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From "Casse-Pipe"

Louis-Ferdinand Céline

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unhappy than some for I want to know and understand
70) to put it simply I am proud is that a weakness I don't believe it is and it
will surely bring misery or perhaps *Success*.

Louis-Ferdinand Céline
tr. *David Hayman*

from *Casse-Pipe*

Corporal Le Meheu occupied the far end of the guardhouse, his elbows on the table, by the lampshade. He was snoring. Far off as I was, I saw the night light glinting on his little mustache. His eyes were hidden by his helmet. Its weight made his head nod . . . He kept rising up . . . He was struggling against sleep . . . It had just struck the hour . . .

I'd been waiting in front of the gate for a long time. Some gate, a gate that gave you notions, one of those real cast-iron giants, a monster trellis of spears, upright like that, in the pitch black.

My orders I held in my hand . . . The hour was there, written down.

The sentry from the box had pushed open the wicket himself, with his rifle butt. He had just called in:

"Corporal! Here's the volunteer!"

"Get him in here, the dumb prick!"

There were a good twenty men flopped on the straw of the stall. They shook themselves. They grunted. The sentry barely had the tips of his ears sticking out over the heap of capes he had on . . . such a pile of them he looked like a cloud colored artichoke . . . they bunched up on the paved floor at his feet, a petticoat with flares. I'd noticed the paving stones already, bigger than skulls . . . almost step in between them . . .

We went into this den, which stank so bad from the men it made you weak; the stink got deep in your nose, enough to knock you out . . . It got you sniffing all over the place, it was so unbelievably strong, biting . . . Meat, piss, and chewing tobacco and bladder reek, they had an overpowering stink, and then the sad cold coffee, and then a taste of horseshit, and then something bland, like the smell of a dead rat, hovering in the corners . . . It worked on your lungs, you had to force every breath. But that guy crouched by the lamp, he didn't give me any time to think about it.

"Listen, lead ass, you need my boots to get you started? . . . Holler out your name, what's the word on you? . . . You think you can sign up without me? Want me to send a wheel barrow for you . . ."

Certainly I wanted to get to the table, but everybody's feet were sticking out in the way . . . all these spurred boots . . . steaming . . . all the flopouts in the straw. They snored away all jammed together . . . Bundled up in their rotten clothes, they made a solid barrier. I stepped over the whole pile, as best I could. The corporal had shamed me.

“Take a look at this goon! This cherry! Never seen such a half-assed civilian! Shit! They really fixed us up with something special! Come here, sweetheart.”

The whole meat rack started in moaning because I’d knocked into a saber. It hiccupped and rumbled. I had broken up everybody’s sleep! The corporal bel-lowed: “Animals, shut your yaps!”

They got up from the straw one by one, the stiffs, to have a look at my pan and my coat, Uncle Edouard’s as it happened . . . They all had red pusses themselves, flaming red, except for one guy who was kind of greenish. They all yawned enormous ovens. In the light, as they grimaced, their teeth showed all rotten, gapped, crooked. The unlovely grinders of old horses . . . those square faces . . . They snickered, those hideous freaks, to see me standing like that in front of the corporal, ill at ease, unavoidably.

They were rasping at each other, they were making their observations. It wasn’t comprehensible, what they were asking me . . . herd noises. The corporal was having a hard time getting my orders open . . . they kept getting stuck be-tween his fingers . . . finally he got to my name. He had to copy it on the roster . . . All this was quite a chore . . . He worked at it with great concentration.

Just above him on a shelf, a great jumble of helmets, plumed, bushy red, tremendous, flowing back—a magnificent effect.

The corporal, his tongue hanging way out, finally managed to get my name written down.

“Orderly! Quick! Jump, you pest! Get smoking, move! Our Parisian’s here! Go tell the sarge right away, the volunteer, the volunteer! Understand?”

The orderly got out of his bed, from way back in the straw he crawled through the general litter. He was all tangled up with the other snorers, he didn’t feel much like leaping out . . . no . . . He finally got himself organized, but he was wobbling on his pins. He grubbed the scum out of his eyes. . . . He fumbled for his sword belt. He lost his saber. He couldn’t get buckled together . . . Somehow, he managed to reach the door. He pushed himself out into the night, all stooped over, as if fatigue had made a hunchback out of him . . . In the guardhouse nothing was going right, I’d disturbed their sleep . . . I had waked them up . . . the whole herd.

