

THE HUNCHBACK

BOOK I: THE LITTLE PARISIAN

PART ONE: THE MASTERS OF ARMS

1. The Louron Valley

A city stood here once: Lorre, with its pagan temples, amphitheaters, and palaces. Now it's a deserted valley, where the Gascon peasant's lazy plow shies away from blunting its iron blade against the buried marble columns. The mountains rise close by: right in front of you the snowy horizon of the high Pyrenees cuts across your view and reveals the blue sky of Spain through the deep pass used by smugglers from Benasque. A few miles away, at the Bagnères de Luchon hot springs, consumptive Parisians cough, dance, joke, and imagine they're curing the incurable. A little further away in the other direction, arthritic Parisians expect to leave their sciatica at the bottom of the sulfur pools at Barèges les Bains. It's not iron or magnesium or sulfur that'll cure Paris—it's faith!

This is the Louron Valley, lying between the Aure and Barousse valleys, though less familiar to the bustling tourists who come each year to discover this untamed country. This is the Louron Valley, with its flowering oases, its rushing streams, its extraordinary boulders, and its river, the brown Clarabide, a dark crystal flowing between steep banks past its mysterious forests and its arrogant old castle, as swaggering and improbable as a chivalric poem.

As you come down the mountain, to the left of the pass, on the slopes of little Véjan Peak, you can see the whole landscape at a glance. The Louron Valley lies at the tip of Gascony and spreads out like a fan between the Ens Forest and those beautiful Fréchet Woods that stretch across the Barousse Valley between the paradisiacal villages of Mauléon, Nestes, and Campan. The soil is poor, but the view is rich.

Almost everywhere the ground cracks open violently. The ruts tear apart lawns, wash away the roots of giant beech trees, expose the base of the rocks; the vertical banks are split from top to bottom by the invasive roots of the pines. At the foot of the cliff some caveman once dug his home, and at the top a trail guide's or shepherd's hut now perches like the high, solitary aerie of an eagle.

The Ens Forest follows the foot of a hill that ends abruptly in the middle of the valley to let the Clarabide flow by. The eastern end of that hill is marked by a steep bluff no path has ever climbed. The hill lies crossways to the mountain ranges around it and would close off the valley, like a wall stretched between the mountains, if the river didn't stop it short. The locals call this remarkable place the Hachaz, the ax blow. Of course, there's a legend involved, but I'll spare you. Here stood the palaces of the city of Lorre, which probably gave its name to the Louron Valley. And here can still be seen the ruins of the Castle of Caylus-Tarrides.

The ruins look imposing from a distance. They cover a large area, and more than a hundred paces from the Hachaz the broken tops of the old towers still poke through the trees. Up close it's like a fortified

village. Trees have sprung up everywhere in the rubble, and here and there a pine has had to force its way through a stone vault. But most of those ruins are humble buildings of wood and clay rather than granite.

Caylus-Tarrides was the name of the local branch of a noble family important mostly due to its wealth. According to tradition, one of them, Baron Gaston de Tarrides, built a wall around the little village of Tarrides to protect his Huguenot vassals after the abjuration of Henri IV. If you visit the ruins of Caylus you'll be shown the baron's tree. It's an oak, rooted on the bank of the moat to the west of the castle. One night lightning struck it. It was already a big tree, and when it fell it came to rest lying across the moat. It's been there ever since, alive only through its bark, which is all that survived at the split. But oddly one shoot has sprung from the trunk, thirty or forty feet out from the banks of the moat. That shoot has grown and become a mighty oak, an oak suspended in the air, a miraculous oak, on which twenty-five hundred tourists have already carved their names.

