

# MALEVIL



**ROBERT  
MERLE**

*A novel by the author of*  
**THE DAY OF THE DOLPHIN**

**MALEVIL**  
**Robert Merle**

## CHAPTER ONE

At teachers college we had a professor who was insane about Proust and his *madeleine*. I studied that famous passage myself, under his guidance, as an admiring student. But time has dimmed my admiration, and now I find it very literary, that little cake. Oh, I know a taste or a tune can bring back some past moment and make it vivid in your memory again. But it never works for more than a few seconds. There is a brief illumination, then the curtain falls again and the present is back, tyrannical as ever. It's a very nice idea, recovering your whole past from just a little sponge cake dipped in weak tea, if only it were true.

What put me in mind of Proust's *madeleine* was the discovery, just the other day, at the back of a drawer, of an old, an extremely old, packet of pipe tobacco that must have belonged to my uncle. I gave it to Colin. Crazy with delight at the thought of a whiff of his favorite poison after so long, he promptly filled his pipe and lit it. I stayed watching him, and the moment I breathed in the aroma of those first few puffs, my uncle and the world of "before" came welling back up inside me. So clearly that it took my breath away. Though, as I say, it was only for a moment.

And Colin threw up. Either he had become unused to smoking or the tobacco was too old.

I envy Proust. At least he had a solid foundation under him while he explored his past: a certain present, an indubitable future. But for us the past is doubly past, our "time past" is doubly inaccessible, because included in it is the whole universe in which that time flowed. There has been a complete break. The forward march of the ages has been interrupted. We no longer know where or when we are. Or whether there is to be any future at all.

Needless to say, we do what we can to conceal our anxiety beneath the mask of words. When we refer to that break in time we use periphrases. To begin with, following Meyssonier, who was always one for official jargon, we used to say "Zero Day." But that was somehow still a little too military for our taste. And eventually we adopted a somewhat more veiled euphemism, first hit upon by La Menou with her peasant circumspection: "the day it happened." You couldn't find anything much easier to swallow than that, could you?

And so, still using words, we restored order into chaos and even managed to re-establish a linear progression in time. We now say, "before" or "the day

it happened” or “after.” Such are the little linguistic devices we’ve invented for ourselves. And the feeling of security they give us is exactly proportionate to their hypocrisy. Because “after” really means both our uncertain present and also our hypothetical future.

Even without *madeleines* or pipe smoke, we think about it a lot, that world “before.” Each in his little corner. In general conversation we all exercise a kind of censorship on one another; such journeys into the past are scarcely helpful to our survival. We avoid allowing them to proliferate.

But once alone, things are otherwise. Although I am barely in my forties, ever since “the day it happened” I have a tendency toward insomnia, like an old man. And it is at night that I do my remembering. Though what I actually remember varies from one night to the next. In order to exculpate myself in my own eyes for this self-indulgence, I tell myself that since the world “before” no longer exists except inside my own head, that means it would cease to exist altogether if I didn’t think about it.

Recently I have begun to make a distinction between random memories and habitual memories. Because I have finally grasped the difference between them. The habitual memories are the ones I am using to convince myself of my own identity, a conviction I stand very much in need of in this “after” in which almost all recognizable landmarks have disappeared. And that, really, is what I spend my sleepless nights doing: constantly tacking to and fro across that desert, across those shifting sands, across that past now doubly past, creating landmarks to stop me losing myself. And when I say “losing myself,” I also mean losing my identity.

The year 1948 was one of those landmarks. I was twelve. I had just been placed top for our district—ineffable glory—in the national exams. And in the kitchen of La Grange Forte, our little farm, I was trying to persuade my parents over the midday meal that we should clear more land, a course of action that seemed to me the merest common sense. Like everyone else in those parts, we had no more than twenty-five acres of good quality grazing and arable land. The rest was all woods, and useless woods too, since we no longer gathered the chestnuts or used the leaves for fodder.

My father and mother were scarcely listening to me. I might as well have been talking to clods of earth. Which in fact they somewhat resembled, both being brown-haired and brown-eyed. I was brown-haired but had blue eyes like my uncle.

Looking back at that scene over the years, with adult eyes, I understand it better now, I think, and I find it very unpleasant.

My mother, for example. A self-righteous nagger and a whiner. She suffered from the besetting sin of the mediocre. She was a chronic complainer, because it gave her an excuse for her totally hidebound attitude to life. Given that everything in the world was a mess, why move even so much as a little finger to change it? My suggestion that they clear some of the woods caused her immediate umbrage.

“And who’s going to find the money?” She sneered. “Are you going to pay for the bulldozer?”

Apart from the scorn in her tone, there was the irritation of knowing perfectly well that the sums entered in their savings bank book were being devalued all the time by inflation. I knew they were being devalued, because my uncle explained it to me. So I explained it to her in my turn, without mentioning my uncle. Wasted caution.

