

## Chapter One

### 1

#### War

Hot, thought the Parisians. The warm air of spring. It was night, they were at war and there was an air raid. But dawn was near and the war far away. The first to hear the hum of the siren were those who couldn't sleep--the ill and bedridden, mothers with sons at the front, women crying for the men they loved. To them it began as a long breath, like air being forced into a deep sigh. It wasn't long before its wailing filled the sky. It came from afar, from beyond the horizon, slowly, almost lazily. Those still asleep dreamed of waves breaking over pebbles, a March storm whipping the woods, a herd of cows trampling the ground with their hooves, until finally sleep was shaken off and they struggled to open their eyes, murmuring, "Is it an air raid?"

The women, more anxious, more alert, were already up, although some of them, after closing the windows and shutters, went back to bed. The night before--Monday, 3 June--bombs had fallen on Paris for the first time since the beginning of the war. Yet everyone remained calm. Even though the reports were terrible, no one believed them. No more so than if victory had been announced. "We don't understand what's happening," people said.

They had to dress their children by torchlight. Mothers lifted small, warm, heavy bodies into their arms: "Come on, don't be afraid, don't cry." An air raid. All the lights were out, but beneath the clear, golden June sky, every house, every street was visible. As for the Seine, the river seemed to absorb even the faintest glimmers of light and reflect them back a hundred times brighter, like some multifaceted mirror. Badly blacked-out windows, glistening rooftops, the metal hinges of doors all shone in the water. There were a few red lights that stayed on longer than the others, no one knew why, and the Seine drew them in, capturing them and bouncing them playfully on its waves. From above, it could be seen flowing along, as white as a river of milk. It guided the enemy planes, some people thought. Others said that couldn't be so. In truth, no one really knew anything. "I'm staying in bed," sleepy voices murmured, "I'm not scared." "All the same, it just takes one . . ." the more sensible replied.

Through the windows that ran along the service stairs in new apartment blocks, little flashes of light could be seen descending: the people living on the sixth floor were fleeing the upper storeys; they held their torches in front of them, in spite of the regulations. "Do you think I want to fall on my face on the stairs! Are you coming, Emile?" Everyone instinctively lowered their voices as if the enemy's eyes and ears were everywhere. One after another, doors slammed shut. In the poorer neighbourhoods there was always a crowd in the Métro, or the foul-smelling shelters. The wealthy simply went to sit with the concierge, straining to hear the shells bursting and the explosions that meant bombs were falling, their bodies as tense as frightened animals in dark woods as the hunter gets closer. Though the poor were just as afraid as the rich, and valued their lives just as much, they were more sheeplike: they needed one another, needed to link arms, to groan or laugh together.

Day was breaking. A silvery blue light slid over the cobblestones, over the parapets along the quayside, over the towers of Notre-Dame. Bags of sand were piled halfway up all the important monuments, encircling Carpeaux's dancers on the façade of the Opera House, silencing the Marseillaise on the Arc de Triomphe.

Still at some distance, great guns were firing; they drew nearer, and every window shuddered in reply. In hot rooms with blacked-out windows, children were born, and their cries made the women forget the sound of sirens and war. To the dying, the barrage of gunfire seemed far away, without any meaning whatsoever, just one more element in that vague, menacing whisper that washes over those on the brink of death. Children slept peacefully, held tight against their mothers' sides, their lips making sucking noises, like little lambs. Street sellers' carts lay abandoned, full of fresh flowers.

The sun came up, fiery red, in a cloudless sky. A shell was fired, now so close to Paris that from the top of every monument birds rose into the sky. Great black birds, rarely seen at other times, stretched out their pink-tinged wings. Beautiful fat pigeons cooed; swallows wheeled; sparrows hopped peacefully in the deserted streets. Along the Seine each poplar tree held a cluster of little brown birds who sang as loudly as they could. From deep beneath the ground came the muffled noise everyone had been waiting for, a sort of three-tone fanfare. The air raid was over.

## 2

In the Péricand household they listened in shocked silence to the evening news on the radio, but no one passed comment on the latest developments. The Péricands were a cultivated family: their traditions, their way of thinking, their middle-class, Catholic background, their ties with the Church (their eldest son, Philippe Péricand, was a priest), all these things made them mistrustful of the government of France. On the other hand, Monsieur Péricand's position as curator of one of the country's national museums bound them to an administration that showered its faithful with honours and financial rewards.

A cat held a little piece of bony fish tentatively between its sharp teeth. He was afraid to swallow it, but he couldn't bring himself to spit it out either.

Madame Péricand finally decided that only a male mind could explain with clarity such strange, serious events. Neither her husband nor her eldest son was at home: her husband was dining with friends, her son was not in Paris. Charlotte Péricand, who ruled the family's daily life with an iron hand (whether it was managing the household, her children's education or her husband's career), was not in the habit of seeking anyone's opinion. But this was of a different order. She needed a voice of authority to tell her what to believe. Once pointed in the right direction, there would be no stopping her. Even if given absolute proof she was mistaken, she would reply with a cold, condescending smile, "My father said so . . . My husband is very well-informed." And she would make a dismissive little gesture with her gloved hand.

She took pride in her husband's position (she herself would have preferred a more domestic lifestyle, but following the example of our Dear Saviour, each of us has his cross to bear). She had come home between appointments to oversee her children's studies, the baby's bottles and the servants' work, but she didn't have time to take off her hat and coat. For as long as the Péricand children could remember, their mother was always ready to go out, armed with hat and white gloves. (Since she was thrifty, her mended gloves had the faint smell of stain remover, a reminder of their passage through the dry-cleaners.)

