrase avidly adopted by students—on a marble table in that rowdy drinking-den which dishonored the Place de l'École-de-Médecine between 1830 and 1840, known as La Taverna.

The table was only just large enough to serve as a pedestal for that pair of gladiators. It was a celebrated duel, in which the law became involved, but not lithography. The mariner ended up falling with a punctured breast. La Taverna was closed. Joulou took refuge with Marguerite. That was his destiny—for it was all about Marguerite. The mariner had incurred the wrath of Marguerite. It was Marguerite who had promised the 100 oysters and the truffles.

At Marguerite's, Joulou allowed himself to slide below his true status. He was Marguerite's domestic—and her master.

Let us talk about Marguerite.

When did she come from, this Marguerite? Bordeaux is a province famous throughout the world. Marguerite gladly donned headgear in the charming mode of the daughters of Bordeaux. She knotted a headscarf with supreme coquetry. But she spoke, and more especially wrote, in a manner very different from a grisette from Bordeaux, and her artistry on the piano testified to serious study. Where did she come from?

From Bordeaux, and also elsewhere. One travels.

She lied when she said that she was the daughter of a colonel. In 1811, infantry Lieutenant Sadoulas, an old soldier who had won his epaulette the hard way, with the point of his sword, had brought a young Aragonese woman back from Spain, who was very popular in the regiment. The Aragonese woman was a good soul, as her compatriots generally are. From the sub-lieutenants just out of military school to the registrar major,ⁱ a serious and weighty man, everyone was completely satisfied with her. So Lieutenant Sadoulas married her. In the latter months of 1812, she brought into the world a little girl whom the major, her godfather, baptized Marguerite.

Lieutenant Sadoulas died somehow, somewhere or other; by then, his Aragonese wife no longer had the time to worry about him. She was part of the household of the major, who had retired from active service in 1812. The major was a good godfather; he put his god-daughter into one of those excellent boarding-schools which are springing up around Écouen and Villiers-le-Bel to render homage to the memory of Madame Campanⁱⁱ—after which he and the Aragonese woman fell out. He got married; the Aragonese woman put herself about, with mixed fortunes.

One morning in the month of May 1827, the major and his wife came to the boarding-school. In the six years that they had been married, they had had no children, and the major, artfully pleading various circumstances—his already-mature age, that of Madame, who was also getting older, the displeasure of solitude, and others—had convinced Madame to adopt young Marguerite-Aimée, who had, according to the brave soldier, a great deal of promise.

He was right about that; Marguerite-Aimée exceeded her promise. The major learned, as soon as he set foot in the boarding-school visiting-room, that Marguerite-Aimée had taken flight the evening before with a piano-teacher, who had also promised, and had kept his.

Marguerite was then 15 years old. She was an angel, according to the mistress of the boarding-school—no more and no less, at any rate, than all her other pupils. There was talk of hanging the piano teacher. Marguerite's young comrades, with a wisdom beyond their years, saw the matter in a colder light and confessed between themselves that the teacher had been abducted by Marguerite. On due reflection, that is the story of every seduction. Instead of the epic punishments dreamed up by poets, I propose for Don Juan a dunce's cap and the whip.

One is naïve at 15; at the first stop, Marguerite asked the piano teacher whether he knew any Russian princes—and that was certainly not ill-advised, for I have seen piano teachers who have earned a lot of money by knowing Russian princes. At the second stop, the two fugitives quarreled fatally. At the third, Marguerite attracted the attention of a driver who sold game-birds on the side. That gave him eminent connections. After having paid court to Marguerite for frivolous motives, successfully, he confided her to the owner of the best restaurant in the Place Saint-Martin in Tours, in Touraine.

A few thoughtless readers might think that this was not worth the trouble of having left the excellent boarding-school in Écouen or Villiers-le-Bel. Our response is that almost all strong personalities, armed on the move and determined to fight the battle of life without delay, have a predetermined plan. This plan has its inverse. Marguerite was mounted on two ideas: the Russian prince, who might equally well be an American plantation-owner; and the man that she called, in the precocious calculations of her strategy, "her first husband." She had no fear of adventure, but she did not dread the common path—except that the Russian prince and the "first husband" both appeared to her young imagination in the status of a ladder or a threshold, for climbing, or

for gaining admittance. In letting himself cross the line, that simpleton seducer the piano teacher had made a poor bargain!

