

## THE BICOLE

*To my daughter Denise*

### Chapter I

It was nearly midnight and the old painter Théophraste Lapastille had been dying since morning. After seventy-five years of life, all consecrated to labor, there was more hardship still to come in dying!

The lamp set on a nearby table revealed his eyes, sunken in the orbits, and his meager chest raised with increasing rarity by his last respiratory spasms. Beneath the tangle of his entirely white beard, however, a great serenity ennobled his features. He seemed to be forgiving society for having failed to recognize his talent as a landscape painter, and for having left him to struggle throughout a long, sterile life.

At his bedside, profiled in the half-light, was his maidservant Mélanie. Almost as old as him, the companion for forty years of his struggles and privations, she was inundating him, before the definitive separation, with the distraught gaze the Mary Magdalen lavished upon the expiring Christ.

What would become of her on earth without her master? What use would her arms be henceforth, if she no longer had to care for him? Was Heaven, therefore, no longer Heaven, which refused to take them both at the same time? Oh, to be sure, she would not profit for long from the little money she had saved to shelter her from poverty. All the better, to join him more rapidly! And for the first time, a resentment against fate was born in the profoundly generous soul of the old serving woman.

Tears would have given her some relief, but she forced herself not to weep. How could one tell whether the dying might not perceive what was happening around them? By virtue of a supreme commiseration, she even contrived to smile at the expiring man.

Then, in order to forget the present, and also the somber future, she began to glean moments from her memories. There were joyous ones, Théophraste Lapastille having retained the whimsy of a young artist into old age. But there were also painful ones, and Gehenna had too often shown its fangs in the lodgings, when the painter was obstinate in not dipping into his modest heritage, in order to save it for whichever of the two of them died the later.

Mélanie recalled her arrival in the studio, perched on the fifth and final floor of a humble building in the Rue de Montparnasse. At first, the bright light of the main room had seduced her, but on leaving her first place in the home of well-to-do bourgeois she had soon become alarmed by the welcome that she had been given here.

The master, a lanky fellow in a scarlet toga, while laying out his conditions, threw his paintbrush into the air and caught it in flight. He declared to her, singing like the comedian at the Théâtre de Montparnasse on operetta days, that he expected a willing servant. She would, to be sure, do the housework, the cooking and darn his socks, but she would also serve him as a model. He even made her turn around, and back again, to see how she was put together. Then, he showed her their bedrooms, as well as the kitchen—three narrow rooms, captive in a gallery to which access was gained by a ladder-like stairway, only separated from one another by quilted curtains.

Those initial observations had nearly put Mélanie off. Oh, no, she was not made to sleep in that garret, cook in that redoubt and, above all, to strike poses like those brazen creatures one passed in the street. She had a traditional soul, and Bohemia frightened her. She was, therefore, about to retire when she noticed the eyes of the scarlet-clad Roman: eyes of a blue similar to the cornflowers of the fields, with such an honest and tranquil gleam that she was immediately conquered—and so she had hitched her life to that radiance.

For forty years she had slept in the gallery; she had prepared the meals and washed the dishes between the two curtains and, when she was not doing housework, had consented to adopt poses, which were, in fact, perfectly decent, for Théophraste Lapastille only every half-undressed the nymphs that he placed in each of his landscapes. What, in any case, is more virginal than a nymph—the word signifies “veiled woman,” and also “bride”—who is a goddess of health, and of healing...

So, in accordance with the needs of the location, Mélanie sometimes appeared crowned with flowers, sometimes waving ribbons, sometime holding an urn, sometimes on the point of entering or emerging from a clear pool. She was a naiad next to a spring, a nereid at the crest of a wave, a limoniad next to a pool, an oread in a mountain hollow, a dryad under an oak tree.

Thanks to her rustic beauty, and her full and harmonious figure, Théophraste Lapastille’s paintings had at first attracted attention. One dealer bought them for export to America, exploiting him. At length, however, the repetition of the same nymph had ended up wearying the art-lovers, making them forget the real seduction of the scenery in which they were placed. And as Lapastille did not have the breadth of a Corot or a Diaz, indifference passed over his work. Glory—and in a very narrow circle—only remained for Mélanie. The painter’s friends had called her “the nymph” for a long time, and Théophraste said “the old nymph.”

