TARARE

PART 1

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Statement of originality.

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Signed ____________

Matthew Sefton
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Synopsis

*Tarare Part 1* is the first half of a novella aimed at exploring the life of the famous 18th century French glutton, Tarare. The work is a hybrid of biography and historical fiction, with a reliance on facts where facts are available. It is based primarily on the medical journals of Professor Percy, who gave in detail a strange and grotesque account of Tarare’s brief life, ranging from his experiences as a showman on the streets of Paris, to a military courier, and finally, as a cruel and inhuman monster, capable of committing depraved acts of cannibalism and infanticide. In the first chapter, set in 1797, Professor Percy is on his way to meet with Tarare, who is dying in a hospital in Versailles. The next four chapters, which take place five years earlier, represent the main crux of the narrative. They document Tarare’s stay at the hospital in Soultz-sous-Forêts, prior to his employment as a military courier. Here, under the scrutiny of Doctor Courville and Professor Percy, he becomes the subject of a number of bizarre medical experiments designed to test his eating capacity.

Set for the most part in the beginnings of the French Revolution, *Tarare Part 1* foreshadows the political and social violence that is yet to come. It offers a unique perspective on history, examining the grim but fascinating world of 18th century medicine. The first part of my novella follows Professor Percy as he attempts to make sense of Tarare’s actions, both medically and philosophically. Ultimately, he is left with more questions than answers.
Preface

‘I think if it had always been customary for him to treat food with discretion, then he would not dream of drinking blood or tearing corpses, nor make anything so horrible into a treat.’ – Pr. Percy, Mémoire sur la polyphagie (1804).

In the year 1804, a curious article written by one Professor Percy appeared in Journal de médecine, chirurgie, pharmacie. Its contents, on first glance, seem bold and allegorical, the product of some vivid imagination. But while Percy’s article at times reads almost like fiction, there is no doubting its veracity. Pierre-François Percy was a well-respected surgeon and medical theoretician, who, during the Napoleonic Wars, rose to become chief surgeon of the Grand Armée. His article on Tarare stands alone in a long list of dry publications and serious medical research.

Mémoire sur la polyphagia is the only known source that documents Tarare’s medical history, providing an illustration of his life on the streets, to his stay at the military hospital, to his brief and highly unsuccessful career as an army messenger. It goes on to explain his return to the hospital, and Percy’s attempts to cure him. As Tarare becomes increasingly unstable, he resorts to drastic measures to satisfy his hunger, including consuming corpses from the hospital mortuary, and even stealing a live child from one of the wards. Finally he is driven from the hospital and is not discovered again until 1797, four years later, when he turns up in Versailles, dying from what appears to be tuberculosis.

Over the course of two centuries, Percy’s paper has been recycled and regurgitated, almost to the point of non-recognition. Due to this, there are a number of common misconceptions about Tarare, the first and most obvious of which is the spelling of his name. In 1819, Samuel Fothergil Bradley and William Huthinson introduced Percy’s paper to London with their article “Polyphagism” in the London Medical and Physical Journal, however, they misspelled Tarare’s name as ‘Tarrare’ and even Doctor Courville’s name as ‘Comville.’

It is often stated erroneously that Tarare was taken to the military hospital in Soultz-Haut-Rhin. This is a simple mistake but one that should nevertheless be corrected. In the original document Percy states that Tarare was taken to a town called Soultz, between Wissembourg and Haguenau, exactly where Soultz-sous-Forêts is today.

It is also commonly cited that the author of Mémoire sur la polyphagie is a certain George Didier, Baron Percy. However, this is almost certainly not the case. The name appears to have first come up in Jan Bondeson’s 2004 book, The Two Headed Boy and Other Medical Marvels, but where he got it
from remains a complete mystery. I contacted him on the subject and all I got in reply was a confession stating he couldn’t remember.

_Tarare Part 1_ is a work of historical fiction, yet it has a basis in truth that is far greater than what one might expect. Due to the limited information on my subjects however, many of the finer points of characterisation are fabricated, or in Percy’s case, extrapolated from his own writing style.

By the time the last guests arrived at the Maison de Percy, the sun had already begun to set over
the city of Paris, casting long pale shadows across the bronze lit streets. For those passing by, the
house at Auteuil was a picture of perfect serenity— a small elegant terrace, situated in the outskirts
of the district, overlooking the River Seine. From inside however, came the sound of women chatting
and wine being poured. Colonel Bouchard’s distinctive laughter echoed through the wooden
floorboards—most likely the aftermath of some raucous joke. By the sound of things, Madame Percy
was on the baby grand again, this time filling the space with the soft ordered music of Bach—a
fugue. There was more joy in the air than cigar smoke. The smell of roasted coffee and glazed meats
came drifting out from the kitchens, causing the guests to salivate. This rich, salty aroma made its
way through the salon and out into the ante-chamber, where it tip-toed up two flights of stairs,
creeping into a darkened room on the third storey. Here, amongst the piles of books and
manuscripts, the piano sounded washed out, grey, like a distant memory, an echo of the past.
A fire was on in the professor’s office, glowing hot and orange, pushing back the shadows with
its flickering light; a fire that sizzled and spat, that crunched the kindling and sucked the timber and
ran its tongue across the ironstone hearth.

Pierre-François Percy stood looking into the marble threshold, his eyes unfocused, a letter
grasped firmly in his left hand. Any casual observer would have remarked how calm he appeared,
were it not for the rigidity of his jaw, the tension in his back. In the soft light, he appeared a much
younger man than he truly was; the wrinkles around the corners of his mouth had receded, the
shadows under his eyes had begun to fade. He looked like a man of thirty, perhaps thirty five.
Certainly not forty-three. His bold features stood out against a mane of dark brown hair, greying
slightly around the edges. His jaunt cheekbones and cleft chin gave him a bold air of authority.
Percy inhaled deeply and raised the letter to his chest, tilting his spectacles to filter in the light.
When he was finished, he read the letter again, then stood staring into the flames for some time. A
while later (Percy couldn’t be sure whether it was ten minutes or half an hour) there was a knock on
the door; the valet entered.

‘Your wife wishes to know when you will be coming downstairs.’
The professor moved over to a chest of drawers and retrieved an envelope. With perfectly steady
fingers he folded the letter, then folded it again, forming a neat rectangle.

‘Professor?’
‘Have Jacques ready the carriage, I will be leaving for Versailles tonight.’
‘Is something the matter?’
‘Nothing to be concerned about. Tell my wife I have business to attend to.’ He tucked the 
envelope into the interior pocket of his justaucorps. ‘Actually I will tell her myself. Fetch my riding 
coat, thank you George’
‘Your wig, Citoyen?’
Percy eyed the flaxen head-piece resting on a stand near the door. ‘Leave it.’
The valet nodded and began to depart. Percy sighed. He turned and looked once more into the 
flames, then followed the valet out into the corridor.

The salon was a brightly lit room adorned with paintings of horses and the Italian countryside. It 
was used mostly for entertaining guests, though Percy found himself reading there from time to 
time. A solitary arched window looked out towards a tidy courtyard, centred around a vaselike 
fountain. Positioned around the room were a dozen or so comfortable chairs, several of which were 
already occupied. The other guests had all gathered near the piano, watching Madame Percy run her 
fingers up and down the board.

Doctor Laennec was the first to notice the professor. ‘Ah!’ he exclaimed, putting his glass down 
on a nearby coffee table. ‘The hero has returned!’
The piano stopped, Madame Percy spun around, her eyes gleaming with adrenalin, her radiant 
smile fading as she noticed the grim expression on her husband’s face.

‘Dear?’
The professor stood by the doorway. ‘Something urgent has come to my attention. I must leave 
for Versailles at once.’

‘For Versailles?’ Madame Percy repeated. ‘Why? What has happened?’

Silence descended.

‘It is of no personal consequence. Do not alarm yourselves.’

Madame Percy opened her mouth; she looked around as if begging for assistance. ‘But,’ she 
protested. ‘It is dark. Our guests...’

Colonel Bouchard cleared his throat. ‘My dear boy, I am sure we are all a little confused, perhaps 
if you could explain to us exactly what has happened.’

The professor shook his head. ‘I am afraid not colonel, all I can say is that is an urgent matter 
which I must attend to. I apologise, sincerely. Please feel free, all of you, to stay for supper. I will 
have Charles bring more wine from the kitchens. Charles, a bottle of Bordeaux if you would.’ Percy 
turned back to his guests. ‘I must be going now. Business calls. Adieu.’
With that the professor turned and closed the door behind him, leaving the stunned guests alone with their silence.

‘What could possibly have happened?’ muttered Madame Percy, once the sound of footsteps had dissipated.

‘It must be some high ranking military personnel,’ remarked one of the guests.

‘Or one of their daughters,’ whispered another.

‘No, no, you have it all wrong,’ said Colonel Bouchard, his eyes sparkling mischievously. ‘To be called away, on such an occasion, at this time of night, why, he must have been appointed as personal physician to General Bonaparte!’

‘Or the Royal Family,’ said one woman, sardonically.

This elicited a chorus of laughter, which was in turn interrupted by Doctor Laennec. ‘In this I fear you are mistaken Countess. Not even the professor can cure a man of decapitation.’

There was another bout of laughter. Only Madame Percy remained silent, sitting upright against the piano, her brow furrowed in consternation.

*  

Through a small square window the city of Paris fled past, bringing with it the scent of sewerage and the musk of the night. The carriage rolled down a wide embankment, weaving its way through parked cabs and evening strollers. To Percy’s right, dark shadows glided across the murky waters of the Seine. These long wooden barges would soon make their way towards distant provinces, their hulls filled to the brim with valuable cargos of pepper, cinnamon and Malaga wine. Over the mud and the sand the carriage rolled, across the arches of a wide stone bridge, where an old man was busy emptying clay pots, piled up high on a horse drawn wagon. The carriage turned and made its way down Rue Jean de La Fontaine, where the rows of terraces towered above like the walls of some great crevasse. The smell of boiled onions came drifting out from an open window. Percy’s stomach groaned. He thought about the supper that would soon be served to his hungry guests: the fried turkey, the herbed potatoes, the veal stewed in its own juices, the cheeses and jams that would come out afterwards and the bread that it would be served with. Oh lord the bread!

