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## THE LOST ESTATE

ALAIN-FOURNIER, christened Henri Alban, was born in La Chapelle d'Angillon (Cher) in 1886, the son of a country schoolmaster. He was educated at Brest and in Paris, where he met and fell in love with the original Yvonne, who influenced his whole life and work. *The Lost Estate* (*Le Grand Meaulnes*) was published in 1912. *Les Miracles* appeared posthumously in 1924. Alain-Fournier's important correspondence with Jacques Rivière and his letters to his family were published in 1926 and 1930 respectively. Alain-Fournier was killed in action on the Meuse in 1914.

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ALAIN-FOURNIER

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# The Lost Estate

*Le Grand Meaulnes*

*Translated by* ROBIN BUSS

*with an Introduction by* ADAM GOPNIK

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THE LOST ESTATE

# Introduction

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*New readers are advised that this Introduction makes details of the plot explicit.*

Part Hans Christian Andersen tale – a poor boy brought to a fairy castle – part grimly lyrical study of provincial manners and landscape in a still-rural France, and in part the model of all the adolescent novels which marked so much of twentieth-century literature, Alain-Fournier's 1913 novel *Le Grand Meaulnes* is a keystone of modern French literature which is, oddly, less well-known among English-speaking readers than many French books less famous and foundational. Among French readers, particularly those of a certain age, *Le Grand Meaulnes* is as much part of life as *Catcher in the Rye* is in America and shares some of the same slightly intense glamour that *Brideshead Revisited* has in Britain (both novels which it in certain crucial ways resembles). In a poll of French readers taken as recently as a decade ago, it came sixth among all twentieth-century books, not far behind Saint-Exupéry and Proust and Camus' *L'Étranger* – but it seems likely that many English-speaking readers who have been alienated alongside Meursault and longed along with Swann (and been impatient in the desert with the Little Prince) will have only a vague sense of the action and purpose of this book. (Although the ones who do care, care a lot: as early as the 1920s Havelock Ellis wrote a rhapsodic appreciation of Fournier's novel for English readers.)<sup>1</sup>

Some of the trouble has been laid to its supposedly untranslatable title: *Le Grand Meaulnes* has appeared over the years in English as *The Wanderer*, as *The Lost Domain*, and even as *Big Meaulnes*. 'No English adjective will convey all the shades of meaning that can be read into the simple word "grand" which takes on overtones as the story progresses,' one translator has written<sup>2</sup> – but in fact its title is exactly equivalent, in its combination of sardonic irony and appreciative applause, to that of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* a decade later, one more brief classic of the same resonant kind (and yet one more Anglo-American novel which *Le Grand Meaulnes* resembles and must have influenced). And some other small part of its difficulty lies in the oddity of its author's name, a pseudonym which is not pseudonymous; the author, who died in the first weeks of the Great War, a year after the novel's publication, was actually named Henri-Alban Fournier; the Alain was adopted, and no one is entirely sure where, or whether, to place the hyphen.

The apparent matter of the book is simple and myth-like. François Seurel, the fifteen-year-old narrator, is living in the provincial village of Sainte-Agathe, in the snowy, bleak Sologne, in central France, around the turn of the last century. He is the son of the village schoolmaster, and one day a new, slightly older boy, Augustin Meaulnes, arrives at the school. His size, natural charisma and sheer physical presence leads him to be called 'the Great Meaulnes' and sometimes, in a similar spirit, 'Admiral Meaulnes'. He's big in spirit and size – a country boy, at once innocent and oddly blessed, whom François recognizes quickly as a kind of romantic fool, a knight errant in schoolboy overalls. One day, not long after his arrival at the school, Meaulnes mysteriously disappears for three days. When he comes back suddenly, to the schoolroom, he is at first closed-mouth about his absence. Eventually, though, he confides to the star-struck François the true story of his disappearance.

Lost in a country road in the snow, Meaulnes had wandered into an old château, a 'lost domain', a vast and beautiful country house and garden complete with stables and outbuildings. Far from being abandoned, he discovers, it is weirdly alive with children and young people, who have gathered together there for the wedding of Frantz de Galais, a member of the aristocratic family who seem still to own the run-down place; Meaulnes, for some inexplicable reason, is warmly welcomed by the celebrants, as an old friend. Following a strange Pierrot figure in a dance through the old rooms, he sees a beautiful young girl playing the piano, and the next day sees her again, near a silver lake on the grounds. She turns out to be Yvonne de Galais, Frantz's sister, and Meaulnes instantly falls in love with the frail and lovely girl. But the wedding is mysteriously cancelled, and quickly the entire party abandons the château; Meaulnes is taken away and then roughly deposited back on the highway near Sainte-Agathe.