In summer, when the budget permitted, they rented a cottage in the country. They spent a few months there. The master prepared his entry for the Salon, the maidservant lent him her humble assistance. Both from peasant families, brought together by the atavism of the soil, they savored those laborious vacations to the full. Those were the good days...

Alas, they were about to end, for him, in short order! The woods, the panoramas that he fixed on his canvases, would have no more beauty henceforth. If the earth still called to Mélanie, it was only to follow him into it, as quickly as possible.

But she shivered. Someone was knocking on the door. Borne away by the past, she had not heard them arrive on the landing. Who could be coming at this hour?

She would not open up. The master was too poorly—so poorly that to leave him for a second was to risk not being there to venerate his last sigh. But as the appeal was renewed, more imperiously, and the painter still had a little breath in store, she decided to go and see who it was.

An individual of about forty appeared to her on the landing. In order to climb the dark stairway he had lit the way with a candle that he was holding in the fingertips of his gloved hands. The uncertain light indicated that he was elegant, rich and authoritative.

“Is this really where Théophraste Lapastille lives?” he asked, on the threshold.

“It is. What do you want with him, Monsieur?”

“I want to see him.”

“Monsieur can’t see anyone. He’s very ill.”

“So I heard—that’s what brings me here. I’m his cousin, Dr. Marcel Granive.”

“Oh! You’re the cousin...”

Deferential to all visitors, Mélanie was nevertheless able to retain a certain suspicion of this unique relative, whom she did not know, but about whom her master spoke with scorn. She knew that a feud, of which she did not know the cause, existed between the Lapastilles and the Granives. *A priori*, she placed the latter in the wrong.

The newcomer did not notice, or pretended not to notice, the maidservant’s tone. As she was standing in the doorway to prevent him from coming in, he moved her aside, came into the studio, and stuck his candle into an empty candlestick. Then he turned back to Mélanie.

“Is it very bad?”

“Bad enough for me to beg Monsieur...” the old woman persisted.

But he took no notice. “Has he been visited by a doctor?”

“His own doctor, yes.”

“What did he say?”

“That my poor Master wouldn’t last the night. That’s why...”

“We’ll see about that.”

It was as well to let him do as he wished, in order to get his importunate visit over and done with. It was possible that he was motivated by familial respect. Anyway, who could harm her master now? Mélanie preceded the stranger up the creaking steps.

When he was beside the bed, Dr. Granive considered the dying man coldly, and then took his pulse, more out of professional habit than to query an irremediable situation. At the same time, an avid joy was inscribed on his face.

“He’ll be dead within the hour,” he confirmed. “It’s scarcely worth the trouble of my staying, since there’s nothing to be done. I have other patients. Take good care of him until the end, my worthy woman. As for the funeral, if you have need of me...”

“Monsieur needn’t bother. I’ve done what’s necessary.”

“Perfect!” said the cousin, who had recovered his self-control and signified with that word his contentment with his enquiry.

He went back down to the studio, picked up his candle, and headed for the landing, without a word of farewell for the maidservant. Mélanie shrugged her shoulders and went back up to the dying man.

She had not been there for five minutes when another noise caused her to sit up straight. This time, there was a racket on the staircase. One might have thought that drunks were making the ascent in the dark, stumbling over every step. A shrill voice was encouraging them, or rallying them; it was impossible to say which. Then a whip cracked, which seemed to restore order. But the racket began again almost immediately.

“Oh, aren’t they going to shut up! It shouldn’t be allowed!”

She went back down to the door. As she went past she switched on the electric light in the studio—with the result that, when the door was opened, the bright light put her in confrontation with three individuals far more disquieting than the one who had just left.

They were of modest heights, clad in hooded garments with sleeves, which permitted Mélanie to observe, in the hand of the one who seemed to be in charge, the small whip that she had heard cracking a few moments before. He raised it, moreover, at the domestic—but she did not flinch. She thought at first that she was dealing with drunken art-students in the process of stupidly larking around, or brigands who had come to burgle her, but it was neither one nor the other.

