



## *Contents*

Preface	I
Translator's Introduction	VII
Death on Credit	1
<i>Notes</i>	491



# *Death on Credit*



**H**ERE WE ARE, ALONE AGAIN. It's all so slow, so heavy, so sad... I'll be old soon. Then at last it will be over. So many people have come into my room. They've talked. They haven't said much. They've gone away. They've grown old, wretched, sluggish, each in some corner of the world.

Yesterday, at eight o'clock, Mme Bérengé, the concierge, died. A great storm rises up from the night. Way up here where we are, the whole house is shaking. She was a good friend, gentle and faithful. Tomorrow they're going to bury her in the cemetery on the Rue des Saules. She was really old, at the very end of old age. The first day she coughed I said to her: "Whatever you do, don't stretch out. Sit up in bed." I was worried. Well, now it's happened... anyway, it couldn't be helped...

I haven't always practised medicine... this shit. I'll write to the people who've known her, who've known me, and tell them that Mme Bérengé is dead. Where are they?

I wish the storm would make even more of a clatter, I wish the roofs would cave in, that spring would never come again, that the house would blow down.

Mme Bérengé knew that grief always comes in the mail. I don't know whom to write to any more... Those people are all so far away... They've changed their souls, that's a way to be disloyal, to forget, to keep talking about something else...

Poor old Mme Bérengé, they'll come and take her cross-eyed dog away.

For almost twenty years, all the sadness that comes by mail passed through her hands. It lingers on in the smell of her death, in that awful sour taste. It has burst out... it's here... it's skulking. It knows us and now we know it. It will never go away. Someone will have to put out the fire in the lodge. Whom will I write to? I've nobody left. No one to receive the friendly spirits of the dead... to speak more softly to the world... I'll have to bear it all alone.

Towards the end my old concierge was unable to speak. She was suffocating, she clung to my hand... The postman came in. He saw her die. A little hiccup. That's all. In the old days, lots of people used to knock on her door and ask for me. Now they're gone, far away into

forgetfulness, trying to find souls for themselves. The postman took off his cap. Me, I could vent all my hatred. I know. I'll do that later on if they don't come back. I'd rather tell stories. I'll tell stories that will make them come back, just to kill me, from the ends of the world. Then it will be over and that will be all right with me.

\* \* \*

At the clinic where I work, the Linuty Foundation, I've had thousands of complaints about the stories I tell... My cousin Gustin Sabayot makes no bones about it, he says I should change my style. He's a doctor too, but he works across the Seine, at La Chapelle-Jonction. I didn't have time to go see him yesterday. The fact is I wanted to talk to him about Mme Bérengé. I got started too late. It's a tough one our job, seeing patients. At the end of the day we're both pooped. Most of the patients ask such tedious questions. It's no use trying to hurry, you've got to explain everything in the prescription twenty times over. They get a kick out of making you talk, wearing you down... They're not going to make any use of the wonderful advice you give them, none at all. But they're afraid you won't take trouble enough, and they keep at you to make sure; it's suction cups, X-rays, blood tests... they want you to feel them from top to toe... to measure everything, to take their blood pressure, the whole damn works. Gustin, he's been at it for thirty years at La Jonction. One of these days I think I'm going to send those pests of mine to the slaughterhouse at La Villette for a good drink of warm blood, first thing in the morning. That ought to knock them out for the day. I can't think of any other way to discourage them...

The day before yesterday I finally decided to go and see ol' Gustin at home. His neck of the woods is a twenty-minute walk from my place once you've crossed the Seine. The weather wasn't so good. But I start out just the same. I tell myself I'll take the bus. I hurry through my consultation. I slip out past the accident ward when an old bag spots me and latches on to me. She drags out her words, like me. That comes of fatigue. Her voice grates. That's the liquor. She starts whining and whimpering, she wants me to go home with her. "Oh, Doctor, please come, I beg of you!... My little girl, my Alice!... It's on the Rue Rancienne, just around the corner..." I didn't have to go. My office hours were over, supposedly!... She insists... By that time we're outside... I'm fed up with sick people; I've been patching up those pests all day, thirty of them... I'm all in. Let

them cough! Let them spit! Let their bones fall apart!... Let them bugger each other! Let them fly away with forty different gases in their guts!... To hell with them!... But this snivelling bitch holds me tight, falls on my neck, and blows her despair in my face. It reeks of red wine... I haven't the strength to resist. She won't go away. Maybe when we get to the Rue des Casses, which is a long street without a single lamp, I'll give her a good kick in the arse... Again I weaken... I chicken out... And the record starts up again. "My little girl!... Please, Doctor, please! My little Alice... You know her?" The Rue Rancienne isn't around the corner... It's completely out of my way... I know it. It's after the cable factory... She's still talking, and I listen through my private haze... "Eighty-two francs a week... that's all we've got to live on... with two children!... And my husband is such a brute!... It's shameful, Doctor!..."

