**A Man with a Conscience**

W. Somerset Maugham

St. Laurent de maroni is a pretty little place. It is neat and clean. It has an Hôtel de Ville and a Palais de Justice of which many a town in France would be proud. The streets are wide, and the fine trees that border them give a grateful shade. The houses look as though they had just had a coat of paint. Many of them nestle in little gardens, and in the gardens are palm trees and flame of the forest; cannas flaunt their bright colours and crotons their variety; the bougain­villaeas, purple or red, riot profusely, and the elegant hibiscus offers its gorgeous flowers with a negligence that seems almost affected. St. Laurent de Maroni is the centre of the French penal settlements of Guiana, and a hundred yards from the quay at which you land is the great gateway of the prison camp. These pretty little houses in their tropical gardens are the resi­dences of the prison officials, and if the streets are neat and clean it is because there is no lack of con­victs to keep them so. One day, walking with a casual acquaintance, I came upon a young man, in the round straw hat and the pink-and-white stripes *of* the con­vict’s uniform, who was standing by the roadside with a pick. He was doing nothing.

“Why are you idling?” my companion asked him.

The man gave his shoulders a scornful shrug.

“Look at the blade of grass there,” he answered. “I’ve got twenty years to scratch it away.”

St. Laurent de Maroni exists for the group of prison camps of which it is the centre. Such trade as it has depends on them; its shops, kept by Chinese, are there to satisfy the wants of the warders, the doctors and the numerous officials who are connected with the penal settlements. The streets are silent and deserted. You pass a convict with a dispatch case under his arm: he has some job in the administration; or another with a basket: he is a servant in some­body’s house. Sometimes you come upon a little group in the charge of a warder; often you see them strolling to or from the prison unguarded. The prison gates are open all day long, and the prisoners freely saunter in and out. If you see a man not in the prison uniform, he is probably a freed man who is con­demned to spend a number of years in the colony and who, unable to get work, living on the edge of starvation, is drinking himself to death on the cheap strong rum which is called tafia.

There is a hotel at St. Laurent de Maroni, and here I had my meals. I soon got to know by sight the habitual frequenters. They came in and sat each at his little table, ate their meals in silence and went out again. The hotel was kept by a coloured woman, and the man she lived with, an ex-convict, was the only waiter. But the governor of the colony, who lives at Cayenne, had put at my disposal his own bungalow, and it was there I slept. An old Arab looked after it; he was a devout Mahomedan, and at intervals during the day I heard him say his prayers. To make my bed, keep my rooms tidy and run errands for me, the commandant of the prison had assigned me another convict. Both were serving life sentences for murder; the commandant told me that I could place entire confidence in them; they were as honest as the day, and I could leave anything about without the slight­est risk. But I will not conceal from the reader that when I went to bed at night I took the precaution to lock my door and to bolt my shutters. It was foolish, no doubt, but I slept more comfortably.

I had come with letters of introduction, and both the governor of the prison settlements and the com­mandant of the camp at St. Laurent did everything they could to make my visit agreeable and instruc­tive. I will not here narrate all I heard and saw. I am not a reporter. It is not my business to attack or to defend the system which the French have thought fit to adopt in regard to their criminals. Besides, the system is now condemned; prisoners will soon cease to be sent out to French Guiana, to suffer the illnesses incident to the climate and the work in malarial jungles to which so many are relegated, to endure nameless degradations, to lose hope, to rot, to die. I will only say that I saw no physical cruelty. On the other hand I saw no attempt to make the criminal on the expiration of his sentence a useful citizen. I saw nothing done for his spiritual welfare. I heard nothing of classes that he could attend in order to improve his education, or organized games that might distract his mind. I saw no library where he could get books to read when his day’s work was done. I saw a con­dition of affairs that only the strongest character could hope to surmount. I saw a brutishness that must reduce all but a very few to apathy and despair.

All this has nothing to do with me. It is vain to torment oneself over sufferings that one cannot allevi­ate. My object here is to tell a story. As I am well aware, one can never know everything there is to be known about human nature. One can be sure only of one thing, and that is that it will never cease to have a surprise in store for you. When I had got over the impression of bewilderment, surprise and horror to which my first visit to the prison camp gave rise, I bethought myself that there were certain matters that I was interested to enquire into. I should inform

