LE PASSE-MURAILLE

Il y avait à Montmartre, au troisième étage du 75 bis de la rue d'Orchampt, un excellent homme nommé Dutilleul qui possédait le don singulier de passer à travers les murs sans en être incommodé. Il portait un binocle, une petite barbiche noire, et il était employé de troisième classe au ministère de l'Enregistrement. En hiver, il se rendait à son bureau par l'autobus, et, à la belle saison, il faisait le trajet à pied, sous son chapeau melon.

excellent : utmärkt

posséder : äga

don : gåva

incommodé : besvärlig

binocle : pincené

barbiche : getskägg

employé : anställd

Dutilleul venait d'entrer dans sa quarante-troisième année lorsqu'il eut la révélation de son pouvoir. Un soir, une courte panne d'électricité l'ayant surpris dans le vestibule de son petit appartement de célibataire, il tâtonna un moment dans les ténèbres et, le courant revenu, se trouva sur le palier du troisième étage. Comme sa porte d'entrée était fermée à clé de l'inté­rieur, l'incident lui donna à réfléchir et, malgré les remontrances de sa raison, il se décida à rentrer chez lui comme il en était sorti, en passant à travers la muraille. Cette étrange faculté, qui semblait ne répondre à aucune de ses aspirations, ne laissa pas de le contrarier un peu et, le lendemain samedi, profitant de la semaine anglaise, il alla trouver un médecin du quartier pour lui exposer son cas. Le docteur put se convaincre qu'il disait vrai et, après examen, découvrit la cause du mal dans un durcissement hélicoïdal de la paroi strangulaire du corps thyroïde. Il prescrivit le surmenage intensif et, à raison de deux cachets par an, l'absorption de poudre de pirette tétravalente, mélange de farine de riz et d'hormone de centaure.

révélation : avslöjande

vestibule : hall/tambur

célibataire : ogift

tâtonna (tâtonner) : treva/fumla

ténèbres : mörker

palier : lager/korridor

l'inté­rieur : insidan

malgré : trots

faculté : förmåga

semblait (sembler) : verkar

contrarier : motverkar

exposer : utställa

cas : fall

convaincre : övertyga

examen : undersökning

prescrivit : ge förskrivning

surmenage intensif : överarbete

cachets : dos

l'absorption : konsumption

Ayant absorbé un premier cachet, Dutilleul rangea le médicament dans un tiroir et n'y pensa plus. Quant au surmenage intensif, son activité de fonctionnaire était réglée par des usages ne s'accommodant d'aucun excès, et ses heures de loisir, consacrées à la lecture du journal et à sa collection de timbres, ne l'obligeaient pas non plus à une dépense déraisonnable d'énergie. Au bout d'un an, il avait donc gardé intacte la faculté de passer à travers les murs, mais il ne l'utilisait jamais, sinon par inadvertance, étant peu curieux d'aventures et rétif aux entraînements de l'imagination. L'idée ne lui venait même pas de rentrer chez lui autrement que par la porte et après l'avoir dûment ouverte en faisant jouer la serrure. Peut-être eût-il vieilli dans la paix de ses habitudes sans avoir la tentation de mettre ses dons à l'épreuve, si un événement extraordinaire n'était venu soudain bouleverser son existence. M. Mouron, son sous-chef de bureau, appelé à d'autres fonctions, fut remplacé par un certain M. Lécuyer, qui avait la parole brève et la moustache en brosse. Dès le premier jour, lé nouveau sous-chef vit de très mauvais œil que Dutilleul portât un lorgnon à chaînette et une barbiche noire, et il affecta de le traiter comme une vieille chose gênante et un peu malpropre. Mais le plus grave était qu'il prétendît introduire dans son service des réformes d'une portée considérable et bien faites pour troubler la quiétude de son subordonné. Depuis vingt ans, Dutilleul commençait ses lettres par la formule suivante : « Me reportant à votre honorée du tantième courant et, pour mémoire, à notre échange de lettres antérieur, j'ai l'honneur de vous informer ... » Formule à laquelle M. Lécuyer entendit substituer une autre d'un tour plus américain : « En réponse à votre lettre du tant, je vous informe ... » Dutilleul ne put s'accou­tumer à ces façons épistolaires. Il revenait malgré lui à la manière traditionnelle, avec une obstination machi­nale qui lui valut l'inimitié grandissante du sous-chef. L'atmosphère du ministère de l'Enregistrement lui deve­nait presque pesante. Le matin, il se rendait à son travail avec appréhension, et le soir, dans son lit, il lui arrivait bien souvent de méditer un quart d'heure entier avant de trouver le sommeil.

rangea(ranger) : ordna

Quant au : angående

Ecœuré par cette volonté rétrograde qui compromettait le succès de ses réformes, M. Lécuyer avait relégué Dutilleul dans un réduit à demi obscur, attenant à son bureau. On y accédait par une porte basse et étroite donnant sur le couloir et portant encore en lettres capi­tales l'inscription : Débarras. Dutilleul avait accepté d'un cœur résigné cette humiliation sans précédent, mais chez lui, en lisant dans son journal le récit de quelque sanglant fait divers, il se surprenait à rêver que M. Lécuyer était la victime.

Un jour, le sous-chef fit irruption dans le réduit en brandissant une lettre et il se mit à beugler :

- Recommencez-moi ce torchon ! Recommencez-moi cet innommable torchon qui déshonore mon service !

Dutilleul voulut protester, mais M. Lécuyer, la voix tonnante, le traita de cancrelat routinier, et, avant de partir, froissant la lettre qu'il avait en main, la lui jeta au visage. Dutilleul était modeste, mais fier. Demeuré seul dans son réduit, il fit un peu de tem­pérature et, soudain, se sentit en proie à l'inspiration. Quittant son siège, il entra dans le mur qui séparait son bureau de celui du sous-chef, mais il y entra avec prudence, de telle sorte que sa tête seule émergeât de l'autre côté. M. Lécuyer, assis à sa table de travail, d'une plume encore nerveuse déplaçait une virgule dans le texte d'un employé, soumis à son approbation, lorsqu'il entendit tousser dans son bureau. Levant les yeux, il découvrit avec un effarement indicible la tête de Dutilleul, collée au mur à la façon d'un trophée de chasse. Et cette tête était vivante. A travers le lorgnon à chaînette, elle dardait sur lui, un regard de haine. Bien mieux, la tête se mit à parler.

