Author's Note

This book aims to use the techniques of a novel to retell the true story of the Dreyfus affair, perhaps the greatest political scandal and miscarriage of justice in history, which in the 1890s came to obsess France and ultimately the entire world. It occurred only twenty-five years after the Germans had crushed the French in the war of 1870 and occupied the territories of Alsace and Lorraine – the seismic shock to the European balance of power that was the precursor of the First and Second World Wars.

None of the characters in the pages that follow, not even the most minor, is wholly fictional, and almost all of what occurs, at least in some form, actually happened in real life.

Naturally, however, in order to turn history into a novel, I have been obliged to simplify, to cut out some figures entirely, to dramatise, and to invent many personal details. In particular, Georges Picquart never wrote a secret account of the Dreyfus affair; nor did he place it in a bank vault in Geneva with instructions that it should remain sealed until a century after his death.

But a novelist can imagine otherwise.

Robert Harris
Bastille Day 2013

Dramatis Personae

THE DREYFUS FAMILY
Alfred Dreyfus
Lucie Dreyfus, *wife*
Mathieu Dreyfus, *brother*
Pierre and Jeanne Dreyfus, *children*

THE ARMY
General Auguste Mercier, *Minister of War, 1893–5*
General Jean-Baptiste Billot, *Minister of War, 1896–8*
General Raoul le Mouton de Boisdeffre,
Chief of the General Staff
General Charles-Arthur Gonse,
Chief of the Second Department (Intelligence)
General Georges Gabriel de Pellieux, *Military Commander*, *Département of the Seine*
Colonel Armand du Paty de Clam
Colonel Foucault, *military attaché in Berlin*
Major Charles Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy,
74th Infantry Regiment

THE STATISTICAL SECTION
Colonel Jean Sandherr, *Chief, 1887–95*
Colonel Georges Picquart, *Chief, 1895–7*
Major Hubert-Joseph Henry

Captain Jules-Maximillien Lauth
Captain Junck
Captain Valdant
Felix Gribelin, *archivist*
Madame Marie Bastian, *agent*

THE SÛRETÉ (DETECTIVE POLICE)
François Guénée
Jean-Alfred Desvernine
Louis Tomps

HANDWRITING EXPERT
Alphonse Bertillon

THE LAWYERS
Louis Leblois, *Picquart's friend and attorney*
Fernand Labori, *attorney to Zola, Picquart and Alfred Dreyfus*
Edgar Demange, *attorney to Alfred Dreyfus*
Paul Bertulus, *examining magistrate*

GEORGES PICQUART'S CIRCLE
Pauline Monnier
Blanche de Comminges and family
Louis and Martha Leblois, *friends from Alsace*
Edmond and Jeanne Gast, *cousins*
Anna and Jules Gay, *sister and brother-in-law*
Germain Ducasse, *friend and protégé*
Major Albert Curé, *old army comrade*

THE DIPLOMATS

Colonel Maximilian von Schwartzkoppen, *German military attaché*

Major Alessandro Panizzardi, *Italian military attaché*

THE 'DREYFUSARDS'

Émile Zola

Georges Clemenceau, *politician and newspaper editor*

Albert Clemenceau, *lawyer*

Auguste Scheurer-Kestner, Vice President, *French Senate*

Jean Jaurès, *leader of the French socialist*s

Joseph Reinach, *politician and writer*

Arthur Ranc, *politician*

Bernard Lazare, *writer*

Part One

1

'Major Picquart to see the Minister of War . . .'

The sentry on the rue Saint-Dominique steps out of his box to open the gate and I run through a whirl of snow across the windy courtyard into the warm lobby of the hôtel de Brienne, where a sleek young captain of the Republican Guard rises to salute me. I repeat, with greater urgency: '*Major Picquart to see the Minister of War . . .!*'

We march in step, the captain leading, over the black and white marble of the minister's official residence, up the curving staircase, past suits of silver armour from the time of Louis the Sun King, past that atrocious piece of Imperial kitsch, David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps at the Col du Grand-Saint-Bernard*, until we reach the first floor, where we halt beside a window overlooking the grounds and the captain goes off to announce my arrival, leaving me alone for a few moments to contemplate something rare and beautiful: a garden made silent by snow in the centre of a city on a winter's morning. Even the yellow electric lights in the War Ministry, shimmering through the gauzy trees, have a quality of magic.

'General Mercier is waiting for you, Major.'

The minister's office is huge and ornately panelled in duck-egg blue, with a double balcony over the

whitened lawn. Two elderly men in black uniforms, the most senior officers in the Ministry of War, stand warming the backs of their legs against the open fire. One is General Raoul le Mouton de Boisdeffre, Chief of the General Staff, expert in all things Russian, architect of our burgeoning alliance with the new tsar, who has spent so much time with the Imperial court he has begun to look like a stiff-whiskered Russian count. The other, slightly older at sixty, is his superior: the Minister of War himself, General Auguste Mercier.

I march to the middle of the carpet and salute.

Mercier has an oddly creased and immobile face, like a leather mask. Occasionally I have the odd illusion that another man is watching me through its narrow eye-slits. He says in his quiet voice, 'Well, Major Picquart, that didn't take long. What time did it finish?'

'Half an hour ago, General.'

'So it really is all over?'

I nod. 'It's over.'

And so it begins.

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'Come and sit down by the fire,' orders the minister. He speaks very quietly, as he always does. He indicates a gilt chair. 'Pull it up. Take off your coat. Tell us everything that happened.'

He sits poised in expectation on the edge of his seat: his body bent forwards, his hands clasped, his forearms resting on his knees. Protocol has prevented him from

attending the morning's spectacle in person. He is in the position of an impresario who has missed his own show. He hungers for details: insights, observations, colour.

'What was the mood on the streets first thing?'

'I would say the mood was . . . expectant.'

I describe how I left my apartment in the pre-dawn darkness to walk to the École Militaire, and how the streets, to begin with at least, were unusually quiet, it being a Saturday – 'The Jewish Sabbath,' Mercier interrupts me, with a faint smile – and also freezing cold. In fact, although I do not mention this, as I passed along the gloomy pavements of the rue Boissière and the avenue du Trocadéro, I began to wonder if the minister's great production might turn out to be a flop. But then I reached the pont de l'Alma and saw the shadowy crowd pouring across the dark waters of the Seine, and that was when I realised what Mercier must have known all along: that the human impulse to watch another's humiliation will always prove sufficient insulation against even the bitterest cold.

I joined the multitude as they streamed southwards, over the river and down the avenue Bosquet – such a density of humanity that they spilled off the wooden pavements and into the street. They reminded me of a racecourse crowd – there was the same sense of shared anticipation, of the common pursuit of a classless pleasure. Newspaper vendors threaded back and forth selling the morning's editions. An aroma of roasting chestnuts rose from the braziers on the roadside.

At the bottom of the avenue I broke away and crossed over to the École Militaire, where until a year before I had served as professor of topography. The crowd streamed on past me towards the official assembly point in the place de Fontenoy. It was beginning to get light. The École rang with the sound of drums and bugles, hooves and curses, shouted orders, the tramp of boots. Each of the nine infantry regiments quartered in Paris had been ordered to send two companies to witness the ceremony, one composed of experienced men, the other of new recruits whose moral fibre, Mercier felt, would benefit by this example. As I passed through the grand salons and entered the cour Morland, they were already mustering in their thousands on the frozen mud.