Those Caylus-Tarrides died out early in the eighteenth century, and the last of them was François de Tarrides, Marquis of Caylus, one of the characters in this story. In 1699 the Marquis of Caylus was a man of sixty. Early in the reign of Louis XIV he had attended at court, but without much success, and he'd retired disappointed. He lived now on his estate with his only daughter, the beautiful Aurore de Caylus. His local nickname was Caylus the Jailer. Here's why. Around his fortieth year, the marquis, a widower whose first wife had given him no children, fell in love with the daughter of the Count of Soto-Mayor, Governor of Pamplona. Inez de Soto-Mayor was then seventeen, a Madrid girl, with eyes of fire and a heart burning hotter than her eyes. The marquis was rumored to have given little happiness to his first wife, who'd remained shut up in the old castle of Caylus, where she died at twenty-five. Inez told her father she'd never marry that man. But in the Spain of tragedy and comedy, overruling a girl's will was an elaborate business: city officials, duennas, corrupt valets, and—at least according to storytellers—the Holy Inquisition itself existed for just that purpose. One fair evening poor Inez, hidden behind her blinds, was serenaded for the last time by the magistrate's youngest son, a fine guitar player. The next day she left for France with the marquis. He took her without a dowry, and on top of that he paid the Count of Soto-Mayor who knows how many thousand pistoles. The count, nobler than the king and greedier than he was noble, couldn't resist his offer.

A fever broke out among the young gentlemen of the Louron Valley when the marquis brought his beautiful veiled bride back from Madrid to Caylus Castle. There were no tourists around then, no wandering Lotharios setting fire to provincial hearts wherever discount train fares take them. But the permanent war with Spain kept bands of partisans busy at the border, and the marquis had to be ready. He prepared himself and took on the challenge. The lover who wanted to attempt the conquest of the beautiful Inez would first have to procure some siege cannons. The challenge wasn't just a heart, it was a heart hidden behind the ramparts of a fortress. Tender love letters couldn't reach her, soft lovers' looks wasted their heat and languor, even the guitar was powerless. The beautiful Inez was unapproachable. Not one gallant, or bear hunter, or country squire, or army captain could boast of having glimpsed so much as the spark in her eye. And that's how matters stood. After three or four years, poor Inez finally left that terrible castle—to go to the cemetery. She died of loneliness and boredom. She left a daughter.

The resentful foiled gallants gave the marquis his nickname, the Jailer. From Tarbes to Pamplona, from Argelès to Saint Gaudens, not a man, woman, or child called the marquis anything but the Jailer. After the death of his second wife, he tried again to remarry: he had Bluebeard's good nature, immune to discouragement. But the Governor of Pamplona had no more daughters, and the marquis's reputation was so well established that even the boldest marriageable girls drew back from his approach. He remained a widower, waiting impatiently for his daughter to reach the age when she'd have to be locked away. The gentlefolk of the area didn't like him, and in spite of his wealth he was often alone. Boredom drove him out of his castle. He got in the habit of visiting Paris every year, where younger courtiers borrowed money from him and made fun of him.

While the marquis was away, his daughter was supervised by two or three duennas and an aged castle attendant. Aurore was as beautiful as her mother; Spanish blood ran in her veins. The year she turned sixteen, on many a dark night people in the village of Tarrides could hear the castle dogs barking. Around that time one of the most distinguished noblemen at the French court, Philippe de Lorraine, Duke

of Nevers, came to stay at his castle in Buch, near Jurançon. He was barely twenty, but having burned through life too fast he was dying of some wasting illness. The mountain air did him good: by early spring he was leading the hunt as far afield as the Louron Valley.

The first time the Caylus Castle dogs barked at night, the young Duke of Nevers, overcome by fatigue in the Ens Forest, had asked a woodcutter for shelter. Nevers spent a year at his castle in Buch. The Tarrides shepherds said he was a generous lord. Those shepherds talked about two nighttime incidents from his stay there. One midnight they saw lights moving behind the windows of the old Caylus Castle chapel. The dogs hadn't barked; but a dark shape, one people in the village had spotted so often they'd begun to recognize it, had crept into the moat after nightfall. All those old castles are full of ghosts. Another time, toward eleven at night, Dame Marthe, the younger of the Caylus duennas, left the castle by the main door and ran to the woodcutter's hut where the young Duke of Nevers had once been a guest. A little later a sedan chair crossed the Ens Forest, and then a woman's cries could be heard coming from the woodcutter's hut. The next day the woodcutter had vanished, and his hut was free for the taking. Dame Marthe also left Caylus Castle the same day.