My father listened, but kept quiet. My arguments annoyed my mother even more. Even though they simply slid off that hard red scalp with its thin covering of hair. She wouldn’t even look at me.

She addressed herself to my father over my head. “That boy is getting more like your brother Samuel every day,” she remarked. “Always full of himself. Giving lessons. And ever since he passed his exam, a head like a pumpkin.”

My two little sisters, Paulette and Pélégie, began giggling, so I lashed out with one foot under the table. Pélégie shrieked.

“And completely without feelings as well,” my mother said.

And we continued to hear about my lack of feelings at length. The whole of the time it took to eat two platefuls of soup, pour wine into the remains of the second, and then drink that. My mother had a bookkeeper’s mind, so my defects were reitemized and retotaled every time a new error was added to the list. The fact that they had already been punished and paid for made no difference. Never forgotten, never forgiven, my past crimes never weighed any less.

This litany of past sins was poured out, moreover, in the plaintive tones I loathed so much: vindictiveness coated with a whining slime. Pélégie was shrieking, Paulette—whom I hadn’t so much as touched—was whimpering. Then a climax: Pélégie pulled up her skirt and showed a bright red mark on her shin.

My mother’s whine rose an octave to a piercing wail. “And you, Simon, what you are waiting for? Why don’t you teach him a lesson, that son of yours?”

Because, of course, I was my father’s son, not hers. But my father remained silent. That was his role in that household of ours. Because my

mother, impervious to argument, a stranger to logic, never paid even the slightest attention when he did speak. She had reduced him to silence, and almost to slavery, by the simple expedient of her own verbal flux.

“Do you hear me, Simon?”

I laid down my knife and fork and eased my buttocks off my chair, preparing to dodge my father’s slap. But still he made no move. It occurred to me that it must have been taking some courage on his part, since he was thereby laying up for himself a curtain lecture, in the conjugal bed last thing at night, during which all his own sins would be interminably reiterated in their turn.

But it was a cowardly courage. I once saw my uncle—a wondrous sight!—rise up in thunder and blast his wife, who was a woman very much resembling my own mother, for the two brothers had married two sisters. I couldn’t help wondering what it was about her family that made them all so mean, so ugly, so whining, so greasy-haired.

Only my aunt hadn’t been able to stand the pace. She’d died at the age of forty, out of sheer hatred for life. And my uncle started making up for lost time, running after pretty school leavers. I didn’t blame him. I did the same when I came of man’s estate.

As no clout arrived from my father’s direction, my anxiety waned. No slap from my mother’s side either. Not that the desire to impart one was lacking, but I had just recently devised a very effective parry with one elbow that succeeded in simultaneously avoiding any obvious lack of respect and also causing acute pain to her attacking forearm. Not exactly a passive parry either, since my own arm was energetically advanced to meet hers.

“As a punishment,” my mother announced after a short pause for reflection, “you shan’t have any tart. That will teach you to torment your poor little sisters.”

My father went tch tch with his tongue. But that was as far as he would go. I maintained a proud silence. And then, taking advantage of a moment when my father’s sad nose was lowered over his plate and my mother was away from the table fetching the delicious concoction that had been simmering on the kitchen range since the evening before, I pulled my most hideous face at Pélagie in retaliation for her shrieking. She immediately set up a fresh hullabaloo and whimpered to her mother, in her limited vocabulary, that I had “looked” at her.

“Good heavens,” I said, gazing around the table with eyes all innocence (an innocence made doubly effective by their blueness), “aren’t I even allowed to look at you now?”

Silence. I made a show of having difficulty in forcing down my mother's excellent ratatouille. I even pushed this display of indifference to the point of refusing the second helping that duty forced her to offer me. And while the rest of them sat enjoying every savory mouthful, I kept my eyes fixed on a flyblown engraving hanging on the wall above the sideboard. It depicted "The Return of the Prodigal Son."

The well-behaved son sat in one corner of the frame looking very glum indeed. I didn't blame him either. Because there he was, he'd spent his whole time slogging away to help his father, and he wasn't even allowed a skinny lamb to give his friends a blowout. Whereas that other little runt, no sooner did he turn up again at the farm gate, after wasting all his substance on his fancy pieces, than they just couldn't wait to slaughter the fatted calf.

Gritting my teeth, I thought, It's just the same with my sisters and me. Soft as dough and silly as sheep the both of them. And yet there's my mother always coddling them, flooding them with eau de Cologne, combing their horrible hair, curling it into those silly curls with her curling iron. I snickered to myself. Last Sunday, stealthy as a fox, I had crept up behind them and thrown dusty spiders' webs all over those pretty curls.