And then, just exactly at that moment, an entire detachment showed up. . . . Whang! The door bounced off the wall . . . There must have been at least ten or so . . . They were returning from their stretch of guard duty . . . They seemed to have come a long distance . . . and at a good pace, they were puffing and huffing so hard.

“What’s going on at the armory?” the corporal asked them . . . What about the Third’s stables?”

They gave him some answers I didn’t understand . . . all in grunts.

They stowed their pieces on a rack by the wall. In between the table and the door there wasn’t much space anyway and, with all the new guys standing there, we were wedged in so tightly no one could budge. It was enough to suffo-cate the whole bunch, all the capes squeezed together, couldn’t move your little finger what with those sodden cackling slobs.

Still, standing up stiff like that, they managed to shoot some booze down

their throats, a two-liter binge and then more from the canteen.

They were talking about various misadventures, about horses, that meant, which had gotten away from the stable. That was their big hassle, so it seemed.

"Shit!" a guy in front of me bawled out. "I got to piss!" I couldn't really see much of him, muffled up in his baggy clothes. He was hidden in his pleats, by the squeeze, by his helmet, by the deep shadows.

"Hey, fuck off! Shithead!"

It was unanimous. He wanted to get out anyway. He thrust himself forcibly into the pack. He worked his way as far as the door. Then somebody struck him, brutally, knocking him into the air and out of the guardhouse . . . He bounced on the stones outside . . . his ironwear, his saber, his armour. It made a terrible racket.

"That the volunteer, that one?" It was a shrill voice asked that question from above, one flight up.

"Hut!" barked Le Meheu.

Then I saw him, the one with the question . . . a képi . . . a glint of silver . . . he was coming out from the shadows of a staircase by the wall, a noncom. He came down step by step, taking his time. The men who were up held themselves rigid, frozen at attention. There were still some in the straw, snoring, their feet sticking out of their stall. He pushed in, kicking away right and left. Bang! Whang! . . . They were in the way. He wanted to have a good close look at me. Now, staring from close range, he bawls out: "Hut! Hut!"

He belches in my face to finish up. "La!" he says. He's happy. I don't move.

"Duty officer Rancotte." He announces himself. I still don't budge. The other guys, all around me, they're cracking up.

"Meheu, it's a warehouse this post of yours. Disorder! Anarchy!" And then, without pause, a torrent of insults and threats, along with sturdy belches. I couldn't see the eyes on this Rancotte guy very well because of the smokey lamp, an ember, and especially because of his képi, fanning out, an extravagant bonnet, worn well forward.

He turned around and went to get my orders . . . He read my name . . . this caused some additional mumbling. "Munnh! Mmrah!" Like that. He buttoned up his tunic. He must have been sacking out upstairs in some other crummy hole . . . He waddled around squinting at my papers, giving them the eye from various angles as if I'd handed him a phony. He kept muttering to himself . . .

No doubt about it, he was a real shithead. I'd seen plenty of these already, believe me, lots of nasty faces, but that one there was putrid with mean pettiness. His cheeks were shot through with little veins like noodles, absolutely flaming, the bones were ready to explode. Little mustaches, all shiny, pointed and waxed at the tips . . . He was chewing on a butt stuck in the corner of his mouth . . . I was obviously making him nervous . . . He was going to say something to me . . . He breathed hard, through his nose like a dog. The questions shot out of him all at once . . . savagely . . .

"What about the armory, Le Meheu? You haven't thought about it? No? Eh?"

It made him hop, Meheu, that reminder. He threw himself on the lantern, he jumped for the door.

“Yes, Sergeant! Yes, Sergeant! Right! Right!”

He was outside, he was running . . .

The sarge came back to me. He sniffed around me again, getting closer.

“Why, he stinks, this rabbit, damned if he doesn’t!” Now he had something! He was in heaven!

“Yes, he’s really rotten . . .”

