

‘This intriguing debut is written with the kind of subtlety and expertise that draws you in from the opening paragraph. A strikingly singular talent, Graeme Macrae Burnet blends a gripping story with compelling characters and surprising sweeps of the imagination. This is an accomplished, elegantly written and exciting first novel.’ – WILL MACKIE, Scottish Book Trust



THE  
DISAPPEARANCE  
OF  
*Adèle  
Bedeau*

*by*

Raymond Brunet

*Translated and with an afterword by*

Graeme Macrae Burnet

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# One

IT WAS AN EVENING like any other at the Restaurant de la Cloche. Behind the counter, the proprietor, Pasteur, had poured himself a *pastis*, an indication that no more meals would be served and that any further service would be provided by his wife, Marie, and the waitress, Adèle. It was nine o'clock.

Manfred Baumann was at his usual place by the bar. Lemerre, Petit and Cloutier sat around the table by the door, the day's newspapers folded in a pile between them. On their table was a carafe of red wine, three tumblers, two packets of cigarettes, an ashtray and Lemerre's reading glasses. They would share three carafes before the night was out. Pasteur opened his newspaper on the counter and leaned over it on his elbows. He was developing a bald patch, which he attempted to disguise by combing back his hair. Marie busied herself sorting cutlery.

Adèle served coffee to the two remaining diners and began wiping the waxcloths of the other tables, pushing the crumbs onto the floor that she would later sweep. Manfred observed her. His place was not exactly at the bar, but at the hatch through which food was brought from the kitchen. He continually had to adjust his position to allow the staff to pass, but nobody ever thought to ask him to move. From his post he could survey the restaurant and strangers often mistook him for the proprietor.

Adèle was wearing a short black skirt and a white blouse. Around her waist was a little apron with a pocket in which she kept a notebook for taking orders and the cloth she used for wiping tables. She was a dark, heavy-set girl with a wide behind and large, weighty breasts. She had full lips, an olive complexion and brown eyes, which she habitually kept trained on the floor. Her features were too heavy to be described as pretty, but there was an earthy magnetism about her, a magnetism no doubt amplified by the drabness of the surroundings.

As she leant over the unoccupied tables, Manfred turned towards the counter and, in the mirror above the bar, watched her skirt inch up her thighs. She was wearing tan tights with white ankle socks and black pumps. The three men at the table by the door also observed her; undoubtedly, Manfred imagined, harbouring similar thoughts to his own.

Adèle was nineteen years old and had been working at the Restaurant de la Cloche for five or six months. She was a sullen girl, reluctant to engage in conversation with the regulars, yet Manfred was sure she enjoyed their attention. She kept her blouse loosely fastened, so that it was often possible to see the lace edging of her brassiere. If she did not wish them to stare, why dress in such a provocative manner?

All the same, when she turned towards the bar, Manfred averted his eyes.

Pasteur was staring at an article in the middle pages of *L'Alsace*. There was a crisis in Lebanon.

'Bloody Arabs,' said Manfred.

Pasteur gave a little snort through his nose to acknowledge the remark. He was not one to engage in controversial discussions over the bar. His duties were limited to pouring drinks and issuing bills. He regarded waiting tables as beneath his dignity. Such chores, along with the dispensing of pleasantries, were left to Marie and Adèle or whoever else was working. Manfred, for his part, had no particular opinion on the situation in the Middle East. He had made the remark only because he had thought it

was sort of thing Pasteur might have said, or which would at least have met with his approval. Manfred was quite happy with Pasteur's unwillingness to engage in chit-chat. When he did pass a remark now and again, it tended to fall flat and it was a relief not to feel obliged to make conversation.

At the table by the door, Lemerre, a barber whose shop was not far from the restaurant, was holding forth on the subject of the milking cycle of dairy cows. He was explaining at some length how the yield could be increased merely by milking the cattle at shorter intervals. Cloutier, who had been brought up on a farm, attempted to interject that any gains made by such a measure were lost in the long term by shortening the milk-bearing life of the cows. Lemerre shook his head vigorously and made a gesture with his hand to quieten his companion.