It was worse than that. It was a mystery.

“Is he dead?” asked the animal-tamer, his whip still raised.

“He’s dying.”

“So much the better. Where is he croaking?”

“Upstairs—but you can’t come in.”

“You think so, old woman?”

The man turned his whip toward the other hooded figures, uttered a shrill, indefinable cry—some kind of animal onomatopoeia, like “*Cui-hui!*” and then stood aside to let them pass. The rascals then leapt upon Mélanie, surrounded her with muscles of steel, and tied her to a chair. She only retained from that violent action the breath of a respiration that was not human.

And she watched incomprehensible preparations, paralyzed as much by stupor as by her bonds. Firstly, she saw the man with the whip climb the stairs and go to inspect the dying man’s bedroom. Then, from the height of the galley, he renewed his cry—which must have been an order, given that his accomplices, without consulting one another, immediately took out the components of a metallic apparatus in the form of a spider, which had been hidden under their hooded jackets, and set it up on a tripod fitted with a handle.

While one of them started the machine working, drawing sparks of a mauve fluid therefrom, intense enough to dominate the studio light, the other, with an agility and prehensive skill comparable to that of monkeys, disdaining the staircase, climbed up a pillar supporting the gallery and handed his chief a kind of steel helmet linked to the apparatus by a flexible wire.

In possession of that object, the man in the gallery went back into Théophraste Lapastille’s redoubt and isolated himself with the dying man by dropping the curtain that was the sole partition separating it from the gallery.

Let us open it again for the readers and allow them to witness the no-less-surprising scene unfolding within.

Once in that room of sorts, the man with the whip first took off his hooded garment. Then, since the painter Lapastille was no longer in a position to appreciate the strangeness of anything, let us be astonished in his stead at seeing a rather slender silhouette appear, clad in a tight frock-coat, but with strongly-developed muscles: nothing, in sum, of the body of an athlete, but with the arms of a wrestler—with extremely hairy fists, we observe now that he has taken off his gloves.

What seems paradoxical in that reduced stature, however, is the beard: an opulent brown fleece flowing like a river to the middle of the torso, so cumbersome that its possessor has to pick it up in masses of curls, which is nevertheless carefully groomed, like a child's hair on the day of his first communion. Behind that abundant proliferation agitates a face composed of nothing but flat planes: a face in facets, nervous, pathetic and agitated, plagued by tics; while a metallic glint escapes from the overly narrow eyelids, at the whim of incessant blinking.

That anatomical phenomenon set down his whip and his helmet on the chair occupied a little while before by Mélanie. He moved the lamp closer to the dying man, and when he had him clearly in view he murmured: "Ha ha! Five to the hour! A few moments more and I'd have had to renounce it entirely. The carcass will have to be completely revised, in any case. Let's go—to work!"

He took a flat case out of his frock-coat, from which he extracted a hollow needle about ten centimeters long, to which he fitted the neck of glass ampoule filled with a liquid that looked like blood. Having parted the painter's shirt, without taking the trouble to delimit the region, he plunged the needle directly into the heart. Then he broke the other extremity of the ampoule and waited until atmospheric pressure had expelled the contents into the perforated organ. Then, with an abrupt movement, he withdrew his needle.

Picking up the helmet he had previously set aside, he put it on the head of the dying man, which provoked the spurting of mauve sparks similar to the ones that the hooded physicist had produced in the studio. He consulted his watch, a chronograph. He counted ten seconds. He took off the metallic skullcap and awaited the result of his experiment, while caressing the curls of his beard.

The effect was almost immediate. A slight redness animated the exsanguinated face of Théophraste Lapastille. His breathing became more perceptible, dilating his chest. His eyes resumed their position in the orbits, repossessed by the light of intelligence. His hands trembled slightly, acquiring the strength to push back the sheet. The flame revived, as in the days before his mortal attack.

"You don't recognize me?" asked the regenerator.

