By

Louis Bromfield

Harper & Brothers Publishers

NEW YORK *and* LONDON

1939

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Title: The Hand of God

Date of first publication: 1932

Author: Louis Bromfield (1896-1956)

Date first posted: June 19, 2021

Date last updated: June 19, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210640

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IT TAKES ALL KINDS

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FIRST EDITION

H-O

The story BETTER THAN LIFE *was originally published serially under the title of* AND IT ALL CAME TRUE *and is published in England under the title of* IT HAD TO HAPPEN. *The story* MCLEOD'S FOLLY *was originally published serially under the title of* YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE.

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The individual stories contained in this volume are presented as separate eBooks.
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II

The Hand of God

BUT for the house on the point at Salasso I would never have known the Onspenskis, and not knowing them I would never have noticed their names among the survivors of the disaster which happened to the liner *Philippe Auguste* on its way home from China. Indeed, I would never have known their story at all, for they were never first-rate swindlers whose names appeared in the headlines but only middle-sized ones, who rarely pulled off a *grand coup*, and without knowing them we might have passed over their exploits even without remarking them.

It was a lovely house built in the style of the country with a low sweeping roof of faded and clumsy red tiles on which heavy stones had been laid to keep the wild winter winds of the Bay of Biscay from tearing them loose. I never saw it in winter but I know that while I lived in it the autumn storms were sometimes so violent that one had to close the heavy shutters on the seaward side to prevent the panes from being blown in. The house had big windows with shutters which opened on to small balconies where there were boxes of petunias and ivy geraniums and convolvulus trailing downward in a cloud of blossoms. Inside on the second floor there was a marvelous big room where one ate and sometimes sat over coffee in the evening, looking out over the mountains and the sea, at the moment when the Bay of

Biscay turned a deeper and deeper purple until at last sea and sky came together and there were only the stars and the little circlet of lights marking the distant harbor of Saint Christophe to show where one ended and the other began.

One knows at once whether a house has been built with love and whether it has been lived in with love. Sometimes I have come to a house to spend a month or a season and found myself staying on for years or returning to it again and again because there was something about it which I had been seeking, sometimes without knowing it at all. Usually for all of us, it is peace which we seek, and of all things in life the hardest to find is peace. One needs peace to return to. One knows at once when there is peace in a house.

It was a very old house and the date of its building, 1657, was cut in stone over the doorway. In it generation after generation had been born and died. From it young Basques had gone off to places like Brooklyn and Buenos Ayres to make their fortunes and to return at last to die between the mountains and the sea. The house had peace and dignity and beauty and age.

I came upon it one day by accident while I was walking with the dogs on the moor above the sea, aimlessly and happily because there was so much of solitude and beauty all about me. Behind me rose the whole vast barrier of the Pyrenees, the high distant mountains blue and purple and rocky, the nearer ones melted away into soft mounds of green bracken with little goat paths cast over them like spider webs. Under foot there was purple heather in bloom and a froth of wild flowers, and before me there was the sea and the little harbor, with its blue and green fishing boats. The heather scented the air and suddenly there, a little before me in the

small hollow which concealed and protected it, stood the house.

It was like a magic house which had come up out of the earth. I could not remember having seen it before, and after a moment's reflection I understood why. It stood in a small depression of the moor and was so covered with vines that unless one came upon it by chance one never saw it at all. But there was magic about it as I found out later, for although you could not see the house from the highroad or the distant town of Saint Christophe des Eaux, once you were inside it you had a view which seemed to take in all creation—mountains, sea and sky.

A big garden surrounded it, all inclosed by a hedge of tamarisks which on the day I found it was all in bloom and covered with pink feathery flowers. It was a low friendly hedge. The passers-by, and they were few, might peep through it or look over it by standing on tiptoe. And there, in the midst of the garden, sat the house, close to the earth, bound to it by bonds of clematis and roses and the lovely sky-blue morning glory which is so difficult to grow elsewhere and which grows so easily in that country. At one end of the garden there was a little orchard where vegetables grew beneath the fruit trees, and at the other end, away from the sea, there was a little walled inclosure filled with roses where it was always warm and sheltered.

Beneath the house on the harbor side, the ground sloped away steeply to the tiny village of Salasso so that it seemed one could step out of the garden on to the roofs of the houses. There were no summer people in Salasso, but only fishermen and their families, handsome dark fishermen, who set out with the tides to come home knee-deep in silver sardines and

anchovies. At the end of the village protecting it from the sea lay the great ruin of a Roman fort, and just inside it, sheltered by its ancient rocks, lay a little beach, white and slender like a young moon, with here and there a red rock to break its monotony.

But best of all the house was solitary. On its jutting little plateau, inclosed in its friendly garden, it stood in a world of its own, high above the sea with the wall of mountains sheltering it from unfriendly north winds. It was difficult even to find the way to it, for the only road by which a motor might enter was a narrow, partly overgrown lane, sunk between thick walls of briers and eglantine, which came across the moor from the highroad a mile away—the highroad where Hispanos and Rolls-Royces whizzed backward and forward between San Sebastián and Biarritz all day and all night; and the entrance to the lane was so hidden in a grove of ancient druid oaks that strangers with an adventurous spirit passed it by without even entering. After I lived there I found it was easy to be rid of the people with expensive motors who pressed you for permission to "come and have a look at your little paradise." One only had to tell them to take the first turning after the bridge. Usually they drove past without seeing it at all and if they saw it they only believed that so narrow and tangled a lane could have nothing more impressive than a cow pasture at its flowery end. And so those unworthy of that small paradise seldom entered it.

2

The moment I saw the house I knew it had been lived in by someone who loved it, and happily, I thought, "This is my house. I am the successor to the man who loved it."

The shutters were up and it had the sad look which friendly houses have when they are closed and abandoned. In this case the owner who had loved it was dead only a few months before I discovered it, and his widow could not live there; she was a very old lady and the sea air was bad for her health. And so it was for rent. She would not sell it because she had been happy there and some day, when she felt death coming on, she hoped to return there to die.

"It is a place," she wrote me, "which grows about the heart."

And so, for all too short a time it became mine, and for five summers I lived in it from the beginning of May until the frosts came and turned the bracken brown and the shepherds set fire to the hills so that in the spring the fresh young grass might grow thick for the sheep and goats.

Houses, like people, have personalities, and like the personalities of people they are partly molded by all that has happened to them. There are houses which are cold and empty, houses which are malicious, others which are friendly, others dignified and some, perhaps the best of all, are disheveled and merry. The moment you came into that house, out of the hot sunshine into the cool of its big tiled entrance hall, you were aware of its personality, and the longer you stayed there, the more you knew that this was a house in which charming people had lived, people who were simple and knew the things in life which had value and those which had not. One divined its peculiar warm quality, without reflecting, in the chairs and the very texture of the wall, in the cracks which had never been repaired because the owner had not the heart to outrage the house by tearing aside the

garments of flowers and vines to violate its nakedness with fresh plaster and cement.

The owner too was there, although he had been dead for a long time. The fishermen in the little village below loved him in life and they loved him in death. They never spoke of him by his family name but only as “Monsieur André.” When first I came to the house they regarded me with suspicion and when I met them in the single street of the little village they would address me with a cold “*Bon jour*.” The Basques, a singularly honest and dignified people, are suspicious of you until you have proved yourself. It was only at the end of the second year that they came to be friendly, slowly, at first one and then another and another. Only then did I discover that they had looked upon me as a usurper who had no right in the house of Monsieur André. When they saw how I kept the garden and that I changed nothing, only striving to keep the place as it had always been and never bringing to it any of that noisy vulgar world which had spoiled all the rest of the lovely coast, they began to accept me as the rightful or at least the appropriate heir.

And they talked to me about Monsieur André—how he had come to them nearly forty years before as a young man to buy the place when old Etcheverria died and how he let the widow of old Etcheverria live on for nothing in the little house at the end of the garden until she went to join her husband. He had broken no traditions, changed nothing. The Etcheverria family had lived in the house since it was built in 1657 and had owned the land since the time the Romans built the now desolate fortress, but the coming of Monsieur André had changed nothing.

“That,” the fishermen said, “was right. Monsieur André belonged there. He had the feeling of the place. God looks after such things.”

The people of the village were religious, but it was impossible to say where their Christianity ended and their paganism began, for the Church in its wisdom had compromised with a stubborn people by accepting a blend of the two things. Most of them believed in spells and charms and some of them who had never been away from the village in their lives talked of nymphs and sprites who lived in the groves of oak trees which dotted the countryside. There were witches among the village folk, whose craft had come down through nearly two thousand years from the days before the Romans had penetrated their rocky country. In June, at the beginning of summer, there was a fete in the village which lasted for three days. They burned a young oak tree or a pile of faggots to which the priest himself set fire, coming out of the tiny church at the head of a procession of awkward fisher boys bearing candles and piping in treble voices. On the second day there was a wooden bull carried on the shoulders of two men, which capered through the crowd, spouting harmless fireworks, to go up at last in a blaze of Roman candles, rockets and Catherine wheels. On the third day they danced and drank, and on all three they made love.