The rest of the book tells of Meaulnes' attempt to understand what has happened to him to return to the lost domain, the enchanted castle, to find and win Yvonne and to make the vision which has changed his life part of others' lives, too. He does all of this, with results at once predictably disillusioning and oddly re-enchanting. At the end, he marries Yvonne, but he flees her side – perhaps from guilt, perhaps from a feeling of unworthiness – for another woman, returns and is left with the daughter that she has given him before dying in childbirth. That daughter, we understand from the wiser but not disenchanted François, at the end, will become for Meaulnes the repository of another set of romantic desires.

If the matter is romantic, the treatment of it is often peculiar. At moments, *Le Grand*

Meaulnes is a novel that may seem very hard to ‘understand’ in conventional terms – in places stilted and sentimental seeming; in other places unduly bitter and prematurely soured. Some of this is simply ‘French’, reflecting the way that French life prolongs adolescence while accelerating sex: at moments the protagonists, having school-yard snowball fights, seem as innocent as the schoolboys we are told they are; at other moments, frequenting fast women and contemplating suicide, as hard cases as Baudelaire or Rimbaud, who was, after all, hardly more than a schoolboy himself.

Even the most Francophile of English-speaking readers is likely to throw up their hands, however, at the sudden roller-coaster turns of the narration, at what Dr Johnson might have called the improbability of the incidents and the extremity of the experiences. In the middle of the book, for instance, after Meaulnes’ mysterious sojourn at the château, the reader is stopped cold by a long incident involving a ‘Bohemian’ gypsy and wandering player, who turns out to be Frantz, the son of the mansion, in disguise – a bit of melodrama that might have struck even Balzac as far-fetched. In some places the details of provincial life – the cold and snow, the chestnuts gathered – are as calmly beautiful as a Sisley, and then we are off into a fantasy world where long, moony trips to Paris take place with no visible means of support. Meaulnes himself is never entirely credible as a character, an odd and empty vessel at moments he is a gawky schoolboy, at others as receptive and enchanted a hero as Dante seeing Beatrice. Although the appeal of Yvonne, the just glimpsed fairy princess, to him is apparent, *his* instant appeal to her is very hard to understand.

But if the novel’s incidents are improbable, its images are unforgettable. Hard to enter, it is still harder to abandon. Once read, *Le Grand Meaulnes* is forever after *seen*. Seen rather than remembered: I have noticed that most French readers who are devoted to the book hardly notice or recall, or even brood much on, the somewhat improbable entanglements of the second part of the book – any more than Fitzgerald-lovers are likely to recall the just as sordid and improbable workings of the adulterous affair that leads to Gatsby’s shooting. The force of the imagery – the lost château, the green light – is in both cases so strong that it blissfully erases the apparent point of the story.

As with any book that lasts, it is the quality of Alain-Fournier’s line that counts, the writing and the imagery and the wit, and, even where translation cuts off some of the wit, it doesn’t eclipse the images. What readers have recalled, and cherished, for a century, is the force and simplicity of that fable – the lost domain of happiness, the abandoned château



brought to life again by the presence of children, the perfect fairy princess found within it and then pursued at the cost of common sense and grown-up sexuality – and the way in which the fable is made credible by what Fournier called his ‘nervous, voluptuous prose’ surrounding the dream. By placing what is essentially a medieval allegory of love in the terms of the late nineteenth-century realist novel, Fournier, in his one completed book, created a story whose elements – the great, good place glimpsed in the snow; the girl seen once at a distance, after which life becomes simply an attempt to seek her out again – are part of the way we see and the way we sing now, part of pop culture.