Just as he had resumed breathing and gazing, the painter spoke: "No. Who are you?"

"Tornada, of course. Your old friend Tornada. Have I changed that much? Or is it my beard, which I'm wearing a trifle more floridly?"

A pell-mell of memories, like scenes passing through a cinematograph, inundated Lapastille's interior screen.

"You do in fact, resemble Tornada—but Professor Tornada is almost the same age as me, and you're scarcely forty..."

"Which proves, old Phraste, that your old Nada has been able to conserve himself a little better than you."

*Old Nada, old Phraste:* those terms of their ancient familiarity suddenly convinced the revived moribund. A further progress of his provisional survival: he sat up in bed.

"Damn it!" he stammered. "You...it's you! Of course! Am I still delirious?"

"Absolutely not. Your noggin is as integral as mine."

"Integral noggin" was another expression of Tornada's—the result of what origin and what education, no one could say, but he liked the gross spice of language, and cultivated a humor that was sometimes leaden. He put science into slang, led Aesculapius to the familiar. A droll lyricism emanated from his disquieting person. His comical quips had once been widely quoted, doing the tour of the teaching hospitals, the clinics and the laboratories. Later, when, although marked for more enviable

situations, he had separated himself from official science to work in disdainful isolation, they had served as a weapon against him, accrediting the opinion that he was half mad.

The emotion in Lapastille's heart increased. His liaison with Tornada had been so fecund in intellectual surprises that it could well be, in fact, that his friend had remained young while others aged. He was already a kind of sorcerer, a magician in the arts of surgery and physiology...

"I can't get over your appearing to me like this!" said the painter. "It's true that we haven't seen one another for a long time. Everything kept us apart, though: situation and success. Your scientific discoveries—which I've followed passionately, believe me—have brought you the applause of the world, while my mediocrity, my lack of success, has held me in an obligatory shadow..."

"Lose that habit of false modesty. It's always done you harm. You're an ace, like me. You have genius, like me—but it's less obvious to the stupid crowds. Me, I touch them at the roots..."

"Thirty years...how far away it is, already!" regretted the painter.

"No, it's close at hand," protested Tornada; and he added, enigmatically: "if one considers it as I can. Life has separated us, but death has brought us together again, in order to renew life."

Théophraste Lapastille did not try to interpret that. Did the last remark relate solely to what they were saying? If he was still as he had been before, Tornada continually leapt from one subject to another without any apparent thread. His cerebral machinery vibrated in an incessant rotation, encountering a new lure at every turn, which it gripped in passing, only to abandon it again immediately, so there was nothing to rely on in his speech.

He went on: "Death. Your death. But I'll wager that you don't even suspect that you were in the process of peacefully popping your clogs?"

"What are you saying? Was I dying?"

"He suspects!" Tornada exploded. "Well, yes, old Phraste, you were fading fast. At seventy five, confess that that's a trifle precocious! But what is more serious is that you were about to take that fall without letting me know. If I hadn't found out fortuitously..."

"From whom?"

"From my police. Fortunately, they brought me here in time to bid you *au revoir*...unless you'd prefer it to be *adieu*." Perfidiously, he added: "If you absolutely don't want that inheritance..."

This time, Lapastille leapt on his bed like a carp. What! Tornada knew that old story of the testament, the fairy tale, so fantastic that the interested parties, in order to avoid curiosity, reportage and perhaps ridicule, had sworn reciprocally to keep the secret, and had even demanded an oath from the lawyers that they would keep quiet too?

"What inheritance are you talking about, Tornada?"

"Come on, old Phraste, don't play the trickster with me. If it's necessary to refresh your memory as well as your carcass..." He picked up his whip, stuck it under his arm and sat astride a chair, which gave him the appearance of a bearded jockey. In fact, was he not about to ride a kind of hobby-horse?

"At three o'clock in the afternoon on the eighth of February 1910, at the age of sixty,<sup>1</sup> you were in the study of Maître Gervais, notary, in the Boulevard de Sebastopol. He introduced you to a young medical student, twenty-two years old, Marcel Granive, whom he declared to be your second cousin. Having acquainted you with that relative, of whom you were unaware, the lawyer solemnly opened a red envelope that contained a testament. Is that correct?"