As soon as she had come in this evening, she had gone to stand in front of the radio in the drawing room. Her clothes were black, her hat a divine little creation in fashion that season, decorated with three flowers and topped with a silk pom-pom. Beneath it, her face was pale and anguished, emphasising the marks of age and fatigue. She was forty-seven years old and had five children. You would have thought, to look at her, that God had intended her to be a redhead. Her skin was extremely delicate, lined by the passing years. Freckles were dotted over her strong, majestic nose. The expression in her green eyes was as sharp as a cat's. At the last minute, however, it seemed that Providence had wavered, or decided that a shock of red hair would not be appropriate, neither to Madame Péricand's irreproachable morals nor to her social status, so she had been given mousy brown hair, which she was losing by the handful since she'd had her last child. Monsieur Péricand was a man of great discipline: his religious scruples prohibited a number of pleasures and his concern for his reputation kept him away from places of ill repute. The youngest Péricand child was only two, and between Father Philippe and the baby, there were three other children, not counting the ones Madame Péricand discreetly referred to as the "three accidents": babies she had carried almost to term before losing them, so that three times their mother had been on the verge of death.

The drawing room, where the radio was now playing, was enormous and well-proportioned, with four windows overlooking the Boulevard Delessert. It was furnished in traditional style, with large armchairs and settees upholstered in golden yellow. Next to the balcony, the elder Monsieur Péricand sat in his wheelchair. He was an invalid whose advancing age meant that he sometimes lapsed back into childhood and only truly returned to his right mind when discussing his fortune, which was considerable (he was a Péricand-Maltête, heir of the Maltête family of Lyon). But the war, with its trials and tribulations, no longer affected him. He listened, indifferent, steadily nodding his beautiful silvery beard. The children stood in a semi-circle behind their mother, the youngest in his nanny's arms. Nanny had three sons of her own at the front. She had brought the little boy downstairs to say goodnight to his family and took advantage of her brief entry into the drawing room to listen anxiously to what they were saying on the radio.

The door was slightly ajar and Madame Péricand could sense the presence of the other servants outside. Madeleine, the maid, was so beside herself with worry that she came right up to the doorway. To Madame Péricand, such a breach of the normal rules seemed a frightening indication of things to come. It was in just this manner that the different social classes all ended up on the top deck during a shipwreck. But working-class people were highly strung. "How they do get carried away," Madame Péricand thought reproachfully. She was one of those middle-class women who generally trust the lower classes. "They're not so bad if you know how to deal with them," she would say in the same condescending and slightly sad tone she used to talk of a caged animal. She was proud that she kept her servants for a long time. She insisted on looking after them when they were ill. When Madeleine had had a sore throat, Madame Péricand herself had prepared her gargle. Since she had no time to administer it during the day, she had waited until she got back from the theatre in the evening. Madeleine had woken up with a start and had only expressed her gratitude afterwards, and even then, rather coldly in Madame Péricand's opinion. Well, that's the lower classes for you, never satisfied, and the more you go out of your way to help them, the more ungrateful and moody they are. But Madame Péricand expected no reward except from God.

She turned towards the shadowy figures in the hallway and said with great kindness, "You may come and listen to the news if you like."

"Thank you, Madame," the servants murmured respectfully and slipped into the room on tiptoe.

They all came in: Madeleine; Marie; Auguste, the valet and finally Maria, the cook, embarrassed because her hands smelled of fish. But the news was over. Now came the commentaries on the situation: "Serious, of course, but not alarming," the speaker assured everyone. He spoke in a voice so full, so calm, so effortless, and used such a resonant tone each time he said the words "France," "Homeland" and "Army," that he instilled hope in the hearts of his listeners. He had a particular way of reading such communiqués as "The enemy is continuing relentless attacks on our positions but is encountering the most valiant resistance from our troops." He said the first part of the sentence in a soft, ironic, scornful tone of voice, as if to imply, "At least that's what they'd like us to think." But in the second part he stressed each syllable, hammering home the adjective "valiant" and the words "our troops" with such confidence that people couldn't help thinking, "Surely there's no reason to worry so much!"

Madame Péricand saw the questioning, hopeful stares directed towards her. "It doesn't seem absolutely awful to me!" she said confidently. Not that she believed it; she just felt it was her duty to keep up morale.

Maria and Madeleine let out a sigh.

"You think so, Madame?"

Hubert, the second-eldest son, a boy of seventeen with chubby pink cheeks, seemed the only one struck with despair and amazement. He dabbed nervously at his neck with a crumpled-up handkerchief and shouted in a voice that was so piercing it made him hoarse, "It isn't possible! It

isn't possible that it's come to this! But, Mummy, what has to happen before they call everyone up? Right away--every man between sixteen and sixty! That's what they should do, don't you think so, Mummy?"

He ran into the study and came back with a large map, which he spread out on the table, frantically measuring the distances. "We're finished, I'm telling you, finished, unless . . ."

Hope was restored. "*I* see what they're going to do," he finally announced, with a big happy smile that revealed his white teeth. "I can see it very well. We'll let them advance, advance, and then we'll be waiting for them there and there, look, see, Mummy! Or even . . ."

"Yes, yes," said his mother. "Go and wash your hands now, and push back that bit of hair that keeps falling into your eyes. Just look at you."

Fury in his heart, Hubert folded up his map. Only Philippe took him seriously, only Philippe spoke to him as an equal. "How I hate this family," he said to himself and kicked violently at his little brother's toys as he left the drawing room. Bernard began to cry. "That'll teach him about life," Hubert thought.

The nanny hurried to take Bernard and Jacqueline out of the room; the baby, Emmanuel, was already asleep over her shoulder. Holding Bernard's hand, she strode through the door, crying for her three sons whom she imagined already dead, all of them.