

JEAN DE FODOAS

THE HOUSE IN THE RUE MALCOUSINAT

I launched my blue épée, moving in its nudity, over the old oak table like the body of a young woman. Then I detached the scabbard from my belt, because my mother suffered secretly from the presence of a weapon at my side.

I wiped the sweat from my brow. I disguised as best I could the rip that divided the top of my doublet. It had separated into two the cross of white wool that every good Catholic in Toulouse wore on the right shoulder. I went to the door and darted a glance into the street. It was deserted, and under the bright moon, the stones, in places, seemed covered in snow.

They had not pursued me. They had lost track of me, or they dared not trouble the house where my mother was. No, it wasn't that. Could a sentiment of respect be born in those murderous souls? Assassins who had been my companions! They might have gone to have their weapons blessed at Saint-Sernin by the Bishop of Toulouse, but they were executioners all the same. Those blessed weapons had served to kill imploring prisoners or women who had just been raped.

Lord! Was I myself...but no, I didn't want to think about that. It was no time to regret what I had done. First of all, if one acts, it's by virtue of an internal pressure, a kind of volcano of the soul that one can't resist. Could I have done otherwise than go to fight when the infamous Rabastens had told me that he was recruiting noble and courageous young men to capture the fortress of Montesquieu de Lauragais from the Protestants? He had even added, lowering his voice slightly, that when it was known that I, Jean de Fodoas, was at the head of those elite young men, all the finest flower of Toulousan nobility would follow me.

That Rabastens appeared to me to be such an admirable man! I compared him to Trencavel and Arnaud Bernard! Why does infamy not burst forth on faces like a revelatory lamp? How can noble features and attitudes full of dignity be combined with the most abject baseness? Why does nature prepare such traps in sculpting the faces of men?

And I, being naïve, had allowed myself to be taken in, because there had been talk of my courage, that the nobility of my family had been exalted. It was always my pride that doomed me—my pride and my violence...rather my violence. Had I not struck the first blow? Yes, it seemed to me that I was the one who had struck first.

I tried to reconstitute the scene exactly as it had happened, for it is of great importance to justify oneself by means of solid arguments. We had told the Jews to cease their dances and their cries...all three of us were sitting...we had been drinking, perhaps too much. All three, the three leaders—for, in spite of my youth, Rabastens and Gaston de Cornusson, the son of the former seneschal of Toulouse, had been obliged to admit me to their deliberation.

It was a matter of knowing how the booty would be divided. I wasn't listening, thinking that it wasn't becoming to manifest a gross avidity. There had been enough talk on Toulouse of the poverty into which the Fodoases had fallen. And then, I had heard the sentence, inoffensive in itself but to which the tone of the syllables gave the value of a repulsive insult: "A few écus will be necessary for Jean de Fodoas."

I raised my head and I saw the faces of my two interlocutors disfigured by hideous laughter. They were laughing, and there was in the grimace of their laughter, which made them suddenly similar, the knowledge of my poverty, of the poverty of my family, and the scorn that thieves can have for an

accomplice poorer than them. Not only were they scornful of me, but they wanted to make me their dupe, estimating my value at a few écus.

It was Rabastens that I had slapped, because he was closer to me. Gaston de Cornusson had made a backward movement, and my fist had only struck empty air. Already I had lost the advantage of the man who strikes the first blow. Things ceased almost immediately to be visible. A semi-naked woman, her eyes wide with fear, ran to the nearest lamp and threw it to the floor, for inferior souls think they are protected by darkness.

I heard a cry of “He’s drunk!” and then “Kill him!” And I understood that from the next room, a dozen bandits who had been waiting there, seething with impatience, awaiting the division of the booty were rushing me: bandits who hated me because I had treated them as bandits, and whose companion—my God!—I had been. All the assassins of Montesquieu de Lauragais were around me and I saw their blessed weapons glinting in the smoke like lightning flashes in a storm.

By virtue of the great strength given to me as my share since birth, the table rose up like a rampart and they fell back. I struck the head of a crawling traitor with my heel, delivered a few blows at hazard, and my guardian angel, with his constant fidelity, guided me unwittingly to the door, and doubtless opened it himself, with his angelic hand, for I was suddenly refreshed by the nocturnal air and felt the pavement of the street beneath my feet.

