

# Mountain Sickness

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*“Et ce rêve, depuis m’a fait beaucoup rêver.”*

EDMOND ROSTAND

## I

The tension in my fingers is such that, without the training I have, they would break. The muscles of my right arm are all tensed, I can feel my strength. Pain is the proof that what I do is worth doing. Exhaustion makes me breathe deeper, makes my blood warmer and my saliva bitter. The rock is hurting my palm. I hold it tighter. The irregularities, the cracks and the dents, print their chaotic forms in my flesh. My face turned against the wall, I look at the yellow stains of sulphur on the grey, blue and green stone. My mouth pressed against it, I can taste its flavour of metal and dust, I can smell the wild weeds that stick out of the fissures, I can smell the damp moss and the cold winter wind. Winter has a smell. It comes with the gusts. Some think it is just the cold, tickling their nose, I know it is a smell. A bush of thyme weakly keeps me away from the cliff, its small thin springs pricking my chest. I love the effort preceding rest, I love being cold before sitting next to a fire and I love my hunger even more as the odorous thyme reminds me of the taste of roasted meat, of fresh bread and of red wine. The wind blows, finds its way under my shirt, embraces me entirely and, as I feel my skin chill, the smell of winter overcomes all others. The place is so noisy, the wind howling in my ears. My left hand does not hurt any more, anaesthetized, and my other hand keeps a tight grip high above my head. My right arm, my head and my shoulders are pinned against the cliff, then the rock face curves in forming a right angle with my vertical body, leaving it to hang. Swinging slightly, I look around and around me are mountains, far in the distance but so huge that I imagine myself walking from ridge to ridge. Above me, the grey and pale blue sky and beneath me nothing, at least nothing closer than the sky. I am in an immense prison so perfect that its limits cannot be crossed for its limits cannot be reached. A prison from which I cannot escape for I do not want to escape. I am too tired to go on like this, wounded and frozen. I should go on and fear to remain still but still, I remain. Here is nothing to be afraid of, everything can be reached in one sight, everything is under control. I can entirely feel the landscape for I can entirely feel my body, every part of it reminded to my consciousness by the cold, my memory opened by the smell of thyme and all my thoughts swept away by the wind, all my attempts to think crushed by its imperious and deafening sound. There is nothing to be afraid of, nothing to do but to hold on to this matrix. The valley, encased by walls of rocks, is a bowl with the lake in the middle. Its surface so faithfully reflects the clouds and the sea in which they slowly swim that one could think the sky is a sphere enclosing the bowl, and the lake a hole at the bottom, through which one truly sees the sky. The mountain peaks are like splinters of a broken glass. Through the deepest furrow of the mountains, a river runs, filling the lake. A forest of pine trees covers the slopes across the valley, from the lake to the sky, like a green army put to rout, fleeing this place where I remain, at peace.

A squall of wind flattens me against the wall. I have to use my second hand and grip the cliff in a reflex. The pain is intense for the wound is deep. My body struggles against falling. Whatever the cost, the need for survival is stronger. I shout in the yelling wind, shout my surprise at rediscovering suffering. Something is different now. The physical me has overcome the contemplative me. My selfish being, the part of me that is one and wants to remain one, outmatched my consciousness of the surroundings, of the whole I was attached to, cutting me off the mountains, off the rock, off the sky, turning them into my enemies. I will start climbing again and finish my ascent. Desire and fear, the wind has awoken those two gods from the recesses of my mind, whereas the cold and the beauty of the landscape had put them to sleep. I am now focused on reaching the top. I lift myself with my arms until my feet can reach some hold. Then I resume climbing. Because of the pain in my hand I rely more heavily on my other limbs. Pain is one more element in the routine of climbing with the holds, the temperature, the fatigue. My thoughts are entirely subordinated to my muscles, only focused on finding a route, looking for the next grip, reaching it, testing it, going up and starting again. I do not see the rock any more, I see good holds and bad holds. I do not smell the thyme and the weeds, I breathe to give my muscles oxygen. The only sound I hear is the pulse of my blood running through the veins of my temples, resonance of the strong and regular beat of