Four years passed. Nothing more had been heard of either the woodcutter or Dame Marthe. Philippe de Nevers had left his castle at Buch. But another Philippe, no less notable, no less a lord, honored the Louron Valley with his presence. He was Philippe Polixenes of Mantua, Prince of Gonzague, to whom the Marquis of Caylus intended to give his daughter Aurore in marriage. Gonzague had a slightly feminine face, but overall, he was a man of rare looks, none nobler. His black hair fell soft and shiny around his forehead—whiter than a woman's—and formed naturally the thick, somewhat heavy hairstyle Louis XIV's courtiers could only achieve by adding two or three heads of hair to the one they were born with. Gonzague had the clear proud black-eyed gaze of Italian men. He was tall and well built, and his movements and gestures had a theatrical majesty. We need say nothing of his family: the house of Gonzague stands as high in history as Bouillon, Este, or Montmorency.

Gonzague's connections were as lofty as his rank. He had two friends, as close as brothers, one a Lorraine, the other a Bourbon. The Duke of Chartres (Louis XIV's nephew, later to be Duke of Orléans and Regent of France), the Duke of Nevers, and the Prince of Gonzague were inseparable. The court called them the three Philippes. Their closeness recalled the great classical models of friendship. Philippe de Gonzague was the eldest at thirty, the future Regent only twenty-four, and Nevers a year younger.

You can imagine how the idea of such a son-in-law flattered the vanity of the old Marquis of Caylus. Rumor credited the Prince of Gonzague with immense wealth in Italy. What's more, he was first cousin and sole heir to Nevers, whom everyone thought destined for an early grave. And the properties of Philippe de Nevers, himself the sole heir to that title, were some of the finest in France. Of course, no one could accuse Gonzague of wishing for his friend's death; but there was nothing he could do to prevent it, and the fact is it would make him a millionaire ten times over. The intended father-in-law and son-in-law had more or less settled the matter. As for Aurore, she hadn't been consulted—the Jailer's system.

It was a fine autumn day in 1699. Louis XIV had grown old and grown tired of war. The Peace of Ryswick had just been signed, but skirmishes between partisans continued along the Spanish border, and the Louron Valley played host to lots of those inconvenient visitors. Half a dozen guests sat around a well-furnished table in the dining hall at Caylus Castle; the marquis may have had his faults, but at least he was a good host. Besides the marquis, and Gonzague, and Mademoiselle de Caylus, who sat at the head of the table, the company were all people of middling rank who served them.

One of them, Father Bernard, was chaplain of Caylus and priest of the little village of Tarrides, and in the chapel sacristy he kept the register of births, deaths, and marriages. Another, Dame Isidore, from the Gabour estate, had replaced Dame Marthe as Aurore's lady in waiting. A third, Monsieur de Peyrolles, a gentleman attendant on the Prince of Gonzague, we should present more fully, since he'll play a role in our story. He was a man of middle age, tall and a bit stooped, with a thin pale face and scanty hair. Nowadays we'd have trouble picturing someone like him without glasses; but they weren't in fashion then. His features seemed unassuming, but his myopic eyes had a certain boldness. Gonzague claimed Peyrolles was handy with the sword that hung awkwardly at his side. In short, Gonzague made much of him: he needed him. The other guests, officers at Caylus, were mere sidekicks.

Aurore de Caylus did the honors with cold and silent dignity. In general, even the most beautiful women show their emotions plainly: a woman can be charming around those she loves, and almost unpleasant elsewhere. But Aurore was one of those women who can be captivating even against their will, and who attract admiration without meaning to. She wore Spanish dress; three layers of lace fell amid the jet-black waves of her hair. Though she wasn't yet twenty, the pure proud lines of her mouth already expressed sadness. But what light might shine from a smile on those young lips! And what rays might gleam from those eyes, now hidden by the arching silk of her long lashes. It was long since anyone had seen a smile on Aurore's lips. Her father said, "All that'll change when she's a princess."

At the end of the second course, Aurore rose and asked for permission to withdraw. Dame Isidore looked long and regretfully at the pastries, jams, and preserves being brought out. Duty required her to follow her young mistress.

As soon as Aurore was gone, her father became more cheerful. "Prince, you owe me a rematch at chess. Are you ready?"

"Always at your command, dear marquis," replied Gonzague.

Caylus ordered a table and a chessboard to be brought out. The game now about to begin was at least their hundred and fiftieth in the two weeks the prince had been a guest at the castle. In someone of Gonzague's rank and looks, at the age of thirty a passion for chess would make you wonder. It had to be one of two things: either he was desperately in love with Aurore, or he desperately wanted to get his hands on the dowry. Every day, after lunch and after dinner, out came the chessboard. The Jailer was a fourth-rate player. Every day Gonzague let himself be beaten a dozen times, after which the triumphant Jailer, without leaving the field of battle, fell asleep in his easy chair and snored like a righteous man. And that's how Gonzague courted Aurore de Caylus.

