FTP

The French struck with heart and vigor.

—*The Song of Roland*

He was told: "A train of German soldiers is coming through tonight at 11:34."[1]

From the station it takes less than five minutes to reach the forest. So they can expect the German train at 11:39. He went to the little bistro near the station anyway, where René usually has lunch. Sure enough, René was there in the corner eating with the stationmaster. He walked over to the table. They exchanged casual greetings and talked about the weather.

1. The Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (Partisan Irregular Riflemen; FTP) was a resistance group established in 1941 as the military branch of the French Communist Party (but was open to non-Communists). The fact that Thomas footnotes the title of this story in the first edition of *Contes d'Auxois* suggests the group was still unfamiliar to readers when she wrote the story. The FTP would soon, however, count among France's most important resistance groups and would owe its growing reputation to its strategy of coordinating small, anonymous groups, both urban and rural, to sabotage railways and factories serving Nazi interests, to fire on German soldiers, and to punish collaborators. Its increasing effectiveness is borne out by the fact that by fall 1943, Germany deployed troops charged with annihilating the FTP. By 1944, de Gaulle had to reckon with the FTP as a paramilitary force crucial to France's liberation from within; in February of that year, when he called for French resistance groups to unite as the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur (French Forces of the Interior), the FTP agreed.

René said: "You're not eating here? There's rabbit with potatoes. It's excellent."

He replied: "No, my wife is waiting. She'll let me have it if I'm late."

So René got up and said: "I'll walk part of the way with you. Be right back for my coffee," he called over to the stationmaster.

Then, just as casually, they left, after pausing briefly at the doorway to light their cigarettes.

They walked a short way, then turned onto a little street with grass shooting up between the cobblestones. From time to time, an old woman raises a curtain, then lets it fall. Everybody knows those faces, they are fixtures of the neighborhood. That is René, who works at the train station, and that is Paul, the bank clerk; they have been friends forever. They did their military service together and were both taken prisoner during that "phony war."[2] But they managed to escape before getting sent to Germany. And I know Paul's mother because we went to school together. Paul married a teacher, a little brunette from Paris who thinks somewhat highly of herself, but she's all right. Now

2. Known as the *drôle de guerre*, this period began on 3 September 1939, when France and Britain declared war on Nazi Germany, and ended on 10 May 1940, when Germany invaded Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland, and France. Between these dates, French and British troops waited behind the Maginot Line to face German troops but launched no significant offensives.

René, he's still a boy. It's a shame he hasn't married; he could make some woman very happy. Anyway, that's Paul heading to his home, way down at the end of the street, almost in the fields, a two-story house with a flower garden out front, but he has planted potatoes and spinach in it.

She let the curtain fall again. Nothing ever happens on this street, nothing worth looking at. Not like Grand Square with all the market activity and the Kommandantur that took over the mayor's office; or even rue de la République, now rue du Maréchal-Pétain.

So there's Paul heading home and René walking with him, because they have been friends forever, and that is that.

Paul asked: "Are you positive a train of Germans is coming through tonight at 11:34? You checked it out for yourself?"

"Yes," answered René, "I checked."

"What about the train just before it?" Paul asked.

"It's the freight train that comes through at 10:00. It doesn't stop."

"Five minutes from the train station to the forest," Paul calculates "that means five past ten. It takes a good ten minutes to get from Pierre Levée to the railroad tracks. So, we need to be at Pierre Levée at five minutes before ten. You'll need to go directly to the tracks so you

can be sure the freight train has passed by. And you're in charge of letting Louis and Alain know. I'll tell Big Paul." (He is called that because he is a lot taller than Paul or Robert.)

They stopped to light another cigarette.

"I mix my tobacco with corn silk," one of them said because someone was coming. It was the road surveyor, and they greeted him.

"Got it," said René.

"Got it," said Paul.

And Paul pushed open the garden gate; the bell on it rang out in the deserted street. Then there was the sound of his footsteps on the gravel walkway.

So, there's Paul going home for lunch and René going back to the train station: "I'm telling you, Madame Gentillon, we've got to find a wife for that boy."

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And now Paul is telling Alice:

"You need to get the word to Big Paul and Robert this afternoon: tonight, five of ten, at Pierre Levée."

She blanched a little, meaning her skin went from pale to more pale. She asks no questions. She waits.