I have never attended a public execution, have never tasted that particular atmosphere, but I imagine it must feel something like the École did that morning. The vastness of the cour Morland provided an appropriate stage for a grand spectacle. In the distance, beyond the railings, in the semicircle of the place de Fontenoy, a great murmuring sea of pink faces stirred behind a line of black-uniformed gendarmes. Every centimetre of space was filled. People were standing on benches and on the tops of carriages and omnibuses; they were sitting in the branches of the trees; one man had even managed to scale the pinnacle of the 1870 war memorial.

Mercier, drinking all this up, asks me, 'So how many were present, would you estimate?'

'The Préfecture of Police assured me twenty thousand.'

‘Really?’ The minister looks less impressed than I had expected. ‘You know that I originally wanted to hold the ceremony at Longchamp? The racetrack has a capacity of *fifty* thousand.’

Boisdeffre says flatteringly, ‘And you would have filled it, Minister, by the sound of it.’

‘Of course we would have filled it! But the Ministry of the Interior maintained there was risk of public disorder. Whereas I say: the greater the crowd, the stronger the lesson.’

Still, twenty thousand seemed plenty to me. The noise of the crowd was subdued but ominous, like the breathing of some powerful animal, temporarily quiescent but which could turn dangerous in an instant. Just before eight, an escort of cavalry appeared, trotting along the front of the crowd, and suddenly the beast began to stir, for between the riders could be glimpsed a black prison wagon drawn by four horses. A wave of jeers swelled and rolled over it. The cortège slowed, a gate was opened, and the vehicle and its guard clattered over the cobbles into the École.

As I watched it disappear into an inner courtyard, a man standing near to me said, ‘Observe, Major Picquart: the Romans fed Christians to the lions; we feed them Jews. That is progress, I suppose.’

He was swaddled in a greatcoat with the collar turned up, a grey muffler around his throat, his cap pulled low over his eyes. I recognised him by his voice at first, and then by the way his body shook uncontrollably.

I saluted. ‘Colonel Sandherr.’

Sandherr said, ‘Where will you stand to watch the show?’

‘I haven’t thought about it.’

‘You’re welcome to come and join me and my men.’

‘That would be an honour. But first I have to check that everything is proceeding in accordance with the minister’s instructions.’

‘We will be over there when you have finished your duties.’ He pointed across the cour Morland with a trembling hand. ‘You will have a good view.’

My duties! I wonder, looking back, if he wasn’t being sarcastic. I walked over to the garrison office, where the prisoner was in the custody of Captain Lebrun-Renault of the Republican Guard. I had no desire to see the condemned man again. Only two years earlier he had been a student of mine in this very building. Now I had nothing to say to him; I felt nothing for him; I wished he had never been born and I wanted him gone – from Paris, from France, from Europe. A trooper went and fetched Lebrun-Renault for me. He turned out to be a big, red-faced, horsey young man, rather like a policeman. He came out and reported: ‘The traitor is nervous but calm. I don’t think he will kick up any trouble. The threads of his clothing have been loosened and his sword has been scored half through to ensure it breaks easily. Nothing has been left to chance. If he tries to make a speech, General Darras will give a signal and the band will strike up a tune to drown him out.’

Mercier muses, ‘What kind of tune does one play to drown a man out, I wonder?’

Boisdeffre suggests, 'A sea shanty, Minister?'

'That's good,' says Mercier judiciously. But he doesn't smile; he rarely smiles. He turns to me again. 'So you watched the proceedings with Sandherr and his men. What do you make of them?'

Unsure how to answer – Sandherr is a colonel, after all – I say cautiously, 'A dedicated group of patriots, doing invaluable work and receiving little or no recognition.'

It is a good answer. So good that perhaps my entire life – and with it the story I am about to tell – may have turned upon it. At any rate, Mercier, or the man behind the mask that is Mercier, gives me a searching look as if to check that I really mean what I say, and then nods in approval. 'You're right there, Picquart. France owes them a lot.'

All six of these paragons were present that morning to witness the culmination of their work: the euphemistically named 'Statistical Section' of the General Staff. I sought them out after I had finished talking with Lebrun-Renault. They stood slightly apart from everyone else in the south-west corner of the parade ground, in the lee of one of the low surrounding buildings. Sandherr had his hands in his pockets and his head down, and seemed entirely remote—

'Do you remember,' interrupts the Minister of War, turning to Boisdeffre, 'that they used to call Jean Sandherr "the handsomest man in the French Army"?'

'I do remember that, Minister,' confirms the Chief of the General Staff. 'It's hard to believe it now, poor fellow.'

On one side of Sandherr stood his deputy, a plump alcoholic with a face the colour of brick, taking regular nips from a gunmetal hip flask; on the other was the only member of his staff I knew by sight – the massive figure of Joseph Henry, who clapped me on the shoulder and boomed that he hoped I'd be mentioning him in my report to the minister. The two junior officers of the section, both captains, seemed colourless by comparison. There was also a civilian, a bony clerk who looked as if he seldom saw fresh air, holding a pair of opera glasses. They shifted along to make room for me and the alcoholic offered me a swig of his filthy cognac. Presently we were joined by a couple of other outsiders: a smart official from the Foreign Ministry, and that disturbing booby Colonel du Paty de Clam of the General Staff, his monocle flashing like an empty eye socket in the morning light.

By now the time was drawing close and one could feel the tension tightening under that sinister pale sky. Nearly four thousand soldiers had been drawn up on parade, yet not a sound escaped them. Even the crowd was hushed. The only movement came from the edges of the cour Morland, where a few invited guests were still being shown to their places, hurrying apologetically like latecomers at a funeral. A tiny slim woman in a white fur hat and muff, carrying a frilly blue umbrella and being escorted by a tall lieutenant of the dragoons, was recognised by some of the spectators nearest the railings, and a light patter of applause, punctuated by cries of 'Hurrah!' and 'Bravo!', drifted over the mud.

Sandherr, looking up, grunted, 'Who the devil is that?'

One of the captains took the opera glasses from the clerk and trained them on the lady in furs, who was now nodding and twirling her umbrella in gracious acknowledgement to the crowd.

'Well I'll be damned if it isn't the Divine Sarah!' He adjusted the binoculars slightly. 'And that's Rochebouet of the 28th looking after her, the lucky devil!'

Mercier sits back and caresses his white moustache. Sarah Bernhardt, appearing in his production! This is the stuff he wants from me: the artistic touch, the society gossip. Still, he pretends to be displeased. 'I can't think who would have invited *an actress* . . .'

At ten minutes to nine, the commander of the parade, General Darras, rode out along the cobbled path into the centre of the parade ground. The general's mount snorted and dipped her head as he pulled her up; she shuffled round in a circle, eyeing the vast multitude, pawed the hard ground once, and then stood still.

At nine, the clock began to strike and a command rang out: 'Companies! Attention!' In thunderous unison the boots of four thousand men crashed together. At the same instant, from the far corner of the parade ground a group of five figures appeared and advanced towards the general. As they came closer, the tiny indistinct shapes resolved themselves into an escort of four gunners, surrounding the condemned man. They came on at a smart pace, marching with such perfect timing that their right feet hit the stroke of the chime exactly on every fifth step; only

once did the prisoner stumble, but quickly he corrected himself. As the echo of the last strike died away, they halted and saluted. Then the gunners about-turned and marched away, leaving the convict to face the general alone.

Drums rolled. A bugle sounded. An official stepped forward, holding a sheet of paper up high in front of his face, like a herald in a play. The proclamation flapped in the icy wind, but his voice was surprisingly powerful for so small a man.