Breathing heavily, he sat back and resolved to suppress his hunger; Versailles was still a long way off and he had not eaten since midday. He took the letter out from his pocket and stared at it blankly, unable to read its contents in the diminishing light.

Slowly, the buildings began to disperse, and the paved roads were replaced with tracks of hardened soil until finally the city of Paris was left behind. Percy found himself surrounded by
autumn trees, their bright leaves now rendered a dull-orange-grey by the sparse evening light, their skeletal limbs, like wooden pikes, reaching out to him.

His thoughts drifted back to that night almost four years ago, that night etched into the deep recesses of his memory. He could almost see the torches burning in the darkness, the blood on the floor. *He is a monster!* The words had struck him like a hot iron, *Why do you not see what lies in front of you!* And perhaps he *had* been blinded, by his own preconceptions, his affections for the boy. In truth, no-one had been there when the child was taken, no-one had been there when the corpses were defiled. Yet there had been hunger in the boy’s eyes that night, that he could not deny, and something else, something even more disturbing; fear. *But fear of what?* He wondered. *Of the guillotine? Of God?*

Percy let out a bitter laugh.

Two hours passed before the carriage arrived at the outer limits of Versailles. The driver muttered a few words; the horses began to slow. There was a knock on the carriage door; a gendarme appeared, clad in the national red white and blue.

‘Your papers comrade.’

Percy retrieved the sheets from his pocket and handed it to the man, then sat back, silent. The gendarme grunted and slung his musket over his left shoulder. He inspected the sheets briefly.

‘Is there anyone else travelling with you tonight?’

With a deliberate sluggishness, Percy turned and searched the empty cabin. ‘I certainly hope not.’

The gendarme poked his head through the window, looking behind the door for anyone hidden in the shadows. He grunted again and handed Percy back his papers, then shouted something back to his unseen companions.

‘You are free to go, Citoyen.’

Percy snatched back the documents with a wan smile. ‘Thank you comrade.’

The tall iron gates swung open; the carriage jerked into motion once again. The horses crossed through a wide open courtyard, passing a pair of enormous lion statues. Beyond stood the palace itself, with its many monuments and stately stone structures rising several storeys in the air. In front lay the king’s apartments, and to the right, the royal chapel. Percy imagined a fanfare of trumpets signalling his arrival, an entourage of courtesans standing by to greet him.

But there would be no music tonight. The once elaborate gardens now lingered in a state of decay. The hedges had ceased to be hedges. The fountains had dried up. The palace lay empty, its rooms unfurnished, gathering dust. From here, Percy could see that most of the windows had been boarded up. There was talk of turning the whole thing into a museum.
The carriage turned; this was not to be the professor’s destination.

The driver pulled on his reigns, sending the horses down a narrow backstreet where the buildings, no longer made of stone, huddled together as though struggling to keep warm. Down through a winding alley the carriage rolled, rocking back and forth over uneven ground, past markets and stalls and mangy dogs and thatched houses that looked like they were about to topple. Past the soot-stained wall of an unattended shop, where a boy of eight or nine was relieving himself. Yellow light came flooding out from the open window of a bawdy tavern. Outside a man and a woman sat next to a pile of horse manure, nursing jugs of wine in their laps. They yelled as the carriage flew by, throwing something round and soft (hopefully a rotten cabbage) which missed the driver and rebounded off the cobblestones with a dull thud.

They came at last to a small churchlike building with a sign out the front that read ‘General hospice.’ The driver knocked on the roof to signal that they had arrived.

‘Thank you Jacques.’

The professor gathered his coat around him and exited the carriage, making his way up the hospice’s front steps. He pushed the door open and entered into a little room where a man sat behind a wooden table, playing with a deck of cards.

‘Hospice is closed,’ he announced, not looking up.

‘Professor Percy. I am here to see M. Tessier.’

‘It is late, the doctor has retired to his chambers.’

Percy stood still for a moment. ‘Will you get him for me?’

The card player sighed and looked up from his game of solitaire, his irritated expression quickly fading to one of uncertainty as he noticed the craftsmanship of the professor’s leather shoes, the fineness of his silk stockings.

‘I, ahh...’ he stammered painfully, ‘you see the doctor is— that is to say he—well. I will just go see if he is awake.’

The doorman departed, leaving Percy alone to look around the room. Aside from the wooden table, the only interesting feature was an old poster glued against the far wall. It portrayed a man lying dead in a bathtub, his arms outstretched, his eyes staring to the heavens. Underneath, written in bold lettering, was the word ‘Marat.’ By the looks of things it had been there for some time; the edges were frayed as though someone had tried, in vain, to remove it.

Five minutes later the sound of footsteps could be heard, and a bald, slightly ruffled looking man, came speed-walking down the corridor.

‘Ah Professor Percy, I am so terribly sorry.’ He bowed hurriedly.

‘M. Tessier I presume?’
‘Yes indeed! It was getting late you see and, well, to be perfectly honest I did not think you would actually come.’

The man was smiling so hard his face was red.

‘Well, I came,’ said the professor.

‘Hah, yes! And may I say what an enormous honour it is for you to visit our hospice. An honour for me that is. Err, the improvements you made to the arterial forceps were most ingenious, I—’

‘The patient?’

‘Ah yes of course, right this way.’

With the aid of a lamp, M. Tessier led the professor through a blackened corridor, looking over his shoulder as he spoke. ‘I am afraid the standards here are not exactly what you are used to. We are very understaffed you see. Very, err, limited on resources. There was an epidemic of typhus not two months ago and—’

‘I assure you Citoyen,’ said Percy, staring ahead, ‘in my twenty years as a practitioner, there is nothing I have not seen.’

‘Hah! Yes of course! How foolish of me. Right through here. Once again it is an enormous honour. If you do not mind me asking, do you know the patient? Is he a friend of yours?’

A young woman in a linen gown walked past them in the corridor. Her hair fell wildly across her shoulders. She was bleeding from the mouth.

‘I think perhaps friend is not the right word for it,’ said Percy.

‘To be honest I was surprised he even knew your name,’ continued the doctor. ‘Not that I am in any position to judge mind you. Err, I am afraid the patient is not doing too well at the moment, he has been rejecting food you see, and appears to be in a state of high fever, keeps muttering something about a... silver fork? Does that mean anything to you? He told me you would be able to help. Just through here.’

The corridor opened into a wide room with thirty or so iron beds cramped inside. The air was stiff with the smell of excrement. Four rusted lamps, draped in cobwebs, provided the only source of light in the windowless room. As Percy took a step forward a pair of syphilitic hands reached out to greet him. He pushed them aside and moved on. From all around came the sound of the sick and dying. Men and women coughed and groaned, chamber pots lay strewn across the piss-soaked floor, some of them toppled over, their contents leaking out. Piles of used sheets lay bundled in the corner. In the centre was a large bucket of communal drinking water. On the far wall, imprinted in the dust, was a cross-shaped mark, where a crucifix had been taken down some time ago. Below this mark was another iron trestle, and there, writhing in between the sweat stained sheets, his skin a sickly yellow under the hospital lights, was the pale and bloated body of Tarare.
In the north-east of France, right next to the German border, lies a small village halfway between Weissembourg and Haguenau, known as Soultz-sous-Forêts. Here, in the latter half of the 18th century, the people of Soultz lived exhausting, quiet lives, toiling in the fields or making pitch and pottery while their sons and husbands went to war. In the surrounding countryside, leathery peasants tended to their crops of barley, or cultivated the soil with the aid of ox-drawn ploughs. Elderly women picked grapes off the vines and dropped them into baskets of woven grass. The town itself was comprised of a few hundred houses, mostly timber framed and Germanic in design. There was a butcher, a brothel, a bakery, all painted black and white. Only one building seemed out of place in this walled, rural community, and that was the Château Greiger, which stood in the centre of town, facing north, its many windows looking down onto a long garden, framed by an alley of linden trees. Once belonging to the mayor of Soultz, this U-shaped complex had since been taken over by revolutionaries and converted into a large-scale military hospital. An iron gate had been erected outside the front, enclosing a paved courtyard leading to three wooden doors.

It was through one of these doors that Joseph Courville, head of the department, entered the hospital one summer morning, humming cheerfully to himself as he made his way past a room full of dying soldiers. He was an attractive young man in his mid-twenties who possessed about him at all times a rather vacant expression, as though he was never listening to a single word being said (though of course he almost always was). He was looking for the professor, and found him, finally, in a small ward on the right hand side of the compound, administering a suppository to a wounded patient.

Percy was leaning over the bed, his jacket off. ‘The poppies should take effect shortly,’

He untied a medical bag from around his shoulder. Two doctor’s aids by his side, Thomas and Antoine-Jean, helped flip the soldier back into a sitting position. Courville could now make out the infected wound on the soldier’s right leg, a dark mass of granulated flesh, stretching from his shin to his right kneecap. Thomas handed the soldier a jug of whisky, which he took gratefully, whimpering as he held the container to his lips. He tilted the jug high into the air, almost vertically, so that the brown liquid ran down his throat in a single stream. He spluttered, sending some of the whisky off his moustache and onto the linen sheets below.

Courville cleared his throat. ‘Good morning, comrade.’

