

A MAN AND HIS MOUNTAIN  
or  
THE STORY OF MAURICE PONQUE, UNUSUAL PAINTER.

Episode One.

The family Ponque, whose only child, the young Maurice, is our protagonist, lived in a working class quarter of Paris - a quarter grey, banal, without inspiration and almost without life. Destined to become a painter, the auspices of his youth were hardly favourable as his parents had to struggle to the point of exhaustion merely to win the necessities of life, therefore art did not play any role in the quotidian lifestyle of the Ponque family.

By chance, Maurice had a spinster aunt who lived in a Norman village, between Paris and Rouen. She was interested in painting and literature and, without other familial obligations, she adopted, in a spiritual sense, the young Maurice, thus she often invited him to spend a week at her place. Maurice's parents were grateful for these invitations, conscious that their son would be better nourished at his aunt's house than their own. During one of these visits, in order to pass a rainy winter's afternoon, Maurice's aunt invited him to select something from her numerous bookshelves which contained a collection of books which was very eclectic. At the time, Maurice was twelve years old, and to tell the truth, reading was not to his taste. He explored the bookcases in an unenthusiastic manner when he saw a quite small volume which bore the bizarre title "Le Horla", written by a certain G. de Maupassant of which the name recalled to him something, something imprecise. He commenced reading, his curiosity drawn by the strange title, though soon he found himself fascinated by the story which was at one and the same time frightening and magnetising.

After a little, he read this: 'Second July - I am back. I am cured. I have been away on a charming excursion. I have visited le mont Saint-Michel which I did not know.'

Nor did Maurice know le mont Saint-Michel, he had heard it spoken of, he recognised the name, but nothing other than that. He continued to read: 'A bay stretched out before me, lost to view, between two separate coasts losing itself in the distance in the mists; and in the middle of that immense amber bay, under a golden sky and with clarity, raising itself somber and pointed is a strange mountain, in the middle of the sand. The sun had disappeared, and on the still flamboyant horizon standing out was the profile of a fantastic rock which bore on its summit a fantastic monument.'

Maurice paused for a moment and tried to evoke the picture painted by the words of the writer. He continued to read: 'I had entered into this gigantic jewel of granite, also light as lace, covered with towers, bell towers, where ascended tortuous stairways, and which lanced into the blue sky of day, into the black sky of night, their bizarre heads bristling with chimera, devils and fantastic beasts, monstrous flowers, and joined one to the other by delicate, ornate arches.'

Maurice paused once more, dazzled by the images brilliantly created by the lively words of the author, even if certain ones were unknown to him.

"Auntie," he asked, "what is a chimera?"



"A chimera,"- she responded, "is a beast both fantastic and mythical. One could say it has the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a serpent, in short, the creature of nightmares. But where did you find the word?"

"Here," he said, pointing to the book, "I came to read about a fantastic rock which bore a fantastic monument, covered with fantastic beasts, which is called le mont Saint-Michel. Le mont - does it exist, or is it equally mythical?"

"Le mont does exist, for sure," assured the aunt, "I did go there twenty years ago, well before you were born. I remember it with clarity - its truly as you have said - its fantastic!"

"Le mont, is it far from here? Could we go there soon?"

"Hold on, Maurice, don't rush! Le mont has been there for over one thousand years, it will still be there tomorrow. It is far from here, about 250 kilometres as the crow flies, but without a car, the journey is terribly complicated."

The aunt found her atlas and showed him le mont, and explained to him the complications of the journey, meanwhile she promised him that they would go there 'as soon as possible', a promise which hardly satisfied him.

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During the next visit to his aunt's, she suggested that they go to Giverny to visit the Claude Monet Museum. Since Giverny is found close to the aunt's village, Maurice and she would perhaps go there once each year, and it was always an enjoyable visit, especially when it was fine. This day it was fine when they set off, but the weather changed for the worse and when they arrived at the museum, the skies opened up and it began to pour. Luckily the aunt and her nephew had entered the large house before the bad fortune had commenced, and the aunt, always realistic, proposed: "Considering we are isolated here by the driving rain, we should make good use of our time. Each time that we have come, we have passed our day exploring the beautiful gardens in front of the house and the water garden with the water-lilies, the Japanese bridge and the weeping willows, but today, what if we explore the beautiful house of the artist?"

And so they passed the hours slowly walking through the rooms, looking at the paintings, the Japanese prints and the great variety of objets d'art which Monet had collected. They stayed a long time in the studio where partition walls had been almost obscured by the huge paintings of water-lilies, the young Maurice was completely fascinated, not at all bored, and his aunt, in seeing his fascination, decided not to explain to him that most of the pictures were only copies. For three hours of that afternoon they found themselves in the large room on the first floor; the aunt was looking at the incessant rain through the window which fell on the gardens, while the boy examined the contents of the room. The near reverie of the aunt was suddenly interrupted by a cry which was uttered by her nephew:

"Come quick, Auntie, look at that!"

The aunt hurried to the boy, who was fixedly regarding a large and ancient photograph in sepia hanging before him.

"That must be le mont Saint-Michel," he exclaimed, "look!"  
'The fantastic rock which bore on its summit a fantastic monument' and I think I also see the fantastic beasts."

"You are correct, Maurice, that certainly is le mont Saint-Michel.", confirmed the aunt.



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Half an hour later, the rain had died away, the two left the grand house of rose coloured rough cast, green shutters, and roof of slate. They dispatched themselves off to Vernon Station when Maurice, in a grave manner, declared to his aunt:

"You know, Auntie, when I am big, I will be a painter like Monsieur Monet, but I will only paint le mont Saint-Michel and nothing else!"

"I am glad to hear that you will be a painter, but you will perhaps find there are other subjects which will please you equally.", she answered, smiling slightly.

"No, not at all, I shall paint nothing but le mont!", said he decisively.

