

The History of a Watch

Followed by a

Conversation on Watchmaking between Mr Trottevite and Mr Vabien

By

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To The Reader

This history was first published in *La Loupe de l'Horloger*; but it appeared in that almanac in detached fragments and with rather long intervals between each part.

It is undoubtedly because of this, rather than the merit of work, that the author owes the many requests which were addressed to him by his colleagues to publish this small history in its entirety, as well as the Dialogue on the Horology Industry between Mr Trottevite and Mr Vabien.

It should be understood that it has been rather difficult for us not to yield to such sympathetic entreaties, and they are the reasons which explain, even if they do not excuse, the appearance of this new extravagance.

It remains to know in what capacity our poor watch appears today in front of the public. We well know her to be somewhat of a philosopher, although a shy person, but it is precisely because of her philosophy that it had perhaps been better for her to remain where she was. Undoubtedly, it would have been wiser.

We thus hand over all responsibility for this publication to those of our confederates who believe that the public in general and watch makers in particular will find some interest in reading this small book.

We sincerely wish it well for the sake of the editor.

Borsendorff.

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The History of a Watch Narrated by herself, her Life and her Adventures

*Sur le cadran mobile essayons d'épier
Le furtif mouvement de l'aiguille d'acier;
Mais l'heure au pied discret, rasant l'émail
fragile,
Mesure notre vie et parait immobile.*
Ed. Allez.

*Telle est la montre qui chemine
A pas toujours égaux, aveugle et sans dessein.
Ouvrez-lé, lisez dans son sein.*
Lafontaine

Chapter 1

A watch telling her history, some will say, is presumption, bragging.

But why not?

Did I not have, like all others who are beaten down by the cudgel of time, my transitory life, my existence, my adventures?

Why, when, like the poor forgotten of this world, day by day I see my past being thinned out like the dropping petals of a flower in its decline, why shouldn't I also have the consolation to recall my life, as one likes to remember a dream which has just disappeared?

Life is nothing else. So I yield to the quite inoffensive and quite forgivable desire of a nature as frail as mine.

No, reader, I am neither bragging nor pretentious; I am a Swiss woman. I recall that day in the free city of Geneva, on the edge of one of the most beautiful lakes in the world, whose limpid and pure waters even today bathe the foot of the statue raised to the great Rousseau, the son of a watchmaker.

I was, if I may express myself so, the first child of a young Genevan artist whose name I will conceal, fearing the fate of his unfortunate daughter would make him weep. But I must pay homage to his rare skill in watchmaking, by pointing out the many congratulations which were addressed to me, and which, in fact, justly belong to him.

My size, at the same time flat and round, dainty and well shaped, flighty and severe, was twenty millimetres in diameter.

Splendid teeth, which I took care to hide, attested the good conformity of my delicate parts, whose perfect harmony and regular play seemed to ensure me a secular existence, if the unfitted hand of one of those unfortunate watchmakers to whom, poor victims, we are too often entrusted, had not created disorder in my mechanism by mutilating me, for ever, by one of those blows of a cruel and misused screwdriver. But let us leave this painful memory, which will return only too soon.

I still remember being in the small, neat room, on the waxed oak bench of the young artist who formed me from nothing; on the day when, showing signs of life for the first time, he had

just learned how to make me go regularly.

With the first beat of my balance, what joy radiated from his face. No, not even the first breath of a new-born child creates more pleasure in her father, who watches the first beats of her heart with no more silence and no more attention, than that with which my maker listened to the regular rhythm of my first oscillations.

With what precautions, with what hurried care I was surrounded, so that nothing would blight me, nothing would tarnish the velvet of my gilding or the glare of my steel.

I who, a few days before, was just a shapeless scrap of brass, that was only touched with fear and dislike. I who, like so many of my sister molecules, could have been formed into the shape of a hideous cauldron to be consumed on the fire in a black kitchen and have perished slowly under the destroying sandstone of some kitchen boys. I had been made into an objet d'art exciting admiration. Finally I was a watch, and soon the czar of metals was going to bow in front of me, and fashion himself to receive me with dignity.

Also it is necessary to know with what pride I cleft the air by making my gilded balance vibrate, presenting in turn the two round lips of my cylinder to the successive caresses of each tilted and polished tooth of the most delicate steel wheel of my mechanism, by which I enjoyed suspending my march for a fifth of second on each vibration.

With what happiness all the hard and polished pivots of my steel arbors with glittering leaves and decorated deep hollows, rolled freely in my holes of splendid pink rubies, and all carried slowly my notched, light wheels, each one achieving, in the same given time, the same revolutions. While my fugitive hands marked, slipping over the enamel of my dial, the hour which has passed, the minute which passes and the second which flees.

It was in 1831, about the first days of the month which paints our meadows green and makes the first flowers appear.

The toil of my vigilant hands, by marking each dawn, had been able to count twelve risings of the sun, when on the following dawn, being made captive within the folds of a silky paper, I was for ever removed from my natal bench, to be delivered to the counter of the trader in Geneva for whom I was intended.

There, like a slave who is sold and is delivered to the buyer, I underwent a vexatious examination for a watch of my quality. But I was avenged. At the first sight of my delicate form, I was pleased to see my severe inquisitor hastily transform himself into an admirer. I even heard the encouraging congratulations which he gave the humble artist for whom I had cost so much labour and who would never again examine me.

A few moments later I was covered by a splendid gold dress, purposely made to my size, a true masterpiece of chiselling and engraving, and on which scintillated, on a base of splendid blue enamel, the thousand facets of a rich set of diamonds. This brilliant ornament, following the contour of my form while leaving my movements free, finally made a complete watch of me, and from now on put me in the first rank of luxury jewels.

I was as proud as a girl who sees herself adorned for the first time and I believed myself the most beautiful in the world. Pride seized me. I already saw myself suspended at the side of a young and brilliant duchess, balancing me negligently in the satin folds of some courtly dress. I saw myself being celebrated, desired, admired, coveted, frequenting salons, boudoirs, goodness knows where else? When, at a single blow, all these beautiful hopes disappear.

My new owner, after having given me a number which he put down in a large book, coldly put me in a dark drawer where I was mixed pell-mell with all kinds of watches who were

dumb and quiet.

In the midst of the dull silence of this prison, the noise of my escapement was only heard for a few hours, like a plaintive cry. I thus exhausted the little force which remained in my spring, and then, in my turn, I became as dumb as my partners; because once recorded, counted and the door of his iron trunk closed, our jailer no longer took care of us.

Then my golden dreams of the previous minute were soon succeeded by the darkest reflections.

I cursed fortune, grieving for my humble oak bench and the modest shelter of the silica bell under which, free and in broad daylight, I had been the object of such soft attentions.

Seeing my abandonment, I thought of the benevolent and skilful hands whose daily care maintained my soft mechanism in an unceasingly state movement which made my life, my joy and my glory.

What was going to happen to me?

How long would my captivity last?

Fifteen days passed thus, when one morning, my companions and I were finally withdrawn from our prison and placed in a row on the roomy counter of our trader. The jailer's book was opened and our numbers and description copied onto an invoice which was to be our passenger waybill. But our fate did not change - we were transferred from one prison to another.

Several dreadful cardboard boxes with six and twelve compartments awaited us, like as many mobile prisons, where each one of us was put indiscriminately into a separate cell. Then, packed up, tied up, sealed, and having on each of our boxes, like a passport, the customs-house seal, we were sent to Paris.

It is thus that I, poor unfortunate, was removed from my birthplace, without one last look at the sky reflecting herself in the pure and limpid waters of the majestic lake. Not so much as a sunbeam touched me during all the voyage from Geneva to Paris, where I arrived on the third dawn, a vulgar parcel with the address of a wholesale watch merchant.

As soon as we were delivered, our recipient broke our fastenings and took us from our wrappings. But it was only to transport us to Guénégaud Street, to the Mint, where each one of us had to undergo, at the office of guarantee, an examination of the assay of the metal of his or her case. Then finally, the iron of a murderous hammer put onto each of us the imprint of a punch called a hallmark.

I, who believed myself to be an artistic creation, saw myself obliged to undergo the mark and to pay customs duty for my entry just like a cheap cow.

Consequently, I had a presentiment of my destiny.

Indeed, on being returned to our recipient, the merchant of Paris, he was also found to be a jailer just like the dealer in Geneva. He was a prelude to our reception just as the other had been for our departure; the same inspection, entry in the jailer's book, regimental number, and then, finally, again the eternal drawer of a safe with an iron door which opened to receive us a second time and closed again almost at once.

It was done, and I saw myself doomed to captivity and the lapse of memory. However, I was mistaken - misfortune makes one unjust and sometimes mislays reason. Because two days later I was the object of an unexpected privilege. I was carefully withdrawn from my drawer and deposited in a jewellery box on softly-doubled pink satin, in the company of several charming watches, and we were transported to a watchmaker of repute in the Palais

Royal.

There, after the indispensable turn of the key was given to each of us, and an examination through the obligatory magnifying glass, I was chosen by the watchmaker.

A few days later I was entrusted to a workman of the house, an extremely skilful man in his art who, after having stripped me of my rich vestment, proceeded to meticulously examine my mechanism, which he entirely disassembled.

Initially I felt a little outraged by this way of acting towards me; but it appears that the watchmakers of Paris are accustomed to doing this with all watches; it is what they call *repassage*. I had to be resigned. I was thus finished.

For the rest, I have only praise for the operations and delicate procedures to which I was treated. Only I was extremely surprised, when I was dressed after my toilet, to see engraved on my gold dome the name: Leroy, à Paris.

I had been baptized with the name of my new owner.

I was very sensitive to this trickery, which singularly wounded my filial love. Because, by thus misrepresenting me, I was deprived of the humble name of my father.

Which is how I became a watch of Leroy. And for me a new existence started from that day.

I will speak little about my more or less long stay in the Palais Royal, in the luxurious store of the Galerie de Valois, where, placed behind the glass of a rich window, I occupied a place of honour, motionless amidst a number of my companions arranged symmetrically. Thus we attracted each day, by our number and our variety, the glances of a multitude of passers-by who stopped unceasingly in front of our display, going into ecstasies, gaping, and expressing in turn their various feelings of covetousness or curiosity, surprise or admiration, by a thousand exclamations and a thousand facial expressions worthy of Charlet's pencil.

During this stay, I often left my window to rest in the white hand of more than one charming creature, the contact of whose pretty fingers made me quiver.

Many times during these short moments, when I was thus passed from hand to hand, seized by a gentle and secret agitation, I quietly resolved my choice of the mistress to whom I aspired to belong. Then, when the time when I believed I had been picked and the deal was done, the merchant articulated the fatal words *thirty Louis*, and the ungrateful ones forsook me almost at once!

Their love for me, for which I would have consecrated my whole being to them, to count each minute of their existence, ceased with a little money. Then, wretchedly humiliated, I again returned my usual place in the window display.

Finally one evening, a couple, young and extremely elegant, entered the store accompanied by an older person.

The window opened, several of my companions were withdrawn and shown one after the other, and then, as usual, my turn came.