"Yes. How do you know?"

"Let me go on. That testament was the final lunacy of an uncle of whom you and your cousin were equally unaware, your uncle Louis Lapastille, an adventurer of sorts, who had set off at young age to dig for gold in the Klondike, and then fetched up, in his old age, in New York, where he was a member of the club of billionaires. It is necessary not to believe any longer in American uncles, since the war that so disastrously associated our polite French folk with the improper Transatlantics, who left again thereafter—but your uncle was, in fact, not a myth.

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<sup>1</sup> This date suggests that the author started to write the story in 1924, setting it a few months in the future, not long after the publication of the previous item in the sequence.

“He had made his debut long before the universal catastrophe and had succeeded in amassing an incalculable fortune, consisting primarily of jewels collected in India by touts, gold ornaments, celebrated art-works and paintings, always bought via intermediaries in sales in France, Italy or Holland, and, finally, of the gold nuggets that his lucky stars had led him to discover. He also discovered, and profitably took possession of, the treasure of the Maharajah of Mandore, which, having been brought to England two centuries ago by a cargo-ship, sank off the Isle of Wight, previous attempts to fish it up having been in vain. That, I know from my personal information, because he didn’t boast, your uncle Louis.

“In brief, all of this colossal wealth, which, if liquidated, would have made him the richest man on earth—I estimate it at three billion or thereabouts—your uncle had gathered in Brow City, a small town out there, in a country house—or, rather, a fortress—which he had had specially built and which was guarded night and day by twenty policemen. They are there still, watched over in the same fashion. Am I correct?”

“Yes.” Lapastille lit up. “Out there is Brow City there’s a fresco by Titian and Giorgione, which those two masters destined for the Fondacio dei Tedeschi in Venice. There are all the sketches for the pictures that Rubens painted for the Jesuit church in Anvers, burned in 1718. There’s a dawn scene by Ruydaël, six landscapes by Poussin, bas-reliefs by Pigalle; a *Serment d’amour* by Fragonard; seventeenth-century wood carvings; a *Phèdre* by Polygnotus; and primitives, and moderns...there’s...there’s a heap of marvels, in sum...marvels!”

“Of inestimable value—which, in accordance with the testament opened in Maître Gervais’ study, your uncle left to his natural heir Théophraste Lapastille, the only son of his brother Adolphe, and, in default of him—if he were to die without issue—to his sister-in-law, Madame Zulma Granive, wife of the late Théodore Granive, or to the posterity of the latter. Is that correct?”

“That’s correct. There is also, in the Brow City treasure, Raphael’s *Pythagoras Admonishing Diogenes*, three Muses by Le Sueur; part of the Campana collections, of which Napoléon didn’t get the whole; and Gobelins after drawings by Lebrun. And prints by Perino del Vaga!”

“Let me finish, damn it!” Tornada said, impatiently. “The testament in question would therefore have made overnight, of Théophraste Lapastille or some Granive or other, a unique potentate, if Uncle Louis had not included therein one last paragraph, which I quote word for word: ‘My heirs, whether they be of the Lapastille or the Granive branch, will only enter into possession of my fortune on the eighth of February 1950’—which is to say, twenty-five years from now. ‘Until that date, my possessions will lie dormant in Brow City, such as they presently are, under the protection of the American authorities.’”

Having finished his quotation, Tornada spread-eagled his chair-mare. He hoisted himself up on his short legs, brandished his whip and proclaimed: “And Théophraste Lapastille, the primary heir of Uncle Louis, is dying at seventy-five, dispossessed of that fantastic treasure by Dr. Marcel Granive, son of Zulma Granive, née Lapastille.”

“I’m submissive to my destiny!” said the painter, nonplussed.

“One does not submit to destiny; one controls it.”

“How?”

“By coming to knock on Tornada’s door!”

“Seventy-five is an age at which one can retire, old Nada!”