"Tell them not to forget their 'notebooks.'"

She knows what he means by notebooks. But the color has returned to her cheeks. She says nothing. She waits. He adds: "It's for a train."

Then she throws her coat over her shoulders and leaves for the school.

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She teaches the course for the primary school certificate. And she is quite certain that at least fifteen of her students will have no trouble passing the exam. She makes every effort not to let them see or feel any of her worry. She went to the school library to look for a book. It is *The Song of Roland*. She slipped a note inside. At four o'clock she asked her best student, Marie-Catherine, to stay after class a few minutes. She told her: "Marie-Catherine, take this book and give it to your father; he asked me to get it for him. Don't forget, Marie-Catherine."

But she knows Marie-Catherine never forgets anything.

On her way home, Alice stopped by the shoe shop. The store was crowded. She asked: "When can I bring my wooden shoes in to be repaired? Look, the sole on this one is cracked again."[3]

"That's because they're junk," Big Paul responded.

"Also, I need you to pull a nail out of this one right away, it's hurting my foot."

3. Beginning in 1940, France was charged with providing six million pairs of shoes to Germany. French citizens could not purchase new shoes without a provisions card coupon (which was virtually impossible to acquire), and shoe production and repairs for the French were done with wood or paper since all available leather was used for the shoes sent to Germany. Even in peacetime, however, shoes with wooden heels were the norm for poor French schoolchildren in the countryside.

She sat down on a low chair and started to take her shoe off. Meanwhile, the shop cleared out. She said very quickly: "Tonight, five minutes before ten, at Pierre Levée. Don't forget your notebook."

Then she put her shoe back on.

He smiled, and all the lines around his mouth and eyes showed. He was a fit man, about fifty, but he had so many wrinkles. Someone else came into the shop.

"So, when can I bring my wooden shoes in?"

"Not before next week," he replied, "I'm swamped with work."

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They ate dinner. They listened to the radio. He is pretending to be calm. But she feels his worry. No, not worry, interest, his intense interest in everything. But for her, it is worry. She watches him as she dries the dishes and wonders: "What if this is the last time I ever see him?" She feels her heart beating. She was not meant to be a hero's wife, the kind who hands a shield to her husband or her son and says: "Come back with it, or on it."[4] She was meant for routine, peaceful days: for reading and writing lessons, for dictations, for fixing leaky faucets, for coming home in the evening to clean and cook, for having a child

4. An expression often attributed to Plutarch's *Moralia* (vol. 3, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard UP, 1931), "Come back with your shield, or on it" is what Spartan mothers are supposed to have said to their sons as they saw them off to war (241).

to cradle in her arms, for having a husband to love, and for loving him always.

After all, did she not have everything she needed to make that kind of happiness a reality? But that kind of happiness, she knows, is not possible, and she would have to forget about it, because every moment serves as a reminder that *right now* there can be no happiness, not even the simplest or most humble, without lying or selfishness. Ah, well: happiness would have to be for tomorrow, and for others perhaps. But not for us. And not now.

He has to get going if he does not want to be late. And he cannot be late. But Paul never knows what time it is.

"It's almost a quarter to ten," she says.

He hugged her distractedly. But what if this is the last time, she wonders. She heard his footsteps on the gravel walkway. But not the bell on the gate. She removes it at dusk so no one is alerted to any of their comings and goings at night. By morning, very early, everything is back in place.

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She grabbed her knitting and her hands move quickly. Then they come to rest on her knees, and all she has left is the waiting, the anxious waiting.

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There is no moon, but the stars are out. A warm night that already feels like summer. But beneath this beautiful night sky, what are we?

The first thing to do is get out of the city. That is easy: at this hour, no one is out. Besides, if he did run into anyone, he would say it is a beautiful night so he came out to smoke a cigarette before turning in. And besides that, his papers are in order: he is a good, conscientious employee who does his work, and everyone in town knows him. What would be so strange about him stepping out for a cigarette on a beautiful night like this?

He took the little alleyway that runs along the gasworks. The fields are just beyond the hedges, and his feet sink into the soft earth.