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Episode Two

(LOST)

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Episode Three

At the age of thirty-two years, Maurice Ponque had realized more or less faithfully the vows which he made to his aunt that day at Giverny, twenty years ago. Maurice himself would deny that he was 'a painter like Monsieur Monet', but certainly he had not painted anything 'but le mont', if one did not count a few still lifes and other coarsely painted subjects commanded by an ancient master of painting.

If one asked him how many times he had painted le mont, he answered always "I do not know, perhaps four hundred, perhaps six hundred". If one did not know him well, one would have said that he affected the distraction which certain artists of little importance whatever genre put on, who wish to demonstrate a separation or remoteness in regard to the quotidian and prosaic world, consequently they consider that world unworthy of their presence and their art. But no, Maurice was not like that, he was a practical and realistic man who was well aware of his qualities as a painter - he knew full well that he was not a master of his art and, in spite of all his hopes, he never would be. As for the question 'How many times have you painted le mont?', it must first be made clear in order to eliminate all ambiguity. Indeed one would have to pose three questions, of which the first would be, 'How many times have you tried to paint le mont?', the second 'how many times have you repainted, torn up or thrown in the dustbin an unsuccessful painting that you have not thought acceptable?', and the third, 'how many times have you painted le mont to your entire satisfaction?' The responses Maurice might give are 1) perhaps six hundred, 2) perhaps two hundred and 3) half a dozen at the most.

As a painter Maurice was competent, efficient, serious, industrious and, it must be said, banal; the public found his works agreeable and at a certain price they sold well, particularly in some shops on the 'Grande-rue du mont' and in the villages and towns nearby, but the one time that he modestly increased the prices, the sale of paintings ceased almost on the spot - a lesson at one time salutary and depressing. In analysing the situation, he concluded that to be able to achieve a modest living in painting le mont he would have to limit himself to a popular style,



that is to say, to paint in a figurative and traditional manner. Many of the purchasers of these pictures were tourists, who were looking for a souvenir of their visit to le mont; something permanent, something more important and unique than a postcard, but at the same time something which was neither too large, too bulky, and above all, not too expensive.

Maurice preferred to paint le mont in its entirety no matter what angle, le mont against a background of sky, either the clear midday sky or the rose of dawn or the rose of twilight, either the sky with light white clouds or the sky with a thunderstorm laden with menacing clouds. He especially liked the profile of le mont, the entire form which had struck him when he viewed for the first time that photograph hung before him in that room at Giverny, he loved to distinguish 'a fantastic monument... covered with towers..., the bell towers, where ascended toutuous stairways and which pierced the blue sky of day and the black sky of night, their bizarre heads bristling with chimera, devils, fantastic beasts, monstrous flowers, and joined one to the other by fine, delicately worked arches'. To him it appeared that the public also preferred the paintings of the entire mont, given that the unique profile of le mont was known and immediately recognised by almost the whole world including international tourists, as it was recognised by the pilgrims in times past (called 'miquelots'), who called it 'Mount Joy', on seeing it from afar.

Time and time again Maurice painted these same aspects of le mont; the grand halls with their columns fine but reassuring, the cloister with its little garden 'suspended between sea and sky', the towers that encircled the rock level with the sea, and the Saint Aubert chapel and surroundings. Maurice painted several times the huge wooden wheel that the prisoners had to turn by walking inside, in order to hoist a kind of chariot which held provisions and other goods, in the fourteenth century when le mont served as a prison. Certainly such paintings of le mont were sold, but without doubt the views of le mont from a distance were the most popular. Sufficiently often Maurice had dreamt about painting the golden statue of the archangel Saint Michael as he set off to vanquish the dragon of Satan which surmounted the grand gothic spire, but the inaccessibility of the statue rendered that idea practically impossible. Certainly he had photographs of the statue which had been taken from a small aeroplane or perhaps a helicopter using a telephoto lense, and he had seen another one taken of the spire at the summit when one could climb, several years ago, a temporary scaffolding. Perhaps he could get up level with the statue by means of a hot air balloon, but it must be confessed, he had a fear of heights, so that dream remained unaccomplished, but one day, perhaps, who knows?

By choice Maurice painted in oils, but frequently he used watercolours - the public presumed that a watercolour had to cost less than a painting executed in oils, an opinion that Maurice did not partake of at all, given that he painted, by habit 'en plain air'. Thus to do a watercolour when it was drizzling was heart-breaking and difficult work, and when it rained, an impossible task. The rapidity of acrylics offered him advantages over oils and watercolours when he painted on the sand around le mont where it was necessary to pay attention to the tide which came in 'like a horse on the gallop', if you are not paying attention, but this said, Maurice did not like acrylics much, even if a large part of the public could not distinguish them from oils - Maurice was a fond traditionalist.



Maurice was by preference a solitary being but he was not a misanthropist, nor it must be said, a misogynist. He had had romantic attachments and those with whom he would pass an hour or perhaps two at maximum discussing matters of little import in a cafe, but after that period he grew impatient, would look at his watch, murmur some transparent excuse and nearly stumble over himself so impatient would he be to leave. In general, the local people who knew him pardoned his ways one to the other 'he is an artist you know, they are all a little crazy', but certain compassionate young women had deduced that he had a crushing secret which had no doubt resulted from a failed love affair, consequently they sought to relieve him. These women, he would flee like the plague!

Being alone and painting le mont was the most profound pleasure that Maurice could experience, but Dear God!, a pleasure more and more rare, particularly during the months when the tourists descended upon le mont. In response to the natural curiosity which attracts a crowd to a painter no matter how unimportant, the local people began to point him out to tourists as a character of le mont, like a personage who was 'eccentric, even a little cracked', and as a consequence the multitude who encircled him grew day after day. The situation for Maurice was beginning to become almost unbearable, thus he decided to look for refuge at his aunt's, a good distance from his adored mont, and what's more, a sense of unease had troubled him for some time and he had concluded, well before the gratuitous harassment of the mobs that a short separation with le mont would do him good.