my heart. My mind is goaded by my body and slowly are my feelings blinded by my activity. In this second state, I soon reach the top of the cliff. I am on a ten-foot wide, five-foot long, snow-white promontory. Here, I can look upon the landscape and there is no shame to feel safe, for I fought my way up. In the darkness, the calm huge mass of the mountains seems comforting but at the same time unreliable. Like Icebergs, their beauty hides a deadly submerged threat. The white carpet covering the ground is warming up my legs up to my knees. I must reach the top of the mountain. There, the whole world is beneath and everything that is beneath is therefore harmless. Above is nothing but stars, shining in the unstained sky, too far to reach me, their light too weak to hurt me. The silvery moon, so round and low between two peaks, like an inset pearl, reminds me of the sun, the only enemy I cannot outdistance. Its rays can hurt you anywhere you are, even at the summit, a snake in paradise. Birch trees and pine trees are bordering the cliff, sentinels at the foot of a wall. I get closer and catch a glimpse of the forest beyond. I enter and go into the mountain, following the green light flickering in front of me. The trees spread into the wide cave and are quickly shrouded in its darkness, their high tops near the invisible ceiling on which the stars are pinned. I go deep into this disquieting place that surprisingly comforts me. The green light I follow with confidence is only bright enough to light a meter away. I can barely see around me. Between the trunks dark forms are drawn on darkness, ink blotches on a black sheet of paper, moving chaotic spirals of delirium. A cold wind gushes from the bottom of the cave at regular intervals like a giant respiration. The light leads me to a vast glade. More precisely, I think it is vast, for I still cannot see much, but I have a feeling of vacuum. I am led forward and now the ground is covered with brambles. I haste after the light. My clothes are torn by thorns but if I were outdistanced by the light I would be lost in utter darkness. All of a sudden, it speeds up and flees out of my sight. I come to a stand hoping it will soon be back. The stars are glimmering above but their light seems to be absorbed by the pitch dark surroundings. I cannot see my hands. The green light reappears, a hundred yards away from me. It is now flashing like a beacon and my eyes must get used to this new brightness. Now I can see it. Sleeping on a hill, guarding it as a treasure, is a huge dragon. Its skin has the colour of rocks and the wind of the cave is its breath. I do not dare to move, out of respect for this mighty beautiful beast, fascinated by the ancient throbbing and regular panting of its heaving chest. Terror strikes me. The beast has opened its eyes and is now gazing at me. I am an intruder profaning its lair. It holds a tremendous grudge against me for coming here and seeing its treasure, which I can now see is made of corpses and skeletons. My body is instantly covered in sweat. The monster rises to its feet, spreads its wide wings, hiding the light and throwing me into darkness. Now that I cannot see it, I feel strangely reassured that it cannot reach or hurt me. My whole body feels relaxed. When I open my eyes, daylight hurts.

## II

The walls of the room are yellow and cracked. There is a glass of water on a little chest of drawers next to me and next to the chest of drawers is a bed, with someone in it. I can see nothing but the blanket over his legs, the rest of his body hidden by the piece of furniture. I cannot move my head. I have such a headache. I can barely open my eyes. The day light, from a window I do not see, is dazzling. The weather must be gorgeous out there. On a chair, close to me, is my wife, turned towards me. I do not really know where we are but I am surprised to see her. She looks tired. Her head is bowed towards her chest. Both hands resting flat on her thighs, as if she had been smoothing her skirt when she fell asleep. I can see her wan face, with dark circles under her closed eyes. Light glitters through her hair. She is wearing a beautiful pair of golden earrings, the one I like so much. Why is she wearing these earrings with such casual clothes? I must ask her, but I feel dizzy. I close my eyes before trying to stand and wait a second or so, until the world around stabilizes. I focus on breathing slowly and deeply, to control the pain. I open my eyes again. I remember why she put on these jewels. Her dress is not casual at all. She is wearing a beautiful black cocktail dress and a pearl necklace. As for me, I am in tails. I must have had one of those little malaises I have when I drink too much. We have taken shelter in a little room, the walls are papered in fawn and next to the sofa where I lay is an old oak table. I sit up and effort clouds my sight with yellow spots, quickly blinding me. As the yellow blur disappears like a burning partition wall of paper, my sleepy wife appears. She always stays with me in those cases, even when I fall asleep. I walk to her and carefully kiss her closed eyelids. She opens them slowly and smiles at me.

“You feel better?”

She takes my hands in hers.

“Yes. Much better. I am sorry I kept you waiting.”