That happy memory was just enough to hold me back from the brink of despair as my eyes crept down from the engraving of the Prodigal Son to the apricot tart, whose aroma I could scent and whose golden curving side I could just make out on top of the sideboard. At that moment my mother rose from her chair, not without a certain ceremonial air, and placed it on the table—right in front of my nose.

I immediately got up, pushed my hands into my pockets, and made for the door.

"What's this?" my father said in the slightly husky voice of someone who doesn't use it much. "Don't you want your share of tart?"

I felt no gratitude for his belated counterorder. I swiveled around, without taking my hands out of my pockets, and said curtly over my shoulder, "I'm not hungry."

"Now then!" my mother immediately broke in. "That's your father you're speaking to, my lad!"

I didn't stay for the rest. The interminable rest. I knew she was intent on ruining my father's tart for him now, just as she'd deprived me of mine.

I emerged into the farmyard and began wandering up and down, fists clenched tight in my pockets. Down in Malejac people said that my father was "as goodhearted as good white bread." And that was just the trouble. Too much soft white and not enough crust.

I wandered on in angry, bitter meditation. It was impossible to hold any kind of reasonable conversation with that stupid bitch (that was the term I used). She treated me like a fool, made me a laughingstock in front of those bleating sisters of mine, and to cap it all she dared to punish me. I was not about to forget that tart. Not for its own sake. Because of the humiliation. Fists still clenched in my pockets, I stalked to and fro across the yard, squaring my already broad shoulders. The nerve of it, depriving the district's champion scholar of his dessert!

It was the proverbial last straw. I was boiling with icy rage, I'd had enough. And thirty years later I can still recapture the taste of that rage. With hindsight, I have the impression I was a pretty lousy Oedipus. My Jocasta was in no danger at all, even in thought. Not that I didn't work it out, my regulation complex, but not on my mother, on Adelaide, who kept our local grocery shop in Malejac. Not only was she always generous with her merry laughter and her candies, she was also an abundantly built blonde with breasts that could answer up to any daydream. And as to my regulation "male identification"—what terrible jargon—that was made not with my own father but with my uncle. Who in fact—although I didn't know it then—resided in the very heart of Adelaide's good graces. So without knowing it, I did in fact possess a real family side by side with the one I was rejecting.

And a third one too, a family which is still dear to me and which I created myself: the Club. A supersecret society with seven members that I founded during my primary school days in Malejac (population 401, twelfth-century church), and of which I was in my turn the father, constantly displaying in all my fearless feats that spirit of enterprise so lacking in my father, and firm, ah yes, a hand as firm as iron beneath my velvet glove.

My decision had been taken. Perpetually insulted here, I would take refuge in the bosom of that other family. I waited till my father had gone upstairs for his siesta and my mother was busy washing the dishes with her two ringleted milksop daughters clinging to her skirts. I slipped up to my garret room, hurriedly filled my haversack (a present from my uncle), and having buckled it up, threw it out onto the woodpile outside my window. Before making my escape I left a note on my table. It was addressed, very formally, to Monsieur Simon Comte, farmer, La Grange Forte, Malejac.

*Dear Father,*

*I am leaving. I am not treated in this house the way I deserve.*



*Lots of love,  
Emmanuel.*

And while my poor father dozed behind his closed shutters, unaware as yet that his farm was already without a successor, I was pedaling through the warm sunlight, haversack on my back, toward Malevil.

Malevil was a big thirteenth-century castle, half in ruins, perched halfway up a steep cliff looking out across the little valley of the two Rhunes. Its owner had abandoned it to its own devices, and ever since a block of stone had fallen from the battlements of the keep and killed a tourist it had been made illegal to enter it. The Ministry of Works had put up two large notices to this effect, and the mayor of Malejac had closed the sole access road along the side of the hill with four strands of barbed wire. Reinforcing this barbed wire, though owing nothing to the local council, there were also fifty yards of impenetrable brambles, growing steadily thicker every year, all along the old track that ran up the side of the cliff toward Malevil on its dizzy height and separated it from the hill on which my uncle's farm, Les Sept Fayards, then stood.

There lay my goal. Under my inspired leadership, the Club had violated all the taboos. We had devised an invisible gate in the barbed wire, then hollowed out a tunnel through the gigantic brambles, concealed from the track by a cunningly placed bend. On the second floor of the castle keep, from which the actual boards had long since disappeared, we made a catwalk by nailing old planks from my uncle's junk shed across from joist to joist. In this way we were able to make our way across the vast main room to a small room at the far side, and Meyssonier, already very much the handyman thanks to having the run of his father's workshop, had put in a window frame and a door with a padlock.

The keep stood too high to be damp. The ribbed vaulting of its roof had resisted the ravages of time. And our den contained a fireplace, an old mattress covered with sacks, a table, and stools.