One morning shortly after these events, he rose early, then, after telephoning his aunt, he quickly threw some essential items into his only suitcase, threw this into his car in lightening time and set off en route to the Norman village where his aunt still lived. It was a journey of perhaps ten, perhaps fifteen hours, depending on the caprice of the motor car, but this day it behaved in exemplary fashion and he arrived at his aunt's a little before night fell. Maurice was glad he had arrived when there was still daylight, for he knew well that the headlights were even more capricious than his car.

The aunt embraced him affectionately and led him into the little rustic house which he remembered well from his childhood; almost nothing had changed and it immediately put him at his ease, like it was still the time when he was twelve years old. He returned often enough to visit his aunt, perhaps every six months on average, and always he found a tranquility and a complete lack of pressure, either on the exterior, or on the interior. Maurice was able to talk, discuss, even to argue with her over the hours, frequently until the early morning, without being inundated with the confusion which he suffered when he talked with others. The aunt and the nephew talked about painting in general, literature, philosophy and other diverse subjects, but only rarely did they talk about Maurice's painting. He had no desire to talk about it, in having had his full of it for the moment, and he suspected that she disapproved of his idee fixe, his obsession with le mont, though she never had said so. Alone the silence on the subject indicated to Maurice a certain disapproval. Time and time again, she would suggest to him a little excursion to the beautiful countryside around about her village, where he could paint, but each time he had invented a feeble excuse and in consequence she no longer suggested it any more.



The night of his arrival, they were still at the table, the remainder of their dinner had not been removed, and they chatted about one thing and another like two twin spirits when all of a sudden, without any warning, all of the lights in the house went out.

"That's it," said the aunt, "that's the third time lately that the fuse has blown!"

"Calm yourself, Auntie, calm yourself," reassured Maurice.

"I will go and replace the fuse. Is there an electric torch here."

"I am being calm," retorted the aunt, "and there are some candles and a box of matches over there on the buffet, I placed them there expressly because I had a premonition of such a mishap. But I'll go myself, because of the darkness, you have upset everything!"

She got up and without hurrying, went to the buffet, lit two candles and gave one to Maurice, and said to him, "You go, my brave one, now you can be the electrician."

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Maurice walked as on eggs toward the fuse box, the light from the candle was hardly effective. He looked anxiously at the box. 'Good God', he thought, 'It dates back to the ark. I must repair this electrical installation as soon as possible'. He localised the burnt fuse, took it out, luckily found a spare fuse and commenced replacing it, but something was not in order, the blasted fuse was stuck, Maurice could not put it into position! Damn fuse!

"Is everything alright?" asked the aunt in hearing the curses muttered by her nephew, "Are there any problems?"

"No it's alright. I've nearly finished." Maurice pushed violently at the fuse. This came to nothing.

"Are you certain? I could help you perhaps?", suggested she, very concerned.

"No, stay there, only a moment or so!" said he angrily.

Maurice punched the fuse box, then a second time, then a third time. The box appeared to explode, as if it had been struck by lightning, then the peircing cry of Maurice - "My eyes, my eyes, they are burning! Where are you Aunt?"

"Here!" - she cried, shocked, like a robot, "here, I'm coming. Do not move, I'm coming!"

She guided him towards the chairs and settled him in an old armchair, took herself into the kitchen and returned with a good piece of moistened gauze with which she bathed his eyes.

"Is that better? Do they hurt more, your eyes?", she asked anxiously.

"Yes, that's better, but they still hurt me a little. That will soon pass I hope. But why not relight the candle, I cannot see anything."

"But the candle is here, on the table, in front of you, lit!", she replied, horrified.

"And I say that I can see nothing, Auntie, I cannot see a blasted thing!", he sobbed, crushed.



## THE STORY OF MAURICE PONQUE, AN UNUSUAL PAINTER.

## THE FOURTH EPISODE.

Ten months after the explosion of the fusebox which almost blinded him, Maurice was more often than not in a state of deep depression. During the confused weeks after the accident when he believed himself to be totally blind, and the specialists thought likewise, he had accepted his fate in a rather fatalistic manner, and that had rather surprised him; one would have thought that his loss of sight would have completely crushed him, but no, he was more or less philosophic. Three months afterwards, he noticed however that he could see slightly - only a little - and during the following months his sight improved gradually, not only in Maurice's opinion but also according to the doctors' tests, and thus his fatalism changed into hope. This improvement continued until eight months after that dreadful night, and then Maurice began to notice that his vision was no longer changing, neither for the better nor for the worse, and the doctors confirmed this, and said to him "Be patient, be brave, Monsieur, Nature is following its own course!" But Nature was following no course in particular, and nothing happened except that Maurice's hope transformed itself into depression.

In broad daylight, Maurice could make out large, close objects well enough, provided that they were brightly coloured, so that he did not collide with nor trip over them, but when it was overcast he needed to be very careful. As for colour, it was as though he were wearing welding glasses; everything was grey like old lead, with traces of colour only when the light was bright. Sometimes he asked himself whether the traces of colour were only phantoms from his memory; if he thought he saw a vague red-grey shape, was it only because he well knew that the object in front of him was red, or rather, that it had been red before the accident? The specialists assured him that he was not mistaken, that in fact he could see colours, but he was never fully convinced of it.

After having left the hospital where he spent the month after the accident, Maurice went to live with his aunt, at her suggestion. Really there was no other viable option; certainly at that stage he could not live alone, and likewise he could not stay with his parents as they were both in poor health and had their own share of worries. There was a small room free at his aunt's house, that is to say that it became free after she had removed from it a thirty year accumulation of "bric-à-brac". His aunt was quite happy to be able to help him, but Maurice rather feared that she had feelings of guilt vis-à-vis the accident, in spite of the fact that he had assured her many times that it was just destiny, and that no-one was to blame.