'In the name of the people of France,' he intoned, 'the first permanent court martial of the military government of Paris, having met in camera, delivered its verdict in public session as follows. The following single question was put to the members of the court: Is Alfred Dreyfus, captain of the 14th Artillery Regiment, a certified General Staff officer and probationer of the army's General Staff, guilty of delivering to a foreign power or to its agents in Paris in 1894 a certain number of secret or confidential documents concerning national defence?

'The court declared unanimously: "Yes, the accused is guilty."

'The court unanimously sentences Alfred Dreyfus to the penalty of deportation to a fortified enclosure for life, pronounces the discharge of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, and orders that his military degradation should take place before the first military parade of the Paris garrison.'

He stepped back. General Darras rose in his stirrups and drew his sword. The condemned man had to crane

his neck to look up at him. His pince-nez had been taken from him. He wore a pair of rimless spectacles.

'Alfred Dreyfus, you are not worthy to bear arms. In the name of the French people, we degrade you!'

'And it was at this point,' I tell Mercier, 'that the prisoner spoke for the first time.'

Mercier jerks back in surprise. '*He spoke?*'

'Yes.' I pull my notebook from my trouser pocket. 'He raised both his arms above his head, and shouted . . .' And here I check to make sure I have it exactly right: '"Soldiers, they are degrading an innocent man . . . Soldiers, they are dishonouring an innocent man . . . Long live France . . . Long live the army . . ."' I read it plainly, without emotion, which is appropriate, because that is how it was delivered. The only difference is that Dreyfus, as a Mulhouse Jew, flavoured the words with a slight German accent.

The minister frowns. 'How was this allowed to happen? I thought you said they planned to play a march if the prisoner made a speech?'

'General Darras took the view that a few shouts of protest did not constitute a speech, and that music would disturb the gravity of the occasion.'

'And was there any reaction from the crowd?'

'Yes.' I check my notes again. 'They began to chant: "Death . . . death . . . death . . ."'

When the chanting started, we looked towards the railings. Sandherr said: 'They need to get a move on, or this could get out of hand.'

I asked to borrow the opera glasses. I raised them to

my eyes, adjusted the focus, and saw a giant of a man, a sergeant major of the Republican Guard, lay his hands on Dreyfus. In a series of powerful movements he yanked the epaulettes from Dreyfus's shoulders, wrenched all the buttons from his tunic and the gold braid from his sleeves, knelt and ripped the red stripes from his trousers. I focused on Dreyfus's expression. It was blank. He stared ahead as he was tugged this way and that, submitting to these indignities as a child might to having its clothes adjusted by an irritable adult. Finally, the sergeant major drew Dreyfus's sword from its scabbard, planted the tip in the mud, and snapped the blade with a thrust of his boot. He threw the two halves on to the little heap of haberdashery at Dreyfus's feet, took two sharp paces backwards, turned his head towards the general and saluted, while Dreyfus gazed down at the torn symbols of his honour.

Sandherr said impatiently: 'Come on, Picquart – you're the one with the glasses. Tell us what he looks like.'

'He looks,' I replied, handing the binoculars back to the clerk, 'like a Jewish tailor counting the cost of all that gold braid going to waste. If he had a tape measure around his neck, he might be in a cutting room on the rue Auber.'

'That's good,' said Sandherr. 'I like that.'

'Very good,' echoes Mercier, closing his eyes. 'I can picture him exactly.'

Dreyfus shouted out again: 'Long live France! I swear I am innocent!'

Then he began a long march, under escort, around all four sides of the cour Morland, parading in his torn uniform in front of every detachment, so that the soldiers could remember for ever how the army deals with traitors. Every so often he would call out, 'I am innocent!' which would draw jeers and cries of 'Judas!' and 'Jewish traitor!' from the watching crowd. The whole thing seemed to drag on endlessly, though by my watch it lasted no more than seven minutes.

When Dreyfus started to walk towards our position, the man from the Foreign Ministry, who was taking his turn with the binoculars, said in his languid voice: 'I don't understand how the fellow can allow himself to be subjected to such humiliation and still maintain he's innocent. Surely if he really was innocent he would put up a struggle, rather than allow himself to be led around so tamely? Or is this a Jewish trait, do you suppose?'

'Of course it's a Jewish trait!' retorted Sandherr. 'This is a race entirely without patriotism, or honour, or pride. They have done nothing but betray the people they live among for centuries, starting with Jesus Christ.'

When Dreyfus passed where we were standing, Sandherr turned his back to demonstrate his contempt. But I could not take my eyes from him. Whether because of the past three months in prison or the bitter cold of that morning, his face was greyish-white and puffy: the colour of a maggot. His buttonless black tunic was hanging open, revealing his white shirt. His sparse hair was sticking up in tufts; something gleamed in it. He did not break step as he marched by with his

guards. He glanced in our direction and briefly his gaze locked on to mine and I saw straight into his soul, glimpsed the animal fear, the desperate mental struggle to keep himself together. As I watched him go, I realised the gleam in his hair was saliva. He must have wondered what part I had played in his ruin.

Only one stage of his Calvary remained: for him the worst part of it, I am sure, when he had to pass along the railings in front of the crowd. The police had linked arms to try to keep the public at a distance. But when the spectators saw the prisoner approaching, they surged forwards. The police line bulged, tautened and then burst apart, releasing a flood of protesters, who poured across the pavement and spread along the railings. Dreyfus stopped, turned and faced them, raised his arms and said something. But he had his back to me and I couldn't hear his words, only the familiar taunts of 'Judas!', 'Traitor!' and 'Death to the Jew!' that were thrown back in his face.

Finally, his escort pulled him away and steered him towards the prison wagon, waiting just ahead with its mounted outriders. The condemned man's hands were cuffed behind his back. He stepped up into the wagon. The doors were closed and locked, the horses whipped, and the cortège jolted forwards, out of the gate and into the place de Fontenoy. For a moment I doubted if it would escape the surrounding crowd, stretching out their hands to strike the sides of the wagon. But the cavalry officers used the flats of their swords to drive them back. I heard the whip crack twice. The driver

shouted a command. The wagon accelerated free of the mob, turned left and disappeared.

An instant later the order was given for the parade to march past. The stamp of boots seemed to shake the ground. Bugles were blown. Drums beat time. As the band struck up 'Sambre-et-Meuse' it started to snow. I felt a great sense of release. I believe we all did. Spontaneously we turned to one another and shook hands. It was as if a healthy body had purged itself of something foul and pestilential, and now life could begin anew.

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I finish my report. The minister's room falls silent, apart from the crackle of the fire.

'The only pity,' Mercier says eventually, 'is that the traitor will continue to remain alive. I say this more for his sake than anyone else's. What kind of life is left to him? It would have been kinder to finish him off. That's why I wanted the Chamber of Deputies to restore the death penalty for treason.'

Boisdeffre nods ingratiatingly. 'You did your best, Minister.'

With a creak of knee joints, Mercier stands. He walks over to a large globe, which stands in a mount beside his desk, and beckons me to join him. He puts on a pair of spectacles and peers down at the Earth, like a short-sighted deity.

'I need to put him in a place where it's impossible

for him to talk to anyone. I don't want him smuggling out any more treasonous messages. And just as important, I don't want anyone communicating with *him*.'

The minister places a surprisingly delicate hand on the northern hemisphere and gently turns the world. The Atlantic slides past. He halts the sphere and points to a spot on the coast of South America, seven thousand kilometres from Paris. He looks at me and raises an eyebrow, inviting me to guess.

I say, 'The penal colony at Cayenne?'

'Close, but more secure than that.' He leans in and taps the globe. 'Devil's Island: fifteen kilometres off the coast. The sea around it is infested with sharks. The immense waves and strong currents make it hard even to land a boat.'