Pierre Levée is a crossroads where you will find a tall beech tree but no stone of any kind. Once upon a time a menhir,[5] or something like it, must have stood there; Alice could tell you because she knows all the old stories and all the old names. He thinks about Alice and about how much richer his life has been since they got married. And about how, if she were not his wife, he might not have the courage and the faith to be a man, here, tonight.

5. *Pierre Levée* means "raised stone" in French, and *menhir* is formed from the Breton words *maen*, meaning "stone," and *hir*, meaning "long." A menhir is a very large stone that stands alone or in alignment with other stones. Believed to date back as far as six to seven thousand years and distributed throughout Western Europe, menhirs are particularly concentrated in northwestern France and resonate especially with Breton culture, folklore, and history. Single menhirs, often strikingly tall, may have marked important sites or passageways for certain rituals and, later on, routes for religious pilgrimages, or *pardons*, as they are known in Brittany.

A shadow, no, two are visible against the trees at the intersection. He moves in closer: one is Big Paul, the other is Alain. And there is Louis, and here comes Robert.

"René is at the tracks, waiting for us. Have you got the guns? And the lag bolts?"

"Yes, yes," they nod to each other.

But why are these six men here tonight, instead of dozing off drearily to sleep with the rest of this little city?

Big Paul is the one taking the lead. There was a time when he believed in the peaceful transformation of the world, in the disappearance of injustice, in abundance, peace, and joy, when he believed that all you had to do was extend a hand and speak out about justice, and the wealthy would renounce wealth and spread it around. And then, slowly but surely, he learned that nothing is gained without struggle. And that is why he is here now with others who know what they want and who desire the means for obtaining it.

Paul is married to Alice. She taught him that human will makes history and that today, as in the past, this will to be free must be sought out in the history of each day, because history is not something that happens to you, it is something you make happen.

And there is Robert; he is here because he cannot accept that his country has been conquered but does nothing to regain its independence. That is why he has joined

those who, no longer waiting for help to come from somewhere else, have decided to fight as long as it takes to liberate his country.

And there is Louis, a tannery worker, here to stand with workers and country folk in the USSR who have achieved liberation and who know what they are defending and dying for.

And there is Alain; not quite seventeen, he is here because he loves to be counted among the fighters—dealing the blows as well as taking them when he has to—and he loves courage, even though he does not know it by name.

And over there, alone in the distance, is René, walking along the railroad tracks, on his way to meet them. René grew up on public assistance. He never knew who his parents were, so he knows how hard this world is for children without parents, and he knows that his job at the train station represents a major achievement for someone like him: "I am proof that anyone can achieve anything they set their minds to in our society." But he knows good and well that this is a lie, because the circumstances you are born into dramatically affect what your future will be. Someday, though, justice will determine everyone's future.

And thus, these six men move silently across the deserted land beneath the naked sky. And because these men

are here, in France, as others are across Europe, engaged in an act of will and freedom, something has changed in human history, in this Europe beaten down by stomping boots, this bloodied, faceless, voiceless Europe.

And because these six men are here, with others like them in France and throughout Europe, men who refuse to bow, to be duped, men who are fully committed, something has changed to move people one step away from the abyss and one step closer to the humanity they are not yet but will be tomorrow.

They have reached the main road that cuts through the forest. They stop for a moment and listen intently. Frogs croak. Then the wind blows, stirring the leafless branches. That creaking is the noise of one pine tree trunk rubbing against another.

Amid the sounds of sky and forest, they strain to make out the sounds of humans: footsteps of a patrol guard, an approaching bicycle, an automobile droning in the distance. But there is nothing.

So they hurry across the road, taking cover in the trees on the other side. The railroad tracks are just a couple of yards away. On their way down to the track bed, they see a shadowy figure, someone in a kneeling position, already at work. And now all of them are crouched down or bent over along the tracks, looking like strange gnomes in the bizarre light of their lanterns.

Paul checks his watch: "Are we done?" he asks.

"Yes, we're done," they whisper in response.

They have taken cover in the trees again, submachine guns at their sides.

In the distance they hear the train coming, gathering speed as it leaves the station behind: in just a few more seconds, it will be here.

They see the train's engine roll over on its side, the fuel car right behind it, in a heap of twisted metal. From the other cars that remain on the tracks, they see frightened German soldiers emerge.

Then calmly, the six begin to shoot. Harboring no more hatred than a surgeon would.

Harboring no more hatred.