Our secret had remained undiscovered. It was twelve months now since we had first fitted out these premises, unsuspected by any adult. On my way there I had passed word of my intentions to Colin, who would pass it in his turn to Meyssonier, who would pass it to Peyssou, who would then tell the others. I was not going into exile unprepared.

I spent that afternoon in my cell, then the night and all the next day. It was less delightful than I'd expected. It was July, the other Club members

were all working on various farms, so I wouldn't be seeing them till the evening. And I didn't dare stick my nose out of Malevil. They must have already set the police on my tail down at La Grange Forte.

At seven o'clock there was a knock on the clubroom door. I was expecting big Peyssou, who was due to bring me food supplies. I had already unlocked the padlock on the door, and without getting up from the mattress on which I was uncomfortably stretched with a book of bloody adventure stories in one hand, I yelled out, "Come in, you great nit!"

It was my Uncle Samuel. He was a Protestant, hence the Biblical first name. He stood there, life-size, dressed in an old checked shirt, open to show his muscled neck, and a pair of old Army issue riding breeches (he had served in the cavalry), taller than the open doorway, his forehead touching the stone lintel, and gazing in at me with a deep frown above his smiling eyes.

I freeze on that frame. Because the boy lying on the mattress is me. But the man, my uncle standing in the doorway, he is me too. Uncle Samuel was then more or less the same age as I am now, and everyone agrees that I am very much like him to look at. So that in this scene, during which very few words were exchanged, I have the impression of seeing the boy I once was confronting the man I have become.

In describing Uncle Samuel I shall also be describing myself. He was of above average height, very thickset, yet with slim hips, a square face, tanned complexion, eyebrows black as soot, and blue eyes. Most people in Malejac surrounded themselves from morning till night with a constant murmur of comforting, meaningless words. But my uncle never spoke when he had nothing to say. And when he did speak, he did so briefly, always straight to the point. And he was equally thrifty with his gestures.

It was this decisiveness of his that most attracted me to him. Because at home, my father, my mother, my sisters, everything was always so messy somehow. Their thoughts so muddled. Their speech like cobwebs everywhere.

I also admired my uncle's spirit of enterprise. He had cleared the maximum possible acreage on his farm for cultivation. He had divided up one arm of the river that ran through it into tanks, and now bred trout in them. He had set up a score or so of beehives. He had even bought a secondhand Geiger counter to prospect for uranium in the volcanic rocks that pushed up here and there through the soil on one side of his hill. And when "ranches" and riding stables began appearing everywhere, he promptly sold all his cows and replaced them with horses.

"Knew I'd find you here," my uncle said.

I stared up at him, dumbfounded. But we understood each other, Uncle Samuel and me. After a moment he replied to my tongue-tied gaze. “The planks. The planks you used last summer from my junk shed. They were too heavy for you to carry. You dragged them. I followed the trail.”

So he’d known for a whole year! And he’d never breathed a word to anyone, not even to me.

“I had a look around,” my uncle went on. “The keep battlements are safe enough. There won’t be any more falls.”

I was flooded with gratitude. Uncle Samuel had been keeping watch over me, but from a distance, without telling me, without bothering me. I looked at him, but he avoided my gaze. He didn’t want to get sentimental. He grabbed one of the stools, checked that it was strong enough to bear his weight, and sat down, straddling it as though it were a horse. Then he came straight to the point, at a gallop.

“Now listen, Emmanuel, they haven’t said anything about it yet to anyone. And they haven’t told the police.” A tiny smile. “You know what *she* is like. Terrified what people will say. So here’s what I suggest. I’ll have you over to live with me till the vacation’s over. When school begins again, there’s no problem. You’ll be going to La Roque as a boarder.”

A pause.

“What about the weekends?” I said.

My uncle’s eyes sparkled. Like him, I knew how to say things without speaking them. If I was already back at school in my mind, that meant I had agreed to finish my vacation with him.

“Spend them at my place, if you like,” he said, the brisk words accompanied by a leisurely gesture.

A short pause.

“Though you must go over and eat now and then at La Grange Forte.”

Just often enough, sweet mother, to keep up appearances. I saw immediately that everyone stood to gain by this arrangement.

“Right then,” my uncle said as he rose abruptly to his feet. “If you agree, pack up your things and come down after me to the river meadow. I’m just bringing in some hay for the horses.”

He was already gone, and I was already filling my haversack.

Once out of the bramble tunnel and through the gate in the barbed wire, I hurtled at full speed down the bed of the dried-up stream that ran between the sheer cliff of Malevil and the dome of my uncle’s hill. Overjoyed at being out of my gloomy lair. The trees that had taken root everywhere in the cracks

of the ruined walls made it dark with their overhanging branches, and I took in a great breath of relief as I emerged into the bright valley of the Rhunes.