- Monsieur, dit-elle, vous êtes un voyou, un butor et un galopin.

Béant d'horreur, M. Lécuyer ne pouvait détacher les yeux de cette apparition. Enfin, s'arrachant à son fau­teuil, il bondit dans le couloir et courut jusqu'au réduit. Dutilleul, le porte-plume à la main, était installé à sa place habituelle, dans une attitude paisible et laborieuse. Le sous-chef le regarda longuement et, après avoir balbutié quelques paroles, regagna son bureau. A peine venait-il de s'asseoir que la tête réapparaissait sur la muraille.

- Monsieur, vous êtes un voyou, un butor et un galopin.

Au cours de cette seule journée, la tête redoutée apparut vingt-trois fois sur le mur et, les jours suivants, à la même cadence. Dutilleul, qui avait acquis une certaine aisance à ce jeu, ne se contentait plus d'invec­tiver contre le sous-chef. Il proférait des menaces obscures, s'écriant par exemple d'une voix sépulcrale, ponctuée de rires vraiment démoniaques :

- Garou ! garou ! Un poil de loup ! (rire). Il rôde un frisson à décorner tous les hiboux (rire).

Ce qu'entendant, le pauvre sous-chef devenait un peu plus pâle, un peu plus suffocant, et ses cheveux se dressaient bien droits sur sa tête et il lui coulait dans le dos d'horribles sueurs d'agonie. Le premier jour, il maigrit d'une livre. Dans la semaine qui suivit, outre qu'il se mit à fondre presque à vue d'œil, il prit l'habitude de manger le potage avec sa fourchette et de saluer militairement les gardiens de la paix. Au début de la deuxième semaine, une ambulance vint le prendre à son domicile et l'emmena dans une maison de santé.

Dutilleul, délivré de la tyrannie de M. Lécuyer, put revenir à ses chères formules : « Me reportant à votre honorée du tantième courant ... » Pourtant, il était insatisfait. Quelque chose en lui réclamait, un besoin nouveau, impérieux, qui n'était rien de moins que le besoin de passer à travers les murs. Sans doute le pouvait-il faire aisément, par exemple chez lui, et du reste, il n'y manqua pas. Mais l'homme qui possède des dons brillants ne peut se satisfaire longtemps de les exercer sur un objet médiocre. Passer à travers les murs ne saurait d'ailleurs constituer une fin en soi. C'est le départ d'une aventure, qui appelle une suite, un développement et, en somme, une rétribution. Dutilleul le comprit très bien. Il sentait en lui un besoin d'expansion, un désir croissant de s'accomplir et de se surpasser, et une certaine nostalgie qui était quelque chose comme l'appel de derrière le mur. Malheureusement, il lui manquait un but. Il chercha son inspiration dans la lecture du journal, particulièrement aux chapitres de la politique et du sport, qui lui semblaient être des activités honorables, mais s'étant finalement rendu compte qu'elles n'offraient aucun débouché aux personnes qui passaient à travers les murs, il se rabattit sur le fait divers qui se révéla des plus suggestifs.

Le premier cambriolage auquel se livra Dutilleul eut lieu dans un grand établissement de crédit de la rive droite. Ayant traversé une douzaine de murs et de cloisons, il pénétra dans divers coffres-forts, emplit ses poches de billets de banque et, avant de se retirer, signa son larcin à la craie rouge, du pseudonyme de Garou-Garou, avec un fort joli paraphe qui fut repro­duit le lendemain par tous les journaux. Au bout d'une semaine, ce nom de Garou-Garou connut une extraordinaire célébrité. La sympathie du public allait sans réserve à ce prestigieux cambrioleur qui narguait si joliment la police. Il se signalait chaque nuit par un nouvel exploit accompli soit au détriment d'une banque, soit à celui d'une bijouterie ou d'un riche particulier. A Paris comme en province, il n'y avait point de femme un peu rêveuse qui n'eût le fervent désir d'appartenir corps et âme au terrible Garou-Garou. Après le vol du fameux diamant de Burdigala et le cambriolage du Crédit municipal, qui eurent lieu la même semaine, l'enthousiasme de la foule atteignit au délire. Le ministre de l'Intérieur dut démissionner, entraînant dans sa chute le ministre de l'Enregistrement. Cependant, Dutilleul devenu l'un des hommes les plus riches de Paris, était toujours ponctuel à son bureau et on parlait de lui pour les palmes académiques. Le matin, au ministère de l'Enregistrement, son plaisir était d'écouter les commentaires que faisaient les collègues sur ses exploits de la veille. « Ce Garou-Garou, disaient-ils, est un homme formidable, un surhomme, un génie. » En entendant de tels éloges, Dutilleul devenait rouge de confusion et, derrière le lorgnon à chaînette, son regard brillait d'amitié et de gratitude. Un jour, cette atmosphère de sympathie le mit tellement en confiance qu'il ne crut pas pouvoir garder le secret plus longtemps. Avec un reste de timidité, il considéra ses collègues groupés autour d'un journal relatant le cambriolage de la Banque de France, et déclara d'une voix modeste: « Vous savez, Garou-Garou, c'est moi. » Un rire énorme et interminable accueillit la confidence de Dutilleul qui reçut, par dérision, le surnom de Garou-Garou. Le soir, à l'heure de quitter le ministère, il était l'objet de plaisanteries sans fin de la part de ses camarades et la vie lui semblait moins belle.

Quelques jours plus tard, Garou-Garou se faisait pincer par une ronde de nuit dans une bijouterie de la rue de la Paix. Il avait apposé sa signature sur le comptoir­caisse et s'était mis à chanter une chanson à boire en fracassant différentes vitrines à l'aide d'un hanap en or massif. Il lui eût été facile de s'enfoncer dans un mur et d'échapper ainsi à la ronde de nuit, mais tout porte à croire qu'il voulait être arrêté et probablement à seule fin de confondre ses collègues dont l'incrédulité l'avait mortifié. Ceux-ci, en effet, furent bien surpris, lorsque les journaux du lendemain publièrent en pre­mière page la photographie de Dutilleul. Ils regrettèrent amèrement d'avoir méconnu leur génial camarade et lui rendirent hommage en se laissant pousser une petite barbiche. Certains même, entraînés par le remords et l'admiration, tentèrent de se faire la main sur le porte-feuille ou la montre de famille de leurs amis et connaissances.