The professor turned, noticing the doctor for the first time. ‘Ah, doctor, good morning.’
'Are you very busy?'
Percy removed a tourniquet from the bag. ‘Only in the sense that I am trying to save lives.’
‘Yes I see...I have something to show you when you are done.’
‘Fine, fine.’
Percy handed the tourniquet to one of the doctor’s aides, who removed the sheets from the bed and fastened it to the patient’s upper leg.
Courville leant against the wall. ‘Do you mind if I watch? I very rarely get the chance to witness a transfemoral amputation.’
‘Not at all.’
With shaking hands, the soldier grabbed Thomas by the arm and began to plead with him.
‘It will be over in less than a minute,’ said the doctor-in-training, pinning him down.
‘Oh God no. please God. Our father, who art in heaven.’
Percy placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘What is your name soldier?’
‘E- Étienne.’
The professor unravelled the bag to reveal a set of sharpened tools. ‘Tell me Étienne, would you rather live with three limbs or die with four?’
The soldier was crying. He looked up into the corner of the room and shook his head.
‘Come, come,’ said Percy selecting a small hand saw, ‘gather your courage. You must be strong for me now.’
The soldier continued to protest but the opium had begun to kick in and his words were coming out slurred and incoherent. His eyes were unfocused, their pupils dilated. One of the doctor’s aids held out a wooden peg.
‘Bite down.’
Étienne shook his head, he was drooling.
‘Take it.’
Percy rested the teeth of the saw several inches above the infected area, halfway up the soldier’s thigh.
‘Hold him steady,’ he said, and then begun.
The soldier bit down onto the wooden peg, screaming in pain, his back arching, his head digging into the mattress. The medical staff scrambled on their feet, struggling to pin him down. From their beds the other patients watched in wide-eyed misery as the blade sawed steadily onwards, slicing through muscle, dividing ligaments and arteries. Blood trickled down in a steady stream, like urine, making pattering sounds as it splashed against the inside of a copper pot. As the saw arrived at the bone there was a terrible grinding sound. Percy doubled his stroke. The wooden peg fell from the
soldier’s mouth. He cried out, harsh and unrestrained. The saw halted on a crack in the femur; Percy leant forwards, using gravity to push the blade onwards. Soon the bone gave way and the professor was moving quickly through the soft, fatty reserves in the upper thigh. It was almost through; the soldier’s leg hung limply, lifelessly, on a thread. With the last bit of skin tearing away, the limb was separated from the body and hoisted into the air like a prize ham. Percy placed it carefully on the floor, where it was wrapped in a linen cloth.

‘Fourteen seconds!’ Courville announced, tucking a silver pocket watch into the sleeve of his double-breasted jacket. ‘A new record I should think.’

‘Pardon?!’
The soldier was still screaming wildly.
‘I said, fourteen seconds! A new record!’
‘Oh yes. Not quite.’
Percy took out a curved knife and began cutting away at the loose flesh. He dug the point in, removing any pieces of fractured bone. The arteries were then held down with a pair of forceps, stemming the flow of blood. Afterwards, he set about wiping the wound with an oil-dipped cloth, which brought about another round of screaming, more hysterical than the last. He turned to the doctors-in-training.

‘Since cauterization is inappropriate, I would recommend cutting the ligatures short.’ Percy stood up. ‘Thomas, finish up here if you would. Remember to wash the sheets when you are done. If this man dies of infection I will be holding you responsible.’

He turned to the other doctor-in-training, the younger of the two, ‘What was your name, boy?’
‘Antoine-Jean.’
‘Of course, Antoine-Jean. Be a good boy and fetch me a new waistcoat from my office. Thank you Antoine-Jean.’

The boy nodded and began to depart.
Percy waited for him to go then turned to Courville. ‘Utterly hopeless.’ he said, shaking his head.

‘Now, what is it you wished to show me?’
The soldier had ceased his screaming and was now cropped up against the wall, filling the room with one long, continuous moan.

‘Perhaps this conversation would be better suited to your office,’ the doctor suggested.
‘Ah, of course.’
Percy walked over to the wall and retrieved a green jacket from a pair of hooks. He made his way out the door. Courville took one last look at the wailing soldier and followed behind.

‘What happened?’
‘Musket fire,’ said Percy, ‘close range. Nasty business.’

‘Will he survive?’

Percy was silent for a moment, he turned to his colleague, ‘Who can tell?’ he said, and he smiled. They met up with Antoine-Jean coming back from professor’s office. Percy took off his bloodied waistcoat and handed it to the boy, who gave him a fresh one of the same colour, a dark brown. He quickly donned this, as well as the green jacket.

‘How do I look?’ he said, now that he was fully attired.

‘Like a true dandy, Citoyen,’ said the boy, thinking it best not to mention the spot of blood on the professor’s collar.

‘Bah! Be off with you. There is work to be done.’

The boy nodded and began moving away. The two men approached a door near the back of the compound. It swung open to reveal a narrow room lined with books. Light filtered in through the blinds of a window, casting stripes of shadow across the timber floor. The professor took a seat behind a chestnut table and offered a stool to his companion, who waved his hand in polite refusal.

‘Now,’ said Percy, grasping both sides of the desk, ‘we have to do something about that damn brothel!’

‘Err, the brothel, Citoyen?’

‘Are you aware that out of the forty-three casualties last season only seven died of actual war wounds? Fourteen alone succumbed to venereal infection!’

‘The men have been sneaking out at night.’

‘Well? How do you propose we stop them?’

‘I am not sure we can Citoyen. The hospital is understaffed as it is.’

‘Well, we could we at least fix the hole in the fence.’

Courville shook his head, ‘We could. But another would be made. I fear there is no fence in the world strong enough to contain a man’s lust.’

Percy scowled, ‘We are doing it all wrong I tell you. France needs doctors, not soldiers. The entire medical system lies in shambles and what do we do about it? Nothing! I say our biggest enemy right now is not the Prussians or the Austrians. It comes not from the north but from our own homes, and I am not talking about the bleeding monarchists! Prostitution is ruining this country.’

‘How have you been treating them?’

‘Who? The prostitutes?’

‘The patients.’

‘With olive oil,’ Percy mumbled. ‘Saffron when we can afford it. Though personally I believe a better solution would be to cut off their balls. You wanted to show me something?’
Courville took out a leather bound tome from the bookcase and began casually flicking through it. ‘I have something you may be interested in,’ he said.

‘Yes?’

‘How familiar are you with the works of Rabelais?’

‘Oh, I may have struggled through Gargantua and Pantagruel…’

‘Then you are no stranger to tales of gluttony?’

Percy took a long, deep breath and began massaging his eyebrows. ‘Is this what you have come for? To discuss Rabelais?’

‘Not as such. Although it has been on my mind of late. Did you know that Marcus Aurelius once saw a man eat a sheep, a pig and a wild boar, as well as a serving of wine and bread, and all in one day?’

‘A wild exaggeration I am sure.’

‘Perhaps comrade, but there have been many proven examples of hunger that are just as monstrous. Realdo Columbus speaks of an omnivore who, one day in the Martin apothecary, swallowed a load of coal as well as the sack containing it.’

‘I am sure you are building to a point.’

‘The point is comrade, that there may be more truth to these tales than you might think. I myself have witnessed such incredible acts of digestion.’

Percy leant back in his chair. ‘And when was this?’

‘Some three years ago now, during my apprenticeship at the Hôtel-Dieu. We had with us on a number of occasions a young man from Lyon, a street performer, who would swallow for a living all manner of things: stones; corks; baskets of apples. He came in one day with a terrible colic after having devoured fourteen candles.’

‘I could see how that would be a problem.’

‘Another time, he swallowed a live eel. The boy returned again and again, until Desault became disgusted by his presence and drove him away. Threatened to cut him open if I recall. Well, the boy fled into the night and we never saw him since.’

‘An interesting tale, but I fail to see what it has to do with me.’

Courville smiled. ‘We never saw him, that is, until just this morning, when he arrived by ambulance at our front gates.’ There was a moment’s silence. Courville slapped his hands against the desk. ‘Oh come on professor, admit you are as intrigued as I am!’

‘And you are sure it is the same man?’

‘Positive. He is unmistakeable.’

‘What was the boy’s name?’
Courville leant over the desk, his eyes twinkling. ‘Why not ask him yourself?’ he said.

* 

At the back of the compound, in the lower left ward, was a large space that doubled as both the kitchen and the servant’s quarters. Here, the staff slept in between the pots and the pans, on mattresses stuffed with hay laid down on the cold flagstone floor. Come five a.m. they would rise from their beds, clear the space, and begin preparing food for two hundred men. Despite the draught that blew in through the windows, and the occasional stench of rabbit fur, the living conditions were still better than most, and Madame Boucher, head-cook, took great pride in the fact. According to her, the kitchen was the cleanest room in the hospital, and it should be kept that way *you lazy ingrate-bastards*. She was busy stirring a copper pot when Doctor Courville and Professor Percy entered through the arching doorway.

‘Ah! Citoyenne Boucher!’ said Courville, his arms opened wide. ‘Thank you so kindly for letting us use the space.’

Madame Boucher put down her ladle and walked over to greet her guests. She breathed in deeply, her apron rising up and down, her face flushed.

‘It’s good to see someone who appreciates my cooking.’ She tugged on her head cloth. ‘Good morning professor.’

Percy was more than familiar with the food-staff. He had been down to the kitchen on a number of occasions to argue over the dietary requirements of his patients. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Percy understood the benefits of a well-rounded diet, and was, in particular, a strong advocate of vegetables, which he used frequently to treat patients with diarrhoea or homesickness.

‘Good day, Citoyenne.’

The kitchen was spacious and bright, with a high vaulted ceiling and whitewashed walls. In the centre sat an open stone hearth, where meat roasted slowly over a charcoal fire. The smell of onion soup came drifting out from a bright red stove in the corner. At the back of the room a young man sat behind a dish-cluttered table, drinking from a bowl of soup. He was of average height and quite thin, weighing no more, Percy estimated, than 120 pounds. Some of the kitchen staff had formed a semi-circle several paces away.