"Prince," said the marquis while setting up his pieces, "today I'm going to show you a gambit I found in a learned treatise by Cessolis. I don't play chess like other people, and I make sure to draw from the best sources. Most people don't know chess was invented by Attalus, king of Pergamon, to entertain the Greeks during the long siege of Troy. It's only ignoramuses or liars who give the credit to Palamedes. All right, now please pay attention to your game."

"Marquis," said Gonzague, "I can't tell you how much I enjoy playing chess with you."

They began, with the other guests still around them. When Gonzague had lost the first game, he signaled to his factotum Peyrolles, who tossed aside his napkin and left. One by one the chaplain and the other officers did the same. The Jailer and Gonzague were left alone.

"The Romans called the game *latrunculi*, or little thieves," continued the old man. "The Greeks called it *latrikion*. In his excellent book Sarrazin observes..."

"Marquis," interrupted Gonzague, "I beg your pardon for my absent-mindedness. May I have your permission to take back this move?"

By mistake he'd moved a pawn and won the game. The Jailer hesitated, pulling on his ear, but generosity won out. "Take it back, prince, but don't do it again. Chess isn't for children."

Gonzague sighed deeply.

"I know, I know," said Caylus mockingly, "we're in love."

"To distraction, marquis!"

"I know all that, prince. Focus on your game! I'm taking your bishop."

"Yesterday," said Gonzague, like a man trying to shake off painful thoughts, "you didn't finish the story about the gentleman who tried to sneak into your house..."

"Ah, you sly trickster!" cried the Jailer. "You're trying to distract me! But I'm like Caesar, who could dictate five letters at the same time. Did you know he played chess? Anyway, the gentleman got half a dozen sword cuts down there in the moat. That kind of thing happened more than once. The conduct of the ladies of Caylus has never given slander anything to chew on."

"And what you did as a husband, marquis," asked Gonzague casually, "would you do it as a father?"

"Of course. I don't know any other way to guard the daughters of Eve. *Shah mata*, prince, as the Persians say! You're beaten again." The old man stretched out in his chair and arranged himself for his siesta. "From those two words, *shah mata*, which mean the king is dead, we've derived checkmate,

according to Ménage and according to Frère. As for women, believe me, good blades around good walls, that's the recipe for virtue!" He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Gonzague quickly left the dining room. It was about two in the afternoon. Peyrolles was pacing in the corridor, waiting for his master.

"Our men?" said Gonzague as soon as he saw him.

"Six have arrived," replied Peyrolles.

"Where are they?"

"At the Adam's Apple tavern, on the other side of the moat."

"Who are the two missing?"

"Master Cocardasse Junior, from Tarbes, and Brother Passepoil, his second-in-command."

"Two good blades!" said the prince. "And the other business?"

"Dame Marthe is with Mademoiselle de Caylus right now."

"With the child?"

"With the child."

"How did she get in?"

"By the low window in the baths that opens onto the moat, under the bridge."

Gonzague thought for a moment. "Have you questioned Father Bernard?"

"He won't talk."

"How much did you offer him?"

"Five hundred pistoles."

"That Dame Marthe must know where the register is. Don't let her leave the castle."

"Done," said Peyrolles.

Gonzague paced with long strides. "I want to talk to her myself," he murmured. "But are you sure my cousin Nevers got Aurore's message?"

"Our German carried it."

"And Nevers is due to arrive?"

"This evening."

They'd reached the door to Gonzague's rooms. At Caylus Castle, three corridors met at right angles: one going to the main living quarters, two going to the wings. The prince's rooms were in the west wing and ended at the stairs leading down to the baths. There was a noise in the central corridor. It was Dame Marthe, coming out of Mademoiselle de Caylus's rooms. Gonzague and Peyrolles ducked quickly into Gonzague's rooms, leaving the door open.