On jugera sans doute que le fait de se laisser prendre par la police pour étonner quelques collègues témoigne d'une grande légèreté, indigne d'un homme exceptionnel, mais le ressort apparent de la volonté est fort peu de chose dans une telle détermination. En renonçant à la liberté, Dutilleul croyait céder à un orgueilleux désir de revanche, alors qu'en réalité il glissait simplement sur la pente de sa destinée. Pour un homme qui passe à travers les murs, il n'y a point de carrière un peu poussée s'il n'a tâté au moins une fois de la prison. Lorsque Dutilleul pénétra dans les locaux de la Santé, il eut l'impression d'être gâté par le sort. L'épaisseur des murs était pour lui un véritable régal. Le lendemain même de son incarcération, les gardiens découvrirent avec stupeur que le prisonnier avait planté un clou dans le mur de sa cellule et qu'il y avait accroché une montre en or appartenant au directeur de la prison. Il ne put ou ne voulut révéler comment cet objet était entré en sa possession. La montre fut rendue à son propriétaire et, le lendemain, retrouvée au chevet de Garou-Garou avec le tome premier des TroisMousquetaires emprunté à la bibliothèque du directeur. Le personnel de la Santé était sur les dents. Les gardiens se plaignaient en outre de recevoir des coups de pied dans le derrière, dont la provenance était inexplicable. II semblait que les murs eussent, non plus des oreilles, mais des pieds. La détention de Garou-Garou durait depuis une semaine, lorsque le directeur de la Santé, en pénétrant un matin dans son bureau, trouva sur sa table la lettre suivante :

« Monsieur le directeur. Me reportant à notre entretien du 17 courant et, pour mémoire, à vos instructions générales du 15 mai de l'année dernière, j'ai l'honneur de vous informer que je viens d'achever la lecture du second tome des Trois Mousquetaires et que je compte m'évader cette nuit entre onze heures vingt-cinq et onze heures trente-cinq. Je vous prie, monsieur le directeur, d'agréer l'expression de mon profond respect. Garou­Garou. »

Malgré l'étroite surveillance dont il fut l'objet cette nuit-là, Dutilleul s'évada à onze heures trente. Connue du public le lendemain matin, la nouvelle souleva partout un enthousiasme magnifique. Cependant, ayant effectué un nouveau cambriolage qui mit le comble à sa popularité, Dutilleul semblait peu soucieux de se cacher et circulait à travers Montmartre sans aucune précaution. Trois jours après son évasion, il fut arrêté rue Caulaincourt au café du Rêve, un peu avant midi, alors qu'il buvait un vin blanc citron avec des amis.

Reconduit à la Santé et enfermé au triple verrou dans un cachot ombreux, Garou-Garou s'en échappa le soir même et alla coucher à l'appartement du directeur, dans la chambre d'ami. Le lendemain matin, vers neuf heures, il sonnait la bonne pour avoir son petit déjeuner et se laissait cueillir au lit, sans résistance, par les gardiens alertés. Outré, le directeur établit un poste de garde à la porte de son cachot et le mit au pain sec. Vers midi, le prisonnier s'en fut déjeuner dans un restaurant voisin de la prison et, après avoir bu son café, téléphona au directeur.

- Allô ! Monsieur le directeur, je suis confus, mais tout à l'heure, au moment de sortir, j'ai oublié de prendre votre portefeuille, de sorte que je me trouve en panne au restaurant. Voulez-vous avoir la bonté d'envoyer quelqu'un pour régler l'addition ?

Le directeur accourut en personne et s'emporta jusqu'à proférer des menaces et des injures. Atteint dans sa fierté, Dutilleul s'évada la nuit suivante et pour ne plus revenir. Cette fois, il prit la précaution de raser sa barbiche noire et remplaça son lorgnon à chaînette par des lunettes en écaille. Une casquette de sport et un costume à larges carreaux avec culotte de golf ache­vèrent de le transformer. Il s'installa dans un petit. appartement de l'avenue Junot où, dès avant sa pre­mière arrestation, il avait fait transporter une partie de son mobilier et les objets auxquels il tenait le plus. Le bruit de sa renommée commençait à le lasser et depuis son séjour à la Santé, il était un peu blasé sur le plaisir de passer à travers les murs. Les plus épais, les plus orgueilleux, lui semblaient maintenant de simples paravents, et il rêvait de s'enfoncer au cœur de quelque massive pyramide. Tout en mûrissant le projet d'un voyage en Egypte, il menait une vie des plus paisibles, partagée entre sa collection de timbres, le cinéma et de longues flâneries à travers Montmartre. Sa métamorphose était si complète qu'il passait, glabre et lunetté d'écaille, à côté de ses meilleurs amis sans être reconnu. Seul le peintre Gen Paul, à qui rien ne saurait échapper d'un changement survenu dans la physionomie d'un vieil habitant du quartier, avait fini par pénétrer sa véritable identité. Un matin qu'il se trouva nez à nez avec Dutilleul au coin de la rue de l'Abreuvoir, il ne put s'empêcher de lui dire dans son rude argot

- Dis donc, je vois que tu t'es miché en gigolpince pour tétarer ceux de la sûrepige - ce qui signifie à peu près en langage vulgaire: je vois que tu t'es déguisé en élégant pour confondre les inspecteurs de la Sûreté.

- Ah! murmura Dutilleul, tu m'as reconnu !

Il en fut troublé et décida de hâter son départ pour l'Egypte. Ce fut l'après-midi de ce même jour qu'il devint amoureux d'une beauté blonde rencontrée deux fois rue Lepic à un quart d'heure d'intervalle. Il en oublia aussitôt sa collection de timbres et l'Egypte et les Pyramides. De son côté, la blonde l'avait regardé avec beaucoup d'intérêt. Il n'y a rien qui parle à l'imagination des jeunes femmes d'aujourd'hui comme des culottes de golf et une paire de lunettes en écaille. Cela sent son cinéaste et fait rêver cocktails et nuits de Californie. Malheureusement, la belle, Dutilleul en fut informé par Gen Paul, était mariée à un homme brutal et jaloux. Ce mari soupçonneux, qui menait d'ailleurs une vie de bâtons de chaise, délaissait régulièrement sa femme entre dix heures du soir et quatre heures du matin, mais avant de sortir, prenait la précaution de la boucler dans sa chambre, à deux tours de clé, toutes persiennes fermées au cadenas. Dans la journée, il la surveillait étroitement, lui arrivant même de la suivre dans les rues de Montmartre.