For the rest of the year they were a hard-working, moral people, but for the three days which marked the beginning of summer, during that ancient festival of fertility, they cast aside restraint and became pagans. For them the Druids were still only a little way off, no farther than the grove of oaks at the entrance to the lane, where they had worshiped and held sacrifices two thousand years before. In that lost corner the

line of tradition had never been broken. The fishermen were content with their hard spare lives. They wanted only to be left in peace. And Monsieur André had not disturbed them. Although he was dead they still spoke of him as if he were alive. If the Onspenskis had not come he would have lived on forever among them in his house and garden just above their roof tops, and presently he would have become a legend and after a longer time he would perhaps have become a local saint, perhaps Saint André des Falaises. That is the way such things came about in that country.

I heard about Monsieur André from the Baron as well. The Baron was a little old man who was land poor and lived with his sister in a huge decaying château at the top of one of the low foothills between the house and the highroad. He it was who owned the moor and he it was who for fifty years had been the protector of the village and the house, for he had refused to sell a hectare of his land when bit by bit the whole coast came to be ruined. During the boom days of the twenties he could have got any price for it, but he preferred to keep that last corner of his world as he had always known it.

He was a small man, very dainty in build, with a kind of shabby elegance that was touching. When I first knew him he was seventy years old and his sister Mademoiselle Fernande was only a little younger. They lived alone the year round in the big château with only one servant, and I never saw the inside of it for I was never invited there. After a little while I learned that it was not through lack of friendliness. No one had been invited inside its walls for nearly thirty years. The fishermen said it was because there was no furniture; bit by bit, for years they had been selling it secretly to keep their land. The Baron was rather dry and shriveled and his wit had

the same quality. There was about him the innocence of an elderly professor; he was one of those who are born to remain innocent in spite of everything. The fishermen, when I came to know them better, told me that in the village he had two sons and a daughter, and fourteen grandchildren descended from the days when he had been young. Perhaps it was these bonds of flesh and blood, sprung from the bacchanalian revels of the annual fete, marking the beginning of summer, which made him doubly the protector of that little corner of the world. I suspect that there was an unspoken understanding between him and the village people.

He spent most of his time among them and long ago when he was younger, he and his friend Monsieur André would go out in their boats with them, far out into the Bay of Biscay. His sister Mademoiselle Fernande shared his love for the village and the moors. She too had a passion for fishing and most of their days in good weather were spent in fishing from the crumbling jetties of the Roman fort. After I came and began fishing with a rod and reel among the rocks in the churning water on the sea side of the jetties, a new passion came into her life. Armed with rod and reel, barefooted with a knee-length khaki skirt, the old lady would join me in clambering over the rocks, fighting the surf as stoutly as any young man. Sometimes I was alarmed lest a wave should toss her against the rocks and break her limbs, but she seemed indestructible. When she was overturned by a boisterous wave she only shouted with laughter, picked herself up and set about casting once more.

The Baron was a scholar. All his life he had lived among the shepherds and fishermen, and he had collected and written down their legends, their spells, their superstitions,

and in the end he had come to believe in them himself. If you mocked at them he would grow very still and serious and concerned and say, “But there *is* a power in them. You shouldn’t mock. I know. I have seen things happen. You see, this is an immensely old country. We are still very near to the remote past.” But he would rarely go deeper than that into the subject. Although we came to be friends, I think he always regarded me as an outsider, not to be trusted with the secrets he knew. Mademoiselle Fernande too believed the dark sinister stories, even more profoundly I think than her brother.

From the Baron and the fishermen I came presently to know all about Monsieur André. They told me that he had died in the house one summer evening in the great room on the second floor, propped up in a chair so that he might look out for the last time on that beloved view of the mountains and the sea. For forty years he had lived part of every year in the house. He was a lawyer whose work was in Paris but he never stayed in Paris when it was possible to escape to Salasso. “This is a very ancient country,” the Baron said. “He may have lived here before and loved it and so always wanted to return.”

But Monsieur André was much more than a mere lawyer, for he had loved music and played the piano and he was an expert gardener and a good cook and a wit and for him, as for the Baron and Mademoiselle Fernande, there were neither kings nor beggars but only men and women. In his old age he liked fishing from the jetties and making water colors of the houses in the village and of the brown village children.

In the village the fishermen said, “He is one of those whom God blesses by giving the secret of a rich life. God must have

loved him." They did not mean that God had given him money, for Monsieur André had never had more than he needed to live upon simply and to keep his wife in comfort when he was dead. They meant that for him life had always been, until that moment when he died in the room overlooking the sea, rich and full. He loved so many people and so many things.

Sometimes in the quiet of the evening and sometimes in the heat of the day, you were aware of the presence of Monsieur André in the house and in the garden. There were the roses and the plum trees which he had grafted and planted and the flat stones he had laid down from the doorway to the little gate in the hedge of tamarisk and the funny little water colors made with such intricate pains adorning the walls, and in the cupboard in the hall there were his fishing rods, where he had put them away neatly for the last time years ago. Sometimes while walking in the garden in the evening with the sound of the sea at the foot of the cliffs in your ears, you were certain that he was walking there beside you, as pleased as anything that you loved the place and the garden. There were moments when I was almost certain that he touched my elbow gently, calling my notice to a spectacular rose or a fine ripe red plum. And again late at night when everyone but myself had gone to bed and I lay on the balcony looking up at the stars and listening to the sound of chains rattling about the fishing boats below, I knew that he was there beside me enjoying the peace, drinking it in, savoring it, as I was doing.

I do not believe or disbelieve in ghosts but I do have faith in the presence of the past and the sense of being and continuity which lies in old houses and gardens. Monsieur André was a friendly presence and I know that he came very

near to speaking to me. Perhaps it was that in that corner, so ancient and so undefiled and full of peace, the presence found it simple and easy to speak to me. Perhaps it knew that I was grateful.

3

For five summers we lived there, my wife, my children and the dogs, between the mountains and the sea. The children ran about half-naked and brown, in and out of the sea, catching hermit crabs and little red fish among the red rocks. They never had enough of it—that corner where man lived at peace with his fellow men, a life which was simple and good. There was not, I think, in all that village a man who lived to pile up money or would descend to cheating his neighbor. At the end we came to think of it as the Last Paradise.

And then one day a cablegram from America finished it all. We had to go home, perhaps for years, perhaps forever. We left in October after the garden and house had been put in order for the winter and Monsieur André's fishing rods and reels had been well polished and oiled and neatly put away in the cupboard in the hall. We left at night so that we should not be tempted to look back and see the house for the last time across the wide bay on our way to the station in Saint Christophe. There on the station platform we found the Baron and Mademoiselle Fernande, looking very odd and stiff in the worn old-fashioned clothes which they thought dignified and suitable for seeing us off. Mademoiselle Fernande wore a jacket with high sleeves which must have been made in the nineties and carried in her hand a little bunch of heather which she gave us "to remember them by."

It was a clear moonlight night when the distant high mountains seemed very near. Just on the opposite side of the canal, and on the station platform an old Basque sang "Ay-ay-ay." On the train I could not look at my wife for I knew that there were tears in her eyes and that if I looked at her I too would weep. The youngest child looked out from her berth and said, "When are we coming back to Salasso?"

"Some day," I replied.

"Next summer?"

"Some day."

But we never came back because the Onspenskis were there before us.

4

I prospered in America and when four years had passed, I knew that we could go back, and in the middle of the winter I wrote to my friend Dalambure for news of the house. I meant either to rent it or to buy it, no matter what it cost me.

Dalambure lived on the coast but he never belonged properly to Salasso, and on the rare occasions when he came to the house, he brought with him a certain restlessness and discontent. I was always vaguely disturbed and angry when he came because he seemed unaware of the beauty and peace of the place. I was always like a gardener who, showing a visitor through his garden, is rewarded only by politeness and stupid insincere remarks. Except for the disturbing quality which he brought to the place, I was fond of him. Away from Salasso, in a city street, in a café with a drink and a pile of newspapers, he was quick and witty and cynical and intelligent.

He wrote bitter books and inflammatory articles for the Paris newspapers, but he spent as much time as possible on the coast, though as far as I could see for no other reason than because he was born there, for he seemed completely unaware of its beauties or its character. In time I had a letter from him, full of political gossip and the details of the great Dumesnil scandal. A bank had failed, ruining thousands of modest depositors, and the scandal penetrated like a sinister growth to the very heart of the French government.

"It was," he wrote, "an affair as despicable and sordid as possible and most of the men involved are of the lowest sort. But what can one expect in depraved times like these when greed and fear lie at the root of everything? I doubt if any of the criminals will be brought to justice by man although I still have hope that God will not overlook them, for they are guilty of the blackest of all sins—that of preying upon their fellow men." His letter was largely an echo of some flaming article he had written for a Paris newspaper. From it, I knew that he was launched again on one of his famous crusades, but this foreign scandal neither touched nor interested me very profoundly. I wanted news of the house and Monsieur André, the Baron, Mademoiselle Fernande, the village, all that paradise to which one might escape from a sordid, weary and depressing world.