'A common misconception,' he said, before continuing with his lecture. Cloutier stared at the table and fidgeted with the stem of his glass. Lemerre was a corpulent man in his early fifties. He was wearing a burgundy V-neck sweater over a black polo neck. His trousers were hiked halfway up his belly and secured with a thin leather belt. His hair, which Manfred assumed he dyed, was jet black and combed back from his forehead, revealing a pronounced widow's peak. Petit and Cloutier were both married, but they rarely made reference to their wives and when they did so it was always in the same deprecating terms. Lemerre had never married. 'I don't believe in keeping animals in the house,' was his customary explanation.

From outside, the Restaurant de la Cloche of Saint-Louis was an unremarkable place. The pale yellow render on the exterior walls was stained and chipped. The sign on the wall above the windows was unenticing, but the restaurant's central location made promotion redundant. The door to the restaurant was on a corner adjacent to a car park in which the town's weekly market was held. On the wall next to the door was a blackboard on which the day's specials were written, and above this a small balcony with an ornate wrought iron balustrade. The balcony belonged to the

apartment in which Pasteur and his wife lived. Inside, the restaurant was surprisingly spacious. The decor was unpretentious. Two wide pillars divided the room, informally separating the dining area on the right of the door from the tables by the window where locals dropped in during the day for a quick glass, or spent the evening drinking and exchanging views on the contents of the day's newspapers. The dining area was furnished with fifteen or so rickety wooden tables covered with brightly coloured waxcloths and set with cutlery and tumblers. On the wall behind the counter, partially obscured by a glass shelf of liqueur bottles, was a large mirror advertising Alsace beer, its art deco lettering chipped and barely legible in places. This mirror created the illusion that the restaurant was bigger than it was. It also gave the place an air of faded grandeur. Marie often grumbled that it looked shabby, but Pasteur insisted that it gave the place charm. 'We're not running a Paris bistro,' was his habitual response to any suggestion of upgrading. On the wall to the right of the counter were the doors to the toilets, flanked by two hulking dark wood dressers used to store cutlery, glasses and crockery. The dressers had been there as long as anyone could remember. Certainly they predated Pasteur's ownership of the establishment.

Manfred Baumann was thirty-six years old. He was dressed tonight, as he was every night, in a black suit and white shirt with a tie loosened at the neck. His dark hair was neatly cut and parted to one side. He was a good-looking man, but his eyes shifted nervously as if he was trying to avoid eye contact. Consequently, people often felt ill at ease in his company and this served to reinforce his own awkwardness. Once a month, on Wednesday afternoon when the bank where he worked was closed, Manfred went to Lemerre's shop to have his hair cut. Without fail Lemerre asked him what he would like done and Manfred would reply, 'The usual'. As he cut Manfred's hair, Lemerre engaged in small talk about the weather or uncontroversial subjects from the day's papers and when Manfred left, he would bid him goodbye with the phrase 'Until Thursday'.

Yet not three hours later, Lemerre would be sitting at his table with Petit and Cloutier and Manfred would be standing at his place at the counter of the Restaurant de la Cloche. They would acknowledge each other, but no more so than if they were strangers happening to make eye contact. On Thursdays, however, Manfred was invited to join the three men in the weekly game of bridge. Manfred did not particularly enjoy playing cards and the atmosphere was invariably strained. It seemed to Manfred that his presence at their table made the others uncomfortable, yet to turn down their invitation would be interpreted as a snub. The tradition had begun three years previously after the death of Le Fevre. The Thursday after the funeral the three friends were short of a man to make up their four and asked Manfred to join them. He was aware that he was simply filling the dead man's shoes, and Lemerre's customary farewell of 'Until Thursday' made it clear that he was not welcome to join them on other evenings.

Manfred ordered his final glass of wine of the evening. A bottle was kept behind the bar for him and Pasteur drained the remaining contents into a fresh glass and placed it on the counter. Manfred always drank the whole bottle, but he ordered by the glass. This arrangement meant that he paid twice as much for his drinks than if he simply ordered the bottle, but out of habit he never did. Once, he had calculated how much he would save over the course of the year if he were to change his practice. It had been a sizeable amount, but he stuck to his routine. He told himself that it was coarse to stand alone at the bar with a bottle. It would suggest that he came in with the intention of getting drunk, not that that would concern the other patrons of the restaurant. Manfred also felt that this habit might account for Lemerre and his friends' reserved attitude towards him, as if by ordering by the glass he was setting himself above the three men who drank carafes. It gave the impression that he thought he was better than them. This was in fact true.

