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*Boule de Suif*  
*and Other Stories*



## Boule de Suif

FOR SEVERAL DAYS in succession, tattered remnants of the defeated army had been passing through the town. They were no longer troops, but hordes of stragglers. The men had long, filthy beards, their uniforms were in shreds, and they shambled along, without a flag, without a regiment. All of them seemed crushed, broken, incapable of thought or resolve, marching merely out of habit, and dropping with fatigue the minute they stopped. The greater number were reservists, pacific characters and quiet well-to-do men, bent beneath the weight of their rifles; or alert little militiamen, quick to panic and easily roused to enthusiasm, as ready for attack as for flight; then, in their midst, a few red-trousered soldiers, the debris of a division that had been given a good thrashing in some great battle; sombre artillerymen marching in line with these various foot soldiers; and, at times, the shining helmet of a dragoon dragging his feet along and barely keeping up with the lighter step of the infantry.

Legions of irregular combatants bearing heroic names – the “Avengers of Defeat”, the “Citizens of the Tomb”, the “Companions of Death” – went by in turn, looking like bandits.

Their leaders, formerly cloth or seed merchants, or dealers in tallow or soap, were occasional warriors who had been appointed officers because of their wealth or the length of their moustaches. Loaded with weapons, flannel and gold braid, they spoke with booming voices, discussed plans of campaign and declared that they could, all by themselves, carry France in its death agony on their boastful shoulders;

but they were sometimes frightened of their own troops – men fit only for the gallows, prone to bravado, always indulging in pillage and debauchery.

The Prussians were about to enter Rouen, people said.

The National Guard, which had, for the last two months, been very cautiously reconnoitring in the nearby woods, sometimes shooting their own sentries and ready to leap into action every time a little rabbit stirred in the undergrowth, had returned to hearth and home. Their weapons, their uniforms, all the murderous paraphernalia with which they had struck fear all along the highways for three leagues around, had suddenly disappeared.

The last French soldiers had finally crossed the Seine to reach Pont-Audemer via Saint-Sever and Bourg-Achard; and, walking behind them, the general, in despair, unable to attempt anything with this ragtag assortment, himself crushed by the overwhelming rout of a people used to victory and now disastrously beaten despite its legendary bravery, made his way along on foot, between two aides-de-camp.

Then a profound calm, a terrified and silent sense of foreboding, started to hover above the city. Many pot-bellied men from the middle class, emasculated by commerce, anxiously awaited the victors, trembling at the idea that their roasting spits or their big kitchen knives might be viewed as weapons.

Life seemed to have come to a standstill: the shops were closed, the streets mute. Sometimes one of the residents, intimidated by this silence, sidled hastily along the walls.

The anguish of expectation made them long for the enemy's arrival.

On the afternoon of the day following the departure of the French troops, a few uhlans, emerging from God knows where, swept through the city. Then, a little later, a dark mass

came down from the slopes of the Sainte-Catherine district, while two other streams of invaders appeared coming along the Darnétal and Bois-Guillaume roads. The vanguards of the three bodies, at exactly the same moment, joined forces on the square in front of the town hall, and, along all the neighbouring roads the German army started to arrive, battalion after battalion, making the cobbles echo to the clattering rhythm of their marching.

Commands shouted out in an unknown guttural tongue rose along the houses which seemed dead and deserted, while from behind the closed shutters eyes peeped out at these victorious men, masters of the city and the fortunes and lives within it by “right of conquest”. The inhabitants in their darkened rooms were struck by the panic induced by natural cataclysms, by those great murderous upheavals of the earth against which all wisdom and all strength are useless. For the same sensation reappears each time that the established order of things is overturned, when security no longer exists, and all that was protected by the laws of men or of nature finds itself at the mercy of a fierce and mindless brutality. The earthquake that crushes an entire populace as the houses collapse, the overflowing river whose torrent sweeps along drowned peasants with the carcasses of cattle and the wooden beams torn from rooftops, and the glorious army massacring those who offer any resistance, leading the others away as prisoners, pillaging in the name of the sabre and giving thanks to some God with the sound of their cannon – all these are so many terrible scourges which confound any belief in eternal justice, any trust that we have learnt to place in Heaven’s protection and man’s reason.

But, at every door, small detachments now started to knock before disappearing into the houses. After invasion came



occupation. The vanquished now had to fulfil their duty of showing themselves gracious towards the victors.

After a while, once the first terror had evaporated, a new calm set in. In many households, the Prussian officer ate at table with the family. He was sometimes well brought up, and out of politeness would express his sympathy for France and his repugnance at having to take part in this war. People felt grateful to him for these sentiments – after all, maybe they might need his protection one day or another. By dealing tactfully with him, they might get away with a few men less to feed. And why hurt the feelings of someone on whom they were entirely dependent? To behave like that would be an act less of bravery than of rashness – and rashness is no longer a failing of the Rouen middle classes, as it had been at the time of the heroic defences in which their city once distinguished itself. Furthermore, drawing on the supreme reason of French urbanity, people told themselves that, after all, it was perfectly permissible to be polite at home, so long as they did not show themselves familiar with the foreign soldier in public. Once outside the house, they no longer wanted to know him, but indoors they were quite prepared to have a chat, and the German would stay on a little longer each evening, warming himself at the family hearth.