The story is simple, but not without tension. At the heart of *Le Grand Meaulnes* Fournier placed two parallel but counter-pointed impulses: the first towards Yvonne, that idealized erotic love, one glimpsed briefly and pursued for ever after, and the second towards the recapture of childhood, evoked by the lost domain where Meaulnes first sees her. The hero, like so many teenagers who will come after him (cf. David in Scott Spencer’s *Endless Love*), is torn between the two – between a desire to retake the lost domain, to go back to the good place, and a desire to conquer the beautiful unknown, to get the girl and keep her. Sexual conquest is identified with romantic recuperation; the erotic world leads back to a state of childhood bliss. *Le Grand Meaulnes* is not a coming-of-age story – though the hero marries and even fathers a child – but, like *Catcher in the Rye*, a *refusal-to-age* story, a story of a fight, seen by the narrator as quixotic and noble, to remain within the enchanted world of childhood and at the same time to make that enchanted world continuous with the post-adolescent world of romance and erotic love. *Le Grand Meaulnes* is both a kid who refuses to grow up, Peter Pan in provincial France, and a Parsifal, pursuing his love to the ends of the earth even as she proves to be merely another girl. It is this double movement that gives the book its persistent poetic intensity, even in the midst of its strangely dated and mannered atmospherics.

The intensity of *Le Grand Meaulnes* as imagery and fable seems due in large part to the immediacy of such emotions for the author. Hardly more than a schoolboy himself when he wrote it, Henri-Alban Fournier drew on a set of adolescent erotic experiences – ‘crushes’ one could call them, fairly enough – that were still close enough to recall, just distant enough to become literature. Fournier was born in 1886 in the Sologne, and his father really was a schoolteacher, though, rather than staying in the village school as he got older, Fournier was sent away to Paris, where he studied at the elite Louis-Le-Grand. In 1903, he went away briefly to a preparatory school in Sceaux, where he met Jacques Rivière, who would later

become the founder of the great periodical the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, as well as Fournier's brother-in-law. They exchanged letters on literature for the rest of Fournier's life, and Rivière seems to have encouraged him to become a novelist; in a sense, in his novel Fournier cast himself in the Rivière role, the wise watcher, while actually being a kind of Meaulnes himself.

On 1 June 1905 – Ascension Day – Fournier walked out of an exhibition at the Grand Palais on the Right Bank and, like Freddy in *My Fair Lady*, saw a girl who seemed to be the most beautiful and haunting he had ever seen. He followed her down along the Cours la Reine and across the Seine, until eventually she turned into a house on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. He haunted the street and was eventually rewarded with another glimpse of her, and, after some time had gone by, actually got her into a conversation. Her name, it turned out, was Yvonne de Quievrecourt; she asked him, perhaps flirtatiously, to please never follow her again, as she was engaged. A year later, he went back to the Boulevard to look for her again, but couldn't find her. 'Even if she had been there,' he wrote to Rivière, 'she would not have been the same girl.' (Eventually, he would meet her once again, just before the publication of his book, when she was already the mother of two children.)

The dry-eyed critic is duty-bound to doubt both the truth and the force of the famous anecdotal meeting of Fournier and the original Yvonne – but anyone who has seen a photograph of Yvonne as she was when Fournier saw her will not doubt it for a minute, any more than anyone who recalls seeing a beautiful small girl as a boy will doubt the truth of Dante's feelings about Beatrice. The force of this revelation – of perfect beauty, the one true love, revealed in a glimpse and then lost, or never even held – stayed with him through the next few years, as he did two years of military service and then eventually became an aide to the French statesman Jean Casimir-Périer. When his book was published, it was an instant hit – coming second in that year's Goncourt competition – though it was published, of course, on the brink of catastrophe. Fournier fought with the French army in that terrible August and died on the front in September. He wasn't yet twenty-eight years old.

But on the other hand, it does not require a faith in Freudian dogma – though, perhaps, it requires an understanding moulded by Freudian insight – to see that in the intricate and seductive fabric of romance as Fournier made it for himself there is some plain sheer fear of sex. We have a sense, reflecting on Fournier's life and art, that what is being fabulized is in part an ambivalence about sexual intercourse; we want to sleep with the girl in a fairy-tale

castle and still live there, remain children and get laid at once. The intensity of the romance of childhood and the attempt to marry it, literally, to an erotic-romantic dream glow bright for Fournier with the light of something not quite real, a flare not a fire. Fournier's dream is at once erotically charged and sexually neutered (we can no more imagine the act of sex that produces the child in *Le Grand Meaulnes* than we can imagine Gatsby penetrating Daisy).