Hardly had I been deposited on the green baize of the counter, than the young cavalier, who hitherto had remained a dumb witness, gracefully hastened to point me out and present me to his young companion.

On seeing me, she exclaimed at once, with an almost childish grace which suited her: "Oh! little, beautiful watch!" Then she took me and turned me over in her pretty fingers, holding me close and further away from her entrancing figure, not ceasing to caress me with her two beautiful eyes during this small manoeuvre. And then she added, while showing me to the old

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man who was with them: "Look, father, isn't it nice!"

Since my previous disappointments, I had been on guard against all these passing remarks of tenderness of which I knew the worth, and I had, thank God, finally lost my usual sentimentality in the face of female customers, though this one was delightful.

Also, this time my disquiet at the answer of the father worried me very little. He, after having paid homage to my prettiness, like a jewel, added that it would be madness to choose me; such a small watch could never work well, nor to give the hour.

With these words, which immediately disappointed my beautiful admirer, I felt sharply wounded.

But the watchmaker took my side and, thanks to the helpful turn of a key, I was able to avenge this insult to my dignity, proving to my detractor, by my bold action which matched that of a chronometer of our great masters, how poorly such a judgement was ventured against me.

In the face of such peremptory reason and one of those feminine glances that our beautiful purchaser fixed on her father and the young man, who at once took part in my defence, the fight was won.

An instant later, carefully placed in a beautiful jewellery box, I was in the possession of my new owner. Henceforth my hands impatiently ceased their rest to mark the hour of my deliverance and by their vigilant step to watch over the immutable walk of time.

I finally left the shop in the Galerie de Valois.

Chapter 2

My new owner was named Laura. She was an eighteen year old girl, well formed, alert, alive, quivering, with long and ample black hair, blue eyes shaded by long ebony lashes, a virginal complexion, and whose vermilion and smiling mouth, showing a glimpse of two lines of bright white pearls, gave to her aspect what seemed to me gentleness and sweetness, but at the same time ingenuousness and voluptuousness.

An only daughter, she lived with her father and mother in the Rue du Bac, on the first floor of a splendid house.

Laura's father, Mr. Dumonin, was a rich, retired merchant who had, it is said, made his brilliant fortune by bold transactions in the wool trade.

It should be understood that I pass over in silence the number of sheep shorn for so great a fortune, the private details and secrets of which my admission to the domestic hearth of this family could reveal. I will stick to my history. Moreover I am a watch, and watches are not indiscreet; so our owners can be reassured.

On the day of my entry into the Dumonin family, I was welcomed. The small doubts which papa had shown with regards to me in the watchmaker's shop, had been entirely dissipated by a gracious kiss from his daughter, for whom I was now a cherished jewel. Mrs Dumonin, an excellent mother who idolised her child, found me charming. And finally, the old governess, who had raised her small Laura, gave me the most touching reception.

It was the day before the marriage of Miss Laura, and thus I came to supplement the rich wedding presents which were offered to her fiancé. It is unnecessary to add that this person was the young cavalier whom I saw accompanying my liberator at the time of my purchase in the Palais Royal. His name was Arthur de Norza and he was a viscount. It is true that Miss Laura had a dowry of 400,000 francs.

Thus, for my debut in the world, I went to mark the first minute of the solemn contract which bound two beings, one to the other, for life; quite a delicate mission.

Already each step that my hands made on my dial was, for my young mistress, who undoubtedly hardly thought of it, as many minutes which were taken from the life of this young girl, of this beautiful life of sweet unconcern, of gay playfulness, of innocent illusions; finally, of this life which my small enamel circle marked, from the next dawn to the last hour.

Indeed, the following day, at the time when the mayor of the tenth district addressed to my young mistress the well-known question of the vows of marriage, I marked the last minute of midday. The decisive minute, when, at the same time as the fatal yes escapes, freedom flies away.

I had been placed in the blouse of the fiancée, who carried me for the first time. In this secret place I could feel all her emotions; I was like the metronome of her heart, equalising her beats during this long minute to the fast rhythm of my balance.

That evening I attended the wedding ball. Gold and silk scintillated in a thousand beams of light. It was my first ball. I was proud to be able to bring my gold spangle to this festival, thinking it would be noted.

Alas! I was greatly disappointed. No-one paid any attention to the poor watch, and the least jewel had the advantage over me. Everyone said: "what a beautiful pin" ... "what a beautiful necklace" ... "what a beautiful diadem, the water of those diamonds is delightful, it contrasts so well with the ebony of her hair" ... A glove was pulled off a pretty hand to show a beautiful ring, but nobody asked to see me for the time.

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It was then that I became conscious of the uselessness of the diamonds and rich chiselling of my case, and how ridiculous it was to place us, poor watches, on the same level as jewels of luxury.

At the ball, I did not appear. On the contrary, the agitation of the dancing was harmful to the functions of my mechanism, for which rest is more appropriate.

However, if my pride was wounded by the preference given to jewels, at least I had, in the evening, the compensation of seeing that I was not as unimportant to my young mistress as one might suppose.

Many a time, in the interval between the last quadrilles, I felt the hand of my promised-in-marriage casually draw me from her silken blouse to take a furtive glance at the watchful hour which fled on my dial. Indeed, I marked for her the approach of the moment of desire and at the same time of apprehension; that of the first private meeting with her husband.

It was one o'clock in the night when this moment arrived and she went to the bridal chamber.

As she entered this sanctuary her breast leapt so violently that, being very small, I would not have been able to hold the place which I occupied in her blouse for much longer, if, finally, my fastening had not been detached.

After which, I returned modestly to my jewellery box of the previous day, where I counted the passing of the mysterious hours of this new night. A night which for me was longer than usual, because the following day she forgot her poor watch. I was not wound up, and for several days it was necessary for me to mark the same hour.

Since that date, one year had passed. My mistress, of course, had left the paternal home to live with her husband, who had a splendid town house in Taitbout street.

I had thus been twelve months in this residence, punctually marking each day in the life of this happy couple, never leaving my mistress who, during the day, almost constantly carried me with her, and at night, placed me close to her bedside. In this the watch has an advantage over other jewels, and, I give this testimony to her, she had finally developed the good practice of winding me regularly, and even testified some attachment to me that she proved by a thousand small intelligent attentions.

As I have shown, I still like to remember this time, of too short duration, and the gentle mission which I had then to undertake daily.

My mistress was young, alive, sporting. It was I who each day marked the hours of her walks, spectacles, balls, soirées, finally of all her pleasures, although often I did not partake in them.

She was tender and loving. I marked the moments of all her private meetings with her young husband, at that time so eagerly, and the delicious hours of effusion and gentle talks.

She was kind and charitable. Often my hands indicated the hour of a visit to the attic of a poor person, and this hour was always unexpected but much desired, because it put an end to misery or brought relief from pain.

Thus these first twelve months passed for me, during which, for all this time, I did not have to mark one hour of sadness, nor one minute of trouble.

About this time, Mrs de Norza brought into the world a small, charming girl. She seemed so delighted to have become a mother that I had only beautiful minutes of happiness to count. But transitory minutes, because soon my mission of telling the hour was going to change and become quite painful for me.

Indeed, as of that moment Mr. de Norza became offensive. He changed entirely with respect to his wife, and soon I was the secret witness of some indoor scenes which were not long in revealing to my mistress that Mr. de Norza had married the daughter of the wool merchant only for her dowry and for the inheritance to come.

Consequently there started a succession of long hours, of which each minute produced a tear for me to count.

I leave the cheating and venal spirit of the count, the perfidious and corrupt heart which he had hitherto hidden, his disordered passion for gambling and all the vicissitudes which followed from it. They were, for Mademoiselle Dumonin, the other side of the countess's escutcheon.

I will not speak about those long nights when it was necessary for me to count the hours of anguish; all the more poignant nights for the young mother because, in spite of these hard tests, her love for her husband seemed still to have deep roots in her heart. And each day her mood, formerly so playful with naive and pure gaiety, was stripped from her like an open rose whose petals are detached one by one by gusts of wind.

However, as time passed in the Taitbout mansion, each new dawn brought another day and saw Mrs. de Norza's small girl grow. She reached her second year.

Already her small-talk and her innocent caresses were gentle and invaluable consolations for the mother, bringing some diversion from her pain and increasing her tenderness for her child. But this same tenderness would be fatal to me. Indeed, it was the cause of my first misfortune and my separation from Mrs. de Norza. Here is how:

In her maternal care, my mistress had discovered that, placed at the ear of her small daughter, I had the invaluable virtue of calming the cries which her frequent whims caused.

This means was used, even used often. The noise that the small babe heard pricked her curiosity more and more. She wanted to see the little *bébête*, as she called me. I was shown to her. Soon it went so far as to place me in the frail fingers of the spoilt child, where many times I quivered with fear and terror. Until one beautiful morning I finally escaped from her grasp and fell onto the parquet floor. My glass remained intact, but a pivot of my cylinder broke.

The little *bébête* had died.

My casket was used as a stretcher, and the order was given to the chambermaid to carry me as quickly as possible to the watchmaker who had sold me.

But neither the watchmaker nor my mistress were to see me again.

The chambermaid, who accepted the order, was a very prickly young brunette, but curious and also very vain.

As soon as she had left on her mission and was on the street, she withdrew me from my casket and hung me on the belt of her dress; taking care, being proud, to display that she had a watch, and not losing any opportunity to stop and show me on the way. Arriving on the Boulevard des Italiens, close to the Chinese baths¹, she met a group of strolling players, milling in front of stands for acrobats, to enjoy the burlesque spectacle of a show in full swing. At the moment when Punch receives the compulsory box on the ears, the hand of a skilful pickpocket seized me, cut the gold chain which held me to the belt of my maidservant and

1 The Chinese baths, of very original and picturesque construction, were at that time on this boulevard at the corner with the Rue de la Michodière. Above was a vast bazaar. Showing there was a menagerie from Africa, and the advertisement was put on the door. The whole has since been demolished to make room for the modern houses which exist today.

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removed me so subtly that she did not notice. He probably even sneered at the piteous look of the simpleton when we were already far away, the robber and I.

Thus, after three years of splendour, there I was: poor, disinherited, sinking down into uncertainty and agitation after only one blow in a life of adventures.

Chapter 3

Two hours after this flight, I was in a disreputable café of the city² in the company of two men of bad appearance; they were in a separate cubicle of the common room, sitting at a wooden table covered with an oil-cloth and emptying a small carafe of brandy together.

“I think this has been a good day”, said he who had stolen me, withdrawing me from the pocket of his trousers together with a handful of old copper coins and some tobacco with which I was mixed, and which he deposited on the table at the same time as me. At this moment I, poor unfortunate, thought of my velvet jewellery box.

“I couldn’t cut the chain the higher”, said the other, emptying a glass full of brandy in one gulp, “that worries me”.

“It doesn’t matter”, replied the former, “see these beautiful stones, how they gleam. They are real! Ah then, was the little one a duchess?”

The two robbers murmured together, and, examining me attentively, they opened my case and my dome and clumsily felt the thickness of my gold with their fingers. Then, realizing that I did not run, one of them tried to make my balance move with the point of his knife.

