

Part One THE DISPLACEMENT

I. The Englishman's Cellar

"Pernod, you say?"

"Yes, old chap, Pernod. And Benedictine, kummel, Cointreau, whisky, gin—how do I know? Not to mention champagne and wine, naturally. Hold on—here's your bolt-hole."

And by means of a short communication tunnel dug under the walls of a pretty white house in the style of a villa, the two officers quit the trench to go into a cellar. It was scarcely possible to see in there, by means of the light coming through a narrow air-vent, but Captain Loubet, taking out his lighter, lit a stout oil-lamp suspended from the vault and the subterranean space brightened. One table, three chairs, two iron-framed beds, one Henri II bookcase with a glass front fitted with green curtains, sketched out an accommodation, in a corner where the floor-tiles had been swept clean. Further away, the clutter commenced: a mass of furniture and other objects, piled up at random, obstructed the greater part of the cellar, and only a narrow path cleared around the periphery gave access to the carefully-labeled racks where multiple rows of bottles were superimposed in good order.

Such was the sumptuous domain in which Lieutenant Marcel Renard was about to succeed Captain Henri Loubet for the next fortnight.

The captain enjoyed the lieutenant's bewilderment.

"Takes you aback, doesn't it, old chap, to find this at the front line, after 30 months of war? I had no suspicion of the riches myself, to begin with. My predecessor had no idea this cellar existed. The door was walled up, you see, along with the air-vent. As the sector was quiet, I lived on the ground floor for the first few days, but when a few big shells from Metz fell on us—in error, I think, having been aimed at the battery on the flank—I thought it more prudent to take shelter. My orderly, a cunning fellow, ferreted around, sniffed out the camouflage, found the door...and here we are!"

While talking, the captain opened the bookcase with the masked glass panes, the shelves of which were garnished by a collection of bottles. "This is just to have a small selection close at hand, without searching the racks. I had the books thrown into the river. Pernod for me—what about you?"

"OK, Pernod," the lieutenant accepted. "But tell me, Captain, is this the stock of a wine-merchant, then?"

"Not at all. It appears that it was the villa of a so-called Englishman before the war, who passed himself off as an engineer—but he was really a Boche, and he was sentenced to be shot as a spy in '14...at any rate, may the old bibber rest in peace. Thanks to him, I've not been too bored here, and you'll owe him the same gratitude, and others after you... To the health of the English engineer!"

They were putting down their glasses when two *poilus* came in. One, with the look of a street-porter about him, was bent down under the weight of a trunk; the other was marching beside him discreetly, guiding his companion by means of unctuous little gestures that were almost sacerdotal. He had him deposit the trunk on one of the beds, then sent him away with a amiable smile.

"Thanks, Saucisson. Go fetch the other one now." Then he turned the clean-shaven face of a perfect flunkey to Renard, and with his eyes respectfully lowered, said: "Would the lieutenant care to indicate a cupboard where I can arrange his linen and effects?"

His accent was less distinguished than his outfit, and the latter, which was probably unparalleled throughout the sector—a jacket elegantly pinched at the waist, yellow shoes, an embroidered silk skull-cap—revealed numerous whims that the captain seemed to be studying with a disgusted expression.

The lieutenant pointed to the Henri II bookcase. "There, Jasmin. You have only to take out the bottom shelves and put the bottles on the ground to one side. And if you'd like to pour yourself a glass of Pernod, go ahead."

"The lieutenant knows that I don't indulge," the man murmured, as he set to work.

“That’s my orderly,” Renard explained, in a whisper, seeing that Loubet was about to make unkind comments about his costume and declaration of sobriety. What can you do?—he’s the former *valet de chambre* of the Duc de Pinchefalise. I sometimes joke about his exaggerated distinction and his family name, which drives him to despair—he’s called Wambrechies; Jasmin Wambrechies—but apart from that, I’ve nothing for which to reproach him; he serves me to perfection. He has no peer for finding chocolate.”