To be sure, no one could outdistance me at a run, and I had been able to reach the Rue Malcousinat and the little house, a modest vestige of the lost splendor of the Fodoases. How blissful solitude is, especially when the respiration of one’s mother floats there, like the brush of an ineffable wing.

My mother wasn’t asleep. At the top of the staircase her door was open. She knew that I was there, and anxiety augmented her light breath. I heard it as an appeal, and also as a reproach. Perhaps she had not slept, and had waited for me incessantly.

My resolution was firm not to say anything about the night’s events, sensible as I knew her to be to accounts of violence. I promised myself, as I climbed the stairs with the even and calm tread of a late stroller going home to bed, simply to kiss her on the forehead and go back to my room.

But when I saw her, so tiny in her armchair, so pale and so dignified, when I perceived in her features the effort to efface the anguish and replace it with a smile, my heart burst like a pomegranate under an excessively hot ray of sunlight, and I fell at her knees.

“I’ll tell you everything!” I cried.

But she put her hand over my lips. “No, don’t say anything; I can guess...”

What had she guessed? What had already happened a hundred times, the violence, the presence of evil that she sensed around her beloved son, and which she would have liked to chase away with the caress of her tremulous hands.

“Your cross is torn,” she murmured. “Leave me your doublet so that I can mend it.”

I wanted to speak, to excuse myself, to tell her about the insult received, but I sensed that my explanations would be lost in the purity of her soul like boat sinking in a sea of dreams.

Then it seemed to me that my sentiments were transformed with the same rapidity as some nocturnal landscapes when they are suddenly illuminated by a ray of the rising sun falling from a mountain.

I assured her that, from that moment on, a new man had been born. While speaking, I sensed that man, full of perfections, appearing out of the depths of my soul. I saw him, I saw myself, full of kindness, pardoning offenses, incapable of anger. My entire past life horrified me.

“I swear to you that I won’t go to the rendezvous with the three Pibrac brothers.”

Those three brothers were ruined castellans, of which there are so many, who followed the profession of bandits and attacked travelers on the roads. They had come to Toulouse to recruit courageous men from among the bad lots of the city, and they had naturally thought of me.

But my mother, in her sanctity, had no idea who the Pibrac brothers were.

“I swear to you not to show myself in the city any more with Marie Cose,¹ and not to see her again.”

¹ Most of the names in this chapter are fictitious, but Marie Cose is mentioned in the published Annals of Toulouse as a notorious serial adulteress of great beauty who was condemned to be whipped after seducing the son of a town

With her fragile hand, my mother waved away the image of that scandalous young woman.

“I swear to you to forget that slap that I gave Rabastens, to forget the laughter of those accursed swine. I shall love poverty as you have told me to do. And even...”

I had an insensate vow on my lips. Timidly, but with patience, my mother had often expressed the desire to see me enter some religious order.

I glimpsed, as in a dream, the colonnades of a cloister, the lined-up tombstones and the broad sleeves of robes flying around me like brown birds.

Raising my eyes, I saw my mother’s ecstatic face. She did not believe my promises, but my good intentions were sufficient for her. And on my forehead it seemed that a moist droplet, a little warm tear, had just fallen.

And it was at that moment, at that divine moment, that a noise coming from the depths of Hell reached me, for, as Isaac Andréa had often said to me, there is a direct communication between divine things and infernal things, to such an extent that it is not insensate to think that they have the same origin.

Someone was knocking on the door. They were regular blows, struck with violence, with no restraint, with no regard for the late hour and the tranquility of the inhabitants of the Rue Malcousinat.

If God sees into souls, he could take account of the fact that when I got to my feet, the syllables of my oath were still floating on my lips, and I only had the intention of shouting pacifying words through the door. I searched for a general remark about the blindness into which we had thrown drink, the necessity of sleep and forgetfulness.

What happened then? Perhaps, as I have thought by virtue of certain indications, there is a personal genius in my épée that, although deprived of speech, offers suggestions and impels actions in accordance with its nature. Perhaps the things that were being said in the street by infamous men—of which I perceived fragments such as: *Miserable hovel of beggars! His old caricature of a mother*—were of a character such that one could not hear them without a complete transformation of the living fires that circulate in the blood vessels.

