

THE SILENT MEN

It was the dead of winter and yet a radiant sun was rising over the already active city. At the end of the jetty, sea and sky fused in a single dazzling light. But Yvars did not see them. He was cycling slowly along the boulevards above the harbor. On the fixed pedal of his cycle his crippled leg rested stiffly while the other labored to cope with the slippery pavement still wet with the night's moisture. Without raising his head, a slight figure astride the saddle, he avoided the rails of the former car-line, suddenly turned the handlebars to [63] let autos pass him, and occasionally elbowed back into place the musette bag in which Fernande had put his lunch. At such moments he would think bitterly of the bag's contents. Between the two slices of coarse bread, instead of the Spanish omelet he liked or the beefsteak fried in oil, there was nothing but cheese.

The ride to the shop had never seemed to him so long. To be sure, he was aging. At forty, though he had remained as slim as a vine shoot, a man's muscles don't warm up so quickly. At times, reading sports commentaries in which a thirty-year-old athlete was referred to as a veteran, he would shrug his shoulders. "If he's a veteran," he would say to Fernande, "then I'm practically in a wheelchair." Yet he knew that the reporter wasn't altogether wrong. At thirty a man is already beginning to lose his wind without noticing it. At forty he's not yet in a wheelchair, but he's definitely heading in that direction. Wasn't that just why he now avoided looking toward the sea during the ride to the other end of town where the cooper's shop was? When he was twenty he never got tired of watching it, for it used to hold in store a happy week-end on the beach. Despite or because of his lameness, he had always liked swimming. Then the [64] years had passed, there had been Fernande, the birth of the boy, and, to make ends meet, the over-time, at the shop on Saturdays and on various odd jobs for others on Sundays. Little by little he had lost the habit of those violent days that used to satiate him. The deep, clear water, the hot sun, the girls, the physical life—there was no other form of happiness in this country. And that happiness disappeared with youth. Yvars continued to love the sea, but only at the end of the day when the water in the bay became a little darker. The moment was pleasant on the terrace beside his house where he would sit down after work, grateful for his clean shirt that Fernande ironed so well and for the glass of anisette all frosted over. Evening would fall, the sky would become all soft and mellow, the neighbors talking with Yvars would suddenly lower their voices. At those times he didn't know whether he was happy or felt like crying. At least he

felt in harmony at such moments, he had nothing to do but wait quietly, without quite knowing for what.

In the morning when he went back to work, on the other hand, he didn't like to look at the sea. Though it was always there to greet him, he re-fused to see it until evening. This morning he was [65] pedaling along with head down, feeling even heavier than usual; his heart too was heavy. When he had come back from the meeting, the night be-fore, and had announced that they were going back to work, Fernande had gaily said: "Then the boss is giving you all a raise?" The boss was not giving any raise; the strike had failed. They hadn't managed things right, it had to be admitted. An impetuous walkout, and the union had been right to back it up only halfheartedly. After all, some fifteen workers hardly counted; the union had to consider the other cooper's shops that hadn't gone along. You couldn't really blame the union. Coop-erage, threatened by the building of tankers and tank trucks, was not thriving. Fewer and fewer barrels and large casks were being made; work consisted chiefly in repairing the huge tuns already in existence. Employers saw their business com-promised, to be sure, but even so they wanted to maintain a margin of profit and the easiest way still seemed to them to block wages despite the rise in living costs. What can coopers do when cooper-age disappears? You don't change trades when you've gone to the trouble of learning one; this one was hard and called for a long apprenticeship. The good cooper, the one who fits his curved staves [66] and tightens them in the fire with an iron hoop, al-most hermetically, without calking with raffia or oakum, was rare. Yvars knew this and was proud of it. Changing trades is nothing, but to give up what you know, your master craftsmanship, is not easy. A fine craft without employment and you're stuck, you have to resign yourself. But resignation isn't easy either. It was hard to have one's mouth shut, not to be able to discuss really, and to take the same road every morning with an accumulating fatigue, in order to receive at the end of every week merely what they are willing to give you, which is less and less adequate.