The life—the real life—of our boarding-school girl would not begin until the day after the bankruptcy of the Russian prince, or the first day of her widowhood. Until then, she was a chrysalis, concealing in her armpits the long butterfly-wings that were bound one day to carry the former caterpillar into the sky.

The restaurant-owner was a widower, but one does not go mad on the Place Saint-Martin in Tours. The restaurant-owner made a mockery of Marguerite by marrying an over-ripe woman of private means, who brought him an income of 2700 francs and a useful talent for book-keeping. Marguerite had a harsh lesson; the new wife threw her out. She fell prey to a commercial traveler, whom she ate away to the bone, but there was nothing much of him but skin.

Paris would be the first city in France if Bordeaux did not exist—in the opinion of the Bordelais. Marguerite lived in Bordeaux. One can learn a great deal there; it is full of money-changers. On two or three occasions, she was on the point of finding her Russian prince or “first husband” there, but she was too young, perhaps even too beautiful—that is more harmful than you might think.

She was a shopgirl; she turned quantities of Gascon heads with neither honor nor profit. She went into the theater, where a Russian prince with a cardboard doll paid 100 *écus* to have her whistled. She gave piano lessons and alarmed the instincts of mothers. She was a governess. Game over, no? A governess in one of the finest vineyards in Médoc, at 1400 francs a year! They were marquises, those vintners; they were Bordelais—which is to say that they were Epicureans, florid, ticklish, debauched and naïve. Game over!

No. Marguerite was too young. The Cid became famous at his first stroke and the young Condé inscribed the name of Rocroy in history ⁱⁱⁱ but Caesar waited 33 years, and Caesar was the greatest of the three. It is necessary to wait, to be checked, to suffer.

I don't know what Margaret Sadoulas hadn't done at 19, as she was when the Lyon diligence threw her up, badly-dressed, a trifle under the weather, very discouraged, but miraculously beautiful, on the pavement of the Post Office in the Rue Saint-Honoré in Paris. What is certain is that she had not succeeded in anything. Her beauty was alarming. Far away, in the Bay of Bengal, where the Russian princes of the sea come and go, corsair ships, shrewder than Marguerite, mask their gun-ports and carefully conceal the pretty ring of cannons that earn their living.

Paris is a reef or a port, as Fate decides. From the first step she took there, Marguerite was, quite frankly, a shipwreck-victim. She could never be happy, or even amused, in the joyful sense of the word. She loved nothing, neither good nor evil. She was that terrible woman of bronze who passes by amid our laughter like the afterthought of fatality. Oh well! Paris is so powerful, so gay! It has so many uphill slopes! It puts an arm around the necks of these statues so charged with electricity that one sees them galvanized momentarily and forced to live. For a year, Marguerite as the queen of the Latin Quarter. She laughed, if she did not love, and even tottered on the brink of love on one occasion.

The position of Monsieur le Vicomte Chrétien Joulou Plesguen du Bréhut in Marguerite Sadoulas' house was no mystery to the regulars at La Taverna. There are certain sentiments of pride there, amid much profligacy, and it must not be forgotten that a Taverna, or its replacement in our era, is a sort of crucible, diabolically heated, from which emerges, on occasion, the noble life of a magistrate, or the pure renown of a great physician. To be sure, it is not necessary for an illustrious magistrate or an eminent doctor to pass through the ordeal of these smoky purgatories, but many have come through them, and many more will.

This is a mystery of moral chemistry that certainly has its depths. Supposing that the proverb is true and that it is necessary that “youth is spent,” these super-heated laboratories expend youth rapidly. The weak leave the shreds of their vitality there; the strong emerge from them intact, neatly decatized ^{iv} and ready to enter into the serious business of life with a firm step.

People laugh at everything there, and perhaps that is a bad thing. Everyone laughed at Joulou's position, including him, although he had not wanted to accept it. Ridicule kills good but preserves evil; in this case, ridicule masked the shame. Joulou did the cooking and bragged about it. For the easy-going, it was a bizarre and burlesque vassalage; for the austere, Joulou's nickname, “the Brute,” covered everything with a pitiful veil.