One day during the period when it seemed that that his sight had ceased to improve, Maurice and his aunt were talking of what the future held for him. Clearly the conversation was not light-hearted, as Maurice was deeply depressed, and he confessed to her that from time to time he had thought of suicide because, without being able to paint, his future seemed completely empty. Desperately the aunt sought to change the direction of the conversation when suddenly she had an idea which seemed to offer some possibilities.

"Maurice, I can fully understand your despair, and in your shoes, I might be thinking the same way. However we should remember that you are not the only gifted person who has ever been in a seemingly



impossible situation. Beethoven comes to mind; I think of his battle against near-deafness, which was equally crushing for him as your near-blindness."

"What on earth are you talking about, Aunt? Beethoven was a genius, but I'm only a dauber!" he replied with ill grace.

"That is just not true, Maurice, you are talented, even if I do think that sometimes you do not make the most of your gift. I have confidence in you, even in this present situation which seems to hold little hope - she countered him vehemently - but let's go back to Ludwig van Beethoven, a genius as you say, but an ordinary human being at the same time. I used to know a little German; I have forgotten a lot of it of course, but I read and translated, among other things, a letter written by Beethoven himself to his brothers in which he spoke of his problem and his way of combatting it. If I remember correctly, the book containing Beethoven's text is still somewhere here, that is, unless I threw it out when I was cleaning out your room."

She fossicked for several minutes in the bookshelves, which clearly had grown in number since that rainy afternoon twenty years prior when Maurice found "Le Horla" for the first time. She retrieved a small booklet which was rather dog-eared and worn, then held it out to Maurice, saying:

"We're in luck, here it is!"

She hesitated a moment, then drew back the book, and added:

"I'm very sorry, Maurice, that was a stupid thing to do, I wasn't thinking!"

"Doesn't matter - he replied impassively - and what did your 'famous' Beethoven say?"

The aunt opened the little book and found a loose sheet on which she had written her translation in now well faded ink.

"My 'famous' Beethoven - she began, gently smiling - wrote as follows, in German, of course, and I trust that you and Herr Beethoven will excuse the clumsiness of my translation. This letter is rather long, so I'll only quote some relevant extracts."

"You are going to censor Beethoven? He's not here to defend himself now; that's not very kind, you know!"

The aunt ignored Maurice's facetious remark, and went on:

"This letter is called the 'Heiligenstadt Testament' after the little town where he wrote it on the 6th of October, 1802. It seems that Beethoven had a poor opinion of the doctors of that time, because he wrote as follows to his brothers:

'But reflect; for six years I was in an incurable condition, which had been aggravated by imprudent doctors. Year after year I hoped that they would cure me, but they deceived me and finally I was obliged to accept the prospect of an illness that would continue, and whose cure would either take years or indeed was quite impossible.'"

"Doctors haven't changed very much!" observed Maurice caustically.

"And Beethoven also suffered a great deal because he wasn't able to experience the sensations which used to be so dear to him, that is, music and natural sounds. - continued the aunt - He wrote as follows:

'Sometimes loneliness and the desire for company urged me, enticed me, to seek the companionship of others, but alas, what humiliation if someone next to me heard a distant flute and I heard nothing, or if someone heard a shepherd singing and once again I heard nothing. Such incidents lead me to the threshold of despair; it only needed a little more and I would have ended my life myself. Only art held me back,



ach, it seemed impossible for me to quit this world before I produced all of that which I deem myself capable' - the aunt hesitated - no, perhaps 'all of that for which I feel myself inclined' would be a better translation."

"Wait a moment, my dear Aunt! - protested Maurice - There's a great difference between the two situations - There's a great difference between the two situations, his and mine. Beethoven could indeed compose after being afflicted with deafness, because he composed first of all in his head, then he could put his composition on paper to communicate it to the musicians. The only thing missing was the feedback, that is, he could not himself compare the orchestra's music with that which was in his head. In my case, I can only compose in my head, and that's as far as it goes!"

"At the moment, that may seem to you to be as far as it goes, but I have some other ideas which I'll explain to you soon enough, but you and I must be patient and philosophic so that my ideas can succeed." said the aunt teasingly.

"In this situation, I would listen to all ideas of any kind, from anybody, even from my dear aunt whose ideas are sometimes a little crazy!" answered Maurice. He was quite familiar with his aunt's ideas which were never dull, even if they sometimes did not work."

"From time to time I may be a little crazy - his aunt conceded - but as they say 'To remain sane in today's world, one must be a little mad.' Anyhow you'll see soon enough if my ideas are crazy or not. Let's go back to my 'famous' Beethoven for the last time to find out what he said about patience and being philosophic. Here it is:

'Patience, as they call it, I must take it as my guide, as I am determined, and I hope always to be so, to endure until it pleases the inexorable 'Parques' to break my thread. Perhaps things will improve, perhaps not, I am resigned! Already constrained in my twenty-eighth year to become a philosopher - it is not easy - for an artist harder than for anyone else.' I like that line about the 'Parques', it sounds well in German: '-bis es den unerbittlichen Parzen gefällt, den Faden zu brechen-'"

"Funny language, German! - remarked Maurice, fascinated - But tell me, who are these 'Parques'? Are they some more of your mythical beings who fascinate you so much?"

"Exactly! - his aunt confirmed - according to the mythology of many ancient peoples, the three 'Parques' were the personification of destiny; they spun day and night and each thread represented the life of a person, and when that thread was broken, 'Good night!', hence Beethoven's reference. Yes, they were well known among the Ancients; the Greeks called them 'Moirai'; to the Romans they were the 'Parcae', hence obviously our 'Parques'; the Scandinavians called them 'Norns', and according to others peoples they were 'The Mothers', the 'Daughters of the Night' and also simply 'The Fates'. Comparatively recently Shakespear gave them the rôles of the three witches in his drama 'Macbeth'. An other thing I read about Beethoven is that, on his deathbed, he quoted as his last words that famous Latin line 'Plaudite amici, comedia finita', that is, 'Applaud, my friends, the completed work' - actually, 'theatrical work'. Did he mean that life is like a theatre in which everyone is given a rôle which one should play to the best of their ability? Or am I stretching it too far, Maurice?"