'I thought that place had been closed down years ago.'

'It was. The last inhabitants were a colony of convict lepers. I will need to seek approval in the Chamber, but this time I will get it. The island will be reopened especially for Dreyfus. Well, what do you think?'

My immediate reaction is surprise. Mercier, married to an Englishwoman, is considered a republican and a free-thinker – he refuses to attend Mass, for example – qualities I admire. And yet, for all that, there lingers about him something of the Jesuit fanatic. *Devil's Island?* I think. *We're supposed to be on the brink of the twentieth century, not the eighteenth . . .*

'Well?' he repeats. 'What's your view?'

'Isn't it a trifle . . .' I choose the word carefully, wishing to be tactful, '*Dumas*?'

'Dumas? What do you mean, Dumas?'

'Only that it sounds like a punishment from historical fiction. I feel an echo of *The Man in the Iron Mask*. Won't Dreyfus become known as "The Man on Devil's Island"? It will make him the most famous prisoner in the world . . .'

'Exactly!' cries Mercier, and slaps his thigh in a rare display of feeling. 'That's *exactly* what I like about it. The public's imagination will be captured.'

I bow to his superior political judgement. At the same time I wonder what the public has to do with it. Only when I am collecting my coat and about to leave does he offer a clue.

'This may be the last time that you will see me in this office.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, General.'

'You understand I take little interest in politics – I am a professional soldier, not a politician. But I gather there is great dissatisfaction among the parties, and the government may only last another week or two. There may even be a new president.' He shrugs. 'Anyway, there it is. We soldiers serve where we are ordered.' He shakes my hand. 'I have been impressed by the intelligence you have shown during this wretched affair, Major Picquart. It will not be forgotten, will it, Chief?'

'No, Minister.' Boisdeffre also rises to shake my hand. 'Thank you, Picquart. Most illuminating. One might almost have been there oneself. How are your Russian studies, by the way?'

'I doubt I'll ever be able to speak the language,

General, but I can read Tolstoy now – with a dictionary, of course.'

'Excellent. There are great things happening between France and Russia. A good knowledge of Russian will be very useful to a rising officer.'

I am at the door and about to open it, feeling suitably warmed by all this flattery, when Mercier suddenly asks: 'Tell me, was my name mentioned at all?'

'I'm sorry?' I'm not sure what he means. 'Mentioned in what sense?'

'During the ceremony this morning.'

'I don't think so . . .'

'It doesn't matter at all.' Mercier makes a dismissive gesture. 'I just wondered if there was any kind of demonstration in the crowd . . .'

'No, none that I saw.'

'Good. I didn't expect there would be.'

I close the door softly behind me.

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Stepping back out into the windy canyon of the rue Saint-Dominique, I clutch my cap to my head and walk the one hundred metres to the War Ministry next door. There is nobody about. Clearly my brother officers have better things to do on a Saturday than attend to the bureaucracy of the French army. Sensible fellows! I shall write up my official report, clear my desk, and try to put Dreyfus out of my mind. I trot up the stairs and along the corridor to my office.

Since Napoleon's time, the War Ministry has been divided into four departments. The First deals with administration; the Second, intelligence; the Third, operations and training; and the Fourth, transport. I work in the Third, under the command of Colonel Boucher, who – also being a sensible fellow – is nowhere to be seen this winter's morning. As his deputy, I have a small office to myself, a monk's bare cell, with a window looking out on to a dreary courtyard. Two chairs, a desk and a filing cabinet are the extent of my furniture. The heating is not working. The air is so cold I can see my breath. I sit, still wearing my overcoat, and contemplate the drift of paperwork that has accumulated over the past few days. With a groan, I reach for one of the dossiers.

It must be a couple of hours later, early in the afternoon, when I hear heavy footsteps approaching along the deserted corridor. Whoever it is walks past my office, stops, and then comes back and stands outside my door. The wood is thin enough for me to hear their heavy breathing. I stand, cross quietly to the door, listen, and then fling it open to discover the Chief of the Second Department – that is, the head of all military intelligence – staring me in the face. I am not sure which of us is the more flustered.

'General Gonse,' I say, saluting. 'I had no idea it was you.'

Gonse is famous for his fourteen-hour days. I might have guessed that if anyone else was likely to be in the building, it would be him. His enemies say it is the only way he can keep on top of his job.

'That's quite all right, Major Picquart. This place is a warren. May I?' He waddles into my office on his short legs, puffing on a cigarette. 'Sorry to interrupt you, but I just had a message from Colonel Guérin at the place Vendôme. He says that Dreyfus confessed at the parade this morning. Did you know that?'

I gape at him like a fool. 'No, General, I did not.'

'Apparently, in the half-hour before the ceremony this morning, he told the captain who was guarding him that he *did* pass documents to the Germans.' Gonse shrugs. 'I thought you ought to know, as you were supposed to be keeping an eye on it all for the minister.'

'But I've already given him my report . . .' I am aghast. This is the sort of incompetence that can wreck a man's career. Ever since October, despite the overwhelming evidence against him, Dreyfus has refused to admit his guilt. And now I'm being told that finally he has confessed, practically under my nose, and I missed it! 'I had better go and get to the bottom of this.'

'I suggest you do. And when you have, come back and report to me.'

Once again I hurry out into the chilly grey half-light. I take a cab from the rank on the corner of the boulevard Saint-Germain, and when we reach the École Militaire I ask the driver to wait while I run inside. The silence of the vast empty parade ground mocks me. The only sign of life is the workmen clearing the litter from the place de Fontenoy. I return to the cab and ask to be driven as fast as possible to the headquarters of the military governor of Paris in the place Vendôme, where I wait in the lobby

of that gloomy and dilapidated building for Colonel Guérin. He takes his time, and when he does appear he has the air of a man who has been interrupted in the middle of a good lunch to which he is anxious to return.

'I've already explained all this to General Gonse.'

'I'm sorry, Colonel. Would you mind explaining it to me?'

He sighs. 'Captain Lebrun-Renault was detailed to keep an eye on Dreyfus in the guardroom until the ceremony started. He handed him over to the escort, and just as the degradation started he came over to where a group of us were standing and said something like "Well I'll be damned, the scum just admitted everything."'

I take out my notebook. 'What did the captain say Dreyfus had told him?'

'I don't recall his actual words. The essence of it was that he'd handed over secrets to the Germans, but they weren't very important, that the minister knew all about them, and that in a few years' time the whole story would come out. Something like that. You need to talk to Lebrun-Renault.'

'I do. Where can I find him?'

'I've no idea. He's off duty.'

'Is he still in Paris?'

'My dear Major, how would I know that?'

'I don't quite understand,' I say. 'Why would Dreyfus suddenly admit his guilt to a total stranger, at such a moment and with nothing to gain by it, after denying everything for three months?'

‘I can’t help you there.’ The colonel looks over his shoulder in the direction of his lunch.

‘And if he’d just confessed to Captain Lebrun-Renault, why did he then go out and repeatedly shout his innocence into a hostile crowd of tens of thousands?’

The colonel squares his shoulders. ‘Are you calling one of my officers a liar?’

‘Thank you, Colonel.’ I put away my notebook.

When I get back to the ministry, I go straight to Gonse’s office. He is labouring over a stack of files. He swings his boots up on to the desk and tilts back in his chair as he listens to my report. He says, ‘So you don’t think there’s anything in it?’