I know it's all a lot of hokum. Her whole story stank of booze and sour stomach.

By that time we'd got to their digs...

I climb the stairs. At last I could sit down... The little kid wears glasses.

I sit down beside her bed. She's still playing with her doll, kind of. I try to cheer her up. I'm always good for a laugh when I put my mind to it... She's not dying, the brat... She has trouble breathing... She's certainly got an inflammation... I make her laugh. She gags. I tell her mother there's nothing to worry about. The bitch! Now she's got me cornered, she decides she can use a doctor too. It's her legs, all covered with black-and-blue marks where she's been beaten. She hikes up her skirts. Enormous bruises and deep burns. Her unemployed husband did that with the poker. That's the way he is. I give her some advice... I take a piece of string and make a kind of swing for the miserable doll... Up and down she goes, from the bed to the doorknob and back... it's better than talking.

I apply the stethoscope. She's wheezing pretty bad, but it's nothing dangerous... I give reassurances again. I say the same words twice. That's what gets you down. The kid begins to laugh. She gags again. I have to stop. Her face is all blue... Mightn't she have a little diphtheria? I'll have to see... Take a specimen?... Tomorrow!...

The dad comes in. With his eighty-two francs they can't afford wine, they're stuck with cider. "I drink it out of a bowl," he says right off the bat. "It makes you piss." And he takes a swig from the bottle. He shows me... We all say how lucky it is that the little angel isn't too sick. What interests me most is the doll... I'm too tired to bother about grown-ups



and diagnoses. Grown-ups are a pain in the arse! I won't treat a single one until next day.

I don't give a damn that they think I don't take my work seriously. I drink their health again. The consultation is free, absolutely complimentary. The mother brings up her legs again. I give her a last piece of advice. Then I go down the stairs. On the pavement there's a little dog with a limp. He follows me without a moment's hesitation. Everything sticks to me today. It's a little fox terrier, black and white. Seems to be lost. Those unemployed punks upstairs, what ingratitude! They don't even see me to the door. I bet they're fighting again. I can hear them yelling. He can stick the whole poker up her ass for all I care. That'll teach her to bother me!

Presently I turn off to the left... towards Colombes pretty much. The little dog is still following me... After Asnières comes La Jonction, and then my cousin's. But the dog is limping heavily. He's staring at me. I couldn't stand seeing him drag along like that. Maybe I'd better go home after all. We turned back by way of the Pont Bineau, skirting the row of factories. The dispensary wasn't quite shut when we got there... "We'll feed the little mutt," I said to Mme Hortense. "Somebody'll have to get some meat... We'll call up first thing in the morning. The SPCA will send a car for him. We'd better lock him up for tonight." Then I went out again, easy in my mind. But that dog was too scared. He'd been beaten too much. Life is hard on the streets. When we opened the window next day, he wouldn't wait, he jumped out, he was even afraid of us. He thought we'd punished him. He couldn't understand. He didn't trust anybody any more. It's terrible when that happens.

\* \* \*

Gustin knows me well. When he's sober, he has good ideas. He is an expert in questions of style. His judgements are reliable. There's no jealousy in him. He doesn't ask much of this world. He's got an old sorrow... disappointment in love. He doesn't want to forget it. He seldom talks about it. She was a floozie. Gustin is good as gold. He'll never change till his dying day.

Meanwhile he drinks a little bit...

Me, my trouble is insomnia. If I had always slept properly, I'd never have written a line...

