Chapter 9

But I can honestly say that the time from summer to summer went very quickly. And I knew as soon as the weather turned hot that something new was in store for me. My case was set down for the last session of the Court of Assizes, and that session was due to end some time in June. The trial opened with the sun glaring outside. My lawyer had assured me that it wouldn't last more than two or three days. "Besides," he had added, "the court will be pressed for time. Yours isn't the most important case of the session. Right after you, there's a parricide coming up."

They came for me at seven-thirty in the morning and I was driven to the courthouse in the prison van. The two policemen took me into a small room that smelled of darkness. We waited, seated near a door through which we could hear voices, shouts, chairs being dragged across the floor, and a lot of commotion which made me think of those neighborhood fêtes when the hall is cleared for dancing after the concert. The policemen told me we had to wait for the judges and one of them offered me a cigarette, which I turned down. Shortly

after that he asked me if I had the "jitters." I said no—and that, in a way, I was even interested in seeing a trial. I'd never had the chance before. "Yeah," said the other policeman, "but it gets a little boring after a while."

A short time later a small bell rang in the room. Then they took my handcuffs off. They opened the door and led me into the dock. The room was packed. Despite the blinds, the sun filtered through in places and the air was already stifling. They hadn't opened the windows. I sat down with the policemen standing on either side of me. It was then that I noticed a row of faces in front of me. They were all looking at me: I realized that they were the jury. But I can't say what distinguished one from another. I had just one impression: I was sitting across from a row of seats on a streetcar and all these anonymous passengers were looking over the new arrival to see if they could find something funny about him. I knew it was a silly idea since it wasn't anything funny they were after but a crime. There isn't much difference, though—in any case that was the idea that came to me.

I was feeling a little dizzy too, with all those people in that stuffy room. I looked around the courtroom again but I couldn't make out a single face. I think that at first I hadn't realized that all those people were crowding in to see me. Usually people didn't pay much attention to me. It took some doing on my part to understand that I was the cause of all the excitement. I said to the policeman, "Some crowd!" He told me it was because of the

press and he pointed to a group of men at a table just below the jury box. He said, "That's them." I asked, "Who?" and he repeated, "The press." He knew one of the reporters, who just then spotted him and was making his way toward us. He was an older, friendly man with a twisted little grin on his face. He gave the policeman a warm handshake. I noticed then that everyone was waving and exchanging greetings and talking, as if they were in a club where people are glad to find themselves among others from the same world. That is how I explained to myself the strange impression I had of being odd man out, a kind of intruder. Yet the reporter turned and spoke to me with a smile. He told me that he hoped everything would go well for me. I thanked him and he added, "You know, we've blown your case up a little. Summer is the slow season for the news. And your story and the parricide were the only ones worth bothering about." Then he pointed in the direction of the group he had just left, at a little man who looked like a fattened-up weasel. He told me that the man was a special correspondent for a Paris paper. "Actually, he didn't come because of you. But since they assigned him to cover the parricide trial, they asked him to send a dispatch about your case at the same time." And again I almost thanked him. But I thought that that would be ridiculous. He waved cordially, shyly, and left us. We waited a few more minutes.

My lawyer arrived, in his gown, surrounded by lots of colleagues. He walked over to the reporters and shook

some hands. They joked and laughed and looked completely at ease, until the moment when the bell in the court rang. Everyone went back to his place. My lawyer walked over to me, shook my hand, and advised me to respond briefly to the questions that would be put to me, not to volunteer anything, and to leave the rest to him.

To my left I heard the sound of a chair being pulled out and I saw a tall, thin man dressed in red and wearing a pince-nez who was carefully folding his robe as he sat down. That was the prosecutor. A bailiff said, "All rise." At the same time two large fans started to whir. Three judges, two in black, the third in red, entered with files in hand and walked briskly to the rostrum which dominated the room. The man in the red gown sat on the chair in the middle, set his cap down in front of him, wiped his bald little head with a handkerchief, and announced that the court was now in session.

The reporters already had their pens in hand. They all had the same indifferent and somewhat snide look on their faces. One of them, however, much younger than the others, wearing gray flannels and a blue tie, had left his pen lying in front of him and was looking at me. All I could see in his slightly lopsided face were his two very bright eyes, which were examining me closely without betraying any definable emotion. And I had the odd impression of being watched by myself. Maybe it was for that reason, and also because I wasn't familiar with all the procedures, that I didn't quite understand everything that happened next: the drawing of lots for

the jury; the questions put by the presiding judge to my lawyer, the prosecutor, and the jury (each time, the jurors' heads would all turn toward the bench at the same time); the quick reading of the indictment, in which I recognized names of people and places; and some more questions to my lawyer.