Only a little was necessary at this critical moment for my cylinder to be the victim or for me to receive one of these scars whose marks remain for ever. But there is no need to worry as it is known that it would be a watchmaker who would cause my first wound. Nevertheless I quivered with terror. Never before had I suffered an outrage of the kind.

“Father Isaac’s jaw will drop! He likes beautiful pieces so much”.

“He doesn’t pay well for them, the old Jew”, said he who had drawn me from his pocket.

“What do want? With him we are safe. He is still the most honest of our men; and if he doesn’t buy expensive, he doesn’t sell to anybody”.

I saw that I was going to pass into the hands of a receiver. Indeed, after another similar conference, my two individuals wrapped me in the paper from a horn of tobacco, a delicate attention on their part which surprised me, and left to take me to their Jew.

He lived close to the Hôtel-de-Ville, in an old house in the Rue de la Vannerie³, of which the dark entrance was hidden. But my two robbers knew it. They opened it, and, after climbing three stairs, they tapped three special blows on a heavy door which, on this signal, opened on its solid hinges almost at once.

The place we entered was dark and separated in two by a partition with iron netting, in the middle of which was a counter. There, sitting in front of a bureau of blackened wood, and in the midst of a confused clutter of goods of all types, was an old, dried up, dirty, badly combed man, with a long beard, flabby eyes, hooked fingers and wearing filthy clothes: it was Father Isaac.

“Dad”, said one of my two captors, while passing across the counter the paper in which I was wrapped, “we bring sweet-meats for you”.

He put on his glasses, slowly unfolded the paper and, after a short examination, answered with an air of affected unconcern, while rewrapping me carelessly in my paper: “Four Louis.”

I was indignant!, my brilliants alone were worth ten.

² The dark and narrow streets of the city, entirely gone today, used to swarm with establishments of ill repute and slums where, together with the dregs of society, the majority of robbers would meet.

³ This very narrow street disappeared in the demolitions; it faced the Hôtel-de-Ville. In its place Avenue Victoria was built.

“Give us even money at least”, warned one of the two thieves: “A hundred francs!”

For an answer, Father Isaac folded up the paper and handed me back to the salesman; he was about to close his counter when, undoubtedly knowing their man, they accepted the eighty francs and withdrew muttering “old swindler.”

At soon as the Jew was alone, he took from the desk in front of which he sat, an old chipped magnifying glass, and he examined each diamond on my case one by one, prolonging his inspection like a man who is content with his deal. Then, after a few minutes he placed me in front of him, slowly leaned back in his armchair and rubbed his hands together meditatively.

“This is annoying”, he said a few moments later, “but it is best to be careful”. He rose and went to find a small wooden box containing various tools, which he brought to his desk and with which he extracted me from my case.

This is my explanation of the enigma. The receiver wanted to wash away my original sin by destroying the far too compromising identifying marks. Quickly my dome was removed, the diamonds of my case prised off, and the back removed and cut into pieces with murderous shears.

The remainder of my case, which did not have any distinctive marks, was saved, as still being useful in the transformation which this manufacturer was to make me undergo, with the objective of benefiting more from me by destroying me.

At this point his work of destruction stopped. He weighed the diamonds which he had extracted with the eye of an Israelite, and put the remains of my case-back in a crucible. As for my movement, without worrying about the fracture which prevented me from going, he carelessly put me in a small carton, still impregnated with a pharmaceutical odour and on which one read: Pills according to the formula. And he relegated me to the bottom of an overcrowded drawer.

There, I could finally meditate on the fragility of importance in this world and the quirks of fate which had been so fatal to me. They were caused by the rich ornaments of which I had been so vain and so proud, and by the status to which I had aspired so much. After having captivated a countess, I was, after only one blow, reduced the mean level of those vulgar watches which can be in the possession of the lowest.

At the end of six months sequestration, I finally left my dreadful drawer.

The Jew had provided my case with another gold back, without brilliants and modestly guilloched. The name on my dome had disappeared, and that of Bréguet had been substituted.

I no longer recognized myself in this new getup, although I was still very nice. I was worth less, but I had become a watch of Bréguet.

Thus it is, that we poor bastards are baptized by merchants in their manner, and are given the names which they desire.

When I was fitted into my new case, the Jew finally thought of winding me. He realized that I needed repair and for this purpose he carried me to his usual workman, whom I will always remember.

He was a person who had left the safety of leather-work for the watch industry. He occupied a small, disreputable shop in the neighbourhood of Rue Saint Martin, where he worked in the company of another similar artist.

A badly planed, narrow board, with two inoffensive vices fixed at its edge, was used by

them as a bench. It was cluttered with glasses with broken stems, all sorts of cases, small flasks, brushes, spanish whiting, charcoal, elder wood, etc., and odd tools in bad condition. Amidst which the scattered parts of several disassembled watches, mixed with various cuckoos from the Black Forest, rolled here and there in the dust.

On seeing this confusion, I could not prevent myself from thinking of the waxed oak bench so well arranged by my maker in Geneva, and that of the finisher in the Palais Royal. I could not believe that I was in the shop of a clock and watch maker. However, there were watches and clocks, and the sign read: Tapard and Frottard, clock and watch makers.

It was Tapard who carried out my examination. To assist his eye he had a magnifying glass surrounded by thick wire, at the end of which was fixed a piece of wood, so that it could put in his mouth like a pipe. But it was a quite unnecessary consideration, because the first twist of his screwdriver, which he made to remove my cock, tore the slot, slid over the screw, and made a gash on my gilding, which was my first scar, but not my last.

I quivered with terror, imagining what I was going to be exposed to by this man undertaking my repair. Alas! it was true. The Jew wanted to pay little. He and Tapard are the plague of watches.

Chapter 4

Each day of the two long months that I remained with this unfortunate watchmaker, I was the dumb witness to mutilations, at the same time cruel and bizarre, that one by one the unhappy watches underwent, their destiny in this chronometric slaughter-house.

During this period, I was picked up and examined at least ten times by our Tapard. Initially his hesitation made me think that, because of the rare delicacy of my mechanism, he would give up undertaking my repair. But ignorance has no doubts and my turn for execution arrived. He treated me like my unfortunate companions.

I cannot, dear reader, describe the severe trial that I underwent on behalf of this singular expert with Spanish whiting, for whom the rasp replaced the turns; the scraper and hammer, the file; the pincers and the brush, all!

Admittedly, the stray mouse which meets the cat's paw, whose cruel claws make him endure a thousand deaths, or the unfortunate cockchafer whose wings and legs are pulled off by a barbarous child, to be stuck by a greased pin making it a transitory wind-mill until it expires; they are tortured more than the watch which falls into the awkward hands of an ignorant watchmaker.

At least when their martyrdom is complete, it is over; the mouse is no longer asked to run, nor the beetle to fly. But the poor watch, mutilated by the hand of its torturer, is required to still work after its torment, and it is expected that it works just as well as it did.

I who, before, was a masterpiece of design and realization in miniature, a most perfect example of the laws of geometry and mechanics, I left this disastrous, disfiguring trial like a canvas of Raphaël over which a house painter has plied his sacrilegious brush.

This time, I was crippled for ever, if not disabled. But, I was repaired, as watchmakers say.

Finally, I ran. How? I do not know how, and the master Tapard knew even less.

Surely that great God called Luck could well be there for a purpose.

As for the hour, this painful experience left my balance very distorted, and turning around on the lame cylinder with which I had been clad, attested well enough that, from now on, the measurement of time would cease to be one of my attributes.

I went tick-tock. That was all that I could do. Besides, it should be said, it was the only thing that the master Isaac required of his watches - and of his chronometric expert⁴.

In this sad state, I was replaced in the gold case with which you are acquainted, and which, as you are aware, was the new costume by which the Jew had transfigured me, to hide his stolen goods and to better benefit from me.

The habit, it is said, does not make the monk.

The case even less makes the watch.

Also, under the noble metal envelope which masked my infirmities, I felt that with my blemishes and defects I resembled faded vanity, whose only value is that given to her by her milliner and her perfumer; in a word, I was no longer anything but a small good-for-nothing.

Then I recalled my past filled with such gentle memories, and, being an honest watch, I feared for my future, the annoying disappointments which I would cause the people who

⁴ Warning to the reader: The majority of second-hand dealers who are not clock and watch makers, but nonetheless deal in clocks and watches, never require more of workmen than they make them work. However, despite similar outcomes, many of the public still, to this day, give preference to these manufacturers for their purchases and horological repairs.

from now on, by acquiring me in good faith, would let themselves be taken in by my misleading appearance.

Tapard had just put me in my case. I was still in his uncertain hand, and, trembling all over under the cracked lens of his magnifying glass badly adjusted to his threatening eye, when my owner came to collect me.

On entering the chronometric shop, master Isaac, seeing me completed, drew his snuffbox with an air of satisfaction, and stuffed his nose inside and out, so that, on opening me to give his inspector's glance in his turn, part of the tobacco with which he had overfilled his nose fell into my movement.

I quivered with fear.

Fortunately for me, the quantity was insufficient to make me sneeze. Departing this time for a small price, I was finally delivered from the dangerous hands of my first torturer.

Oh well, I will acknowledge it! This old Israelite, who had blindly sacrificed me to his sordid rapacity and who was the cause of my fate, seemed to me a liberator at this time. It was almost with joy that I was turned over into his possession. It is true that misfortune changes the feelings of those who suffer.

He did not keep me for long.

The following day I was exchanged for a bolt of Dutch canvas and thirty crowns cash, to a women's clothing merchant in the Temple district, named Troquenville. I was delivered to her as being a watch made, in all respects, by the very hands of Bréguet.

On this subject the Jew, half in French and half in German, spun a small history of my origin; which, of course, in no way resembled the truth. But he so convincingly proved it, by basing it on the undeniable authenticity of the name engraved on my dome, that in the face of such an argument the chronometric understanding and ability of the dress merchant disappeared completely.

She was convinced.

Although I was for Mrs. Troquenville a genuine Bréguet watch, she nonetheless relegated me, having acquired me, to a large cardboard box filled with lace, ribbons and other trinkets, that she kept in the midst of a pile of petticoats, gowns and shawls, whose overcrowding made of her residence a veritable Capernaum.

Being under this avalanche of female clothes, I believed myself buried until the end of time.

Far from it. This same cardboard box that I took for a tomb and whose lid was fixed to the bottom by a broad belt, was, on the contrary, intended to accompany my lady trader on the frequent peregrinations which she made to the homes of her many customers, composed particularly of the kind of women commonly qualified by the adjectival kept, but then simply called grisettes (girls of the lower class), and in turn, since then, called lorettes, girls of marble, plaster, and goodness knows what else? and finally dainty dishes and gandines, as Mr. Louis Lurine so spiritually calls them nowadays.

It was thus one of these daughters of Eve, worshiping idleness, her pastime the mirror, her nature fickle, her passions lace and cakes, her principles money and flattering the stupid, to whom I was intended.

Undoubtedly the hours of such lives do not require to be regulated by the rigid and punctual march of a chronometer. I was thus a watch well suited to this situation.