The next moment Dame Marthe came fast and stealthy down the corridor. It was broad daylight, but it was siesta hour, and the Spanish custom had crossed the Pyrenees: everyone at Caylus Castle was asleep, and Dame Marthe had every reason to hope she'd meet no one. As she passed Gonzague's door, Peyrolles threw himself on her and pressed his handkerchief hard against her mouth, stifling her first cry. Then he took her by the waist and carried her, half-fainted, into his master's room.

II. Cocardasse and Passepoil

One straddled a work horse with long tangled mane and hairy knock knees; the other sat sidesaddle on a donkey, like a lady of the manor on her palfrey. In spite of his humble mount, who let his head hang sadly between his legs, the first man carried himself proudly. He wore a laced doublet of buffalo hide with a heart-shaped breastplate, moth-eaten tartan stockings, and a pair of those fine funnel-shaped boots so fashionable at the time of Louis XIV. He topped it all off with a swashbuckling hat and an enormous rapier. Behold Master Cocardasse Junior, a native of Toulouse, formerly a fencing master in Paris, now eking out a living in Tarbes.

The other man, shy and humble, was dressed like a shabby clerk: he wore a long black doublet cut straight like a cassock over black leggings shiny with use, a wool cap carefully pulled over his ears, and stout fur-lined boots in spite of the heat. In contrast to Master Cocardasse—who prided himself on his rich curly hair, as tousled and as black as an African's—nothing but a few locks of faded blond stuck to his companion's temples. Likewise, while two frightening hooks served Cocardasse as a mustache, his second-in-command made do with three off-white whiskers sticking out below his long nose. For this peaceful traveler was indeed a provost of arms, and we can assure you that when he had to he could swing with vigor the great ugly sword that slapped the sides of his donkey. He was named Amable Passepoil. He came from Villedieu in Lower Normandy, a town that rivals Condé sur Noireau in its output of mercenaries. His friends called him Brother Passepoil, either because of his clerical dress or because he'd been a barber's assistant and a pharmacist's flunky before strapping on a sword. In spite of the sentimental gleam in his beady blinking blue eyes when a skirt of red fustian crossed the road, he was ugly in all ways possible. Cocardasse, on the other hand, could pass anywhere for a handsome rogue.

The pair of them stumbled along under the sun of the South of France. Every stone on the road made Cocardasse's cob shy away, and every few paces Passepoil's charger threw a fit.

"You know, brother," said Cocardasse in a thick Gascon accent, "we've been looking at that same damned castle on that same damned mountain for two hours now. It seems to be moving as fast as we are."

"Patience, patience!" answered Passepoil in a nasal Norman singsong. "We'll get there soon enough for what we have to do there."

"God's hat!" sighed the Gascon. "Passepoil, if we were better behaved, with our skills we could be choosier about our jobs."

"You're right, Cocardasse," replied the Norman, "but our passions have ruined us."

"Gambling, wine..."

"And women!" And Passepoil raised his eyes to heaven.

They were following the banks of the Clarabide, through the middle of the Louron Valley. The Hachaz rose before them like an immense pedestal for the massive walls of Caylus Castle. There were no ramparts on this side, so you could see the whole ancient structure, from the foundations to the rooftops, and for an admirer of fine views this would have been an obligatory stop. Indeed, Caylus Castle formed a worthy crown to that great cliff, the result of some forgotten geological convulsion.

Local people said the castle was much older than the Caylus family itself. The firm hand of the Roman army must have passed there, and beneath the moss and bushes covering its approaches could be seen the traces of pagan construction. But only hints of that remained, and everything that rose above the ground belonged to the Lombard style of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The two main towers that flanked the central building to southeast and northeast were square and squat rather than tall. The windows, always placed above an arrow slit, were small and plain, and their arches rested on simple pilasters devoid of moldings. The builder's only indulgence had been a sort of mosaic: the stones, symmetrically cut and placed, were separated by protruding bricks.

That was the foreground, whose austere form matched the bleakness of the Hachaz. But behind the straight lines of the central structure, which could have been built by Charlemagne, a jumble of gables and turrets followed the rising slope of the hill and formed an amphitheater. The keep, a high octagonal

tower topped by a Byzantine balcony with cloverleaf arches, crowned the hodgepodge of roofs like a giant standing amid dwarves.