“You even permit him to hire domestics?” muttered the captain, recalling the arrival of the trunk.

“Oh, the other one’s my new colleague’s orderly. They share the work—and, my word, it goes very well like that.”

The said colleague, the sublieutenant of the eighth, made his appearance in the cellar at that moment. He was a tall blond young man with a serious and thoughtful expression, whom Renard introduced to the captain by the name of Henri de Lanselles, although his monocle had earned him the more familiar nickname of Monocard. He came to announce that the relief was complete.

Loubet gave the new arrival the honors of *his* cellar one last time, then darted a farewell glance at the precious bottles and, after a brief hesitation, took hold of a bottle of Pernod, which he wrapped up in a newspaper and hid in the vast pocket of his trench-coat.

“In memory of the Englishman,” he sniggered. Then, shaking the hands of the two officers, he wished them god luck and went out to rejoin the company that was standing down.

Assembled on the edge of the village, behind a large brick building, the men of the tenth, kitbags on their backs, were only waiting for their captain. The trench stretched away in front of them, and further away—in the forest with bare branches that sheltered the artillery battery, which had been crossed many times in the last fortnight for fetch provisions from Landremont—the road. And today, the road led to the rear, to rest, and, for some, to paradisaic leave.

While Loubet headed in that direction, through the subterranean tunnel that cut diagonally through the entire village, the two lieutenants proceeded with the ritual assembly of the eighth, who were about to occupy Port-sur-Seille.

Port-sur-Seille, grouped on the left bank of the river, still had numerous houses standing, which permitted the communication trenches to be forsaken and prudent circulation, even in broad daylight, through the streets and terraced gardens. Only on the eastern side, toward the river—beyond which was no-man’s-land, then desolate brushwood, Boches and 20 kilometers further away, the silhouette of Metz and the hummocks of the fortifications—did they burrow underground in the listening-posts and the machine-gun nests lined up along the bank.

The fire, however, was normally fairly benign: a few shells in the morning; four more at precisely eight o’clock in the evening—no one knew why—falling one after another in the same place; that was, for the time being, pretty much the daily “sprinkling” of Port-sur-Seille. And the continuous rumble of the cannon to the north made the men appreciate the relative mildness of that favored corner. “We’re peppered now and again, but it’s pretty routine,” was the report on the sector that the men of the tenth, before departing, had just communicated to their successors of the eighth.

The latter, about a 120 in number, assembled in the dusk in their ranks on the little square completely sheltered by the gross Medieval tower and another more modern building, in front of which the mobile kitchens were already working flat out, listened to the allocation of posts and fatigues: food supplies, sandbags, horse-grooming, barbed wire, cleaning, and so on. Then, in response to the fateful “Break ranks!” they all dispersed into the gathering gloom.

The fortunate, unoccupied or designated for night duties, went to get their water-bottles and ran for the “reimbursable”—the wine supplement, as thick and as purple as mulberry juice. In the shelters, while waiting for the soup, tins of corned beef were opened. A few, by virtue of an excess of zeal that generated mild hilarity around them, started cleaning their rifles. By the light of a candle-stub, the “artists” unpacked their materials and set about making aluminum jewelry or finding ingenious uses for cartridge-cases. An interested group watched the manipulations of the most skillful, who were occupied in inserting lice into the bezels of rings, beneath magnifying-glasses. Two inseparables, Totor and Dudule, were warmly debating the issue of the leave-roster. “Even if I get blown up, when my leave falls due, you’ll see someone popping up to the head of the column at top speed...”

After casting an indulgent glance over the familiar spectacle, visiting the as-yet-deserted infirmary, watching the sapper corporal distributing picks and spades from a shed behind the church

and the motorcyclist repairing his machine, the lieutenants headed for the company office, installed on the ground floor of the old tower. Beside the door, two telephonists were checking the alignment of the copper antenna that was hanging down from the top of the tower. One of them, a short thickset sergeant with a crafty expression, saluted the lieutenant with respectful familiarity.