It lay in late sunlight, the sunlight between six and seven, the most beautiful time of all. That was something I'd learned, since my uncle had pointed it out. There was something gentle in the air. The meadows were greener, the shadows longer, the light golden. I pedaled on toward my uncle's red tractor. Behind it was the wagon with its great yellowish mound of hay. And beyond, two parallel lines, the poplars along the banks of the Rhune, with their perpetually dancing silver-gray leaves. I loved the sound they made: like a gentle summer shower.

Without speaking, my uncle took hold of my bike and tied it with a length of rope on top of the hay. He got up onto the tractor seat while I clambered up beside him and settled myself against the mudguard. Not a word spoken. Not even an exchange of glances. But from the slight quiver of his hands I could sense how happy he was—never having had a child by my scrawny aunt—to be driving a son of his own back home to Les Sept Fayards at last.

La Menou stood waiting for me at the front door, her emaciated arms folded over an absent bosom, her little death's-head face wrinkled into a smile. Her weakness for me was in inverse proportion to the strength of her antagonism toward my mother. And the antagonism she had also entertained against my aunt, while she was still alive. But don't get any ideas. La Menou didn't sleep with my uncle. Nor was she his servant. She had land of her own. He brought in her hay for her, she ran his house, he fed her.

La Menou was thin too, like my aunt, but merry with it. She never whined, she trounced you with relish. Eighty pounds, black clothes included. But at the bottom of those hollow eye sockets her little black button eyes sparkled with a love of life. Though virtuous, virtuous in every way, except when she was a young girl. And in particular, thrifty. So thrifty, in fact, my uncle claimed, that she had starved herself to the point where she had no bottom left to sit on.

And a tiger when it came to work. Arms like matchsticks, but when she was out hoeing her vines, the rows she could do in an hour! And while she hoed, her only son, Momo, then about to turn eighteen, would be out there pulling along a toy train on a length of string and going choo-choo.

To add spice to her life, La Menou kept up a perpetual squabble with my uncle. But he was her god. And his divinity overflowed onto me. So to welcome me to Les Sept Fayards she had cooked a dinner fit to burst your belt. And as its culmination, with deliberate malice, she produced an enormous tart.

If I were making a film I would move in to a close-up of that tart. Followed by a fade and mix into a flashback: 1947, summer the year before. Another “milestone.”

I was eleven. I was falling in love with Adelaide, organizing the new premises for the Club in Malevil, and arriving at a new attitude toward religion.

I have already mentioned the role played by the owner of Malejac’s grocery store in my awakening. She was thirty, and her very maturity hypnotized me. I might also add that even today, despite so many experiences to the contrary, I still, thanks to her, associate kindness with abundant curves, and thinness, thanks to you-know-who, with lack of feelings. A pity that’s not my theme. I should like to tell you about all the fevers excited by all those luscious curves. When the Abbé Lebas, beginning to show concern over the use to which we were putting our attributes, talked to us in our catechism class about “sins of the flesh,” I was unable to conceive that the flesh he was talking about was my own, since I was all muscles and sinews, so I immediately applied the expression to Adelaide, and the idea of sin began to seem delightful.

Nor was I even put out by the fact that my idol, although so generously proportioned, had the reputation of being inclined to lightness. On the contrary, that seemed only to augur well for my own future. Though the years that were to make a rooster out of the cockerel I was at eleven seemed to stretch unendingly ahead.

Meanwhile, that summer at least, I had plenty to occupy me. The “war” was at its height. The valiant heretic captain Emmanuel Comte, besieged inside Malevil with his co-religionists, was defending the castle against the sinister Meyssonier, head of the Catholic League. I say sinister because his aim was to sack the castle and put all the heretics inside it—male and female alike—to the sword. The women were represented by bundles of kindling, the children by somewhat smaller bundles.

Victory was not a foregone conclusion, it depended upon the fortunes of battle. Anyone who was struck or even grazed by a spear, an arrow, a stone, or, in hand-to-hand fighting, by the point of a sword, had to exclaim, “I am slain!” and fall to the ground. It was permissible, once the battle had been won, to cut the throats of the wounded and kill the women, but not, as big Peyssou did on one occasion, to hurl oneself upon one of the more sizable bundles of wood with the intention of raping it. We were hard and pure, like our ancestors. In public anyway. Lechery was a private matter.

One afternoon, when fortune sat on my helm, I sent an arrow winging down from the ramparts straight into Meyssonier’s chest. He fell. I pushed

my head through my arrow slit, brandished my fist, and yelled in a voice of thunder, "Death to you, Catholic swine!"

This terrible cry froze the assailants in their tracks. In their stupor they forgot to cover themselves, and our arrows laid them all low forthwith.

At that I emerged with slow stride from the main gate, dispatched my lieutenants Colin and Giraud to finish off Dumont and Condat, then thrust my sword through Meyssonier's throat.