Pasteur never remarked on Manfred's drinking habits. Why should he? It was no skin off his nose if Manfred wanted to pay twice as much as necessary for his wine.

As the clock ticked towards ten o'clock, Adèle became more animated in her movements. She swept around the tables with something approaching gusto, and even exchanged some sort of joke with the men by the door. Lemerre made a remark, which must have been lewd, because Adèle playfully wagged an admonishing finger at him, before turning on her heel and sashaying back towards the bar. Manfred had never seen her behave in this flirtatious fashion before, but she still lowered her eyes as he stepped back to allow her to pass through the hatch. She disappeared into the back and returned a few minutes later. She was wearing the same skirt as before, but had changed into black tights and high heels, and was now wearing a denim jacket over a tight black top. She had applied mascara and lipstick. She bid Pasteur goodnight. He glanced up at the clock and nodded a grudging farewell. Adèle appeared unaware of the impact of her transformation on the remaining patrons of the bar. She glanced neither left nor right as she made her exit.

Manfred drained the remains of his wine and put the money on the pewter salver upon which Pasteur had placed his bill a few moments before. Manfred always made sure he had the precise amount in his pocket. If he paid with a large note, it meant waiting for Pasteur to rummage in his pocketbook for change, and then having to ostentatiously leave a tip.

Manfred put on his raincoat, which had been hanging on the hat-stand next to the door to the WC, and left with a curt nod to Lemerre and his cronies. It was the beginning of September and the first autumnal chill was in the air. The streets of Saint-Louis were deserted. As he turned the corner into Rue de Mulhouse, he spotted Adèle a hundred metres or so ahead. She was walking slowly and Manfred found himself catching up with her. He could hear the clacking of her heels on the pavement. Manfred slowed his pace – he could hardly stride past her without making

some kind of greeting and this would lead to them falling into inevitably awkward conversation. Perhaps Adèle would think he had followed her. Or perhaps her flirtatious display in the restaurant had actually been for his benefit and she had deliberately walked in this direction to contrive a meeting.

No matter how much he slowed his pace, Manfred continued to gain ground. The closer he got, the slower Adèle seemed to become. At one point, she stopped and, steadying herself on a lamppost, adjusted the ankle-strap of her shoe. Manfred was now barely twenty metres behind her. He bent down and pretended to tie his shoelace. He hunched his head over his knee, hoping that Adèle would not spot him. He listened to the clack of her heels on the pavement grow fainter. When he looked up she was no longer in sight. She must have turned off or entered a building.

Manfred resumed his normal brisk pace. Then, as he approached the little park in front of the Protestant temple, he saw Adèle standing by the low wall that separated the park from the pavement. She was smoking a cigarette and appeared to be waiting for someone. By the time Manfred spotted her it was too late to take evasive action. He contemplated crossing the street, in which case a brief wave would constitute adequate acknowledgement of his passing, but Adèle had already seen him and was watching him approach. Manfred was not drunk, but, under her scrutiny, he suddenly felt a little unsteady on his feet. It crossed his mind that she might be waiting for him, but he immediately dismissed the thought.

‘Good evening, Adèle,’ he said when he was a few metres away. He stopped, not because he wanted to, but because it would have seemed rude to walk straight past as if she was a mere waitress unworthy of a few pleasantries.

‘Good evening, Manfred,’ she replied.

Until that moment Manfred was not even aware that she knew his first name. And for her to use it suggested some familiarity between them. In the restaurant she had only ever addressed him

as Monsieur Baumann. Had he even detected a flirtatious tone in her voice?

‘It’s chilly,’ Manfred said, because he could think of nothing else.

‘Yes,’ said Adèle. With her free hand she pulled her jacket closed over her chest, either to attest to Manfred’s remark or to conceal her cleavage.

There was a pause. ‘Of course, it’s always cooler at night when the sky is clear,’ Manfred continued. ‘The clouds act as insulation. They trap the heat, just like a blanket on a bed.’

Adèle looked at him for a moment and then nodded slowly. She blew a smoke ring. Manfred regretted mentioning bed. He could feel the colour rising to his cheeks.

‘Are you waiting for someone?’ he asked when it became apparent that she was not going to add anything. It was none of his business what she was doing, but again he could think of nothing else to say. And what if she replied that, no, she wasn’t waiting for anyone. What would he do then? Invite her to his apartment or to one of the bars in town that stayed open late and about which he knew nothing?