- Toujours à la biglouse, quoi. C'est de la grosse nature de truand qu'admet pas qu'on ait des vouloirs de piquer dans son réséda.

Mais cet avertissement de Gen Paul ne réussit qu'à enflammer Dutilleul. Le lendemain, croisant la jeune femme rue Tholozé, il osa la suivre dans une crémerie et, tandis qu'elle attendait son tour d'être servie, il lui dit qu'il l'aimait respectueusement, qu'il savait tout : le mari méchant, la porte à clé et les persiennes, mais qu'il serait le soir même dans sa chambre. La blonde rougit et son pot à lait trembla dans sa main et, les yeux mouillés de tendresse, elle soupira faiblement : « Hélas ! Monsieur, c'est impossible. »

Le soir de ce jour radieux, vers dix heures, Dutilleul était en faction dans la rue Norvins et surveillait un robuste mur de clôture, derrière lequel se trouvait une petite maison dont il n'apercevait que la girouette et la cheminée. Une porte s'ouvrir dans ce mur et un homme, après l'avoir soigneusement fermée à clé derrière lui, descendit vers l'avenue Junot. Dutilleul attendit de l’avoir vu disparaître, très loin, au tournant de la descente et compta encore jusqu'à dix. Alors, il s’élança, entra dans le mur au pas gymnastique et, toujours courant à travers les obstacles, pénétra dans la chambre de la belle recluse. Elle l'accueillit avec ivresse et ils s’aimèrent jusqu'à une heure avancée.

Le lendemain, Dutilleul eut la contrariété de souffrir de violents maux de tête. La chose était sans importance et il n’allait pas, pour si peu, manquer à son rendez-vous. Néanmoins, ayant par hasard découvert des cachets épars au fond d'un tiroir, il en avala un le matin et un l’après-midi. Le soir, ses douleurs de tête étaient supportables et l'exaltation les lui fit oublier. La jeune femme l'attendait avec toute l'impatience qu’avaient fait naître en elle les souvenirs de la veille et ils s’aimèrent cette nuit-là, jusqu'à trois heures du matin. Lorsqu’il s'en alla, Dutilleul, en traversant les murs de la maison, eut l'impression d’un frottement inaccoutumé aux hanches et aux épaules. Toutefois, il ne crut pas devoir y prêter attention. Ce ne fut d’ailleurs qu'en pénétrant dans le mur de clôture qu’il éprouva nettement la sensation d'une résistance. Il lui semblait se mouvoir dans une matière encore fluide, mais qui devenait pâteuse et prenait, à chacun de ses efforts, plus de consistance. Ayant réussi à se loger tout entier dans l'épaisseur du mur, il s'aperçut qu'il n'avançait plus et se souvint avec terreur des deux cachets qu'il avait pris dans la journée. Ces cachets, qu'il avait crus d'aspirine, contenaient en réalité de la poudre de pirette tétravalente prescrite par le docteur l'année précédente. L'effet de cette médication s'ajoutant à celui d'un surmenage intensif, se manifestait d'une façon soudaine.

Dutilleul était comme figé à l'intérieur de la muraille. Il y est encore à présent, incorporé à la pierre. Les noctambules qui descendent la rue Norvins à l'heure où la rumeur de Paris s'est apaisée, entendent une voix assourdie qui semble venir d'outre-tombe et qu'ils prennent pour la plainte du vent sifflant aux carrefours de la Butte. C'est Garou-Garou Dutilleul qui lamente la fin de sa glorieuse carrière et le regret des amours trop brèves. Certaines nuits d'hiver, il arrive que le peintre Gen Paul, décrochant sa guitare, s'aventure dans la solitude sonore de la rue Norvins pour consoler d'une chanson le pauvre prisonnier, et les notes, envolées de ses doigts engourdis, pénètrent au cœur de la pierre comme des gouttes de clair de lune.

Marcel Aymé, Le passe-muraille, Gallimard 1943

The man who could walk through walls (Le Passe-Muraille)

A story by Marcel Aymé (1943) , translated by Karen Reshkin

In Montmartre on the fourth floor of number 75½ Rue Orchampt there once lived a fine fellow named Dutilleul who had the remarkable gift of being able to pass through walls with perfect ease. He wore a pince-nez and a small black goatee and he worked as a level three clerk in the Registration Ministry. In winter he would take the bus to work, and come summer he would walk, wearing his bowler hat.

pince-nez: /ˌpæːnsˈneɪ/ (especially in the past) glasses held on a person's nose by a spring rather than by pieces that fit around the ears.



goatee: /ˈɡəʊ.tiː/ a small, usually pointed beard grown only on the chin, not the cheeks

clerk: /klɑːk/ a person who works in an office, dealing with records or performing general office duties

Dutilleul discovered his power shortly after he turned forty-two. One evening, the electricity went out briefly while he was standing in the front hall of his small bachelor apartment. He groped around for a moment in the dark, and when the power came back on, he found himself standing on his fourth floor landing. Since the door to his apartment was locked from the inside, this gave him pause for thought. Despite the objections of his common sense, he decided to return home in the same way he left—by passing through the wall. This strange ability seemed to have no bearing on any of his aspirations, and he could not help feeling rather vexed about it. The following day was Saturday, and since he worked a five-day week, he sought out the local doctor and presented his case to him. The doctor satisfied himself that Dutilleul was telling the truth, and upon examining him he discovered that the problem was caused by a helicoidal hardening of the strangular membrane of the thyroid gland. He prescribed intensive overwork and told him to take two doses a year of tetravalent pirette powder containing a mixture of rice flour and centaur hormone.

groped: to feel with your hands, especially in order to find or move towards something when you cannot see easily

objection: the act of expressing or feeling opposition to or dislike of something or someone

aspirations: something that you hope to achieve

can not help something / doing something: to not be able to control or stop something

vexed: difficult to deal with and causing a lot of disagreement and argument

seek (sought): to try to find or get something, especially something that is not a physical object

prescribe: to tell someone what they must have or do, or to make a rule of something

Dutilleul took one dose, then put the medicine in the back of a drawer and forgot about it. As for intensive overwork, his activity as a civil servant followed fixed practices which did not lend themselves to any excess. He spent his free time reading the newspaper and working on his stamp collection; these activities did not require him to expend an unreasonable amount of energy either. After a year then, he still retained the ability to pass through walls, but he never used it intentionally; he had little interest in adventures and he stubbornly resisted the impulses of his imagination. The idea never even occurred to him to enter his apartment any other way than by the door, and that after having duly opened it using the lock.