‘He’s been at it all morning,’ said Madame Boucher.
Courville walked towards the semi-circle and began waving his hands. ‘Thank you,’ he said, ‘thank you.’ The crowd dispersed and Courville approached the table. ‘This here is Professor Percy,’ he said, ‘he is going to take a look at you.’

There was something strange about the young man, Percy noted, how thin his hair was, how fair. He would have been no older than twenty yet his face was lined with deep creases, almost like wrinkles. Percy took a step closer and raised a hand instinctively to his nose. A powerful stench emanated from the table, like a pile of rotten meat or a gangrenous foot. The professor exchanged glances with his colleague and walked over.

‘What is your name, soldier?’

The young man swallowed and wiped the remaining soup from his chin. ‘Tarare,’ he said softly.

‘Like the opera?’

Tarare nodded. Droplets of sweat beaded from his forehead.

‘Are you a fan of Salieri?’

No reply.

‘The composer. Salieri.’

The young man looked up at the professor with shy, uncertain eyes.

‘He wrote Tarare,’ continued Percy.

‘Never saw it.’

The boy finished a bowl of soup and started on another.

Percy smiled, ‘My, you are a hungry fellow.’

‘This is his seventh bowl,’ came the voice of Madame Boucher.

‘Oh? Yes? Fascinating...’

Courville sat back in the corner, smiling proudly to himself. ‘You should have seen him this morning. We found him in a state of prolonged starvation. Apparently his rations were not enough to sustain him.’

‘Yes thank you doctor,’ interrupted the professor, ‘I am sure the soldier is more than capable of telling his story.’

‘Err, yes. Of course,’ Courville walked over and tapped the young man lightly on the head.

‘Tarare, tell the professor your story. The one you told me this morning. Remember?’

The young man drained the last morsel of soup from the bowl and ran his finger around the edge, scraping it clean. ‘What story?’

‘The one about the rations.’

Tarare looked back at Percy. ‘They didn’t feed me enough.’ He said, sucking his fingers dry.

‘Oh no?’
‘We got a bit of meat. Some rice. Pay was six sous, eight deniers a day. Bread was two sous, six deniers a day. Then we had to pay for travel. Uniforms.’

Percy shook his head. ‘And they complain about a lack of morale. How are we meant to win a war with starving soldiers?’

‘I don’t know what they’re complaining about,’ chimed in Madame Boucher, ‘always whining about this and that. “Ooh there’s not enough food. Ooh we’re hungry.” You give me a cap and a sword and I’ll stick it to the Prussians!’

Courville laughed. ‘Now there is a true child of the revolution.’

‘Ma foi!’ agreed the professor. ‘She could do more with a skillet than a hundred men ever could.’

The two men laughed, heartily.

Tarare raised his bowl in the air and looked over at Madame Boucher, who was frantically chopping some carrots at a nearby table.

‘More soup?’

‘You’ll get no more soup!’ she snapped. ‘We have other mouths to feed you understand?’

The professor raised a hand, ‘Please Citoyenne, indulge the man. I would like to test his appetite, so to speak.’

Madame Boucher looked back at the pot of soup, still boiling away. She furrowed her brow. ‘Of course professor. I will go find something.’

‘Thank you, Citoyenne. You have been more than generous.’

Madame Boucher walked over to the walk-in storage closet and came back with a basket of plums, which she placed gently on the table. Tarare stacked his bowl on top of the others and began gorging himself on the purple fruit, tearing off large portions with his teeth and swallowing them down, almost without chewing. His skin glistened with sweat.

‘Tell me,’ said Percy, ‘why is he sweating so much?’

‘It’s hot in here,’ said Madame Boucher, who was sweating a great deal herself.

‘No, no,’ said Courville, ‘I observed the same phenomenon in Paris. Every time he ate he would sweat profusely. I feel it is key somehow to his incredible appetite, as though his body is incapable of processing the food.’

The salty liquid ran down Tarare’s neck, forming stains around the collar of his blue jacket.

‘Erystichthon...’ murmured Percy.

‘I am sorry?’

‘Hmm? Oh no. I was just reminded of something,’ he turned back to Tarare. ‘I would like to take another look at you sometime, perhaps in the next few days.’
Tarare nodded. He sucked the last piece of flesh off a seed and swallowed it whole, then reached inside the basket with stained fingers and pulled out another. The dark juice ran down his chin and dribbled onto the table, where it coagulated with the soup and the sweat, forming a salty, red paste.
After breakfast, Tarare sat back in his chair, his chin resting against his neck, his stomach bloated. He had eaten, in total, seven bowls of soup, nine plums, two freshly baked loaves of bread, and a wedge of cheese which Madame Boucher had provided with some reluctance. It was decided, due to overcrowding, that he would be given a bed in the old church, which was located around the back of the hospital, just a few minutes away.

Pierre-François Percy saw very little of Tarare over the following days. He was more than busy with his surgery—what with the new wave of soldiers that had come in from the north—and whatever free time he came across was spent locked away in his office, hidden under piles of manuscripts. Over the last few months he had been working on an exciting new book: Instructions Pertaining to the Extraction of Foreign Objects From Wounds Caused by Firearms, and the Description of a New Instrument Designed for this Purpose. It wasn’t until the following Monday, the 15\textsuperscript{th} of August, that he made time in his busy schedule for a long awaited medical examination.

He left the hospital early and wandered through the gardens, taking in the fresh air. It was a wonderful day, with the sun peeking out from behind the clouds, slowly drying what remained of the morning dew. From a distant grove came the scent of ripened lemons, drifting by in the southerly breeze. He saw the church looming ahead, its tall brick spire rising forty feet in the air, and decided quite impulsively, to take a turn and go for a walk through the town. He was feeling freer than he had been in months, no longer cooped up in that dingy old office, surrounded by books and dust. The streets of Soultz bustled with life; after a series of overcast days, the townspeople had emerged from their houses to once again bask in the summer sun. At the corner of Rue de l’Ecole and Rue de Fleckenstein, a little market had been set up, where men and women attempted to flog their wares. One girl stood behind a stall full of apples, yelling discounts at passers-by. Another merchant, a man this time, leant against cart loaded with hay. There was a young boy by his side, tying bales with string and handing them out to eager customers. A child playing next to a willow tree brandished a stick in the air and sang the chorus of La Marseillaise.

‘Aux armes, citoyens,
Formez vos batallions
Marchons! Marchons!
Qu’un sang impur
Abreuve nos silons.’
Percy made his way past the brothel, grumbling audibly to himself. It was closed now of course, its curtains drawn, yet it seemed to mock him all the same. Come night time, its windows would open, and the men, drunk and rowdy, would come stumbling through the door in droves. A moment’s pleasure for a lifetime of pain, and he would be the one left to clean up the mess.

Percy remembered something that Courville had told him and decided to stop off at the local fishmonger. The owner was a young, barefooted girl in a bland dress that looked as though it had been sewn together from various scraps of linen.

‘You heard the news?’ she asked. ‘They overthrew the monarchy, the fédérés. They’ve been going around smashing everything.’

Percy had heard the news. Everyone had. ‘Indeed Citoyenne, we are living through interesting times.’

The girl reached into a bucket and pulled out the longest eel she had, gripping it firmly in her hand. ‘Ahh, What I would give to be down there, right at the heart of it. They say the Swiss guards are dead, and that King Louis is next.’

Percy smiled at her, ‘I will take the bucket too,’ he said, ‘If you do not mind.’ He pulled out a purse from his pocket and handed her a few coins.

‘You from the hospital?’

Percy nodded.

‘Better be careful,’ she said, flicking her hair, ‘there’s a monster about.’

The professor’s eyes sharpened, ‘a monster Citoyenne?’

The girl laughed, ‘A demon, living in the chapel. They say he reeks like death and eats more than a hundred men. At least that’s what I heard.’

‘And who, pray, is telling you these stories?’

The girl blinked. ‘The soldiers. They been spreading rumours.’

‘Oh have they now? And do you believe these rumours?’

She shook her head. ‘I told them I don’t believe anything til I see it myself. Except I know demons are real because of my aunt Marie.’

Percy laughed loudly. He took the bucket in his hand.

‘Next time those soldiers come, you tell them to stop sneaking through the gate.’

The girl nodded, ‘yes Citoyen.’

He thanked her and began making his way back to the hospital, chuckling silently to himself.

*
The church was an old brick structure, built by the Catholics in the 15th century. It had recently undergone a series of dramatic renovations, including having its floor stripped, its pulpit levelled, and any religious icons removed from the site. Even the stained glass windows, which once bore the images of the apostles, had been dismantled and replaced. The new designs were simple, elegant, and could be opened or closed to allow for better ventilation.

The oaken doors groaned as Percy pushed them aside, his eyes adjusting slowly to the dim light. Inside the space there was room for forty beds, crammed together side by side. It was a motley group of men that lay before him; the army’s approach to regulating uniforms was loose at best and as a result many of the soldiers still wore the old white. For those that did wear the new blue, the colours ranged from a deep navy to a light bluish grey. Percy wondered how they had ever managed to function as a battalion.

He recognised Tarare immediately by the signature smell, a delightful mix of body odour and fetid meat. Those who were unlucky enough to be next to him had all pushed their beds back as far as possible, creating a small clearing in the centre of the room.

‘Professor!’

The voice came from behind him. He turned, recognising its owner as the soldier he had operated on a week earlier, the man with the gangrenous thigh.

‘Ah Étienne! How is your leg?’

The soldier looked down at the cloth wrapped stub, soaking in a bloody pool on the bed. ‘Still amputated,’ he said.

‘Hah! Yes, I should expect so. Are you in a great deal of pain?’

‘Yes Monsieur, err Citoyen. Could I have some more of that poppy juice?’

Percy shook his head, ‘I am afraid we are still low on resources. I will have someone come by this afternoon to change your dressings.’ He turned to leave.

‘Professor?’

‘Yes Étienne.’

‘Is there any chance that I could be moved back into the hospital?’

Percy frowned. ‘But my dear boy, you just got here. The air is better in the church, you will have a higher probability of staving off infection.’