So they had got angry. Two or three of them had hesitated, but the anger had spread to them too after the first discussions with the boss. He had told them flatly, in fact, that they could take it or leave it. A man doesn't talk that way. "What's he expect of us?" Esposito had said. "That we'll stoop over and wait to be kicked in the ass?" The boss wasn't a bad sort, however. He had inherited from his father, had grown up in the shop, and had known almost all the workers for years. Occasionally he invited them to have a snack in the shop; they would cook sardines or

sausage meat over fires of shavings and, thanks partly to the wine, he was [67] really very nice. At New Year's he always gave five bottles of vintage wine to each of the men, and often, when one of them was ill or celebrated an event like marriage or first communion, he would make a gift of money. At the birth of his daughter, there had been sugar-coated almonds for everyone. Two or three times he had invited Yvars to hunt on his coastal property. He liked his workmen, no doubt, and often recalled the fact that his father had begun as an apprentice. But he had never gone to their homes; he wasn't aware. He thought only of himself because he knew nothing but him-self, and now you could take it or leave it. In other words, he had become obstinate likewise. But, in his position, he could allow himself to be.

He had forced the union's hand, and the shop had closed its doors. "Don't go to the trouble of picketing," the boss had said; "when the shop's not working, I save money." That wasn't true, but it didn't help matters since he was telling them to their faces that he gave them work out of charity. Es-posito was wild with fury and had told him he wasn't a man. The boss was hot-blooded and they had to be separated. But, at the same time, it had made an impression on the workers. Twenty days on strike, the wives sad at home, two or three of [68] them discouraged, and, in the end, the union had advised them to give in on the promise of arbitration and recovery of the lost days through over-time. They had decided to go back to work. Swag-gering, of course, and saying that it wasn't all set-tled, that it would have to be reconsidered. But this morning, with a fatigue that resembled defeat, cheese instead of meat, the illusion was no longer possible. No matter how the sun shone, the sea held forth no more promises. Yvars pressed on his single pedal and with each turn of the wheel it seemed to him he was aging a little. He couldn't think of the shop, of the fellow workers and the boss he would soon be seeing again without feeling his heart become a trifle heavier. Fernande had been worried: "What will you men say to him?" "Noth-ing." Yvars had straddled his bicycle, and had shaken his head. He had clenched his teeth; his small, dark, and wrinkled face with its delicate features had become hard. "We're going back to work. That's enough." Now he was cycling along, his teeth still clenched, with a sad, dry anger that darkened even the sky itself.

He left the boulevard, and the sea, to attack the moist streets of the old Spanish quarter. They led to an area occupied solely by sheds, junkyards, and [69] garages, where the shop was—a sort of low shed that was faced with stone up to a halfway point and then glassed in up to the corrugated metal roof. This shop opened onto the former cooperage, a courtyard surrounded by a covered

shed that had been abandoned when the business had enlarged and now served only as a storehouse for worn-out machines and old casks. Beyond the courtyard, separated from it by a sort of path covered with old tiles, the boss's garden began, at the end of which his house stood. Big and ugly, it was nevertheless prepossessing because of the Virginia creeper and the straggling honeysuckle surrounding the outside steps.

Yvars saw at once that the doors of the shop were closed. A group of workmen stood silently in front of them. This was the first time since he had been working here that he had found the doors closed when he arrived. The boss had wanted to emphasize that he had the upper hand. Yvars turned toward the left, parked his bicycle under the lean-to that prolonged the shed on that side, and walked toward the door. From a distance he recognized Esposito, a tall dark, hairy fellow who worked beside him, Marcou, the union delegate, with his tenor's profile, Saïd, the only Arab in the shop, then all [70] the others who silently watched him approach. But before he had joined them, they all suddenly looked in the direction of the shop doors, which had just begun to open. Ballester, the foreman, appeared in the opening. He opened one of the heavy doors and, turning his back to the workmen, pushed it slowly on its iron rail.

Ballester, who was the oldest of all, disapproved of the strike but had kept silent as soon as Esposito had told him that he was serving the boss's interests. Now he stood near the door, broad and short in his navy-blue jersey, already barefoot (he was the only one besides Saïd who worked barefoot), and he watched them go in one by one with his eyes that were so pale they seemed colorless in his old tanned face, his mouth downcast under his thick, drooping mustache. They were silent, humiliated by this return of the defeated, furious at their own silence, but the more it was prolonged the less capable they were of breaking it. They went in without looking at Ballester, for they knew he was carrying out an order in making them go in like that, and his bitter and downcast look told them what he was thinking. Yvars, for one, looked at him.

Ballester, who liked him, nodded his head without saying a word.