“Don't be. It was too crowded anyway. I needed to escape too.”

“Are you ready to go back?”

She takes my arm and we walk together back to 23 Savile Row's dining room. A man alone having left the party so suddenly, half way through the dinner, would not fail to be jeered by his fellows, as soon as the women had left. With my beautiful wife on my side, no one could possibly think of taunting me. Tight against me, her body is perfectly fitted to mine, as if we were the two pieces of the same broken sculpture of ivory and ebony brought back together. I stand up straight to hold her close without getting in the way of her smooth catlike elegance. She moves in her dress like a panther in its fur. Satin seems to be her skin. When she stares at another man, she does it with a short intensity. No sooner does the man have the time to think this look is for him alone than she has already looked away with a smile. It is a spell she casts on everyone, charming and out-of-reach at the same time. I too have been hit by this green lightning when I first met her. Now I am the one she rests her eyes on, her vivid emerald irises full of sweetness. She closes her eyes when in my arms, confident she does not have to seduce me. I am the other piece of the sculpture and no one dare laugh at art, so it is with unlimited pride that I enter the dining room.

It is a spacious rectangular room. Next to the door a comfortable couch and two deep leather armchairs are usually turned towards the heavily carved marble mantelpiece. They were removed to make room for the long table stretched across the room. The table is so large that I cannot see the floor. The space left for the guests is so narrow the butler has to brush past the walls as a spy sneaking into the room. We have entered a safe. The room is full of the white napkin, covered in light, crystal glasses edged with gold, silver cutlery, fragile carafes sparkling in the quivering candlelights, containing their colourful drinks to accompany colourful deserts. Straight, surrounding the treasure, are dark tailcoats, dark dresses, dark wooden walls and through the windows the dark London night. Most of the men present are mountaineers. I feel so proud of being able to distinguish them from the others. An observer used to this kind of party will be able to recognise different groups among the guests. There are a few well-mannered and delicate dandies whose principal occupation is to well spend their aristocratic money, recognisable by their carefully designed laid-back attitude. There are also the unmistakable (and many) officers of Her Majesty's Armed Forces, somehow thicker, often wearing an impressively neat moustache. Stiff and starchy, they look as if having to give evidence of the greatness of the Empire even in the way they blow their noses. Finally, somewhere in between, are doctors, teachers, engineers and Oxbridge students from good families. At first sight, one would think all these gentlemen are linked only by their identical dark suits and smart upper-class postures. The well-informed eye, though, can see the symptoms of a disease making some of these men alike, regardless of their everyday occupations. A vacant stare, for a second, cutting one off from the rest of the world. Little white smooth scars, almost invisible, on the nose, the ears, the fingers, where frost bite them. Hands slightly swollen. Rough hands made insensitive by the cold, taking the delicate glasses a bit clumsily, lifting the drinks up to their slightly dry lips. These wounds, invisible for the common run of people, let us know we all belong. Dandy or Colonel, professor or student, all of us disease-stricken, all of us mountaineers.

We walk in unnoticed and take back our separated seats. All the guests are listening to the president's speech. He is standing, a flute of champagne in his hand, under a banderole which reads: “Happy new year, Alpine Club 1924”.

“...Charles Bruce, George Mallory, “Sandy” Irvine, we have the best Alpinists in the world. Last year, yes I can still say last year it's only eleven, the members of Bruce's expedition went higher than anybody else ever did. However, Everest was not to be conquered in 1922 and it was written that no one could have reached the summit that year. But we English people do not fail a little pause to let listeners know something nice is coming) we improve! (proud laughter in the assembly) Success is the only possible outcome for our enterprises and it is written in our blood that we will reach this summit. (pause) So why not prolong the agony? (laughter). There shall be another expedition (aaaah! of relief), led by Charles Bruce, and we shall reach the top of the world (tragic pause): “because it is there”! (thunderous applause at the final quote).”

His praising Charles Bruce means he has come back into favour. By chance, George Mallory is just next to me. We met just before he left for the Everest expedition. He is a fine fellow and we hit it off immediately. He is the only one here not applauding. Probably the memory of the failed expedition still hurts.

“Now that you've reached the highest point ever you are quite a celebrity,” I say, trying to cheer him up, “even the president of the Club quotes you.”