This makes the dream, of course, unreal, as dreams must be, and easy to condemn. The rose has her thorns, but eventually there must be little roses. But unreal though it may be, the fantasy remains essential to the novel of adolescence that Fournier invented. The novel of adolescence is very different from the novel of arrival: the novel of arrival taking as its subject the growth of the youth into a man; the novel of adolescence, the rejection of apparent maturity for youth. The great novels of arrival – *Lost Illusions* or *Phineas Finn* or, in another way, *David Copperfield* – are about the romance of growing up. (*Great Expectations* is perhaps, in this as in so many other ways, what professors call a key transitional work: Pip grows up by going back to the heartfelt intuitions and loyalties of his childhood. David grows up; Pip gets back.) Meaulnes' final image in the narrator's mind is of the same big schoolboy with a taste for adventure, not a man tempered by experience; it is the resilience of his romantic nature, not its instruction by experience, that makes him matter to François, and to us.

A line of robust critical counter-reading of *Le Grand Meaulnes* insists, first, that Fournier's epiphany in Paris was constructed, as most such literary epiphanies so often are, retrospectively, in light of the book he later wrote and had in mind to write. (Real though she was, Beatrice doubtless shone brighter to Dante once he started writing his poem and needed her image more.) More important, the movement of the book can be understood, without too much strain, as really counter-romantic; Meaulnes, after all, impregnates his fairy, leaves her to die in childbirth and is left not with the persistence of his adolescent fantasies but with the physical consequence of his animal and adult nature: his daughter, not his dream. (The vengeful fantasy of seeing a woman who has, in real life, rejected you die while bearing your child is one that Hemingway indulged in, too, a few years later, in *A Farewell to Arms*, an adolescent novel pretending to be a war book.) It is possible to draw a cold, sardonic moral from *Le Grand Meaulnes* just as, once again; it is possible to draw an anti-idealist and anti-romantic moral from *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby, after all, is not an avatar of the American dreamer, but a victim of the American dream – a decent man brought down by the false

pursuit of an unworthy object and a sordid and debased and meretricious set of values; all those shirts are not a worthy object of a grown man's desire.

Yet to say this is to deny the manifest spell both novels cast. It is left to ordinary books, of which there are many, to teach realistic lessons and point out morals; good books cast spells and cast out demons. If *Le Grand Meaulnes* offers a kind of day-dream, it has lasted for a very long day. Part of the power of the novel is that Fournier was among the first to see that this form of erotic attachment – which in one way is not erotic attachment at all, but merely adolescent fantasy – can be as powerful as any other. Fournier's fantasy persists into our own day as a pattern in books as stirring (and unlike) as *A Separate Peace* and *The Secret History*. Alain-Fournier was the first to give form to one of the most powerful of twentieth-century myths, which continues to illuminate life.

A flare more than a fire... with one of those dreadful symmetries that are too much for fiction, this novel of a lost, enchanted world was published just as the lights were about to go out all over Europe, and real flares would take their place. Yet perhaps it was the tragedy that awaited poor Meaulnes, and poor Fournier (as it awaited Wells and the boys in the Peter Pan house, for that matter), that helped give this day-dream its resonance. Poor Meaulnes? Poor Fournier? Lucky Meaulnes, lucky Fournier, perhaps, for all that they foresaw, and for all that they were not forced to see. There are worse things in the world to be prisoners of than childhood.

Adam Gopn

## NOTES

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1. Havelock Ellis, Introduction to *The Wanderer* (New York: New Directions, 1928).
2. Frank Davison, Translator's Introduction, *Le Grand Meaulnes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).

## A Note on the Translation

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Translators of Alain-Fournier's novel have come across several difficulties, starting with the title. 'Le Grand Meaulnes' is both the title of the book and the name given to its central character, the schoolboy whose fellows are impressed by his presence and his height: *grand* can mean 'tall' as well as 'great'. Some, like the translator of the previous version in Penguin Classics, decided to skirt round the problem by keeping the French title, with an alternative, 'The Lost Domain', as a subtitle. Another translator tried 'The Wanderer' and, as a subtitle, 'The End of Youth'. There are, in fact, more titles of this book in English than there are translations of it.

My own solution is to take a phrase from the novel, 'le domaine perdu', to translate it literally as 'the lost estate' and to use that as the title, taking advantage of the fact that in English the word 'estate' can be used to mean both a property in the country and a period of life ('man's estate', 'youth's estate'): this is a book about the passing of adolescence – and nostalgia for it – in which the central character comes across an isolated country house and estate, has a strange adventure and is later unable to find his way back there. But I do not imagine that everyone will approve of my choice of title. This is a work that has passionate admirers who will defend it against any meddling.