the reader that three quarters of the convicts at St. Laurent de Maroni are there for murder. This is not official information and it may be that I exaggerate; every prisoner has a little book in which are set down his crime, his sentence, his punishments, and what­ever else the authorities think necessary to keep note of; and it was from an examination of a considerable number of these that I formed my estimate. It gave me something of a shock to realize that in England far, far the greater number of these men whom I saw working in shops, lounging about the verandas of their dormitories or sauntering through the streets would have suffered capital punishment. I found them not at all disinclined to speak *of* the crime for which they had been convicted, and in pursuance of my purpose I spent the better part of one day enquir­ing into crimes of passion. I wanted to know exactly what was the motive that had made a man kill his wife or his girl. I had a notion that jealousy and wounded honour might not perhaps tell the whole story. I got some curious replies, and among them one that was not to my mind lacking in humour. This was from a man working in the carpenter’s shop who had cut his wife’s throat; when I asked him why he had done it, he answered with a shrug of the shoulders: *“Manque d’entente."* His casual tone made the best translation of this: We didn’t get on very well. I could not help observing that if men in general looked upon this as an adequate reason for murdering their wives, the mortality in the female sex would be alarming. But after putting a good many questions to a good many men, I arrived at the conclusion that at the bottom of nearly all these crimes was an economic motive; they had killed their wives or mistresses not only from jealousy, because they were unfaithful to them, but also because somehow it affected their pockets. A woman’s infidelity was sometimes an occasion of financial loss, and it was this in the end that drove a man to his desperate act; or, himself in need of money to gratify other passions, he murdered because his victim was an obstacle to his exclusive possession of it. I do not conclude that a man never kills his woman because his love is spurned or his honour tarnished. I only offer my observation on these particular cases as a curious sidelight on human nature. I should not venture to deduce from it a general rule.

I spent another day enquiring into the matter of conscience. Moralists have sought to persuade us that it is one of the most powerful agents in human be­haviour. Now that reason and pity have agreed to regard hell-fire as a hateful myth, many good men have seen in conscience the chief safeguard that shall induce the human race to walk in the way of righteous­ness. Shakespeare has told us that it makes cowards of us all. Novelists and playwrights have described *for* us the pangs that assail the wicked; they have vividly pictured the anguish of a stricken conscience and the sleepless nights it occasions; they have shown it poisoning every pleasure till life is so intolerable that discovery and punishment come as a welcome relief. I had often wondered how much of all this was true. Moralists have an axe to grind; they must draw a moral. They think that if they say a thing often enough people will believe it. They are apt to state that a thing is so when they consider it desirable that it should be. They tell us that the wages of sin is death; we know very well that it is not always. And so *far* as the authors of fiction are concerned, the play­wrights and the novelists, when they get hold of an effective theme they are disposed to make use of it without bothering very much whether it agrees with the facts of life. Certain statements about human nature become, as it were, common property and so are accepted as self-evident. In the same way painters for ages painted shadows black, and it was not till the impressionists looked at them with unprejudiced eyes and painted what they saw that we discovered that shadows were coloured. It had sometimes struck me that perhaps conscience was the expression of a high moral development, so that its influence was strong only in those whose virtue was so shining that they were unlikely to commit any action for which they could seriously reproach themselves. It is generally accepted that murder is a shocking crime, and it is the murderer above all other criminals who is sup­posed to suffer remorse. His victim, we have been led to believe, haunts his dreams in horrifying night­mares, and the recollection of his dreadful deed tor­tures his waking hours. I could not miss the oppor­tunity to enquire into the truth of this. I had no intention of insisting if I encountered reticence or distress, but I found in none of those with whom I talked any such thing. Some said that in the same circumstances they would do as they had done before. Determinists without knowing it, they seemed to look upon their action as ordained by a fate over which they had no control. Some appeared to think that their crime was committed by someone with whom they had no connection.

“When one’s young, one’s foolish,” they said, with a careless gesture or a deprecating smile.

Others told me that if they had known what the punishment was they would suffer, they would cer­tainly have held their hands. I found in none any regret for the human being they had violently bereft of life. It seemed to me that they had no more feeling for the creature they had killed than if it had been a pig whose throat they had cut in the way of business. Far from feeling pity for their victim, they were more inclined to feel anger because he had been the oc­casion of their imprisonment in that distant land. In only one man did I discern anything that might appropriately be called a conscience, and his story was so remarkable that I think it well worth narrat­ing. For in this case it was, so far as I can understand, remorse that was the motive of the crime. I noticed the man’s number, which was printed on the chest of the pink-and-white pyjamas of his prison uniform, but I have forgotten it. Anyhow, it is of no conse­quence. I never knew his name. He did not offer to tell me, and I did not like to ask it. I will call him Jean Charvin.