Expend: to use or spend time, effort, or money

Duly: in the correct way or at the correct time; as expected

Intentionally: in a planned or intended way

stubbornly: in a way that shows you are determined to do what you want and refuse to do anything else

// to discover the gift

He might have lived out his life in his peaceable habits and never been tempted to put his gifts to the test if an extraordinary event had not suddenly disrupted his existence. Monsieur Mouron, the associate office director, left to take another position and was replaced by one Monsieur Lécuyer, who spoke in short, clipped sentences and wore a toothbrush mustache. From the very first day, the new associate office director was highly displeased to see that Dutilleul wore a pince-nez on a chain and a black goatee, and he made a great show of treating him as an obsolete nuisance or a slightly grubby antique.

tempted: to make someone want to have or do something, especially something that is unnecessary or wrong

disrupted: to prevent something, especially a system, process, or event, from continuing as usual or as expected

Far more serious however, was his plan to introduce far-reaching reforms in the office; they seemed specially designed to disturb the peace of his subordinate. For twenty years, Dutilleul had begun all his letters with the following phrase: “In reference to your esteemed correspondence of the 12th of the present month, and furthermore in reference to our previous exchange of letters, I have the honor of writing to inform you that...” Monsieur Lécuyer replaced this with a turn of phrase that had a more American ring to it: “In response to your letter of the 12th, I inform you that...” Dutilleul could not adapt to these epistolary fashions. He couldn’t help himself; he reverted to the traditional formula with a mechanical obstinacy that earned him the growing enmity of the associate director. He began to find the atmosphere at the Ministry of Registration oppressive. He felt apprehensive on his way to work in the morning, and at night in his bed he often lay awake turning things over in his mind for a full fifteen minutes before he could fall asleep.

Subordinate: having a lower or less important position

epistolary: involving or consisting of letter writing

obstinacy: the quality of being unreasonably determined, especially to act in a particular way and not to change at all, despite what anyone else says

enmity: a feeling of hate

oppressive: cruel and unfair

apprehensive: feeling worried about something that you are going to do or that is going to happen

Monsieur Lécuyer was disgusted by this willful backwardness which was threatening the success of his reforms, so he had Dutilleul’s desk moved to a small dim closet next to his office. It was only accessible by a low narrow door which opened onto the corridor and still bore the inscription “RUBBISH” in capital letters. Dutilleul accepted this unprecedented humiliation with resignation, but at home, whenever he would read in the newspaper about some gory incident, he found himself daydreaming, imagining Monsieur Lécuyer as the victim.

inscribe: to write words in a book or carve (= cut) them on an object

unprecedented: /ʌnˈpres.ɪ.den.tɪd/ never having happened or existed in the past

humiliate: /hjuːˌmɪl.iˈeɪ.ʃən/ to make someone feel ashamed or lose respect for himself or herself

resignation: /ˌrez.ɪɡˈneɪ.ʃən/ the act of telling your employer that you are leaving your job

gory: /ˈɡɔː.ri/ involving violence and blood

One day, the associate director burst into his closet brandishing a letter and bellowing, “Rewrite this stinking letter! You will rewrite this appalling piece of drivel which is dishonoring my department!”

brandishing: to wave something in the air in a threatening or excited way

bellow: /ˈbel.əʊ/ to shout in a loud voice, or (of a cow or large animal) to make a loud, deep sound

appalling: /əˈpɔː.lɪŋ/ to make someone have strong feelings of shock or of disapproval

drivel: nonsense or boring and unnecessary information

Dutilleul tried to protest, but Monsieur Lécuyer, in a thunderous voice, called him a hidebound cockroach and as he left, he took the letter he had in his hand, crumpled it up into a ball, and threw it in his face. Dutilleul was modest but proud. He sat alone in his closet, steaming, when suddenly he had an inspiration. He rose from his chair and entered the wall which separated his office from that of the associate director. He was careful to move only partway through the wall, so that just his head emerged on the other side. Monsieur Lécuyer was seated at his work table, his ever-twitching pen shifting a comma in the text an employee had submitted to him for approval. Hearing a quiet cough in his office, he looked up, and discovered to his unspeakable alarm the head (just the head) of Dutilleul stuck to the wall like a hunting trophy. What’s more, the head was alive. It looked over its pince-nez glasses at him with deepest hatred. And then it began to speak.

hidebound: having fixed opinions and ways of doing things and not willing to change or be influenced, especially by new or modern ideas

cockroach: a flat, brown or black insect sometimes found in the home



modest: not large in size or amount, or not expensive

modest: not usually talking about or making obvious your own abilities and achievements

twitch: (to cause) to make a sudden small movement with a part of the body, usually without intending to

“Monsieur,” it said, “you are a hoodlum, a boor, and a spoiled brat.”

hoodlum: a violent person, especially one who is member of a group of criminals

boor: a person who is rude and does not consider other people's feelings

Gaping with horror, Monsieur Lécuyer couldn’t take his eyes off this apparition. At last, tearing himself out of his chair, he leapt into the corridor and raced to the closet. Dutilleul sat in his usual place, pen in hand, looking perfectly peaceful and industrious. The associate director stared at him for a long moment, mumbled a few words, and went back to his office. No sooner had he sat down then the head reappeared on the wall.

apparition: /ˌæp.əˈrɪʃ.ən/ the spirit of a dead person appearing in a form that can be seen

industrious: /ɪnˈdʌs.tri.əs/ An industrious person works hard

“Monsieur, you are a hoodlum, a boor, and a spoiled brat.”