The city itself started, little by little, to regain its ordinary appearance. The French still emerged only rarely, but the streets were crawling with Prussian soldiers. In any case, the officers of the Blue Hussars, arrogantly scraping their great tools of death along the cobbles, did not seem to have for the ordinary citizens much more contempt than had the French light infantrymen who, the year before, had been drinking in the same cafés.

Nonetheless, there was something in the air – something subtle and unfamiliar, a strange and intolerable atmosphere, like a spreading odour: the odour of invasion. It filled the houses and the public places, affected the taste of food, gave people the impression they were travelling far from home among dangerous barbarian tribes.

The victors demanded money – a lot of money. The inhabitants always paid; in any case, they were rich. But the more a Norman merchant is rolling in money, the more he suffers from having to make any sacrifice, or see any scrap of his fortune passing into the hands of someone else.

However, two or three leagues downriver from the city, towards Croisset, Dieppedalle or Biessart, the bargemen and fishers would often dredge up from the depths the corpse of some German all swollen in his uniform, killed with the thrust of a knife or a well-aimed kick, his head crushed by a stone – or sometimes he had been pushed into the water from a bridge. The muddy river buried these obscure acts of vengeance, savage and legitimate, anonymous deeds of heroism, silent assaults – more perilous than battles fought out in the open, and without any of their resounding glory. For hatred towards the foreigner always causes a few intrepid characters to take up arms, ready as they are to die for an Idea.

Finally, although the invaders imposed their inflexible discipline on the city, they perpetrated none of the horrors that rumour had ascribed to them all along their triumphal march, and people grew emboldened; the need to do business again started to weigh on the hearts of the local merchants. Some of them had major business interests in Le Havre, which was still occupied by the French army, and they wanted to try to reach this port by travelling overland to Dieppe, where they would take a boat.

They used the influence of the German officers they had got to know, and authorization for them to leave the city was obtained from the general-in-chief.

So it was that a big four-horse coach was reserved for the trip, and ten persons registered with the coachman; and they resolved to leave one Tuesday morning, before daybreak, so as to avoid attracting a crowd of onlookers.

A frost had frozen the earth solid for days now, and on Monday, around three o'clock, big black clouds coming from the north brought snow, which fell uninterruptedly all evening and all night.

At half-past four in the morning, the travellers gathered in the yard of the Hôtel de Normandie, where they were to board the stagecoach.

They were still very sleepy, and shivered with cold under their wraps. They could barely see each other in the darkness, and the heavy winter clothes they had put on made them all look like overweight priests with their long cassocks. But two men recognized one another, a third came up to them and they started chatting.

"I'm taking my wife along," said one.

"So am I."

"Me too."

The first added, "We're not coming back to Rouen, and if the Prussians move towards Le Havre, we'll go to England."

They all had the same plans, being of a similar mind.

But the coach was still not being harnessed. A little lamp, carried by a stable boy, emerged from time to time from one dark doorway, only to disappear immediately into another. Horses' hoofs stamped on the ground, the noise muffled by the stable litter, and a man's voice talking to the animals and swearing could be heard from the depths of the building.

A low jangle of bells announced the fact that the harnesses were being positioned; this jangle soon became a clear and continuous ringing, following the rhythm of the horses' movements, sometimes stopping, then starting up again with a sudden shake, accompanied by the dull thud of an iron-shod clog clomping across the ground.

The door suddenly closed. All noise ceased. The frozen citizens had fallen silent: they stood there, motionless and stiff.

An uninterrupted curtain of white snowflakes glimmered ceaselessly as it fell to the earth – it effaced shapes and covered everything with a foamy, icy powder, and in the great silence of the city, calm and buried under the winter weather, all that could be heard was this indescribable, vague, floating whisper – the noise of falling snow – more of a sensation than a noise: the intermingling of light atoms that seemed to fill the whole of space, blanketing the world.

The man reappeared with his lamp, pulling along at the end of a rope an unwilling and refractory horse. He set him to the shafts, attached the traces and spent a long time going round making sure that the harness was secure, for he had only one hand free, as the other was carrying his lamp. As he was going to fetch the second horse, he noticed all these motionless travellers, already white with snow, and said to them, "Why don't you get into the coach? At least you'll be sheltered there."

They seemed not to have thought of this, and they leapt at the chance. The three men settled their wives in the back of the coach and got up after them, then the other shapeless and hidden figures in turn took the last seats without exchanging a word.

The floor was covered with straw and their feet snuggled into it. The ladies at the back, who had brought along little copper footwarmers heated by chemical fuel, lit these apparatuses

and spent some time listing in low voices the benefits they brought, repeating to each other things that they had already known for a long time.

Finally, once the coach had been harnessed, with six horses instead of four because it was harder to pull, a voice outside asked, "Has everyone got in?" A voice inside replied, "Yes." And off they went.