Of this then he merely wrote, "I have been to look at the house at Salasso. The old lady died three years ago and it has been sold to some people called Onspenski. It is much changed. I don't think you'd like it any more."

"Even if it has been sold," I thought, "I can buy it back and undo the changes." The memory of it had grown about my spirit as the old vines had grown over the house.

The children asked, “Are we going to Salasso? Can we go bathing and shrimping and fishing there? You promised us you’d go back to Salasso.” And I answered, “Yes, somehow or other, we’ll arrange it.”

As soon as we landed I went off to the coast to stay with Dalambure and see what might be done. On the train I wakened early in the morning and, looking out, saw that we were in the mountains going through a little green valley where the hillsides were checkered with little patches of maize and potatoes and pasture land. Inside me the old excitement returned. It was as if I were returning home after having been away for a long time. I could not go back to sleep and I fell to speculating whether it was possible to have lived many lives and to have kept some dim memory of them. Otherwise, how could one explain the feeling one sometimes had on seeing for the first time a new country? Here on this coast I was always at home, although I was in a foreign country where no one spoke my language. I had never felt a stranger even among the fishermen. I had known this country the moment I saw it, as my very own. I had lived here once, long ago in some other life.

The train slipped down and down through valley after valley and suddenly in a blaze of sunlight I found the sea, without which life for me becomes after a time petty and tiresome.

Dalambure was there to meet me and we had a late breakfast on his balcony above the canal.

He was a man of middle age, nervous and thin and energetic, with a body which seemed burned out; but in his eyes the fire was still alive. They were large and dark, almost his only claim to beauty, and at times they would blaze with

the light of fury and indignation. He was a man who had little sense of *things*, and very little sentiment. There was very little warmth in him and he had almost no sensual contact with life. He was very nearly all brain and so he was always alone. He traveled light with no wife, no children, no baggage. He fancied himself a cynic, and so he was until the questions of justice and humanity raised their heads; then the dark eyes would blaze and the spirit of a crusader would take possession of him. In spite of himself and his intelligence, he was by nature an idealist and something of a reformer. He was a powerful man in France for he had a wicked, biting pen whose molten outpourings were read by friend and enemy alike.

Dalambure's house was as perfect a reflection of himself as Monsieur André's was of him. It was rather a gaunt house, plain and undistinguished, which by accident had a picturesque view of the canal and the harbor, although I am certain that Dalambure had never noticed the view and would have been quite as content if there had been only a blank wall opposite him. It was furnished with the necessities of life and nothing in it had any charm or personality. For him a chair was merely something to sit on and a bed a construction which made it possible to lie down and sleep. He had no idea whether his furniture was ugly or beautiful or whether any piece of it possessed any character, any past or any associations. His concern was wholly with ideas and so to him my obsession for the house of Monsieur André was merely absurd and foolish.

When Dalambure died, he would never live on in the house and garden he had created. He would simply vanish into thin air together with his ideas. If he survived at all, it

would be in a few cold pages of print, unread because the issues which they concerned were dead with him. He was a tormented man with no sense whatever of how rich life might be. He saw the man at the next table in the café, his neighbor or greengrocer, and the Baron and Mademoiselle Fernande not as individuals and human but like most reformers, all lumped together into a single great abstraction which he called "Humanity." He was not like Monsieur André and the old Baron one of those "beloved of God."

At breakfast we had vile coffee full of chicory, some stalish rolls and marmalade out of a pot. When we had finished, I said, "What about the people who have bought the house?"

He grinned and the mocking cynical look damped the fire of his fine eyes. "They're coming for lunch," he said. "You can see for yourself. We're on very good terms at present. They're trying to bribe me and I'm pretending that I'm willing but am not satisfied with their offers."

"Bribe you?" I said. "What do they want of you?"

"Plenty," he said, and grinned again. "You see, it's like this. Onspenski—that's the name. There are two of them. Onspenski and his wife. You see, they're mixed up in the Dumesnil scandal. He's one of the guiltiest. He not only swindled the poor investors but some of his fellow crooks as well. I don't know whether he or she is the crookedest and the smartest. I should say he had the brains and she is the force behind him, but anyway there are a lot of people fighting to hush up the investigation, and my friends the Onspenskis are two of the most interested. I'm fighting to bring the whole thing into the light." The cynical look went out of his eyes and the fire returned. "And I mean to do it.

They're trying to buy me off from writing the articles I've been doing. I'm about to start on the Onspenskis themselves. They think they can buy anything with money so I'm letting them hang themselves. I'm letting them think that I feel the way they do—that money is the only important thing in the world. I'm letting them think that until I've got everything I want and then I'll explain that I'm not interested in money and thank them for the little story they've given me. You can only fight fire with fire."

"Have they ever been in your house?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then I should think they'd see that money and luxury don't mean much to you."

Dalambure laughed. "My dear fellow," he said, "they're not writers like you. They're thinking of nothing but money. That's why crooks usually come a cropper in the end. The longer they work the narrower they get. In the end they can't see *around* things."

"Why are they called Onspenski?"

"That's not his real name. I know all about that, too. I've been finding out things."

"Are they French?"

"I'm not sure. He speaks with an accent—Russian, I should think. She must have lived in Paris most of her life. When she gets excited she shows it and talks like a concierge. But it doesn't matter where they were born or what country they came from. They haven't any nationality at all. They aren't attached to anything or anybody—not even to each other, I'd wager, if it came to a pinch." He chuckled. "Maybe they'll amuse you. Perhaps you'll like them."

I knew that the last remark was a shot fired at random in my direction. Often he had accused me of being too gregarious, of liking people too easily, or at least of suffering the presence and acquaintance of scoundrels and bores merely because I liked picking their brains and using them as material. The odd thing about Dalambure was that while he loved humanity in the abstract he detested it individually. He loved the forest and hated the trees. In his idealism no man ever was perfect enough. Even his friends had to suffer criticism, if indeed he had any friends. His peculiar humanitarianism made him utterly lonely. I, who knew him very well, never had the faintest idea of his life when we were not together. Whether he had ever been married, whether he had mistresses, who his other friends were, I never knew. That was one of the things which made it so difficult when one or two men tried honestly to discover how it was he died. No one knew anything about him except his cook Marie Therèse and she only knew that he rose and ate and went to bed at certain hours.

In reply I grinned and said, "Maybe they will amuse me. I've never found anyone as bad as you paint them."

"Some day you will. I think the Onspenskis will give you the chance."

"You won't take people as a whole."

"No. Some qualities are so bad that they can poison or destroy all the rest of a character. The trouble is that you're never really forced to associate with evil people. You never know them except in a casual way. They happen to be my business. Some day you'll see."

Beneath the speech and in the intelligent twinkle of his dark eyes, I discovered an amazing satisfaction and certainty.

He was almost sunny about it, as if he found a kind of vindicatory pleasure in the vileness of mankind, and I was aware suddenly why it was that he had no intimates. Even I, sitting there opposite him, was no friend in the human sense, but only a specimen in his laboratory, like the Onspenskis with whom he was experimenting over the matter of a bribe. Doubtless toward me as a microscopic organism he had a little warmer feeling than for the Onspenskis; otherwise there was not much difference.

It was a fine bright morning and all the while we sat talking I kept thinking of how lovely the house at Salasso must look and how pleasant it would be to have a swim and lie naked in the sea behind the red rocks of the little beach, and when we had finished breakfast I proposed setting out at once on foot for the village.

But Dalambure stopped me. "No, I wouldn't go out there if I were you—not until you've met the Onspenskis. If they saw you poking about they'd become suspicious and that might spoil your chances of getting back the house. They have a lot to be suspicious about just now. And besides it might make them think you want it as much as you do, and that's something you must never let them know, or they'll make it cost you your last penny. Take my advice. They're coming to lunch. Wait until the afternoon."

So I yielded to his cynical arguments and spent the morning with him in the town of Saint Christophe. It was a dullish morning. We sat at his favorite café and read all the French newspapers and Dalambure waved his arms and denounced the evil ways of the world. A dozen or so of acquaintances passed by the table with a word of greeting or sat with us for a moment. On the whole they seemed

pleasant, dull fellows, but at their approach, I observed that Dalambure always withdrew inside himself. It was like a turtle drawing in its head. He had no real contact with any of these men and desired none. You felt that in his heart he found none of them worthy, and it occurred to me that there was something immensely aloof, almost Jehovah-like about him.

"Perhaps," I thought, "he is not human but merely an instrument of God for punishing the evil ways of mankind." But it was a very lonely business, being an instrument of God.

The little square before the café was flooded with sunlight and the plane trees cast blue-black shadows across our table. It was still too early in the year for the descent of those regiments of tourists and idlers which had come to infest the coast, bringing devastation in one hand and fantastic prosperity in the other, and so the square was pleasant and empty except for the townspeople, the fishermen, and now and then a soldier.

