

THE HAUTOTS, FATHER AND SON

I

THE house, half farm, half manor, was one of those country places neither one thing nor the other, which were once almost noblemen's mansions and are now occupied by farmers in a big way. In front of the door the dogs, tied up to the apple-trees in the courtyard, were yelping and barking at the sight of the game-bags carried by the keeper and some small boys. In the large room which served as both kitchen and dining-room, the two Hautots, father and son, M. Bermont, the collector of taxes, and M. Mondaru, the lawyer, were having a snack and a glass of wine before starting out, for it was the opening of the shooting season.

Hautot senior, proud of everything he owned, was already boasting of the game which his guests would find on his estates. He was a stalwart Norman, one of those powerful, full-blooded, large-boned men who can lift an apple-cart on their shoulders. Half peasant, half gentleman, rich, respected, influential, used to getting his own way, he had kept his son, César Hautot, at school till he reached the third form, so that he should not be illiterate, before taking him away for fear of his becoming a gentleman with no interest in the land.

César Hautot, nearly as tall as his father but slighter, was a model son, obedient, always cheerful and full of admiration, respect, and deference for his father's wishes and opinions.

M. Bermont, the collector of taxes, a portly little man whose red cheeks were streaked with thin purple veins like the tributaries, and the winding course of rivers on maps, asked:

'And what about hares? Are there any?'

Old Hautot replied:

'As many as you like, especially down in Puysatier Bottom.'

'Where do we start?' enquired the lawyer, a fat pasty-faced man

who did himself well and was beginning to develop a paunch; he was wearing a brand new shooting suit bought in Rouen the week before, which was rather tight.

'Oh! over there, in the low-lying ground; we'll drive the partridges out into the open and shoot from higher up.'

Old Hautot got up. The others followed suit, picked up their guns which were standing in the corners of the room, examined the hammers, stamped their feet in order to get comfortable in their boots which were a bit hard, not yet softened by the heat of the foot, and went out; the dogs, straining at their leash, barked shrilly, beating the air with their forepaws.

They started for the low ground. It was a small valley or rather an undulating stretch of poor country, left uncultivated, intersected with ravines full of bracken, affording excellent cover.

The guns spaced themselves out with old Hautot on the right and his son on the left and the two guests in the centre of the line. The gamekeeper and the boys carrying the game-bags followed behind. It was the solemn moment of waiting for the first shot, when the heart beats a little faster and the finger is nervously feeling the trigger.

Suddenly a shot rang out. Old Hautot had fired. They all halted and saw a partridge break away from a covey in full flight and fall into a ravine full of dense scrub. In his excitement the old man broke into a run, plunging forward, tearing away the brambles that stood in his way, and presently disappeared in the undergrowth in search of his bird.

Almost immediately a second shot was heard.

'Ah! the cunning old dog!' cried M. Bermont, 'he must have started a hare down there.'

Everyone waited, their eyes glued to the impenetrable tangle of branches.

The lawyer, using his hands like a megaphone, shouted: 'Have you got them?' There was no answer from old Hautot; and César, turning to the gamekeeper, said: 'You go and help him, Joseph; we must keep in line, we'll wait.'

And Joseph, a dried-up old man like a gnarled tree-trunk, whose

joints all stood out like knobs, went quietly off, down into the ravine, threading his way carefully through the breaks in the scrub like a fox. Suddenly he shouted:

'Come, quick! there's been an accident.'

They all ran forward and plunged into the undergrowth. Old Hautot was lying on his side unconscious, holding his stomach with both hands, while a stream of blood was pouring on to the grass through his linen jacket where it had been torn by the shot. He had let go of his gun to pick up the dead partridge within reach of his hand and the shock of its fall had discharged the second barrel full into his stomach. They lifted him out of the ditch and took off his clothes, and found a gaping wound with his entrails hanging out. After bandaging him as best they could, they carried him home and waited for the doctor, who had been sent for with a priest.

When the doctor came, he shook his head gravely and, turning to young Hautot who was sobbing in a chair, he said:

'My poor boy, things look pretty bad.'

But when the dressing was finished, the wounded man's fingers twitched; he opened his mouth, then his eyes, and looked round the room with a blank unseeing gaze, as if searching in his memory to recall and realize what had happened; and he murmured:

'My God! my number's up!'

