The Clochard

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Abstract

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A Quiet contentment filled the mind of the shabby little man who was turning right along the Boulevard St. Germain. Through bleary eyes in a begrimed face half hidden by a mask of whiskers, a look dimly said that the day had been good for him. His hand clutched the neck of a bottle nearly full of a unique mixture of fine wines. Today many discarded bottles had stood in the alleys behind famous Parisian restaurants, waiting for the little man to empty their dregs into his bottle. The strong mixture would keep him warm for the night, even though it was cool for a mid-June evening.

The little man shuffled across St. Germain Place and stopped for a moment to listen to a wailing guitarist serenading a group of students at tables in a sidewalk cafe; then he passed on along the Boulevard, with an experienced sidestep as a fat tourist spat in the direction of his feet. Parisians, out for an evening stroll by twos or threes, were beginning to crowd the streets.

Once it had been pleasant to walk among these crowds of gay, well-dressed people, but it was safer for the little man to hurry on home. Always someone accused him of stealing a purse or wallet. Even now a thin young man in a dark suit was watching him suspiciously from across the street. No, it was best to hurry on. In two blocks he would turn into Rue de Chaude, the sidestreet that was his home.

It was the apartment building whose front was three feet ahead of the butcher shop’s next door that made the protective corner for the little man. Sitting in that corner he was sheltered from the winter winds and shaded from the heat of the summer. In the corner stood a small wooden crate which was sometimes a chair, often a pillow, and occasionally a cupboard for the wine bottle.

This corner and its crate were the little man’s home territory. It was a cardinal rule among his kind that no man tres-
passes on another's territory; he neither sat in another man's corner nor disturbed another man's crate. The same was true for the sewer grating and neatly tied roll of burlap cloth at the curb in front of the corner. The grating belongs to him, and no one else is entitled to sleep there. The air from the grating, filled with human smells from the endlessly creeping Metro below, keeps the little man warm at night. In winter, when it is too cold for the grating, he goes to the Metro entrance at Cité and sleeps on the steps when it closes for the night.

But now the summer was still young, and the little man jaywalked across the deserted street, stopped to remove a fair-sized cigarette butt from the gutter beneath the street light, and shuffled on toward his corner, the loose sole of one shoe making small flapping sounds on the bricks. He set the crate aside, lowered himself into the corner, placed the cherished bottle on the sidewalk between his knees, and carefully laid the cigarette butt on top of the crate. Staring at the butt, he thought, "... a match. Get one on the way to Les Halles tonight. Ah, but since it has been a good day for me, perhaps I will not work in Les Halles this night."

The thought of his work brought a picture to the little man's mind: Les Halles, the great open marketplace, the stomach of Paris. Each night it rumbles with the sounds of lumbering trucks carrying heavy loads over city streets, and it reeks with the heady odor of a great mixture of straw­berries, herring, roses, hog carcasses, and onions. Brawny men begin at midnight to unload the tons of smells. Nearly any night the workers can use an extra hand. The little man thought of the nights when he carried the great crates of vegetables on his back, receiving a few hundred francs for the backbreaking effort. With the money he would buy a bowl of steaming onion soup covered with a thick crust of cheese, the three a.m. meal of all Les Halles workers. He would meet other little men at the Pig's Foot, or another of the corner cafe-bars in Les Halles, where they too go for the soup and a glass of white wine. He seldom speaks to the other men, for there is nothing to talk about. Someone at the end of the bar plays an accordion. The room is warm, the air filled with smoke. The little man experiences a moment's longing to
spend the night in that place, but at four a.m. the owner will close the bar and throw out the stragglers. The little man's stomach will not be so full or warm again until a more familiar sensation in the pit of that stomach persuades him to spend another night working in Les Halles. When the wine-collecting is good, as it was this day, the sensation does not come.

The little man sat in his corner, gazing at nothing, unconscious of the few passers-by in the shadowy street. The clicking heels of a prostitute with a poodle on a leash went swiftly by on the opposite side of the street. She finds her business up along the Boulevard, not on the deserted sidestreet. The little man did not see her. There was a time when he desired, might have hoped to afford, the lady's services, but that time was gone. There was a time, too, when he may have thought to work every night in Les Halles, to have a family, to live in one of the apartments above the shops along a wider street, but that time, too, was long gone. Now, there was time to doze in the corner, to empty today's rewards from the bottle, and not to work tonight, and tomorrow to go collecting, and perhaps tomorrow night to work in the market.

The Creator

by James Wickliff

The Creator chipped at the marble
And kneaded and shaped the clay;
He molded the heart of the image
That posed for him day after day.

The woman posed by the window
Where her beauty reflected the light;
The Creator warmed with desire
And died in her arms that night.

The Creator lies on his deathbed
In the corner against the dark wall:
The woman has cut off his hair
And her husband has bashed in his skull.