Before she had the chance to answer, and to Manfred’s relief, a young man pulled up on a scooter. He nodded curtly in Manfred’s direction. Manfred acknowledged him and bid good-night to Adèle.

‘Good night, monsieur,’ she replied.

As he walked off, Manfred stole a glance over his shoulder in time to see Adèle throw her leg over the seat of the scooter. He imagined the young man asking who he was. *Some guy from the restaurant*, would be her likely response.

Manfred lived ten minutes’ walk away, on the top floor of a four-storey 1960s apartment block set back from Rue de Mulhouse. The apartment consisted of a small kitchen, a bedroom, a living room that Manfred rarely used, and a small shower room. The kitchen overlooked a small leafy park surrounded by other similar apartment blocks. There were benches for the residents

and a children's play park. There was a small balcony outside the kitchen window, which caught the sunlight in early evening, but Manfred rarely sat out for fear that the other residents might think he had an unhealthy interest in the play park below. People often thought ill of single men in their thirties, especially those who chose to keep themselves to themselves. Manfred kept his apartment scrupulously clean and tidy.

Once home, Manfred poured himself a nightcap from the bottle on the kitchen counter and knocked it back. He poured himself a second and took it with him to bed. He lifted the book from his bedside table, but did not open it. His encounter with Adèle had left him unsettled, excited even. It was not just she had used his first name, so much as the fact that when her companion arrived, she had reverted to 'monsieur', as if concerned to give the impression that there was nothing between them. Manfred had never thought there *was* anything between them, but she could easily have bid goodnight without using either form of address. It was a deliberate act to conceal the intimate moment they had shared from her boyfriend.

Manfred recalled the sight of Adèle tottering on the pavement in front of him, adjusting the ankle-strap of her shoe. He masturbated with greater vigour than usual and fell asleep without mopping up his emission.

## Two

SAINT-LOUIS IS A TOWN of around twenty thousand people nestling at the very edge of the Alsace, separated from Germany and Switzerland by the width of the Rhine. It is a place of little note and aside from a handful of the picturesque oak-beamed houses characteristic of the region, there is little to detain visitors. Like most border towns, it is a place of transit. People pass through on their way elsewhere, and the town is so lacking in points of interest it is as if the townsfolk have resigned themselves to this. The brighter young people of Saint-Louis up and leave for college, most likely never to return.

The town centre, inasmuch as Saint-Louis can be said to have a centre, is a miscellany of unattractive post-war buildings peppered with a few more traditional dwellings that have survived the passage of time and town-planning. The signs above the shops are faded and the window displays are uninviting, as if the proprietors have abandoned the idea of attracting passing trade. The word that most often springs into the minds of those passing through, if they notice the town at all, is nondescript. Saint-Louis is nondescript.

Yet for three hundred years the town has sustained a population. It is a population somewhat less educated, less well-off and more inclined to the political right than the majority of their countrymen, but this mediocre tribe still requires, now and then,

a new pair of shoes or an outfit of clothing, they need their hair cut, their teeth attended to and their ailments cured. They must withdraw and borrow money. They require places to eat, drink, gossip or simply postpone returning home. Their streets must be cleaned, refuse collected, law and order must be kept. Their houses require the attention of plumbers, electricians, joiners and decorators. Their children must be schooled, the aged nursed and the dead buried.

In short, the people of Saint-Louis are exactly like people elsewhere, in towns equally drab or markedly more glamorous. And like the inhabitants of other places, the townfolk of Saint-Louis feel a certain chauvinistic pride in their municipality, even as they retain an awareness of its mediocrity. Some dream of an escape, or live with the regret that they did not get out when they had the chance. The majority, though, go about their business with little or no thought to their surroundings.

Manfred Baumann was born on the Swiss side of the border to a Swiss father and a French mother. Gottwald Baumann was a brewery worker from Basel. He was a short, exceptionally swarthy man with a glint in his eye. Manfred's mother, Anaïs Paliard, was a high-spirited girl cursed with a sickly constitution, from a well-to-do Saint-Louis family of lawyers. Manfred spent the first six years of his life in Basel. He remembered little of these years, yet Swiss-German remained the language with which he felt most at home. He had hardly spoken it since his early childhood, but hearing it still transported him to those hazy early years. Manfred had only two memories of his father from this period of his life. The first was of the rancid smell that emanated from him when he returned from an evening at some bar, coupled with the bristle of his stubbled chin as he leaned over to kiss him goodnight.