5

It was their voices I was aware of first of all. I heard them quarreling as they arrived below the balcony of Dalambure's house in a large and very smart roadster painted yellow with *aubergine* trimmings. I do not know what they were quarreling about but as the motor stopped I heard her voice, rather coarse and throaty, abusing him, and then his occasional reply, in a lower voice. She was using good Rabelaisian words straight from the gutters of Paris, and one had the impression that behind them there was a woman who suffered from blasted nerves and was tortured by perpetual

anxiety, not one of those “favored by God.” Suddenly he made a retort spoken rapidly and viciously which silenced her. I do not know what it was and I dared not betray my presence on the balcony by peering over the edge. I have a horror of overhearing scenes in which two people exhibit themselves naked and shameless, and at that moment, even though I had never seen the Onspenskis and as yet they meant nothing whatever to me, I suffered a sudden feeling of sickness and retreated into the sitting room. Perhaps, I thought, that is why Dalambure is really contemptuous of me, because I run away from unpleasantness and unpleasant people.

Dalambure himself brought them into the sitting room and introduced them, walking a little behind with a mildly contemptuous expression on his thin face. It was as if he were holding them at arm’s length like a scientist presenting a pair of exotic animals which have a very bad smell.

The man was the more subtle and more perfectly concealed of the two. He was small and slightly built and nondescript in appearance, like any small middle-aged clerk in a bank. He was growing bald and his hair was simply hair-colored. He wore white flannel trousers and white buckskin shoes and a blue yachting jacket with gold buttons. His clothes were expensive and smart, but too new, as the clothes of most Latin men nearly always are, and there was something grotesque in the sight of a bank clerk dressed as the owner of a fashionable yacht. His eyes were his only point of distinction. They were small and dark and very bright, and crafty rather than intelligent. When he was introduced he gave me a quick glance and then looked away out of the window, as if absorbed by the beauty of the view

which Dalambure had never seen. But it occurred to me that he did not see it either and that he really never saw anything because his consciousness was always turned inward, absorbed in the swift and complicated and evil things which were always going on inside the small, slightly bald head. But he had awareness, which came to him one might have said, through the skin rather than through his eyes. He was aware, I know, of myself, of his wife, of Dalambure. I was not at all sure that he was unaware even of the *insides* of all of us. His left arm he carried in a sling and the side of his face was covered with scratches which were almost healed.

The woman was quite different. She was three or four inches taller than her husband and had an inclination to be fat. This she had endeavored to restrain by corseting and I suppose by occasional dieting and cures, although this must have been difficult, for greed and sensuality were written in every line of her face and curve of her body. Actually she presented the illusion of an outline which was fashionably slim, but the illusion was a failure. She was inclined to bulge, and beyond that you were aware without thinking of it of the woman God and nature and glands had meant her to be. You *saw* her as fat. The impression surrounded her as if a dotted line had been drawn about her figure, indicating the true contour of curves and billows. She too was fashionably dressed in expensive clothes which had come from the smartest of dressmakers, but as with the man, the clothes made no difference. One had the impression of a cook who had gone out on her day off in a costume borrowed from her fashionable mistress. Madame Onspenski must have been a blonde for her skin was fair and her eyes were a peculiar shade of pale blue. The exact color of her hair it was impossible to divine for it was dyed a garish shade of gold.

They were a pair such as one sees often enough in expensive hotels, casinos and watering places, pretentious and assertive, yet arriving nowhere in the world to which they aspire. Gotten up in all the trappings of people of the world, they still remain what they are. You see them dining alone or occasionally with a pair like themselves and now and then with a man or a woman belonging to a different world, and then you know that there is some evil work afoot, blackmail or swindling or sometimes even murder.

6

Perhaps because it is my business to notice things about people, I noticed small details about the Onspenskis, among them, that she was greedy and that he ate like a man whose stomach is delicate and whose nerves torture him. The food was what one might have expected of Dalambure—the food of a man who was insensible to cooking and ate merely because it was necessary to eat in order to keep alive. It was cooked by an old woman called Marie Therèse who came from the village of Salasso to work in Saint Christophe in summer.

She was wrinkled and bent but her hair was black with the black of dye, streaked and purple at the ends. By profession she was not a cook at all, but a witch, and no one who cared in the least about food would have kept her for longer than a meal or two. But she had been with Dalambure for seven years and had come to look upon him as her charge. Perhaps there was in her feeling for him something of gratitude because he never complained of her cooking and kept her on.

When she saw me, her wrinkled face crumpled into a smile and she said, “Ah, my friend, I’m glad you’re back. Perhaps

you can change things at Salasso?”

When I asked what needed changing, she shrugged her shoulders and said, “You will see for yourself. Everything is different. Now when you walk down to the port, your neighbor passing you on the opposite side of the dike looks at you and wishes you ill.”

She was very good herself at ill-wishing and with some families in Salasso she was the object of fear and awe. When a catch was poor or a goat died they blamed it on Marie Therèse; yet when anyone, whether friend or enemy, in Salasso fell ill, he sent for the old woman. She tried spells but she also had a whole pharmacopoeia of her own which included such things as dock and rhubarb leaves and poultices of nettles. She was a hereditary witch and her secrets had been passed on to her down the dim corridors of a hundred generations. She herself did not know their origin but I think it likely that she was descended from one of those Druid priestesses who had dominated the people and performed their offices in the oak grove near the Baron’s castle long before the Romans came over the mountains from Spain.

She was one of those who was aware of good and evil, and although for years I tried to discover how it was that she could divine the internal spirit of a stranger, she was never able to tell me, save to say simply, “I don’t know. It just comes over me. I feel it. I am always right.” And she always was. In her long life she had predicted personal disasters. Scientifically, I suppose, she was able to do this by means of a keen instinct joined with a genius for observation. Her black beady eyes rarely missed the smallest gesture or intonation which might be significant.

She believed profoundly in the presence of Monsieur André in the old house and the garden and asserted flatly that she had met him walking at night on the dike or in the ruins of the old Roman fort. “I did not see him,” she said, “but he was there. He was even carrying his fishing rod as he always used to do. He walked along beside me for a long time and we talked to each other without speaking at all. He was a happy presence. He was glad when you came to live in the house. He is not happy now. He is wandering in the village.”

And now while she passed the *potage garbure* and the tough octopus cooked in its own juice, she bristled. She hated the Onspenskis and it seemed to me that she was also frightened of them, and I had never before seen the indomitable old woman frightened of anyone. When she served them she stood at arms’ length from the table as if they had some disease which might be acquired by contact.

Madame Onspenski made what she considered polite and worldly conversation. She talked of “the season” and the coming speedboat races and the new casino as if she were an important figure in relation to all of them—something which she was not. Presently when she had overplayed her game I divined that she really knew no one on the coast and had no part in its life. It was all swank and nonsense. Onspenski scarcely spoke at all. He was the cleverer of the two and might have gotten on in a worldly way had he been alone, but she queered his game. I think he knew what she was doing and was, not perhaps ashamed of her but annoyed with her for being such a transparent fool.

When the meat was brought in she had to cut it for him because his left arm was useless in its sling. I wondered how

he had come by the injuries which were nearly healed. Now she had an excuse to tell the story.

She told it while preparing his food for him.

It had happened on the road from Paris to Saint Christophe two weeks earlier. Onspenski was driving the car with Madame Onspenski sitting beside him and the chauffeur in the rumble seat. Above Saint Christophe there is a pass over the mountains which bears the name of the Devil's Footprint. Some ancient legend has it that the Devil made the depression one night when he stumbled and in a rage kicked the mountain. In the pass the road is narrow and winds up the side of the bare mountain, and on one side there is a drop which ranges from a few yards to two thousand feet. In the highest part of the pass the accident occurred.

"*Figurez-vous*," said Madame Onspenski, "the steering gear snapped and the car went sideways right through the wall at the side of the road. I thought 'This is the end of the Onspenskis' and then I didn't remember anything, until I found myself halfway out of the car door with nothing below me but two thousand feet of space. I was so dizzy I didn't dare to move. And then I thought of my jewel case and pulled myself back into the car. The chauffeur was crushed under it and there was blood all over everything. Alexei had his arm broken and his face scratched but otherwise he was all right. But the chauffeur was dead—killed right off, just like that," and with her knife she crushed one of the peas on the plate to show how he had been smashed. "It was a miracle. Everybody said so. It was one chance in a thousand that we didn't fall all the way down right into the river. The car caught on a small rock. They pulled us both up with ropes,

but to get the chauffeur’s body they had to pry the car loose and let it fall all the way down the mountain.”

And then she gave a chuckle of satisfaction, “But after all, we had luck. Alexei wasn’t hurt much and we’ll get the insurance for the car and a nice fat sum besides from the automobile manufacturers. There wasn’t any doubt of what caused the accident. Imagine an expensive car like that being made with a flaw in it. They’ll have to pay us for that, all right!” She chuckled again.

There was something triumphant and awful in her manner as if she felt herself immune from all the misfortunes of ordinary people; as if she were aware of some special protection. While she talked I discovered the figure of Marie Therèse standing in the doorway, listening to the talk. Twice I saw her cross herself and make the sign against the evil eye. Then she went on with the serving, still keeping at arms’ length from the other guests.