I met him on my first visit to the camp with the commandant. We were walking through a courtyard round which were cells, not punishment cells, but individual cells which are given to well-behaved prisoners who ask for them. They are sought after by those to whom the promiscuity *of* the dormitories is odious. Most of them were empty, for their occu­pants were engaged in their various employments. Jean Charvin was at work in his cell, writing at a small table, and the door was open. The commandant called him, and he came out. I looked into the cell. It contained a fixed hammock, with a dingy mosquito net; by the side *of* this was a small table on which were his bits and pieces, a shaving mop and a razor, a hairbrush and two or three battered books. On the walls were photographs of persons of respectable appearance and illustrations from picture papers.

He had been sitting on his bed to write, and the table on which he had been writing was covered with papers. They looked like accounts. He was a hand­some man, tall, erect and lean, with flashing dark eyes and clean-cut, strong features. The first thing I noticed about him was that he had a fine head of long, naturally waving dark brown hair. This at once made him look different from the rest of the prison­ers, whose hair is close-cropped, but cropped so badly, in ridges, that it gives them a sinister look. The com­mandant spoke to him of some official business, and then as we were leaving added in a friendly way:

“I see your hair is growing well.”

Jean Charvin reddened and smiled. His smile was boyish and engaging.

“It’ll be some time yet before I get it right again.” The commandant dismissed him, and we went on. “He’s a very decent fellow,” he said. “He’s in the accountant’s department, and he’s had leave to let his hair grow. He’s delighted.”

“What is he here for?” I asked.

“He killed his wife. But he’s only got six years. He’s clever and a good worker. He’ll do well. He comes from a very decent family, and he’s had an excellent education.”

I thought no more of Jean Charvin, but by chance I met him next day on the road. He was coming towards me. He carried a black dispatch case under his arm, and except for the pink-and-white stripes of his uniform and the ugly round straw hat that con­cealed his handsome head of hair, you might have taken him for a young lawyer on his way to court. He walked with a long, leisurely stride, and he had an easy, you might almost say a gallant, bearing. He recognized me, and taking off his hat bade me good morning. I stopped, and for something to say asked him where he was going. He told me he was taking some papers from the governor’s office to the bank. There was a pleasing frankness in his face, and his eyes, his really beautiful eyes, shone with good will. I supposed that the vigour of his youth was such that it made life, notwithstanding his position and his surroundings, more than tolerable, even pleasant. You would have said that here was a young man without a care in the world.

“I hear you’re going to St. Jean tomorrow,” he said.

“Yes. It appears I must start at dawn.”

St. Jean is a camp seventeen kilometres from St. Laurent, and it is here that are interned the habitual criminals who have been sentenced to transportation after repeated terms of imprisonment. They are petty thieves, confidence men, forgers, tricksters and such­like; the prisoners of St. Laurent, condemned for more serious offences, look upon them with contempt.

“You should find it an interesting experience,’

Jean Charvin said, with his frank and engaging smile. “But keep your pocketbook buttoned up, they’d steal the shirt off your back if they had half a chance. They’re a dirty lot of scoundrels!”

That afternoon, waiting till the heat of the day w as less, I sat on the veranda outside my bedroom and read; I had drawn the jalousies, and it was tolerably cool. My old Arab came up the stairs on his bare feet, and in his halting French told me that there was a man from the commandant who wanted to see me.

“Send him up,” I said.

In a moment the man came, and it was Jean Charvin. He told me that the commandant had sent him to give me a message about my excursion next day to St. Jean. When he had delivered it I asked him if he would not sit down and have a cigarette with me. He wore a cheap wrist watch, and he looked at it.

“I have a few minutes to spare. I should be glad to.” He sat down and lit the cigarette I offered him. He gave me a smiling look of his soft eyes. “Do you know, this is the first time I’ve ever been asked to sit down since I was sentenced.” He inhaled a long whiff of his cigarette. “Egyptian. I haven’t smoked an Egyptian cigarette for three years.”

The convicts make their own cigarettes out of a coarse, strong tobacco that is sold in square blue packets. Since one is not allowed to pay them for the services they may render you, but may give them tobacco, I had bought a good many packets of this.

“How does it taste?”

“One gets accustomed to everything, and to tell you the truth, my palate is so vitiated, I prefer the stuff we get here.”

“I’ll give you a couple of packets.”

I went into my room and fetched them. When I returned he was looking at some books that were lying on the table.

“Are you fond of reading?” I asked.

“Very. I think the want of books is what I most suffer from now. The few I can get hold of I’m forced to read over and over again.”

To so great a reader as myself no deprivation seems more insupportable than the lack of books.

“I have several French ones in my bag. I’ll look them out, and if you care to have them I’ll give them to you if you can come along again.”