Two ditches, to right and left of the two Lombard towers, formed the moat, whose ends had once been closed by walls to hold in the moat water. The edge of the village of Tarrides could be seen through the beech trees beyond the moat to the north. Within the circle of the moat stood the chapel, built at the beginning of the thirteenth century in the ogival style, showing its twin transepts with glittering windows. Caylus Castle was the gem of the valleys of the Pyrenees.

But Cocardasse and Passepoil had no taste for the fine arts. They went on their way, and only glanced up at the somber castle to judge how far they still had to go. They were headed to Caylus Castle, and though as the crow flies it was barely half a league away, since they had to go around the Hachaz they faced another hour of travel. Cocardasse must have been a cheerful companion when his purse was full, and even Passepoil's cunning face showed signs of customary good humor, but today they were sad and had their reasons for it: empty stomachs, empty pockets, and the prospect of probably dangerous work, the kind of work you can afford to turn down if you have food on the table. Unluckily for Cocardasse and Passepoil, their passions had eaten up everything.

And now Cocardasse said, "God's hat! I'll never touch another card or another glass!"

"I renounce love forever!" added Passepoil.

And both of them built fine virtuous dreams on their future savings.

"I'll buy all the right gear!" cried Cocardasse enthusiastically. "And I'll become a soldier in our little Parisian's company."

"Me too," added Passepoil, "a soldier or the head surgeon's valet."

"Wouldn't I make a fine cavalryman for the king?"

"The regiment I join would at least be sure of being properly bled."

And together they said, "We'd see the little Parisian again! We'd be sure to fend off some attack against him now and then."

"He'd call me good old Cocardasse again!"

"He'd make fun of Brother Passepoil the way he used to."

"Thunder and lightning!" Cocardasse punched his cob, who could do no more. "We've fallen pretty low for swordsmen, brother, but for every sin there's a mercy. I feel like with the little Parisian I'd reform."

Passepoil shook his head sadly and gave his clothes a despairing look. "Who knows if he'd even choose to recognize us?"

"Oh, come on," said Cocardasse, "that boy's got a true heart!"

"Such skill," sighed Passepoil, "and such speed!"

"Such poise with a weapon! And so direct!"

"Remember his crosscut in retreat?"

"Remember his three straight lunges, called in advance in that attack on Delespine?"

"What a heart!"

"A true heart! Always lucky at gambling, God's hat. And a fellow who knew how to drink!"

"And who drove women wild!"

With every answer they grew more animated. By mutual agreement they stopped to shake hands with deep, sincere feeling.

"God's death," said Cocardasse, "we'll be his valets if the little Parisian wants, won't we?"

"And we'll make him into a great lord!" added Passepoil. "That way Peyrolles's money won't bring us bad luck."

So it was Monsieur de Peyrolles, right-hand man to Prince Philippe de Gonzague, who was making Cocardasse and Passepoil travel like this. They knew Peyrolles well, and his master Gonzague even better. Before teaching the country squires of Tarbes the noble art of Italian fencing, they'd kept a fencing school in Paris, on the Rue Croix des Petits Champs, near the Louvre. And without the difficulties their passions inflicted on their business they might have made their fortune, because the whole court came to them. They were just a pair of decent rascals, who had—no doubt in a moment of weakness—committed

some indiscretion. They were so good with their swords! Let's be merciful, and not try too hard to find out why one day, slipping the key under the door, they'd left Paris as if a fire were at their heels. Certainly in Paris in those days fencing masters associated with the highest noblemen. They often knew more about what was going on than the courtiers themselves. They were the gossip columns come to life. And you can imagine that Passepoil, who'd been a barber, must have known some things! As a result, they both counted on making a living from their skills.

As they set off from Tarbes Passepoil had said, "This job is worth millions. The Duke of Nevers is the greatest blade in the world after the little Parisian. If it involves Nevers, the pay has to be good." And Cocardasse had agreed enthusiastically.

It was two in the afternoon when they reached the village of Tarrides, and the first peasant they met pointed the way to the Adam's Apple tavern. The small downstairs taproom was already almost full when they came in. A girl in the traditional bright skirt and laced corset of Foix was busy bringing out pitchers, tin goblets, light for pipes in a clog—everything to restore six hearty men after a long slog in the sun of the Pyrenees valleys.