In spite of that, for several weeks Mrs. Troquenville exhibited me in vain, with none of her

capricious customers being interested in me.

Then, being a woman who knows her world, she realised that I would never prevail over the least trinket in her cardboard box so long as I was represented as an object of utility, and that while so showing me, I would very likely await the last judgement before finding the opportunity to leave.

My merchant was right: frivolity alone really enjoys the favours of the world; its homages, its incense for them is gold.

For useful things: scorn and parsimony. It would even seem that baseness is the social thermometer by which one measures the importance of the service that gives back in kind.

Fortunately for me, as I have shown, I was of sufficiently little use to hope to be not completely rejected.

Only I lacked one small accessory: a chain! This sign of ancient and modern slavery, this livery, this social passport. Finally this token for the collar on the neck of the large and corpulent dog of fable, and which, not only avoiding the young wolf, becomes for him title to the consideration of the world.

The following day I got my accessory and the merchant dressed me with the prescribed chain. It was, I must admit, made of gold and very pretty.

From that moment I left the black cardboard box which had been my dungeon for the belt of Mrs. Troquenville, indicating to her each day, as best I could, the doubtful beginning of her waist, whose width, it should be said, was not appropriate to be used for display.

A few days afterwards she found a purchaser for me among those same ones who, previously, had scorned me.

I omit the particular details of the bargaining, which she futilely started at a figure much higher than my value, and which was concluded, I believe, at so much a week, or rather at so much a lover as these ladies say.

That day, for the first time since I had left the hands of Tapard, the square of a watch key was set on the arbor of my mainspring.

With the contact of its cold steel, I felt as if an electric spark had traversed every molecule of my mechanism. I shivered like I was a wounded person being suddenly awakened from a deep sleep which deadens pain, and to whom was shouted: run!

In that moment, awareness of my wounds returned to me. I made an effort. I took up residence in the Rue des Martyrs.

Chapter 5

It was indeed in this hilly street, which seemed to me to be my Calvary, that she who had acquired me resided.

She lived on the second floor of one of those elegant houses then newly constructed; that is to say, in one of those small, vain, dainty apartments which, by their particular provisions, with their profusion of glass and especially of doors, seemed on purpose to be reserved for the abode of that idleness characterizing the class of woman to which my new owner belonged.

Her name was Aǵlaé. She was a blonde of twenty years, slender, whose wasp-like waist emphasized her figure, perhaps a little projecting but softened by the most gracious contours on which glances liked to rest, like a butterfly on a flower.

Large eyes whose pupils made one think of fields of cornflowers, a mouth not too large, and whose mocking smile showed two rows of pearls competing with the whiteness of my enamel dial; these had certainly made a pretty girl of her, even without the white and carmine of the small, enticing dimples of her cheeks which betrayed a too frequent use.

She had acquired me, not to tell the time, but as an accessory and an item of luxury, and only because I had the merit to justify the finery of a chain, whose gold rings, twisting around the contours of her swan-like neck, had the advantage of innocently attracting glances to shoulders that the flighty girl should have taken care to cover.

I could thus have some value by attending on her to share some of her solicitude.

Alas! I was mistaken.

On the first day that I was in the possession of Miss Aǵlaé, I had a glimpse of the sad role which I would have to play in the world of the lorettes. The arrival of three of her friends, who simultaneously visited her on this day, gave me a sample of it.

“Darling,” said one of them while entering, “we come to present our distinguished and friendly references to you.”

Three alabaster hands reached out at the same time and were placed in the two which my owner offered them. Two obstinate mouths approached together and each grazed a small dimple of my Aǵlaé’s cheeks.

Naturally there were congratulations on the new chain which her friends saw for the first time, and which each one touched in turn.

“We thus become acquainted with the director of mines in California? What luxury!”

And then the trio started on me.

“Ah, my dear, a watch!” a girl with large and languorous eyes named Pamela exclaimed.

“No,” retorted another, “you can see that Aǵlaé has become romantic; it is a medallion in which to put the hair of her Arthur.”

“It is a perfume bottle,” counteracted another.

“Nonsense!” responded Pamela, “it is a small horse in a stable which Aǵlaé provides herself while waiting for the landau which was promised to her by the count de Norza.”

This name made me start.

“Then it will be used by her to give her orders to her future coachman.”

“Wrong, my darlings! Aǵlaé has become a bourgeois woman, if not a French dish. From now on she wants to be on time for her meetings and regulate the hours of her existence.”

“And those of the old catarrhal marquis, who always forgets his manners and stays too late,” added the other cunningly.

“Ladies, respect!” exclaimed Follichette, a small brunette with sharp and sly black eyes,

who during this conference had opened my back and had read the inscription on my dome, "It is made by Bréguet!"

"In that case it must mark the centuries, the cycles, the leap years, the days of the month, the moons, - and even those of pleasure."

"Yes, all! - except the hour," retorted the first.

"Now will you say what it is, Aḡlaé? We each have an appointment and no watch."

"Good heavens! it is midday," exclaimed Follichette while turning my dial towards the audience.

It was indeed the hour that I indicated. But we were in June and the sun had set. Mrs. Troquenville, when winding me, had undoubtedly forgotten to set me to the hour. Moreover, did I know what I showed?

"It is not surprising," merrily retorted my owner withdrawing me gently from the hands of her interlocutor, "you startled it, poor little soul."

"Which is to say, it beats like a trinket. It is a small onion."

"It is good for nothing," added Pamela.

"Forgive me, ladies, it has an escapement and mother Troquenville, who sold it to me as trustworthy, said to me that it has a cylinder."

"You are wrong, dear friend, you have been caught with one less, cinq lindres. With the difference in the price, you could have given us ale and cakes."

"I know what I am talking about. My father was from the Black Forest and, as you know my dears, the most famous clock maker in the land, in fact of cuckoos. I thus propose, in the interests of the delicate health of the aforementioned watch, boarding for six months at my aunt's."

"Bravo! Follichette is right."

"It is a place of rest and refuge for sick watches," added Follichette. And a thousand other gibes.

For the moment Aḡlaé preferred to give me refuge on her belt.

The arrival of an old woman, large, tall, dry and thin, wearing grotesque finery which was not suitable for either her age or her size, put an end to this debate.

It was the fortune teller, a worthy follower of Lenormand, who came religiously, three times a week, to question the future using dirty cards called the Tarot.

As for the young, these ladies did it together every day with ordinary cards.

But I leave the gipsy and the future. Already, then as today, I dwelt more on the past.

On seeing the little value that these merry, silly women placed on me, I thought of the beginning of my life.

I remembered the reception, so eager and so benevolent, that I had received at the time of my entry in the Dumonin family a few years before. I thought of the delicate and assiduous care which I had received from my first mistress. It seemed to me I could still feel the last vibration that my balance completed for my beautiful Laura at the last second of her life as a girl, and the beginning of the first minute of her existence as a woman, countess and mother.

By bringing together this memory and the mockery of which I was currently the object, I felt the contempt into which I had fallen.

Admittedly, I was no longer the watch I used to be. However, in hands other than those of Aḡlaé, I could still have been put in a position to render some good service.

But I had fallen into the hands of a flighty girl who, fearing the ravages of time, did not want, as she said, to be mystified by the hands of a dial which unceasingly indicating to her how much she had aged (and who, for this reason, never wound her clocks, although they did not mark the days of the month). So how could I to be useful?

With such a creature, I necessarily became even less than a lock that one opens and closes with a key. I became, like her clocks, a chronometric misinterpretation, an instrument to deceive; my dial a false witness; my hands falsehood incarnate.

Because in spite of her aversion to time, the beautiful Aġlaé had, however, a way of making use of it. And her clocks, though they were never wound up, did not always mark the same hour.

To her maidservant fell the task of moving their hands, and her subtle finger, replacing their mechanisms, made them turn at will according to instructions, as her mistress changed her lovers according to the circumstances.

I thus became an auxiliary in the service of these temporal subterfuges.

And certainly, each time the maidservant set the dials to whatsoever hour was needed for the situation; either to hasten the exit of a lover before the arrival of another, or on the arrival of the latter, to have the pretext of accusing him of lateness, to play concern or otherwise. If, in one of these cases, the cheating Aġlaé called upon the authority of her clocks, a chronometer, the newcomer to the observatory, had not found grace.

What then, when her dainty hand, white and plump, which attracted lips, coquettishly brought me out? Whatever hour I marked, the accused looked at nothing other than my misleading enamel and my lying hands - and they were convinced.

Was Aġlaé the only star who regulated the hours of her boudoir? So that poor wretches returned home from there with their heads and purses as out-of-order as her watch; but content.

I will not talk about the intrigues which occurred in my presence, in the boudoir of the Rue des Martyrs, a small meeting place for all kinds of turpitudes, a confessional where so many weaknesses and human frailties came to be acknowledged in turn.

It would be to repeat banalities to show the empire of a poor son of Adam, a small profligate of twenty years, without position, without spirit even, but who had pretty eyes, a leg well turned, and who showed it.

Since Eve, who did not have a watch to mislead her lover, nothing has changed. The men, not having paradise to lose today, sacrifice their fortune and their honour. If Hercules had Omphale and Samson Dalila, the men nowadays have Aġlaé. Only, those who today pass for strong, are the most hypocritical. Behold all.

I will thus conceal how Mr. de Norza, who I found in the boudoir of Rue des Martyrs to be among the most assiduous attendants on Aġlaé, was that same one who, a few years before on the day before his wedding, had bought me from the Palais-Royal to join the rich wedding presents which he was offered by the one engaged to take title of countess.

I am not a novelist, nor even a literary lady, but a poor watch. I stick to my simple history and I let the count deceive himself at his ease, by questioning the out-of-order hours which my capricious and untrue hands marked then, and which, formerly, on this same enamel, had been for him in that other place, the vigilant and very faithful messenger of another time.

Chapter 6

My stay at the Rue des Martyrs was not long. Aglaé was then, as is said on the exchange, on the rise.

Indeed, this kind of women, like bad stock-exchange securities, has great fluctuations; falling rapidly and rising suddenly, and, like such stocks, she is only wanted in the latter case. Our lorette being in vogue, she had many friends with whom, it should be said, she shared her good fortunes rather readily.

One of them, Pamela, whom the reader knows already, precipitately announced one morning that she was about to make the conquest of an English lord or a Russian prince, she did not know with which; and the meeting was fixed for the very same day. "However," she said to Aglaé, "I do not have even one Louis: will you be my banker?"

"How much do you need?"

"What you will lend me."

"There are five Louis," said Aglaé, nonchalantly stretched out on her couch, drawing on a cigarette; and she pointed to an open bag sitting on the chimney, in which there was this sum together with her chain and me.

"Thank you, dear friend. But," the crafty Pamela who had another goal added at once, "my rendezvous is in the Boulogne forest and I should not be late. Please lend me your watch until this evening, I will take care and know the hour. Think, my darling, a Russian prince! He must be an exact man, and so it is necessary that I should be too." And, without waiting for an answer, she had already taken off her hat and put my chain around her neck.