‘No, I do not. Not now I’ve heard the details. It’s much more likely this dim captain of the Guard got the wrong end of the stick. Either that or he embellished a tale to make himself look important to his comrades. Of course I am assuming,’ I add, ‘that Dreyfus wasn’t a double agent planted on the Germans.’

Gonse laughs and lights another cigarette. ‘If only!’

‘What would you like me to do, General?’

‘I don’t see there’s anything much you can do.’

I hesitate. ‘There is one way of getting a definite answer, of course.’

‘What’s that?’

‘We could ask Dreyfus.’

Gonse shakes his head. ‘Absolutely not. He’s now beyond communication. Besides, he’ll soon be shipped out of Paris.’ He lifts his feet from the desk and sets them on the floor. He pulls the stack of files towards him.

Cigarette ash spills down the front of his tunic. 'Just leave it with me. I'll go and explain everything to the Chief of Staff and the minister.' He opens a dossier and starts to scan it. He doesn't look up. 'Thank you, Major Picquart. You are dismissed.'

2

That evening, in civilian clothes, I travel out to Versailles to see my mother. The draughty train sways through Paris suburbs weirdly etched by snow and gaslight. The journey takes the best part of an hour; I have the carriage to myself. I try to read a novel, *The Adolescent* by Dostoyevsky, but every time we cross a set of points the lights cut out and I lose my place. In the blue glow of the emergency illumination I stare out of the window and imagine Dreyfus in his cell in La Santé prison. Convicts are transported by rail in converted cattle trucks. I presume he will be sent west, to an Atlantic port, to await deportation. In this weather the journey will be a bitter hell. I close my eyes and try to doze.

My mother has a small apartment in a modern street near the Versailles railway station. She is seventy-seven and lives alone, a widow for almost thirty years. I take it in turns with my sister to spend time with her. Anna is older than I, and has children, which I do not: my watch always falls on a Saturday night, the only time I can be sure of getting away from the ministry.

It is well past dark by the time I arrive; the temperature

must be minus ten. My mother shouts from behind the locked door: 'Who's there?'

'It's Georges, Maman.'

'Who?'

'Georges. Your son.'

It takes me a minute to persuade her to let me in. Sometimes she mistakes me for my older brother, Paul, who died five years ago; sometimes – and this is oddly worse – for my father, who died when I was eleven. (Another sister died before I was born, a brother when he was eleven days old; there is one thing to be said for senility – since her mind has gone, she does not lack for company.)

The bread and milk are frozen solid; the pipes are canisters of ice. I spend the first half-hour lighting fires to try to thaw the place out, the second on my back fixing a leak. We eat boeuf bourguignon, which the maid who comes in once a day has bought at the local *traiteur*. Maman rallies; she even seems to remember who I am. I tell her what I've been doing but I don't mention Dreyfus or the degradation: she would struggle to understand what I am talking about. Later we sit at the piano, which occupies most of her tiny sitting room, and play a duet, the Chopin rondo. Her playing is faultless; the musical part of her brain remains quite intact; it will be the last thing to go. After she has put herself to bed, I sit on the stool and examine the photographs on top of the piano: the solemn family groups in Strasbourg, the garden of the house in Geudertheim,

a miniature of my mother as a music student, a picnic in the woods of Neudorf – artefacts from a vanished world, the Atlantis we lost in the war.*

I was sixteen when the Germans shelled Strasbourg, thus kindly enabling me to witness at first hand an event that we teach at the École Supérieure de Guerre as 'the first full-scale use of modern long-range artillery specifically to reduce a civilian population'. I watched the city's art gallery and library burn to the ground, saw neighbourhoods blown to pieces, knelt beside friends as they died, helped dig strangers out of the rubble. After nine weeks the garrison surrendered. We were offered a choice between staying put and becoming German or giving up everything and moving to France. We arrived in Paris destitute and shorn of all illusions about the security of our civilised life.

Before the humiliation of 1870 I might have become a professor of music or a surgeon; after it, any career other than the army seemed frivolous. The Ministry of War paid for my education; the army became my father, and no son ever strove harder to please a demanding papa. I compensated for a somewhat dreamy and artistic nature by ferocious discipline. Out of a class of 304 cadets at the military school at Saint-Cyr, I emerged fifth. I can speak German, Italian, English and Spanish. I have fought in the Aurès mountains in north Africa and won the

* The war of 1870 between France and Germany resulted in a crushing defeat for the French army, which suffered over 140,000 casualties. Under the terms of the armistice, the eastern territories of Alsace and Lorraine became part of Germany.

Colonial Medal, on the Red River in Indochina and won the Star for bravery. I am a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour. And today, after twenty-four years in uniform, I have been singled out for commendation by both the Minister of War and the Chief of the General Staff. As I lie in my mother's spare bedroom in Versailles, and the fifth of January 1895 turns into the sixth, the voice in my head is not that of Alfred Dreyfus proclaiming his innocence, but Auguste Mercier's hinting at my promotion: *I have been impressed by the intelligence you have shown . . . It will not be forgotten . . .*

*

The following morning, to the sound of bells, I take my mother's fragile arm and escort her to the top of the icy road and around the corner to the cathedral of Saint-Louis – a particularly bombastic monument to state superstition, I always think; why couldn't the Germans have blown up *this*? The worshippers are a monochrome congregation, black and white, nuns and widows. I withdraw my arm from hers at the door. 'I'll meet you here after Mass.'

'Aren't you coming in?'

'I never come in, Maman. We have this conversation every week.'

She peers at me with moist grey eyes. Her voice quivers. 'But what shall I tell God?'

'Tell Him I'll be in the Café du Commerce in the square over there.'

I leave her in the care of a young priest and walk towards the café. On the way I stop to buy a couple of newspapers, *Le Figaro* and *Le Petit Journal*. I take a seat at a table in the window, order coffee, light a cigarette. Both papers have the degradation on their front pages – the *Journal*, indeed, has almost nothing else. Its report is illustrated by a series of crude sketches: of Dreyfus being marched into the parade ground, of the plump little official in his cape reading out the judgment, of the insignia being ripped from Dreyfus's uniform, and of Dreyfus himself looking like a white-haired old man at thirty-five. The headline is 'The Expiation': 'We demanded for the traitor Dreyfus the supreme penalty. We continue to believe that the only appropriate punishment is death . . .' It is as if all the loathing and recrimination bottled up since the defeat of 1870 has found an outlet in a single individual.

I sip my coffee and my gaze skims over the *Journal*'s sensational description of the ceremony until suddenly it hits this: 'Dreyfus turned towards his escort and said: "If I did hand over documents, it was only to receive others of greater importance. In three years the truth will come out and the minister himself will reopen my case." This half-confession is the first that the traitor has made since his arrest . . .'

Without taking my eyes from the newsprint, I slowly put down my cup and read the passage again. Then I pick up *Le Figaro*. No mention of any confession, half or otherwise, on the front page: a relief. But on the second

is a late news item – 'Here now is the account of a witness, received in the last hour . . .' – and I find myself reading another version of the same story, only this time Lebrun-Renault is identified as the source by name, and this time there is no mistaking the authentic voice of Dreyfus. I can hear his desperation in every line, frantic to convince anyone, even the officer guarding him:

> *'Look, Captain; listen. A letter was discovered in a cupboard in an embassy; it was a covering note for four other documents. This letter was shown to handwriting experts. Three said I had written it; two said I hadn't. And it's solely on the basis of this that I've been condemned! When I was eighteen, I entered the École Polytechnique. I had a brilliant military career ahead of me, a fortune of five hundred thousand francs and the prospect of an annual income of fifty thousand a year. I've never chased girls. I've never touched a playing card in my life. Therefore I had no need of money. So why would I commit treason? For money? No. So why?'*

None of these details is supposed to be made public, and my first response is to curse Lebrun-Renault beneath my breath as a bloody young fool. Shooting one's mouth off in front of journalists is unpardonable for an officer at any time – but on a matter as sensitive as this? He must have been drunk! It crosses my mind that I should return to Paris immediately and go straight to the War Ministry. But then I consider my mother, no doubt even at this moment down on her knees praying for my immortal soul, and decide that I am probably better off out of it.