As for Peyssou, first I cut off those organs of which he was so proud, then I thrust my sword into his breast and worked it in and out of the wound, asking him "in a voice like cold steel" if it gave him pleasure to be raped. I always kept Peyssou till last, his death throes were always magnificent.

The heat of the day and its battle over, we were once more gathered around the table in our den inside the keep for a last cigarette and the piece of chewing gum that would remove its taint from our breath.

And I could see immediately, just from the way he was chewing, that Meyssonier was put out. Beneath the narrow forehead, topped by its austere fence of brushcut hair, his gray eyes were flickering nonstop.

"What's up, Meyssonier?" I asked in a friendly tone. "Is something wrong? Are you mad about something?"

The eyelids flickered even more rapidly. He was hesitant to criticize me, because he usually got the worst of it in the end. But the duty to do so was there all the same, pressing in on his narrow skull from all sides.

"What's wrong," he burst out finally, "is that you shouldn't have called me a Catholic swine!"

There was a murmur of agreement from Dumont and Condat, and though Colin and Giraud kept silent out of loyalty, their very silence held a hint of disapproval that did not escape me. Only Peyssou, his great dumpling face split by a wide grin, remained wholly serene.

"What?" I cried with a brazen show of surprise. "But that was part of the game! In the game I have to be the Protestant; you can't expect me to start saying nice things about the Catholic who's coming to murder me."

"The game doesn't excuse everything," Meyssonier replied firmly. "There are limits, even in a game. For example, you pretend to cut off Peyssou's you-know-what, but you don't really cut them off."

Peyssou's smile grew wider.

"And besides, it was never in the rules to insult one another," Meyssonier added with his eyes glued on the tabletop.

"And especially about religion," Dumont put in.

I looked across at Dumont. I knew him and his touchy spots only too well. "I didn't insult you," I said, hoping to drive a wedge between him and

Meyssonnier. "I was talking to Meyssonnier."

"It comes to the same thing," Dumont said, "since I'm a Catholic too."

I protested indignantly, "But so am I!"

"Exactly," Meyssonnier cut in. "You oughtn't to speak ill of your own religion."

Whereupon Peyssou lumbered into the argument with the dismissive comment that "the whole thing is a fuss about nothing, because being a Catholic or a Protestant comes to the same thing really."

He was immediately jumped on from all sides. His specialities were brute strength and filthy-mindedness! Let him stick to them and keep out of religion, since he didn't understand it!

"I'll bet you don't even know your ten commandments," Meyssonnier said scornfully.

"I bet I do then," Peyssou retorted.

He stood up, as though he were at catechism class, and began reciting them full tilt, but he came to a dead stop after the fourth. He was hooted down and collapsed onto his stool again covered in shame.

Peyssou's diversion had given me time to think.

"Right," I said with a guileless straight-from-the-shoulder air. "I agree I was wrong. Because I'm not like some people; when I am in the wrong I admit it right away. So there you are, I was wrong. Does that make you feel better?"

"It's not enough just to say you were wrong," Meyssonnier said peevishly.

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed indignantly. "You don't expect me to start getting down on my knees to you just because I called you a swine?"

"I don't give a damn about you calling me a swine," Meyssonnier said. "I'm quite prepared to call you the same thing. But what you actually called me was a *Catholic swine*."

"Exactly," I came back. "It wasn't you I was insulting, it was the Catholic religion."

"Yes, that's true," Dumont said.

I glanced across at him. Meyssonnier had just lost his strongest ally.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," little Colin burst out suddenly, turning to Meyssonnier, "this whole thing's getting to be a big bore. Comte has admitted he's in the wrong. What more do you want?"

Meyssonnier was about to open his mouth when Peyssou, delighted at a chance for revenge, threw out both arms in a wild gesture and exclaimed, "The whole thing is a load of manure!"

“Listen, Meyssonnier,” I said with the air of a person being scrupulously fair. “I’ve called you a swine, you’ve called me a swine, so there you are. We’re quits.”

Meyssonnier went red. “I didn’t call you a swine,” he said indignantly.

I looked around at the other members of the Club, shook my head sadly, and said nothing.

“You said, ‘I’m quite prepared to call you the same thing,’ though,” Giraud reminded him.

“But that’s not the same thing at all,” Meyssonnier protested, fully aware of the vast difference between a contingent insult and an insult that has actually been delivered, but powerless to express it.

“You’re quibbling, Meyssonnier,” I said sadly.

“I don’t care,” Meyssonnier cried in a last desperate bid at defiance. “You insulted the Catholic religion, and you can’t say you didn’t!”

“But I haven’t said I didn’t!” I replied, spreading my hands in a gesture of wounded sincerity. “In fact I explicitly admitted that I did, only a moment ago. Didn’t I?”

“Yes, yes, you did,” the other Club members cried.