It surprised me, that remark, seeing that the place we were in smelled so hellish that it was a terrible struggle not to lose control and just pass out. It seemed he was putting on an act.

“Why, he’s going to give me the heavens!” He announced this at the top of his voice.

He called Meheu back in.

“Take this rabbit outside for me, Corporal, immediately! I don’t want any more of him in here! Air, Air! God’s sake! He’s unbelievable, the slob! I can’t breathe! The whole detail’s going to drop dead from it! Beat it! Out! Get rid of him, Meheu! Show him around the barracks!”

It was obvious that just the sight of my mug had made this Rancotte take a powerful dislike to me.

“Hut!” He yells at me preparatory to going out. I look at the others. I do what they do. I put my feet together, at the heels, I snap my head up.

“Ah! This is how you fix a rabbit! Ah! How to shape up a civilian! Wait a bit!” He looked at me from further off.

“At reveille, Corporal, you will escort him to clothing supply! Get it? . . . He doesn’t look too clumsy . . . no! . . . no! . . . not at all! . . . He’s a little dream! Just take a shot at that profile! Say, he’s got no color in him! He belongs in the hospital already! What’ll happen, birdie, when we start making you take wing? Ah, then you’ll flutter! Ah, little cutie birdie! You’re going to see some country! Just wait, my fine recruit, I’ll put the blood back in your tubes. You’ll give the chambermaids hell!”

He flicked at his boots with his slender riding crop. He was promising himself a lot of fun. He breathed in my face the whole time.

“Why did you join up! You ever been a coachman? Maybe a tailor by trade? A thief, eh, little fellow? Tumbler possibly? You weren’t a groom neither? You were really in the perfume business? A charcoal seller then? A scissors grinder?”

“No, sir.”

They were breaking up, the other guys, to see me being made an ass of. They were writhing in the straw, they were convulsed.

“Then why, dammit, are you screwing around in the Seventeenth Heavy Cavalry? Eh? You don’t know yourself. Marvelous! Nothing left to eat at your house? Your oven broken?”

I saw there was no need to say anything.

“Go! At the order, move! Take off! Follow the music! Don’t lose the corporal! Oh, and about the barrow, Meheu! I don’t want to see that thing around anymore! Hear me? Four squadrons, four! And then a fifth one for your ugly yap!

We're spoiling them here, these cute kids! You know how many assholes that makes, dummy, four squadrons? And then with a fifth? The whole deal's chow for Zonzon! You haven't finished having fun with the barrows, chow hound! No shit! You'll reenlist! Three years! Five years! You'll never be done! Like with the brioches for your crew! Right! Well! By damn, you're going to have fun! This is training we got here, my cossack! This is the practical theory of the fat cavalry! horse shit theory! Ah! Hut! How long have you stuck yourself with? You won't tell me? How long did you sign up for? Well? It's written down?"

"Three years."

"That's not enough, baloney! Out! Take off! I don't want to see him! Kick him around for me, Le Meheu! He just stinks. What time is it, Corporal? Twelve-ten? Twelve-twelve?"

He takes out his turnip, a big thing.

"What day is it? Not the twenty-second? It's not, huh? The twenty-fifth? You should know, you porkfaces! No! Today, I'm informing you, is the twenty-fourth. Surprise you? Does it, you moles?"

He steps aside, he skips towards the table, he grabs up the roster, he leans, with Le Meheu, over the page which has my name.

"You don't know the day anymore, Corporal? You don't know a thing anymore, right? You're dirt dumb and useless, Corporal Meheu! You'll like it when they dance, your sleeves! When we strip them clean! . . ."

He showed him his own stripes.

He belches . . . he sits . . . He takes the pen from him, snatching it from his fingers . . . He does the number over . . . the 4 . . . He concentrates . . . A blot! . . . They both contemplate the blot . . . staring down . . . The men all lean forward together.

"Isn't that pretty." Rancotte admires. Can't help spreading it around. It's going to make a regular butterfly . . .

"Buah!" He shoots up a commanding belch.