In the course of a single day, the dreaded head reappeared on the wall twenty-three times, and it kept up the same pace over the following days. Dutilleul became rather good at this game, and he no longer contented himself with shouting abuse at the associate director. He uttered veiled threats; for example, he would cackle demoniacally and wail in a sepulchral voice:

dreaded: causing fear or worry

uttered: /ˈʌt.ər/ to say something or to make a sound with your voice

veiled: /veɪld/ veiled words or ways of behaving are not direct or expressed clearly

cackle: /ˈkæk.əl/ to make the loud, unpleasant sound of a chicken

demoniacally: /ˌdiː.məˈnaɪ.ə.kəl.i/ in a wild and evil way, like a devil (= evil spirit)

sepulchral: /səˈpʌl.krəl/ suggesting death or places where the dead are buried

“The Lone Wolf’s on the prowl! Beware! (laughter)

No one’s safe—he’s everywhere! (laughter)”

Whenever he heard this, the poor associate director grew a little paler and made a choking noise; his hair stood straight up on his head and the cold sweat /swet/ of terror trickled down his back. He lost a pound that first day.

trickled: trickle down, from, out of, etc. sth If liquid trickles somewhere, it flows slowly and without force in a thin line

As the week wore on, you could practically see him melting away. He took to eating his soup with a fork and greeting policemen with a smart military salute.

salute: (especially of people in the armed forces) to make a formal sign of respect to someone, especially by raising the right hand to the side of the head

At the beginning of the second week, an ambulance came to his residence and took him away to a sanitarium.

residence: a home

sanitarium: a sanatorium(a special type of hospital, usually in the countryside, where people can have treatment and rest, especially when getting better after a long illness)

// Dutilleul scared the evil associate director Monsieur Lécuyer using his wall-passing ability.

Now that Dutilleul was free of Monsieur Lécuyer’s tyranny, he could return to his cherished phrases: “In reference to your esteemed correspondence of the 27th of the present month...” And yet, he was unsatisfied somehow. There was an unmet demand inside him, a new, urgent need, which was none other than the need to walk through walls.

tyranny: /ˈtɪr.ən.i/ government by a ruler or small group of people who have unlimited power over the people in their country or state and use it unfairly and cruelly:

cherished: /ˈtʃer·ɪʃt/ bringing the pleasure of love or caring about someone or something that is important to you

He could certainly indulge this need easily, at home for example, and he didn’t waste the opportunity. But a man possessed of brilliant gifts cannot satisfy himself for long by exercising them on a mediocre subject. Walking through walls cannot really serve as an end in itself. Rather, it is the first step in an adventure, which calls for continuation, development, and, in short, a payoff. Dutilleul understood this fully. He felt within him a need for expansion, a growing desire to fulfill and surpass himself, and a certain bittersweet pull which was something like the call of the other side of the wall. Unfortunately, what he lacked was a goal. He sought inspiration by reading the newspaper. He paid special attention to the sports and politics sections, as these seemed to be honorable activities, but in the end, he realized that they really didn’t offer any opportunities for people who could walk through walls. That’s when he settled on the police blotter, which turned out to be most suggestive.

indulge: to allow yourself or another person to have something enjoyable, especially more than is good for you

mediocre: /ˌmiː.diˈəʊ.kər/ not very good

surpass: to do or be better than

bittersweet: containing a mixture of sadness and happiness

payoff: the result of a set of actions, or an explanation at the end of something

blotter: a large piece of blotting paper with a stiff back that is used to absorb ink, and is often put on the top of a desk to protect it when writing

Dutilleul’s first burglary took place in an important financial institution /ˌɪn.stɪˈtʃuː.ʃən/ on the Right Bank. He passed through a dozen walls and partitions and let himself into various vaults, where he filled his pockets with banknotes. As he left, he signed his work in red chalk, using the alias “The Lone Wolf”, underlined with a distinctive flourish which made it onto the front page of all the newspapers the following morning. Within a week, the name The Lone Wolf had gained extraordinary celebrity. Public sympathy was unreservedly behind this prestigious burglar who so thoroughly flouted the police.

vaults: /vɒlt/ a room, especially in a bank, with thick walls and a strong door, used to store money or valuable things in safe conditions

alias: used when giving the name that a person is generally known by, after giving their real name

distinctive: /dɪˈstɪŋk.tɪv/ Something that is distinctive is easy to recognize because it is different from other things

flourish: /ˈflɜr·ɪʃ/ a big, noticeable movement

celebrity: /səˈleb.rə.ti/ someone who is famous, especially in the entertainment business

unreservedly: /ˌʌn.rɪˈzɜː.vɪd.li/ completely, without any doubts or feeling of being uncertain

prestige: /presˈtiːʒ/ respect and admiration given to someone or something, usually because of a reputation for high quality, success, or social influence

thoroughly: /ˈθʌr.ə.li/ completely, very much

flout: /flaʊt/ to intentionally disobey a rule or law, or to intentionally avoid behavior that is usual or expected

Every night he distinguished himself with some new exploit; sometimes his target was a bank, other times a jewelry store or some wealthy individual. From Paris to the provinces, there wasn’t a woman who, in her daydreams, didn’t nourish a fervent desire to belong to the fearsome Lone Wolf, body and soul. After the theft of the famous Burdigala Diamond and the break-in at the Crédit Municipal the same week, this enthusiasm reached a fever pitch. The Interior Minister was forced to resign, and he brought the Minister of Registration down with him. Nonetheless, Dutilleul, now one of the richest men in Paris, remained perfectly punctual at work; there was talk of awarding him the national medal for service to education. Every morning at the Ministry of Registration, he took great pleasure listening to his colleagues discuss his exploits of the night before. “That Lone Wolf,” they would say, “a great man, Superman, a genius!” Dutilleul blushed with embarrassment to hear such praise, and he beamed with friendship and gratitude from behind his pince-nez on its chain.

distinguished: used to describe a respected and admired person, or their work

exploit: to use someone or something unfairly for your own advantage

nourish: /ˈnʌr.ɪʃ/ to provide people or living things with food in order to make them grow and keep them healthy

fervent: /ˈfɜː.vənt/ used to describe beliefs that are strongly and sincerely felt or people who have strong and sincere beliefs

enthusiasm: /ɪnˈθjuː.zi.æz.əm/ a feeling of energetic interest in a particular subject or activity and an eagerness to be involved in it

fever pitch: a state of extreme excitement.

blushed: to become pink in the face, usually from embarrassment

praise: to express admiration or approval of the achievements or characteristics of a person or thing

beamed: to smile with obvious pleasure

One day this sympathetic atmosphere boosted his confidence so much that he thought he would not be able to keep his secret any longer. As his colleagues stood together around a newspaper reading about the burglary at the Bank of France, he studied them shyly, then announced in a modest voice, “As it so happens, I’m the Lone Wolf.” Dutilleul’s confession was greeted with loud and long laughter, and it earned him the derisive nickname “The Lone Wolf”. At night when it was time to leave work, he was the butt of endless jokes from his colleagues, and life lost some of its luster for him.