My offer was due only in part to kindness; I wanted to have another chance of a talk with him.

“I should have to show them to the commandant. He would only let me keep them if there was no doubt they couldn’t possibly corrupt my morals. But he’s a good-natured man, I don’t think he’ll make any difficulties.”

There was a hint of slyness in the smile with which he said this, and I suspected that he had taken the measure *of* the well-meaning, conscientious chief of the camp and knew pretty well how to get on the right side of him. It would have been unjust to blame him if he exercised tact, and even cunning, to render his lot as tolerable as might be.

“The commandant has a very good opinion of you.”

“He’s a fine man. I’m very grateful to him, he’s done a great deal for me. I’m an accountant by pro­fession and he’s put me in the accountant’s depart­ment. I love figures, it gives me an intense satisfaction to deal with them, they’re living things to me, and now that I can handle them all day long I feel myself again.”

“And are you glad to have a cell of your own?”

“It’s made all the difference. To be herded with fifty men, the scum of the earth, and never to be alone for a minute—it was awful. That was the worst of all. At home, at Le Havre—that is where I lived—I had an apartment, modest of course, but my own, and we had a maid who came in by the day. We lived de­cently. It made it ten times harder for me than for the rest, most of them, who have never known any­thing but squalor, filth and promiscuity.”

I had asked him about the cell in the hope that I could get him to talk about the life that is led in those vast dormitories in which the men are locked from five in the evening till five next morning. During these twelve hours they are their own masters. A warder can enter, they told me, only at the risk of his life. They have no light after eight o’clock, but from sardine tins, a little oil, and a rag they make lamps by the light of which they can see enough to play cards. They gamble furiously, not for love, but for the money they keep secreted on their bodies; they are unscrupulous, ruthless men, and naturally enough bitter quarrels often arise. They are settled with knives. Often in the morning, when the dormitory is opened, a man is found dead, but no threats, no promises, will induce anyone to betray the slayer. Other things Jean Charvin told me which I cannot narrate. He told me of one young fellow who had come out from France on the same ship with himself and with whom he had made friends. He was a good­looking boy. One day he went to the commandant and asked him if he could have a cell to himself. The commandant asked him why he wanted one. He explained. The commandant looked through his list and told him that at the moment all were occupied, but that as soon as there was a vacancy he should have one. Next morning when the dormitory was opened, he was found dead on his hammock with his belly ripped open to the breastbone.

“They’re savage brutes, and if one isn’t a brute by the time one arrives only a miracle can save one from becoming as brutal as the rest.”

Jean Charvin looked at his watch and got up. He walked away from me and then, with his charming smile, turned and faced me.

“I must go now. If the commandant gives me per­mission I will come and get the books you were kind enough to offer me.”

In Guiana you do not shake hands with a convict, and a tactful man, taking leave of you, puts himself in such a position that there can be no question of your offering him your hand or of refusing his should he, forgetting for a moment, instinctively tender it. Heaven knows, it would have meant nothing to me to shake hands with Jean Charvin; it gave me a pang to see the care he had taken to spare me embarrass­ment.

I saw him twice more during my stay at St. Laurent. He told me his story, but I will tell it now in my words rather than in his, for I had to piece it together from what he said at one time and another, and what he left out I have had to supply out of my own imagi­nation. I do not believe it has led me astray. It was as though he had given me three letters out of a number of five-letter words; the chances are that I have guessed most of the words correctly.

Jean Charvin was born and bred in the great sea­port of Le Havre. His father had a good post in the customs. Having finished his education, he did his military service and then looked about for a job. Like a great many other young Frenchmen he was pre­pared to sacrifice the hazardous chance of wealth for a respectable security. His natural gift for figures made it easy for him to get a place in the accountant’s department of a large exporting house. His future was assured. He could look forward to earning a sufficient income to live in the modest comfort of the class to which he belonged. He was industrious and well behaved. Like most young Frenchmen of his gener­ation he was athletic. He swam and played tennis in summer, and in winter he bicycled. On two evenings a week to keep himself fit he spent a couple of hours in a gymnasium. Through his childhood, his ado­lescence and his young manhood, he lived in the constant companionship of a boy called, shall we say for the purposes of this narrative, Henri Renard, whose father was also an official in the customs. Jean and Riri went to school together, played together, worked for their examinations together, spent their holidays together, for the two families were intimate, had their first affairs with girls together, partnered one another in the local tennis tournaments, and did their military service together. They never quarrelled. They were never so happy as in one another’s society. They were inseparable. When the time came for them to start working, they decided that they would go into the same firm; but that was not so easy; Jean tried to get Riri a job in the exporting house that had engaged him, but could not manage it, and it was not till a year later that Riri got something to do. But by then trade was as bad at Le Havre as everywhere else, and in a few months he found himself once more without employment.