The novelist John Fowles was one such admirer. In his Afterword to Lowell Blair's translation he described Alain-Fournier's novel as a 'poignant and unique masterpiece of alchemized memory'.<sup>1</sup> He also remarked that, in his opinion, the book was 'very nearly untranslatable': 'Just as certain great French wines like Montrachet and Sancerre... have defeated all attempts by foreign vineyards to imitate them, so do Fournier's style, tonality, and charm refuse transposition into another language.' He was not, he said, suggesting that Lowell Blair had made a bad job of it, 'but simply underlining the insoluble problems that face the brave man who tried the task'.<sup>2</sup>

Fowles is not the only person to suggest that Alain-Fournier's book is, in many respects, untranslatable. Frank Davison, the translator of the previous Penguin Classics version, has two lengthy footnotes early in the book explaining his difficulties with two crucial problems of translation: the first is the title of the book; the second is the designation of the isolated house and grounds that Meaulnes discovers, for which Fournier uses the French word

*domaine*.<sup>3</sup> As Davison points out, both terms, *grand* and *domaine*, here carry overtones and shades of meaning that are not conveyed by any single word in English. As a result, he decided, first, to retain the French expression 'Le Grand Meaulnes' both as the title of the book and as the name of its central character; and secondly, to use the English word *domain*, while describing it as 'a literal, if not exact, translation'.

There are, clearly, difficulties in translating any literary work, but I think that both Fowles and Davison have tended to exaggerate the problems in this case. As I said, *Le Grand Meaulnes* is a novel that has attracted a cult following. For those who read it in French, the language of the book, the atmosphere of the book, the very words of the book acquire a peculiar resonance, an indefinable poetry that seems to exclude any form of re-expression. 'Le domaine mystérieux', 'Tétrange domaine' and, most of all, 'Le Grand Meaulnes' are beyond translation: read Davison's first note, in which he finds not only 'tall' and 'great' in this particular *grand*, but also 'the big, the protective, the almost grown-up... in schoolboy parlance, good old Meaulnes' and, 'in retrospect', the image of someone 'daring, noble, tragic, fabulous'<sup>4</sup>... No wonder he throws up his hands in despair and decides not to translate the phrase at all, using the French word throughout his version.

Yet, as Davison himself admits, some of the meanings evoked by the words *grand* and *domaine* only attach to the phrase 'in retrospect', after one has read the Alain-Fournier's book. Similarly, for some readers of F. Scott Fitzgerald, the mere phrase 'The Great Gatsby' may have a powerful connotative charge. So if these everyday words, *grand* and *domaine*, have acquired such a charge in the context of this book, to the extent that they appear untranslatable, this must be because they are part of a whole in which the narrative and the language it uses combine to move the reader in a particular way. The words that designate the hero and the place where he had his adventure acquire their poetic charge from the context of the novel, not the other way around.

For that reason, I have decided to translate these expressions into plain English: Meaulnes is 'The Great Meaulnes', the *domaine* is the 'estate'. I assume that my English readers will be able to get over the tendency to call the central character The Great Moan, and that they will realize that a country estate in the Sologne is not the same as one in Hampshire or Shropshire. In short, though, I have decided simply to ignore these two cruxes that seemed such a problem to Davison and to hope that the rest of my translation will, at least to some extent, convey what Fowles calls Fournier's 'very simple, poetic manner'.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Fowles goes on to mention certain negative characteristics of Fournier's style: his simplicity which is at times naivety, his repetitions... He might have added Fournier's fondness for suspension points, as well as for sentences and even paragraphs beginning with 'and'. There is also the typical Fournier sentence, with its subordinate clauses separated by commas, giving a nervous feel to the writing:

Meaulnes, hiding behind the firs, so that no one could see him, was looking at this clutter when he noticed, on the other side of the yard, just above the seat in a tall charabanc, a half-open window in one of the outbuildings (p. 48)

– one result of which is to give a sense of anxiety, unease, disturbance – words that recur over and over again to describe the feelings of the characters and particularly of The Great Meaulnes himself.

Every translation represents a series of compromises; no translation can convey the whole of the original. The most I can hope is that, for some readers at least, I shall have suggested a little of the charm of Alain-Fournier's 'untranslatable' novel.

Robin Bu

## NOTES

1. Alain-Fournier, *The Wanderer, or The End of Youth (Le Grand Meaulnes)*, translated by Lowell Blair with an Afterword by John Fowles, Signet Classic, New American Library, 1971, p. 223.
2. Ibid., pp. 221–2.
3. Alain-Fournier, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, translated by Frank Davison, Penguin Books, 1966, pp. 18 and 47. This translation was originally published by Oxford University Press in 1959.
4. Davison, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, p. 18.
5. Fowles, Afterword to *The Wanderer*, p. 221.