Everybody in the room shuts up except for that vicious half-wit, bitching, with his visor flashing so brightly under the lamp, his big silver stripe also . . . that I was dazzled by them . . . the men all around are snuffling . . . They lie in a heap, like animals . . . They're waiting for the storm . . . The pen hesitates. . . . The N.C.O. is considering . . . he plays with himself . . . he kneads at himself . . . He tortures his mouth . . . He licks his lips, has a little nibble on his mustache. He is puzzled by my name . . . he goes back to his penmanship . . . the men all lean in further . . . as the pen goes up . . . comes down, first my name, then my father's Christian name . . . "Dammit!" he exclaims . . . "Fernand? Ferdinand? . . . son of Auguste . . . born Auguste . . . tell me more! Sergeant first class Rancotte . . . son of Rancotte, trumpet-major, 12th Dragoons. That shut you up, brown nose? Trooper's son . . . Oh yes. Trooper's son. That's simple . . . that's simple . . . plain enough! yeah! shit! Auguste . . . insurance . . . employee . . . Do you see that? Insurance? . . . What's this insurance? Hell, I never heard of insurance! Ah! Hah! What's insurance do that's so big? You are pretentious, my friend! Pretentious! Audacious! Yes! Right! Me, Rancotte! Is that under-

stood? Hut! At ease! Attention! Heels together! Heels together! Pull your head out of your shoulders! There! Hut!”

I already knew about the heels, I'd seen it . . . I had the idea . . . they had to make a clack . . .

He swallowed down his smoke . . . he spat a great gob of phlegm and then another at the unlit stove. This produced splat flowers . . . spit dribbling down. He wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve . . . Suddenly he came up with an idea.

“Orderly! My orderly! Where's that turnip butt gone?” Couch! Pfrutt! Pflac! the spit globs out where it hits.

Two cavalrymen instantly rush out of the guardhouse . . . They're hustling, on the double . . . we hear them . . . rattling with their sabers at quite some distance, out there on the stones . . . They come back empty-handed . . . They haven't seen him . . . Uproar in the hell hole. Endless asschewing over the missing orderly.

But now Le Meheu remembers.

“He's on duty this week at the remount station!”

“Ah, the gutter rat! he never said anything! What about *your* men, Le Meheu? Are they ready . . . your dapper dogs, ready?”

“All accounted for, Sergeant!”

A frigid wind takes over on the threshold, so mean it freezes your juices. Winter's there already, the evil bastard, sending you icy rain, the shakes, the cutting gust.

The men on duty haul themselves out of the warm straw one by one, they go and form up against the wall, right under the dripping eaves, arms at the order.

“Over here, by my lantern!”

Rancotte shows me the exact spot, lighting up the first stone at the end of the line.

“Here!” He says to me . . . “Understand? Your rifle goes by your boot. Oh, that's right, you don't have one! You don't have one! You got nothing! Forget it! Watch, anyhow . . . Bend around a little so you can see. You see those rifle butts, take a good look! You'll take 'em up the ass, rabbit! If you don't handle yourself a little better!”

He looks down on the ground with me. He draws himself up . . . This causes an internal eddy. He belches. He speaks: “Ah, pardon!”

“Ah, Christ! Ah, my ass and balls! We're not finished, you and I! You wanted to hitch up for three? Very nice! Very nice, you little bastard. You won't be sorry.”

Just then we were blacked out, his lantern faded, it smoked, it caught again . . .

But Rancotte must have felt too warm, what with making speeches, he skinned off his cape, he strolled along in the rain in just his tunic and tight riding breeches, with the water dripping down his body; I certainly irritated him a lot, he thought I was really the worst. He set himself to sniffing, nosing around the men at attention, he checked their stances . . . They were absolutely unmoving,

as if stiffened by the cold, by that wind of ice. Rancotte came back to me, to renew his little war. He held the lantern up again, right before his eyes.

"Take a look new guy! Take a look, snot blossom! Duty Sergeant Rancotte! See if you can remember for a minute. Rancotte! Rancotte! They call me Biribi! Yes! Exactly! Biribi! Two for the chopper! 1908! Tough ones! Three for the chopper! 1910! Yeah, like that! Three rocks! Oumph! Biribi! No lie! That's Rancotte! Straighten out your insubordinates! Vicious bastards! Yes, Biribi, it's beautiful! You don't know about Biribi? We'll shape you up! You'll learn! Diddler! Cleaning rod! Yes! That's it! Rifle! Cleaning rod!"