The door of the house was narrow, made of stout oak, and held shut by the thick transversal beam. I understood that several men were braced against it, attempting to break it down. They were breathing heavily, and one of them said:

“He must be shivering with fear on the other side.”

Gold alone, with his power of vision, can testify that my intention was simply to show those degraded individuals that I was not afraid of them. I remember that, during the moments that followed, I constantly had the sensation that my mother’s tear was luminous on my forehead, like a fantastic star, the sight of which would dazzle my enemies.

I threw myself at the door and with a single thrust, I pulled away the beam that ensured its closure.

Events never happen as the imagination represents their details. I had seized my épée in my right hand, and I believed confusedly that a kind of Archangel Michael would appear to the indigenes in the street, with a star placed on his forehead.

For a second I had that illusion, for those who were shoving the door fell to the floor, and I was able to believe that they were prostrating themselves. But a fat man, whom I recognized by his silhouette as Balbaria, leapt over those who had fallen with a surprising agility.

That Balbaria had an arm longer than any other, and the right side of his face as more developed than the left. One ear almost hung down to the shoulder. At least, I saw him thus, and I had not refrained, in the course of our expedition, from laughing at such a disproportion, which no one apart from me had noticed.

He seized me by the throat with his deformed but strangely solid hand, crying: “I’ve got him!”

In a din of broken things, forms filled the room.

councilor. She is featured in *Le Trésor des Albigeois* as a somewhat raddled prostitute, although the relevant section of that novel does not seem to be set any later than the present chapter. Several other characters mentioned in passing, including Isaac Andréa and Captain Mauric, had also played minor parts in *Le Trésor des Albigeois*.

Subsequently, I was astonished by the brevity of that scene. Doubtless it was the howl that Balbaria uttered that sowed fear in souls. The cutting edge of my blade sawed through the arm near the elbow. I was able to recoil as far as the staircase. I was suddenly animated by a marvelous presence of mind.

The room was only illuminated by a night-light attached to the wall and the lunar circle that the open door made. All my thrusts must have carried. But that is not sufficient to explain that panic so rapidly took hold of the assailants. Like the waves of a tide that has reached the extremity of its force, they flowed back into the street. I was able to close the door behind them and bolt it again.

An occult intervention had occurred, and had preserved me from the complete invasion of my house by those furious individuals. But I immediately wondered why it had not occurred sooner. A minute sooner would have sufficed. What a caprice there is in providential interventions.

Everything around me was devastated. Balbaria's blood or someone else's, was forming ruddy pools on the diamond-shaped floor-tiles. The mirror had shattered into smithereens. I nearly uttered a cry on seeing the miniature of Bérangère de Palassol that the painter Thomas Capellan had painted for me partly ripped from its frame and soiled.

I thought at first of going to give my mother an explanation. But what? The best thing was to tell her the truth. I did not have time. A rumor was coming from the street,

What was happening there? Had the chastisement been insufficient? Or perhaps too great?

As the tumult became louder, I thought that the wisest thing to do was to find out what it was. I climbed the stairs in three bounds and went open my bedroom window, which overlooked the Rue Malcousinat.

The sound produced by the shutters provoked a clamor. I was able to see that a man, doubtless traversed by an unconsidered thrust, was lying on the ground. Several others were carrying a beam for which they must have gone in search to the Rue des Changes, where there was a house undergoing demolition. I distinguished the monstrous silhouette of Rabastens and the thin caricature that was the Cornusson son. A few lights illuminated windows here and there. I recognized, on the first floor of the house facing mine, a certain Donadieu, candle in hand, who could not know anything of the quarrel, but was nevertheless turning in my direction a face full of hatred.

Only a man who weighs his intentions and know the extent to which they differ from the actions they engender can know the words that I pronounced and no one heard. They were words of conciliation. I tried to summarize rapidly the infamy of Rabastens and Cornusson in my regard and to explain that the incident that had occurred that evening was its fatal conclusion. But it seemed to me that no one was listening. Injustice possessed those frantic creatures.

Suddenly, a detonation resounded, followed by a little noise near my head. A musket-ball had just brushed me. I recoiled, but without haste, in order to show my indifference in the face of danger. Their aim was poor. But they were going to see!