“He can quote me if he likes”, Mallory says, “yes, the English will reach the top, but how many good men are going to die before that?”

He seems to be a little drunk and in a very bad mood.

“I tell you, I was opposed to have Bruce lead the expedition. You should have read the report, a very informative piece of paper. Bruce wrote it. Seven Sherpas died in the avalanche. He mentioned it with lost material: ice axes, shovels, oxygen, seven Sherpas... and tonight, not a single word for them.”

“I missed most of the speech, but the president said the expedition was a failure. He knows as well as we do that losing men is the greatest failure.”

“Men, yes, members of the expedition ... but no Sherpa has ever been mentioned as the member of an expedition. They only care about glory.”

He is looking at the other end of the table where Bruce is seated. The man is laughing at a joke he told his neighbours, his cheeks glowing from the wine he has been drinking. His Colonel's moustache is the biggest of all those exposed around the table. Every time I have met this man he has been good humoured. I find it difficult to imagine him as a boorish brute.

“The expedition was a failure because we did not reach the top. If we had, dead Sherpas or not, they would have been as happy ...”, continues Mallory, giving a blank look at the glass in his hand, as if it were a Deutsch mark that had suddenly lost all its value.

“...and so would I”, he adds.

He said these last words very low, talking to himself like someone confessing a shameful secret. He confided in me because he knows that I can understand him. Everyone of us, we know that climbing is gambling with our lives. We all know that many of our comrades died in the mountain snow, crushed by rock falls, swept by avalanches, swallowed by deep crevasses, exhausted by the cold, the lack of oxygen, the wounds, the feeling that this slope we are on will never end. Death is a possible outcome for any of our expeditions, but we only think of the summit. We must reach it, this there be dragon, as if the answer to a vital question we cannot even express awaited us there, as if seeing the world from above would change our lives. It is an amazing feeling of power to be there, dizzy with pain and exhaustion, no boundary in our sight. Everything is simple. We are demiurges for we have defeated the mountain god. What a deception to be back on earth, glory being only a weak ersatz of divinity. Every time, the secret answer seems to flee higher, to another summit we have not reached yet. Are we all crazy? Mallory too, this rock, this unbeatable athlete and delicate intellectual feels it as I do: when it comes to climbing, we lose control of our minds, we are driven by a wild need, a pointless urge. All of a sudden, I feel oppressed by the company of these madmen. In their eyes I can see that they acknowledge me as part of their conspiracy. We are traitors to reason. We deceive the journalists, our wives, our children. They all think we are novel heroes, the last adventurers conquering the only remaining Terra Incognita. But we are addicts, mesmerized by the legend of the climber killing the dragon-Mountain and getting the treasure. My head spins. I chase away the vulture that is at its repast in front of me. It waddles along the table out of my reach, then attacks a strawberry pie, with impunity, the others ignoring him. Could climbing be unworthy? What is Mallory's opinion on this? He finishes his drink in one go, I am still drunk. I plunge both hands in the white napkin and take a handful of its cold snow to put it on my face and try to cool down my ideas. Why are all the mountaineers gazing at me? Why this reproachful, disgusted look? Have I done something so unacceptable? I feel like an informer exposed in a secret meeting or an enemy officer in a war camp, when the prisoners are preparing to escape. They are sitting still, frozen in the middle of a movement, one drinking, the other lifting his fork, all glancing sidelong towards me. Beside them, the women and sane men are continuing their talks, unaware of this silent trial. I must find my wife. Where is she? I feel heavy, as if the eyes looking at me were the anchor points of invisible grapnels. I manage to get up, trying to find her, but the snow is unstable and cracks under my feet. The ground collapses. Before me the dark fissure swallows the carafes, the candelabra, the silver cutlery and breaks the walls to join the night outside. Behind me, an avalanche hurtles down the slope, dragging me away. Hopefully, I am roped together with Mallory who is yelling at me to hold on. Around me my neighbours at the table are sliding away, as silently as do their chairs. I can see the other guests on the other side of the table. They continue their discussions, unaffected by the disaster, or keep gazing at me. I close my eyes in apprehension of a piece of furniture falling towards me. I am waiting for the shock, but the shock does not come. I open my eyes again and see the soothing vivid green. My wife is looking at me as she wipes my forehead with a wet handkerchief.

