Chapter 10

Even in the prisoner's dock it's always interesting to hear people talk about you. And during the summations by the prosecutor and my lawyer, there was a lot said about me, maybe more about me than about my crime. But were their two speeches so different after all? My lawyer raised his arms and pleaded guilty, but with an explanation. The prosecutor waved his hands and proclaimed my guilt, but without an explanation. One thing bothered me a little, though. Despite everything that was on my mind, I felt like intervening every now and then, but my lawyer kept telling me, "Just keep quiet—it won't do your case any good." In a way, they seemed to be arguing the case as if it had nothing to do with me. Everything was happening without my participation. My fate was being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion. There were times when I felt like breaking in on all of them and saying, "Wait a minute! Who's the accused here? Being the accused counts for something. And I have something to say!" But on second thought, I didn't have anything to say. Besides, I have to admit that whatever interest you can get people to take in you doesn't

last very long. For example, I got bored very quickly with the prosecutor's speech. Only bits and pieces—a gesture or a long but isolated tirade—caught my attention or aroused my interest.

The gist of what he was saying, if I understood him correctly, was that my crime was premeditated. At least that is what he tried to show. As he himself said, "I will prove it to you, gentlemen, and I will prove it in two ways. First, in the blinding clarity of the facts, and second, in the dim light cast by the mind of this criminal soul." He reminded the court of my insensitivity; of my ignorance when asked Maman's age; of my swim the next day—with a woman; of the Fernandel movie; and finally of my taking Marie home with me. It took me a few minutes to understand the last part because he kept saying "his mistress" and to me she was Marie. Then he came to the business with Raymond. I thought his way of viewing the events had a certain consistency. What he was saying was plausible. I had agreed with Raymond to write the letter in order to lure his mistress and submit her to mistreatment by a man "of doubtful morality." I had provoked Raymond's adversaries at the beach. Raymond had been wounded. I had asked him to give me his gun. I had gone back alone intending to use it. I had shot the Arab as I planned. I had waited. And to make sure I had done the job right, I fired four more shots, calmly, point-blank—thoughtfully, as it were.

"And there you have it, gentlemen," said the prosecu-

tor. "I have retraced for you the course of events which led this man to kill with full knowledge of his actions. I stress this point," he said, "for this is no ordinary murder, no thoughtless act for which you might find mitigating circumstances. This man, gentlemen, this man is intelligent. You heard him, didn't you? He knows how to answer. He knows the value of words. And no one can say that he acted without realizing what he was doing."

I was listening, and I could hear that I was being judged intelligent. But I couldn't quite understand how an ordinary man's good qualities could become crushing accusations against a guilty man. At least that was what struck me, and I stopped listening to the prosecutor until I heard him say, "Has he so much as expressed any remorse? Never, gentlemen. Not once during the preliminary hearings did this man show emotion over his heinous offense." At that point, he turned in my direction, pointed his finger at me, and went on attacking me without my ever really understanding why. Of course, I couldn't help admitting that he was right. I didn't feel much remorse for what I'd done. But I was surprised by how relentless he was. I would have liked to have tried explaining to him cordially, almost affectionately, that I had never been able to truly feel remorse for anything. My mind was always on what was coming next, today or tomorrow. But naturally, given the position I'd been put in, I couldn't talk to anyone in that way. I didn't have the right to show any feeling or goodwill. And I

tried to listen again, because the prosecutor started talking about my soul.

He said that he had peered into it and that he had found nothing, gentlemen of the jury. He said the truth was that I didn't have a soul and that nothing human, not one of the moral principles that govern men's hearts, was within my reach. "Of course," he added, "we cannot blame him for this. We cannot complain that he lacks what it was not in his power to acquire. But here in this court the wholly negative virtue of tolerance must give way to the sterner but loftier virtue of justice. Especially when the emptiness of a man's heart becomes, as we find it has in this man, an abyss threatening to swallow up society." It was then that he talked about my attitude toward Maman. He repeated what he had said earlier in the proceedings. But it went on much longer than when he was talking about my crime—so long, in fact, that finally all I was aware of was how hot a morning it was. At least until the prosecutor stopped and after a short silence continued in a very low voice filled with conviction: "Tomorrow, gentlemen, this same court is to sit in judgment of the most monstrous of crimes: the murder of a father." According to him, the imagination recoiled before such an odious offense. He went so far as to hope that human justice would mete out punishment unflinchingly. But he wasn't afraid to say it: my callousness inspired in him a horror nearly greater than that which he felt at the crime of parricide. And also according to him, a man who is morally guilty of killing

his mother severs himself from society in the same way as the man who raises a murderous hand against the father who begat him. In any case, the one man paved the way for the deeds of the other, in a sense foreshadowed and even legitimized them. "I am convinced, gentlemen," he added, raising his voice, "that you will not think it too bold of me if I suggest to you that the man who is seated in the dock is also guilty of the murder to be tried in this court tomorrow. He must be punished accordingly." Here the prosecutor wiped his face, which was glistening with sweat. He concluded by saying that his duty was a painful one but that he would carry it out resolutely. He stated that I had no place in a society whose most fundamental rules I ignored and that I could not appeal to the same human heart whose elementary response I knew nothing of. "I ask you for this man's head," he said, "and I do so with a heart at ease. For if in the course of what has been a long career I have had occasion to call for the death penalty, never as strongly as today have I felt this painful duty made easier, lighter, clearer by the certain knowledge of a sacred imperative and by the horror I feel when I look into a man's face and all I see is a monster."