Onspenski scarcely talked at all, yet you felt his presence far more strongly than that of the woman who was so dominating and noisy. He was always there, watching. He was a watcher, a little like a snake, silent and observant, awaiting his chance to strike. That perhaps was his way of working. That perhaps was how he had swindled not only simple people but fellow crooks as well. He was the brains and she was the force of the combination. When he felt scruples or fear or distrust, she bullied him into action. It was one of those combinations in which one was essential to the other. They were two parts of a whole which fitted together. And the more I saw them the more I knew that it would cost me trouble and much money to recover Monsieur André’s house and garden, for his wandering presence and for myself.

When we had had our coffee, Dalambure said quietly to me, “Go and have your after-lunch nap. We have business to discuss.” And his dark eyes twinkled for a second.

But before I left Madame Onspenski said, “You must come out to tea with us and see what we’ve done with the house. I hear that you lived there before us so I suppose you’ll be interested.”

I thanked her and said that I should like to come out that very afternoon. For a moment she hesitated and then said, “Yes, do come. Alexei won’t be there, but you can come another time when he is.” And as she spoke, I caught the briefest shadow of a glance exchanged between them.

When I wakened it was nearly four o’clock and Dalambure was standing in the doorway with a grin on his face, a cigarette hanging from one corner of his tired mouth.

“Good sleep?” he asked.

“Yes, I dreamt of your friend, Madame Onspenski.”

“Bad dream?”

“No, I can’t remember now except that she was in the room, over there by the window.”

“It must have been a dream. She was never out of my sight.”

I sat up and lighted a cigarette, “Anything settled?”

“No, I asked too much.” He was silent for a moment. “I think she’s going to try seduction next, like a female crook in a melodrama.”

I laughed.

“Don’t laugh,” he said. “She showed every sign of it. But I found out one thing. I have a suspicion things aren’t going

well. He's nervous. I may get a letter from Paris by the afternoon train. Then I'll know."

I looked at him for a time in silence, and it occurred to me suddenly that after all, in the matter of human relationships he was a child, without experience. He was enjoying the affair of the Onspenskis as a child enjoys a game. He never thought of me or the house at all. He meant to bring the Onspenskis to jail.

"Do you think it's a safe game you're playing?" I asked.

"What do you mean by safe?"

"If bribery fails, there's only one other way to stop you."

He laughed. "They'll never try that. They're cowards."

"Rats fight when cornered."

He threw his cigarette out of the window into the canal. "Run along," he said, "to your tea party. I fancy Madame Onspenski will outdo herself because you're a friend of mine."

I took the white road along the sea under the dunes, past the graveyard and the old grove of oaks and without passing through the village I came to the foot of the goat path leading up from the beach. But the goat path wasn't there. In its place was a clumsy stairway of concrete and the goat path up which the children and dogs had scrambled so many times was overgrown with weeds. The stairway was like a scar on the face of the rocky hill. I climbed up and up, because the path was impassable. At the top I found the sea spread out in the brilliant sunlight on one side and on the other the distant mountains which were blurred by the haze of late spring heat.

But something awful had happened. The hedge of tamarisk was gone, the hedge which had been covered with feathery

flowers on the day I first stumbled upon the house, and in its place was a high wall of concrete. No longer could you peep over the hedge into the friendly garden. For a moment I was tempted to turn back without even entering the garden at all, and then I thought, “Perhaps the inside isn’t changed. After all, I *could* pull down the wall.”

In place of the rickety old slatted gate, there was a solid gate of oak, painted red, and when I pulled the bell, it was answered by a fierce sound of barking. I waited and then rang again and again, and when at last it was opened, I understood the delay. Madame Onspenski had been sitting all the while on the terrace in front of the door but instead of opening the gate herself in a friendly way as Monsieur André would have done, she had waited for a servant to come from some part of the house or garden. A lady, she thought, did not open her own gate. With her on the terrace was sitting a man, dressed in the uniform of a commandant of the French Navy. The dogs which had barked had been shut up.

The house was no longer there, or rather the old house had been so changed that it was difficult any longer to recognize it. The shutters were gone and the old wooden balconies and the flower boxes. The Onspenskis had made it *moderne*. It would have been more merciful to have pulled it down altogether than to have violated the old walls with wide sheets of glass and harsh window frames of steel. On the terrace surrounding Madame Onspenski and her other guest was a strange conglomeration of bright-colored furniture bought at some Paris department store as “smart.” I wanted to run away but now it was impossible, for Madame Onspenski had risen and was coming forward to greet me with that

artificial graciousness which it seemed she put on and took off as if it were an old coat.

The conversation during tea was not very interesting and for what there was Madame Onspenski made herself responsible. The Naval officer was not made happy by my presence and so he sulked. He was a little dark man with a rather stupid good-looking face and a chunky air of virility. He was, I should say, the sort who took up with the first woman he met on coming into port. At Saint Christophe his woman was Madame Onspenski. It was clear as day that he was impatient for me to go away and I had the feeling that I had upset everything by arriving at exactly the wrong moment. Also it was clear that they had known each other for a long time, for they addressed each other by their small names and had an air of intimacy and understanding which is born only of the long association of lover and mistress. His name was Bessantin and his boat lay anchored in the middle of the bay a couple of miles off. I wondered how Onspenski looked upon the affair and then remembered the glance I had intercepted between them. It was very likely that he knew all about it.

For myself I was too sick to feel like talking much, least of all to a woman I did not like and a man whose only feeling for me was that he wished me out of sight so that he might have what he wanted from the woman. From time to time while I drank my whisky and soda I discovered other barbarities committed by the Onspenskis. The fruit trees grafted by Monsieur André had been cut down and the neat box-bordered kitchen garden destroyed to make place for an ugly red tennis court. The rose garden had vanished to make way for an absurd summerhouse. But worst of all, the view

was gone. From the garden one could see neither the mountains nor the sea. They had changed the garden from an open friendly place from which one might see the heads of one's neighbors as they passed along the hedge into a prison, barren and bleak. Now, sitting in the garden was like sitting in the recreation yard of a prison.

When tea was finished, Madame Onspenski asked me if I should like to see the changes in the interior of the house but I had had enough and said I would see them on some other occasion. She seemed proud of what she had done and in no hurry to have me leave, but that may have been part of the game she was playing with the Naval officer. She was neither young nor fascinating, and it was difficult to see why he should have felt any desire for her, but men of his physical type, leading the life he led, sometimes develop strong tastes in women.

I took my hat and stick and bade them good afternoon, but Madame Onspenski insisted on going as far as the gate with me. I wanted to walk home over the moors and so I went to the back gate. As I opened it she said, "I hope you like what we've done. We've made it quite modern."

I looked at her, wondering that there were people in the world of so little taste and sensibility, and then I said, "Madame, you have murdered a house!"

To this she responded with a loud peal of laughter. "Oh!" she said, "you *are* a joker! I must remember to tell Alexei that."

The gate closed and that was the last time I ever saw her.

From the gate I walked along the little sunken lane which led up to the moors and as I walked I kept thinking of Monsieur André and what had become of him. He could no

longer stay in that garden. It was impossible to think of his presence in the evening inside that fortress guarded by dogs. Perhaps Marie Therèse was right. Perhaps he was wandering in the village and in the ancient fort, homeless, his tiny paradise destroyed.

And then I came to the top of the little rise in the lane where the moors stretched away toward the blue mountains with the Baron's ill-kempt old castle in the foreground; but even there the blight had struck. They were scarred with ugly new roads scraped out of the soft purple heather and scattered over them stood perhaps fifty new villas. They were built of brick and concrete and were of monstrous designs made to order not even by an architect but by a contractor. A half-dozen of them were finished and ready to be occupied, but the others were all in various stages of construction, some without windows, others without even roofs. And the odd thing was that although the season was only a month away when they might be rented, there was no sign of any effort being made to complete them. There was not a workman in sight and already the weeds had taken possession of the roadways. The finished villas stood as empty as the unfinished ones and all of them had that gaunt look of houses which had never been finished and occupied and were already beginning to fall into ruin. They were dying without ever having lived.

7

Dalambure was standing on the balcony waiting for me with a grin on his face. When I joined him there, he asked, "Well, did you like the changes made by our friends?"

"You might have prepared me a little."

"I couldn't. You wouldn't have believed me."

"It seems a pity that God permits such people to live."

"That," said Dalambure, "is one of the many mysteries which make me doubt the existence of God."

Marie Therèse brought us apéritifs, and I saw that she was full of curiosity and had a desire to talk to me but dared not in front of Dalambure. I gave her a glance which said, "We'll have a talk later," and she understood it perfectly and went away satisfied.

"Are the villas their work too?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How did they get the land away from the Baron?"

He looked away from me toward the harbor and I saw again in his eyes that old hatred and contempt for man as an individual. "That was easy enough. The whole place was loaded with mortgages. The old man and his sister have been selling chairs and tables for years to pay the interest and keep their land. When the Onspenskis found the place and thought it was a good speculation, they simply got hold of some of the mortgages and squeezed him out. They thought they'd take advantage of the Baron. I have a suspicion they may have been caught."