And so I allow the day to proceed as planned. I retrieve my mother from the clutches of a pair of nuns, we walk back to the house, and at noon my cousin, Edmond Gast, sends his carriage to collect us for lunch at his home in the nearby village of Ville-d'Avray. It is a pleasant, easy gathering of family and friends: the sort of friends who have been around long enough to feel like family. Edmond, a couple of years my junior, is already the mayor of Ville-d'Avray, one of those lucky individuals with a gift for life. He farms, paints, hunts, makes money easily, spends it well, and loves his wife – and who can be surprised, since Jeanne is still as pretty as a girl by Renoir? I envy no man, but if I did it would be Edmond. Next to Jeanne in the dining room sits Louis Leblois, who was at school with me; beside me is his wife, Martha; opposite me is Pauline Romazzotti, who, despite her Italian surname, grew up with us near Strasbourg, and who is now married to an official at the Foreign Ministry, Philippe Monnier, a man eight or ten years older than the rest of us. She is wearing a plain grey dress trimmed with white which she knows I like because it reminds me of one she wore when she was eighteen.

Everyone around the table apart from Monnier is an exile from Alsace and nobody has a good word to say for our fellow Alsatian, Dreyfus, not even Edmond, whose politics are radical republican. We all have tales of Jews, especially from Mulhouse, whose loyalties, when it came to the crunch and they were offered their choice of citizenship after the war, turned out to be German rather than French.

'They shift with the wind, according to who has power,' pronounces Monnier, waving his wine glass back and forth. 'That is how their race has survived for two thousand years. You can't blame them, really.'

Only Leblois ventures a scintilla of doubt. 'Mind you, speaking as a lawyer, I'm against secret trials in principle, and I must admit I wonder if a Christian officer would have been denied the normal judicial process in the same way – especially as according to *Le Figaro* the evidence against him sounds so thin.'

I say coldly, 'He was "denied the normal judicial process", as you put it, Louis, because the case involved matters of national security that simply couldn't have been aired in open court, whoever was the defendant. And there was plenty of evidence against him: I can give you my absolute assurance of that!'

Pauline frowns at me and I realise I have raised my voice. There is a silence. Louis adjusts his napkin but says nothing more. He doesn't want to spoil the meal, and Pauline, ever the diplomat's wife, seizes the chance to move the conversation on to a more congenial topic.

'Did I tell you that Philippe and I have discovered the most wonderful new Alsatian restaurant on the rue Marbeuf . . .'

*

It is five by the time I arrive home. My apartment is in the sixteenth arrondissement, close to the place Victor Hugo. The address makes me sound much smarter than

I am. In truth, I have just two small rooms on the fourth floor, and I struggle to afford even these on a major's pay. I am no Dreyfus, with a private income ten times my salary. But it has always been my temperament to prefer a tiny amount of the excellent to a plenitude of the mediocre; I get by, just about.

I let myself in from the street and have barely taken a couple of paces towards the stairs when I hear the concierge's voice behind me – 'Major Picquart!' – and turn to discover Madame Guerault brandishing a visiting card. 'An officer came to call on you,' she announces, advancing towards me. 'A general!'

I take the card: 'General Charles-Arthur Gonse, Ministry of War'. On the reverse he has written his home address.

His place is close to the avenue du Bois de Boulogne; I can walk to it easily. Within five minutes I am ringing his bell. The door is opened by a very different figure from the relaxed fellow I left on Saturday afternoon. He is unshaven; the pouches beneath his eyes are dark and heavy with exhaustion. His tunic is open to the waist, revealing a slightly grubby undershirt. He holds a glass of cognac.

'Picquart. Good of you to come.'

'My apologies that I'm not in uniform, General.'

'No matter. It's a Sunday, after all.'

I follow him through the darkened apartment – 'My wife is in the country,' he explains over his shoulder – and into what seems to be his study. Above the window is a pair of crossed spears – mementos of his

service in North Africa, I assume – and on the chimney-piece a photograph of him taken a quarter of a century ago, as a junior staff officer in the 13th Army Corps. He refreshes his drink from a decanter and pours one for me, then flops down on to the couch with a groan and lights a cigarette.

'This damned Dreyfus affair,' he says. 'It will be the death of us all.'

I make some light reply – 'Really? I would have preferred mine to be slightly more heroic!' – but Gonse fixes me with a look of great seriousness.

'My dear Picquart, you don't seem to realise: we have just come very close to war. I have been up since one o'clock this morning, and all because of that damned fool Lebrun-Renault!'

'My God!' Taken aback, I set down my untasted glass of cognac.

'I know it's hard to believe,' he says, 'that such a catastrophe might have resulted from one idiot's gossip, but it's true.'

He tells me how, an hour after midnight, he was woken by a messenger from the Minister of War. Summoned to the hôtel de Brienne, he found Mercier in his dressing gown with a private secretary from the Élysée Palace who had with him copies of the first editions of the Paris newspapers. The private secretary then repeated to Gonse what he had just told Mercier: that the President was appalled – appalled! scandalised! – by what he had just read. How could it be that an officer of the Republican Guard could spread such

stories – in particular, that a document had been stolen by the French government from the German Embassy, and that the whole episode was some kind of espionage trap for the Germans? Was the Minister of War aware that the German ambassador was coming to the Élysée that very afternoon to present a formal note of protest from Berlin? That the German emperor was threatening to withdraw his ambassador from Paris unless the French government stated once and for all that it accepted the German government's assurances that it had never had any dealings with Captain Alfred Dreyfus? Find him, the President demanded! Find this Captain Lebrun-Renault *and shut him up!*

And so General Arthur Gonse, the Chief of French Military Intelligence, at the age of fifty-six, found himself in the humiliating position of taking a carriage and going from door to door – to regimental headquarters, to Lebrun-Renault's lodgings, to the fleshpots of Pigalle – until finally, just before dawn, he had run his quarry to earth in the Moulin Rouge, where the young captain was still holding forth to an audience of reporters and prostitutes!

At this point I have to press my forefinger across my lips to hide a smile, for the monologue is not without its comic elements – all the greater when delivered in Gonse's hoarse and outraged tones. I can only imagine what it must have been like for Lebrun-Renault to turn around and see Gonse bearing down upon him, or his frantic attempts to sober up before explaining his actions, first to the Minister of War, and then, in what

must have been an exquisitely embarrassing interview, to President Casimir-Perier himself.

'There is nothing at all funny about this, Major!' Gonse has detected my amusement. 'We are in no condition to fight a war against Germany! If they were to decide to use this as a pretext to attack us, then God help France!'

'Of course, General.' Gonse is part of that generation – Mercier and Boisdeffre are of it too – who were scarred as young officers by the rout of 1870 and have been frightened of the Germans' shadow ever since. 'Three-to-two' is their mantra of pessimism: there are three Germans to every two Frenchmen; they spend three francs on armaments to every two that we can afford. I rather despise them for their defeatism. 'How has Berlin reacted?'

'Some form of words is being negotiated in the Foreign Ministry to the effect that the Germans are no more responsible for the documents that get sent to them than we are for the ones that come to us.'