[71] Now they were all in the little locker-room on the right of the entrance: open stalls separated by unpainted boards to which had been attached, on either side, little locked cupboards; the farthest stall from the entrance, up against the walls of the shed, had been transformed into a shower above a gutter hollowed out of the earthen floor. In the center of the shop could be seen work in various stages, already finished large casks, loose-hooped, waiting for the forcing in the fire, thick benches with a long slot hollowed out in them (and in some of

them had been slipped circular wooden bottoms waiting to be planed to a sharp edge), and finally cold fires. Along the wall, on the left of the entrance, the workbenches extended in a row. In front of them stood piles of staves to be planed. Against the right wall, not far from the dressing-room, two large power saws, thoroughly oiled, strong and silent, gleamed.

Some time ago, the workshop had become too big for the handful of men who worked there. This was an advantage in the hot season, a disadvantage in winter. But today, in this vast space, the work dropped half finished, the casks abandoned in every corner with a single hoop holding the base of the staves spreading at the top like coarse wooden [72] flowers, the sawdust covering the benches, the tool-boxes and machines—everything gave the shop a look of neglect. They looked at it, dressed now in their old jumpers and their faded and patched pants, and they hesitated. Ballester was watching them. “So,” he said, “we pitch in?” One by one, they went to their posts without saying a word. Ballester went from one to another, briefly reminding them of the work to be begun or finished. No one answered. Soon the first hammer resounded against the iron-tipped wedge sinking a hoop over the convex part of a barrel, a plane groaned as it hit a knot, and one of the saws, started up by Esposito, got under way with a great whirring of blade. Saïd would bring staves on request or light fires of shavings on which the casks were placed to make them swell in their corset of iron hoops. When no one called for him, he stood at a workbench riveting the big rusty hoops with heavy hammer blows. The scent of burning shavings began to fill the shop. Yvars, who was planing and fitting the staves cut out by Esposito, recognized the old scent and his heart relaxed somewhat. All were working in silence, but a warmth, a life was gradually beginning to reawaken in the shop. Through the broad windows a clean, fresh light began to fill the shed. [73] The smoke rose bluish in the golden sunlight; Yvars even heard an insect buzz close to him.

At that moment the door into the former shop opened in the end wall and M. Lassalle, the boss, stopped on the threshold. Thin and dark, he was scarcely more than thirty. His white coverall hanging open over a tan gabardine suit, he looked at ease in his body. Despite his very bony face cut like a hatchet, he generally aroused liking, as do most people who exude vitality. Yet he seemed somewhat embarrassed as he came through the door. His greeting was less sonorous than usual; in any case, no one answered it. The sound of the hammers hesitated, lost the beat, and resumed even louder. M. Lassalle took a few hesitant steps, then he headed toward little Valery, who had been working with them for only a year. Near the power saw, a few feet away from

Yvars, he was putting a bottom on a big hogshead and the boss watched him. Valery went on working without saying anything. "Well, my boy," said M. Lassalle, "how are things?" The young man suddenly be-came more awkward in his movements. He glanced at Esposito, who was close to him, picking up a pile of staves in his huge arms to take them to Yvars. Esposito looked at him too while going on with his [74] work, and Valery peered back into his hogshead without answering the boss. Lassalle, rather non-plused, remained a moment planted in front of the young man, then he shrugged his shoulders and turned toward Marcou. The latter, astride his bench, was giving the finishing touches, with slow, careful strokes, to sharpening the edge of a bottom. "Hello, Marcou," Lassalle said in a flatter voice. Marcou did not answer, entirely occupied with taking very thin shavings off his wood. "What's got into you?" Lassalle asked in a loud voice as he turned toward the other workmen. "We didn't agree, to be sure. But that doesn't keep us from hav-ing to work together. So what's the use of this?" Marcou got up, raised his bottom piece, verified the circular sharp edge with the palm of his hand, squinted his languorous eyes with a look of sat-isfaction, and, still silent, went toward another workman who was putting together a hogshead. Throughout the whole shop could be heard noth-ing but the sound of hammers and of the power saw. "O.K.," Lassalle said. "When you get over this, let me know through Ballester." Calmly, he walked out of the shop.

Almost immediately afterward, above the din of the shop, a bell rang out twice. Ballester, who [75] had just sat down to roll a cigarette, got up slowly and went to the door at the end. After he had left, the hammers resounded with less noise; one of the workmen had even stopped when Ballester came back. From the door he said merely: "The boss wants you, Marcou and Yvars." Yvars's first im-pulse was to go and wash his hands, but Marcou grasped him by the arm as he went by and Yvars limped out behind him.