There were, however, those among Marguerite's visitors who knew nothing about this domestic mystery. When the bell rang, when that young and sonorous voice called out to Marguerite from the landing, Joulou went pale.

“It's the handsome Roland,” said Marguerite.

“You promised you wouldn't let him in,” Joulou murmured.

“I promised?” Marguerite repeated. “Whom? I was alone—you don't count. And there are days when it seems to me that that boy is a prince in disguise. I'm not hungry—go dine alone.”

Joulou clenched his fists. Outside, the impatient voice shouted: “Marguerite, I'll set fire to it if no one opens up!”

That was not a joke, so Marguerite smiled. She shoved Joulou away. He groaned and disappeared into the narrow corridor.

“Who gave you the right to act like this in my home, Monsieur Roland?” Marguerite demanded, opening the door to the landing herself.

There was certainly an element of theatricality in the majesty of her pose, but her tone was truly that of a queen. Roland lowered his eyes before her like a child. He was certainly no longer making threats. A blush like the ones born from the embarrassed modesty of young girls covered his cheeks.

“If you only knew what has happened to me today, Marguerite,” he stammered, “and how unhappy I am!”

Marguerite dropped her regal tone and her pompous pose to reply: “What do you expect me to do about it?”

Everything that was said on the landing was audible in the kitchen. Joulou took down the chicken that he had drawn away from the fire during his visit to the drawing-room. He was not unskillful, for a vicomte. The chicken was perfectly cooked, and filled the narrow kitchen with its odor. Joulou’s nostrils and eyes testified to his keen satisfaction, although his furrowed eyebrows still spoke of jealous rancor.

Bah! he thought. *Why get upset? I can’t leave here to go into the king’s household. This life is all right by me. She’s an eccentric! She’s an artiste! Is it my fault that I have tastes beyond my means? This one will end up like all the others. She doesn’t love anyone, except me!* He rubbed his hands after having deposited the chicken on a chipped dish.

Meanwhile, Roland had come in, and the exterior door had been closed and bolted. Joulou could no longer hear anything but a murmur of voices coming from the drawing-room.

“Brute!” he muttered. “Not so brutish! The life of a student, eh! The Latin Quarter! And people jeer at academic pleasures! She isn’t hungry, so I’ll have a forkful myself, at my leisure!”

Marguerite was sitting on her divan and Roland was kneeling at her feet. “There’s no sense in having eyes like that,” she murmured. “I’m not joking. You’re too handsome for a man. It’s ugly.”

“That’s not an answer,” said Roland, whose voice was tremulous.

“Answer to what? Always the same song? I don’t love you—you know that perfectly well. It’s understood, it’s agreed. I don’t have a heart like other women. I don’t think I have a heart at all.”

Roland contemplated her in fascination. While pronouncing these harsh words, she had lifted the handsome Buridan’s toque and was passing her fingers gently through his broad curls.

“Oh, don’t blaspheme, Marguerite!” said the great child, chattering familiar lines in good faith—lines that acquire a certain savor in passing through the mouths of innocents, and which, moreover, suited his comedy costume so well. “God will punish you! You’ll fall hopelessly in love.”^v

“Are we addressing one another in the familiar fashion?” she asked, withdrawing her hand.

He blushed again.

“It’s carnival time,” she added. “I forgive you. Go on!”

These few words had been pronounced with a light and cool clarity which implied that she had sometimes sat down in a real drawing-room.

Joulou was sitting at the kitchen table and tearing the chicken limb from limb sensuously, in order to build a pretty pyramid on a cracked plate.

Marguerite was playing with the chaplet of large pearls that streamed over her dazzling bosom. There were moments when Roland experienced a sharp pain as he watched her.

“Everything’s going well,” she said, after a silence. “If you weren’t proud and were poor, the tailors would clothe you for nothing.”

A tear rolled down Roland’s cheek. “I am proud,” he whispered, raising his head.

“And you’re not poor?”

“Indeed—I’m very poor.”

She studied him with a gaze that slid like a shining liquid jet between her half-closed eyelids. “If I were capable of loving,” she thought, aloud, “it would be a man who is poor and proud.” She got up and stretched herself, boldly displaying the gracious splendor of her figure. “But,” she added, “I know full well that I’m not capable of loving.”