The doctor was holding his hand.

'Not a bit of it, not a bit of it! A few days in bed and you'll be as fit as a fiddle!'

But Hautot went on:

'No, my number's up! My stomach's shot away; I know all about it.'

Then he added suddenly:

'I want to talk to my son, if I've got time.'

Young Hautot could not restrain his sobs and kept repeating like a small child: 'Daddy, Daddy, poor Daddy!'

His father went on in a stronger voice:

'Come along now, stop crying; it's not the time for tears; I want to talk to you. Sit here quite close to me; it won't take long and I shall get a weight off my mind. Will you all leave us, please?'

They all went out, leaving father and son together.

As soon as they were alone, the old man said:

'Listen, my son; you are twenty-four and one can tell you things. In any case there's not really as much mystery about it as we are accustomed to pretend. You know your mother died seven years ago and I am only forty-five now, as I married at nineteen. You know that?'

The son stammered:

'Yes, I know.'

'Your mother died seven years ago and I was left a widower. Well, a man like me can't live alone at thirty-seven. See?'

'Yes, I see.'

The father, breathing with difficulty, his pale face twisted with agony, went on:

'My God, this pain! Well, you know what I mean. A man isn't made to live like a monk, but I wouldn't marry again – I had promised your mother that. So . . . you understand what I mean?'

'Yes, father.'

'Well, I found a girl in Rouen, Rue de l'Éperlan, number eighteen, third floor, second door – I'm telling you everything, don't forget it – a girl who couldn't have been nicer to me, affectionate, loving, a real good wife to me, in fact. You're taking in what I'm telling you, my boy?'

'Yes, father.'

'So, if I die, I owe her something, something substantial that she can live on. You understand?'

'Yes, father.'

'I tell you, she's a good girl, a real good sort and, if it hadn't been for you and the memory of your mother and this house where we all three lived together, I should have brought her here and married her, I promise you. Listen . . . listen, my boy . . . I might have made a will, but I haven't . . . I wouldn't do it . . . some things . . . things like this oughtn't to be put in writing . . . it's too painful for the family . . . it causes all sorts of trouble . . . and everybody's unhappy. Legal documents are no good; never use them. If I'm

rich to-day, it's because I've never used them all my life. You understand, my son?'

'Yes, father.'

'There's something else . . . listen carefully. Well, I've not made a will, I wouldn't . . . and I know you, you've got a good heart, you're generous and free with your money . . . see? I said to myself that before I died I would tell you everything and ask you not to forget the girl – Caroline Donet, Rue de l'Éperlan number eighteen, third floor, second door . . . don't forget – and there's something more; go there as soon as I am gone – and see to it that she has no cause to regret my memory. You have the means, you can do it, I'm leaving you enough . . . oh! listen . . . during the week you won't find her, she works at Mme Moreau's, Rue Beauvoisine. Go on Thursday, that's the day she expects me; Thursday has been my day with her for six years. Poor little girl, won't she cry just! . . . I'm telling you all this, because I know you well, my son. These are things one doesn't tell everyone, one doesn't tell a lawyer or a priest. Everybody does them and everybody knows about them, but they aren't mentioned, except when it can't be avoided. So no outsider must be let into the secret, only the family, because the family is really one person. See?'

'Yes, father.'

'You promise?'

'Yes, father.'

'You swear?'

'Yes, father.'

'I beg and implore you, son, don't forget. It's my dearest wish.'

'I won't forget, father.'

'You'll go yourself. I want you to do the whole thing yourself.'

'Yes, father.'

'And then you'll see . . . you'll see . . . she'll explain everything. I can't tell you any more. You've sworn?'

'Yes, father.'

'All right, my son. Kiss me. Good-bye. I'm going to turn up my toes, I'm quite certain of it. Tell them to come in.'

Young Hautot kissed his father with tears in his eyes; then, obedient as always, he opened the door and the priest entered in his white surplice, bearing the holy oils.

But the dying man had closed his eyes and refused to open them again; he refused to answer or show even by a sign that he was conscious.

He had said all he had to say and, strong as he was, he was exhausted. Moreover he felt at peace with the world and wanted to be left alone to die undisturbed. Why should he confess to God's deputy, when he had just made his confession to his son, who was one of the family?