Perhaps Aglaé was going to venture some objection, but it was already too late. She put on a good face and was satisfied to slowly exhale a new puff of her cigarette.

"Go," she said. "I see that today it is necessary that I am also your watchmaker and your jeweller.

"You are always my good friend," affected Pamela, complaisantly admiring herself in a mirror and readjusting her hat. "How do I look?"

"Resplendent; you will melt all the ice of Néwa."

"Until this evening," Pamela said, finally satisfied. Then she clasped the hand of her friend, kissed her forehead and departed.

Ten minutes later, the fate of Aglaé's watch was sealed.

The appointment and the Russian prince were quite simply a tale invented by our Pamela who, at the time, was much reduced and lacked the means to live. So she had used this story to appropriate her friend's watch and chain.

In the part of the world to which these ladies belong there is very little delicacy, and this way of acquiring property is commonly practised; it is literally called to extract a carrot.

After leaving her friend, Pamela, instead of going to the Boulogne forest, went straight to the suburb of Montmartre, to a house whose entrance was remarkably dark. She went up to the first floor, and entered the office of a commission agent for a pawnshop.

It was a large, dusty, badly lit room, divided into two sections by a wooden partition having on the side reserved for the public a board at breast height and two large counters, on one of which one read Pawning and on the other Redeeming.

On the other side of the partition there were several shelves encumbered by boxes, packages and books, and a long table at the height of the counters, in front of which there were two or three clerks with pens behind their ears, trying to convey an air of importance, hardly

in keeping with the modesty of their employment.

At the end, on the right of the section reserved for the public, there was a door on which one read: Private. This door gave into another section forming a continuation of the first.

This place was reserved for privileged customers or often, undoubtedly, for those who wanted to conceal their poverty or their embarrassment from the public. Pamela, who was a regular, entered it and put me in the hands of the commission agent, of whom she asked for as much as possible.

At once he removed my chain, touched it with etching fluid, put it in a balance and announced 85 grams. Then, having subjected the gold of my case to the same baptism of nitric acid, he opened it rather awkwardly, touched it, pretended to look at my movement, about which he knew nothing, and finally offered 300 francs for the lot.

Pamela accepted the money and left with the pawn ticket which she was likely to have in her pocket for ever.

The chain and I were put in a small, round cardboard box, on the lid of which the commission agent stuck a square of paper with his name, the number of the pawn and the amount of the loan.

Sealed and numbered, the fate of our box was to join others in a larger box, where I passed the remainder of the day.

Thus I fulfilled my destiny. This time I was pawned, on the nail, hung up, at my uncle's, my aunt's, in a house, and goodness knows what else? All the vulgar names given in turn to these establishments of very philanthropic piety, which lend on pledges at the moderate rate of twelve to fifteen percent.

Is this not the meeting place of all big or small misfortunes; the banker for all those who do not have a bank; the dispatcher of adversity, like that of pretentious finery?

This is also the only resource for the unhappy who, forced to part with their most expensive objects, want to keep alive the hope of being able to re-enter one day to claim their possessions; hope which, admittedly, is sometimes maintained for a long time with strength and with sacrifices but which, generally, is broken under the mallet of the auctioneer.

The whole day during which I remained in the office of the commission agent offered me the spectacle of a painful contrast: to see all the disparate pledges passing in turn over the pawning counter, betraying by their nature the degree of embarrassment or penury of each borrower.

From the tailor's piece of cloth to the threadbare coat of the worker, the mirror from his chimney and the mattress from his bed; from the jewels of the dandy, the laces of the coquette, the instruments of the musician and the tools of the craftsman, to the books of the philosopher.

I believe I still feel the pang which I had that day, caused by a poor young widow timidly presenting at the counter, for the second time, a thin bundle containing her last clothes. The clerk brutally pushed back her small package and shouted at her in a sour tone: "I have already said that we do not lend on so little."

"But, Sir," ventured the poor woman softly, advancing her head to the counter so as not to be heard by the assistants, "it is all that I have, and my child is hungry."

Then, with tears in her eyes, she drew her engagement ring from her skinny finger, kissed it furtively, and reached out to add it to her humble bundle, saying quietly: "Oh well, add that."

She got three francs for the lot; but the clerk kept ten pence of it for the box.

Such is this place called the Mount of Piety, where the selfishness of an insincere girl had sequestered me.

I would have liked at that moment to belong to the unfortunate mistress of the ring. At least I would have been used for a good deed. I would have been happy to be able to relieve her distress more effectively. Then my captivity would not have been so painful for me, because I would have known a person in the world who had liked me and who had thought of me.

At night-fall a van stopped at the door of the commission agent. Almost at once a man entered the office carrying a large, unpleasant bag made of coarse, grey linen. It was filled with packages, boxes and objects of every nature which were taken out and deposited there; they were the pledges released the day before and brought back on the request of the commission agent.

A few moments later, the box which contained me was, in its turn, put pell-mell with all kinds of packages, instruments, pans and other objects into this large bag of the pawnshop which, tied up like a floor cloth, was taken down to the van, a kind of defrocked hearse of Parisian misfortune, which, after having completed its round from office to office, finally travelled with its cargo to the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux, to the central house of the pawnshop.

There, the following day, each pledge was checked again, examined, recorded, numbered and classified, according to its nature, as are patients in a hospital or prisoners in a jail.

A yellow sheet of paper, a docket giving my sequence number, my description, my value and that of my chain, was this time put in my box, which was finally deposited in one of the many compartments of a strong room reserved for valuable objects.

I will not speak of my thirteen months of captivity in this Clichy hive of industry, where so many products, created for daily use, for the great day and liberty, are hidden, sequestered, fade, wear out, pass from fashion, and are thus imprisoned for the term of misfortune of their owners. From the light fabric with tender colours, made as an ornament for an innocent girl, to the musician's instrument, intended to repeat the sublimes notes of Mozart and Boieldieu. From the plates and cutlery of a family who invited company, to the punctual watch, this small, living and portable timepiece, made to go without ceasing or rest and which is, here, condemned to silence and immobility!

However, there were always more than two thousand watches!

The lost hours!

Nevertheless each day there took place a certain change among the prisoners of this chronometric Mazas. Daily the wicker-basket liberator, suspended by its rope, was lowered into our room through a trapdoor placed in the ceiling, and thus went up the happy prisoners whose owners came to pay back the money.

I saw many large, silver watches leaving thus, who, however, had entered well after me! These, of course, undoubtedly belonged to faithful, hard-working, brave men who paid for their return, and which were plain as they liked them. Admittedly I no longer had a share of fidelity; moreover, had I ever? Nobody had thought of me.

But at the pawnshop, like elsewhere, there are limits. My abandonment was precisely the cause which prevented my stay from being prolonged beyond the term fixed for renewals, while there were other watches which the attachment of the owners had kept them there for several years. These are not generally the defective watches that are given up and which are sold in this place; I bring this fact to the knowledge of the reader who might be tempted to

shop in this kind of watch industry.

As I was of this category, at the expiry of my thirteenth month, I was taken to my place in a large room, amongst the pledges intended to be sold. My chain was classified among the jewels.

Finally, on Saturday, I was sold at auction, like a piece of meat, and knocked down for 65 francs to a second-hand dealer from the Bande Noire who, by himself, bought most of the watches sold at the house of the Blancs-Manteaux that day.

That same evening he resold most of the watches which he had bought in a lot to a provincial watchmaker who had come to Paris to make purchases.

I was one of this number.

Chapter 7

This time there seemed a ray of hope for me. I was in the hands of a watchmaker!

He was for me like the arrival of a pilot on board a ship in distress, in heavy weather at the entrance of a difficult and dangerous port. Often its safety depends on only a single manoeuvre. In the same way a skilful hand could save me.

Alas! vain hope.

I soon learned that my chronometric pilot was from Falaise, a region rightly famous for its horses, its cotton bonnets and its lanterns, but not, I now know, for its watchmakers.

However, in this regard my new owner, named Pivotot, enjoyed a certain reputation in that district.

He had a well arranged store in the town, where he managed side-by-side watches, jewellery, artificial flowers, ladies' clothes and drapery. He extracted teeth, and even, if need be, assisted with childbirth; without a diploma of course.

Moreover, he belonged to several more or less erudite societies, from which he had obtained various medals. It is true that he was the owner of good cider vintages and largely paid his contributions. Also the small newspaper of the place, like those of Paris, sometimes devoted its prose and its flattery to him. But newspapers do so if misled, and especially if misleading!

Ultimately, my Bréguet of Falaise who, as we saw, provided the watch industry with a source as dubious as that from the Mount of Piety, was none other, in chronometry, than the disciple of some retired drummers of the national guard, a fellow-user of the corpulent brush.

He had literally reduced the whole art of practical watch repair to its simplest expression: polishing.

He treated a watch like military leather or the handle of a sword, with whitening and the brush; he cleaned its holes with matches!

An economic and extremely clever method, undoubtedly, but seldom effective. So in many cases Mr. Pivotot was obliged to have recourse to workmen in Paris, humbly working in rooms and using very different means.

One of them, to whom he showed me before leaving, having recognized my pitiful state, wanted 40 francs from him to repair me! Unfortunately for me, the watchmaker of Falaise recoiled from this sacrifice. I had to be resigned to his uncomfortable method which, it should however be said, was less dangerous than that of Tapard.

I had only just arrived at his place when an unforeseen circumstance failed to be the cause of my end and my complete destruction: I was not hallmarked. Father Isaac, through economy, had not had my case stamped.

Thus I had been fixed on my snap hook and hung in one of the windows of the store in Falaise for only a few days, when the quality controllers presented themselves for their usual visit.

After a rather meticulous inspection of the newly arrived goods, they failed to give my owner an infringement notice because I was not punched. They gave, as reasons for exempting him, all the consideration which Mr. Pivotot enjoyed in the country and all the evidence, quite obviously, of his good faith.

Nevertheless, the following day even, he had to carry my case to the office of the inspector, to make me undergo this operation. This person, being recently employed and undoubtedly

wanting to be zealous, declared the assay of its gold to be below the tolerance, and cut it up.

He was not right, it was more than 750 thousandths. But Mr. Pivotot did not argue. He was for his watch - and me for my case.

However, all watchmakers, even in chambers, are subject to the tax visits of these people. Moreover, let it be said, they are always very courteous, but, under the pretext of the control of watches, nonetheless have the right to enter residences at any hour and to inspect whatever they wish.

This formality can still be justified for jewellery and the goldsmith's work, as a guarantee to the public of the good quality of the gold and silver, being the principal value of these objects. But it seems to me, poor victim, not to have any purpose in the watch industry.

To a watch, what is the case? Nothing. Save only that the case is the envelope.

What is the container to its contents, what is the peel or the shell to the fruit? What is essential, whether it be of gold, silver or copper, is that the interior is good.

There are pocket chronometers costing 700 francs, whose cases do not have a value of 15 francs.

Undoubtedly if, for watches (and in the interest of the public), there were a control to be made and a punch to be put, it should be on our movements and not on our cases.

While waiting, the chisel of the tax department came to destroy mine.