"Is he still here?"

"He kept the château. That's all there is left. They didn't want that. It's a white elephant. The old man has been ill, I hear. He might like to see you."

I told him about the commandant who had been so rudely impatient for me to go.

"Ah, Bessantin. That's an old story. It's been going on for three years."

"Onspenski knows of it, I'm sure."

"I'm sure he does."

"Blackmail?"

"Nothing so simple as that. I shouldn't be surprised if Bessantin ended his days in Guiana on the island."

"What are they up to?"

"I don't know. That's one of the things I'm trying to find out."

He seemed so good-humored that I thought he must have had news of some sort, and after a little time I found that I was right. He took his time but presently he said, "I had a letter from Paris this afternoon. It's true. They are hard up for money. My price is really too big for them. Something seems to have slipped up. That's why the villas never were finished. It's just possible that someone higher up in the scandal has been blackmailing them."

"Maybe there is a God after all."

He laughed, "No, they'll wiggle out some way or other. It isn't the first time they've been in a hole. I found out who they are too. He was born in Odessa. His father was a Roumanian. She is a Belgian. She came to Paris as a child. That explains her accent. He has been in prison twice and once in a lunatic asylum."

"I suppose that's why he's so quiet."

"The lunacy was a trick. It should have been prison instead. But there's a reckoning ahead. About a month from now there will be trouble. Maybe I can help along God a little in this justice business."

"That won't bring back the house nor rid the moors of those God-forsaken villas."

He grinned. "You're too attached to *things*. If you liked ideas better, you would be happier. Nobody can steal ideas from you. Nobody can destroy them the way the Onspenskis have destroyed Salasso." Then his fine eyes contracted to little black points. "I should like to see them roasting nicely in hell."

I was spared Marie Therèse's awful cooking that evening for we dined in the restaurant on the square and afterward went to the Casino. I had no chance to keep my promised appointment with the old witch. After midnight when I returned she had not gone to bed and when Dalambure had retired and I was reading in my room, she came to the door and knocked, asking if she might speak to me. In an old flowered wrapper with her dyed hair in curl papers, Marie Therèse looked more than ever the witch. Her wrinkled face had an expression of anxiety and malice as she stood, with an air of deprecation, just inside the door, still holding the handle.

"You have seen the place, Monsieur?" she asked.

"Yes."

"They have brought evil to Salasso. It was so quiet before."

"I haven't been in the village."

"You wouldn't know it. It's full of the evil they brought with them." For a moment she was silent and then asked, "Will you do something if I ask?"

I smiled, "I can't make promises without knowing."

"It's about Monsieur Dalambure. Tell him to let them alone. They're evil people."

"Don't you want them punished?"

“It’s not for him to do. He’s not strong enough. Only God can punish them. The devil is on their side.” Then suddenly she was angry. “Don’t smile, I know about these things. God meant to kill them when that accident happened, but the devil saved them. It was the hand of God which broke the thing it steered by. Don’t smile. I know about these things. Monsieur Dalambure isn’t strong enough to be God.”

I wasn’t smiling now. She was so earnest and so tragic and intense that one believed for a moment that she did “know about these things.”

“I promise, but it will do no good.”

She seemed relieved but she chattered on for a time about good and evil and God and Monsieur André. She said that the Onspenskis built the wall and kept dogs inside because they were afraid. “People like that are always afraid.” They liked the house, she said, because it was so near to the frontier. They could escape if necessary into Spain on a moment’s notice.

At last she left me, but when I put out the light, I could not sleep. My mind was awake and I was aware of the spell of that dark beautiful country. From my window I could see the mountains in the moonlight, the distant ones blue and cold, the nearer ones stained here and there with dark patches made by the ancient oak forests, still inhabited, the shepherds said, by dryads and tree spirits. In the darkness I came again to believe as I had done when I lived in Monsieur André’s house that all things were possible and that nothing was astonishing. There was good and there was evil in the world and why should these elements not manifest themselves in people? Why should not evil be a tangible force unseen but known by its effect, like electricity? These two strangers,

coming suddenly into that quiet world, had poisoned it and defeated the good kindly powers of the dead Monsieur André and the living Baron.

8

My train left at nine o'clock the following night. Dalambure asked me to stay on but I had no desire to stay or ever to see Salasso again, which indeed I never did. It was too much like the pain of looking upon the body of one you have loved. It was over and finished. There remained only my visit to the Baron.

The château was surrounded by a wall and partly hidden from the road by the trees of the ragged park. Once, long ago, before the façade of the house, there had been a garden of rare plants, exotic to that part of the world, but with no one to care for it, it had fallen into ruin and decay. On that last morning, looking up the abandoned driveway, I had the feeling that with the passing of the château and the park a whole era of civilization and good living had come to an end. Once the owners of this house had lived off their land, quiet simple folk, gentle and unpretentious. But that was all finished now. What Dalambure said had truth in it—that those who got on in this modern world were like the Onspenskis, those who gathered about to feast on the corpse, without scruples, very often even without nationality, the greedy, the money-changers, the ghouls. You could not envy them. You could only feel contempt. Through the trees as I walked, I had a view of the moors scarred by the new roads and violated by the gaunt half-finished empty villas.

At the door I pulled a rusty bell handle and from some far-off part of the château there was a ghostly answering jangle;

but no one came. Again I rang and then a third time and presently I heard the sound of footsteps coming down the big stone-paved hallway.

It was Mademoiselle Fernande herself who opened the gate, and for a moment she did not recognize me. She, herself, was terribly changed. It was natural that she should have looked older, but there was a deadness and melancholy in her face and manner. The old spirit which had led the old lady barefoot across the rocks through the surf with her fishing rod was gone. She smiled but it was worse than if she had not smiled at all. And she invited me to come in, a thing which she had never done before. She was glad to see me.

The hall was absolutely empty of furniture, a big ugly hall built in the wrong period with a clumsy chandelier of glass, but the salon into which she led me had a certain romantic style and there were still some furnishings in it—two chairs, a sofa, a pair of tables and a screen. They remained, I understood at a glance, because they had no value. They were all of the Second Empire, pretentious and vulgar and ugly, just as the furniture of our times is spare and mean and without character. The good furniture, the inherited pieces, had gone long ago in order to keep the land, and now the land was gone with the furniture.

Mademoiselle Fernande seated herself in one of the chairs, sitting upright a little on the edge like a young girl of a middle-class French family receiving her first caller. As a child she had been trained thus and now as an old woman, receiving one in her house for the first time, the manner returned to her. She smiled but she was sad. She asked politely after my wife and children and even the Aberdeen terriers. One of them was dead, having left sons and

daughters. That bit pleased her and for a moment she seemed jolly again. But it was impossible to picture this tired old woman ever again climbing over the rocks barefooted to fish for *meunier*. She was, in spite of her stiff prim carriage, limp, defeated and tired, a woman who had finished with life.

"It was good of you to call so soon," she said.

"I'm only here for two days and I didn't want to go away without seeing you and your brother."

For a moment the ghost of surprise came into her face. "Didn't you know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

"My brother is dead. He only died last night."

"Oh!" For a moment I could think of nothing to say. These two people more than twice my age, of another world and another blood, strangers, had been very near to me. People I knew had died, relations and friends and acquaintances, yet very few of them had gone away leaving me with a sensation of sorrow and genuine loss. I was suddenly aware that these two old people had meant something special to me. I had never thought of it until that moment. There was no one who could fill the small niche which the Baron had occupied, no one ever again who would be as Mademoiselle Fernande had been in her old khaki skirt and sweater laughing and swearing, when the surf swept round a rock and struck her full on. That would never happen again for she too in a way was already dead. Their going left a hole which nothing would fill, until I myself was dead.

"I'm so sorry," I said, "I didn't know."

"It was the land," she said. "After they took the land away from us he never went out any more. He kept all the curtains

drawn on that side of the house. You see the land never belonged to anyone but our family—never. And when they took it away it made him feel useless and weak. And now he's dead." She spoke dully, without resentment or hatred, and when she had finished there was a silence as if she had meant to add that she too would soon be gone.

"Would you like to see him?" she asked.

I dislike looking upon dead people, but I was aware that she was old-fashioned and that it would please her. She led the way through the empty hall and up the big stairway to a room with a view of the mountains. It too was empty of furniture save for a great bed and two chairs which were occupied by two nuns who did not stop their prayers to look up as we came in. The old man was dressed in shabby old-fashioned evening clothes which he had not worn for perhaps thirty years. I had always thought of him as pleasant and kindly but never as handsome. Now in death he was beautiful and one saw in his face that he had had a good life and been a friend to his neighbors. Like his old comrade Monsieur André there had been neither kings nor beggars for him, but only men. I said a prayer for him and we went out.

At the door Mademoiselle Fernande took my hand. "He would be glad to know that you came. He often spoke of you—especially after they came and destroyed Monsieur André's house." Again there was a silence and I understood what she was thinking—that this would be the last time we should ever meet. She did not ask me if I meant to come back to Salasso. She *knew* that for me as well as for herself, it was finished.