The last rites were administered, he was sprinkled with holy water and given absolution surrounded by his farm-hands on their knees, but not a movement of his features revealed that he was still alive.

He died about midnight after four hours of convulsive twitching, indicative of intense suffering.

II

The funeral took place on Tuesday, the shooting season having opened on Sunday. When he got home after driving his father to the cemetery, César Hautot spent the rest of the day in tears. He hardly slept at all the following night and felt so depressed when he woke up, that he wondered how he could go on living.

All day, however, he kept on thinking that, to carry out his father's dying wish, he must go to Rouen next day and see this girl, Caroline Donet, who lived at number 18 Rue de l'Éperlan, third floor, second door. He had repeated under his breath, as one mumbles a prayer, the name and address over and over again in order not to forget them, till, in the end, he couldn't stop muttering the words mechanically again and again or turn his mind to anything at all, his tongue and his thoughts being obsessed by the phrase.

Accordingly next morning about eight o'clock he ordered Barleycorn to be put in the gig and set off at a brisk trot behind the

powerful Percheron down the main road from Ainville to Rouen. He was wearing his black frock-coat with his big top-hat on his head and his trousers with under-straps. In the circumstances he had been unwilling to put on over his best suit the blue blouse which bellies out in the wind and protects the black broad-cloth from dust and spots and which is hurriedly slipped off on arrival, as soon as the wearer has alighted from the vehicle.

He got into Rouen as ten o'clock was striking, stopped, as he always did, at the Good Companions Hotel in the Rue des Trois Mares and had to endure the effusive condolences of the host, his wife and his five sons, for the sad news had spread; after that he had to give full details of the accident, which made him cry; he refused the help which they were all eager to offer, knowing that he was now a rich man, and declined lunch at the hotel, which offended them.

After dusting his hat, brushing his frock-coat and cleaning his boots, he went off to look for the Rue de l'Éperlan, not daring to ask anyone the way for fear of being recognized and arousing suspicion.

Finally, not being able to find it, he saw a priest and enquired of him, trusting to the professional discretion of the Church.

He had only a hundred yards to go – it was the second turning on the right.

Then he hesitated. Up to this point he had obeyed the dead man's wishes blindly like an animal. Now he felt all upset, uncomfortable, humiliated at the prospect of finding himself, the legitimate son, face to face with the woman who had been his father's mistress. All the accumulation of moral prejudices stored up in his subconscious mind by centuries of traditional teaching, all that he had learnt from the days of his catechism about these immoral creatures, the instinctive contempt of every man for the whole sex, even if he marries one of them, his peasant's narrow puritanism, all these feelings stirred in him, holding him back, making him ashamed and bringing a blush to his cheek.

But he reflected: 'I promised father; I must keep my word.' So

he pushed the door of number 18 which was ajar, revealing a dark staircase; he went up three flights, saw a door, then a second, found a bell-rope and pulled it.

The tinkle of the bell in a near-by room made him shiver. The door opened and he found himself face to face with a young woman, nicely dressed, dark with a fresh complexion, who looked at him in surprise.

He did not know what to say to her and she, not suspecting anything and waiting for him to speak, did not ask him in. They looked at one another in silence for half a minute:

At last she asked:

'What can I do for you, Sir?'

He murmured:

'I am young Hautot.'

She started, turned pale and stammered, as if she had known him for years:

'M. César Hautot?'

'Yes.'

'Well . . .?'

'I've got a message from my father.'

She exclaimed: 'Oh, my God!' and drew back so that he could come in. He shut the door and followed her.

He noticed a little boy of four or five, sitting on the floor playing with a cat in front of a range, from which rose the steam of food keeping hot.

'Sit down,' she said.

He sat down. . . . She asked: 'Well . . .?'

He sat there not daring to begin his story, his eyes fixed on the table in the centre of the room, laid for three, one place being for a child. He looked at the chair with its back to the fire, the plate, the napkin, the glasses, a bottle of red wine partly drunk and a bottle of white wine unopened. It was his father's place, with his back to the fire! Everything was ready for him. It was his father's piece of bread that he saw and recognized by the side of the fork, for the crust had been removed because of the bad state of Hautot's teeth. Then, raising his eyes, he noticed on the wall his father's portrait,

the large photograph taken in Paris in the Exhibition year, the same one that hung over the bed in his room at Ainville.