When the prosecutor returned to his seat, there was a rather long silence. My head was spinning with heat and astonishment. The presiding judge cleared his throat and in a very low voice asked me if I had anything to add. I stood up, and since I did wish to speak, I said, almost at random, in fact, that I never intended to kill the Arab.

The judge replied by saying that at least that was an assertion, that until then he hadn't quite grasped the nature of my defense, and that before hearing from my lawyer he would be happy to have me state precisely the motives for my act. Fumbling a little with my words and realizing how ridiculous I sounded, I blurted out that it was because of the sun. People laughed. My lawyer threw up his hands, and immediately after that he was given the floor. But he stated that it was late and that he would need several hours. He requested that the trial be reconvened in the afternoon. The court granted his motion.

That afternoon the big fans were still churning the thick air in the courtroom and the jurors' brightly colored fans were all moving in unison. It seemed to me as if my lawyer's summation would never end. At one point, though, I listened, because he was saying, "It is true I killed a man." He went on like that, saying "I" whenever he was speaking about me. I was completely taken aback. I leaned over to one of the guards and asked him why he was doing that. He told me to keep quiet, and a few seconds later he added, "All lawyers do it." I thought it was a way to exclude me even further from the case, reduce me to nothing, and, in a sense, substitute himself for me. But I think I was already very far removed from that courtroom. Besides, my lawyer seemed ridiculous to me. He rushed through a plea of provocation, and then he too talked about my soul. But to me he seemed to be a lot less talented than the

prosecutor. "I, too," he said, "have peered into this man's soul, but unlike the esteemed representative of the government prosecutor's office, I did see something there, and I can assure you that I read it like an open book." What he read was that I was an honest man, a steadily employed, tireless worker, loyal to the firm that employed him, well liked, and sympathetic to the misfortunes of others. To him, I was a model son who had supported his mother as long as he could. In the end I had hoped that a home for the aged would give the old woman the comfort that with my limited means I could not provide for her. "Gentlemen," he added, "I am amazed that so much has been made of this home. For after all, if it were necessary to prove the usefulness and importance of such institutions, all one would have to say is that it is the state itself which subsidizes them." The only thing is, he didn't say anything about the funeral, and I thought that that was a glaring omission in his summation. But all the long speeches, all the interminable days and hours that people had spent talking about my soul, had left me with the impression of a colorless swirling river that was making me dizzy.

In the end, all I remember is that while my lawyer went on talking, I could hear through the expanse of chambers and courtrooms an ice cream vendor blowing his tin trumpet out in the street. I was assailed by memories of a life that wasn't mine anymore, but one in which I'd found the simplest and most lasting joys: the smells of summer, the part of town I loved, a certain evening sky, Marie's dresses and the way she laughed.

The utter pointlessness of whatever I was doing there seized me by the throat, and all I wanted was to get it over with and get back to my cell and sleep. I barely even heard when my lawyer, wrapping up, exclaimed that the jury surely would not send an honest, hard-working man to his death because he had lost control of himself for one moment, and then he asked them to find extenuating circumstances for a crime for which I was already suffering the most agonizing of punishments—eternal remorse. Court was adjourned and my lawyer sat back down. He looked exhausted. But his colleagues came over to shake his hand. I heard: "That was brilliant!" One of them even appealed to me as a witness. "Wasn't it?" he said. I agreed, but my congratulations weren't sincere, because I was too tired.

Meanwhile, the sun was getting low outside and it wasn't as hot anymore. From what street noises I could hear, I sensed the sweetness of evening coming on. There we all were, waiting. And what we were all waiting for really concerned only me. I looked around the room again. Everything was the same as it had been the first day. My eyes met those of the little robot woman and the reporter in the gray jacket. That reminded me that I hadn't tried to catch Marie's eye once during the whole trial. I hadn't forgotten about her; I'd just had too much to do. I saw her sitting between Céleste and Raymond. She made a little gesture as if to say "At last." There was a worried little smile on her face. But my heart felt nothing, and I couldn't even return her smile.

The judges came back in. Very quickly a series of

questions was read to the jury. I heard "guilty of murder" . . . "premeditated" . . . "extenuating circumstances." The jurors filed out, and I was taken to the little room where I had waited before. My lawyer joined me. He was very talkative and spoke to me more confidently and cordially than he ever had before. He thought that everything would go well and that I would get off with a few years in prison or at hard labor. I asked him whether he thought there was any chance of overturning the verdict if it was unfavorable. He said no. His tactic had been not to file any motions so as not to antagonize the jury. He explained to me that verdicts weren't set aside just like that, for nothing. That seemed obvious and I accepted his logic. Looking at it objectively, it made perfect sense. Otherwise there would be too much pointless paperwork. "Anyway," he said, "we can always appeal. But I'm convinced that the outcome will be favorable."

We waited a long time—almost three-quarters of an hour, I think. Then a bell rang. My lawyer left me, saying, "The foreman of the jury is going to announce the verdict. You'll only be brought in for the passing of sentence." Doors slammed. People were running on stairs somewhere, but I couldn't tell if they were nearby or far away. Then I heard a muffled voice reading something in the courtroom. When the bell rang again, when the door to the dock opened, what rose to meet me was the silence in the courtroom, silence and the strange feeling I had when I noticed that the young reporter had turned

his eyes away. I didn't look in Marie's direction. I didn't have time to, because the presiding judge told me in bizarre language that I was to have my head cut off in a public square in the name of the French people. Then it seemed to me that I suddenly knew what was on everybody's face. It was a look of consideration, I'm sure. The policemen were very gentle with me. The lawyer put his hand on my wrist. I wasn't thinking about anything anymore. But the presiding judge asked me if I had anything to say. I thought about it. I said, "No." That's when they took me away.