Can you imagine that the two bottles of Beaune suggested by Joulou to replace the beer were in the kitchen? He had got them in advance, on the beautiful sinner’s credit, from the depths of one of those horns of plenty native to the Latin quarter and the Bréda region: the famous grocer who sells truffles at forty sous a pound. O youth! Noble and charming age! O smiling poetry, which believes in the champagne of Seltz, its truffles and its love. Vicomte Joulou had few illusions, but his stomach was as fine as Marguerite’s gaze. He loved the Madeira of La Villette without believing in it.^{vi} We hope, in due course, to seduce the reader completely with a more skillfully-rendered portrait of this great character.

Just as Joulou was respectfully uncorking the first bottle of Beaune in order to set it next to the plate where the fragmented chicken formed an appetizing pyramid, the celebrated “drinker’s chorus” that fashion is beginning to introduce into every opera sent its howled notes through the closed window: “*Allons! Chantons! Trinquons! Buvons!*”

Joulou liked that kind of verse, which has none of the faults of wearisome Alexandrines. He also liked music when it was screeched loudly and out of tune. With a sigh of envy, he murmured: “There’s a party at the Tour de Nesle! It’s annoying to be dining alone!”

Mechanically, he opened the kitchen window, which overlooked the garden of a tavern next to the Chaumière, whose sign bore the title of the fashionable play.

“*Allons! Chantons! Trinquons! Buvoons!*”

All these ingenious rhymes entered the kitchen tumultuously, with others no less expressive: *flacons, lurons, bouchons, tendrons, bourgeois* and *chansons*.^{vii} Joulou had the taste of them in his mouth. He leaned his elbows on the window-sill and looked down intently into the interior of a simple, austere and rather dirty “drawing-room” in which a company was carousing. They were all men, and they were all wearing costumes as if for a masked ball.”

Hold on! thought Joulou. *That’s Deban’s office-staff on the spree!* “Hey there! Deban’s boys! Hey!”

“Hey!” was the reply. “Joulou? The brute! We’re nibbling away at our trimmed coins, Messire. There’s Philippe, Gaultier, Landry, Orsini, the king and the minister, but we’re missing Burdian and the ladies. Throw us Marguerite and jump down after her, you old roué!”

On the other side of the partition wall, Marguerite’s hands, whiter than the ivory keys, ran over the keyboard. The piano sang like a soul. Roland listened in ecstasy to the pearly tears that Desdemona weeps and which comprise the *Romance du Saule*...^{viii}

ⁱ There is no English equivalent of the French functionary known as a “*gros major*,” who is primarily distinguished by taking charge of the regimental records—hence my improvisation.

ⁱⁱ Jeanne-Louise-Henriette Campan (1752-1822) was an intimate of Marie-Antoinette who contrived to survive the Terror and founded a school at Saint-Germain. Having become friendly with the future Empress Josephine, she was appointed by Napoléon to supervise a school he founded in Écouen, which survived until the Restoration. She wrote an influential handbook of female education, prescribing a curriculum rigorously devoted to domestic arts and skills.

ⁱⁱⁱ Louis II, Prince de Condé (1621-1686) was 22 when he won a famous victory over the Spanish infantry at the battle of Rocroy.

^{iv} Decatization was a process employed in the textile industry, in which the curl was removed from wool or silk fabric by means of steam.

^v Roland addresses Marguerite as “tu” here, rather than using the formal “vous”—hence her reaction.

^{vi} Seltz is the region of Prussia that produced the most celebrated sparkling water of the period; La Villette is a suburb of Paris best-known for its slaughterhouses; this passage leads one to assume that its fortified wines were as convincing a substitute for the real thing as soda water is for champagne, and is presumably implying that Joulou’s Beaune might not have originated in Burgundy.

^{vii} I have left these words in French to preserve the untranslatable wordplay, although their actual meanings are not insignificant. The verb derivatives in the drinking song translate as “Let’s go! Let’s sing! Let’s clink glasses! Let’s drink!” while Joulou’s improvised extensions are relevant plural nouns: bottles, curses, corks, tender shoots (or, metaphorically, young girls), buds and songs.

^{viii} The *Romance du Saule* [the ballad of the willow] is featured in Rossini’s *Othello* (1816); as the text implies, it is a piano solo accompanied by a mournful song intoned by Desdemona.