As I walked along the roadway to the big gates, the whole bay was spread out below me and on the clear blue surface a single boat moved. It was a launch coming from the destroyer

to the tiny harbor of Salasso—Commandant Bessantin, bestial and full of lust, going to his mistress, Madame Onspenski.

I left by the night train and Dalambure went with me to the station. He was still in high spirits. His investigation was going well. We had a drink together and he promised to meet me in a month in Paris. As the train pulled out his tall, lonely figure was the only one on the platform save for the porters. When I leaned out of the window to bid him good-by he grinned, but it was a grin without good humor, a cold grin which had nothing to do with me. He was thinking of his ideas and of the task he had set himself, pleased that it was going so well.

"You'll be seeing all of us before long," he said, "me and the Onspenskis. I'll be coming to Paris when they're arrested."

But he was wrong. Within the month he was dead and all the papers which he had collected to finish off the Onspenskis were never found, not so much as a scrap of them. And most of the evidence I imagine he had kept in his head.

9

There were fine eulogies of Dalambure and his work in the Paris newspapers. His friends praised him with sincerity and his enemies because even in death he was a dangerous man to have attacked. The papers said that he had died of ptomaine poisoning, suddenly, alone in his grim characterless house while his one servant was at market. In that theory there was a certain bitter humor; it would have been so easy to die of poisoning from the cooking of Marie Therèse. But I knew

and I fancy a great many others knew that he did not die in that way. I remembered the visit of Marie Therèse to my room long after midnight when she stood, holding to the door handle, saying, “It’s not for him to punish them. He’s not strong enough. Monsieur Dalambure is not strong enough to be God.”

The exposure of the Onspenskis and the others in the great Dumesnil scandal died with Dalambure. In the reform papers there was talk of an investigation of his death but nothing came of it in the end. They buried him in the cemetery of Saint Christophe which was the one place he had ever loved, and when I examined myself I found that oddly I did not miss him at all. His going left no hole as the death of the Baron had done. God had not loved him as he had loved the others.

The only echo of the case came when Marie Therèse was arrested. For weeks she had gone about Saint Christophe and Salasso saying openly that the Onspenskis had poisoned Dalambure to be rid of him and his knowledge. It was the Onspenskis who had her arrested at last on a charge of slander, and they did their best to bring against her an accusation of having poisoned her master, something which with all their crooked spidery inclinations they might easily have done. That would have been the ultimate refinement of their power for evil. But the magistrate, an upright and intelligent man, saved her by finding that she was not malicious and evil but merely a harmless old woman who was not quite sane and could not be held responsible for the gossip she spread. The accusation against her turned the whole of Salasso against the Onspenskis, so that it was impossible to find anyone to work for them and they were

left more than ever alone in the prison which they had made of Monsieur André's house and garden.

At the end of the summer they left and never returned there. The half-finished villas fell slowly into decay and the poor house itself had a succession of fly-by-night tenants until it was bought at last by a Greek syndicate which turned it into a restaurant and house of assignation. And one night in November after the shepherds had begun to burn the dead bracken from the hills Mademoiselle Fernande died alone in the château.

10

And so the story might have ended, the story of how the Onspenskis brought the blight of evil to one of the last pleasant corners of Europe. For me Salasso and Saint Christophe was finished but in my heart I still felt the need of vengeance. I wanted to know the end of the Onspenskis. I wanted to know whether Marie Therèse was right when she said that in the end the Hand of God would reach out and crush them.

Their name one encountered from time to time during the years that followed. It was an unusual name and I learned to pick it out almost at once from among dozens of others in a newspaper. I found it in papers in London and Berlin and Paris, nearly always concerned with the account of some new financial scheme. Now and then it appeared in the list of names of those visiting Venice or Biarritz or Deauville, spots where they might ply their trade profitably; and at once I could see the pair dressed for roles which they were never permitted to play, moving among people who ignored them, lonely perhaps without knowing it, trying always for money

and even for distinction which would never be theirs because they could not work honestly either for the one or the other.

I do not think that, in spite of their swindles, they were ever very rich. There was always blackmail to be paid and fellow crooks and corrupt politicians to be appeased and several times at least their ventures failed and left them bankrupt, but no matter what their fortunes were they always bluffed and always they seemed to find new victims. They belonged to these times when one day a man is fabulously rich and the next he finds himself with nothing but debts, and no more than honorable people were they able to escape the seethings and surgings of economics in a day of depressions. It was the world crisis which ruined them at Salasso where they had gambled on wrecking the place to make a fortune. They had come too late and one day there were no more rich English or Americans or Argentines or Spanish on the whole coast and the bottom dropped out of everything. So they simply walked off and left it, leaving the money-lenders to gather what they could from the half-finished villas and the ruined house and the defiled moor.

Year after year their names kept bobbing up in the stormy times, like bits of cork in a wild surf. You could read that they were now in this country, now in that one, always themselves without nationality casting a blight wherever they appeared.

And then four years after I had had tea with Madame Onspenski and the French commandant, I discovered the clue to their affair. There was at that moment one of the spy scares which regularly afflict European countries, when there is an uproar and a scandal and names and accusations are hurled and in the end only the stupid and those without influence are

caught. They make dull reading and rarely are they like the romantic stories of spies one reads of in fiction. The spies of reality, or at least the ones that are caught, seem always to be gentle retired professors or chambermaids or old maids in need of money. I would not have troubled to read this particular scandal save for the sight of a name in headlines, this time not the name of Onspenski but of the dark little Commandant Bessantin who had wished me in Hades the day I went to tea. He hanged himself in a brothel in Havre a little time before the police came to arrest him on suspicion of having sold naval secrets to the Germans. And suddenly years after it had happened I understood the glance which I had caught passing between the Onspenskis in poor Dalambure's dining room. Even that had had nothing to do with anything so human as a love affair: it had had to do with money.

Somehow her name never came into the case and it was not for me, a foreigner, to turn informer and make an accusation which, however certain of it I might be, I could not possibly prove. If Dalambure had been alive he would no doubt have charged into the fray, but I had no desire to play at being God.

11

The *Philippe Auguste* was a liner de luxe, small, but beautifully and expensively made to sail between Hong Kong and Europe, touching at the Straits and Colombo and Port Said. She was a costly boat not alone because of all the chromium plate, the modern paintings and the silks which had gone into her construction, but also because there had never been any need of her. She was born out of the idiocy of

competition between nations and steamship companies, by one line to spite another. She was the fastest ship in the Orient trade, but even when she made a successful voyage she did so only at the expense of her sister ships. Like the Onspenskis, the *Philippe Auguste* was a product of these times, one of the brilliant ideas of giant businessmen who had a reputation for being at once clever and sound; and she was a millstone about the neck of the company which owned her. More than that she had always had bad luck. At her launching two workmen had been crushed to death. Once she went aground in the Malay Straits. In the Red Sea she cut a big Arab dhow clean in half and again while in the harbor at Marseilles she had caught fire mysteriously and lost half her beautiful insides. The men who had built her as a spite ship came to regard her as a monster.

But in the end it was always the government who paid for the folly, out of the subsidy which came from the pockets of taxpayers and went, a large part of it, into the pockets of the businessmen. It was only when a wave of reform washed over the government and the subsidy was cut in half that the men who had built the *Philippe Auguste* began to feel alarm. Among them there were two or three who felt that perhaps it was better if she were done away with altogether, under circumstances of course, by which there could be no doubt as to the validity of the insurance.

And so a few months after the subsidy had been cut, the *Philippe Auguste* burned and sank in the Red Sea almost within sight of Aden. It had been well planned to take place at a season when the weather was fine and there was small chance of passengers drowning or dying of exposure in the open boats; but the ship had a full list of passengers and

something went wrong and forty-two passengers were drowned or burned to death. Among them were twenty-eight women and seven children. Most of them were French and English returning home on leave from the Orient.

No amount of investigating ever fixed a cause for the disaster. According to the survivors the fire seemed to break out all at once in a dozen different places. It happened at eight in the morning when the first early risers were coming into the dining saloon for breakfast. A great many passengers, not yet dressed, had not even time to put on their clothes, and escaped clad only in pyjamas and dressing gowns.

All sorts of strange stories were brought out at the inquiry, one that the ship had been threatened with destruction many times by Chinese opium dealers who claimed they were charged too much by certain of the ship's officers for smuggling drugs into Europe. The directors of the company hinted that she had been set on fire by men in the employ of the rival line whose competition was so costly. There were stories of time bombs and phosphorus bombs but nothing whatever was proved save that by some means or other the ship had been deliberately fired. In the end the pious commission in charge of the inquiry gave out the opinion that the disaster was probably the work of communists, and for this it may have been that the members received a reward, collected in the end from the taxpayer. Only the insurance companies dared to hint that the ship had been burned by the company itself and for this hint they were censured in court and threatened with suits for slander and libel and in the end they paid. I think the directors of the company knew by that time that they were safe, for the only people besides

themselves who knew the truth were dead. One fact never came out at all during the investigation. It was the fact that the Onspenskis were on board. Again the Hand of God had stretched out toward them.