'They have a nerve!'

'Not really. They're just providing cover for their agent. We'd do the same. But it's been touch and go all day, I can tell you.'

The more I think of it, the more amazing it seems. 'They'd really break off diplomatic relations and risk a war just to protect one spy?'

'Well, of course, they're embarrassed at being caught out. It's humiliating for them. Typical damned Prussian overreaction . . .'

His hand is shaking. He lights a fresh cigarette from his old one and drops the stub into the sawn-off cap of a shell case which serves as his ashtray. He picks a few shreds of tobacco from his tongue then settles back in his couch and regards me through the cloud of smoke. 'You haven't touched your drink, I see.'

'I prefer to keep a clear head when talk turns to war.'

'Ah! That's exactly when I find I need one!' He drains his glass and toys with it. He smiles at me. I can tell he's desperate for another by the way he glances over at the decanter, but he doesn't want to look like a drunk in front of me. He clears his throat and says: 'The minister has been impressed by you, Picquart; by your conduct throughout this whole affair. So has the Chief of Staff. You've obviously gained valuable experience of secret intelligence over the past three months. So we have it in mind to recommend you for promotion. We're thinking of offering you command of the Statistical Section.'

I try to hide my dismay. Espionage is grubby work. Everything I have seen of the Dreyfus case has reinforced that view. It isn't what I joined the army to do. 'But surely,' I object, 'the section already has a very able commander in Colonel Sandherr?'

'He *is* able. But Sandherr is a sick man, and between you and me he isn't likely to recover. Also, he's been in the post ten years; he needs a rest. Now, Picquart, forgive me, but I have to ask you this, given the nature of the secret information you'd be handling – there isn't anything in your past or private life that could leave you open to blackmail, is there?'

With gathering dismay I realise my fate has already been decided, perhaps the previous afternoon when Gonse met Mercier and Boisdeffre. 'No,' I say, 'not that I'm aware of.'

'You're not married, I believe?'

'No.'

'Any particular reason for that?'

'I like my own company. And I can't afford a wife.'

'That's all?'

'That's all.'

'Any money worries?'

'No money.' I shrug. 'No worries.'

'Good.' Gonse looks relieved. 'Then it's settled.'

But still I struggle against my destiny. 'You realise the existing staff won't like an outsider coming in – what about Colonel Sandherr's deputy?'

'He's retiring.'

'Or Major Henry?'

'Oh, Henry's a good soldier. He'll soon knuckle down and do what's best for the section.'

'Doesn't he want the job himself?'

'He does, but he lacks the education, and the social polish for such a senior position. His wife's father keeps an inn, I believe.'

'But I know nothing about spying—'

'Come now, my dear Picquart!' Gonse is starting to become irritated. 'You have exactly the qualities for the post. Where's the problem? It's true the unit doesn't exist officially. There'll be no parades or stories in the newspapers. You won't be able to tell anyone what

you're up to. But everyone who's important will know exactly what you're doing. You'll have daily access to the minister. And of course you'll be promoted to colonel.' He gives me a shrewd look. 'How old are you?'

'Forty.'

'Forty! There's no one else in the entire army of that rank at your age. Think of it: you should make general long before you're fifty! And after that . . . You could be Chief one day.'

Gonse knows exactly how to play me. I am ambitious, though not consumed by it, I hope: I appreciate there are other things in life besides the army – still, I would like to ride my talents as far as they will take me. I calculate: a couple of years in a job I don't much like, and at the end of them my prospects will be golden. My resistance falters. I surrender.

'When might this happen?'

'Not immediately. In a few months. I'd be grateful if you didn't mention it to anyone.'

I nod. 'Of course, I shall do whatever the army wants me to do. I'm grateful for your faith in me. I'll try to prove worthy of it.'

'Good man! I'm sure you will. Now I insist you have that drink that's still sitting next to you . . .'

And so it is settled. We toast my future. We toast the army. And then Gonse shows me out. At the door, he puts his hand on my arm and squeezes it paternally. His breath is sweet with cognac and cigarette smoke. 'I know you think spying isn't proper soldiering, Georges, but it is. In the modern age, this is the front line. We have

to fight the Germans every day. They're stronger than we are in men and materiel – "three-to-two", remember! – so we have to be sharper in intelligence.' His grip on my arm tightens. 'Exposing a traitor like Dreyfus is as vital to France as winning a battle in the field.'

Outside it is starting to snow again. All along the avenue Victor Hugo countless thousands of snowflakes are caught in the glow of the gas lamps. A white carpet is being laid across the road. It's odd. I am about to become the youngest colonel in the French army but I feel no sense of exhilaration.

In my apartment Pauline waits. She has kept on the same plain grey dress she wore at lunch so that I may have the pleasure of taking it off her. She turns to allow me to unfasten it at the back, lifting her hair in both hands so that I can reach the top hook. I kiss the nape of her neck and murmur into her skin: 'How long do we have?'

'An hour. He thinks I'm at church. Your lips are cold. Where have you been?'

I am about to tell her, but then remember Gonse's instruction. 'Nowhere,' I say.

3

Six months pass. June arrives. The air warms up and very soon Paris starts to reek of shit. The stench rises out of the sewers and settles over the city like a putrid gas. People venture out of doors wearing linen masks or with handkerchiefs pressed to their noses, but it doesn't make much difference. In the newspapers the experts are unanimous that it isn't as bad as the original 'great stink' of 1880 – I can't speak to that: I was in Algeria at the time – but certainly it ruins the early days of summer. 'It is impossible to stand on one's balcony,' complains *Le Figaro*, 'impossible to sit on the terrace of one of the busy, joyful cafés that are the pride of our boulevards, without thinking that one must be downwind from some uncouth, invisible giant.' The smell infiltrates one's hair and clothes and settles in one's nostrils, even on one's tongue, so that everything tastes of corruption. Such is the atmosphere on the day I take charge of the Statistical Section.

Major Henry, when he comes to collect me at the Ministry of War, makes light of it: 'This is nothing. You should have grown up on a farm! Folk's shit, pigs' shit: where's the difference?' His face in the heat is as smooth and fat as a large pink baby's. A smirk trembles constantly on his lips. He addresses me with

a slight overemphasis on my rank – '*Colonel* Picquart!' – that somehow combines respect, congratulations and mockery in a single word. I take no offence. Henry is to be my deputy, a consolation for being passed over for the chief's job. From now on we are locked in roles as ancient as warfare. He is the experienced old soldier who has come up through the ranks, the sergeant major who makes things work; I the younger commissioned officer, theoretically in charge, who must somehow be prevented from doing too much damage. If each of us doesn't push the other too far, I think we should get along fine.

Henry stands. 'So then, *Colonel*: shall we go?'

I have never before set foot in the Statistical Section – not surprising, as few even know of its existence – and so I have requested that Henry show me round. I expect to be led to some discreet corner of the ministry. Instead he conducts me out of the back gate and a short walk up the road to an ancient, grimy house on the corner of the rue de l'Université which I have often passed and always assumed to be derelict. The darkened windows are heavily shuttered. There is no nameplate beside the door. Inside, the gloomy lobby is pervaded by the same cloying smell of raw sewage as the rest of Paris, but with an added spice of musty dampness.

Henry smears his thumb through a patch of black spores growing on the wall. 'A few years ago they wanted to pull this place down,' he says, 'but Colonel Sandherr stopped them. Nobody disturbs us here.'

'I am sure they don't.'

‘This is Bachir.’ Henry indicates an elderly Arab doorman, in the blue tunic and pantaloons of a native Algerian regiment, who sits in the corner on a stool. ‘He knows all our secrets, don’t you, Bachir?’