I had a Spanish musket in my cupboard, of an old-fashioned form, but which I always kept ready for use. The troubled times that Toulouse was traversing required the possession of a musket. I seized it, installed the fork on the window-sill and fired, almost without taking aim.

Doubtless Cornusson merited being punished, for I saw him fall against the opposite wall. The clamors of hatred redoubled. At the same time, the blows of the beam resounded that several men were using as a battering-ram against my door.

I was astonished that the soldiers of La Maynade had not yet come. As I was struggling with my musket in the hope of firing a second shot, I heard them arriving from the Rue des Changes and the Rue du Pont, and Rabastens' band negotiated with them.

Expert in crime, Rabastens was even more so in lying. It was necessary to ward off his assertions. I deliberated as to whether I ought not to go downstairs, open my door and place myself in the hands of the sergeant of the watch. But I recognized the voice of Captain Mauric. He had come in person! The captain of the watch, in consequence of a few nocturnal quarrels, had pronounced inconceivable words in my regard, which testified to the villainy of his soul.

“That’s a swashbuckler that I’ll bring to account the next time,” he had said to the venerable magistrate Jean de Balanquier,² who was a friend of my father and who had interceded on my behalf.

Now, the next time had arrived. Captain Mauric ought to have taken possession of Rabastens and his troop of bandits who were disturbing the nocturnal peace by firing gunshots and trying to break down the door of a house using a beam as a battering-ram. Instead of that, by the light of a torch that one of the men was holding, I saw him leaning over the recumbent Cornusson and helping him to get up, and I distinguished in the curve of his back the respectful baseness that the son of a former seneschal can inspire in a chief of police.

“Captain Mauric,” I shouted, in a loud voice, “in making a pact with assassins you’re becoming an assassin yourself.”

I thought, too late, that that was not calculated to settle my affairs, but truthful words spring forth with the same force as water once sprang forth under the staff of Moses.

Another detonation rang out. And the wielders of the beam, who had stopped momentarily with the arrival of La Maynarde’s men, recommenced striking my door with regular blows, as if they were accomplishing a just and excellent task.

Anger provokes a state of intoxication that is dolorous at first but becomes blissful at a certain degree by virtue of the total loss of the reasonable faculties. At a stroke I attained that height, at which consciousness has no place. I sensed my strength multiplied, and that is what enabled me to lift up an enormous dresser, of which I would have been incapable at any other moment, to carry it to the window and to launch it into the street. It fell with an enormous crash, and cries of rage and dolor went up. I launched all the other furniture with the same ease, until the room was entirely bare, with the exception of the bed, which was fortunately, or unfortunately, fixed to the floor and the ceiling by its columns of sculpted wood.

“They’ll kill you! Save yourself, I beg you!”

My mother was beside me, and I remember having been struck by her extreme smallness, as if I were seeing her for the first time. Her hands were clasped together, and in spite of the dramatic character of the situation, I had difficulty not exclaiming at the exiguity of her stature.

“It’s not my fault, I swear to you!” I cried. “There’s a power that has come, which has seized me, which acted in my stead....”

I felt on my forehead the gesture of a waxen hand, which meant that words were futile.

“Don’t worry about me. I recognize the voice of the Seigneur de Venerque, who loved our father so much. I’ve nothing to fear, since he’s there.”

Jean de Balanquier, Seigneur de Venerque, was the magistrate in charge of the police. I was astounded to know that he was present. The affair must be considered very important for him to be summoned in the middle of the night.

The affair was, however, insignificant in principle. Bandits drunk on wine had wanted to take me for a dupe. I had slapped one. Perhaps, in the dark, I had delivered an unfortunate sword-thrust. But I had fled, and that would not be interpreted in a pacific fashion. My house had been invaded. Did I not have the right to defend myself? Undoubtedly the blows I had struck at hazard and in the dark, blows that often strike empty space, had been directed unwittingly by a occult power—for I recognized an occult power in all of that.

But it was not the time to determine the part played by God and that of the Devil....

When one is lost in the tempest of events, a man always has a mast to which to cling, which is the appetite for life. He accomplishes mechanically the actions most appropriate to perpetuate his existence. I glimpsed in a second what it was necessary to do.