‘I know, but...’

‘What exactly is bothering you?’

Étienne’s eyes flicked to the bed in the centre of the room. Tarare was sitting upright, his head rocking from side to side, his eyes staring aimlessly into the void. Percy followed his gaze.

‘Is it the smell?’
Étienne shook his head, ‘He looks at me sometimes, just sits there and stares. I can hear him breathing at night.’

‘Oh do not be absurd!’ Percy scoffed, ‘The boy is a child at heart. I daresay he was probably just curious about your leg.’

‘But-’

‘I will not hear another word, you are to stay here and that is the end of the matter. I shall leave you to your rest.’

With that, Percy turned and began walking towards the bed in the clearing. As he did so he caught a whiff of something else, something even more disturbing, rising from the chamber pot on the floor. He took out a red handkerchief from his coat pocket and held it to his nose.

‘Good day soldier.’

Tarare turned. He looked almost immediately to the bucket in the professor’s hand.

Percy swished its contents back and forth. ‘Do you know what this is? It was bought fresh from the markets this morning.’

The boy watched as the eel writhed about in its watery prison.

‘Have you eaten?’

Tarare shook his head.

‘How fortunate. I was hoping to have a look at you. Would you mind standing up for me?’

The young man got up from the bed. Percy took out a large pair of callipers and then placed his medical bag on top of a nearby stool. He knelt down next to the boy, gagging as a second wave of noxious gas rose up to meet him.

‘By God!’

A group of nearby soldiers burst into laughter; Tarare’s bowel movements had become somewhat of a running joke amongst the church’s inhabitants. Percy hoisted the container in the air and examined its contents, his fingers pinched firmly around his nose. The leavings were brown and liquegent, like filthy swamp water, with pieces of undigested food bobbing about here and there. He coughed and moved his head away, unable to stand the stench any longer. His curiosity satisfied, he moved over to the wall and flung the mess out an open window, prompting another wild cheer from the members of the congregation.

‘Now,’ he said, walking back over to the bed, ‘Let me have a look at you.’

Tarare untucked his grey shirt, revealing a mass of loose skin. It oozed forth, flopping down below his waistline.

Percy looked up. ‘Have you lost weight recently?’
Tarare shook his head. He grabbed a handful of skin and pulled it to one side, stretching it almost entirely around his body.

‘How very interesting,’ said Percy, taking out his callipers.

The young man flinched as the cold metal touched his skin.

‘Now let go.’

The loose flesh fell back into place with a jelly-like elasticity. In its natural state it drooped below his crotch. Percy cleared his throat and pulled himself off his knees.

‘Yes,’ he said, quite unsure of what to make of all this. ‘How are you finding the hospital rations? Are they adequate?’

Tarare thought about this. ‘Mmmm, no.’

A soldier nearby, a large man with his arm in bandages, raised himself up into a sitting position.

‘The bastard’s been stealing my soup!’ he yelled.

Percy tutted, he looked into Tarare’s eyes. ‘Is this true?’

The boy’s face was a blank mask. He nodded.

‘Well,’ said Percy, ‘we cannot have this. If you want any hope of living a normal life you are just going to have to learn to control that hunger of yours. In the meantime, I shall have a talk to Citoyenne Boucher about increasing your rations.’

The soldier who had spoken earlier levered himself up into a sitting position. He began flailing his arm about in discontent. ‘The bastard is already given four bowls a day, not counting whatever he steals from me. Where are my extra rations? Hey? He’s not even sick!’

This comment aroused a general cry of approval from several others nearby.

‘I assure you,’ said Percy, raising his voice only slightly, ‘the boy suffers from a most terrible infliction. It is in my interest, and in the interest of medical science, that he is to be kept in a state of wellbeing. If you are unhappy with your own rations then bring it up with the kitchen staff.’

The soldiers sat back, quiet.

‘Now’ said Percy, turning back to Tarare, ‘I would like you to puff out your cheeks for me, like this.’ He demonstrated.

Tarare sucked in a mass of air and held it in his mouth, the creases on his face straightening as his cheeks ballooned outwards. At full inflation they resembled those of a monkey. Percy estimated that he could fit both his fists in there. The boy’s lips were thin and cracked from dehydration. The professor took a step closer and gently plied them open, revealing a full set of discoloured teeth. The mottled enamel was well worn and glistened with saliva.

‘Open.’
The jaw unhinged, forming a straight channel down to the oesophagus. Percy pulled back as a surge of hot breath came steaming out like rancid milk. He measured the width of the jaw then went back to his journal to jot in some notes.

*Premature ageing. Exhibiting signs of respiratory disease. Increased sweating. Inability to process foods leads to removal of excess salts via the skin? Possible intestinal worms. Odour v. bad.*

*Diarrhoea. Stomach and cheeks stretched to accommodate vast quantities of food. Q: Is it the boy’s diet that is dictating his physiology or his physiology that is dictating his diet?*

He finished and sucked the remaining ink off his pen—a bad habit—then sat still for a moment, lost in thought. He turned back to the boy.

‘Now, Tarare, if you may, I would like you to tell me a little about your life.’

Tarare looked up at ceiling. ‘My life?’

‘Do you remember, for instance, the first time you ate more than what was expected?’

‘Mmmm, no,’ he said, chewing on his cuticles. ‘Always been like this. Even when I was a young boy. Papa kicked me out. Said “Tarare, you eat too much.” I got into his cupboard one day. He was a night-man my Papa, used to collect people’s shit. This was when we was living in Lyon.’

‘And your mother?’

Tarare shook his head.

The professor scribbled this down.

‘After that, I was mostly begging. Got taken in by some whores. They died though. Did some jobs here and there. Started eating things for money. This was when I was maybe fourteen. Then I got a job with a doctor.’

Percy raised his eyebrows. ‘A doctor?’

‘Amatucci. He was an Italian. We went around selling medicine. Holy water from Naples, plants from...orients.’

‘Ah yes, and magical berries from the Ivory Coast. I believe I know what sort of doctor you mean. Pray continue.’

‘It was our job to draw in the crowds you see? We put on shows. I played Gros-Guillaume in the commedia dell’arte. They stuffed feathers up my shirt. Mostly just went on stage and ate whatever people threw at me. Got good at it so he gave me my own act. Except he paid bad so I left. Went to Paris. Started doing my own shows, swallowing harder stuff. Stuff not supposed to be eaten. Like coins sometimes, or rocks. Coins was good because you could shit them out again. Wash them off. I started stealing things. Like watches, chains. I’d swallow it down so people couldn’t find it. Sometimes it was too big though, what I ate, and I’d have to go to hospital.’
At this point a nurse came walking past with a large bucket of water. She threw the contents on the floor, washing away the scum. Percy smiled, waiting for her to pass before continuing the interrogation.

‘Courville informed me you spent some time at the Hotel-Dieu. You met Desault there is that correct?’

Tarare nodded. ‘Desault... He was angry because I kept coming back. One time I bet a man that I could swallow a door handle. Got stuck. Desault refused to let me back in, said I was wasting his time, that I was going to die. So I ran off. Drank a lantern full of warm oil. Got very sick, but after several days the handle passed. I continued working on the streets for a bit but no-one had any food because of the drought. People was angry. They said “Tarare, you should be ashamed. Eating all that food. Give me some.” They used to chase me around. Beat me.’ Tarare paused. He made a dry, rumbling sound in the back of his throat then leant over the nearest chamber pot and hawked up a ball of phlegm.

Without flinching Percy motioned for the boy to continue.

‘When the war started I heard they was paying people to join the army. There was someone in Paris signing people up so I put my name down. Except they still didn’t feed me. Pay was six sous, eight denier a day. Bread was two sous, six denier a day. I started doing tricks for soldiers, betting my rations. Still not enough. Fell sick. Ended up here.’

‘Yes I see.’ Percy stood up. ‘And the rest is happening as we speak. Well, thank you Tarare, that was most enlightening. Now, if you would indulge me, I once heard that you swallowed a live eel, is that correct?’

The boy nodded.

‘Would you care to demonstrate?’

Tarare walked over to the bucket and plucked the eel from its container, sending a wave of water splashing out onto the pavestones. Almost immediately, the creature squirmed through his fingers and dropped to the floor, where it proceeded to flap about in a frenzy. The soldiers nearby all roared with laughter, some of them stood on their beds and shouted out encouragements. Those who were well enough stamped their feet. Tarare finally managed to pin the creature down and hoist it up by its tail. After ten seconds the eel stopped flailing about and grew docile and stiff. Tarare raised it above his head, opening his mouth wide. Like a professional sword swallower, the boy began lowering the eel down his gullet. He gagged once, twice. A soldier nearby shouted something lewd. There was another bout of laughter. Finally, letting go of the tail, the eel disappeared down the boy’s throat and was chewed down in a single piece. The stamping reached a terrific climax; the chorus broke out in rapturous applause.
From his position against the wall, Percy smiled to himself. The boy was a showman all right. If nothing else he knew how to play a crowd. Unlike the others Percy had seen him bite down at the last second, crushing the creature’s skull between his powerful jaws. There was nothing unnatural at play here; the eel had been dead long before it entered the boy’s stomach. Oh, he was a freak all right, that was certain, but no stranger than any of the other freaks Percy had examined in his lifetime, including the woman covered in hair or the man with backwards facing knees. What had they called the man again? The Heron? Percy remembered how badly he had been treated, how the children had taunted him, thrown sticks at him, then run away laughing, screaming in mock terror as the poor man came stumbling after, like something from a nightmare, a demon.