The young woman broke the silence:

'Well, M. César . . . ?'

He looked at her. Anxiety had made her pale as death and she waited, her hands trembling with apprehension.

At last he took the plunge.

'Well, Mam'zelle, Daddy died on Sunday, the opening day of the shooting season.'

She was so flabbergasted that she did not move. After a few seconds' silence she murmured in an almost inaudible voice:

'It can't be true!'

And suddenly tears started to her eyes and, raising her hands, she covered her face and began to sob.

The child looked round and, seeing his mother in tears, began to howl. Presently, realizing that this strange man was the cause of the sudden outburst, he rushed at César and, seizing his trousers with one hand, he pounded his leg with the other as hard as he could. And César, not knowing what to do and deeply moved, sat there between the woman weeping for his father and the child defending his mother. His eyes filled with tears and he felt he was going to cry: so, to recover his self-possession, he began to talk.

'Yes,' he said, 'the tragedy occurred on Sunday morning about eight o'clock. . . .' And he told the story, as if she was capable of taking it in, not omitting anything, with a peasant's meticulous accuracy of detail. And the child went on attacking him all the time, now kicking at his ankles.

When he came to the moment when old Hautot had spoken of her, she caught her own name, and, uncovering her face, asked:

'I'm sorry, I wasn't listening and I want to know everything . . . I wonder if you would mind beginning again.'

He began again, repeating the same phrases: 'The tragedy occurred on Sunday morning about eight o'clock . . .'

He told the whole story at great length, with pauses, full stops and reflections of his own from time to time. She listened eagerly,

appreciating with a woman's intuition all the painful details, starting with horror and constantly ejaculating: 'Oh, my God!' The child, thinking she had calmed down, had stopped striking César to hold his mother's hand and he was listening too, as if he could understand.

When the story was over, young Hautot went on:

'Now we'll fix up between ourselves how to carry out his wishes. Listen, I'm not hard up, he left me quite well off. I don't want you to have any cause to complain.'

But she interrupted quickly:

'Oh! M. César, M. César, not to-day! My heart is broken . . . another time, another day, not to-day! If I accept, please understand it's not for myself . . . No, no, no, I swear it, it's for the child. Anyhow the money must be settled on him.'

In a flash César, startled, guessed the truth and stammered:

'So the child's his?'

'Yes, of course!'

And young Hautot looked at his little half-brother, conscious of strong, somewhat painful feelings which he could not define.

After a long silence, for she was in tears again, César went on in a state of acute embarrassment:

'Well, in that case, Mam'zelle Donet, I'll be getting along. When would it suit you to discuss the matter?'

She exclaimed:

'Oh no! Don't go, don't go, don't leave me alone with Émile! I should die of misery. I've got no one left now, no one except my boy. It's a grim prospect for me, M. César. Look here, sit down. You've got lots more to tell me. You must tell me everything he did at home all the week.'

And César, obedient as always, sat down again.

She pulled up another chair for herself close to his in front of the range, where the dishes were still simmering, took Émile on her knee and plied César with questions about his father, little intimate revealing questions, so that he could not fail to realize instinctively how completely the poor girl had given her whole heart to Hautot.

And following the natural train of his thought, always limited,

he came back to the accident, which he described again with all the same details.

When he said: 'He had a hole in his stomach you could have put your two fists into,' she uttered a stifled cry and tears started from her eyes again. César began to cry, too, for tears are infectious, and, as weeping always makes one sentimental, he leant over towards Émile, whose forehead was within reach of his mouth, and kissed him.

His mother, recovering herself, murmured:

'He's a poor little orphan now!'

'So am I,' said César.

Nothing more was said.

But suddenly the young woman's practical instincts as a housewife, who has to think of everything, were aroused.

'You've probably had nothing to eat this morning, M. César?'

'No, Mam'zelle.'

'Oh! You must be hungry; you must have something to eat!'

'Thank you,' he said, 'I'm not hungry, I've been too miserable.'

She replied:

'However unhappy one is, one has got to go on living; I know you won't refuse! Besides, you must stay a little longer. When you've gone, I don't know what I shall do.'

He gave way after a half-hearted resistance and, sitting opposite her with his back to the fire, he ate a plate of tripe which was crackling in the oven and drank a glass of red wine. But he would not let her open the white wine.