On the wall hung six stout rapiers and their related gear. Every forehead might as well have been branded with the words "hired killer." They had tanned faces, bold looks, insolent mustaches. An honest citizen coming in here by mistake would have fainted away just at the sight of their swashbuckling profiles. Three sat at the first table, near the door: three Spaniards, by their looks. At the next table sat an Italian scarred on brow and chin, and across from him a frightful devil whose accent betrayed his German origin. At the third table sat a lout with long tangled hair who growled in Breton dialect. The three Spaniards were named Saldaña, Pinto, and Pépé, known as El Matador; all of them were swordsmen, one from Murcia, one from Seville, the third from Pamplona. The Italian was an assassin from Spoleto named Giuseppe Faenza. The German was named Staupitz, the Breton Joel de Jugan. Monsieur de Peyrolles had recruited all of these blades; he knew his job.

When Cocardasse and Passepoil, after stabling their sad mounts, entered the Adam's Apple taproom, they both took a step backward at the sight of this respectable company. The low room was lit only by a single window, and in the half-light and the cloud of pipe smoke they saw at first just the projecting tips of mustaches on narrow faces, and the rapiers hanging on the wall. But six hoarse voices called out together, "Master Cocardasse! Brother Passepoil!" accompanied by assorted oaths from the Papal States, from the banks of the Rhine, from Brittany, from Murcia and Navarre and Andalusia.

Cocardasse shaded his eyes with his hand. "Crooked ace! *Todos camaradas?*"

"All old friends," translated Passepoil, his voice shaking. He was a coward by birth, whom necessity had made brave. He got goose bumps for a trifle, but he fought like a demon.

Handshakes all around, the kind of firm handshakes that crush fingers, a flow of hugs that pressed together silk doublets, old cloth, threadbare velvet—everything except clean linen. Nowadays fencing masters, or as they prefer to be called, "professors of fencing," are serious hardworking men, good husbands, good fathers, following an honest trade. But in the seventeenth century a virtuoso of the cut and thrust was either a kind of polished charlatan and a favorite of court and town, or else a poor rascal who had to do unspeakable things just to drink his fill of bad wine in cheap dives. There was no middle ground. Our friends at the Adam's Apple had no doubt seen their good days, but the sun of prosperity had set on all of them. They'd all been drenched in the same storm.

Before Cocardasse and Passepoil arrived, the three groups had had nothing in common: the Breton knew no one, the German mixed only with the Italian, and the three Spaniards kept proudly to themselves. But Paris was already a center for the noble arts, and men like Cocardasse and Passepoil, who'd held forth on the Rue Croix des Petits Champs, behind the Palais-Royal, were likely to know all the braggarts of Europe. They connected all the groups, who had so much in common. The ice was broken, tables pulled together, pitchers mingled, introductions made, résumés recited.

It was enough to make your hair stand on end: those six rapiers hanging on the wall had carved up more Christian flesh than all the axes of all the executioners of France and Navarre combined. The Breton, if he'd been a Huron, would have carried three dozen scalps on his belt; the Italian's dreams were haunted by twenty and some ghosts; the German had massacred two fifth-rate princes, three fourth-rate

princes, five third-rate princes, and one second-rate prince, and he was still looking for a first-rate prince. And that was nothing compared to the three Spaniards, who could easily have drowned in the blood of their countless victims. P  p   El Matador spoke of nothing but skewering three men at a time. We can think of no higher praise for our Gascon and our Norman: they were the toast of this band of cutthroats.

When the first round had been drunk and the noise of the boasting had dwindled a little, Cocardasse said, "Now, my beauties, let's talk business."

They called in the barmaid, trembling amid these cannibals, and ordered more wine. She was a big cross-eyed brunette. Passepoil had already aimed the artillery of his amorous gaze at her. He tried to follow her out, on the pretext of getting better wine, but Cocardasse grabbed him by the collar. "You promised to overcome your passions," he said solemnly. Passepoil sat back down with a sigh. When the wine came, the wench was dismissed with orders not to return.

"My beauties," resumed Cocardasse, "Brother Passepoil and I didn't expect to meet such beloved company so far from the populated spots where you generally exercise your talents."

"Alas, Cocardasse, *caro mio*," said Faenza, "do you know any towns where there's work now?"

And all of them shook their heads like men who feel their virtue isn't sufficiently recognized.

Then Salda  a said, "Don't you know why we're here?"