² As with Marie Cose, this name is taken from contemporary documents referring to a real magistrate active in Toulouse in the last decades of the sixteenth century and the first two decades of the seventeenth, although his title is listed in some of those documents as “Seigneur de Montlaur et de Lagarde” rather than the one with which the present text credits him.

At the extremity of a kind of ladder ending in a mansard there was a skylight that overlooked the roofs. That was the route of my salvation, on condition that I acted quickly.

The sound of the beam against my door had paused for a brief interval, doubtless corresponding to the arrival of the Seigneur de Venerque, but it had resumed and I had just heard a crack that presaged an imminent yielding of the door.

I clasped my mother in my arms.

“Quickly!” she said, again.

I took a few steps, opened a door and stepped on to the ladder that led to the roof.

But without reflecting, moved suddenly by an internal force, I turned back and tumbled down the ladder. I had left my sword in the room downstairs, and, as I was about to depart without it, I had had the sentiment of abandoning an inseparable companion.

The door was about to collapse. I lost a few seconds then searching for the épée that I had left on the bottom step of the stairway. It was shining with an unusual gleam. It was longer than usual. It has a singular life. When I seized it by the hilt and replaced it in its scabbard it seemed to me that I was enveloping in a robe a maleficent creature, bloodstained but supple and beautiful, which bore evil in its substance, a fraternal creature destined to accompany me for a long time and to communicate to me the poisons nourished in its steel bosom.

I had vertigo, and it required a great effort on my part to tear myself away from the attraction of the combat. Perhaps, without a further appeal from my mother, I would not have been above to tear my gaze away from the door, which flew into splinters.

Finally, I launched myself forth, I carefully closed the door behind me that gave access to the ladder. It was quite well hidden, and a few minutes would go by before anyone found it.

When I emerged on to the roofs, I felt the nocturnal air like a refreshing wave. It is a particularity of my nature to pass with disconcerting rapidity from one state of mind to another. After having crawled for a few minutes among the gutters and between the chimneys I let myself fall on to my back. A great lassitude seized me, and, at the same time, a perfect serenity. I nearly threw my sword away, but I thought about the racket it would make as it fell into the street.

To my right I saw the bell-tower of La Dalbade and the confused mass of the Château Narbonnais. To my left, Saint-Sernin projected its steeple into the sky with the unalterable patience that a heart of eternal stone gives. And in all directions I saw the stars, as far as the eye could see, and it seemed to me that they were falling like rain on sleeping Toulouse. How beautiful they were, and how insensate I had been not to come to contemplate them more frequently! In truth, it was an ideal situation to be lying on the roof of a house in that marvelous city.

But the gleam of the stars paled. In the distance, a belfry projected a flock of brazen birds through motionless spaces. The sky became the color of ash and smoke, and in the distance, above the distant slopes of Pech David, there was a tiny solar bloodstain. What, morning already, and the end of the nocturnal delight that I was savoring! How rapid everything was, most of all the celestial colors and the fleeting gleam of the stars!

Voices wrenched me out of my torpor. My enemies were pursuing me, then, even into the sky. I recommenced crawling, but my course was limited by the abysses of the streets. In the end, a kind of vertigo gripped me, and I wondered whether the wisest thing might not be to leap into the void at random.

Isaac Andréa had often told me that every man, especially if he is a good man, has several invisible spirits that protect him. It was time for a decisive and dangerous experiment. If Isaac Andréa had told the truth, it would be easy for my spirits to sustain me in my fall.

And as I deliberated as to whether I ought to trust that uncertain promise, the spirits in question, which were perhaps deliberating in their own account as to the most favorable means of stealing me away from my persecutors, found an unexpected resource.

A skylight that I had perceived, not far away from me, like an obscure eye, opened slowly. The opening was about to increase and becoming gaping. I scarcely had any choice as to the means of getting out of trouble, and I leapt into the unknown with the greatest possible lightness.

I did not fall from a great height. A hand, moreover, helped me to get up. I was about to put myself on the defensive when, gaping with astonishment. I realized that I had before me the thin silhouette and the large-nosed face of my friend and protector, the Jesuit Du Jarric.