Riri was a light-hearted youth, and he enjoyed his leisure. He danced, bathed and played tennis. It was thus that he made the acquaintance of a girl who had recently come to live at Le Havre. Her father had been a captain in the colonial army, and on his death her mother had returned to Le Havre, which was her native place. Marie-Louise was then eighteen. She had spent almost all her life in Tonkin. This gave her an exotic attraction for the young men who had never been out of France in their lives, and first Riri, then Jean, fell in love with her. Perhaps that was inevi­table; it was certainly unfortunate. She was a well- brought-up girl, an only child, and her mother, besides her pension, had a little money of her own. It was evident that she could be pursued only with a view to marriage. Of course Riri, dependent for the while entirely on his father, could not make an offer that there was the least chance of Madame Meurice, Marie-Louise’s mother, accepting; but having the whole day to himself he was able to see a great deal more of Marie-Louise than Jean could. Madame Meurice was something of an invalid, so that Marie- Louise had more liberty than most French girls of her age and station. She knew that both Riri and

Jean were in love with her, she liked them both and was pleased by their attentions, but she gave no sign that she was in love with either. It was impossible to tell which she preferred. She was well aware that Riri was not in a position to marry her.

“What did she look like?” I asked Jean Charvin.

“She was small, with a pretty little figure, with large grey eyes, a pale skin and soft, mouse-coloured hair. She was rather like a little mouse. She was not beautiful, but pretty, in a quaint demure way; there was something very appealing about her. She was easy to get on with. She was simple and unaffected. You couldn’t help feeling that she was reliable and would make anyone a good wife.”

Jean and Riri hid nothing from one another, and Jean made no secret of the fact that he was in love with Marie-Louise, but Riri had met her first, and it was an understood thing between them that Jean should not stand in his way. At length she made her choice. One day Riri waited for Jean to come away from his office and told him that Marie-Louise had consented to marry him. They had arranged that as soon as he got a job his father should go to her mother and make the formal offer. Jean was hard hit. It was not easy to listen with eager sympathy to the plans that the excitable and enchanted Riri made for the future. But he was too much attached to Riri to feel sore with him; he knew how lovable he was, and he could not blame Marie-Louise. He tried with all his might to accept honestly the sacrifice he made on the altar of friendship.

“Why did she choose him rather than you?” I asked.

“He had immense vitality. He was the gayest, most amusing lad you ever met. His high spirits were infectious. You couldn’t be dull in his company.”

“He had pep,” I smiled.

“And an incredible charm.”

“Was he good-looking?”

“No, not very. He was shorter than me, slight and wiry; but he had a nice, good-humoured face.” Jean Charvin smiled rather pleasantly. “I think without any vanity I can say that I was better-looking than Riri.”

But Riri did not get a job. His father, tired of keep­ing him in idleness, wrote to everyone he could think of, the members *of* his family and his friends in vari­ous parts of France, asking them if they could not find something, however modest, for Riri to do; and at last he got a letter from a cousin in Lyons who was in the silk business to say that his firm were looking for a young man to go out to Phnom-Penh, in Cam­bodia, where they had a branch, to buy native silk for them. If Riri was willing to take the job he could get it for him.

Though, like all French parents, Riri’s hated him to emigrate, there seemed no help for it, and it was determined, although the salary was small, that he must go. He was not disinclined. Cambodia was not so far from Tonkin, and Marie-Louise must be fa­miliar with the life. She had so often talked of it that he had come to the conclusion that she would be glad to go back to the East. To his dismay she told him that nothing would induce her to. In the first place she could not desert her mother, whose health was obviously declining; and then, after having at last settled down in France, she was determined never again to leave it. She was sympathetic to Riri, but resolute. With nothing else in prospect his father would not hear of his refusing the offer; there was no help for it, he had to go. Jean hated losing him, but from the moment Riri told him his bad news, he had realized with an exulting heart that fate was playing into his hands. With Riri out of his way for five years at least and, unless he were incompetent, with the probability that he would settle in the East for good, Jean could not doubt that after a while Marie-Louise would marry him. His circumstances, his settled, respectable position in Le Havre, where she could be near her mother, would make her think it very sensi­ble; and when she was no longer under the spell of Riri’s charm there was no reason why her great liking for him should not turn to love. Life changed for him. After months of misery he was happy again, and though he kept them to himself he too now made great plans for the future. There was no need any longer to try not to love Marie-Louise.

