

Madame Gaillard's life already lay behind her though she was not yet thirty years old. To the world she looked as old as her years – and at the same time two, three, a hundred times older, like the mummy of a young girl. But on the inside she was long since dead. When she was a child, her father had struck her across the forehead with a poker, just above the base of the nose, and she had lost for good all sense of smell and every sense of human warmth and human coldness – indeed, every human passion. With that one blow, tenderness had become as foreign to her as enmity, joy as strange as despair. She felt nothing when later she slept with a man, and just as little when she bore her children. She did not grieve over those that died, nor rejoice over those that remained to her. When her husband beat her, she did not flinch, and she felt no sense of relief when he died of cholera in the Hôtel-Dieu. The only two sensations that she was aware of were a very slight depression at the approach of her monthly migraine and a very slight elevation of mood at its departure. Otherwise, this numbed woman felt nothing.

On the other hand . . . or perhaps precisely because of her total lack of emotion . . . Madame Gaillard had a merciless sense of order and justice. She showed no preference for any one of the children entrusted to her nor discriminated against any one of them. She served up three meals a day and not the tiniest snack more. She changed the nappies of the little ones three times a day, but only until their second birthday. Whoever shat in his pants after that received an unceremonious slap and one less meal. Exactly one half of the boarding fees were spent for her wards, exactly one half she retained for herself. She did not attempt to increase her profits when prices went down; and in hard times she did

not charge a single sol extra, even when it was a matter of life and death. Otherwise her business would have been of no value to her. She needed the money. She had figured it down to the penny. In her old age she wanted to buy an annuity, with just enough beyond that so that she could afford to die at home rather than perish miserably in the Hôtel-Dieu as her husband had. The death itself had left her cold. But she dreaded a communal, public death among hundreds of strangers. She wanted to afford a private death, and for that she needed her full cut of the boarding fees. True, there were winters when three or four of her two dozen little boarders died. Still, her record was considerably better than that of most other private foster-mothers and surpassed by far the second of the great public and ecclesiastical orphanages, where the losses often came to nine out of ten. There were plenty of replacements. Paris produced over ten thousand new foundlings, bastards and orphans a year. Several such losses were quite affordable.

For the Grenouille, Madame Gaillard's establishment was a blessing. He probably could not have survived anywhere else. But here, with this small-souled woman, he thrived. He had a tough constitution. Whoever has survived his own birth on a rubbish heap is not so easily shoved back out of this world again. He could eat watery soup for days on end, he managed on the thinnest milk, digested the rottest vegetables and spoiled meat. In the course of his childhood he survived the measles, dysentery, chicken pox, cholera, a twenty-foot fall into a well and a scalding with boiling water poured over his chest. True, he bore scars and chafings and scabs from it all, and a slightly crippled foot left him with a limp, but he lived. He was as tough as a resistant bacterium and as content as a tick sitting quietly on a tree and living off a tiny drop of blood plundered years before. He required a minimum ration of food and clothing

for his body. For his soul he required nothing. Security, attention, tenderness, love – or whatever all those things are called that children are said to require – were utterly dispensable to the young Grenouille. Or rather, so it seems to us, he had utterly dispensed with them just to go on living – from the very start. The cry that followed his birth, the cry with which he had brought himself to people's attention and his mother to the gallows, was not an instinctive cry for sympathy and love. That cry, emitted upon careful consideration, one might almost say upon mature consideration, was the newborn's decision *agains* love and nevertheless *for* life. Under the circumstances, the latter was possible only without the former, and had the child demanded both, it would doubtless have abruptly come to a grisly end. Of course, it could have grabbed the other possibility open to it and held its peace and thus have chosen the path from birth to death without a detour by way of life, sparing itself and the world a great deal of mischief. But to have made such a modest exit would have demanded a modicum of native civility, and that Grenouille did not possess. He was an abomination from the start. He decided in favour of life out of sheer spite and sheer malice.

Obviously he did not decide this as an adult would decide, who requires his more or less substantial experience and reason to choose among various options. But he did decide vegetatively, as a bean when once tossed aside must decide whether it ought to germinate or had better let things be.

Or like that tick in the tree, for which life has nothing better to offer than perpetual hibernation. The ugly little tick, which by rolling its blue-grey body up into a ball, offers the least possible surface to the world; which by making its skin smooth and dense emits nothing, lets not the tiniest bit of perspiration escape. The tick, which makes

itself extra small and inconspicuous so that no one will see it and step on it. The lovely tick which, wrapped up in itself, huddles in its tree, blind and dumb, and simply sniffs, sniffs all year long, for miles around, for the blood of some passing animal that it could never reach under its own power. The tick could let itself drop. It could fall to the floor of the forest and creep a millimetre or two here or there on its six tiny legs and lie down to die under the leaves – it would be no great loss, God knows. But the tick, stubborn, sullen and loathsome, huddles there and lives and waits. Waits, for that most improbable of chances that will bring blood, in animal form, directly beneath its tree. And only then does it abandon caution and drop and scratch and bore and bite into that alien flesh...

The young Grenouille was such a tick. He lived encapsulated in himself and waited for better times. He gave the world nothing but his dung – no smile, no cry, no glimmer in the eye, not even his own scent. Every other woman would have kicked this monstrous child out. But not Madame Gaillard. She could not smell that he did not smell, and she expected no stirrings from his soul, because her own was sealed tight.

The other children, however, sensed at once what Grenouille was about. From the first day, the new arrival was a sinister presence to them. They avoided the box in which he lay and edged closer together in their beds as if it had grown colder in the room. The younger ones would sometimes cry out in the night; they felt a draught sweep through the room. Others dreamed something was taking their breath away. One day the older ones conspired to suffocate him. They piled rags and blankets and straw over his face and weighed it all down with bricks. When Madame Gaillard dug him out the next morning, he was crumpled and squashed and blue, but not dead. They tried