They had escaped in a small boat, comfortably and calmly among the first of the passengers. As if they had been provided with some foreknowledge of the disaster they appeared fully dressed on deck almost at the moment of the alarm, he carrying two motion picture cameras and a case full of films and Madame Onspenski with her furs and jewels. Their lifeboat was the first one clear of the ship and for three hours while the *Philippe Auguste* burned like a furnace, the boat containing the Onspenskis had circled about her until at last with her cargo of burned bodies the liner slipped out of sight. The boat managed to pick up five people struggling in the water but in these rescues the Onspenskis played no part for they were busy all the time with his two motion picture cameras photographing the dying ship, the wretched people who jumped overboard and those who were struggling in the water. (It was the more exciting as a spectacle because the sharks appeared a couple of hours before the boat sank.) When one film was finished he handed the camera to Madame Onspenski who had already charged the other with film; and so they missed nothing. It was a beautiful clear day with brilliant sunlight. The burning ship was painted white and altogether the conditions were perfect for photography. From time to time Madame Onspenski urged the crew of the boat to go nearer to the ship so that they might make pictures which were more detailed.

It was late afternoon when the boat containing the Onspenskis was picked up by a passing ship bound for Aden.

There the rescued were landed and taken to the grim hotel which stands a little way from the port; but when the party arrived at the hotel the Onspenskis were not with them. They had simply vanished.

In the same boat there had been a Dutch banker hurrying home from the Orient to save his bank from disaster and a young Englishman on his way to see his wife who was dying in Bournemouth. They it was who discovered whither the Onspenskis had vanished for when they went to the flying field to engage a plane to take them to London and Amsterdam, there was no plane because the only one available had set out for Europe half an hour earlier bearing a certain Monsieur and Madame Onspenski. There had been room in it for three more passengers but Monsieur and Madame Onspenski had chartered the whole plane on the guarantee that it would leave immediately. They had, it seemed, some excellent photographs of the *Philippe Auguste* disaster and they were in great haste to reach Paris and sell them at once before there was any competition. The sooner they sold them the better the price would be.

Their plane landed and refueled the next morning at Istanbul. It left there about eleven o'clock, soaring up and up until it disappeared in the clouds bound for Italy and Paris. The next day passed and the next and there was no news of it. It was as if it had climbed into the clouds and simply vanished.

In a café in Tunis I picked up the *Petit Parisien* one morning to read that a certain Monsieur and Madame Onspenski together with a plane and the pilot had been lost. It was believed that the plane had fallen into the Adriatic. One paper, for which Dalambure had written long ago, remarked

that the unsavory Onspenskis had escaped from one disaster only to lose their lives in another. I closed the paper thinking, “The Hand of God has struck them down at last. Now I shall never see their names again.”

But I was wrong.

12

In the middle of Italy in the widest part of the Apennines there is a great expanse of country which is savage and marshy and uninhabited. Wild boars live there and a few packs of wolves, which during hard winters come out of the region and attack cattle and even children in the neighboring villages. Under the winter rains the marshes become impassable for man and only the wolves with their soft pads can cross them. Sometimes even a wolf is caught and sucked down into their muddy depths. But in summer the marshes dry out and the earth becomes firm enough to bear the weight of a man, and then it is, late in August, that the peasants organize great drives to kill the wolves which plague them during the winter. They kill them in great numbers. In October the rains begin and once more the marshes become impassable and the wolves are safe for another year.

It was the wolf hunters who found what was left of the bodies. The plane, torn, smashed, rusted and half-buried in the quicksand, was their first discovery. Inside crushed beneath the motor, they found what was left of the pilot who must have been killed immediately. It was a boy of fourteen who found Madame Onspenski. All that remained were bits of torn clothing, bones and a few wisps of dyed yellow hair. The skeleton was buried to the waist in the mud which in winter must have been like thick soup. She had died thus in

an upright position. She could not have been badly injured by the crash of the plane for none of the bones were broken and she had managed to struggle through the mud for a distance of nearly a hundred yards before the quicksand slowly sucked her down.

Another hundred yards beyond her skeleton they found the torn clothing and the bones of the sly little Onspenski himself. He too had been caught in the mire and about him on the now firm earth lay scattered two motion picture cameras, a box containing films, now rotting and ruined, and a despatch case filled with papers on which the writing was illegible. (It is sad to speculate how much evil might have been uncovered if one could have read those papers.) All these things had belonged to him, but these things were not all. Beside the skeleton there lay a woman's handbag with more than four thousand francs in it and a woman's jewel case filled with jewels.

Knowing the Onspenskis it was easy to reconstruct the story. The woman's greed had done for her at last. Weighing twice as much as her "husband" she had been the first to sink into the quicksand and there he had left her, struggling, in the knowledge that she was already as good as dead, first taking from her her money and her jewels. There must, I think, have been a struggle and curses and a scene between them which dimmed all the other countless scenes which had taken place in their long knavish association, a scene infernal in its evil.

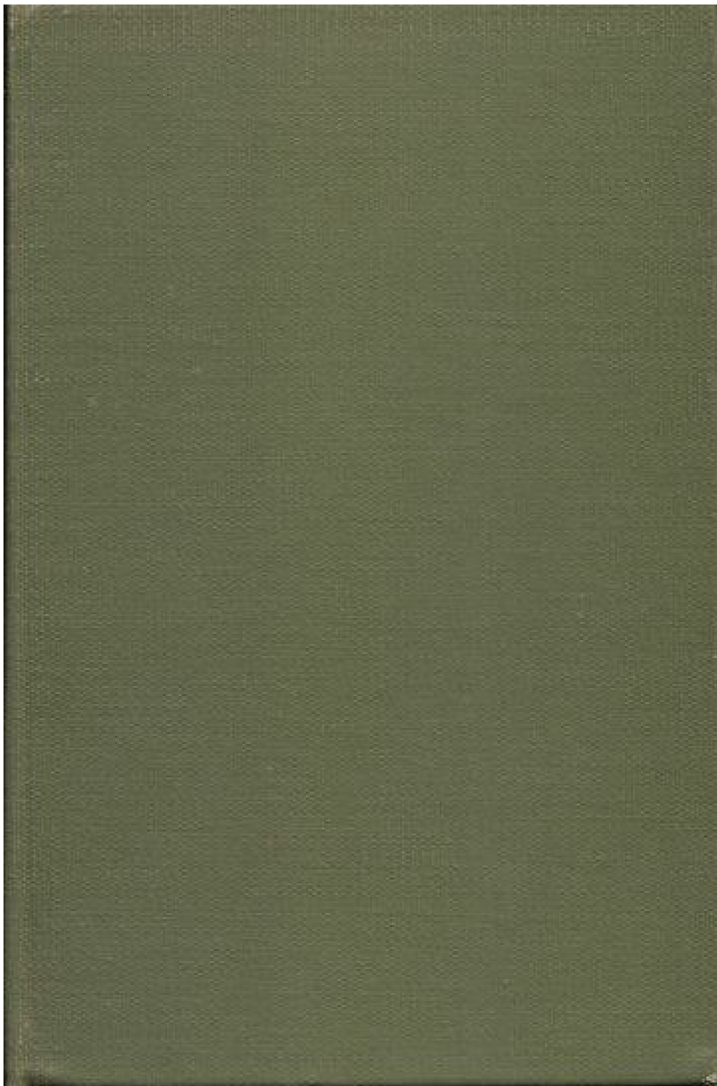
And so he had left her there to die only to be caught himself a little further on in the awful devouring slimy mud. He was light and spidery and he might have escaped save for the weight of the cameras and the jewel case and the papers,

but in the end the obsession of greed was too strong in him too, and he sank carrying his possessions with him.

The wolves had picked their bones clean. It may have been that while they struggled there, floundering hopelessly in the quicksand, they heard the howls of the animals coming nearer and nearer. It was impossible to know whether they were alive or dead when the wolves attacked.

I thought again of Monsieur André and the Baron and old Mademoiselle Fernande and Marie Therèse and the commandant who had hanged himself in Havre and all the other victims I had known—there were countless others, the old men and women ruined in their swindles, the men, women, and children who had died when the *Philippe Auguste* was burned—but I thought most of Dalambure, lean, tall, with the fire in his eyes and the look of contempt about his mouth whenever he spoke of the Onspenskis. In the end justice had been done. If they had escaped the Hand of God a dozen times, it had fallen at last with an awful vengeance.

I put down my paper, finished my drink and went inside the hotel to the writing room. There I wrote a letter to old Marie Therèse telling her the whole story. I knew she could not read but her granddaughter would read it to her and she would go about from house to house in Saint Christophe and Salasso spreading the tale of God's vengeance, and I knew that in not one house would she find a soul with pity for the Onspenskis or sorrow that the hand of God had reached the Onspenskis at last. As I wrote there echoed in my ear something which poor Dalambure had said long ago, "They aren't attached to anything or anybody—not even to each other, I'd wager, if it came to a pinch."



[The end of *The Hand of God* by Louis Bromfield]