Suddenly his hopes were shattered. One of the shipping firms at Le Havre had a vacancy, and it looked as though the application that Riri had quickly made would be favourably considered. A friend in the office told him that it was a certainty. It would settle everything. It was an old and conservative house, and it was well known that when you once got into it you were there for life. Jean Charvin was in despair, and the worst of it was that he had to keep his anguish to himself. One day the director of his own firm sent for him.

When he reached this point Jean stopped. A harassed look came into his eyes.

“I’m going to tell you something now that I’ve never told to anyone before. I’m an honest man, a man of principle; I’m going to tell you of the only discreditable action I’ve ever done in my life.”

I must remind the reader here that Jean Charvin was wearing the pink-and-white stripes of the con­vict’s uniform, with his number stencilled on his chest, and that he was serving a term of imprison­ment for the murder of his wife.

“I couldn’t imagine what the director wanted with me. He was sitting at his desk when I went into his office, and he gave me a searching look.

“‘I want to ask you a question of great impor­tance,’ he said. ‘I wish you to treat it as confidential. I shall of course treat your answer as equally so.’

“I waited. He went on:

“‘You’ve been with us for a considerable time. I am very well satisfied with you, there is no reason why you shouldn’t reach a very good position in the firm. I put implicit confidence in you.’

“‘Thank you, sir,’ I said. ‘I will always try to merit your good opinion.’

“‘The question at issue is this. Monsieur Untel is proposing to engage Henri Renard. He is very particular about the character of his employees, and in this case it is essential that he shouldn’t make a mistake. Part of Henri Renard’s duties would be to pay the crews of the firm’s ships, and many hundreds of thousand francs will pass through his hands. I know that Henri Renard is your great friend and that your families have always been very intimate. I put you on your honour to tell me whether Monsieur Untel would be justified in engaging this young man.’

“I saw at once what the question meant. If Riri got the job he would stay and marry Marie-Louise, if he didn’t he would go out to Cambodia and I should marry her. I swear to you it was not I who answered, it was someone who stood in my shoes and spoke with my voice, I had nothing to do with the words that came from my mouth.

*“‘Monsieur le directeur,’* I said, ‘Henri and I have been friends all our lives. We have never been sepa­rated for a week. We went to school together; we shared our pocket money and our mistresses when we were old enough to have them; we did our military service together.’

“‘I know. You know him better than anyone in the world. That is why I ask you these questions.’

“‘It is not fair, *Monsieur le directeur.* You are ask­ing me to betray my friend. I cannot, and I will not answer your questions.’

“The director gave me a shrewd smile. He thought himself much cleverer than he really was.

“‘Your answer does you credit, but it has told me all I wished to know.’ Then he smiled kindly. I sup­pose I was pale, I daresay I was trembling a little. ‘Pull yourself together, my dear boy; you’re upset and I can understand it. Sometimes in life one is faced by a situation where honesty stands on the one side and loyalty on the other. Of course one mustn’t hesi­tate, but the choice is bitter. I shall not forget your behaviour in this case, and on behalf of Monsieur Untel I thank you.’

“I withdrew. Next morning Riri received a letter informing him that his services were not required, and a month later he sailed for the Far East.”

Six months after this Jean Charvin and Marie- Louise were married. The marriage was hastened by the increasing gravity of Madame Meurice’s illness. Knowing that she could not live long, she was anxious to see her daughter settled before she died. Jean wrote to Riri telling him the facts, and Riri wrote back warmly congratulating him. He assured him that he need have no compunctions on his behalf; when he had left France he realized that *he* could never marry Marie-Louise, and he was glad that Jean was going to. He was finding consolation at Phnom-Penh. His letter was very cheerful. From the beginning Jean had told himself that Riri, with his mercurial temper­ament, would soon forget Marie-Louise, and his letter looked as if he had already done so. He had done him no irreparable injury. It was a justification. For if *he* had lost Marie-Louise he would have died; with him it was a matter of life and death.

For a year Jean and Marie-Louise were extremely happy. Madame Meurice died, and Marie-Louise inherited a couple of hundred thousand francs; but with the depression and the unstable currency they decided not to have a child till the economic situation was less uncertain. Marie-Louise was a good and frugal housekeeper. She was an affectionate, amiable and satisfactory wife. She was placid. This before he married her had seemed to Jean a rather charming trait, but as time wore on it was borne in upon him that her placidity came from a certain lack of emo­tional ardour. It concealed no depth. He had always thought she was like a little mouse; there was some­thing mouselike in her furtive reticences; she was oddly serious about trivial matters and could busy herself indefinitely with things that were of no conse­quence. She had her own tiny little set of interests and they left no room in her pretty sleek head for any others. She sometimes began a novel, but seldom cared to finish it. Jean was obliged to admit to him­self that she was rather dull. The uneasy thought came to him that perhaps it had not been worth while to do a dirty trick for her sake. It began to worry him. He missed Riri. He tried to persuade himself that what was done was done and that he had really not been a free agent, but he could not quite still the prickings of his conscience. He wished now that when the director of his firm spoke to him he had answered differently.