*To my sister, Isabelle*

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# PART ONE

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I

## THE BOARDER

He came to our place one Sunday in November 189–.

I still say ‘our place’, even though the house no longer belongs to us. It will soon be fifteen years since we left the neighbourhood, and we shall certainly never go back.

We lived on the premises of Sainte-Agathe upper school. My father (like the other pupils, I called him ‘Monsieur Seure’) was in charge of both the upper school, where they studied for the teaching certificate, and the middle school. My mother took the junior class.<sup>1</sup>

A long red house, with five glazed doors shrouded in Virginia creeper, at the far end of the little town; a huge courtyard with shelters and washing places which opened at the front towards the village through a large gateway; on the north side, the road beyond a little barred gate leading to the railway station, three kilometres away; to the south and at the back, fields, gardens and meadows, with the outskirts of town beyond them... There you have a sketch plan of the dwelling in which the most poignant and anguished days of my life were spent, the dwelling where our adventures ebbed and flowed, breaking like waves on a solitary rock...

The transfer lottery – a decision by a school inspector or a departmental préfet<sup>2</sup> – had brought us there. One day, towards the end of the holidays, long ago, a peasant’s cart, going on ahead of our goods and chattels, set my mother and me down in front of the little rusty gate. Some kids who had been stealing peaches from the garden fled silently through gaps in the hedge. My mother, whom we called ‘Millie’, and who was the most methodical housewife that I have ever known, went directly into the rooms full of dusty straw and immediately announced in despair – as she did at every move we made – that our furniture would never fit into such a badly designed house. She came out to confide her troubles in me and, as she spoke, gently wiped my little face, blackened by the journey. Then she went back to make an inventory of all the doorways and windows that would have to be replaced if the quarters were to be made habitable... And I, meanwhile, under a large straw hat with ribbons on it, stayed back on the gravel of this unfamiliar courtyard, waiting, ferreting around in a tentative way by the well and under the shed.

At least, this is how I imagine our arrival today; because whenever I try to recapture the  
distant memory of that first evening, waiting in our courtyard at Sainte-Agathe, what I remember are, in fact, other times of waiting, and I see myself with both hands resting on the bars of the gate, anxiously looking out for someone coming down the main street. And if I try to visualize the first night that I had to spend in my garret, between the first-floor storerooms, what I recall are actually other nights: I am no longer alone in the room; a great restless, friendly shadow wanders back and forth along the wall. This whole, peaceful landscape – the school, Old Martin's field with its three walnut trees and the garden, filled every day from four o'clock onwards by visiting women – is forever enlivened and transformed in my memory by the presence of the person who caused such an upheaval in our adolescent years and who, even after he had gone, did not leave us in peace.

Yet we had already been there for ten years when Meaulnes came.

I was fifteen. It was a cold Sunday in November, the first day of autumn, suggesting the winter to come. All day, Millie had been waiting for a carriage from the station that was to bring her a hat for the cold weather. In the morning, she missed Mass, and I, sitting in the choir with the other children, had looked anxiously towards the bell tower, right up to the sermon, expecting to see her come in with her new hat.

In the afternoon, I had to go to Vespers by myself.

'In any case,' she said, to cheer me up, brushing my child's outfit with her hand, 'even if the hat had arrived, I would certainly have had to devote Sunday to adjusting it.'

In winter, that was how we often spent our Sundays. In the morning, my father would set off for some distant pond shrouded in mist, to fish for pike from a boat, and my mother, retiring until nightfall to her dark bedroom, would darn her simple clothes. She shut herself up in that way because she was afraid that someone or other, one of her friends as poor as she was, and as proud, might catch her at it. So, after Vespers, I would wait in the cold dining room, reading, until she opened the door to show me how the clothes looked on her.

That particular Sunday, an event in front of the church kept me outside after the service. The children had gathered to watch a christening in the porch. On the town square, several men, dressed in their firemen's jackets, had formed columns and were stamping their feet in the cold as they listened to Boujardon, the fire chief, getting entangled in the complexities of drill...

The baptismal bell stopped suddenly like a peal of festive bells that had mistaken the time

and place. Boujardon and his men, their weapons slung across their backs, were jogging away with the fire-engine, and I saw them vanish round the corner followed by four silent boys whose thick soles crushed the twigs on the frosty road down which I did not dare follow them.