“In all of this, you’ve been inexcusably flabby! Come on! Shouldn’t you have made sure that you had at least a dozen kids? In order not to let billions go astray, one marries ten times over—twenty times, if necessary—until one encounters a woman capable of bearing children in perpetuity! That’s what I would have done—me, Tornada!”

“I’ve certainly thought about it...but it would have been necessary to encounter that elite companion.”

“It doesn’t matter who, as long as she play *Mère Gigogne!*”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The French equivalent of the English nursery rhyme character of the old woman who lived in a shoe, and had so many children that she didn’t know what to do.

Lapastille smiled. He found in that unconstrained language the dear whimsy of his friend, similar to his own! But he did not only smile at that. He also smiled at his old slave of forty years; he searched the gloom behind Tornada with his eyes, and when he found that she was not there, he leaned forward confidentially. “There was certainly one from whom I might have claimed the assistance that you reproach me for having neglected...but of too humble a condition...”

“Prejudice!” said Tornada, critically, darting a glance over the gallery.

“And then, so pure of soul...a true saint! I would never have dared!”

“It’s a case of repeating *audaces fortuna*.<sup>3</sup> The old adages are sometimes apt.”

“From fortune, old Nada, I don’t ask anything. I don’t need anything. The little I earn is sufficient. I would only have used that inheritance to spread a little balm over the poverty that grips the world. Yes, to create works, to do good. There are so many unfortunate individuals, and so few charitable ones!”

“That’s true. Man is a vulture to his fellows. That’s why I’ve thought, like you, of changing Society...” He made a leveling gesture with his whip, as if he were shaving heads. But after another gesture, which put off that task for a future time, he went on: “How mistaken one can be! I would have thought, myself, that Théophraste Lapastille, the artist I knew, would either have held on until 1950, or that he would have ensured his posterity, in order not to allow the marvels accumulated in Brow City to fall into foreign hands.”

“To bequeath them to the Museums!” the painter enthused. “But perhaps the Granives will also send them there.”

That name, reintroduced into the conversation, had an electric effect on Tornada. Fury contracted his visage, propagating along his beard, which began to stir like water tormented by deep-seated waves. His right hand clenched on his frock-coat.

“The Granives? You think that I’ll permit that? The inheritance to the Granives? To that Marcel Granive, whom I despise—and how! Do you know what that Marcel Granive is? He’s a fake scientist, a usurper, a swindler, a bandit! He’s stolen from me my dear! He’s stolen a microbe from me—yes, my *Micrococcus vitalisans*! You’re not up to date, but it’s a bacillus that acts on organisms by ridding them of toxins...hence prolonging life. It’s what I had been searching for, for a long time—what I’ve always been searching for. Well, Marcel Granive has robbed me of my bacillus! And to do what? To make a serum—my God, a serum! A serum to sell, or, rather, that he gets rogues of his own sort to sell, at fifty francs for ten grams. You see what a crook he is? Because, if he had also been able to cultivate it, my *Micrococcus vitalisans*...but that’s what he still doesn’t know...he’s neglected the drop of methyl oxiadecalmeliformine that ensures the fermentation! So, his drug is fraud in a bottle. And there you are! That’s the man who has been made an official scientist, who’s been proclaimed a master, who has recently been given the cravat!<sup>4</sup> The cravat...wait a while; I’ve got one of those in reserve for him myself, a cravat! Mine’s made of hemp!”

A glance at the painter abruptly suspended his diatribe however. His interlocutor was no longer following the conversation. He had gone pale again. His eyelids were emptying; his head was falling back on the pillow. The action of the fluid employed to give him a respite before passing on to the beyond had abruptly ceased.

“Hey! Are you going to kick the bucket again?” shouted Tornada, in whom the religion of death was decidedly devoid of possession.

But all that he attempted to do in order to reanimate his friend was in vain. The ineluctable ran its course. In a matter of minutes the soul of Théophraste Lapastille was separated from his mortal remains.

Then Tornada went back to the gallery and cracked his whip at his acolytes, who were guarding Mélanie.

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<sup>3</sup> Fortune favors the brave.

<sup>4</sup> Of the *Légion d’honneur*.