Then a terrible thing happened. Riri contracted typhoid fever and died. It was a frightful shock for Jean. It was a shock to Marie-Louise too; she paid Riri’s parents the proper visit of condolence, but she neither ate less heartily nor slept less soundly. Jean was exasperated by her composure.

“Poor chap, he was always so gay,” she said, “he must have hated dying. But why did he go out there? I told him the climate was bad; it killed my father, and I knew what I was talking about.”

Jean felt that he had killed him. If he had told the director all the good he knew of Riri, knew as no one else in the world did, he would have got the post and would now be alive and well.

“I shall never forgive myself,” he thought. “I shall never be happy again. Oh, what a fool I was, and what a cad!”

He wept for Riri. Marie-Louise sought to comfort him. She was a kind little thing and she loved him.

“You mustn’t take it too hardly. After all you wouldn’t have seen him for five years, and you’d have found him so changed that there wouldn’t have been anything between you any more. He would have been a stranger to you. I’ve seen that sort of thing happen so often. You’d have been delighted to see him, and in half an hour you’d have discovered that you had nothing to say to one another.”

“I daresay you’re right,” he sighed.

“He was too scatter-brained ever to have amounted to anything very much. He never had your firmness of character and your clear, solid intellect.”

He knew what she was thinking. What would have been her position now if she had followed Riri to Indo-China and found herself at twenty-one a widow with nothing but her own two hundred thousand francs to live on? It was a lucky escape, and she congratulated herself on her good sense. Jean was a husband of whom she could be proud. He was earning good money. Jean was tortured by remorse. What he had suffered before was nothing to what he suffered now. The anguish that the recollection of his treach­ery caused him was worse than a physical pain gnaw­ing at his vitals. It would assail him suddenly when he was in the middle of his work and twist his heart­strings with a violent pang. His agony was such that he craved for relief, and it was only by an effort of all his will that he prevented himself from making a full confession to Marie-Louise. But he knew how she would take it; she would not be shocked, she would think it rather a clever trick and be even subtly flat­tered that for her sake he had been guilty of a des­picable act. She could not help him. He began to dislike her. For it was for her that he had done the shameful thing, and what was she? An ordinary, commonplace, rather calculating little woman.

“What a fool I’ve been,” he repeated.

He did not even find her pretty any more. He knew now that she was terribly stupid. But of course she was not to blame for that, she was not to blame be­cause he had been false to his friend; and he forced himself to be as sweet and tender to her as he had always been. He did whatever she wanted. She had only to express a wish for him to fulfil it if it was in his power. He tried to pity her, he tried to be tolerant; he told himself that from her own petty standpoint she was a good wife, methodical, saving, and in her manner, dress and appearance, a credit to a respect­able young man. All that was true; but it was on her account that Riri had died, and he loathed her. She bored him to distraction. Though he said nothing, though he was kind, amiable and indulgent, he could often have killed her. When he did, however, it was almost without meaning to. It was ten months after Riri’s death, and Riri’s parents, Monsieur and Ma­dame Renard, gave a party to celebrate the engage­ment of their daughter. Jean had seen little of them since Riri’s death and he did not want to go. But Marie-Louise said they must; he had been Riri’s greatest friend and it would be a grave lack *of* polite­ness on Jean’s part not to attend an important cele­bration in the family. She had a keen sense *of* social obligation.

“Besides, it’ll be a distraction for you. You’ve been in poor spirits for so long, a little amusement will do you good. There’ll be champagne, won’t there? Madame Renard doesn’t like spending money, but on an occasion like this she’ll have to sacrifice herself.”

Marie-Louise chuckled slyly when she thought what a wrench it would be to Madame Renard to unloose her purse strings.

The party had been very gay. It gave Jean a nasty turn when he found that they were using Riri’s old room for the women to put their wraps in and the men their coats. There was plenty of champagne. Jean drank a great deal to drown the bitter remorse that tormented him. He wanted to deaden the sound in his ears of Riri’s laugh and to shut his eyes to the good humour of his shining glance. It was three o’clock when they got home. Next day was Sunday, so Jean had no work to go to. They slept late. The rest I can tell in Jean Charvin’s own words.