Cocardasse was opening his mouth to answer when Passepoil stepped on his boot. Though nominally the leader, the Gascon was in the habit of following the advice of his second-in-command, who was a wise and prudent Norman.

"I know we were summoned," he answered.

"That was me," interjected Staupitz.

"And that for any ordinary assignment," went on Cocardasse, "Passepoil and I would be more than enough for the job."

"Hell! Usually, when I'm around," said El Matador, "they don't need to hire anyone else."

They all agreed, each according to his degree of eloquence or vanity.

Then Cocardasse said, "So are we going up against an army?"

"Our business," answered Staupitz, who worked for Monsieur de Peyrolles, right-hand man of Prince Philippe de Gonzague, "is with a single man."

A loud laugh greeted this announcement. Cocardasse and Passepoil laughed louder than the rest, but the Norman's foot was still on the Gascon's boot. That meant, "Let me handle this."

Passepoil asked innocently, "And what's the name of this giant who's going to take on eight men?"

"Of whom each one—God's blood!" added Cocardasse, "is worth half a dozen good mercenaries!"

"It's Philippe de Nevers," answered Staupitz.

"But they say he's dying!" cried Salda  a.

"Wheezing!" added Pinto.

"Run down, broken down, tubercular!" cried the others.

Cocardasse and Passepoil now said no more. The latter shook his head slowly and pushed away his glass. Cocardasse did the same.

The others couldn't help noticing their sudden seriousness. "What's going on? What's the matter with you?" they were asked on all sides.

Cocardasse and Passepoil looked at each other in silence.

"What the hell is this about?" cried Salda  a, astonished.

"It almost looks like you want to back out of the job," said Faenza.

"My beauties," replied Cocardasse, "if you thought that, you wouldn't be far wrong."

Objections drowned him out.

"We knew Philippe de Nevers in Paris," added Passepoil gently. "He came to our fencing academy. That's a dying man who'll cut you a new butt crack."

"Us?" they shouted, and all of them shrugged with disdain.

Cocardasse looked around the circle. "I see you haven't heard of the Nevers attack."

They all opened their eyes and ears.

“Old Master Delapalme’s attack,” added Passepoil, “which laid low seven fighters between the town of Roule and the Saint Honoré gate.”

“Those secret attacks are all piffle!” cried El Matador.

“With good footwork, a good eye, a good garde,” added Joel de Jugan, “I care no more for secret attacks than for Noah’s flood!”

“Crooked ace!” said Cocardasse haughtily, “I’m confident I’ve got good footwork, a good eye, and a good garde, my beauties...”

“Me too,” said Passepoil.

“...As good footwork, as good an eye, as good a garde as any of you...”

“To prove which,” said Passepoil with his usual gentleness, “we’re ready to try our skills against any of you, if you like.”

“And yet,” continued Cocardasse, “the Nevers attack doesn’t seem like piffle to me. I was beaten by it in my own academy.”

“Me too.”

“I was hit between the eyes, three times in a row.”

“And I, three times in a row, between the eyes!”

“Three times, without once finding his blade to parry it!”

The six cutthroats were now listening carefully. Nobody laughed anymore.

“So,” said Saldaña, crossing himself, “it’s not a secret attack, it’s a spell.”

Jugan put his hand in his pocket, where he must have kept a rosary.

“It’s a good thing they summoned us all, my beauties,” said Cocardasse solemnly. “You talk about an army—I wish we were an army! Believe me, there’s only one man in the world who can face Philippe de Nevers, sword in hand.”

“And that man?” asked six voices together.

“Is the little Parisian,” replied Cocardasse.

“Oh, him!” cried Passepoil, suddenly enthusiastic. “He’s a devil!”

“The little Parisian?” said the whole circle. “Does your little Parisian have a name?”

“A name you all know, gentlemen. His name is the Chevalier de Lagardère.”

It did indeed seem like the cutthroats all knew that name, because a silence followed. Finally, Saldaña said, “I’ve never met him.”

“All the better for you,” replied Cocardasse. “He doesn’t like men of your type.”

“Is he the one they call handsome Lagardère?” asked Pinto.

“Is he the one,” added Faenza, “who killed those three Flemish men under the walls of Senlis?”

“Is he the one,” began Jugan, “who...”

But Cocardasse forcefully interrupted him. “There aren’t two Lagardères!”