“You could talk about something pleasant now and then.” That was Gustin’s opinion. “Life isn’t always disgusting.” In a way he’s right. With me it’s kind of a mania, a bias. The fact is that in the days when I had that buzzing in both ears, even worse than now, and attacks of fever all day long, I wasn’t half so gloomy... I had lovely dreams... Mme Vitruve, my secretary, was talking about it only the other day. She knew how I tormented myself. When a man’s so generous, he squanders his treasures, loses sight of them. I said to myself: “That damn Vitruve, she’s hidden them some place...” Real marvels they were... bits of Legend, pure delight... That’s the kind of stuff I’m going to write from now on... To make sure, I rummage through my papers... I can’t find a thing... I call Delumelle, my agent; I want to make him my worst enemy... to make him groan under my insults... It takes a lot to faze him!... He doesn’t give a damn! He’s loaded. All he says is that I need a holiday... Finally old Vitruve comes in. I don’t trust her. I have very sound reasons. I light into her, point-blank: where did you put my masterpiece? I had several hundred reasons for suspecting her...

The Linuty Foundation was across the way from the bronze balloon at the Porte Pereire. Almost every day when I’d finished with my patients, she’d come up to deliver my typescripts. A little temporary structure that’s been torn down since. I wasn’t happy there. The hours were too regular. Linuty, who had founded it, was a big millionaire, he wanted everybody to have medical treatment and feel better without money. Philanthropists are a pain in the arse. I’d have preferred some municipal dispensary... a little vaccinating on the side... a modest racket in health certificates... or even a public bath... in other words, a kind of retirement. Well, so be it. I’m not a Yid, or a foreigner, or a Freemason, or a graduate of the École Normale; I don’t know how to promote myself, I fuck around too much, my reputation’s bad. For fifteen years now they’ve seen me struggling along out here in the Zone;\* the dregs of the dregs take liberties with me, show me every sign of contempt. I’m lucky they haven’t fired me. Writing picks me up. I’m not so badly off. Vitruve types my novels. She’s attached to me. “Listen,” I say, “listen, old girl, this is the last time I’m going to give you hell!... If you don’t find my Legend, it’s the parting of the ways, it’s the end of our friendship. No more intimate collaboration!... No more grub and bub, no more dough.”

She bursts into lamentations. She’s a monster in every way, Vitruve, her looks are awful and her work is awful. She’s an obligation. I’ve had her on my neck since I was in England. She’s the fruit of a promise.

We go way back. It was her daughter Angèle in London who made me swear to look after her for ever. I've looked after her all right. That was my vow to Angèle. It dates back to the war. Besides, come to think of it, she knows a lot of things. Okay. She's tight-lipped in principle, but she remembers... Angèle, her daughter, was quite a number. It's amazing how ugly a mother can get. Angèle came to a tragic end. I'll explain all that if I'm forced to. Angèle had a sister, Sophie, a big tall screwball, settled in London. And Mireille, the little niece, is over here. She has the combined vices of the whole family, she's a real bitch... a synthesis.

When I moved from Rancy to Porte Pereire, they both tagged along. Rancy has changed, there's hardly anything left of the walls or the Bastion. Big black scarred stones; they rip them out of the soft ground like decayed teeth. It will all go... the city swallows its old gums. The bus – the P.Q. *bis* they call it now – dashes through the ruins like a bat out of hell. Soon there won't be anything but sawed-off dung-coloured skyscrapers. We'll see. Vitruve and I used to argue about our troubles. She always claimed she'd been through more than I had. That's not possible. Wrinkles, that's for sure, she's got a lot more than me! There's no limit to the amount of wrinkles, the creases that the good years dig in their flesh. "Mireille must have put your papers away."

I leave with her and escort her out to the Quai des Minimes. They live together, near the Bitrounelle chocolate factory, it's called the Hôtel Méridien.

Their room is an inconceivable mess, a junk shop full of miscellaneous articles, mostly underwear, all flimsy and extremely cheap.

Mme Vitruve and her niece both do it. They have three douche bags, as well as a fully equipped kitchen and a rubber bidet. They keep it all between the beds; there's also an enormous atomizer that they've never succeeded in getting to squirt. I wouldn't want to be too hard on Vitruve. Maybe she has had more trouble than I have. That's what makes me control myself. Otherwise, if I were sure, I'd lick the hell out of her. She used to keep the Remington in the fireplace; she hadn't finished paying for it... So she said. I don't pay her too much for my typing, I've got to admit that... sixty-five centimes a page, but it mounts up in the end... especially with big fat books.

When it comes to squinting, though, I never saw the like of Vitruve. It was painful to look at her.