The second was Manfred's fondest memory of his father. For reasons he could not remember (perhaps it was his birthday), Gottwald took Manfred to visit the brewery where he worked. Manfred could recall the heady aroma of yeast and the thunder

of empty barrels being rolled across cobbles. The other brewery workers were, at least in Manfred's memory, short, swarthy, barrel-chested men, just like his father, who walked with their legs apart and their arms swinging outwards. As Gottwald led Manfred through the yard, the men spotted their workmate and shouted, '*Grüezi Gottli.*'

'You know what that means?' Gottwald had asked. 'Little God. Not bad, eh? *Little God.*' Manfred gripped tight on his father's hand and looked forward to the day when he too would work in the brewery.

When Manfred was six years old, the Restaurant de la Cloche came up for sale and Anais's father purchased it for his daughter and her husband to run. The restaurant's town centre location guaranteed a steady stream of trade from nearby shopkeepers and office workers, so, although evening meals were served, the bulk of its business was done during the day. M. Paliard must have thought that he was setting up his son-in-law in a failsafe venture, but he had reckoned without his son-in-law's brewery worker manners and rudimentary grasp of the French language. Gottwald's surly demeanour succeeded in alienating the establishment's clientele. He lacked the graceful manner and authority of the successful *patron*. As the business slid into decline, Gottwald spent every night on the wrong side of the bar, noisily decrying the stuck-up French who had taken their trade elsewhere.

After his father's death, the business was sold, but Manfred and his mother continued to live in the apartment above the restaurant until her delicate health obliged them to move back to the family home on the northern outskirts of the town. Manfred missed living above the bar; the smell of cooking and the sound of the day's debate drifting through the open window as he and his mother ate their evening meal. The bar was the hub of the town. At the family home, Manfred was isolated. To his grandparents, he was less a source of pride than a reminder of their daughter's lapse. Manfred inherited his father's graceless demeanour and his mother's sickly constitution, both of

which mitigated against falling into friendship with the ease of other boys. When they had lived above the bar, older men greeted him cheerfully when he returned home from school as if he was one of them. At weekends he would run errands for the regulars, earning a few centimes for his trouble. In the evenings he would sit at the window above the bar listening to the ebb and flow of conversation, mentally contributing his own sage remarks. At the Paliard house there were no voices to listen to and Manfred would sit in his room listening to the slow ticking of the grandfather clock that stood on the landing halfway up the stairs.

Throughout his schooldays Manfred was known as ‘Swiss’ and the nickname had stuck. He loathed it. Lemerre still used it when inviting Manfred to join the Thursday card game. ‘You joining us, Swiss?’ he yelled across the bar. Manfred wished his mother had reverted to her maiden name, but despite her husband’s shortcomings, she remained devoted to his memory. After Manfred and his mother were obliged to leave the Restaurant de la Cloche, Anaïs would often call him to her bedside. Manfred disliked the smell of his mother’s room. It was like a hospital. The dressing table was arrayed with brown bottles of pills. Towards the end, the doctor visited on an almost daily basis, a privilege afforded to families of the Paliard’s standing. When Manfred entered the room, Anaïs would smile wearily and hold out her arm. Often she was too weak to raise her shoulders from the pillows that supported her. Manfred sat on the edge of the bed holding his mother’s hand.

Anaïs kept a photograph of Gottwald by her bedside. He was standing next to a motor car parked in a lay-by on a twisting road high in the Swiss mountains. The car was a Mercedes which Anaïs’s father had lent them for their honeymoon. Gottwald stood in his shirtsleeves, hands on his hips, chest puffed out, his thick dark hair slicked back in the style of the day, a study in virility.