Outside in the courtyard, the light was so clear, so liquid, that Yvars felt it on his face and bare arms. They went up the outside stairs, under the honeysuckle on which a few blossoms were already visible. When they entered the corridor, whose walls were covered with diplomas, they heard a child crying and M. Lassalle's voice saying: "Put her to bed after lunch. We'll call the doctor if she doesn't get over it." Then the boss appeared sud-denly in the corridor and showed them into the little office they already knew, furnished with imita-tion-rustic furniture and its walls decorated with sports trophies. "Sit down," Lassalle said as he took his place behind the desk. They remained standing. "I called you in because you, Marcou, are the dele-gate and you,

Yvars, my oldest employee after Ballester. I don't want to get back to the [76] discussions, which are now over. I cannot, absolutely not, give you what you ask. The matter has been settled, and we reached the conclusion that work had to be resumed. I see that you are angry with me, and that hurts me, I'm telling you just as I feel it. I merely want to add this: what I can't do today I may perhaps be able to do when business picks up. And if I can do it, I'll do it even before you ask me. Meanwhile, let's try to work together." He stopped talking, seemed to reflect, then looked up at them. "Well?" he said. Marcou was looking out the window. Yvars, his teeth clenched, wanted to speak but couldn't. "Listen," said Lassalle, "you have all closed your minds. You'll get over it. But when you become reasonable again, don't forget what I've just said to you." He rose, went toward Marcou, and held out his hand. "Chao!" he said. Marcou suddenly turned pale, his popular tenor's face hardened and, for a second only, became mean--looking. Then he abruptly turned on his heel and went out. Lassalle, likewise pale, looked at Yvars without holding out his hand. "Go to hell!" he shouted.

When they went back into the shop, the men were lunching. Ballester had gone out. Marcou simply said: "Just wind," and returned to his bench. [77] Esposito stopped biting into his bread to ask what they had answered; Yvars said they hadn't answered anything. Then he went to get his musette bag and came back and sat down on his workbench. He was beginning to eat when, not far from him, he noticed Saïd lying on his back in a pile of shavings, his eyes looking vaguely at the windows made blue by a sky that had become less luminous. He asked him if he had already finished. Saïd said he had eaten his figs. Yvars stopped eating. The uneasy feeling that hadn't left him since the interview with Lassalle suddenly disappeared to make room for a pleasant warmth. He broke his bread in two as he got up and, faced with Saïd's refusal, said that everything would be better next week. "Then it'll be your turn to treat," he said. Saïd smiled. Now he bit into the piece of Yvars's sandwich, but in a gingerly way like a man who isn't hungry.

Esposito took an old pot and lighted a little fire of shavings and chips. He heated some coffee that he had brought in a bottle. He said it was a gift to the shop that his grocer had made when he learned of the strike's failure. A mustard jar passed from hand to hand. Each time Esposito poured out the already sugared coffee. Saïd swallowed it with more pleasure than he had taken in eating. Esposito [78] drank the rest of the coffee right from the burning pot, smacking his lips and swearing. At that moment Ballester came in to give the back-to-work signal.

While they were rising and gathering papers and utensils into their musette bags, Ballester came and stood in their midst and said suddenly that it was hard for all, and for him too, but that this was no reason to act like children and that there was no use in sulking. Esposito, the pot in his hand, turned toward him; his long, coarse face had suddenly become flushed. Yvars knew what he was about to say—and what everyone was thinking at the same time—that they were not sulking, that their mouths had been closed, they had to take it or leave it, and that anger and helplessness sometimes hurt so much that you can't even cry out. They were men, after all, and they weren't going to begin smiling and simpering. But Esposito said none of this, his face finally relaxed, and he slapped Ballester's shoulder gently while the others went back to their work. Again the hammers rang out, the big shed filled with the familiar din, with the smell of shavings and of old clothes damp with sweat. The big saw whined and bit into the fresh wood of the stave that Esposito was slowly pushing in front of him. [79] Where the saw bit, a damp sawdust spurted out and covered with something like bread-crumbs the big hairy hands firmly gripping the wood on each side of the moaning blade. Once the stave was ripped, you could hear only the sound of the motor.

At present Yvars felt only the strain in his back as he leaned over the plane. Generally the fatigue didn't come until later on. He had got out of training during these weeks of inactivity, it was clear. But he thought also of age, which makes manual labor harder when it's not mere precision work. That strain also foreshadowed old age. Wherever the muscles are involved, work eventually becomes hateful, it precedes death, and on evenings following great physical effort sleep itself is like death. The boy wanted to become a school-teacher, he was right; those who indulge in clichés about manual work don't know what they're talking about.

