

Chapter I

Corporal Rouletabille

When Corporal Rouletabille disembarked on the stroke of five p.m. at the Gare de l'Est, he still had the mud of the trenches on his boots, and he strove more vainly than ever, not to rid himself of a glorious clay that scarcely bothered him, but to guess by what magic spell he had been snatched away from his multiple duties as a platoon-leader in a front-line position at Verdun.

He had received an order to go to Paris as quickly as possible and, as soon as he reached the capital, to go to the offices of his paper, *L'Époque*. The whole business seemed to him not merely very mysterious but so “anti-military” that he did not understand it at all.

Even so, in haste as he was to discover the reason for his singular journey, the reporter was glad to walk for a while after long hours spent on the train.

It was the first time he had seen Paris since the outbreak of the war. It was mid-September. The day had been fine. In the oblique rays of sunlight the foliage of the Boulevard de Strasbourg and the Boulevard Magenta was gilded and enflamed, extending its double russet stream toward the heart of Paris. The movement of the city below was full of light and tranquility—just like old times! The young reporter obtained an infinite joy from the sight.

Others before him had come back and had experienced an egotistical pain on seeing the city in its serene pre-war splendor, a few kilometers from the trenches. They had wanted to find a face of suffering in rapport with their own anxieties, anguishes and sacrifices. Rouletabille, however, took a singular pride in it. *It's because I'm out there*, he said to himself, *that it's like this here. Well, that, at least, gives me pleasure. People are confident!*

And he straightened up in his dishevelment, in his muddy garments.

No one even looked at him. Nor did they pay any more attention to the other *poilus* who were coming down the Boulevard de Strasbourg, coming back from the front, trailing around them a whole paraphernalia of the noisy war, any more than they paid attention to those who were going back up to the Gare de l'Est, their leave having ended, ready to go forth and resume their mortal sentry-duty, behind which the city had resumed its respiration, the powerful and calm rhythm of its life as the queen of the world.

At the corner of the great boulevards, Rouletabille stopped momentarily, remembering the frightful tumult of the riotous scenes that had desolated this entire quarter of Paris in the early days of mobilization, when a nervous population thought it saw spies everywhere, and a few hooligans had set forth on looting expeditions.

Now, on the café terraces, around neatly-aligned tables, placid groups of people were taking aperitifs in the mildness of the evening, after the day's labors. *That's pleasing*, Rouletabille thought, *really pleasing! And, as Clemenceau says, the Boche are at Noyon!*¹

Abruptly, he recalled that he had not come to Paris to waste his time in vague philosophical reflections. He hastened his pace toward the newspaper offices, and soon crossed the threshold of *L'Époque's* great hall.

“Rouletabille! Rouletabille!” With what joy he was still welcomed in that old building, where he had none but comrades! Alas, some had already fallen on the battlefields, and the list of heroic victims was getting longer in the golden book proudly displayed in the hall, in the shadow of Mercié's famous statue, *Gloria Victis!*²

¹ Noyon, in the Compiègne, lent its name to two major battles in the Great War subsequent to the writing of *Rouletabille chez Krupp's*. It was the point at which the Germans' Great Spring Offensive was conclusively stopped in March 1918, and the scene of further fierce fighting when the Allies began to drive the Germans back, retaking the town in August 1918. Georges Clemenceau had uttered his famous quote observing that “les Allemands sont à Noyon” in 1915

² A patriotic bronze commemorating the Franco-Prussian War, cast in 1874. Copies of it became commonplace symbols during and after the Great War. The Latin title translates as “Glory to the Vanquished.”

Those of an age at which infirmity had retained them in the editorial offices came out to kiss Rouletabille's cheeks or shake his hand. They found him bearing up superbly beneath his muddy carapace. It was quite apt for them to think that "the war had done him good!"

An old servant, however, with a breast bedecked with medals, was already informing the young man that "the boss" was asking for him. The reporter was immediately introduced into the office of the editor-in-chief.

It was not without a certain emotion that Rouletabille went into that room, in which he would certainly learn the perhaps-redoubtable reason for which he had undertaken such an unexpected journey.

The doors had closed again. The boss was alone.

The man had always had a great amity for Rouletabille, whom he considered as something akin to a son of the household. Ordinarily, when he saw him again after a long absence or some sensation reportage, he welcomed him joyfully. Why, then, was he silent this time? What was wrong? What had happened? What did this solemnity, to which Rouletabille was not accustomed, signify?