The only life left in the village was in the Café Daniel, where you could hear the customers' muffled voices rise and fall. As for me, hugging the wall of the great courtyard that separated our house from the village, I came to the little iron gateway, a little anxious and arriving late.

It was half open and I saw at once that something unusual was afoot.

At the dining-room door – the nearest of the five glazed doors opening on to the courtyard – a woman with grey hair was leaning forward and trying to peer through the curtains. She was small, and wearing an old-fashioned black-velvet bonnet. She had a sharp, thin face, now looking worn with anxiety. I am not sure what premonition made me stop on the first step in front of the gate when I saw her.

'Where has he gone? Oh, my God!' she was muttering. 'He was with me just now. He has already been all round the house. Perhaps he has run away.'

And between each sentence she tapped three times on the window, so lightly that you could hardly hear it.

No one came to open to the unknown visitor. No doubt, Millie had got her hat from the station and was shut in the red room, oblivious to everything, in front of a bed strewn with old ribbons and flattened feathers, sewing, unsewing and remaking her poor hat... And, sure enough, when I did come into the dining room with the visitor right behind me, my mother appeared, both hands holding lengths of brass wire, with ribbons and feathers on her head, not yet quite assembled. She smiled, her blue eyes tired from working at close of day, and told me:

'Look! I was waiting to show you...'

Then, seeing the woman sitting in the large armchair at the back of the room, she stopped in embarrassment and quickly took off her hat which, for the remainder of what followed, she held pressed to her bosom, like a nest turned over in the crook of her right arm.

The woman in the bonnet, who was hugging an umbrella and a leather handbag between her knees, began to explain, gently nodding and making a polite clicking sound with her

tongue. She had fully regained her composure and even, when she started to talk about her son, acquired a superior, mysterious air that intrigued us.

They had come together by car from La Ferté-d'Angillon, which was fourteen kilometres from Sainte-Agathe. A widow – and, as she gave us to understand, very rich – she had lost the younger of her two children, Antoine, who had died one day on coming home from school, after bathing with his brother in an unhealthy pond. She had decided to give us the elder boy, Augustin, as a boarder in the upper school.

At once, she began to sing the praises of this new boy she was bringing us. I no longer recognized the grey-haired woman I had seen bending over by the door a minute earlier, with the imploring, fraught look of a mother hen which has lost the wild one of her brood.

The admiring account that she gave us of her son was quite surprising: he loved to please her and would sometimes walk for miles along the banks of the river, barefoot, to find moorhens' and wild ducks' eggs for her hidden among the reeds... He also set snares for birds and a few nights ago had found a pheasant in the woods, caught by the neck.

I gave Millie a look of astonishment: I would hardly dare go home if I had a tear in my smock.

But my mother was not listening. In fact, she motioned to the lady to keep quiet and, carefully putting her 'nest' down on the table, got up silently as though trying to surprise someone.

Above our heads, in a storeroom piled high with the scorched fireworks from the last Fourteenth of July,<sup>3</sup> a stranger was walking backwards and forwards, with a confident step, shaking the ceiling and then moving on through the vast, murky lofts on the floor above, the sound finally fading as he reached the disused assistant teachers' rooms where we kept drying lime leaves and ripening apples.

'I heard that noise just now in the downstairs rooms,' said Millie, in a low voice. 'I thought it was you, François – that you'd come home.'

No one spoke. All three of us were standing, with hearts beating, when the door from the loft leading to the kitchen staircase opened and someone came down the stairs, walked across the kitchen and stood in the dark doorway of the dining room.

'Is that you, Augustin?' the lady asked.

He was a tall boy of around seventeen. All I could see of him at first, in the evening light

were the peasant's felt hat pushed back on his head and the black smock with a belt around it, like schoolboys wear. I could also see that he was smiling...

He noticed me and, before anyone could ask him anything, said:

'Are you coming into the yard?'

I hesitated for a moment. Then, as Millie didn't stop me, I took my cap and went over to him. We left through the kitchen door and crossed over to the shelter, which was already in darkness. As we went along, in the last of the daylight, I examined his angular features, his straight nose and the down on his upper lip.

'Look,' he said. 'I found this in your attic. Have you never looked there?'

He had a little wheel of blackened wood in his hand, with a chain of tattered rockets running round it: it must have been the Catherine wheel from the Fourteenth of July fireworks.