“Very well,” I continued in intrepid tones, “since I have insulted the Catholic religion, I shall go and make a clean breast of it to the proper authority.” (“The proper authority” was a phrase I’d picked up from my uncle.)

The Club members gazed at me in consternation.

“You don’t mean you’re going to drag the curé into our private quarrels!” Dumont cried.

Because it was a generally held opinion in the Club that the Abbé Lebas had a twisted mind. At confession he had what was for us a very humiliating way of treating all our sins as the merest trifles—with one exception.

The dialogue always went as follows: “Father, I confess to committing the sin of pride.”

“Yes, yes. What else?”

“Father, I confess to having spoken ill of my neighbor.”

“Yes, yes. What else?”

“Father, I confess to having lied to my teacher.”

“Yes, yes. What else?”

“Father, I confess to having stolen ten francs from my mother’s purse.”

“Yes, yes. What else?”

“Father, I confess to having done dirty things.”

“Ah ha!” the Abbé Lebas would cry. “Now we come to it!”



And the interrogation began: “With a girl? With a boy? With an animal? Alone? Naked or with your clothes on? Standing up or lying down? On your bed? In the privy? In the woods? In the classroom? How many times? And what did you think about while you were doing it?” (“Well, I just think that I’m doing it” is Peyssou’s stock answer.) “Whom do you think about? A girl? Another boy? A grown-up woman? A female relative?”

When the Club was founded, one of the first things we swore was to keep the curé in total ignorance of our activities, since it was clearly impossible for him ever to believe in the innocence of a secret society that held clandestine meetings in a place whose existence was unknown to any adult. And yet, in the sense the abbé gave that word, “innocent” the Club most certainly was.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Of course I’m not going running to tell the curé about it. And let him in on the whole thing? What do you think? I said I’m going to make a clean breast of it to the proper authority. And that’s what I’m going to do.”

I got up and said in a curt, lofty tone, “Are you coming, Colin?”

“Yes,” Colin answered, proud at having been singled out.

And taking his cue from me, he strode out with a purposeful air while the Club members gazed after us in amazement.

Our bikes were hidden in the undergrowth down the hill from Malevil.

“Malejac, pronto,” I ordered laconically.

We rode two abreast, but without speaking, even on the flat. I was very fond of little Colin, still am, and during his first term or so at school I stood up for him a lot, because among all those great tough lads, already driving their family tractors at twelve years old, he was so slender and slight, like a dragonfly, with his bright, mischievous eyes, his sharply peaked eyebrows, and a sly mouth with corners tilted up toward his temples.

I had counted on finding the church deserted, but we had scarcely settled ourselves in the special catechism class pew before the Abbé Lebas emerged with shuffling steps and bent back from the vestry. With deep distaste, I watched his long drooping nose and bootlike chin emerge from behind a pillar into the growing dimness of the nave.

As soon as he caught sight of us, at such an unusual hour and in such an unlikely place, he swooped down the aisle like a vulture after carrion and fixed his piercing eyes on ours.

“And what are you two doing here?” he demanded abruptly.

“I’ve come to say a little prayer,” I answered, looking up at him with my bluest eyes, hands modestly folded over my crotch. Then, in the most pious of tones, I added, “As you said we should.”

“And what about you?” he asked sharply, looking at Colin.

“Me too,” Colin said, though his mischievous mouth and sparkling eyes robbed his words of their intended solemnity.

His black eyes even further darkened by suspicion, the abbé scrutinized us one after the other. “You’re sure you didn’t really come for confession?” he asked, turning to me.

“Quite sure, Father,” I told him firmly. And added, “I only confessed on Saturday.”

He straightened up angrily and said with a darkly meaningful look, “And are you going to tell me that you haven’t sinned since Saturday?”

That flustered me. Because unfortunately the abbé was not unaware of my incestuous passion for Adelaide. Incestuous, that is, in my own mind, ever since the day the abbé had said to me, “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself! A woman old enough to be your mother!” And then, for some unfathomable reason: “And twice as heavy as you are!” Because love, after all, is never a question of weights and measures. Particularly when nothing is actually happening apart from “evil thoughts.”

“Oh, of course. But nothing important,” I said.

“Nothing important!” he said, clasping his hands in shock. “What, for instance?”

“Well,” I said, casting about at random, “I’ve lied to my father.”

“Yes, yes,” the abbé said. “And what else?”

I stared at him. Surely he didn’t intend to make me make confession right off like this, without my consent, in the middle of the nave! And what was more, in front of Colin!

“Nothing else,” I said firmly.

The abbé threw me a piercing glance, but I parried it with the shining surface of my limpid eyes and it sank harmlessly down either side of his long nose.

“What about you?” he asked, turning to Colin.

“The same thing,” Colin said.

“The same thing!” The abbé sneered. “So you too lied to your father! And you consider that’s not important!”