“I had a headache when I woke. Marie-Louise was not in bed. She was sitting at the dressing table brushing her hair. I’ve always been very keen on physical culture, and I was in the habit of doing exercises every morning. I didn’t feel very much inclined to do them that morning, but after all that champagne I thought I’d better. I got out of bed and took up my Indian clubs. Our bedroom was fairly large, and there was plenty of room to swing them between the bed and the dressing table where Marie- Louise was sitting. I did my usual exercises. Marie- Louise had started a little while before having her hair cut differently, quite short, and I thought it repulsive. From the back she looked like a boy, and the stubble of cropped hair on her neck made me feel rather sick. She put down her brushes and began to powder her face. She gave a nasty little laugh.

“‘What are you laughing at?’ I asked.

“‘Madame Renard. That was the same dress she wore at our wedding; she’d had it dyed and done over, but it didn’t deceive me. I’d have known it any­where.’

“It was such a stupid remark, it infuriated me. I was seized with rage, and with all my might I hit her over the head with my Indian club. I broke her skull, apparently, and she died two days later in hospital without recovering consciousness.”

He paused for a moment. I handed him a cigarette and lit another myself.

“I was glad she did. We could never have lived together again, and it would have been very hard to explain my action.”

“Very.”

“I was arrested and tried for murder. Of course I swore it was an accident, I said the club had slipped out of my hand, but the medical evidence was against me. The prosecution proved that such an injury as Marie-Louise had suffered could only have been caused by a violent and deliberate blow. Fortunately for me they could find no motive. The public prose­cutor tried to make out that I had been jealous of the attentions some man had paid her at the party and that we had quarrelled on that account, but the man he mentioned swore that he had done nothing to arouse my suspicions, and others at the party testified that we had left the best of friends. They found on the dressing table an unpaid dressmaker’s bill, and the prosecutor suggested that we had quarrelled about that, but I was able to prove that Marie-Louise paid for her clothes out of her own money, so that the bill could not possibly have been the cause of a dis­pute. Witnesses came forward and said that I had always been kind to Marie-Louise. We were generally looked upon as a devoted couple. My character was excellent, and my employer spoke in the highest terms of me. I was never in danger of losing my head, and at one moment I thought I had a chance of getting off altogether. In the end I was sentenced to six years. I don’t regret what I did, for from that day, all the time I was in prison awaiting my trial, and since, while I’ve been here, I’ve ceased to worry about Riri. If I believed in ghosts I’d be inclined to say that Marie-Louise’s death has laid Riri’s. Any­how, my conscience is at rest, and after all the torture I suffered I can assure you that everything I’ve gone through since is worth it; I feel I can now look the world in the face again.”

I know that this is a fantastic story; I am by way of being a realist, and in the stories I write I seek veri­similitude. I eschew the bizarre as scrupulously as I avoid the whimsical. If this had been a tale that I was inventing I would certainly have made it more prob­able. As it is, unless I had heard it with my own ears I am not sure that I should believe it. I do not know whether Jean Charvin told me the truth, and yet the words with which he closed his final visit to me had a convincing ring. I had asked him what were his plans for the future.

“I have friends working for me in France,” he answered. “A great many people thought at the time that I was the victim of a grave miscarriage of justice; the director of my firm is convinced that I was un­justly condemned; and I may get a reduction of my sentence. Even if I don’t, I think I can count upon getting back to France at the end of my six years. You see, I’m making myself very useful here. The accounts were very badly kept when I took them over, and I’ve got them in apple-pie order. There have been leakages, and I am convinced that if they’ll give me a free hand, I can stop them. The com­mandant likes me and I’m certain that he’ll do every­thing he can for me. At the worst I shan’t be much over thirty when I get back.”

“But won’t you find it rather difficult to get work?”

“A clever accountant like me, and a man who’s honest and industrious, can always get work. Of course I shan’t be able to live in Le Havre, but the director of my firm has business connections at Lille and Lyons and Marseilles. He’s promised to do some­thing for me. No, I look forward to the years to come with a good deal of confidence. I shall settle down somewhere, and as soon as I’m comfortably fixed up I shall marry. After what I’ve been through I want a home.”

We were sitting in one of the corners of the veranda that surrounded my house in order to get any draught there might be, and on the north side I had left a jalousie undrawn. The strip of sky you saw with a single coconut tree on one side, its green foliage harsh against the blue, looked like an advertisement for a tropical cruise. Jean Charvin’s eyes searched the distance as though he sought to see the future.

“But next time I marry,” he said thoughtfully, “I shan’t marry for love, I shall marry for money.”