"You've lost me there, Aunty, - Maurice replied - but it seems that I've been given the rôle of the clown, since I've become a painter who can't paint. Should I play the clown's rôle to the best of my ability?"



"Even clowns should do their best, and you are far from being one of them. - his aunt replied - And by the way, have you ever seen Leoncavallo's tragic opera called 'I Pagliacci' or 'The Clowns', in which the last words are 'La commedia è finita'? A coincidence, do you think? Anyhow that's enough of my ramblings, Maurice, I'm now going to explain to you my 'crazy' ideas which concern your future."

"I'm listening, Aunty, your ideas always fascinate me, as you know. Go ahead, I'm all ears!" Maurice invited.

"Good, let's begin at the beginning! - the aunt began - You say you can't paint. Why?"

"Eh! Come on! - said Maurice, stupified - You know very well that I can't paint because I can't see. That's obvious, isn't it!"

"No, I don't agree with you, Maurice. In my opinion, you can see a little therefore you can paint a little! - she said - Have you ever tried to paint since the accident? No! You don't know if you can paint because you've never tried! And I remind you that my 'famous' Beethoven, who was almost deaf at the age of 27, composed most of his works, including all nine symphonies, during his remaining thirty years before he died aged 57."

"Merde alors, Aunty, are you going to haunt me with this bloody Beethoven for the rest of my life?" he exclaimed.

"No, Maurice, only for the rest of my life! After that, my ghost will give you no rest, if you don't get off your tail and start painting!" threatened his aunt.

"I fear you've gone completely 'round the bend. I have suspected it for a while, and now I'm quite convinced of it!" stammered Maurice, worried.

"Your insults have become almost intolerable, but I shall ignore them. - she said a little angrily, but mainly mockingly - I am neither mad nor crazy nor even around the bend, but I am extremely stubborn, and I'm telling you that, starting from tomorrow morning, you're going to paint, whether you like it or not! At first, I'll help you a little, but you shall paint, that's certain!"

Dear readers, I should spare you the remainder of this debate which continued until the wee small hours, sometimes amicably, sometimes heatedly, but when the two had had enough of it, they fell silent and went to bed for what little remained of the night. Needless to say, the aunt had the final word!

The next day was fine and sunny; there was a true August sun. The aunt and nephew had breakfast almost without a word except for the obligatory phatic courtesies. After the repast was finished, the aunt broke the silence with the command:

"Maurice, help me carry that table out to the garden, then I'll go and fetch my painting gear, which I haven't used for ages."

With difficulty they manœuvred the table through the doorway and then to a spot in the bright sunlight which seemed suitable to the aunt. When that was accomplished, the aunt went back into the house and re-emerged several minutes later carrying half a dozen slightly worn brushes, a battered dust covered cardboard box containing small jars with lids, some of which were partly full of various bright and liquid paints, but the rest contained only a crust of dried paint. She also bore a large sheet of perfectly white heavy water-colour paper, and in addition she carried a framed canvas tucked awkwardly



under her arm, a finished painting that Maurice had done about ten years previously.

"What on earth are you doing there, Aunt? - asked Maurice - Are you continuing on with that farce from last night?"

"My word it's continuing, don't imagine that I've already forgotten. - she replied - I've brought my gouache paints and one of your old paintings that you are going to reproduce. It's a view from the south of mont Saint-Michel, the mount framed by some tree-trunks, and there is a little dirt track in the foreground. You gave me it as a birthday present about ten years ago; you remember it?"

The aunt held up the canvas in the direct light of the sun, hoping that her nephew could see it.

"I see it clearly, - he answered - yes, I see the mount, the trees, the track, the yellowed grass. It was a fine day--a few scattered white clouds--in autumn. I see it all quite distinctly!"

"You see the spire?" the aunt asked joyfully, pointing to it with her forefinger.

"Yes, I can see that also without difficulty, but in the picture that you are holding up for me, I can't see a damn thing! - Maurice exclaimed abruptly - I can see everything on my own little cerebral screen, here, in my head. That painting tells me nothing; it's too dark."

At first the aunt seemed depressed by Maurice's reply, but she bounced back almost immediately:

"No matter how, can you see that view! If you can see it, you can paint it, and you are going to paint it, my lad!"

She laid the sheet of paper on the table and anchored it with four stones from the garden, one at each corner, then she opened the jars of gouache, that is, those whose contents were still liquid, and placed them on one side of the sheet, next she laid the brushes on the opposite side.

"Maurice, you can see the paper, you can see the brushes and you can see the paints, can't you? demanded the aunt.

"Well yes, I think I can see them, more or less---" he replied hesitatingly.

"You are a painter, there are your painting materials. Well then, go ahead, paint!" she thundered.

"But it's impossible, I can't---" stammered Maurice.

"Maurice, are you going to paint, or not?" menaced the aunt.

"I can't---" he implored.

"Listen, Maurice, you'd like to eat at lunchtime and tonight, wouldn't you? I'm telling you that you get nothing to eat before that painting is finished. If you are going to behave like a small child, I am going to treat you like one!" she went on, more menacingly than ever.

"You're blackmailing me!" he protested, wounded.

"Dead right I am! For ages you have taken me for your old aunt, quite soft, gentle and perhaps a little naïve. Normally that's the way I am, but, I am telling you, when it is necessary, I can be a right harpy! And I am not joking!" she retorted.

"But how can I start? I beg you, help me! he pleaded.