The reporter briefly examined his conscience. "Boss, you're frightening me!"

"This isn't the right time to be frightened of anyone or anything, my friend, and when I've told you why you've been ordered to come, you'll share my opinion!"

"You're going to ask me to do something terrible?"

"Yes."

"Speak, Monsieur—I'm listening."

At that moment, the telephone rang, and the director unhooked the apparatus set on his desk.

"Hello? Hello? Oh, very good—it's you, Monsieur le Ministre... Yes, he's here!... In good health, indeed!... No, I haven't said anything to him yet... All he knows is that there's a ninety-nine per cent chance of not coming back from the mission... What did he say? Nothing, of course... Of course he'll accept!... Do I still think so? Of course I think so! He's the only one who can get us out of it... Hello? Hello? It's still on for this evening? Good, good!... Eh? Cromer has arrived from London? Well, what did he say? Hello?... Eh?... Frightful!... Good, good!... Prefect!... Yes, that's much better!... Until this evening!"

The editor hung up the telephone. "You realized that we were talking about you!"

"Which Minister was it?" Rouletabille asked.

"You'll find out this evening—we're meeting him at half past ten."

"Where?"

"At the Ministry of the Interior, where certain other very important people will also be gathering."

"Oh—that means it's a real cabinet meeting."

"Yes, Rouletabille, a real cabinet meeting, but a meeting so secret that it has to remain unknown to all those who aren't taking part in it—a meeting at which you'll learn what's expected of you, my young friend. In the meantime..."

"In the meantime, I'll go take a bath," Rouletabille declared, utterly delighted with the extraordinary complexion of events.

"Go take a bath and come back clean and ready to go. We need all your strength, Rouletabille, all your courage and all your intelligence."

The young man was already at the door, but the voice of his chief had suddenly taken on such a singular weight in pronouncing the last words that he turned round. He saw that the boss was becoming increasingly emotional.

"Oh! I've never seen you in such a state, Boss. You're usually so calm! My God, what can this be about?"

The editor took his hands then, leaned toward the reporter and looked into his eyes. "It's quite simply a matter of saving Paris, my young friend. Do you hear, Rouletabille? Saving Paris! Now, until this evening, at half past ten..."

Chapter II

The Secret Cabinet Meeting

The reporter disappeared, escaping down a service stairway. He wanted to be alone; he needed to think.

All in all, he could hardly contain his joy. Since the beginning of the war, he had, like so many others, done his duty obscurely, risking his life a hundred times over in the anonymous needs of national defense, which was certainly full of grandeur, although he would have liked something—let us say the word that was in the back of the reporter's mind—"more amusing." How many times had he not wished that someone might call on his gifts of initiative and invention, in order to carry out some exceptionally difficult mission to which he could have given his entire soul, his entire imagination!

Well, today he had his wish. He had been summoned in order to save Paris! The most important people in the State were looking to Corporal Rouletabille to save Paris! Quite simply!

But what did it mean, though: save Paris?

Those two words were exciting him, dazzling him, although he could not comprehend what form such prodigious adventure might take. He knew full well, having returned from the trenches that *the others* could no longer get through—and everyone else knew that too—and even if they were able to get through, that he could not possibly stop them all on his own! And yet, it followed from the conversation he had just had with his boss that it was him who was going to save Paris—that they were counting on him to save Paris! How, then?

"Some hope!" he said, aloud, on the boulevard that he was in the process of crossing, in order to jump into a cab that would take him to the bath-house...

An hour later, when he came out from there, after some furious hygienic exercise and a solid massage, he found himself much calmer, quite self-composed, ready for any eventuality, all set for any adventure. He dined in a modest restaurant in the Champs-Élysées, in the shade of an arbor, alone with his thoughts and the impatience that he was having difficulty suppressing. He would have liked to show the "very important people" a Rouletabille of marble, whom nothing could disturb.

At ten o'clock he went through the gate of the Place Beauvau. He was immediately shown into the office of the minister's chief aide; the editor of *L'Époque* was already there.

"They're briefing the Minister," the Boss said to him as he shook his hand—and they both stood there, face to face, in silence.

Suddenly, a door opened. An usher showed "the Messieurs" into the Minister's office. A "very important person" was there, whom Rouletabille recognized. Polite formalities were exchanged.

"How goes it with the troops!"