'Two of them haven't gone off, so we can still light them,' he said calmly, like someone who expected something better to turn up later.

He threw his hat down, and I saw that he had a peasant's close-cropped hair. He showed me the two rockets with their bits of paper fuse that had been cut, blackened, then abandoned by the flames. He planted the stick of the firework in the sand and – to my great astonishment, because we were strictly forbidden such things – took a box of matches out of his pocket. Cautiously bending down, he lit the touchpaper. Then, taking my hand, he pulled me sharply back.

A moment later, my mother came out on the doorstep with Meaulnes' mother, after discussing and settling his boarding fee and saw, under the shelter, two sprays of red and white stars bursting – and for a second she could see me, standing in the magical light, holding the hand of the tall, newly arrived boy and not flinching...

Once again, she did not dare say anything.

That evening, there was a silent companion to dinner round the family table, who ate, head bowed, untroubled by the looks that the three of us turned on him.

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## AFTER FOUR O'CLOCK

Until then, I had seldom been to play in the street with the town children: I had suffered from a problem with my hip up to that year, 189–, and this had left me timid and withdrawn. I can still see myself running behind the nimbler boys in the streets round our house, pitifully hopping on one leg.

So they would hardly let me go out. I remember that Millie, who was very proud of me, more than once dragged me back home, under a hail of blows, when she had come across me hobbling around with the urchins from the village.

The arrival of Augustin Meaulnes, coinciding with my being cured of the disability, was the start of a new life.

Before that, when lessons ended, at four o'clock, a long, lonely evening would begin for me. My father took the fire from the stove in the classroom to the fireplace in our dining room, and the last stragglers would leave the now cold school along with the billowing wisps of smoke. There were still some games and chases round the yard. Then night would fall, and the two pupils who had been sweeping the classroom looked for their capes and hoods in the shelter and hurried off, their baskets on their arms, leaving the main gate wide open...

After that, as long as there was any light, I would stay in the part of the building that comprised the town hall, shut up in the records room full of its dead flies and flapping posters, and read, sitting on an old weighing-machine near a window overlooking the garden.

When it was dark and the dogs on the farm next door would start to bark and the window of our little kitchen lit up, I would finally go home. My mother would have started to make dinner. I would go up three steps on the staircase to the loft and sit there, silently, my head pressed against the cold banisters, watching her as she lit the fire in the narrow kitchen by the flickering light of a candle.

But someone came and swept me away from all these tranquil, childish joys – someone who snuffed out the candle that had cast its light on my mother's gentle face as she prepared our evening meal; someone who turned off the light around which we gathered as a happy family on those evenings, after my father had closed the wooden shutters across the French windows. And that someone was Augustin Meaulnes, soon to be called by the other pupils

As soon as he came to board with us, that is, from the first days of December, school was no longer empty in the evening, after four. Despite the cold coming through the open door and the shouts of the sweepers with their buckets of water, there were always some twenty of the older boys after school in the classroom, boys from the country as well as from the village, pressing around Meaulnes. And there were long debates and endless arguments, and would slip into the group, with a feeling of pleasurable anxiety.

Meaulnes would say nothing, though it was always for his benefit that one of the more talkative would push to the front of the crowd and, calling on each of his companions in turn to bear witness, which they noisily did, tell some lengthy tale of marauding and pillage that the others followed open-mouthed, with silent laughter.

Sitting, swinging his legs, on a desk, Meaulnes pondered. At the best moment in the story he too would laugh, but softly, as though saving his bursts of laughter for a better story that he alone knew. Then as night fell and the classroom windows no longer gave enough light to the jumbled mass of boys, Meaulnes would suddenly stand up and shout, 'Come on, off we go!' as he walked through the crowd pressing around him.

Then they would all follow, and you could hear them shouting in the darkness from the far end of town...

\*

I now used to go with them sometimes. With Meaulnes, I would go to the doors of the village stables where the cows were being milked. We would go into shops and, out of the darkness between two creaks of his loom, the weaver would say, 'Here are the students!'

Usually, at dinner time, we would be not far from school, with Desnoues, the wheelwright, who was also a farrier. His workshop used to be an inn, with big, double doors that we left open. From the street, you could hear the bellows of the forge squeaking and, by the light of the fire, in this murky, clanging place, you could sometimes make out countryfolk who had stopped their carts to chat for a while; or occasionally a schoolboy like ourselves, leaning against a door, watching and saying nothing.

And that is where it all began, roughly a week before Christmas.



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