Anyway, the presiding judge said he was going to proceed with the calling of witnesses. The bailiff read off some names that caught my attention. In the middle of what until then had been a shapeless mass of spectators, I saw them stand up one by one, only to disappear again through a side door: the director and the caretaker from the home, old Thomas Pérez, Raymond, Masson, Salamano, and Marie. She waved to me, anxiously. I was still feeling surprised that I hadn't seen them before when Céleste, the last to be called, stood up. I recognized next to him the little woman from the restaurant, with her jacket and her stiff and determined manner. She was staring right at me. But I didn't have time to think about them, because the presiding judge started speaking. He said that the formal proceedings were about to begin and that he didn't think he needed to remind the public to remain silent. According to him, he was there to conduct in an impartial manner the proceedings of a case which he would consider objectively. The verdict returned by the jury would be taken in a spirit of justice, and, in any event, he would have the courtroom cleared at the slightest disturbance.

It was getting hotter, and I could see the people in

the courtroom fanning themselves with newspapers, which made a continuous low rustling sound. The presiding judge gave a signal and the bailiff brought over three fans made of woven straw which the three judges started waving immediately.

My examination began right away. The presiding judge questioned me calmly and even, it seemed to me, with a hint of cordiality. Once again he had me state my name, age, date and place of birth, and although it irritated me, I realized it was only natural, because it would be a very serious thing to try the wrong man. Then he reread the narrative of what I'd done, turning to me every few sentences to ask "Is that correct?" Each time I answered "Yes, Your Honor," as my lawyer had instructed me to do. It took a long time because the judge went into minute detail in his narrative. The reporters were writing the whole time. I was conscious of being watched by the youngest of them and by the little robot woman. Everyone on the row of streetcar seats was turned directly toward the judge, who coughed, leafed through his file, and turned toward me, fanning himself.

He told me that he now had to turn to some questions that might seem irrelevant to my case but might in fact have a significant bearing on it. I knew right away he was going to talk about Maman again, and at the same time I could feel how much it irritated me. He asked me why I had put Maman in the home. I answered that it was because I didn't have the money to have her

looked after and cared for. He asked me if it had been hard on me, and I answered that Maman and I didn't expect anything from each other anymore, or from anyone else either, and that we had both gotten used to our new lives. The judge then said that he didn't want to dwell on this point, and he asked the prosecutor if he had any further questions.

The prosecutor had his back half-turned to me, and without looking at me he stated that, with the court's permission, he would like to know whether I had gone back to the spring by myself intending to kill the Arab. "No," I said. Well, then, why was I armed and why did I return to precisely that spot? I said it just happened that way. And the prosecutor noted in a nasty voice, "That will be all for now." After that things got a little confused, at least for me. But after some conferring, the judge announced that the hearing was adjourned until the afternoon, at which time the witnesses would be heard.

I didn't even have time to think. I was taken out, put into the van, and driven to the prison, where I had something to eat. After a very short time, just long enough for me to realize I was tired, they came back for me; the whole thing started again, and I found myself in the same courtroom, in front of the same faces. Only it was much hotter, and as if by some miracle each member of the jury, the prosecutor, my lawyer, and some of the reporters, too, had been provided with straw fans. The young reporter and the little

robot woman were still there. They weren't fanning themselves, but they were still watching me without saying a word.

I wiped away the sweat covering my face, and I had barely become aware of where I was and what I was doing when I heard the director of the home being called. He was asked whether Maman ever complained about me, and he said yes but that some of it was just a way the residents all had of complaining about their relatives. The judge had him clarify whether she used to reproach me for having put her in the home, and the director again said yes. But this time he didn't add anything else. To another question he replied that he had been surprised by my calm the day of the funeral. He was asked what he meant by "calm." The director then looked down at the tips of his shoes and said that I hadn't wanted to see Maman, that I hadn't cried once, and that I had left right after the funeral without paying my last respects at her grave. And one other thing had surprised him: one of the men who worked for the undertaker had told him I didn't know how old Maman was. There was a brief silence, and then the judge asked him if he was sure I was the man he had just been speaking of. The director didn't understand the question, so the judge told him, "It's a formality." He then asked the prosecutor if he had any questions to put to the witness, and the prosecutor exclaimed, "Oh no, that is quite sufficient!" with such glee and with such a triumphant look in my direction that for the first time in

years I had this stupid urge to cry, because I could feel how much all these people hated me.