"Fine."

"Sit down then, please.

Another "very important person" arrived, and was introduced to Rouletabille.

"Delighted to meet you, young man. Your editor has told us that impossible things can be asked of you. We shall see..."

Rouletabille did not have time to reply. A third VIP made his entrance. It was the one to whom the editor of *L'Époque* had spoken on the telephone as soon as Rouletabille had arrived.

"Well, have you seen Cromer?" everyone asked.

"Cromer," replied the latest arrival, "ought to be upstairs. I told him to meet us at half past ten. What he's revealed is frightful!"

Another door opened, and the head of the Sûreté Générale was announced. "Messieurs," he said, "all my people are here. If you'd care to come up, I'm at your disposal."

So it was to the Sûreté Générale that they were going; they had not wanted to hold the extraordinary meeting in the Ministry itself, but in a more discreet and secluded place.

Through internal stairways and corridors, whose labyrinth Rouletabille knew well, they went to the office of the head of the Sûreté Générale. In the little vestibule preceding the office, a clean-shaven man of Anglo-Saxon appearance, with an energetic expression, was standing with his arms folded, while in the depths of an armchair, an honorable old lady in a black bonnet was displaying a face full of anguish imprinted with infinite sadness. The VIPs bowed to her.

One of them went to the man. “Would you please come in with us, Mr. Cromer.”

The old lady had not moved. She remained alone in the vestibule, with the usher, who closed his chief’s office door on the others.

In the office, they all sat down.

We have employed a necessary discretion in designating the “very important people” who had been assembled there by the head of the Sûreté Générale, and in order to denote their individuality we shall employ the same terms that Rouletabille used when he had to recall in his notes the role that each one played in the mysterious session.

Firstly, there was the one that everyone addressed as “Monsieur le Président,” and sometimes as “Monsieur le Premier,” an expression that is used to address the Prime Minister, the President of the Council and also the President of the Parisian Court of Appeal.³

The second VIP—the one who had introduced Mr. Cromer—was distinguished by an enormous pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, which set veritable portholes over his clean-shaven face every time he had to read a piece of paper or found it interesting to study the features of his interlocutor. Rouletabille, in referring to him, called him “Horn-rimmed Glasses.”⁴

Finally, the third one never stopped smoking enormous cigars, of which he had a profuse supply in a briefcase as large as a small valise. A long time ago, Rouletabille had already nicknamed him “the Tobacconist.”⁵

As he went in, the reporter had slipped into a dark corner from which he could see everything, where he hoped to be forgotten.

“Should we send for Nourry?” asked the head of the Sûreté Générale, to begin with.

Horn-rimmed Glasses, bringing some papers out of his morocco portfolio, said: “No, not yet. First I’m going to read you this letter from Fulbert, which the Invention Service has discovered.”

“You’ll admit, my dear friend, that it’s quite incredible that the Service could receive such an item!” said the one they called the President.

“The staff of the Service will tell you,” Horn-rimmed Glasses replied, “that they receive a hundred of the same sort every month. What’s more, they’re of all kinds. They ended up finding Fulbert’s missive among those that had been rejected as having been written by lunatics!”

With the exception of Rouletabille, everyone there uttered an exclamation, especial the editor of *L’Époque*.

“But Fulbert isn’t just anyone!” he said. “His work on the curative virtues of radium were beginning to cause a sensation a few months before the war broke out.”

“Bah! Let’s not exaggerate,” replied Horn-rimmed Glasses. “Let’s remember that at that time, the scientific establishment was already beginning to treat Fulbert as a poet and a dreamer. And since you remember the claim he made that all the afflictions of humankind would one day be curable with his radium, imagine the astonishment of the staff of the Inventions on receiving a letter in which the same inventor affirmed that he had found a way of destroying ‘in five seconds,’ a considerable fraction of that same humankind. Judge for yourselves; I’ll read

“To Monsieur etc. etc. I have the honor of informing you that I can put at the disposal of the Office of Inventions the plans for an infernal machine capable of destroying a city the size of Berlin in a few minutes, without leaving our own frontiers. Please believe me, Monsieur le Ministre. Your devoted servant, Théodore Fulbert.”

³ Presumably Georges Clemenceau, President of the Council and Minister of War.

⁴ Probably Stephen Pichon, the Minister of Foreign Affairs

⁵ Possibly Louis Loucheur, the Armaments Minister