Percy frowned; from his position against the wall he could see Tarare standing on top of his bed, his arms outstretched, bowing to the audience. For a moment, he thought he saw smile flicker across the boy’s face, but by the time he came up again, the smile, had it ever existed, was gone.
On the day the Château Greiger was due for inspection, Percy, Courville and several of the doctor’s aides had gathered outside on the front lawn, awaiting the arrival of the chief medical officer. It was a crisp, clear morning with the sun shining out from behind the trees and a painting-like stillness in the air, broken only by the soft rustling of falling leaves. At a quarter past eight, a pair of dappled greys came galloping down Rue de Fleckenstein, coming to a slow, cantering halt outside the front gates. A man in his late fifties, dressed entirely in black, emerged from the cabin and hobbled his way over to the welcoming party. He wore a white lace cravat, and short wig, tied neatly into two tails. Doctor Courville stepped forward from the line and greeted his guest.

‘Good morning Doctor Lorentz. I am Doctor Courville, head of the department. On behalf of the entire institution I welcome you to the Château Greiger.’

‘Yes, how do you do,’ said the chief medical officer, bowing stiffly.

‘This is my associate Professor Percy. I believe you two are well acquainted?’

The professor greeted him with a curt nod, ‘Lorentz.’

‘Ah, Percy,’ said the chief medical officer, ‘How long has it been now? A good four years?’

‘Oh yes,’ agreed Percy, ‘very good.’

Lorentz’s lips stretched upwards, almost unnaturally. ‘We have missed your wit at the Academie. You know, when they told me you were stationed in Soultz I could scarcely believe them. I said, “Who? Little Pierre-François? Surely not! He was such a promising student.” But by God, here we are,’ he turned, and began cheerfully examining his surroundings. ‘My, what a fine looking hospital.’

Courville cleared his throat. ‘Would you care for a tour of the facilities?’

The chief medical officer assented and together the three gentlemen strode through the compound, with Courville in the lead, providing an overview of the hospital’s infrastructure. Lorentz was introduced to Madame Boucher as well as the quiet old man who ran the mortuary. He took notes on the number of patients, the pharmaceutical stocks, the staff in each area, jotting down everything he saw in a journal that he kept in his coat pocket. Along the way he would ask the occasional question, usually relating to some statistic or another. How many beds are there in each ward? What is the recovery rate for patients with syphilis? Mostly he remained content to let Courville lead the way.

The party came at last to the lower east ward, which was by far the most crowded in the hospital. Fifty-four patients shared this space, including thirteen members of the general public.
pregnant lady, an old man with gout. Some even shared beds, sleeping head to toe. Despite the efforts of the staff to isolate infection, it was not uncommon for someone to turn over the sheets in the morning and uncover the glassy-eyed stare of a dead soldier. Prior to Lorentz’s visit, Percy had ordered that the ward be left uncleaned, in the hopes that the deplorable condition would convey some understanding of the hospital’s dire situation. The room stank now of sweat and filth, and there was an unnatural humidity in the air, as though the walls and ceilings had been wrapped in a moist linen cloth.

Percy spoke at length, elucidating with poise and compassion the problems they had faced over the last few months: the increased rates of epidemics; the outbursts of diarrhoea; the mountains of cadavers that were even now piling up in the hospital mortuary.

Doctor Lorentz listened to all this with that strange, artificial smile imprinted on his face. When the speech was over he paused to digest all he had heard then said: ‘I understand your concerns, but you must realise these conditions are nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, I daresay I have seen far worse. The hospital in Strasbourg was particularly insalubrious; why, one ward was so overrun with vermin that the floor appeared to part in front of me like the Red Sea. As for your little overcrowding problem, the board has been aware of it for quite some time. In fact, they have come up with a rather elegant solution. You see, the issue, as far as they are concerned, is not a lack of staff, per se, but an excess of patients.’

Percy tilted his head to the side. ‘My apologies Citoyen, did you say an excess of patients?’

‘Quite so.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘Once again I am afraid I must apologise. You are aware, are you not, that this is a hospital?’

Lorentz blinked. ‘Is it? These numbers would suggest otherwise.’ He took out his journal and cleared his throat. ‘Out of the 197 patients in your care last month, 31 perished under various circumstances. That is almost a fifteen percent mortality rate. Per month. It would appear, professor, that you are doing more harm than good.’

On this, Percy’s countenance became noticeably flushed. He breathed out through his nostrils, resisting the urge the slap the smile off Lorentz’s face. A myriad of expressions crossed his mind, but he settled at last with: ‘And what exactly are you proposing we do with these excess patients? Roll out the National Razor?’

Lorentz resurrected a smile. ‘What the board is suggesting is that we re-examine the severity of each patient’s situation. Those who are deemed fit will be transferred to a civilian hospital or returned to their active duties. As for the townspeople, they will be taken to the general hospital in Strasbourg.’
Percy bit his lip. ‘It is all about priorities,’ continued Lorentz. ‘Whether you agree with the new policy or not it has the board’s approval as well as the backing of the chief of staff. We expect the average stay time of all hospitals to be cut by a third, starting at the end of the month.’

Percy was about to open his mouth again when Courville interjected. ‘Of course, Citoyen. We will make the necessary adjustments. Now if you would follow me, we have yet to see the church.’

Lorentz made a pleased ‘ah’ sound and began following Courville down the corridor, with Percy steaming quietly behind.

* 

Leaves crunched underfoot as the three men made their way through the garden. Up ahead, Courville was chatting excitedly with Lorentz. ‘...medical history...simply astounding!’

Percy could only distinguish a handful of phrases. He wasn’t really listening. Somewhere, down near the river, a gaggle of geese squabbled and honked at one another. A kite flew overhead. The church bells began to peal; it was 12 o’clock.

‘...Tarare.’

The word pulled him back to the present company. Courville had been explaining to Lorentz about the hospital’s new addition: the glutton-in-residence.

‘Why, just last week he ate a feast prepared for fifteen German labourers, consisting of four or five vats of sour milk and an enormous bowl of dough—which I believe in their country is cooked in salt and fat—’

Percy could see Lorentz smiling and nodding away. After a minute the chief medical officer tapped Courville on the shoulder and muttered a few words. Courville fell silent, nodded, and began moving away. Lorentz walked back along the path towards Percy, smiling.

‘I was hoping to have a moment to speak with you alone.’

‘Oh?’

The chief medical officer turned and watched Courville as he made his way into the church. ‘What are your thoughts on the hospital’s new administrator? A little young perhaps?’

The professor’s face was a blank slate. ‘I have every faith in Courville’s abilities.’
Lorentz nodded. ‘I was only asking because there have been a number of... unsavoury rumours spreading through the board.’

Percy smiled, thinly. ‘I am sure it is not in the board’s position to entertain rumours.’

‘Of course not, though certain matters have come to our attention.’ Lorentz glanced over his shoulder, he took a step forward. ‘Doctor Courville, he is friendly with the staff, yes?’

‘Amiably so.’

Lorentz caught the moment of hesitation in Percy’s eyes, his smiled broadened. ‘Yes. From what I can gather he has built up quite a...reputation with some of the doctors in training.

Percy fell silent.

‘The board respects your opinion, Percy, as do I. General Beuharnois was particularly impressed with your new ambulance design and, well, these are dark times, Percy—no, I will not say dark, transitionary. Times such as these require people to lead us, people with insight, experience. People such as, well... yourself.’

‘Courville is a more than capable administrator.’

Lorentz returned the blank expression. ‘Is that your... opinion?’

Percy’s lip twitched. ‘Yes damn it, that is my opinion! Now is there anything else I can do for you comrade?’

The chief medical officer shrugged. ‘No. That will be all,’ he said, then turned and wandered back along the path.

*

Percy found Courville waiting for him at the entrance to the church. Together, they gave Lorentz the tour, though by now the chief medical officer appeared to have grown weary of the whole process. He no longer stopped to take notes and even yawned once or twice during one of Courville’s speeches.

‘This space is mostly reserved for soldiers with war wounds, amputees, fractured bones, head injuries... Over here you can see the new windows we had put in. The floor is washed every week or so.’

The professor left them momentarily to check on the soldier, Étienne, whose leg, despite all predictions, had begun to heal remarkably well. He examined the scabrous wound for signs of necrosis, but found nothing to elicit concern.

‘Are you still feeling sensations?’
The soldier wiggled his stump about. ‘Sometimes,’ he admitted. ‘There is an itch maybe, and I will go to scratch it and…’

Percy nodded. ‘That is normal. The body is slower than the mind. It has yet to come to terms with its loss.’ Several yards away he could see Lorentz being introduced to Tarare. Percy frowned. ‘Excuse me,’ he said, and walked off without retying the bandages.

When he got to the inner circle the chief medical officer was holding a handkerchief to his nose. ‘By God,’ he said, stifling laughter, ‘you really are an odious creature.’

If Tarare was affected by this comment he made no effort to show it. He turned and nodded to the professor though, as if for the first time acknowledging who he was.

Percy smiled back. ‘Good afternoon.’

The boy still wore the same clothes he had arrived in, but his jacket was off and his hair had grown considerably in the last few months. It was still very fine, falling across his face in long whispers. The boy looked quite compliant standing there, docile.

‘Ah, professor!’ Courville announced. ‘You are back just in time. I have prepared a little surprise for our guest.’

‘A surprise?’

Courville gestured to the back of the room. ‘If you would all follow me, I have arranged a special viewing in the operating theatre.’

Percy frowned, he hated being left in the dark. ‘I was not informed of any special viewings.’

Lorentz chuckled. ‘Yes, well…it would hardly be a surprise then, would it Percy?’

Courville motioned towards Tarare. ‘Our friend here has agreed to give a demonstration of his eating prowess.’

‘I see…’

Percy searched Tarare’s face for an answer, but the boy just stared back.

‘This way gentlemen,’ said Courville, beckoning them closer.

The four men crossed the floor of the main hall, weaving their way through the soldiers’ beds.

‘There was an incident this morning,’ said Courville, ‘and well… you will see.’

‘An incident?’