### III

I am shattered but I do not know why. I try to remember the dream that upset me, it is impossible. My wife is talking, but I cannot hear her. She is smiling at me as one smiles at a helpless child. I am thirsty. She makes me drink the glass of water that was on the chest of drawers next to my bed. She slightly lifts my head with one hand, holds the glass with the other. It is a kind gesture but feels so uncomfortable. How heavy my arms are! I can barely lift them. I guess from the heat and the decoration of the room that we are still in India. How come she is here? Did I sleep so long she had enough time to come from England? My ears are buzzing, I do not understand her answer. I sign her I am deaf. She seems worried. I comfort her, telling her it will pass soon with a voice I cannot hear but feel to be thick. She smiles but her tired eyes are still distressed. I am so sorry. Why did I leave her? I remember how much I desired this moment, how much I prayed to be able to take refuge in her arms again. Now, the memories of the long walk down the mountain are coming back. I can see the brown rocks of the Nauda Devi's slopes where the six of us were trampling on the irregular ground, starving, numbed with fatigue. At that point we had eaten nothing for three days. When did we reach the camp? I do not know. I think I did not faint. I kept on walking all the time. I try to focus and some isolated images come to my mind: the rocks, the six of us dropping one by one all the pieces of our remaining equipment, the camp finally. I remember dragging myself to the place where I slept the night before we left, though it was at the other end of the camp, as if I could not collapse before reaching my place. I see myself arriving there first, or did I arrive alone? Suddenly, I panic. Where are the others? I spring up, forgetting how weary I am. My fellows are in danger. Then I see the man in the other bed. His body is covered up to the neck by the blanket. His head is wrapped in bandages. He looks like a mummy, it gives me the feeling that his wounds are eternal, incurable. His face has disappeared, he is not a human being anymore, he is a patient. I can see his eyes, deep set in the two holes of the dressing. His look is indefinable, an attack I feel I have already endured, a terrible reproach, as if I were guilty of being in a better shape. Now I recall waking up in my bed several times at night and seeing these eyes in the moon light summoning me to join him in his misery. It must be the wounds and this white mask of gauze that give me this feeling. I ask my wife if he is going to be all right. She takes a sheet of paper and a pen that were on the chest of drawers and writes down his name. He is a member of my team. His hands, feet and face have been frozen. He is doing very poorly but he will pull through. I insist she tell me more about the team. She hesitates then writes me that out of the six of us who returned from the expedition, one has lost his right foot, the one sharing my room will probably be disfigured, the others have already more or less recovered. It is a terrible mess but I am relieved my companions of misfortune have survived. I am suddenly sleepy. I feel safe but distressed.

### IV

The sky is clear, we can see quite well. We are above the clouds, they drift between the mountains like foam on a slow glassy stream. The full moon, orange above the summits, floods us with its light that reflects on the snow and seems to take some of its opacity, filling the air with an imaginary mist. The promontory has the phantasmagorical atmosphere of ghost-inhabited places. We are all busy, gathering in a safe place the equipment we have saved. I see the major yelling at Tensing. The expedition leader seems very angry at the Sherpa's chief. The inventory is done, we go to see the major, now talking with the deputy leader. He is furious, there is very little gear left, certainly not enough to head for the summit. His eyes are blazing with anger, ice tangled up in his eyebrows. Fear makes his face feverish. He tells us what frightens him: the Sherpas had gathered their packs under a tent for the night and the tent was swept away by the avalanche, as well as two of them. They had kept only one bag with them, which is undamaged. The Sherpas' bags contained our food supplies. This means that not only can we not reach the top but we also will not have enough food for the journey back either. We are at camp III. The next day some of us, including me, were to leave and establish camp IV, then start the final assault. Five days of climbing separate us from camp II, where only few provisions await us. Our camp will be supplied in ten days. Instead of being the first Alpinists to conquer the Nauda Devi, we are going to be the first to die of starvation. The twelve of us still alive will have to make it with food for three only. It is impossible. There is no solution. The major tells us he took a decision with the deputy leader of the expedition. He tells us to remember the war and those extreme cases where men are forced to extreme solutions. Even the doctor is Captain in the Royal Air Force. I am the only civilian in the team. This allusion to the war is not