“Bonjour, Monsieur Renard.”

“Bonjour, Dupuy. Your wireless apparatus is set up in the tower?”

“In the observation-post, yes, Monsieur Renard. If you want to go up before it’s completely dark, I’ll join you in a minute.”

The two officers went into the ancient and somber building. Going past the office, where a clerk was visible, hunched over an oil-lamp, they switched on their pocket torches in order to climb the rigid ladders linking the vaulted floors.

“Do you know that radio man?” asked de Lanselles, alias Monocard.

“Yes, that’s right, you’ve just arrived from the two-twenty,” said Renard. “You don’t know. I knew Dupuy as a boy; we used to indulge in rough-and-tumble together. He was the son of the concierge in my father’s workshop, at the Orange automobile factory. He became a mechanic, and then an electrician. In ’14, at 25, he had just gone into the distribution factory at Issy-les-Moulineaux as a workshop manager. If he sees out the war, he’ll go far.”

The noise of a rapid climb shook the wooden rungs. Sergeant Dupuy arrived on the upper platform at the same time as the two officers.

“Beautiful landscape,” murmured de Lanselles, parading his interested monocle around.

In almost complete darkness, only the ribbon of the Seille was still shining faintly. All the rest, whether it was allied or enemy territory, extended in vague undulations toward the forts of Metz, punctuated in the distance by rare fires. To the north, the cannonade was rumbling, and flares were describing their luminous parabolas in the sky.

“Not bad,” Renard conceded. “But you’ll have plenty of time to see it, in a fortnight. Come on, old chap.”

Dupuy took his visitors into the corrugated iron shelter in which another radio operator, wearing earphones, was scribbling notes.

“At present, it’s Lyon that’s sending...a real pleasure, receiving from Lyon; clear signals and not too fast. At midday, the Eiffel Tower. At three o’clock, Nauen, the big Boche transmitter...”

After having spent a quarter of an hour being subjected to a short course in practical wireless telegraphy, and meekly applying their ears to the receivers in which and musical modulations, mysterious to them, were drumming amid the rapid crackling, the two officers went back down. It was freezing up there, and it was nearly six o’clock. The orderlies ought to have lit the fire and prepared the meal.

As they went into the cellar, even though he was used to the cares of the unequaled Jasmin, Renard uttered a brief laugh of satisfaction—and de Lanselles, in spite of his idealism and disdain for the material, wiped the mist off his monocle and permitted himself an appreciative cluck of the tongue.

The roaring stove, laden with pans, was spreading a gentle heat and a savory perfume of roasted fowl through the subterranean. The lamp, fitted with a pink paper hood, was illuminating the table on which, on a clear white tablecloth, a blue porcelain vase ornamented with holly and mistletoe separated the place-settings. The two orderlies, standing to attention to either side of the table, completed the welcoming scene.

“Ha ha! You’ve surpassed yourself, Jasmin, my friend,” said the lieutenant. “That vase...my word, he’s borrowed it from the curé! And what’s that sweet-smelling bird?”

“A teal, Lieutenant. My colleague Saucisson’s been hunting. When we began cleaning up, we found two Lefauchaux, with cartridges. What wines would our lieutenants like served?”

“With game, Pommard would seem suitable to me...or perhaps Mouton-d’Armailhac. What do you think, de Lanselles?”

“Oh, I’ll leave it up to you, Renard; these material details are irrelevant to me.”

“All right then, Pommard and Mouton. A little glass of dry Rhenish to start, and champagne to finish. But first, an aperitif.”

They did honor to the teal, and even more to the Englishman’s bottles.

The next morning, as soon as their officers had left the cellar, the orderlies set about the housework. The unpolished Saucisson saw no necessity to touch the pile of furniture that, in Jasmin's words, "dishonored their masters' apartment," and would have preferred to undertake a methodical examination of the wine-racks, but a remark of Renard's on the subject of the volumes destroyed by "that stupid drunkard Loubet" had served as a pretext for the shrewd Jasmin to interpret it a formal instruction to put the "glory-hole" in order and to set aside any books they might find therein. Arguing on the basis of that order, the *ex-valet de chambre* of the Duc de Pinchefalise, obtained the support of his robust colleague in the work of clearance.