Courville just smiled and tapped his lips. He led the party to a door at the back of the church, which opened to reveal a small room, only twelve by eighteen feet. In its short history the operating theatre had been used only once, and that was on the day that Percy had first come to the Château Greiger, some three months ago. He had given an anatomy lesson for the doctors, illustrating his knowledge on the human vascular system. Lately however there had been no time for academic pursuits, and the room had been deemed far too inaccessible for general surgical use. It lay empty
now, and covered in dust. At the back was a raised, semi-circular platform, surrounded by a wooden barrier, where spectators could stand and look down at the demonstrations below. In the centre of the room was a wooden operating table, and on top of this was a cat.

The creature stared back at Percy with two embers for eyes, glistening in a sea of grey. It was a Chartreux by the looks of it, a stray. Its dark hair, though short, was ruffled and sticky looking, its tail swiped back and forth in an obvious display of irritation.

‘What is going on?’

‘Well,’ said Courville, ‘just this morning one of the nurses caught Tarare chasing the animal through the garden. At first, when they notified me about the incident, I was disgusted, but then I thought to myself, what a perfect opportunity to showcase the boy’s talents in front of Doctor Lorentz. So I told our friend that that he could keep the creature on the condition that he wait until dinner time, and, well, it is 12 o’clock. Here we are!’

The cat hissed as the doctor came closer to the table. It was lying down on its belly, its mouth slightly ajar, its claws tensed and digging into the wood. By the looks of things it had been left inside for some time.

The professor frowned. ‘I am not sure we should be encouraging this sort of behaviour.’

‘Oh, it is all just a bit of fun Percy,’ Lorentz chimed in. ‘If this boy’s appetite is half as remarkable as you say it is, I expect I shall be in for quite a show.’

‘A show?’ Percy turned. ‘This is a hospital, not a colosseum!’

‘Come now,’ said Courville, ‘it is all in the name of science.’

The professor shook his head. ‘No. I cannot allow it.’

Lorentz looked over at Courville expectantly.

‘Percy, please,’ said the doctor, ‘think of it as an experiment. You yourself have conducted such experiments, yes? With an eel I am told? Well, is this crime so different? Should we be judged because the creature is warm blooded instead of cold? Come, you are more reasonable than that.’

Percy continued to protest, but his voice had lost its certainty now and he quickly trailed off into silence. Breathing a deep sigh, he raised the palms of his hands in a sign of acquiescence.

Lorentz smiled. ‘I believe we are in agreement then,’ he said, and followed the professor to the viewing platform, where he stood with an eager expression on his face as though he were about to watch a particularly amusing play.

Percy leant against the barrier. He had grown tired of arguing. Now he only wished that the day was over.

‘Well,’ said Courville, gesturing to Tarare, ‘if everyone is ready, I believe we may begin.’
The boy walked closer to the table. The cat arched its back, hissing at him, its ears flat against its skull. Tarare reached towards it, but the creature swiped and leapt back. Tarare looked over to Percy briefly, then made his way slowly to the other side of the table. Quickly, he snatched the animal around the waist. It spun around, shrieking, biting him on the wrist and drawing blood. Without flinching, Tarare grabbed the creature by the neck and pried its claws from his skin. With his other hand he held its legs together, demobilising it. The creature was still flailing and thrashing about. Tarare looked up at the professor again, as if waiting for a signal.

Percy took a deep breath then nodded, reluctantly.

The boy raised the creature upwards, drawing its exposed belly towards his face. His mouth opened, revealing once again, the stained teeth, the cavernous throat. His jaw slammed shut. There was a high pitched screech as the incisors sank into flesh. Tarare yanked back, ripping out a mouthful of fur and skin. He chewed on this, once, twice, then swallowed it down, not without difficulty. The cat let out a deep throaty groan as the boy dove in once again, this time his face coming up bloody, his teeth pulling on what appeared to be a piece of intestinal tract. The tissue snapped, spraying the wall behind him with droplets of red. The animal’s mouth hung open, it made raspy swallowing sounds, as though choking on its own tongue. Tarare reached inside with his fingers and began prying the wound apart. The cat gave one last, desperate, cry, then lay back in the boy’s arms, its mouth still opening and closing, its eyes staring aimlessly into the void.

There was terrible silence, broken only by the gnashing of teeth, the smacking of saliva, the sucking of blood. Finally, mercifully, the cat fell still.

Percy averted his eyes. He had personally attended thousands of operations in his lifetime, had seen foxes and eagles tear into their prey just as mercilessly, with just as much abandon, yet this was somehow worse. He turned and looked at the others. They were both sitting still, transfixed by the bloody spectacle. The smug little smile had finally faded from Lorentz’s face. Even Courville had turned pale.

For another quarter of an hour the ‘experiment’ continued, until the cat was no longer a cat but a bloody, furry mess. Only the head remained untouched, suspended in the air by a loose string of flesh. In time, this too would be eaten, along with the eyes and the tongue, until nothing would remain but a pile of thin bones, sucked clean and discarded in a neat little pile on the floor.

Afterwards, Tarare, leant up against the wall, breathing heavily, his face sticky and mattered with fur. Sweat ran from every pore, flooded into every orifice. The doctors stood staring, like spectators at a zoo.

Percy went to speak, but found that his voice was cracked. He cleared his throat. ‘Thank you, Tarare.’
A pair of servants lead the boy back through the church, past rows of startled soldiers, and out into the gardens, where he was washed down with buckets of cold water. Once clean, Tarare returned to his bed, where he coiled up in a foetal position and promptly fell asleep.

Half an hour later, Percy noted, the boy threw the fur, in the manner of a carnivore or bird of prey.
The professor had been stooped over the desk for hours now, trawling through the literature for cases of polyphagism. There had been no mention of the disorder in the *Journal de Médecine*, and only a single sentence on the subject in *Journal des Scavans*, under the heading *Unusual Eating Disorders*. One article about a farmer, “who possessed at all times a most voracious appetite,” appeared promising at first, but read more like a cookbook than a medical dissertation.

He tucked the collection of journals back in their homes on the shelves, then took out a green ledger, returning with it to his desk. It was dark outside; the sun had dropped far beyond the horizon, taking with it the last hint of light. His office window was now nothing but a dusty mirror, reflecting an image of a darkened world, a simulacrum of the real.

Percy stared back at his own distorted reflection and sighed. The shadows in his office had grown thicker now, and it was with great difficulty that he continued to read. Desperate, he tried adjusting the length of the flame by twisting a metal tube on the side of the lamp, but to no avail; the old thing had been broken for months. It was his father’s, an antique. Cursing, he held the pages closer to the flames and tried to funnel in the light. After another ten minutes he gave up and threw the book against the table.

Unstimulated, the professor’s mind quickly began to wander. His thoughts drifted back to the events of last week, to Doctor Lorentz’s visit and the grim experiment Courville had prepared. He recalled how the three of them had stopped for dinner afterwards—a three course meal consisting of lettuce and crouton soup, chicken a la tartare, and fillets of rabbit with rice—how the chief medical officer had poked at his food with a knife and fork, before setting it aside, confessing that he was ‘not in the slightest bit hungry.’ In truth, Percy had been feeling rather squeamish himself, but he had still managed to devour every last morsel on his plate, stopping only to look up at Lorentz every now and again and smile. The chief medical officer had departed soon after, announcing that the day had been ‘most enlightening,’ and thanking them both for their hospitality.

In the darkness Percy chuckled to himself. It had, he decided, all been worth it.

He shook his head. He was reminiscing again. Still, in the poor light, there was almost nothing he could do, except perhaps fetch another lamp, and he was far too exhausted for that. He slumped back in his chair and stared into the light, his eyes dropping out of focus. The flame darted back and forth, lapping at the oil like a hungry wolf. He was reminded then (though he knew not why) of a Turkish dancer he had seen as a young boy, an entertainer at a festival of sorts. She had been part of
a travelling theatre, he recalled, and as she danced beads of red and gold had swayed through the air and her smooth, creaseless hips, like liquid velvet, appeared to have melted in front of him. He could see her now, dancing, moaning—

There was a knock on the door, Percy shot up, leaning forward against the table. He opened a book just as Courville poked his head through the door.

‘Good evening, professor.’

‘Ah Courville, what brings you here.’

The doctor smiled and moved his hand out from behind the wall, revealing a bottle of brandy. He swished the contents around suggestively.

Percy stared back at him. ‘I have work to do.’

‘It can be done in the morning. Come come, it is late, that light is no good for reading. Are you an owl? Meet me in the gardens, I have ordered some cheese and bread from the kitchens.’

‘Courville…’

‘It will be strictly business, I have a little proposition I would like to discuss with you.’

Percy sighed and agreed to meet the doctor downstairs, provided he have another ten minutes to finish things up.


Night-time. A table has been set up in the garden, adorned with a selection of canapés. An oil lamp, positioned in the centre casts a mild orange glow around the scene. A row of linden trees sway gently in the breeze. In the background the church can be seen, silhouetted by the light of the moon. Courville holds a dark glass bottle in his hands. It is unmarked apart from a red seal near the top, where the word ‘Cognac’ has been stamped into the wax. The doctor pours the amber liquor into two tulip shaped glasses and hands one of them to Percy.

COURVILLE: There we are.

PERCY: Thank you.


PERCY: (Selecting one) Ah.

COURVILLE: It is a lovely night.

PERCY: (Taking a careful bite) A little brisk perhaps.

COURVILLE: (Holding up a glass) To the republic?

PERCY: (He swallows) The republic! (They drink. Percy examines the bottle) How much would a bottle like this cost nowadays?
COURVILLE: A bottle like that? Maybe forty sous. (Percy tuts) It was bought in from the kitchens.

PERCY: And how is Citoyenne Boucher?

COURVILLE: As terrifying as always. You know, it is rather strange to admit, but ever since I have been here I have developed quite a taste for German beer.

PERCY: Bah! Traitor! Enemy of the state!

COURVILLE: (Raising a hand to his mouth) Shhhh.

PERCY: Truly though? I cannot abide the stuff.