For several days, I didn't know what my owner was going to do with me. I had a presentiment of my end. Already I saw the prospect of the inexorable scrap heap, that last resting place where watches are buried.

I was willingly resigned, because is not an existence like mine, which can no longer be of use to anybody, a heavy burden of which one is happy to see oneself disencumbered?

Mr. Pivotot decided my fate differently. He sent my movement to Paris, where he had a new case made, of silver this time, and hallmarked.

He was also of a delicacy for which I sincerely do justice to him. He did not have a name engraved on my new dome; it simply carried this sacramental indication: cylinder escapement, eight ruby holes.

This time it seemed that I was a little more honest, more autonomous, more me. At least I no longer shamelessly displayed on my case an untrue name. However, in spite of that, and I do not know why, by wearing this white and virginal dress I felt the shiver of a secret shame, similar to that which a prostitute must feel when touching an orange-blossom wreath.

Internally, I recognized myself to be unworthy of taking a place in the ranks of watches, being incapable of ever marking the hours, those pieces of time which form eternity.

Undoubtedly the last rub of his hand, not to say grace, and the last potion of whitening, according to his formula, which Mr. Pivotot gave me, were not likely to resuscitate a Lazarus such as I. Also, while putting back my last part, the good man trembled as if he had made a bad attempt. He was more afraid than I was.

After an effort, I again went tick-tock in my fashion. But this forced march re-awoke all my organic pains, and my anxiety for the future started again.

I feared in advance the dissatisfaction of those who allowed themselves to be taken in by my artless exterior, because my new silver case (true lime-smear chronometry), certainly gave me a somewhat dainty and humble air which, at the same time, did not lack seductiveness.

At this moment we were near the time of one of the most important fairs in the district, that of August 10. Mr. Pivotot had one of the most beautiful displays there. He made me sit

in the window reserved for horology.

Justly, the first watch which he sold was me.

I had allured, who? I dare not say it: A policeman!

A bearded, strapping man named Ducollet, with a moustache, five feet six inches tall (one meter eighty-five in the metric system), bought me for sixty francs, without haggling, and paid them, as one says, to the last red cent.

When I was put in contact with the skin of his nervous grip, I believed that it would be the end of me. All the molecules of my brass and my steel contracted avoiding its occlusion which however, it should be said, was not frightening.

On the contrary, Mr. Ducollet took me with all the delicacy of which he was able, and put to me in his pocket with the greatest care in the world.

How, I thought in my fear, does a watch as small as me, so frail, so capricious, whimsical at all times, come to belong to a gendarme, so punctual?

Undoubtedly, I thought, if he trusts my hands, he will be forever at fault and he will be sent away from the police station, he who sends others to prison. Where will he send me?

This aspect of my fear was badly founded. Policemen have very sensitive hearts, if not towards watches, at least for beef stew, and especially for cooks. Moreover, they, as everybody knows, give much in return.

The cook seems dedicated, by social position, to the municipal officer or to the policeman, just as the wet-nurse and the nursery-maid are to the raw recruit.

So the sensitive Ducollet had not purchased me for his personal use, but to make a gift of me to the object of his passions, a famous cordon-bleu cook of the area and a beautiful woman as well, who honoured his kitchen.

However, it was the day before August 15, and almost all the cooks, in the country of Caux, are called Marie; which explains perfectly the gallantry of our policeman.

I will not speak about the miserable culinary exploits which I helped produce at the kitchen fire! Hard-boiled eggs! Burnt roasts! Ruined desserts! And goodness knows what else! Who could enumerate the thousand troubles which I made the poor Marie endure?

What I know is that several times she just refrained from making me join the burning wood in her stove, because I was the reason her master, that Cupid in the uniform of a policeman, had turned his head and her sauces, and finally she lost her place and her reputation.

However the poor girl had tried several times by giving me to various watch cobblers, the misdeeds of whom I conceal here and who, of course, did nothing but worsen my condition. So that from that day, she relegated me to the bottom of her trunk, in order to avoid the same disasters on other occasions.

That was good and I could perhaps be still there today, which would have prolonged my existence indefinitely. But, fortunately for the reader, the policeman is not a symbol of fidelity; like floods and destiny, he changes.

Thus a day came when Marie, on her part, no longer wanted to keep anything which reminded her of his inconstancy.

Deservedly she was the godmother of one of his nephews, now reaching his twelfth year, who was about to take his first communion.

He was the son of an estimable grocer of Pontoise, named Canelle, to whom his father, for the past two years, had promised a watch on that day.

The aunt benefited from the occasion; she made gift of her's to her godson.

Behold how I had thus fallen into the hands of small rascal of twelve years, twisted and badly formed, with bad teeth, slovenly, aggrressive, lazy and talkative, having the chin of a clog, eyes of a mole, a turned-up nose and an inordinately wide mouth threatening to swallow his two ears.

He was the idol of his father, from whom he stole sugar and prunes; the spoiled child of his mother, who saw him to be more beautiful than a cherubim, because he had crisp hair like a poodle; a child prodigy for both, because he went to a private school at a fee of three francs per month, where he had obtained a first prize, undoubtedly for greediness, and where he had taken two years to learn his catechism to earn a watch. Finally he was a wonder, a phoenix, as are all children in the blind eyes of their fathers and mothers.

For me he was simply the small torturer to whom I owe my death.

The day of the communion arrived.

It goes without saying that on that day the sermon, the service, the Eucharistic even, occupied my rascal much less than his watch, with which he heaped scorn on all of his comrades who did not have one. God knows what I suffered and how much time he gave to me each hour.

But it was nothing.

Two days later he took me to school without the knowledge of his parents. Then the hour for recreation arrived. Alas! it was the time of my martyrdom.

On the instigation of Canelle's son, ten schoolboys, of whom oldest was not thirteen years, were assembled around his desk to carry out the examination of my mechanism.

My case was opened and soon scrapers and penknives had their fun. My movement was detached from its case, and in less than fifteen minutes I no longer had a balance spring or pivots on my steel arbors, the majority of which were broken or distorted. My wheels were bent and broken, their teeth notched. My screws and my bridges were mixed up.

Finally, like those wild carnivores who tear out the entrails of their victim to devour the heart, these small vampires did not stop until they had managed to pull out of my barrel my heart and my life, my mainspring! Then they were content.

My remains were passed from schoolboy to schoolboy in the class of Canelle's son, who exchanged them for gingerbread. My mainspring ended up with the son of a country wig maker; he gave it to his father who used it in the making of toupees and false plaits for the use of the bare craniums of Pontoise, and of the old women who detest baldness.

Such was my end.

So, dear reader, that is the prosaic end of this watch of quality, whom you knew initially to be so brilliant, admired, proud. Who, stripped of gold and diamonds, dreaming only of palaces, noblemen and duchesses, believing herself intended to be the dispenser of one of those great hours which mark, regulate and decide, was fated for a cook and a boiled egg.

Alas! the frail and innocent hand of a child was enough to break, with just one blow, all these conceited hopes and to cause the first fall which cast me down the vulgar ladder of life's disappointments, step by step, to the abject state where I fell.

I do not even have the consolation of seeing my remnants gathered in the one grave. Then, at least, all my united molecules would have been able one day, in the one furnace, to embrace each other and form an integral part of a new metal sheet leaving the rolling mill.

And who knows? Then they may have contributed, once again, to the making of another watch?

The History of a Watch

And even, although my remains have been dispersed and delivered up to all the quirks of fate, there may be one who could affirm that from within a new watch, bought yesterday, on the dial of which the hour is read in that moment, he hears the weak and regular murmur made up of my own molecules?

But no!

When independently of Time, the great chemist of the universe who transforms all, my organic molecules could, in the vast crucible of industry, still merge with the remains of a thousand other machines and make hybrid couplings. My vanity, or the fear of nothing, can only make me dream of new and ridiculous assemblies of my molecules to perpetuate my unimportant individuality.

Today, the steel of my delicate arbors, of which I was so proud, could be part of the powerful axle of the engine in the colossal Great-Eastern, which furrows the floods of the Ocean; of the frail needle which the small girl uses to equip her headstock; of a lightning conductor which dominates the palace of the king to face the lightning; a nail planted in the sole of a well-worn shoe of the most miserable beggar.

In the same way finally, the brass constituents of my body could as well belong to the telegraph, whose electric sparks exchange the thoughts of people and brings them closer, as to the gun which divides and silences them.

End

A Conversation on Watchmaking between Mr Trottevite and Mr Vabien

Messrs Trottevite and Vabien are two estimable horologists I know, who were formerly distinguished in this honourable career by a rare application and by several inventions which were worth the encouragement of the guild.

They count about the same number of years, and their hats attest to the little value which they place on their hairstyles. Neglect of their manner of dressing and the cut of their clothes, on which the passage of a brush exposes the cord of a cloth of a very considerable age, shows for how long our two artists have put themselves above the prejudices of capricious fashion.

Without speaking about their collars, which still attest to some rare hairs on their heads; nor about the lazy eyelids of their left eyes, seeming, by practice, to hand over their functions to their neighbours on the right; and, with the nose of one a little too red and the abdomen of the other somewhat pronounced. Such is, or as little as is necessary, the portrait of our two horologists, whose ages have already passed a considerable number of grape harvests.

Moreover, they are friends from childhood. The same acquaintances and a certain similarity of tastes had formerly bound them close together. But in this world nothing is eternal, not even friendship, whose bond is easily untied when it is loose, and breaks abruptly when it is too tight.

This happened to our two friends on a particular day, because of the different opinions each of them had regarding discovering perpetual motion. Later, it should be said in passing, they met each other. But alas! they had not sought it; Trottevite used the invaluable instrument of the word, of which he gave his share, and Vabien used the mechanism of his door.

After twenty or so years of this small estrangement, our two artists encountered each other in Paris, in the Quai de l'Horlogerie, and they recommenced their old friendship. On the spot they fixed an appointment, with the creditable aim of renewing their chats on watchmaking, which formerly had given them much pleasure.

Vabien is a watchmaker, stouter, not to say like a burgrave, than his friend who is younger by some solstices. He lodged for nearly half a century at 14 Rue du Cherche-Midi, where he never ceased living in the rooms on the upper floor of this house.

Nevertheless it is there that the punctual Trottevite, who lives in the Rue de Cadran (Rue Saint-Sauveur today), comes to taste the sweetness of friendship again. He had already climbed the five floors to his friend, and, since then, sitting on the traditional stool with three feet, two elbows resting on the bench, he contemplates through the inexorable magnifying loupe in his eye, a movement which the pupils of Pierre Leroy and Ferdinand Berthoud would have envied.

"Ah well! "What do you think of it!" exclaimed Vabien, who had yielded his place to his friend and invited him to this small exploration. "Ah! what pinions! what gearing! what hands! No more like that are made!"

"I am touched!" Trottevite responded, while depositing the movement on the bench with some regret, and which he seemed to still admire out of the corner of his eye. "You must be happy to have such ones!"

“Happy. But I would not like to repair any other.”

“However, they rare are today,” Trottevite added, giving a little support to this sentiment.

