

Daniel Mercier went up the stairs at Gare Saint-Lazare as the crowd surged down. Men and women hurried distractedly past him, most clutching briefcases but some with suitcases. In the crush, they could easily have knocked into him but they didn't. On the contrary, it seemed as though they parted to let him through. At the top of the steps, he crossed the main concourse and headed for the platforms. Here too it was crowded, with an uninterrupted tide of humanity pouring from the trains. Daniel forced his way through to the arrivals board. The train would be arriving at platform 23. He retraced his steps and stood next to the ticket-punching machines.

At 9.45 p.m. train 78654 arrived with a grinding sound and released its passengers. Daniel craned his neck, looking for his wife and son. He saw Véronique first. She waved, then described a circle above her head, finishing her gesture with an astonished look. Jérôme meanwhile made a bee-line for his father, flinging himself at his legs and almost tripping him up. When Véronique reached

them, slightly out of breath, she stared at her husband.

‘What on earth is that hat?’

‘It’s Mitterrand’s hat.’

‘I can see it’s Mitterrand’s hat.’

‘No,’ Daniel corrected her. ‘I mean this really is Mitterrand’s hat.’

When he’d told her at the station that it really was Mitterrand’s hat, Véronique had stared at him again, her head on one side, with that little frown she always wore when she was trying to work out if he was having her on or not. The same frown as when Daniel had asked her to marry him, or when he’d first asked her out on a date to an exhibition at the Beaubourg. In other words, the frown that was the reason, amongst others, that he had fallen in love with her.

‘What do you mean?’ she had asked incredulously.

‘Have you got Mitterrand’s hat, Papa?’

‘Yes I have,’ Daniel had replied, grabbing their bags.

‘So you’re the president?’

‘Yep, that’s me. President of the Republic,’ Daniel had answered, delighted by his son’s suggestion.

Daniel had refused to divulge anything further as they drove back.

‘I’ll tell you all about it when we get home.’

Véronique had pressed him, but he stood firm. When they got up to their sixteenth-floor apartment in the fifteenth *arrondissement*, Daniel announced that he’d made supper. Cold meat, chicken, tomato and basil salad, and cheese. Véronique was impressed – her husband rarely

made dinner. First they had an aperitif.

‘Take a seat,’ said Daniel, who had still not taken off his hat.

Véronique sat. And Jérôme snuggled up beside her.

‘To us,’ said Daniel, solemnly clinking glasses with his wife.

Jérôme copied them with his Orangina.

Daniel removed his hat and held it out to Véronique. She took it carefully, running her finger over the felt. Jérôme immediately did the same.

‘Are your hands clean?’ his mother asked anxiously.

Then she turned the hat upside down, and her eye fell on the band of leather running round the inside. The two gold letters stood out clearly: F.M. Véronique looked up at her husband.