When Yvars straightened up to catch his breath and also to drive away these evil thoughts, the bell rang out again. It was insistent, but in such a strange way, with stops and imperious starts, that the men interrupted their work. Ballester listened, surprised, then made up his mind and went slowly to the door. He had disappeared for several seconds when the [80] ringing finally ceased. They resumed work. Again the door was flung open and Ballester ran toward the locker-room. He came out wearing canvas shoes and, slipping on his jacket, said to Yvars as he went by: "The kid has had an attack. I'm off to get Germain," and he ran toward the main door. Dr. Germain took care of the shop's health; he lived in this outlying quarter. Yvars repeated the news without commentary. They gathered around him and looked at one another, embarrassed.

Noth-ing could be heard but the motor of the power saw running freely. "It's perhaps nothing," one of them said. They went back to their places, the shop filled again with their noises, but they were working slowly, as if waiting for something.

A quarter of an hour later, Ballester came in again, hung up his jacket, and, without saying a word, went out through the little door. On the windows the light was getting dimmer. A little later, in the intervals when the saw was not ripping into the wood, the dull bell of an ambulance could be heard, at first in the distance, then nearer, finally just outside. Then silence. After a moment Ballester came back and everyone went up to him. Esposito had turned off the motor. Ballester said that while undressing in her room the child had [81] sud-denly keeled over as if mowed down. "Did you ever hear anything like it!" Marcou said. Ballester shook his head and gestured vaguely toward the shop; but he looked as if he had had quite a turn. Again the ambulance bell was heard. They were all there, in the silent shop, under the yellow light coming through the glass panels, with their rough, useless hands hanging down along their old saw-dust-covered pants.

The rest of the afternoon dragged. Yvars now felt only his fatigue and his still heavy heart. He would have liked to talk. But he had nothing to say, nor did the others. On their uncommunicative faces could be read merely sorrow and a sort of ob-stinacy. Sometimes the word "calamity" took shape in him, but just barely, for it disappeared immedi-ately—as a bubble forms and bursts simultaneously. He wanted to get home, to be with Fernande again, and the boy, on the terrace. As it happened, Balles-ter announced closing-time. The machines stopped. Without hurrying, they began to put out the fires and to put everything in order on their benches, then they went one by one to the locker-room. Saïd remained behind; he was to clean up the shop and water down the dusty soil. When Yvars reached the locker-room, Esposito, huge and hairy, was [82] already under the shower. His back was turned to them as he soaped himself noisily. Generally, they kidded him about his modesty; the big bear, indeed, obstinately hid his pudenda. But no one seemed to notice on this occasion. Esposito backed out of the shower and wrapped a towel around him like a loincloth. The others took their turns, and Marcou was vigorously slapping his bare sides when they heard the big door roll slowly open on its cast-iron wheel. Lassalle came in.

He was dressed as at the time of his first visit, but his hair was rather disheveled. He stopped on the threshold, looked at the vast deserted shop, took a few steps, stopped again, and looked

toward the locker-room. Esposito, still covered with his loin-cloth, turned toward him. Naked, embarrassed, he teetered from one foot to the other. Yvars thought that it was up to Marcou to say something. But Marcou remained invisible behind the sheet of water that surrounded him. Esposito grabbed a shirt and was nimbly slipping it on when Lassalle said: "Good night," in a rather toneless voice and began to walk toward the little door. When it occurred to Yvars that someone ought to call him, the door had already closed.

[83] Yvars dressed without washing, said good-night likewise, but with his whole heart, and they answered with the same warmth. He went out rapidly, got his bicycle, and, when he straddled it, he felt the strain in his back again. He was cycling along now in the late afternoon through the trafficky city. He was going fast because he was eager to get back to the old house and the terrace. He would wash in the wash-house before sitting down to look at the sea, which was already accompanying him, darker than in the morning, above the parapet of the boulevard. But the little girl accompanied him too and he couldn't stop thinking of her.

At home, his boy was back from school and reading the pictorials. Fernande asked Yvars whether everything had gone all right. He said nothing, cleaned up in the wash-house, then sat down on the bench against the low wall of the terrace. Mended washing hung above his head and the sky was becoming transparent; over the wall the soft evening sea was visible. Fernande brought the anisette, two glasses, and the jug of cool water. She sat down beside her husband. He told her everything, holding her hand as in the early days of their marriage. When he had finished, he didn't stir, looking toward [84] the sea where already, from one end of the horizon to the other, the twilight was swiftly falling. "Ah! it's his own fault!" he said. If only he were young again, and Fernande too, they would have gone away, across the sea