“Rare! Yes, because you also like the others. You gave up the art to make a trade of it, and you call that progress. Me, I remained faithful to my principles. Watchmaking, for me, was always a poetic art, almost a form of worship. And I say, that for the watchmaker to condescend to hold in his hand the movements of watches such as those which are made today, it is to disavow his art, to profane his science, to degrade the dignity of the watchmaker to the level of the iron worker.”

“Come! do not exaggerate,” interrupted Trottevite, “and do not fly away into the realms of astronomical regulators, taking on the airs of a melodramatic traitor to strike down all those poor movements which, hiding humbly in the pockets of workers, give no less service to humanity.”

“Because, independently of chronometers which reign as sovereigns (though their time begins to pass), it is necessary to recognize that there is also the civil watch industry which, being extensive, has no less importance.”

“I recognize only one thing”, said Vabien vehemently. “It is that, what one calls the watch industry, civil or not, must be used to give the time. Time being immutable, it specifies, consequently, all the instruments that one intends to measure it, which must be executed so as to approach this goal as closely as possible, and that, to reach it, it is necessary that reasoning, science, and, I repeat, art preside over their manufacture.”

“However, I do not want to excommunicate, as you say, the civil industry, and not to admit to the ranks of art other than high precision watchmaking; those of which the running, completely superior, requires for its execution, necessarily irreproachable, the widest practical knowledge and possession of the highest sciences.”

“It is the apothee!”

“I know how hard and difficult the way is to reach it; how it is filled with brambles and spines which tear and very often kill those who venture there, before they can gather even one laurel - especially if they are not a little favoured by Pluto.”

“But if Raphael and Michelangelo are rare, does it follow that painting does not make constant progress?”

“Doesn't there exist an immense abyss between a painter, whoever he is, and the man, sitting on a small plank suspended by a rope, who whitewashes the front of a house with a brush?”

“Ah well! According to me, there is as much difference between the watchmakers of the past and those of today, and between the good watches of then and the majority of those which are made now; when one makes a watch like one makes a cotton bonnet, and repairs it, like one waxes a pair of boots, by brushing it.

“I know that, being in favour of progress, you will object that by manufacture on a large scale one achieves an easier and better execution.”

“I will answer yes; apparently. More flattering at a glance. But after the scrupulous examination of principles and the result, no! Because the thought of profit is foremost in the factory, and that of art is pushed to the back. Also, for the few successful watches that some rare manufacturers make, one counts thousands which are simply a confused cluster of brass and steel parts, numbered and adapted after a fashion to each other, by the dozen and the gross.

Not carrying a name, with a passable dial and hands. Of a value given by the different metals and weights of their cases. And these are what are pompously offered to the public as instruments suitable to regulate their time, time which is composed of the invaluable moments of their existences. Watches which are dangerous for cooks to trust to boil eggs, being able to stop and allow them to harden.”

“These are the services which this type of watchmaking render to society. For these reasons, in my indignation as a watchmaker, I take on, as you say, the airs of a melodramatic traitor, to strike down, not being able to destroy it, all this kind of watchmaking, which is a deception made on the public.”

“I did not expect such an outburst”, said Trotteville after a short pause, “and I agree entirely on this point. Admittedly, like you, I know that there is a class of watchmaking which should not bear the name, that this is precisely what is spread, the number of which increases every day and the quality of which decreases, if it is possible for it to fall lower. But is it the watchmakers who are the cause?”

“Yes!”

“But they are the first victims.”

“It is possible, but it is they who are the principal cause. Because if they had had only a little artistry in their hearts, they would never have fed such a manufacture and have been, to some extent, its accomplices, by agreeing to participate in the circulation of such brass hardware.”

“In all the cases the victim here is the public, who pay to have a useful and serviceable thing, and who, as with similar good-for-nothing things, is given, on the contrary, new vicissitudes. Because in the chapter of human tribulations, a bad watch does not play the least role.”

“If the public, whom you defend, is the victim here”, answered Trotteville vehemently, “it is its own torturer. Because if it had always addressed itself directly to watchmakers, to these same who are true and who work with their own hands, it would only have had good pieces, I am sure. Then this art would not have been reduced today to the level of the most negligible trade, having become the prey of a crowd of individuals. Individuals having for a guide ignorance, for science the lure of gain, and who, great or small, benefit from this blindness of the public to satisfy their mercenary attitude.”

“Very good. But why have watchmakers imitated them? Why didn't they stick to selling perfect watches? Why, finally, did they support the trade of these same individuals, by agreeing to hold in their hands this hardware which does not have any of the properties needed for giving the time correctly?”

“Because a man cannot live by poetry and filings alone; for if one supports the heart the other kills the body. In the end it is necessary that a man eats.”

“Prosaic.”

“Because you would not go to a chiropodist to have your hair cut.”

“I resemble to you, I do not have any left.”

“Then have you had a toupee made?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Ah well! But for the watchmakers, it is certain the public does the opposite. He will not buy his shoes from the hatter, his milk from the newsagent, his wine from the water carrier, nor be married by the undertaker. But to buy his watch he goes to a jeweller, a bookseller, an optician, a tapestry maker, a cabinet maker, a second-hand dealer, a haberdasher, a scrap merchant, a potter. I believe he would even go to a horse dealer.”

“He goes to fairs, bazaars, street corners, under carriage entrances and to the ports. He goes everywhere except to a watchmaker.”

“He will also approach, to repair his watch, his musical instrument maker, his wig maker, or, if he is a national guard, his drummer, rather than go to a watchmaker.”

“Also one sees watches on display everywhere. Here with shovels and tweezers; there with drinking cups, pepper shakers, dishes and forks. Elsewhere with chamber pots and coconuts, slippers and bidets; or amongst old books and old syringes, straps, old breeches, old scrap and old boots. Everywhere, finally, except at the watchmaker’s who alone does not have any; which is his most distinctive sign.”

“For this is the reason and why many watchmakers are afflicted by the same words as I; that is, wanting to live, they are indeed obliged to accept the position that all these distributors have created in watchmaking.”

“Poor horology!” murmured Vabien.

“Rather say, poor public! Because that is not all! After having bought his watch in these places, he continues to confuse it with the most vulgar objects. A watch, for him, seems to have come from a mould. It must mark the hour only because it is called watch; it is in its nature just as barking is in that of a griffon. And if one speaks to him about wear or repair, then he comes out with the great saying: It is a horse with a stable. Except, he gives him something to eat every day.”

“He takes care to lubricate the wheels of his carriage every month, to shoe his horse according to the distance it travels, repairs his clothing and his linen according to the time that he has worn them; and finally, he fills his fountain when he has drawn water from it! However, his horse and his carriage rest at least at night; he wears his clothing only during the day and he does not always drink water. But he knows that all can wear, and his fountain can empty itself.”

“But for his watch! This small, so delicate mechanism, composed of such little wheels making thousands of various revolutions; this small machine, squeezed into a tiny space, which he carries so negligently in his pocket; finally, this watch that he constantly questions, which is useful for everything, which goes during the day and night, to which one grants neither peace nor rest, which in one hour gives eighteen thousand vibrations of its balance; that is four hundred and thirty-two thousand per day or a hundred fifty-seven million six hundred and twenty four thousand per annum; for this watch it is very different. It should never wear. It must go indefinitely.”

“Yes! It is useful for the hour every day, it is needed sometimes every minute. Each year he spends more on the most negligible of his futilities than for the maintenance of his watch. So, when his watch needs repair he will be recalcitrant. It is then to the brushers furtively enrolled in the society of watchmakers, and who only use the powder puff, that he will go (as he says) simply to degrease it! when all the cost of a skilful watchmaker would certainly not be too much put it in order.”

“What an avalanche you have brought down upon the public”, the severe Vabien ventured gently, who, during the vehement broadside of his companion, had gravely seated himself in an old armchair re-stuffed with straw, better for sniffing at ease one of those good pinches which did honour to his nose.

“If it is so”, he added, after a settling and slowly closing his snuffbox, whose capacity exceeded that of Cassandra, “I pity watchmaking.”

“Well and good!”

“Yes, but I blame the watchmakers.”

“How? Still?”, asked Trottevite with an air of surprise.

“Undoubtedly! But by getting along together”, Vabien answered, “the watchmakers would have been able to avoid the debasement of such a useful art; which, I repeat, thanks to the guilty co-operation of men like you, is today nothing more than a mean trade in which everyone wants to participate, and that nobody understands.”

“I see where you are heading. You want guilds and controls, or at least the obligatory masterpiece of old, for the pupil who wants to work.”

“Where would be the evil? Don't doctors have to have a diploma and pass examinations?”

“That does not prevent”, Trottevite responded, “killing by prescription, charlatans growing rich, and doctors vegetating as much as the watchmakers of great merit whom I know.”

“It matters”, replied Vabien, “for medicine at least. The faculty is the emulator of art, the rampart of science which breaks the ignorance of charlatanism. Isn't this important?”

“For example, doesn't the School of Art each year pay the lodging of pupils to compete for the prize of Rome? Is this nothing for the young artists?”

“Ah well! Couldn't what is done for painting and sculpture be done for watchmaking?”

“Is the art, the purpose of which is the measurement of time, the knowledge of longitude at sea, which is the navigators' guide on all the oceans, below that of assembling some colours on a canvas or making a chisel cut a block of stone? Certainly not! If it is considered lower today, that only shows the shameful indifference of those watchmakers who, like you, no longer have any artistic feeling.”

“You speak about it indulgently.”

“Indulgently!”, responded Vabien a little piqued. “What has prevented, for example, those who embraced watchmaking, when it was flourishing, from joining together to form, for the purpose of art, a serious association; to group unceasingly around all the great men who, in one century, illuminated watchmaking by their names in turn?”

“The authority of their science and their undeniable merit, their work, their competition, their union with all, and finally the importance of this art, could, in this manner, attract the attention of a French government to watchmaking. And, certainly, one had then been able to inspire a very different direction to that which it followed; abandoned and delivered up to all the snares of mercantile speculation which, to make money, does everything to degenerate and degrade.”

“What you say is extremely attractive”, Trottevite answered, “and perhaps a little true, if those governments, better inspired, had taken this industry under their powerful aegis. But

as for your claim that a guild of watchmakers could have exerted influence on destinies, you are singularly mistaken.”

“Initially they were by no means missing, and although all the guilds which were formed successively had a program of general interest, they only served the petty interests of some transitory coteries, generated ridiculous rivalries, and, in spite of the sincerity and the devotion of some their founders, all ended up disintegrating from want of cohesion.”

“But they had been able to form an academy of watchmaking”, interrupted Vabien.

“Which certainly did not change anything from what exists today; moreover one would consider it a hospital for sick vanities, that is all. Because the particular academies, like the majority of the guilds, although said to be learned, are nothing else.”

“Pessimist and sceptic that you are”, Vabien exclaimed, striking the arm of his chair. “You no longer believe in anything at all”.

“Perhaps. I believe that the artistic feeling is too fiery at home. It misleads your reason.”

“You, you reason like a five franc piece.”