‘Yes, Major!’

‘Bachir, this is *Colonel* Picquart . . .’

We step into the dimly lit interior and Henry throws open a door to reveal four or five seedy-looking characters smoking pipes and playing cards. They turn to stare at me, and I just have time to take the measure of the drab sofa and chairs and the scaly carpet before Henry says, ‘Excuse us, gentlemen,’ and quickly closes the door again.

‘Who are they?’ I ask.

‘Just people who do work for us.’

‘What sort of work?’

‘Police agents. Informers. Men with useful skills. Colonel Sandherr takes the view that it’s better to keep them out of mischief here rather than let them hang around on the streets.’

We climb the creaking staircase to what Henry calls ‘the inner sanctum’. Because all the doors are closed, there is almost no natural light along the first-floor passage. Electricity has been installed, but crudely, with no attempt to redecorate where the cables have been buried. A piece of the plaster ceiling has come down and been propped against the wall.

I am introduced to the unit one by one. Each man has his own room and keeps his door closed while he works. There is Major Cordier, the alcoholic who will

be retiring shortly, sitting in his shirtsleeves, reading the anti-Semitic press, *La Libre Parole* and *L'Intransigeant*, whether for work or pleasure I do not ask. There is the new man, Captain Junck, whom I know slightly from my lectures at the École Supérieure de Guerre – a tall and muscular young man with an immense moustache, who now is wearing an apron and a pair of thin gloves. He is opening a pile of intercepted letters, using a kind of kettle, heated over a jet of gas flame, to steam the glue on the envelope: this is known as a 'wet opening', Henry explains.

In the next-door room, another captain, Valdant, is using the 'dry' method, scraping at the gummed seals with a scalpel: I watch for a couple of minutes as he makes a small opening on either side of the envelope flap, slides in a long, thin pair of forceps, twists them around a dozen times to roll the letter into a cylinder, and extracts it deftly through the aperture without leaving a mark. Upstairs, M. Gribelin, the spidery archivist who had the binoculars at Dreyfus's degradation, sits in the centre of a large room filled with locked cabinets, and instinctively hides what he is reading the moment I appear. Captain Matton's room is empty: Henry explains that he is leaving – the work is not to his taste. Finally I am introduced to Captain Lauth, whom I also remember from the degradation ceremony: another handsome, blond cavalryman from Alsace, in his thirties, who speaks German and ought to be charging around the countryside on horseback. Yet here he is instead, also wearing an apron, hunched

over his desk with a strong electric light directed on to a small pile of torn-up notepaper, moving the pieces around with a pair of tweezers. I look to Henry for an explanation. 'We should talk about that,' he says.

We go back downstairs to the first-floor landing. 'That's my office,' he says, pointing to a door without opening it, 'and there is where Colonel Sandherr works' – he looks suddenly pained – 'or used to work, I should say. I suppose that will be yours now.'

'Well, I'll need to work somewhere.'

To reach it, we pass through a vestibule with a couple of chairs and a hatstand. The office beyond is unexpectedly small and dark. The curtains are drawn. I turn on the light. To my right is a large table, to my left a big steel filing cupboard with a stout lock. Facing me is a desk; to one side of it a second door leads back out to the corridor; behind it is a tall window. I cross to the window and pull back the dusty curtains to disclose an unexpected view over a large formal garden. Topography is my speciality – an awareness of where things lie in relation to one another; precision about streets, distances, terrain – nevertheless, it takes me a moment to realise that I am looking at the rear elevation of the hôtel de Brienne, the minister's garden. It is odd to see it from this angle.

'My God,' I say, 'if I had a telescope, I could practically see into the minister's office!'

'Do you want me to get you one?'

'No.' I look at Henry. I can't make out whether he's joking. I turn back to the window and try to open it. I hit the catch a couple of times with the heel of my

hand, but it has rusted shut. Already I am starting to loathe this place. 'All right,' I say wiping the rust off my hand, 'I'm clearly going to rely on you a great deal, Major, certainly for the first few months. This is all very new to me.'

'Naturally, Colonel. First, permit me to give you your keys.' He holds out five, on an iron ring attached to a light chain, which I could clip to my belt. 'This is to the front door. This is to your office door. This is your safe. This: your desk.'

'And this?'

'That lets you into the garden of the hôtel de Brienne. When you need to see the minister, that's the way you go. General Mercier presented the key to Colonel Sandherr.'

'What's wrong with the front door?'

'This way's quicker. And more private.'

'Do we have a telephone?'

'Yes, it's outside Captain Valdant's room.'

'What about a secretary?'

'Colonel Sandherr didn't trust them. If you need a file, ask Gribelin. If you need help copying, you can use one of the captains. Valdant can type.'

I feel as if I have wandered into some strange religious sect, with obscure private rituals. The Ministry of War is built on the site of an old nunnery, and the officers of the General Staff on the rue Saint-Dominique are nicknamed 'the Dominicians' because of their secret ways. But already I can see they have nothing on the Statistical Section.

‘You were going to tell me what Captain Lauth was working on just now.’

‘We have an agent inside the German Embassy. The agent supplies us regularly with documents that have been thrown away and are supposed to go to the embassy furnace to be burned with the trash. Instead they come to us. Mostly they’ve been torn up, so we have to piece them together. It’s a skilled job. Lauth is good at it.’

‘This was how you first got on to Dreyfus?’

‘It was.’

‘By sticking together a torn-up letter?’

‘Exactly.’

‘My God, from such small beginnings . . .! Who is this agent?’

‘We always use the code name “Auguste”. The product is referred to as “the usual route”.’

I smile. ‘All right, let me put it another way: who is “Auguste”?’ Henry is reluctant to reply, but I am determined to press him: if I am ever to get a grip on this job, I must know how the service functions from top to bottom, and the sooner the better. ‘Come now, Major Henry, I am the head of this section. You will have to tell me.’

Reluctantly he says, ‘A woman called Marie Bastian; one of the embassy cleaners. In particular she cleans the office of the German military attaché.’

‘How long has she been working for us?’

‘Five years. I’m her handler. I pay her two hundred francs a month.’ He cannot resist adding boastfully, ‘It’s the greatest bargain in Europe!’

'How does she get the material to us?'

'I meet her in a church near here, sometimes every week, sometimes two – in the evenings, when it's quiet. Nobody sees us. I take the stuff straight home.'

'You take it home?' I can't conceal my surprise. 'Is that safe?'

'Absolutely. There's only my wife and me, and our baby lad. I sort through it there, take a quick look at whatever's in French – I can't understand German: Lauth handles the German stuff here.'

'I see. Good.' Although I nod in approval, this procedure strikes me as amateurish in the extreme. But I am not going to pick a fight on my first day. 'I have a feeling we are going to get along very well, Major Henry.'

'I do hope so, Colonel.'

I look at my watch. 'If you'll excuse me, I shall have to go out soon to see the Chief of Staff.'

'Would you like me to come with you?'

'No.' Again I am not sure if he is being serious. 'That won't be necessary. He's taking me to lunch.'

'Splendid. I'll be in my office if you need me.' Our exchange is as formal as a *pas de deux*.

Henry salutes and leaves. I close the door and look around me. My skin crawls slightly; I feel as if I am wearing the outfit of a dead man. There are shadows on the walls where Sandherr's pictures hung, burns on the desk from his cigarettes, ring marks on the table from his drinks. A worn track in the carpet shows where he used to push back his chair. His presence oppresses me. I find the correct key and unlock the safe. Inside