“No, Father,” Colin answered. “It was actually to my mother I told my lie.” And the folds at the corners of his mouth curved up toward his temples.

I was afraid the abbé was going to explode and drive us out of the temple. But he managed to control himself. “I see,” he said, still addressing himself to Colin but in an almost menacing tone. “So the idea came into your head, just like that, to come to church and say a little prayer?”

I opened my mouth to answer him, but the abbé cut me short. “Keep quiet, Comte, do you hear? I know you! Always ready with an answer! Just

let Colin speak!”

“No, Father,” Colin said. “It wasn’t me that had the idea. It was Comte.”

“Oh, so it was Comte, eh? Excellent! Excellent! Even more likely, I must say,” the abbé said with heavy irony. “And where were you when this idea of his occurred?”

“On our bikes,” Colin said. “We were just riding along, not doing anything wrong, when suddenly Comte said to me, ‘Hey, why don’t we go to church and say a little prayer.’ ‘Good idea,’ I said. And that was that,” Colin concluded, the corners of his mouth twinkling upward quite unconsciously.

“Hey, why don’t we go to church and say a little prayer!” the abbé parodied in a voice of suppressed fury.

Then quick as a sword thrust: “And where were you coming from on your bikes?”

“From Les Sept Fayards,” Colin said without a moment’s hesitation.

Which was a stroke of genius on his part, because if there was one person in Malejac the Abbé Lebas absolutely couldn’t go to in order to check how we spent our time, it was my uncle.

The abbé’s black glance flicked from my transparent eyes to Colin’s gondola smile. He was in the position of a musketeer in the middle of a duel watching his sword sent spinning out of his hand. Or that at any rate was the image I thought up later when giving an account of our conversation to the Club.

“Very well, then, say your little prayer!” the abbé finally shot at us sourly. “Heaven knows you need to, the both of you!”

Whereupon he turned his back on us, as though abandoning us to the Evil One. And shuffling away once more, back bowed, pushing his ponderous profile in front of him, he regained the vestry and slammed the door behind him.

When all was once more silent, I folded my arms on my chest, fixed my eyes on the little lamp over the altar, and said very quietly, but so that Colin could hear me, “God, I’m sorry I insulted Your religion.”

If the door of the tabernacle had opened at that moment, bathing us with light, and if a deep, resonant voice like a radio announcer’s had addressed me, saying, My child, I forgive you, and as a punishment you must recite me ten Paternosters, I wouldn’t have been in the slightest surprised. But nothing happened whatever, and I was obliged to imagine Him speaking in my voice and impose the ten Paternosters on myself. I was just on the point of adding ten Ave Marias, just for symmetry’s sake, when I decided I’d better not, on the grounds that if God were by any chance Protestant after all, then He

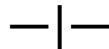
wouldn't be exactly delighted with me for giving the Virgin Mary equal rights.

I hadn't finished my third Paternoster before Colin gave me a dig in the ribs. "What's up with you? Aren't we going now?"

I turned my head and eyed him sternly. "Wait! I have to do the penance He's given me, don't I?"

Colin was silent. And continued silent thereafter. Forever mute on the subject. No surprise. No questions.

And the question that comes into my own mind after all these years is nothing to do with my sincerity then. At eleven everything is a game, so the problem doesn't even arise. What strikes me now, what I remember most, is the audacity I displayed in conceiving the idea that it was possible to pass over the Abbé Lebas's head and establish relations directly with God.



April 1970: the next milestone. A jump of more than twenty years. It takes a slight effort to abandon my short pants and put on the long trousers of my man's estate. I am thirty-four, headmaster of Malejac school, and my uncle is sitting opposite me in his kitchen smoking his pipe. His changeover to horses has proved a success, perhaps too big a success even. In order to expand he needs to buy more land, and any land he sets his sights on—he is thought to be rich—doubles in price the moment he appears on the scene.

"Take Berthaud. You know Berthaud. Two years he kept me on the hook. And then asked me a fortune! Though it didn't matter that much. I never gave a pile of horse dung for Berthaud's farm really. It was never anything but a last resort. No, Emmanuel, what I really wanted, I'll tell you straight, what I wanted was Malevil."

"Malevil!"

"Yes," my uncle said. "Malevil."

"But why?" I said, dumbfounded. "It's nothing but woods and ruins."

"Ah ha," my uncle said, "I can see I'd better set you straight about what Malevil is. Malevil is a hundred and seventy acres of first-grade agricultural land that has been grown over for less than fifty years with undergrowth. Malevil is a vineyard that in my grandpa's day was producing the best wine in the whole district. It all has to be replanted, that I grant, but the land is there. Malevil is a cellar without a rival in all Malejac: stone vaulting, cool, and as big as the school playground. Malevil is an outer wall against which you can build any number of stables and stalls with almost no trouble, with