The coach rolled on ever so slowly, at the most laboured pace. The wheels sank into the snow, the whole vehicle emitted groans and muffled creaks, the horses slipped, panted, steamed, and the coachman's giant whip continually cracked, flew out on this side and that, curling and uncurling like a slender snake, and suddenly lashing a firm round crupper that then tautened in a more violent effort.

But the day was imperceptibly dawning. The light snowflakes that one traveller, a pure-blooded Rouennais, had compared to a shower of cotton were no longer falling. A murky light was filtering through heavy, dark clouds that set off the dazzling whiteness of the countryside where there sometimes appeared a line of tall trees decked with hoar frost, and sometimes a hovel decked out in a hood of snow.

In the coach, they looked at each other curiously, in the wan light of dawn.

Right at the back, in the best seats, M. and Mme Loiseau, wholesale wine merchants from the Rue Grand-Pont, were sitting opposite each other, dozing.

The former clerk of a boss who had been ruined in business, Loiseau had bought up his stock and made his fortune. He sold very poor wine very cheaply to the small countryside retailers and enjoyed the reputation among his friends and acquaintances of being a sly old fox, a real Norman, full of cunning and joviality.

His reputation as a swindler was so well established that one evening, in the *préfecture*, M. Tournel, the author of fables and songs, a man of biting and subtle wit, a local celebrity, had proposed to the ladies who, as he could see, were starting to drowse, that they play a game of “*Loiseau vole*”: the witticism itself *flew* through the prefect’s drawing rooms; then, having reached those in the rest of the town, made everyone in the province laugh for a whole month until their jaws ached.\*

Loiseau was, besides that, famous for his practical jokes of every kind – the tricks he played both pleasant and unpleasant – and nobody could mention him without immediately adding, “He’s priceless, is old Loiseau.”

Diminutive in stature, he presented a prominent paunch, topped with a red face, framed by two sets of greying side-whiskers.

His wife – tall, sturdy, resolute, with a loud voice and a mind soon made up – brought order and good bookkeeping to the firm, while he enlivened it with his merriment.

Next to them, more dignified, belonging to a higher caste, sat M. Carré-Lamadon, a considerable personage, well established in the cotton business, proprietor of three spinning mills, officer of the Legion of Honour and member of the General Council. He had remained, throughout the Empire period, at the head of the most loyal opposition solely in order to ensure that he would be paid more to give his support to the same cause that he combated “with courteous weapons”, as he himself put it. Mme Carré-Lamadon, much younger than her husband, continued to be a comforting presence to officers from good families stationed in Rouen.

She was sitting opposite her husband, all small and dainty, a pretty little thing, bundled up in her furs and gazing with a woe-begone expression at the dingy interior of the coach.

The people next to her, Count and Countess Hubert de Bréville, bore one of the oldest and noblest names in Normandy. The Count, an old gentleman of distinguished demeanour, attempted to bring out, by affecting similar dress, his natural resemblance to good King Henri IV who, following a legend that redounded to the family's glory, had made a lady of Bréville pregnant: her husband, by virtue of this deed, had become a count and the governor of a province.

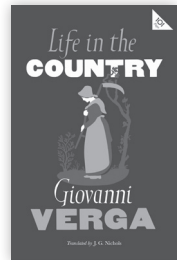
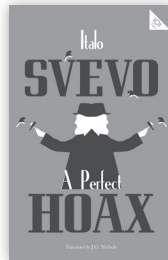
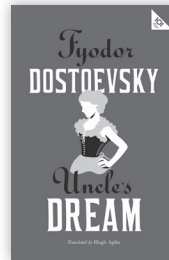
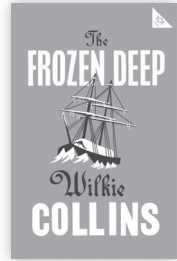
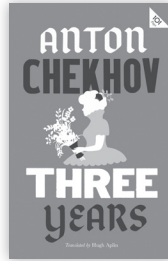
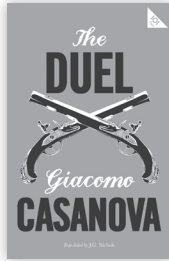
With M. Carré-Lamadon as a colleague on the General Council, Count Hubert represented the Orleanist party in the *département*.\* The story of his marriage to the daughter of a small shipowner from Nantes had always been shrouded in mystery. But as the Countess bore herself like a lady, received her guests better than anyone else and was even said to have been the lover of one of the sons of Louis-Philippe, the whole nobility fêted her, and her salon remained the premier salon in the region, the only one in which old habits of gallantry were preserved, and to which it was difficult to gain access.

The fortune of the de Bréville couple, all in real estate, amounted, it was said, to five hundred thousand pounds in revenue.

These six persons formed the solid ballast of the coach, the section that represented well-to-do society of independent means, serene and strong: decent people, pillars of the establishment, imbued with religion and high principles.

By a strange quirk of fate all the women found themselves sitting on the same side, and the Countess had two other women next to her: two nuns who were telling their beads over and over, mumbling Our Fathers and Hail Marys. One was old, with a face pitted by smallpox, as if she had received a point-blank barrage of grapeshot full in the face. The other, very frail, had a pretty, sickly face and the chest of a

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