The aunt looked fixedly at the finished painting of the mount, then at the jars of paint, then once again at the painting. After reflecting for a long minute, she suddenly turned to her nephew:

"You want me to help you? Good, I'll help you my way. You are going to do this painting in a very simple fashion. Only four colours are needed; pale blue for the sky; yellow ochre for the trees, the track, the yellowed grass and the stone buildings on the mount; cobalt green



for the green grass and the clumps of bushes etc.; and also a dark blue for the shadows and the slate roofs, let's say ultramarine. There they are, from left to right, the pale blue, the ochre, the green and the ultramarine."

She removed the surplus jars and arranged the four selected in order, then asked:

"You can make them out clearly, Maurice?"

Maurice concentrated on the colours for a good minute, and then replied:

"I have to say that I can't make them out with certainty. How about we choose only three brighter colours, for example, cobalt blue, cadmium yellow, and emerald green, then I could separate them more readily. Do you have those three?"

"I think I have them, as near as dammit. Here's the cobalt blue, the cad. yellow, and there's a bright green; not exactly emerald, but it will do." she said, and held up the three chosen for him.

Maurice looked at them hard, then nodded his agreement, and his aunt replaced the four jars on the table by the three newly chosen. Suddenly Maurice gave a start then, agitated, asked his aunt:

"But, Aunt, there's no palette; how can I mix the paints?"

"Imbecile! You'll mix nothing, you'll paint with straight colours, so that you can make them out without too much difficulty! - she retorted exasperatedly - Good God, stop wasting your time, and also mine, and get on with the painting, before I lose my patience completely!"

"But where to begin? What should I paint first?" he stammered.

"I don't give a --, that is, I don't care - she burst out - You make me forget that I'm supposedly a sweet and gentle Lady, and a respectable one at that. For God's sake, take any old brush, dip it in any of the paints, and paint whatever you like!"

She stopped suddenly. Ashamed, she added:

"Excuse me, Maurice, that wasn't at all kind, I shouldn't have said that! Come on, let's start with the trees; the yellow over there, yes, that's it!"

Maurice picked up a fairly broad brush, felt its hairs hesitantly, then, more assured, he plunged the brush into the yellow paint and drew it out, pressing it in a practised manner against the rim of the jar twice so as to remove the excess paint. He hesitated again, holding the brush a fraction above the sheet: he began to sweat; he shivered. His aunt's calm voice reassured him:

"The tree on the left, Maurice, the big one, very straight, in the foreground: go on!"

Maurice took a deep breath, then, very carefully, very slowly, very deliberately, with a single stroke, he painted the big straight tree on the left, which leans a little towards the east. Maurice stared at the sheet, on which he saw a tree; he saw the most beautiful tree in the world!

"You see it, Aunt, my tree? - he shouted - look!"

"Yes, I see it, it's a splendid tree, but there are two more of them, on the right. Go on, continue!" she urged.

Maurice carefully replaced the brush on the table with the others, then selected a second one of them that was less broad.

"The two trees on the right are further away than the one on the left - he meditated, absent-mindedly feeling the hairs of the brush - it's odd that they both have a bow half-way up, and they are almost parallel, like tram tracks. If I paint them like that, they'll say that I am a mediocre painter because you never see twin trees. What do you think, Aunt?"



"I don't give two hoots what the public thinks. Paint them the way that pleases you!" she replied.

"But don't you think that we should take some notice of what the public thinks? After all, it's the public who buys the paintings; the artists themselves don't buy much when it comes to paintings." Maurice reasoned.

"If you think like that, you'll only be a mediocre painter. - countered the aunt - I tell you, paint the trees your way! If your paintings are good, they'll sell themselves. But keep on going, Maurice, I'm going to brew some coffee."

She went into the kitchen and made the coffee as slowly as humanly possible, all the time keeping an eye on Maurice who was painting without a pause. When she returned to the garden with the coffee and some biscuits, she saw on the sheet the three trees, the dirt track, the yellowed grass and the isosceles triangle of the mount, all in cadmium yellow which shone like the sun itself.

"I like that! - she exclaimed - Let's have a coffee-break while we consider the next step."

"What's the time? - asked Maurice - It seems like I've been painting for hours."

"It's almost one: would you like to have lunch now?" the aunt answered.

"No, not at all, I want to continue painting to get the maximum benefit from the sun! - he replied - Applying the first colour is easy enough, but in order to apply the second without overlapping the yellow, I really need intense light. I don't want to botch my first painting, and besides, you said to me 'nothing to eat until the painting is finished', if I remember correctly!"

"You mean to say that you have taken me seriously for the first time? - she laughed - That makes me extremely happy! Fine, now what do you want to do now?"

Maurice looked at the jars on the table, chose another brush, and dipped it into the jar of blue.

"The sky, I think, also the shadows and perhaps the slate roofs of the buildings on the mount. But do me a favour and wash the brushes that I've been using before they completely dry out, please." he replied.

"this time I'll do it for you, but next time you can do it yourself, my lad; I don't want to encourage your laziness." said the aunt. She went off to find a bucket, filled it with water, then vigorously washed the used brushes. When that was done, she sat down in her favorite deck-chair, began to read an out-of-date magazine and soon dropped off to sleep.

Maurice painstakingly painted the sky; he painted with short stabbing strokes, completely involved in his work. Having completed the sky, he indicated the shadows that crossed the track and the grass with fluid strokes, all the time with his eyes concentrated on the sheet. How his eyes hurt, how his head was aching! But he must continue! The slate roofs, the spire, there they are!

Now the green; a clean brush - there's one. The jar of green - over there - careful, remove the surplus! The greenery on the mount, there-there-there! Merde! Too much! Can't be helped! Anything else? Yes, the green grass at the side of the track; there, there and there! Nothing else? There are a few bushes in the mid-ground, and there they are! That all? I think so, I think so!