Derisive: the situation in which someone or something is laughed at and considered stupid or of no value

Luster: the brightness that a shiny surface has

A few days later, the Lone Wolf got picked up by the night patrol in a jewelry shop on Rue de la Paix. He had affixed his signature to the sales counter and was singing a drinking song while smashing various display windows using a solid gold antique goblet. It would have been easy for him to slip into a wall and escape the night patrol, but in all likelihood he wanted to be arrested, probably with the sole intent of getting even with his colleagues; their disbelief was mortifying.

affixed: to fasten or stick one thing to another

goblet: a container from which a drink, especially wine, is drunk, usually made of glass or metal, and with a stem and a base but no handles

intent: giving all your attention to something

disbelief: the feeling of not being able to believe that something is true or real

mortifying: very embarrassing

Indeed, his colleagues were most surprised the next day when the newspapers published Dutilleul’s photograph on the front page. They bitterly regretted underestimating their brilliant comrade and they all saluted him by growing little goatees. A few of them were so carried away with remorse and admiration that they tried to get their hands on the wallets or heirloom watches of their friends and acquaintances.

remorse: a feeling of sadness and being sorry for something you have done

heirloom: a valuable object that has been given by older members of a family to younger members of the same family over many years

acquaintances: /əˈkweɪn.təns/ a person that you have met but do not know well

Now you may well think that letting himself get picked up by the police to astonish a few colleagues shows a great recklessness unworthy of such an exceptional man. But although this act appears willful, his volition had very little to do with the decision. Dutilleul believed that by giving up his freedom, he was giving in to a prideful desire for revenge. In reality, though, he was simply sliding down the slope of his destiny. When a man is able to walk through walls, one can’t really speak of a career until he’s tried prison at least once.

recklessness: dangerous behaviour that shows that you are not thinking about the risks and possible results of your actions

volition: /vəˈlɪʃ.ən/ the power to make your own decisions

// Dutilleu stole a lot of valuable things using his ability and got arrested intentionally

When Dutilleul was taken inside the La Santé prison, he felt as though fate had smiled upon him. The thickness of the walls was a veritable treat for him. The very first morning after he was imprisoned, the astonished guards discovered that the prisoner had driven a nail into his cell wall, and from it he had hung a gold pocket watch belonging to the prison warden. He could not or would not reveal how this object had come into his possession. The watch was restored to its rightful owner, but the next day it was found again on the Lone Wolf’s nightstand, along with the first volume of The Three Musketeers which he had borrowed from the warden’s private library. The prison personnel were under great pressure. Moreover, the guards complained of receiving mysterious kicks in the behind which seemed to come from nowhere; it seemed that the walls didn’t just have ears anymore, but feet as well. The Lone Wolf had been in jail for one week when the warden found the following letter on his desk upon entering his office in the morning.

veritable: used to describe something as another, more exciting, interesting, or unusual thing, as a way of emphasizing its character

warden: /ˈwɔː.dən/ the person in charge of a prison

nightstand: a small table that is kept at the side of a bed

personnel: /ˌpɜː.sənˈel/ the people who are employed in a company, organization, or one of the armed forces

“Dear Monsieur the Warden,

In reference to our exchange of the 17th of the present month, and furthermore in reference to your general instructions of May the15th preceding, I have the honor of informing you that I have just completed reading the second volume of The Three Musketeers and that I expect to escape tonight between 11:25 and 11:35 p.m.

exchange: a short conversation or argument

preceding: existing or happening before someone or something

Most respectfully yours,

The Lone Wolf.”

Despite being under close surveillance that night, Dutilleul escaped at 11:30. When the news hit the streets the following morning, it was greeted everywhere with great enthusiasm. Nonetheless, once Dutilleul had carried out a fresh burglary which raised his popularity to new heights, he didn’t seem very concerned about hiding, and he roamed freely through Montmartre taking no precautions at all. Three days after his escape he was arrested in Rue Caulaincourt at the Café du Rêve a little before noon, as he was enjoying a glass of white wine and lemon with friends.

surveillance: the careful watching of a person or place, especially by the police or army, because of a crime that has happened or is expected

precautions: an action that is done to prevent something unpleasant or dangerous happening

Dutilleul was taken back to the La Santé Prison and triple locked in a dingy solitary cell; he escaped from it that same evening and spent the night at the warden’s apartment, in the guest room. The following morning around nine o’clock, he rang for the maid to bring him his breakfast. The guards were summoned, and they seized him where he sat in bed, putting up no resistance. The warden was outraged; he posted a guard at the door of Dutilleul’s cell and placed him on bread and water. Around noon, the prisoner went off to have lunch at a restaurant near the prison, and when he finished his coffee, he phoned the warden.

dingy: /ˈdɪn.dʒi/ dark and often also dirty

solitary: A solitary person or thing is the only person or thing in a place

summoned: to order someone to come to or be present at a particular place, or to officially arrange a meeting of people

putting up: to fix an object to a vertical surface

outraged: feeling outrage(a feeling of anger and shock)

“Hello! Monsieur the Warden, I hate to bother you, but just now when I went out, I neglected to bring along your wallet, and now here I am at the restaurant and I’ve come up short. Would you be so good as to send someone along to settle the bill?”

neglected: /nɪˈɡlek.tɪd/ not receiving enough care or attention

The warden showed up in person immediately and lost his temper, shouting threats and insults at Dutilleul. Dutilleul’s pride was wounded; he escaped the following night, never to return.

// Dutilleul used his gift to escape the prison for freedom.

This time he took a few precautions. He shaved off his black goatee and traded his pince-nez on its chain for a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. A billed cap and a checked suit with golf trousers completed his transformation. He settled into a small apartment in Avenue Junot; he had moved some of his furniture there along with his most prized possessions long before his first arrest.

