

FIRST

*The time will come when the sun will shine only on free men
who have no master but their reason.*

Marquis de Condorcet

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A young man, young but not *very* young, sits in an anteroom somewhere, some wing or other, in the Palace of Versailles. He is waiting. He has been waiting a long time.

There is no fire in the room, though it is the third week in October and cold as Candlemas. His legs and back are stiffening from it – the cold and three days of travelling through it, first with Cousin André from Bellême to Nogent, then the coach, overfull with raw-faced people in winter coats, baskets on their laps, parcels under their feet, some travelling with dogs, one old man with a cockerel under his coat. Thirty hours to Paris and the rue aux Ours, where they climbed down onto cobbles and horse-shit, and shifted about outside the haulier's office as if unsure of their legs. Then this morning, coming from the lodgings he had taken on the rue – the rue what? – an early start on a hired nag to reach Versailles and this, a day that may be the most important of his life, or may be nothing.

He is not alone in the room. A man of about forty is sitting

opposite him in a narrow armchair, his surtout buttoned to his chin, his eyes shut, his hands crossed in his lap, a large and rather antique-looking ring on one finger. Now and then he sighs, but is otherwise perfectly silent.

Behind this sleeper, and to either side of him, there are mirrors rising from the parquet to the cobwebbed mouldings of the ceiling. The palace is full of mirrors. Living here, it must be impossible not to meet yourself a hundred times a day, every corridor a source of vanity and doubt. The mirrors ahead of him, their surfaces hazed with dust (some idle finger has sketched a man's bulbous cock and next to it a flower that may be a rose), give out a greenish light as if the whole building were sunk, drowned. And there, part of the wreck, his own brown-garbed form, his face in the mottled glass insufficiently carried to be descriptive or particular. A pale oval on a folded body, a body in a brown suit, the suit a gift from his father, its cloth cut by Gontaut, who people like to say is the best tailor in Bellême but who, in truth, is the only tailor, Bellême being the sort of place where a good suit is passed down among a man's valuables along with the brass bed-warmer, the plough and harrow, the riding tack. It's a little tight across his shoulders, a little full in the skirts, a little heavy at the cuffs, but all of it honestly done and after its fashion perfectly correct.

He presses his thighs, presses the bones of his knees, then reaches down to rub something off the ankle of his left stocking. He has been careful to keep them as clean as possible, but leaving in the dark, moving through streets he did not know, no lamps burning at such an hour, who can say what he might have stepped in? He scrapes at it with the edge of his thumb. Mud? Hopefully. He does not sniff his thumb to enquire.

A small dog makes its entrance. Its claws skitter on the floor. It

looks at him, briefly, through large occluded eyes, then goes to the vase, the tall, gilded amphora displayed or abandoned in one of the room's mirrored angles. It sniffs, cocks its leg. A voice – elderly, female – coos to it from the corridor. A shadow passes the open door; the sound of silk hems brushing over the floor is like the onset of rain. The dog bustles after her, its water snaking from the vase towards the crossed heels of the sleeping man. The younger man watches it, the way it navigates across the uneven surface of the parquet, the way even a dog's piss is subject to unalterable physical laws . . .

He is still watching it (on this day that may be the most important of his life, or nothing at all) when the door of the minister's office opens with a snap like the breaking of those seals they put on the doors of infected houses. A figure, a servant or secretary, angular, yellow-eyed, signals to him with a slight raising of his chin. He gets to his feet. The older man has opened his eyes. They have not spoken, do not know each other's names, have merely shared three cold hours of an October morning. The older man smiles. It is the most resigned, most elegant expression in the world; a smile that appears like the flower of vast, profitless learning. The younger man nods to him, then slips, quickly, through the half-open door of the office for fear it might shut on him again, suddenly and for ever.