Maurice straightened up slowly. How his eyes were hurting, how his head was hurting! The garden spun around him, he suddenly felt giddy, he fell, he groaned. The aunt woke with a start, confused.



She saw Maurice prostrate on the lawn, his eyes closed. He was not moving!

"Maurice, what's the matter?" she cried, shocked.

He raised his head a little, then let it fall back onto the grass. He had to say something to his aunt, no matter what.

"You've been sleeping, Aunty?" Stupid question!

"Obviously, but what's the matter with you?"

"Just feeling giddy, that's all. I've probably been leaning too long over the painting. - explained Maurice - What's the time, I'm hungry!"

"It's about five o'clock. Maurice, you've been painting almost five hours without stopping? You're the the one who's crazy! But what about your painting?"

"My painting? It's finished, I think. But go and have a look at it and tell me what you think of it. As for me, I'm going to stay lying here on the grass!" he said decisively.



Episode Five

The aunt got herself up from the chaise longue, went quickly to the table and looked for a longtime at the finished work, the first works of Maurice Ponque, resuscitated painter.

"What do you think, Aunt?", repeated Maurice.

"I am well pleased!", she responded with fervour. You have deserved your dinner after such work. I particularly love the vigour, the vitality, you have made good choices in the colours which give a true force to the paintings."

"But what do you really think, Aunt?", he asked a third time, "Don't be kind to me, you can tell me the truth, I am not a child. Without doubt there are heaps of imperfections that I am not conscious of. You must give me some feedback."

The aunt thought a good minute and then she replied: "You are right Maurice, I must be your feedback, and perhaps I must be a little cruel in order to be kind. If I was in a gallery somewhere and I looked at that picture by an artist who was unknown to me, what would I think? Good, there are aspects which I find quite pleasing; as I was going to say; the vigour, the vitality and the choice of colours. The aspects which do not please me, what are they? In short, the details do not please me because they are very confused and do not say much to me. For myself, I'd eliminate those tentative details, less for the moment. Later, perhaps, one can try them again. Simplification, that's the key!"

"I am much in agreement," accepted Maurice, "because the details troubled me a lot. When it comes to doing details, I know very well what I want to paint, but the control of my hand and my not being able to see anything dripping result in a mass of confusion. For the other part, I find that the usage of three colours is a little complicated; for example, I can distinguish the yellow with the blue, or the yellow with green without difficulty, but in order to distinguish the blue with green, I must concentrate very hard and that's incredibly fatiguing."

"Why not paint as simply as possible in two colours which contrast clearly?", suggested the aunt. "Why not redo the picture tomorrow solely in yellow and blue, or perhaps red and green, as you wish. Dear Jesus, it is late! Let's go to dinner, we have deserved it."

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The next day Maurice painted the same view of le mont in yellow on a background of blue; the following day blue on yellow; the days following in red and green, in yellow on red, in white and black, in yellow and black, and so forth. After two weeks, considering that he had well exhausted all the possibilities of that aspect of le mont, he chose another and repeated all the combinations of colours, but he painted always in silhouette, against the light.

He painted all through the hours which daylight permitted him, and when it was grey, to work as he did was not possible, the aunt found her nephew almost unbearable. He feared, particularly winter which was approaching, and one day his aunt said to him, "We should buy some very strong projectors to enable you to paint indoors during the winter months."

"Provided that the machine could reach a sufficient level of brightness, to me it seems a marvellous idea, and then I could paint at night also!", put in Maurice in a very enthusiastic manner.

"None of this nonsense!" retorted the aunt on the spot, "Already you paint eight or ten hours everyday, and that's enough."

"I was joking Aunt, I promise that I will not paint more than ten hours each day.", said he, "But before connecting the projectors the



electrical installation must be inspected, for I fear the worst." The aunt did as agreed and two weeks later they installed the projectors. Needless to say Maurice did not keep his promise!

During the autumn and winter Maurice painted like one possessed, in spite of the anxious advice of his aunt, who was concerned about his health. She spoke to him about it nearly every day where he hardly ate, hardly slept, but he always responded that it was necessary to paint with as much speed as possible, because he could not be certain that his sight would not fail completely the next day. In consequence at the arrival of springtime he had a large pile of paintings that he had produced one after the other as though on an assembly line. As they were finished, each painting was placed on top of a heap, before soon being covered by the next one. Maurice did not ever look at the finished paintings.

One day, a long-time friend of the aunt's paid them a visit; a friend whose husband was by chance the owner of a well known gallery in Rouen. It was sunny and Maurice painted in broad daylight, consequently the two friends could chat away inside without fear of constricting him. The friend was not up to date on the story of Maurice and she asked the aunt to explain the affair. At first the aunt was reticent, but after a little she told herself that she could not guard the secret for ever, and after all, they were very good friends, even if they did not see one another over very long intervals, and this is no doubt the better means of staying good friends.

Before long, the aunt let it all out, she recounted the whole history of Maurice, from his infancy to the present day, and she even displayed some of his paintings to her friend. Like giving a preview, at this one she asked if she could borrow some in order that her husband might look at them and that he could display them to the advisory committee 'professionals'. The aunt one more time said to herself, 'That could not be a bad thing!', and she gave half a dozen of them to her friend. Her friend had gone, the aunt had a fit of remorse and went to confess to Maurice.

Maurice was horrified by the impudence of his aunt, he who nothing astonished. He thundered against her, she melted into tears, he felt ashamed, both of them were sobbing, he asked forgiveness, they were gripping each other by the arms. At the end of that comedy, both of them tried to reassure themselves that it was for the better, but to tell the truth, neither Maurice nor his aunt believed it. One had opened a Pandora's box!

For penalty, a week later after the visit of his wife, Monsieur le Proprietaire arrived at the aunt's place without notification.

"What a great surprise to see the truly dazzling work of a new artist!", he cried, rushing into the little house, "One time that I had viewed them, it was absolutely necessary for me to meet the artist who had produced such marvels!"