He began to grow tired of his newfound fame, and ever since his stay at La Santé Prison, he had become rather blasé about the pleasure of walking through walls. Even the thickest and most imposing walls now seemed to him nothing more than simple folding screens, and he dreamed of plunging into the heart of some massive pyramid. So while he developed his plan for a trip to Egypt, he was leading the most peaceable of lives, dividing his time between his stamp collection, the movies, and long walks through Montmartre. Clean-shaven now, and wearing his horn-rimmed glasses, his metamorphosis was so complete that he could pass by his best friends without being recognized. Only the painter Gen Paul, who would never fail to notice any sudden change in the countenance of a longtime neighbor, finally unraveled his true identity. One morning he found himself nose to nose with Dutilleul on the corner of the Rue de l’Abreuvoir, and he blurted out in his rough slang:

blasé: /ˌblɑːˈzeɪ/ bored or not excited, or wishing to seem so

metamorphosis: /ˌmet.əˈmɔː.fə.sɪs/ a complete change

countenance: /ˈkaʊn.tən.əns/ the appearance or expression of someone's face

unravel: If you unravel a mysterious, unknown, or complicated subject, you make it known or understood, and if it unravels, it becomes known or understood

blurt: to say something suddenly, and without thinking of the results

“Hey daddy-o, I dig the new drape and sky piece! You’re togged to the bricks! With threads like that you must be stachin’ so you don’t get tapped by the fuzz.” Which means, more or less, “I see that you have adopted an elegant disguise so as to escape the attention of the police detectives.”

“Ah,” murmured Dutilleul, “you’ve recognized me!” This made him uneasy and he decided to move up his departure for Egypt. On the very same afternoon he fell in love with a blonde beauty whom he met in Rue Lepic twice in the space of fifteen minutes. He immediately forgot about his stamp collection and Egypt and the pyramids. As for the blonde, she looked at him with great interest. Nothing captures the imagination of young women today like a pair of golf pants and horn-rimmed glasses. That movie producer look sets them dreaming about cocktail parties and Hollywood nights.

Unfortunately, Dutilleul learned from Gen Paul that this beauty was married to a violently jealous man; moreover, he led a rough-and-tumble existence on the streets of Paris and spent his nights on the town. Every night he would abandon his wife from ten at night to four in the morning, but before he would leave, he always made sure to double-lock her in her room and padlock the shutters. During the day he kept a close eye on her; sometimes he would even follow her through the streets of Montmartre.

jealous: /ˈdʒel.əs/ upset and angry because someone that you love seems interested in another person

tumble: /ˈtʌm.bəl/ to fall quickly and without control

“Hey, I see you’re still chasin’ that skirt. Take it slow, daddy-o. That chick is fine dinner, but her main on the hitch gets evil if he focuses some cat tryin’ to score his barbecue.”

But Gen Paul’s warning only inflamed Dutilleul’s passion further. The next day he saw the young woman in Rue Tholozé. He boldly followed her into a dairy, and while she was waiting in line, he told her that he loved her respectfully and that he knew about everything—the cruel husband, the locked door and the shutters—but that he would be in her bedroom that very night. The blonde blushed; the milk bottle trembled in her hand and her eyes grew moist with tenderness. She gave a muffled sigh. “Alas Monsieur, that is impossible.”

bold: /bəʊld/ not frightened of danger

muffle: /ˈmʌf.əl/ to make a sound quieter and less clear

The evening of that glorious day around ten o’clock found Dutilleul standing like a sentry in Rue Norvins, watching an imposing garden wall; he could only see the weather vane and the chimney of the small house which sat behind it. A door in the wall opened, and a man stepped out. He carefully locked the door behind him and walked off towards Avenue Junot. Dutilleul waited until he was out of sight, until he was all the way down at the bend in the street at the foot of the hill, and then he counted to ten. Then he rushed forward and strode like an athlete into the wall, running straight through the obstacles until he penetrated the bedroom of the lovely recluse. She greeted him ecstatically and they made love late into the night.

sentry: a soldier who guards a place, usually by standing at its entrance

imposing: /ɪmˈpəʊ.zɪŋ/ having an appearance that looks important or causes admiration

vane: a flat, narrow part of a fan, propeller, etc. that turns because of the pressure of air or liquid against it

recluse: a person who lives alone and avoids going outside or talking to other people

ecstatically: /ɪkˈstæt.ɪ.kəl.i/ in an extremely happy way

Unfortunately, the next day Dutilleul had a terrible headache. He was certainly not going to let something so trivial make him miss his rendezvous. Nonetheless, since he discovered some tablets scattered at the bottom of a drawer, he took one in the morning and one in the afternoon. By evening his headache was tolerable, and in his intense excitement he forgot about it altogether. The young woman was waiting for him, full of impatience aroused by her memories of the previous night; that night they made love until three o’clock in the morning. When he left, Dutilleul passed through the walls of the house and felt an unusual rubbing sensation against his hips and shoulders.

trivial: having little value or importance

rendezvous: /ˈrɒn.deɪ.vuː/ an arrangement to meet someone, especially secretly, at a particular place and time, or the place itself

tolerable: of a quality that is acceptable, although certainly not good

He didn’t think it merited much attention though. In fact, it was only when he entered the garden wall that he felt a definite resistance. He felt as though he were moving through some gel-like substance that was still fluid but was growing thicker; it became firmer the more he struggled. Once he was entirely embedded in the thickness of the wall he realized that he was no longer moving forward. Terrified, he remembered the two tablets that he taken that day. He had thought they were aspirin tablets, but in fact they contained the tetravalent pirette powder that the doctor had prescribed the year before. The effect of the medication combined with intensive exertion produced quite a sudden reaction.

merited: /ˈmer.ɪt/ the quality of being good and deserving praise

exertion: /ɪɡˈzɜː.ʃən/ the use of a lot of mental or physical effort

Dutilleul was immobilized inside the wall. He is there to this very day, imprisoned in the stone. When people go walking down the Rue Norvins late at night after the bustle of Paris has died down, they hear a muffled voice which seems to come from beyond the grave; they think it’s the sound of the wind whistling through the streets of Montmartre. It’s Lone Wolf Dutilleul lamenting the end of his glorious career and mourning his all too brief love affair. Sometimes on winter nights the painter Gen Paul takes down his guitar and heads down to the lonely, echoing Rue Norvins to console the poor prisoner with a song. Its notes take flight from his numb fingers and penetrate to the heart of the stone like drops of moonlight.

immobilize: /ɪˈməʊ.bəl.aɪz/ to stop something or someone from moving

bustle: /ˈbʌs.əl/ to do things in a hurried and busy way

lament: /ləˈment/ to express sadness and feeling sorry about something

mourning: /mɔːn/ to feel or express great sadness, especially because of someone's death

numb: /nʌm/ If a part of your body is numb, you are unable to feel it, usually for a short time

penetrate: /ˈpen.ɪ.treɪt/ to move into or through something

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