Velvet-covered chairs, armchairs, a carpet, curtains, a sideboard, even a piano—Monocard could play—gave the installation an unexpected comfort. Empty packing-cases, and whitewood tables and chairs were taken up to the ground floor as a supply of future firewood. A large trunk, whose lock scarcely put up any resistance, was full of civilian clothes: two checkered suits, ulsters, underwear, a black dinner-jacket with waistcoat and trousers.

Saucisson took the dinner-jacket and immediately put it on—and when he had completed his costume with a "stove-pipe" hat, discovered in company with several sporting helmets, he refused to continue the operation before having taken a stroll around the village in his new splendor. He did not get far, though; Sergeant Cipriani—an ill-tempered little Corsican, and a stickler for discipline—encountered him in the kitchens and suggested, in rather sharp terms, that he turn around. To cap it all, Lieutenant Monocard came in during the conversation, and the amateur dandy had to go back to the cellar with his tail between his legs.

He found Jasmin occupied in examining a black leather-bound notebook filled with lines written in a foreign language.

"What's that you're reading? Is it Boche? Where did it come from?"

"It was at the bottom of the trunk. I think it's English. I'll give it to my lieutenant. Who knows? Perhaps the document might assist the national defense."

A far more curious discovery was made that afternoon, however. The furniture having been removed, followed by three boxes of books—perhaps five hundred volumes; enough to fill the Henri II bookcase emptied by the captain twice over—they finally reached an instrument, or, rather, a machine, which was vaguely reminiscent at first glance of a van without wheels, bolted to an enormous cast-iron base. When they had exhausted the most absurd hypotheses regarding the strange device—Jasmin maintained that it was a mysterious instrument of espionage—the two orderlies attempted to get rid of it. Even though they combined their efforts, however—and Saucisson, among other professions, had been a wrestler and weight-lifter in Marseilles—the cast-iron base rendered any transportation impracticable.

"Bah!" sighed Jasmin. "We'll hide the not-very-decorative object under one of those Algerian curtains. First, though, I'll show it to my lieutenant."

At a glance, Renard—an expert in material matters—saw that the apparatus had no serious relationship to an automobile. Only the dials providing indications in English could give that illusion to laymen. In addition to the absence of wheels and even of axles, no mechanical transmission departed from the housing that might have contained something akin to an engine.

After the meal, Renard appealed to de Lanselles to study the singular device, but Monocard had a horror of anything resembling technology and declared himself incompetent. Duty was calling him, in any case; and after having rummaged for twenty minutes in the boxes of books, he left Renard plunged in his examination.

What use could the Englishman have made of this unknown machine?

Suddenly, the officer remembered the black leather-bound notebook, through which he had leafed distractedly in the early afternoon. Several inscriptions on the dials—PAST and FUTURE, among others—were to be found in the notes, where they formed chapter titles. Swiftly, he took it out of the bookcase, into which he had thrown it, and, summoning up his knowledge of English, he set about reading it attentively.

There was no doubt about it: the notebook related to the apparatus. With a disconcerting laconism, the function of each control and the purpose of each dial were specified therein...

After four pages, a suspicion of the truth dawned on the lieutenant...

Was that book by Wells he had once read, which he suddenly remembered with a singular clarity, not merely a novel, then? The machine described therein was not a pure fiction; someone—an engineer—had really imagined, designed and constructed one...

After ten minutes, in which incredulity gradually gave way to doubt, and then to persuasion, Renard, amazed and bewildered but impassioned by the discovery, was obliged to yield to the evidence. The owner of the cellar—the English engineer shot as a spy in '14—was the constructor of the machine described by Wells, and the machine that was resting here in the cellar, perhaps intact and ready to function, was neither more nor less than the famous Time Machine!