Several times he wiped the child's mouth, when he got gravy all over his chin.

As he got up to go, he asked:

'When shall I come back to discuss business, Mam'zelle Donet?'

'Thursday next, if that suits you, M. César. Then I shan't lose any working time. I always have Thursdays off.'

'Next Thursday will suit me fine.'

'You'll come to lunch, of course?'

'Oh! I won't promise that!'

'One can talk much better over a meal. And it will give us more time.'

'Right you are! I'll be here at twelve o'clock.'

And he went away, after kissing Émile again and shaking hands with Mlle Donet.

III

The week passed slowly for César Hautot. He had never been alone before and the loneliness seemed unbearable. Up to now he had always lived with his father, following him to the fields like his shadow, seen to it that his orders were carried out, and, if he was away from him for a few hours, they met again at dinner. They spent the evenings smoking their pipes opposite one another, talking horses, cows and sheep, and the handshake they exchanged every morning seemed the symbol of the deep bond of family affection which united them.

Now César was alone. He went the round of the autumn ploughing, always expecting to see the silhouette of his father, gesticulating, rise up on the far side of a level stretch of field. To kill time, he dropped in on his neighbours and told the story of the accident to everyone who had not heard it and sometimes repeated it to those who had. Then, having finished his work and come to the end of his ideas, he would sit down on the side of the road and wonder if life would go on like this always.

He often thought of Mlle Donet. He had liked her. He had found her refined and gentle, in fact the good sort his father had described. Yes, she certainly came up to his idea of a good sort. He had made up his mind to act generously and give her an income of 2,000 francs a year, settling the capital on the child. He was even conscious of a feeling of pleasure at the prospect of seeing her again on Thursday and making arrangements with her. And the idea of this brother of his, this little fellow of five, who was his father's son, though it affected him unpleasantly, at the same time warmed his heart. It was a kind of family he had in this illegitimate little boy, who would never bear the name of Hautot, a family that he could

recognize or not as he pleased but which would remind him of his father.

So, when he found himself on the Rouen road on Thursday morning, with Barleycorn's rhythmical trot carrying him towards the town, he felt more lighthearted and at peace with the world than at any time since the tragedy.

Entering Mlle Donet's room, he found the table laid as it had been the week before, the only difference being that the crust had not been cut off the bread.

He shook hands with the young woman, kissed Émile on both cheeks and sat down feeling quite at home, though still sad at heart. He thought Mlle Donet looking a little thin and pale. She must have been crying a great deal. She now seemed a little uncomfortable in his presence, as if she had realized something which she had not felt the week before in the first shock of her grief; and she treated him with exaggerated politeness and in the humility of her sorrow she waited upon him with touching solicitude as if to make up by constant attention for all the kindness he had shown her. They dallied over lunch, talking of the business that had brought him. She did not want to accept so much money. It was too much, far too much. She earned enough to live on herself; all she wanted was that Émile should have something behind him when he grew up.

César insisted and even added a present of a thousand francs for herself to cover her mourning.

After he had finished his coffee, she asked:

'Do you smoke?'

'Yes, I've got my pipe.'

He felt in his pocket. Good Heavens! he had forgotten it! He was quite unhappy, till she offered him a pipe of his father's, which she had got locked up in a cupboard.

He accepted, took it, recognized it, sniffed it, proclaimed it in excellent condition with a quiver in his voice, filled and lighted it. Then he took Émile on his knee and made him 'ride a cock-horse', while she cleared away and put the dirty plates at the bottom of the dresser to wash up when he had gone.

About three o'clock he got up regretfully, quite sad at the idea of going.

'Well, Mam'zelle Donet, I must be saying "Good afternoon" – delighted to have made your acquaintance like this!'

She stood in front of him, blushing, deeply moved, and looked at him, thinking of his father.

'Won't you be coming here again?' she said.

He answered simply:

'Certainly, Mam'zelle, if you'd like me to.'

'Of course, M. César! Would next Thursday suit you?'

'Yes, Mam'zelle Donet.'

'Of course, you'll come to lunch?'

'But . . . well, I will, if you like.'

'That's a date then, M. César; next Thursday at twelve, like to-day.'

'Right, Mam'zelle Donet, Thursday, at twelve.'