COURVILLE: (Chuckling) I admit it has a somewhat, sour aftertaste-

PERCY: Somewhat? It tastes of badly burnt bread.

COURVILLE: Oh no. It is rather charming. In a provincial sort of way.

PERCY: My dear man, that is because it is a peasant’s drink.

COURVILLE: You should try it sometime.

PERCY: Absolutely not.

COURVILLE: You will like it.

PERCY: I fear the country air may have gone to your head.

COURVILLE: Oh come now.

PERCY: No, you are quite insane. I should have you locked away in Charenton.

COURVILLE: In Charenton?

PERCY: Yes, with the Marquis De Sade.

(Courville wipes a tear from his eye. Eventually he falls silent.)

COURVILLE: We are friends are we not?

PERCY: (A skewed glance) of course.

COURVILLE: That is good. I want us to be friends. (He smiles) How are you finding it here in Soultz?

PERCY: Well, the air is cleaner than in Paris, the streets less crowded. The peasants, while vulgar, are still better mannered than most. During my stay I have not once been yelled at, leered at, or harassed in any way. To answer your question, I find it very dull indeed.

COURVILLE: You know, it is possible to have too much excitement.

PERCY: Oh, do not misunderstand, you and your staff have been most hospitable. Still, I expect the minute the war is over I shall be returning to Royale Academie.

COURVILLE: Well, I for one am glad I am nowhere near Paris, with all that is going on.

PERCY: My wife is in Paris.

COURVILLE: Are you worried?
PERCY: No. Should I have cause to?
COURVILLE: Oh no, of course not. I am sure she will be fine. Have you heard from her of late?
PERCY: Not for two weeks now. With are both very busy, I with my work, her with her various... projects.
COURVILLE: You must miss her a great deal.
PERCY: Oh yes... What of you? Have you reconsidered marriage?
COURVILLE: (Chuckling) Ah, you know me, I have no time for romance. Besides I am already married. To France. (Changing the subject) Speaking of business, I received a letter yesterday from General Beuharnois. He told me that he has heard ‘remarkable things’ about one of our patients here—I am sure you can guess which one.
PERCY: Tarare.
COURVILLE: Precisely! Which leads me to believe he has been in contact with our good friend Doctor Lorentz. He seemed very eager to meet with the boy. In fact, he wants him perform at a meeting of officers next Thursday at the headquarters in Rhine.
PERCY: Well well.
COURVILLE: What’s more, he requested your personal attendance.
PERCY: Mine?
COURVILLE: Are you so surprised? He no doubt wishes to commend you for your new ambulance design.
PERCY: No, it is just... Tarare was your discovery.
COURVILLE: Oh I merely stumbled upon him. You should go, I haven’t the time for such escapades. Besides, you are the one he likes best.
COURVILLE: Oh he is a difficult man to read, I will give you that, but I see it in the way he looks at you. Like a hungry pup begging his master for scraps. You have been feeding him again haven’t you?
PERCY: We are talking about a man here. Not an animal.
COURVILLE: Oh I know. I know. I was merely jesting. (Leaning forward) Listen, I have something to tell you. (Quietly) you are aware, are you not, of the new restrictions place upon us? The reductions in patients?
PERCY: Of course.
COURVILLE: Well, I thought perhaps we could use this meeting in Rhine as a sort of demonstration of our compliance. A gesture of goodwill, so to speak. How healthy would you say Tarare is?
PERCY: Not very.

COURVILLE: But still able to walk around, yes? He is not crippled with pain, not... ravished with disease. Aside from a few unusual dietary concerns, he is an otherwise healthy soldier in the prime of his youth. (Patriotically) Why, he is a perfect specimen of the new regime!

PERCY: (Playing along) I suppose.

COURVILLE: Well, it occurred to me that his unusual talents could be put to good use.

PERCY: (Laughing) Did it now? And what exactly will you have him do? Devour the enemy?

COURVILLE: (Earnestly) The idea came to me yesterday afternoon while I was in my office. I found a small wooden box, and managed to seal within it a short message, scrawled onto a piece of paper. I gave it to the boy, informing him it was a matter of secret correspondence. The boy swallowed it down without hesitation and I came back the next day to find it once again in his chamber pot. Having washed it thoroughly I pried the container open, not without difficulty, and extracted the message inside, which I found to be in good condition.

PERCY: You are joking.

COURVILLE: No Citoyen, I am not.

PERCY: You are actually suggesting the boy work as a spy?

COURVILLE: Well...as a messenger of sorts. At the very least it will impress the chief of staff.

PERCY: The boy is not well, Courville.

COURVILLE: He is a great deal better than most of the men here. It would be irresponsible to let him stay. Besides, he is colossal drain on resources.

PERCY: Let me pay for him then. I will pay. Accommodation, food, everything.

COURVILLE: (A pause) You would be willing to do that?

PERCY: He fascinates me.

COURVILLE: Why?

PERCY: I am not sure. There is something underneath perhaps. Some...glimmer of intelligence. You must understand, he has had a difficult upbringing.

COURVILLE: (A reflective pause) And if there isn’t? A glimmer I mean.

PERCY: Well...

COURVILLE: What if, after all this, you find nothing. No glimmer, no... spark. Merely a creature of impulse. (Silence. The professor does not know what to say) I am sorry. I have already written back to the General, you will be accompanying Tarare to the meeting on Thursday. (Percy sits back, frustrated) I understand, I do. If I had my way the boy would stay.

PERCY: No, Courville, I do not blame you. (Pause) Still, there are so many questions left unanswered. (He looks out into the night) Where do you think it comes from? The Hunger?
COURVILLE: I am sure I have no idea. *(He points to his belly) Here?*

PERCY: *(Unconvinced)* We all feel it, don’t we? That pull? That desire? In a way, we are all slaves to our senses. *(A reflective pause)* I think that is why I so badly wish to cure him.

COURVILLE: *(Philosophically)* Ah! But can you really cure a man’s desires?

PERCY: I believe it is our duty to try.

COURVILLE: What do you mean?

PERCY: The progress of a society is measured by the extent to which its citizens maintain control of their natural urges, urges to kill, to steal, to commit acts of perversion. Such acts benefit only the individual. They have no place in modern society, whose role is to prosper, to reproduce. You understand what I am talking about don’t you? *(Silence. Courville looks down at the table.)* Yes, you understand. You are good friend, Courville. *(Percy sighs, he looks once more into the night. Bats fly overhead. Birds call from the treetops. A frog croaks nearby. The flame flickers)*

You know, with all this talk of hunger I cannot help but be reminded of a little tale from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the Fable of Erysichthon. Have you heard it? *(Courville is still looking down at the table. He shakes his head)*

The story goes like this: there was once a man in ancient times known as Erysichthon. Now Erysichthon despised the gods, and one day he ordered his men to cut down the sacred oak that stood in the Groves of Ceres. But the men refused, for they knew that to do so would incur the goddess’s wrath. Hearing this, Erysichthon became enraged. He walked over to the nearest man and cut his head off with an axe, then set about felling the great tree himself. But with each swing the oak sighed and began to tremble. Blood poured from its open wounds. Soon a Dryad appeared and commanded the man to stop, but Erysichthon continued, until the tree began to topple. With a terrifying moan the oak fell, crashing through the canopy, carving a great pathway through the forest. The Dryads came to Ceres to inform her of this deed, and together they devised a fitting punishment. That night, when Erysichthon was asleep, Famine crept into his bedroom and breathed down his throat, infecting him with a baleful hunger. In sleep, the brute dreamt of feasts and ground his teeth. When he awoke, he rushed to the dinner table and demanded to be served, but could not be satisfied, even in the midst of eating. The more he ate, the more violent his hunger became, until soon an entire city was not enough. Destitute, Erysichthon was forced to sell his own daughter into slavery, but still his hunger grew, like a terrible fire, consuming everything in its path: the land, the water, the forests. Until finally, when there was no more food in sight, the wretched man turned to his arms and legs... and devoured himself.

*
Étienne sat up in bed, his chest damp with sweat, his leg burning. He would get no sleep tonight, of that he was certain. In the early hours of the morning the church echoed with a grotesque symphony of farts and sobs, a forty piece orchestra of nose-blowers and bucket-pissers. Worse still came the itch, that inescapable, untouchable itch, scraping away at his soul like a thousand tiny cockroaches. Occasionally, when the need became unbearable, he would reach down to scratch it, only to find his hand passing through empty space, that void where his leg should have been. In the darkness Étienne whimpered to himself, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,’ (sometimes the sensation became so vivid he felt as though he could jump out of bed) ‘Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done,’ (He often dreamt of running) ‘In earth, As it is in Heaven.’ (running out into the grass) ‘Give us this day our daily bread,’ (out into the streets) ‘And forgive us our trespasses-’

The breathing came from behind him, softly at first, like the wind whistling through a crack, then growing louder, clearer, filling the space with long raspy whispers. He opened his eyes and scanned the darkness. Nothing. A faint hint of moonlight shone through the window. There was a wall in front of him and beds on either side. He screwed his eyes shut ‘Our father, who art in heaven-’

The stench hit him like putrefied eggs, dripping from a damp cave. A shadow moved in the darkness, crossing to the foot of his bed. It stood there, wheezing. In and out. In and out.

‘What do you want?’ But the words did not come.

The shadow leant forward. He could see boy’s face now, with its strange wrinkles and impenetrable eyes. A hand reached through the darkness. Étienne tried slap it away but found he could not move. He was paralysed. His eyes darted back and forth, searching for escape. He could feel the bandages on his leg beginning to unravel, coming away with a soft squelching sound. The bloodied poultices were pulled out from beneath him, revealing the half healed wound. The boy stepped back. Étienne could now see the mass of cloth and scabrous material glistening between his fingers. The boy stood there, frozen, like an animal caught in a clearing, his breathing stifled. Then, raising the pus-soaked bandages to his mouth, he began to eat.

End of Part I