Anaïs liked to tell Manfred the story of how she and his father had met. Gottwald had crossed the border for the Bastille Day

celebrations. There was a fete in the square next to the Restaurant de la Cloche. It was an unusually hot day, even for July. Anaïs was seventeen. She and a friend wandered round the stalls sampling the wares on offer. They had drunk two or three glasses of rough cider, which had gone straight to their heads. Anaïs's friend, Elisabeth, spotted Gottwald. He was standing at a stall, drinking a glass of beer and blatantly appraising the girls who walked by. Elisabeth insisted that they go over and talk to him. Anaïs was reluctant. She had no experience with men, but Elisabeth was already on her way. She stood shyly at her friend's shoulder as she introduced them. Gottwald kissed their hands and said, '*Enchanté, mademoiselles,*' in a heavy accent that made them both giggle. Soon they were strolling through the crowds together, Elisabeth gaily telling Gottwald all about herself. She was a striking, self-confident girl who, Anaïs suspected, had already had her share of men. Anaïs studied Gottwald closely. He was not handsome in the conventional way – he was too short for that – but there was something in his demeanour and in his twinkling black eyes that fascinated her. It was clear that Gottwald did not understand half of what Elisabeth was saying, but he kept his eyes intensely fixed on her. Anaïs found herself wishing that her friend would stop wittering so that Gottwald could turn his gaze on her.

They paused at a stall and Gottwald bought them each another cider. Elisabeth had to excuse herself for a moment. As soon as she was gone, Gottwald looked Anaïs straight in eye and said, 'I'm glad she's gone. She talks too much, but I'd like to see you again.'

Anaïs felt a quickening in her throat. The idea that this swarthy foreigner preferred her to her more beautiful, charming friend was intoxicating. Before she knew it, she had agreed to meet Gottwald the following day. Nothing was said when Elisabeth returned.

That next day Gottwald and Anaïs went for a walk in the woods. It was cool beneath the foliage. They didn't talk much. Anaïs had no idea what to say to a man, but before the afternoon

was out, Gottwald kissed her. She had her back to a tree and felt overwhelmed by the weight and powerful odour of the man. She almost fainted with passion, she told Manfred. The relationship continued in secret – Gottwald was not the sort of man Anaïs would dream of introducing to her father – until it became impossible to conceal. That was when Gottwald asked her to marry him.

Anaïs finally died when Manfred was fifteen. She had not left the house for two years and had grown as thin and papery as an old woman. Manfred's grandfather came to talk to him one evening shortly after the funeral. At a certain age, he explained, a man had to make his own way in the world. Two years later, after Manfred had failed his *baccalauréat*, his grandfather summoned him to his study. This was a room on the first floor of the house which Manfred was normally forbidden to enter. The walls were lined from floor to ceiling with legal volumes and in the centre of the floor was a large antique desk. There was a fireplace, but M. Paliard did not approve of unnecessary heating and even in the depths of winter he refused, as an example to the other members of the household, to light a fire, preferring to sit over his papers bundled in a hat and scarf in a fug of frosted breath and pipe smoke. Manfred was summoned to the study only to discuss matters of grave import.

Upon entering, Manfred remained standing in the centre of the room for a good five minutes while his grandfather reached the end of the document he was reading. This did not trouble Manfred. It was a matter of indifference to him how his grandfather treated him. M. Paliard removed his reading glasses and indicated with a gesture of his hand that Manfred should sit. He had a long, craggy face, with narrow pale blue eyes set under a heavy forehead. He was almost completely bald and had a wiry grey beard. Manfred had difficulty recalling an occasion on which he had seen him smile.

‘I have spoken to an associate of mine, a Monsieur Jeantet,’ he began without preamble. ‘Jeantet is the manager of Société

Générale on Rue de Mulhouse. He has agreed to take you on, which, under the circumstances, is most charitable of him. You begin on Monday and will be paid after two weeks. I suggest you begin looking for an apartment right away. I will loan you the first month's rent and deposit.'

At the end of his little speech, M. Paliard did something he had never done before. He rose from his seat and poured two small glasses of sherry from a decanter sitting on a silver tray in the window recess. Manfred had never noticed the decanter there before and wondered if his grandfather had had it brought in specially for the occasion. Not only had Manfred never been invited to share a drink with his grandfather, he had never seen him pour a drink for himself. Normally the maid would be summoned for such tasks. Nevertheless, M. Paliard not only poured the drinks, but handed Manfred's to him, before resuming his seat. The two men (for the gesture was clearly intended to mark Manfred's passing into manhood) sipped their sherry in silence. Ten minutes later, M. Paliard stood up to, somewhat awkwardly, indicate that the audience was over.