That ferocious squint gave her an air when she laid out her cards, that is to say her tarot cards. She sold the little ladies silk stockings...

the future too, on credit. When she puzzled and pondered behind her glasses, she had the wandering gaze of a lobster.

Her fortune-telling gave her a certain influence in the neighbourhood. She knew all the cuckolds. She pointed them out to me from the window, and even the three murderers – “I have proof.” I’d also given her an old blood-pressure contraption and taught her a little massage for varicose veins. That added to her income. Her ambition was to do abortions or to get involved in a bloody revolution, so everybody would talk about her and the newspapers would be full of it.

I’ll never be able to say how she nauseated me as I watched her rummaging through that junk pile of hers. All over the world there are trucks that run over nice people at the rate of one a minute... Old Vitruve gave off a pungent smell. Redheads often do. It seems to me that there’s an animal quality in redheads; it’s their destiny: something brutal and tragic; they’ve got it in their skin. I could have laid her out cold when she went on about her memories in that loud voice of hers... Randy as she was, it was hard for her to find enough gratification. Unless a man was drunk and it was very dark, she didn’t have a chance. On that point I was sorry for her. I myself had done better in the way of amorous harmonies. That, too, struck her as unjust. When the time came, I’d have almost enough put by to settle my accounts with death... I had made my aesthetic savings. What marvellous arse I’d enjoyed... I’ve got to admit it, as luminous as light. I’d tucked into the Infinite.

She had no savings – that could be sensed very easily, there was no need to go on about it. To earn her keep and get a little enjoyment on the side, she had to take a customer by surprise or wear him out. It was hell.

By seven o’clock the good little workers have usually gone home. The women are doing the dishes, the males are tied up in radio waves. That’s when Vitruve abandons my beautiful novel and goes out in pursuit of her livelihood. She works her way from landing to landing with her slightly damaged stockings and her crummy lingerie. Before the crash she managed to get along, what with credit and the way she terrified her customers, but today the identical crap is given away at street fairs to stop the gripes of losers at the shell game. That’s unfair competition. I tried to tell her it was all the fault of the Japanese... She didn’t believe me. I accused her of doing away with my wonderful Legend on purpose, even of throwing it in the garbage...

“It’s a masterpiece!” I added. “We’d better find it...”

That made her chortle... We rummaged through the pile of junk.

Finally her niece came in, very late. You should have seen her hips! That arse was a public scandal. Her skirt was all pleated... So that it could hold the note. A rounded accordion. The unemployed are desperate, sex-starved; no dough to take a girl out with... They kick up a fuss. "What about giving me some of that arse!" they'd shout at her. Square in her face. At the end of the hall, the result of always getting a hard-on for nothing. The youngsters with finer features than the rest feel entitled to it, they expect life to coddle them. It wasn't until later that she began to go down and hustle... after no end of calamities... For the present she was just having fun.

She didn't find my beautiful Legend either. She didn't give a damn about "King Krogold"... the only one who cared was myself. Her school of life was the Petit Panier, a dance hall near the Porte Brancion, just before the railway.

They didn't take their eyes off me when I got mad. In their opinion I was absolutely clueless! A stick-in-the-mud, jerk-off intellectual, and so on. But now, surprisingly enough, they were scared I'd clear out. If I had, I wonder what they'd have done. I have no doubt that the aunt thought about it plenty. Lord, the winning smiles they treated me to when I began to talk about a change of air...

In addition to her amazing arse, Mireille had romantic eyes and a bewitching look, but a hefty nose, a beezer, that was her cross. When I wanted to humiliate her a bit, I'd say: "No kidding, Mireille, you've got a nose like a man..." But she was good at telling yarns, she loved them like a sailor. She made up all sorts of things, at first to amuse me, later to make trouble for me. I like to hear a good story, that's my weakness. She went too far, that's all. We got violent in the end, but she certainly deserved the thrashings I gave her, and if I'd laid her out cold, she'd have deserved that too. She finally admitted it. The fact is I was pretty generous... I socked her for good reason... Everybody said so... at least the ones who were in the know.

\* \* \*

I'm not being unfair to Gustin Sabayot when I say that he didn't knock himself out with his diagnoses. He got his ideas from the clouds.