Maurice and his aunt looked with confusion at the newly-arrived, who exclaimed without pausing; "There must be an exhibition without delay, as quickly as possible! The public await with impatience the exhibition of a painter who has triumphed over such terrible misfortune!"

It seemed that the man did not talk but in capital letters, and with exclamation marks at the end of each phrase. Finally Maurice succeeded to stammer two coherent words; "A misfortune?"



"Think of it! Written large on a notice in the front of my gallery: 'ONE HUNDRED PRINCIPAL WORKS BY A BLIND MASTER', no that doesn't go, 'ONE HUNDRED PRINCIPAL WORKS BY A MASTER AFFLICTED WITH BLINDNESS'. Yes that flows! What publicity! With polishing up there will be a real crowd, and each person will desire to buy something, same with your sketches! Think of it!". The man gesticulated in an extravagant manner, in order to indicate the potential crowd of buyers. Suddenly a thought of his; "You have, Sir, one hundred paintings?"

Maurice, completely stunned, indicated with an indcisive gesture the pile of paintings which could be found in the corner of the room.

"There they are, perhaps some hundreds, but...", Maurice tried to protest.

"Good, I will take these! And to the point, have you perhaps got some old paintings, that is to say, ones that you painted when you could see?", the eyes of the man radiating with excitement.

"Here? Half a dozen maybe, but why...?", put Maurice, as if were swimming against the current.

"Good, I'll take those also. Think of this; a wall on my gallery on which one views the old pictures, with a large panel which reads 'BEFORE' and on the other walls, all the new picture with panels which read 'AFTER'! Amazing!" The man gesticulated one more time in order to illustrate the panels and the pictures hanging on the walls of his gallery.

The aunt and Maurice tried piteously to raise a protestation, but the man hushed them with a gesture of his hand. Like a tornado he gathered all the paintings and went, crying out: "Must go, I am in a terrible hurry! I will send you all the details of the exhibition - it is going to be a tremendous success! Goodbye! See you soon!"

The man hurriedly got into his delux car, carelessly shoved the paintings on the seat behind, violently slammed the door, and went off at full speed with a screeching of tyres, in a cloud of dust.

Maurice and his aunt looked at each other a long minute; he was in tears, she was in tears, both of them were sobbing.

"You know, Auntie, it's probably for the best!"

One more time they both found themselves in tears. Their Destiny had chosen its own course.

The Proprietor of the gallery was correct. The exhibition of the paintings of Maurice Ponque was a total success, and there was a great crowd who bought almost all of the 'AFTER' paintings, but, it must be said that only one of the 'BEFORE' paintings was sold. The Proprietor had invited some art critics (old contacts, it must be said), to polish it off, and after several flutes of champagne poured out by Monsieur, for sure, all decided that the new paintings by Maurice were formidable, magnificent, marvellous, ravishing and so forth. An erudite critic observed that a certain painting recalled 'The Menace of the Red Tower' of Giorgio de Chirico, but a colleague equally erudite responded to him tactfully, "Stop speaking such wisdoms! To me they clearly recall the decoupages (cut-outs) of Matisse, Particularly the late works."

The critics evidently wanted to interview the artist, but where was he? The artist had stayed at his aunt's house, or rather he had found asylum in her little house, because he dreaded the worst, that is to say that his paintings would be the object of derision among the connoisseurs.

The aunt reassured him, in saying that the paintings had a grand value, and that they could not but please anyone who had artistic taste but Maurice was not listening, he had shame about something he could not define; and he suspected that this was infact his real blindness.

Suddenly outside one could hear the attack of tyres which indicated



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the sharp braking of a car, then a second braking was heard, two cars! One heard a slamming of doors, one heard a blending of loud voices and harsh laughter. The door to the little house was opened with violence and there they were, a dozen faces all red which wore the look of smiling alcoholic beasts. The first was the Proprietor, the half dozen next faces belonged to the erudite critics, the rest was a range of journalists and 'paparazzi' from Rouen.

Monsieur le Proprietor took the floor;  
"Gentlemen, I present to you our artist and his guardian aunt. You evidently have some questions!"

There was a minute of silence, and then a tempest of different and incoherent voices, lit up by a machine-gun of photographic flashes;

"You have---your naive style---the subtlety---primitive---the elegance---the grace of your blindness---peircing vision---"The Red Tower"---particularly the decupages---de Chirico---of Henri Matisse without any doubt---the colours of Gauguin---particularly of Van Gogh---the vitality and vigour---the symbolism---the reality---thats for when---it must---the next exhibition---an absolute success---" and so on. All of a sudden the deluge stopped and the Proprietor retook the floor without hesitating one moment:

"And you will recall, Gentlemen, that it was I who discovered this new genius, and that it was at my gallery that you have seen for the first time such a truly magical exhibition! But now, we must leave for no doubt our artist is exhausted! Good-bye Madam, Good-bye Sir!"

The cohorts, the Proprietor at the head, beat a path to their cars, one of which was delux and the other which was second hand. The doors slammed, the motors hummed, the tyres screeched, clouds of dust were raised. In forty-five seconds, no more, silence reigned again at the aunts place. After five minutes, the aunt broke the silence and asked of her nephew:

"Are you happy Maurice? It seems you have suddenly become a celebrity."

"No," he said, "I am fed up! Is there anything to drink?"

"What a good idea!" replied the aunt, "I think I have one or two bottle around here somewhere!"

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After returning to Rouen, the critics and the journalists tapped tapped their articles for the reviews and the journals, and each of these gentlemen fervently believed that their printed article would give to the public a penetrating and profound insight into the genial spirit of the new meteor of the artistic firmament. Equally, each of these men agreed that the interview had been most penetrating and most profound, and that the artist himself had responded to all the questions and had explained all without reservation.

Strange as it may seem, neither Maurice nor his aunt were able to utter a single word during the 'interview'.