“No, I am of my century, here and now.”, Trottevite countered at once. “I see things with the camera of truth, you see them through the microscope of the imagination. This is the only difference between us. And that”, he added, “I consider your lot in life.”

“How? At least explain”, asked Vabien, with a ruffled air.

“It is easy. Your father was an extremely distinguished watchmaker. From your childhood you dreamed of watchmaking. Your tastes agreeing with his, you embraced this art ardently, absorbing any book on the study of the exact sciences. For you, to animate metal, to make it obey the laws of mechanics, to subject it to the measurement of time and astronomical indications, such has been your only passion since then. This is why your love for this art, ever growing, limited the sphere of your existence to your bench. Also, as a result of that, you remained completely in the last century.”

“This is why you unceasingly blame the watchmakers’ guild for what is only the logical consequence of change and the requirements of our time. Today, they cannot see the light, and all the academies, all the truths, all the chronometric science of the world could not decrease one iota the public love of trinkets, tinsel, and the good-for-nothing. Lastly, you have worked for fifty years for the love of this art, but what are you? You are still an obscure home worker.”

“Obscure workman!” Vabien murmured, casting a significant glance at Trottevite with this word.

“Artist, if you prefer”, Trottevite responded quickly, indicating he had ruffled the susceptibilities of his companion, “the word doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, artist”, interrupted Vabien with an accentuated voice, “and I have glory from it. My father was one all his life.”

“Precisely. Both of you excelled in your knowledge and your work, which made the fortunes and the reputations of several names in vogue. But you, what did you obtain?”

“Fortune? You can barely survive.”

“Glory? Nothing is more obscure than the name of Vabien.”

“Fame? Except for one or two people coming to you to feed you difficult work that they can-

not carry out themselves, you are as ignored as the inhabitants of the moon.”

“If I am not known to the public, at least I enjoy the respect of the greatest watchmaking celebrities, the glare whose names alone honours me, and is enough to encourage me and make me worthy of their regard. While with your doctrines, you can only deserve their blame.”

“It is possible. But first, no matter what you can say about love of art, my poor Vabien, I do not believe, for me, that the satisfaction of executing beautiful watches, and the honour to work humbly in the shade of a chronometric celebrity, whatever his name, can be sufficient compensation for the worker.

“In Turkey, only a single glance from the sultan is enough, it is said, to fill the humble mortal who receives it with honour and consideration. At the stock exchange, Rothschild’s handshake suffices to release the most compromised creditor who receives it.”

“But, whatever approval (even gracious) that can be in the smile of a watchmaking celebrity, I know that no such mark of solicitude, even if given publicly, can have any value for the poor devil who receives it, other than, at most, to be able to place himself near the least boy in the workshop or the cook of the house.

“As for the men who blame my lack of concern for the art and rant against those who imitate me, I know them. Instead of launching their chronometric lightning bolts, which these great ranters do at first and at which one laughs when they burst in the air like soap bubbles, all that the able and studious workman can hope for from his daily labour is an adequate remuneration at least in line with his talent, his merit and the sacrifices which he made.”

That they set the wages of those who work with our most beautiful, high-precision time-pieces not below the wages of the labourer who turns over the ground with a shovel on a building site.”

“That finally, they ensure that the artist (who, with a little brass and steel, creates these so delicate and so difficult parts, and whose erudite combinations must fight against the influences of the physical laws from which the least molecule cannot escape), is not obliged to give up this work of his taste to seek from the shoddy goods of the watch industry, or the cuckoos of the Black Forest, the ration of bread which is necessary for him to ensure his independence and the existence of his family. Then the artistic apostasies will not have anything more to fear. Also for this reason”, Trottevite added, “I broke with the art long ago to become engaged to the trade.”

“Beautiful engagement!”

“What matters is I benefit. Yes! I left Apollo for Mercury, the bench for the counter, and the turns for the scales; it is easier to handle and especially more lucrative.”

“Who knows, perhaps more glorious”, said Vabien ironically.

“You said it. Yes, more glorious”, Trottevite continued, “and the facts are there. If you want proof then see our industrial exhibitions, the only ones where watchmaking is allowed.”

“They were to be, for the workers, the arena where each one could enter in competition, to contribute honestly, and with their own works, for national awards.”

“What are they today? A great advertisement, a great bazaar where each merchant has a branch of his shop, and sells his goods, goods which have only the merit of him being able to buy them. Is it precious? it is good, it is beautiful. Then he obtains the awards, glory and

fame. He gives the crowd his leaflets and the addresses of his stores. He has the honour and the profit.”

“The artist, the creator, is unknown. The rigours of necessity excluded him from the competition, and he vegetates, ignored in some attic.”

“Thus, as you can see, thorns and oblivion for the worker. For the shop? Not only public favour and riches, but glory, laurels, medals, national awards; and to the merchant who extends his trade, the Legion of Honour!”

“At all events and no matter what you say”, interrupted Vabien getting up precipitately, “the art of Huygens, Harrison, Pierre Leroy, Ferdinand Berthoud, will always have followers who will be proud to walk in their footsteps.”

“Their footsteps? Trottevite answered quietly, “It is science, study, work. Today, in the watch industry, it would be the way to the infirmary.”

“Infirmary!” Vabien exclaimed emphasising this word; “Gilbert gave up his last breath there, it is the pantheon of the poets. Why shouldn’t it be that of artists? Since your century does not have others to offer study, science, work, to enter there, it is a glory which is worth another.”

“Thus know, heart of money and steel, that the true artist draws the merit of his works only from his conscience, and not from the lottery of such official awards and circumstance, who are often only elected by an auction or almost always as the fruit of intrigue. Does it matter to him, with him, the lapse of memory and the favours of an ignorant crowd? Isn’t he aware of his value and his merit?”

“His works, his creations, yes, they are his pleasures. They are the dumb glories to which he is sensitive, the only ones which speak to his heart, to his conscience. That is enough for him, it is the truth!”

“I admire your satisfaction, my dear Vabien, and once more I pay homage to the pure source of the easy consolations which you give to the artist”, said Trottevite smiling. “But” he began again, “you are far too ingenuous for your age. The followers nowadays think differently. They are more positive. Conscience? They put that to one side. And they leave art without profit for the patent which pays and compensates for knowledge.”

“To believe you, it would be necessary to extinguish the art of watchmaking”, interrupted Vabien with an air of incredulity. “Tell me immediately that there are no more watchmakers.”

“May God keep me”, answered Trottevite, “there are more than ever. Only in our time, to make a student into a watchmaker, one needed eight or ten years of training, during which the pupil sacrificed everything; he had to have elementary mathematics, the elements of chemistry and other sciences. It was only with these basic attributes and by obstinate work that one managed to acquire all the theoretical and practical knowledge which was necessary for a watchmaker then; even an ordinary one.”

“It is true that in those times knowledge dominated, and a watchmaker-artist enjoyed, quite rightly, a certain respect. But today all that matters is money, and the emulators nowadays do not aim for anything else.”

“They are only exceptions”, interrupted Vabien again.

“Exceptions? Do you know who is called a watchmaker today? It is a person who, for two

or three years, which he calls training, sat down mechanically in front of a bench, and who left that bench knowing how to hold a magnifying glass to the eye, ignorant of handling the turns and the file, knowing nothing of the brush. His chemistry? It is the dissolving of whiting in alcohol. His mathematics? The value of a gram of gold or silver. He does not know what a degree of a circle is. For him the tangent is Hebrew. The remainder of his knowledge and his science is in his legs and the supply merchant, to whom he runs unceasingly to find all. The bushes already bored and turned for his holes. The screws and the pins of his watches. All, because he cannot make a single part with his fingers."

"I will even add", Trottevite continued, "that any more skill would be useless for him. Because today what one requests from a workman is: that he knots his tie neatly, that his coat is of a good cut, that he has a detachable collar and that he understands weights; that is the most difficult. As for the rest, provided he has clean hands, that he can open and close a watch in front of a customer without dropping it, and use a magnifying glass when necessary, that all that one asks of him. With that, he could not work in your home or mine; but he is sure to occupy the first place in the houses of the watch industry most in vogue nowadays, while waiting to open one of them himself, when he will obtain, in his turn, popularity and exhibition medals."

"You have the air of exaggeration", interrupted Vabien.

"I do not exaggerate; what I say is true", responded Trottevite promptly, "because the watchmakers of this kind are counted today by the gross, like metal pens; without counting those who are self taught."

"Self taught?" murmured Vabien, shaking his head ironically.

"Yes, self taught", retorted Trottevite excitably. "Because, from the person who shouts in the streets, at the corners of the passages, watches for 10 cents with a chain of 150 links, to the bookseller who sells periodicals and for a premium gives the amazed public a watch or a clock hardly worth more than his literature, except that they pay an extremely high price, all are said to be watchmakers."

"Really, you go too far", said Vabien severely. "How can you deprecate the watch industry to the point of putting it on the same level as travelling salesmen or ink-stained paper merchants, because they, to get the public to swallow a ream of prose, add to it a brass casting that they like to call a watch or a clock? Isn't it only some of the public addressed by these kinds of industrialists who will condemn it, and that they will not be long in realizing the kind of watchmaking that these second-hand dealers make him swallow, is none other than a badly gilded pill?"

"On the contrary, well gilded." Trottevite answered with an air of triumph, "And the public will not say, even a little belatedly, that it will no longer be taken in, and it is they who will always sell the most watches and clocks."

"It is possible, but what matters is that such people will never be considered, by a sensible man, as watchmakers."

"Undoubtedly, nor by me either. But", added Trottevite, "that good judgement is rarer than you think, and it is a fact that I point out, because it once more proves the degree of appreciation which the public of our time is able to give you, and which shows you what you can expect from such a judge."

“For him all is a commodity, a watch or butter, the thing matters little to him. And the salesman, it is the weight which is his guide; he only knows what he counts, he weighs or he measures. Art today is no longer valued, it is sold by the hundred, the meter or the kilogram. Yes, my dear Vabien”, added Trottevite by way of finishing, “here is what nowadays your art of Huygens, Harrison, Pierre Leroy and Ferdinand Berthoud, etc. has been reduced to.”

“It is all the same.” said Vabien, after having taken a second snuff and abruptly put his snuffbox into his pocket. “There must be something to make.”

And our two friends separated, exchanging a cordial handshake.

To complete this account, I must add, as a faithful narrator, that on December 22, 1857 at nine o'clock in the morning, about two years after the small conversation which I have just outlined and which had occupied that day, a hearse of the lowest class left the entrance of the Bicêtre hospice, an old people's home, and proceeded to the cemetery of Villejuif. In it was Vabien.

A man, his head bare, followed silently by behind and formed by himself, except for the two undertaker's assistants, the entire procession of the convoy.

The man who accompanied the hearse was Trottevite.

He only had come to be at the last rites for his old friend, an artist of great merit, forsaken and forgotten everyone.

An ophthalmia, which had resulted from working too assiduously, had made him almost entirely blind. No longer able to work, he had to request a favour to be allowed to enter the Bicêtre hospice, which was obtained; but not without much influence, because Vabien had not yet reached the required age.

Four months later he left there, as we have just seen.

End