After asking the jury and my lawyer if they had any questions, the judge called the caretaker. The same ritual was repeated for him as for all the others. As he took the stand the caretaker glanced at me and then looked away. He answered the questions put to him. He said I hadn't wanted to see Maman, that I had smoked and slept some, and that I had had some coffee. It was then I felt a stirring go through the room and for the first time I realized that I was guilty. The caretaker was asked to repeat the part about the coffee and the cigarette. The prosecutor looked at me with an ironic gleam in his eye. At that point my lawyer asked the caretaker if it wasn't true that he had smoked a cigarette with me. But the prosecutor objected vehemently to this question. "Who is on trial here and what kind of tactics are these, trying to taint the witnesses for the prosecution in an effort to detract from testimony that remains nonetheless overwhelming!" In spite of all that, the judge directed the caretaker to answer the question. The old man looked embarrassed and said, "I know I was wrong to do it. But I couldn't refuse the cigarette when monsieur offered it to me." Lastly, I was asked if I had anything to add. "Nothing," I said, "except that the witness is right. It's true, I did offer him a cigarette." The caretaker gave me a surprised and somehow grateful look. He hesitated and then he said that he was the one who offered me the coffee. My lawyer was exultant and stated loudly that

the jury would take note of the fact. But the prosecutor shouted over our heads and said, "Indeed, the gentlemen of the jury will take note of the fact. And they will conclude that a stranger may offer a cup of coffee, but that beside the body of the one who brought him into the world, a son should have refused it." The caretaker went back to his bench.

When Thomas Pérez's turn came, a bailiff had to hold him up and help him get to the witness stand. Pérez said it was really my mother he had known and that he had seen me only once, on the day of the funeral. He was asked how I had acted that day and he replied, "You understand, I was too sad. So I didn't see anything. My sadness made it impossible to see anything. Because for me it was a very great sadness. And I even fainted. So I wasn't able to see monsieur." The prosecutor asked him if he had at least seen me cry. Pérez answered no. The prosecutor in turn said, "The gentlemen of the jury will take note." But my lawyer got angry. He asked Pérez in what seemed to be an exaggerated tone of voice if he had seen me *not* cry. Pérez said, "No." The spectators laughed. And my lawyer, rolling up one of his sleeves, said with finality, "Here we have a perfect reflection of this entire trial: everything is true and nothing is true!" The prosecutor had a blank expression on his face, and with a pencil he was poking holes in the title page of his case file.

After a five-minute recess, during which my lawyer told me that everything was working out for the best, we

heard the testimony of Céleste, who was called by the defense. "The defense" meant me. Every now and then Céleste would glance over in my direction and rotate his panama hat in his hands. He was wearing the new suit he used to put on to go with me to the races sometimes on Sundays. But I think he must not have been able to get his collar on, because he only had a brass stud keeping his shirt fastened. He was asked if I was a customer of his and he said, "Yes, but he was also a friend"; what he thought of me, and he answered that I was a man; what he meant by that, and he stated that everybody knew what that meant; if he had noticed that I was ever withdrawn, and all he would admit was that I didn't speak unless I had something to say. The prosecutor asked him if I kept up with my bill. Céleste laughed and said, "Between us those were just details." He was again asked what he thought about my crime. He put his hands on the edge of the box, and you could tell he had something prepared. He said, "The way I see it, it's bad luck. Everybody knows what bad luck is. It leaves you defenseless. And there it is! The way I see it, it's bad luck." He was about to go on, but the judge told him that that would be all and thanked him. Céleste was a little taken aback. But he stated that he had more to say. He was asked to be brief. He again repeated that it was bad luck. And the judge said, "Yes, fine. But we are here to judge just this sort of bad luck. Thank you." And as if he had reached the end of both his knowledge and his goodwill, Céleste then turned toward me. It looked

to me as if his eyes were glistening and his lips were trembling. He seemed to be asking me what else he could do. I said nothing; I made no gesture of any kind, but it was the first time in my life I ever wanted to kiss a man. The judge again instructed him to step down. Céleste went and sat among the spectators. He sat there throughout the entire trial, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, the panama hat in his hands, listening to everything that was said.

Marie entered. She had put on a hat and she was still beautiful. But I liked her better with her hair loose. From where I was sitting, I could just make out the slight fullness of her breasts, and I recognized the little pout of her lower lip. She seemed very nervous. Right away she was asked how long she had known me. She said since the time she worked in our office. The judge wanted to know what her relation to me was. She said she was my friend. To another question she answered yes, it was true that she was supposed to marry me. Flipping through a file, the prosecutor asked her bluntly when our "liaison" had begun. She indicated the date. The prosecutor remarked indifferently that if he was not mistaken, that was the day after Maman died. Then in a slightly ironic tone he said that he didn't mean to dwell on such a delicate matter, and that he fully appreciated Marie's misgivings, but (and here his tone grew firmer) that he was duty bound to go beyond propriety. So he asked Marie to describe briefly that day when I had first known her. Marie didn't want to, but