particularly directed at me but it is meant to give us courage, even a civilian can understand that. What is that dark tool that he takes out of his bag? I never used such a thing to climb. What is it? Now I see! Why on earth has he brought a gun? It is useless and impossible to manipulate, the cold metal would grip your skin and burn your hand. He takes off his thick mitt, keeping only his woollen gloves. He cracks several matches, putting the flame directly on the metal to warm it up. He slowly aims at the Sherpas. He fires. It suddenly dawns on me what a gun is meant for. It is not just a useless frozen piece of metal. I plunge on the major, awaking from torpor. I catch him by the chest, throw him down and the bullet he fires makes its way towards the summit alone. We struggle in the snow. He is very strong. What keeps the others from helping me? The major is getting the upper hand. I am not only fighting the major. The others have come to his rescue, obedient as soldiers. They overpower me quickly and keep me at bay. The major gets up and rubs his face to take off the snow with a grunt of anger. Two Sherpas are trying to flee, climbing the boulders behind which is the steep slope that leads to the promontory. One is sitting astride on the ridge, the other is still hanging to the wall. He has the last bag with him, aware that there is no survival without it, but deadly slowed down. The major fires once more. The man hanging to the wall collapses immediately. He is hit! No, the man on the top starts slowly to slide. He falls out of sight behind the rocks, supple as a puppet freed from its strings. The last one with the backpack is panic-stricken. He runs like a mad man, yelling plaintive words of terror in his incomprehensible language. He does not know what he is doing any more. He only seems obsessed with the idea of going as far away from us as possible, afraid that the piercing sound of the bullet might pierce through his skin. He is getting closer to the edge of the promontory and the major is ready to fire but an invisible crevasse cracks open under his feet, concealing him from our view, saving him from the bullet. Two men go to the crevice, the last Sherpa is dead and the mountain has swallowed him with the last provisions. A terrible silence ensues. For the first time in days the wind stops for a while. We all glisten like ice statues in the moonlight. I cannot breathe, afraid as I am to break the perfect stillness of the moment. The major turns slowly towards us. He stands up straight and looks at me with severe eyes of condescending reproach. His burning feverish eyes make me understand what I did. By committing this dreadful crime in cold blood, the major was giving us a chance to make it to camp II. By getting in the way, I have let the last Sherpa escape with the food supplies. Because of me the crime has become useless, inhuman, and has doomed us all. "Let him go", orders the major. He tells the others to throw the bodies into the crevasse. They leave me in the snow, without a look. I must make up for the trouble I caused. I stand up, follow them and help them drag the dead man. How heavy a corpse is! I avoid looking at him, looking at anybody, but when, after the third swing, we drop him into the pit, I catch a sight of his face, his young face, so lifelike that I have to hold back a moment to catch him. His body falls, tossed about in his narrow tomb. My eyes follow him, I am shocked as if this fall was killing him a second time. Two of us go to get the Sherpa who slid behind the boulders. Luckily, his body is hanging to the rocks not far away, so it is easy to get him back and put an end to this makeshift burial. The major is standing on the edge of the rock vault. He takes a long look into the abyss, then throws his gun into it. So, the man hides the exhibits. I was infected by the others' reckless submission and blind faith in their captain. Now my mind is clear, I hate this brutal man. The sun is rising, our shameful work is done. The crevasse is deep and we lost the necessary material to try to retrieve the last bag. The major orders to leave at once. We proceed as usual, same disposition, same partner to look after, same burden. We but feel an indescribable apprehension, caused by the rationing of the few provisions. We climb over the boulders and when I reach the top I look back to the promontory. The wind has wiped away the marks of our crimes. Daylight has dissolved the phantoms of the tragedy, as it has dispelled the shadows of the night.

## V

It is morning in the little room. My companion in the bed next to mine is asleep. I am happy he is alive, I would have felt so guilty had he died. Nevertheless, I have not an easy conscience. I have done the right thing, I am the only member of the expedition as pure as the driven snow. Why should I feel guilty? Should I denounce the major to be at peace? I cannot. I am part of the team again, they accepted me, suffered with me, placed their confidence in me during that terrible journey back. I cannot betray them. How many times did they help me to my feet on those slopes where I counted my steps, counted the rocks I crossed, counted the stains that hunger was drawing before my eyes? How many times did they encourage me, reminding me that my wife was waiting for my return? True, the man committed a dreadful crime, but he did it to save me and I did nothing wrong. If I talk, it will be a terrible shame for us all, for