The first thing he did when he stepped out of his house in the morning was to look up at the sky. "Ferdinand," he'd say, "today it's going to be

rheumatism, one case after another. You want to bet?” He read that in the heavens. He was never very far off, because he had a thorough knowledge of the climate and the human temperament.

“Aha! A bit of hot weather after a cold spell! That calls for calomel, take my word for it! There’s jaundice in the air. The wind has changed... From north to west. From cold to rain... That means two weeks of bronchitis... There’s no point in them even getting up. If I were in charge, I’d make out my prescriptions in bed... After all, Ferdinand, when they come to see us, all they do is gab... For doctors who get paid by the call there’s some point in it... but for us?... on a monthly salary... what’s the use?... I could treat them without stepping out of the house. Damn pests. I don’t have to see them. They wouldn’t wheeze any more or less. They wouldn’t vomit any more, they wouldn’t be any yellower or redder, or paler, or less idiotic... That’s the way it is and nobody’s going to change it!” That’s how Gustin felt about it, and he was damn right.

“Do you think they’re sick?... They moan... they belch... they stagger... they fester... You want to clear them out of your waiting room? On the double? Even the ones who damn near suffocate every time they cough?... Offer them a free pass to the movies... or a free drink across the street... you’ll see how many you’ve got left... If they come around and bother you, it’s mostly because they’re bored. On the day before a holiday you never see a soul... Mark my words, the trouble with those poor bastards isn’t their health, what they need is something to do with themselves... they want you to entertain them, cheer them up, fascinate them with their belches... their farts... their aches and pains... they want you to find explanations... fevers... rumblings... new and intriguing ailments... They want you to get interested, to expatiate... that’s what you’ve got your diplomas for... Ah, getting a kick out of his death while he’s busy manufacturing it: that’s mankind for you, Ferdinand! They cling to their clap, their syphilis, their TB. They need them. And their oozing bladders, the fire in their rectums. They don’t give a damn. But if you knock yourself out, if you know how to keep them interested, they won’t die until you get there. That’s your reward. They’ll come around to the bitter end.” When the rain slanted down between the chimneys of the power plant, he’d say: “Ferdinand, this is sciatica day... If I don’t get ten cases today I’ll send my parchment back to the dean!” But when the soot came back at us from the east, which is the driest quarter, over the

Bitrounelle chocolate factory, he'd crush a smudge against his nose and say: "I'll be bugged if the lungers don't start bringing up clots before the night is out. Damn it all, they'll wake me up a dozen times..."

Sometimes in the late afternoon he'd make things easier for himself. He'd climb up the ladder to the enormous cabinet where the samples were kept. And he'd start distributing medicines directly, free of charge, and absolutely without formality. "Hey you, Stringbean, you got palpitations?" he'd say to some sloven. "No." "Haven't you got a sour stomach?... A discharge?... Sure you have. Just a little? Well then, take some of this, you know where, in two quarts of water... it'll do you a world of good!... How about your joints? Don't they ache?... No haemorrhoids? And how about your bowels?... Here are some Pepet suppositories. Worms too? You think so? Well, here are some wonder drops... Take them before you go to bed."

He suggested something from every shelf... There was something for every disorder, every symptom, every obsession... Patients are amazingly greedy. As long as they've got some slop to put in their mouths, they're satisfied, they're glad to get out. They're afraid you might call them back.

With his gift-giving I've seen Gustin reduce to ten minutes a consultation that would have taken hours if handled conscientiously. But I myself had nothing to learn in that line. I had my own system.

I wanted to talk to him about my Legend. We'd found the first part under Mireille's bed. I was badly disappointed when I reread it. The passage of time hadn't helped my romance any. After years of oblivion a child of fancy can look pretty tawdry... Well, with Gustin I could always count on a frank, sincere opinion. I tried to put him in the right frame of mind.

"Gustin," I said. "You haven't always been the mug you are today, bogged down by circumstances, work and thirst, the most disastrous of servitudes... Do you think that, just for a moment, you can revive the poetry in you?... Are your heart and cock still capable of leaping to the words of an epic, sad to be sure, but noble... resplendent?... You feel up to it?..."

Gustin, he stayed where he was, half-doing on his stepladder, in front of his samples and the wide-open medicine cabinet... Not a word out of him... he didn't want to interrupt me...

"It's the story," I informed him, "of Gwendor the Magnificent, Prince of Christiania... Here we are... He is breathing his last... as I stand

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