at the prosecutor's insistence, she went over our swim, the movies, and going back to my place. The prosecutor said that after Marie had given her statements to the examining magistrate, he had consulted the movie listings for that day. He added that Marie herself would tell the court what film was showing. In an almost expressionless voice she did in fact tell the court that it was a Fernandel film. By the time she had finished there was complete silence in the courtroom. The prosecutor then rose and, very gravely and with what struck me as real emotion in his voice, his finger pointing at me, said slowly and distinctly, "Gentlemen of the jury, the day after his mother's death, this man was out swimming, starting up a dubious liaison, and going to the movies, a comedy, for laughs. I have nothing further to say." He sat down in the still-silent courtroom. But all of a sudden Marie began to sob, saying it wasn't like that, there was more to it, and that she was being made to say the opposite of what she was thinking, that she knew me and I hadn't done anything wrong. But at a signal from the judge, the bailiff ushered her out and the trial proceeded.

Hardly anyone listened after that when Masson testified that I was an honest man "and I'd even say a decent one." Hardly anyone listened to Salamano either, when he recalled how I had been good to his dog and when he answered a question about my mother and me by saying that I had run out of things to say to Maman and that was why I'd put her in the home. "You must

understand," Salamano kept saying, "you must understand." But no one seemed to understand. He was ushered out.

Next came Raymond, who was the last witness. He waved to me and all of a sudden, he blurted out that I was innocent. But the judge advised him that he was being asked not for judgments but for facts. He was instructed to wait for the questions before responding. He was directed to state precisely what his relations with the victim were. Raymond took this opportunity to say that he was the one the victim hated ever since he had hit the guy's sister. Nevertheless, the judge asked him whether the victim hadn't also had reason to hate me. Raymond said that my being at the beach was just chance. The prosecutor then asked him how it was that the letter that set the whole drama in motion had been written by me. Raymond responded that it was just chance. The prosecutor retorted that chance already had a lot of misdeeds on its conscience in this case. He wanted to know if it was just by chance that I hadn't intervened when Raymond had beaten up his girlfriend, just by chance that I had acted as a witness at the police station, and again just by chance that my statements on that occasion had proved to be so convenient. Finishing up, he asked Raymond how he made his living, and when Raymond replied "warehouse guard," the prosecutor informed the jury that it was common knowledge that the witness practiced the profession of procurer. I was his friend and accomplice. They had before them the

basest of crimes, a crime made worse than sordid by the fact that they were dealing with a monster, a man without morals. Raymond wanted to defend himself and my lawyer objected, but they were instructed that they must let the prosecutor finish. "I have little to add," the prosecutor said. "Was he your friend?" he asked Raymond. "Yes," Raymond said. "We were pals." The prosecutor then put the same question to me, and I looked at Raymond, who returned my gaze. I answered, "Yes." The prosecutor then turned to the jury and declared, "The same man who the day after his mother died was indulging in the most shameful debauchery killed a man for the most trivial of reasons and did so in order to settle an affair of unspeakable vice."

He then sat down. But my lawyer had lost his patience, and, raising his hands so high that his sleeves fell, revealing the creases of a starched shirt, he shouted, "Come now, is my client on trial for burying his mother or for killing a man?" The spectators laughed. But the prosecutor rose to his feet again, adjusted his robe, and declared that only someone with the naiveté of his esteemed colleague could fail to appreciate that between these two sets of facts there existed a profound, fundamental, and tragic relationship. "Indeed," he loudly exclaimed, "I accuse this man of burying his mother with crime in his heart!" This pronouncement seemed to have a strong effect on the people in the courtroom. My lawyer shrugged his shoulders and wiped the sweat from his brow. But he looked shaken himself, and I realized that things weren't going well for me.

The trial was adjourned. As I was leaving the courthouse on my way back to the van, I recognized for a brief moment the smell and color of the summer evening. In the darkness of my mobile prison I could make out one by one, as if from the depths of my exhaustion, all the familiar sounds of a town I loved and of a certain time of day when I used to feel happy. The cries of the newspaper vendors in the already languid air, the last few birds in the square, the shouts of the sandwich sellers, the screech of the streetcars turning sharply through the upper town, and that hum in the sky before night engulfs the port: all this mapped out for me a route I knew so well before going to prison and which now I traveled blind. Yes, it was the hour when, a long time ago, I was perfectly content. What awaited me back then was always a night of easy, dreamless sleep. And yet something had changed, since it was back to my cell that I went to wait for the next day . . . as if familiar paths traced in summer skies could lead as easily to prison as to the sleep of the innocent.