The following day, Manfred's grandmother took him to Mulhouse to be fitted for a suit. As the tailor fussed around with his measuring tape, Mme Paliard insisted, to Manfred's embarrassment, that the suit should leave some room for growth. Nevertheless, Manfred took some pleasure in the experience. Wearing a suit bestowed gravitas. The image that looked back at him from the tailor's mirror was not the gauche schoolboy he so despised. Afterwards they went for lunch in a smart bistro. Mme Paliard chatted cheerfully through the meal about what a splendid opportunity his new job was. Manfred knew that in reality she was disappointed in him, but he said nothing to contradict her. They shared a bottle of wine, something they would never have done if Manfred's grandfather had been present, and at the end of the meal Mme Paliard burst into tears and told Manfred that he must still come to the house for his meals whenever he wished and that his room would always be

there for him. Manfred was fond of his grandmother and pitied her being left alone with his grandfather. He thanked her and promised to visit regularly.

When Manfred arrived at the bank on Monday morning, M. Jeantet immediately ushered him into his office. He was a round man with a red face and mutton chop whiskers. He wore an old-fashioned herringbone suit over a moth-eaten green cardigan. M. Jeantet cultivated an air of genial bonhomie. He greeted his clients with a vigorous handshake and much backslapping and fussed over them like long-lost friends. He habitually patted the female members of staff on the behind and enjoyed making saucy insinuations about their appearance or how they spent their weekends. This he did without discrimination of age or beauty, no doubt to avoid offending anyone he left out. At first Manfred was surprised at the good humour with which his new colleagues tolerated this behaviour, but he soon realised that behind his back they had any number of unflattering nicknames for the boss. It was difficult to believe that Manfred's grandfather regarded this man as an 'associate'.

Jeantet guided Manfred into his office by the elbow and towards two leather armchairs, uttering a series of proclamations about how delighted he was to have such a bright young man on board.

'Sit down, my boy, sit down,' he exhorted. 'That's a fine suit you're wearing. A little loose if I may say, but that's the way you young chaps are wearing them these days. I'm old-fashioned myself, or so my wife tells me. But I say quality never goes out of style, eh? What do you say? Ha ha.'

'Certainly,' said Manfred.

'Now, this occasion calls for a drink, don't you think?' And despite the fact that it was not yet nine o'clock the bank manager reached for a decanter on the table between them. He poured out two generous measures and toasted to a long and fruitful relationship. Manfred sipped his drink, feeling that he was being initiated into an archaic society of sherry drinkers.

‘It’s important to cement relationships,’ Jeantet went on. ‘That’s something you’ll learn. I’ve got much to teach you – running a bank isn’t about money, no, not at all. It’s about people.’ He paused and gave Manfred a meaningful look to underline the point.

Then quite suddenly, as if a cloud had crossed his face, Jeantet put down his glass and sat back in his armchair, clasping his hands across his belly. Manfred too put down his glass.

‘Now,’ he said in an altogether more sombre tone, ‘your grandfather – a fine man – has told me that you have failed your *baccalauréat*. That is not something to be applauded and normally I would not consider taking on a member of staff whom I did not consider to be up to scratch in the old brain department.’ Here he tapped the side of his forehead. ‘However, your grandfather has assured me that you are a bright young man and I am prepared to take him at his word. I trust you will repay the faith I am showing in you.’

He nodded seriously and then, to indicate that he had said his piece, once again took up his glass.

‘Academic qualifications are all very well, but what matters in life are hard work and a keen eye for human behaviour. I myself am an avid observer of the human animal. I’m not going to lie, you’ve landed on your feet with me. Observe and learn, and you’ll go far.’

He leaned in over the table and indicated that Manfred should do the same, before continuing in a stage whisper. ‘Between you and me, I plan to retire in a few years. Those mangy old bags out there,’ he jabbed his thumb towards the door, ‘haven’t got two brain cells between them. That’s monkey work out there. All they’re interested in is gossiping and picking up their pay cheque at the end of the month. But a bright young man in a good suit like yourself, if you play your cards right, you could be sitting in my place in just a few years. Now, what do you think of that, my boy?’

Manfred resisted the temptation to tell him that he would rather throw himself into the Rhine than spend one minute more than necessary working in the Saint-Louis branch of Société Générale.

'I'm very grateful for the opportunity,' he said.

That same day Manfred made inquiries about the apartment above the Restaurant de la Cloche, but it was occupied by the new proprietor and his wife. He then, as a temporary measure, took the apartment off Rue de Mulhouse.