the club, for me as well. What's the point? They are dead. Admitting how they died will not change anything. I must keep the story to myself. I need to tell my neighbour he can count on me to remain silent. I stand up, upset. It dawns on me that my legs are still unsteady. I just have enough strength not to fully collapse on his bed. He wakes up, his eyes wide open in a frightened look under his gauze eyebrows. I grab him by the shoulders and start getting it off my chest with a faltering voice, almost sobbing. He does not reply. I shake him, as if he was not listening, as if I could force the words into his mind. He protects his face with his arms. "I am no traitor! I won't talk! All this happened in hell and will remain in hell!" He must answer me, he must tell me that I am right to hide the truth, that I am part of the brotherhood. He must join me in the world of the damned and give me a reason to suffer. He finally seems to understand I am not trying to hit him. He lowers his arms. He darts a furious glance at me that calms me at once. Cold sweat runs down my back. He is going to reject me. He is going to say that I am not one of them, that I deserted. I already hate him for this. Damn you! If you do not want me for your comrade, I will not be your accomplice either. He points at the paper and pen on the chest of drawers. Of course, the bandage covers his mouth, he cannot talk! I hurriedly take something to write on and give it to him with a smile. This is why he looked upset! I have been a fool! Because of this dreadful mask, how could he look gentle? I am sure of it now, he will love me the way I love him. "Yes, I'll keep quiet about the major's crime", I whisper. He looks at me intensely, writes something down and gives it to me. I read: "The major did nothing wrong." So, he rejects me, defending his chief officer. In his eyes, I see the accusation again. "I have done nothing wrong. I have done nothing wrong!", I shout, stand up and shout again, pulling out handfuls of my hair. I hate him this traitor, this monster, this coward, this murderer. He quickly scribbles down some words. He looks terrified and hands me the paper with a ludicrous move to get as far away from me within the limits of his bed as he can. I grab it and read it at loud:

*"Don't be mad, okay, we'll say nothing, but calm down."* That is what I told you, you fool! I do not care what you can say! I have done nothing, nothing wrong!"

I stop. I was about to hurl myself at him. I sit on my bed, glance quickly at the door. Has anyone heard me? Probably. This anger, this hatred, this desire to kill with impunity, I felt it before. On the fourth day of our fast, our minds were starting to be affected. Often, I thought that I was passing the same rock for the umpteenth time and I waved at it as one does when meeting an acquaintance by chance several times in the same day. We were walking on a narrow ridge and I thought I was hearing voices calling me from the empty space. The depths seemed to be a refuge where I could fly to. The major was walking behind me. God knows why, he felt like talking to me. He started justifying himself. His willpower had become too weak to repress his guilt. Now I see he was somehow showing a surprising humanity in his attempt to exonerate himself, but, at the time, I only thought he was pathetic. He told me there was no other solution, that it would be a miracle if we survived without food, that he had tried to give us the only chance left, that it was his responsibility, that it was normal that I had been shocked considering I did not fight the great war, that he was not mad at me, but that this was the way dramatic events had to be handled, with dramatic acts. Through my distorted perception of reality, I only heard the man insulting me. He thought he could teach me good and evil, dictate me my judgement. When I had enough, I told him I did not need a father, especially a murderer. He went mad, saying he was the head, that I endangered us all with my sissy squeamishness! We fought again, wild out of starvation, drunk with fatigue. This time, on this ridge, no one had time to interfere. I can see us toppling aside in our struggle, I holding on to a rock, he tumbling down the slope, falling from a six foot high ledge, breaking his neck. The others preferred to consider it as an accident. Maybe, if they had had enough strength left, they would have avenged their chief. Maybe they thought enough blood had been shed. I knew it was murder. I had desired it.

My wife enters the room. She has heard me yelling. She sits on my bed. She asks what the matter is. She loves me so much. I left her alone for so many months, but still, she awaited me and never complained. I take her in my arms. I start crying. I feel the condescending look of my neighbour on my back and hold her tighter, such a sissy, such a hypocrite, such a traitor. With her on my side I am untouchable. She only is strong, not me. She is my rock. This was my last expedition, I swear. As I cry on her shoulder, a nurse comes in and walks to my neighbour's bed. Soon after, the major enters the room. He wonders what's the matter with the members of his team.