He turns, he aims his lantern full on the corporal.

"Cleaning rod, Le Meheu! I said: the rod! Yoour clean-ing rod! Get with it! You heard me! Got wax in your ear?"

Meheu stoops, paws in the folds of his cape. He squints up at Rancotte as if he had a yen for him . . . the tiny rod.

The water on the roof overflows with a rush, it whips him in the face. He grimaces, he pulls out the little steel shaft . . . with a lot of trouble . . . from deep in his linings.

"Ah! Ah! Corporal! Give me that thing! Let me see it! Let me see it closer! Yes . . . All right . . ."

He looks it over in the beam from the lantern.

"Ah, it's so nice! A real jewel, this little rod! My boy, it's a gorgeous thing . . . Yes . . . The cavalryman's pride, a little rod! . . . Yes! yes! That's the truth, boy, nothing better! Ah! I see one, Le Meheu!"

He whoops, he's in heaven over it.

"Ah! I really see one. Ah! I see all, pal. Ah! Is it? Or ain't it? Yes, yes, yes, Meheu! A real spot! Ah! maybe just a little one . . . No! No! A monster, Meheu! A great big rust spot, Corporal! . . ."

He stretches his arms wide to show the full size of this scandalous spot. He gurgles with delight . . . it echoes like water in a drain. . . . The sound is everywhere . . . All through the heavy darkness of the barracks . . . The triumph of cunning.

"Meheu! Meheu! silly boy! You useless crook, your cleaning rod is rotted out! A pound of rust up its ass! Ah! Ah! Half-wit! Your section's out of grease! Great work! Great! The rod's fit for scrap! That's right! Four days, boy! Four full days! To start with! With the charge to think about! What charge? 'Neglect of arms maintenance constituting a truly deleterious example for his section, compromising by his carelessness the entire process of instruction.' Ah! I can see you now, in the can!"

Meheu fumbled his cleaning rod together.

"I can see you sitting pretty, in front of the captain!"

"Hut!"

Everybody jumped back out into the rain, now it was tumbling down, raging, furious, squalls. It sounded just like surf, breaking against the helmets.

"Hut! At ease! Hut!"

"Forward with the whole bunch, Le Meheu! Keep the new guy in step! No slopping around! Ah! The cavalry takes care of itself! The cavalry's elite, hold

up there! Elite! The elite wants to shine! You clods, you burn my ass! The 17th Armored! The heavy cavalry! That's right! Heavy! My weighed down outfit! Heavy, Parisian! But it moves! Fuck the light cav any day! In drill and in the field! Yes! Right in the rump! Yes! Right, heavy cav? Right? Me, Rancotte! That's it."

And he belches into my face again, a mighty blast.

I stood there shivering in my rain shrunk pants, wet enough for wringing.

"Yes."

"Yes, who? Yes what! Yes, dog?"

"Yes, Sergeant! . . ."

"That's better! . . . That's better! . . . That's already better, humpy! . . . Hold yourself straight! . . . Your eyes! . . . Look out a long ways . . . You see the time down there? . . . Up there, on the clock? . . . You don't see anything?"

I saw the dial . . . in midair, far off . . . through the rain . . . a little yellow moon.

"The time?"

"Twelve-twenty-five, Sergeant . . ."

"You see my ass?"

"No, Sergeant."

"All right! If I find one man laughing in ranks I'm slapping him with eight days and a major charge . . . Ah! you goodtime bullshitters, I'm going to make you writhe with pleasure . . . the way I'll teach you, you'll love it to death. Training! training! Right face! Right! Shoulder arms! . . . Just let me find one guy who thinks it's a joke! Meheu, I don't want any more no-sweats! I want them hot as coals! I want them to steam! March! One! Two! And don't lose the dummy! The man in the coat! Hey, he's breathing hard! Don't let him melt, the candy ass! Corporal, you're responsible! Keep that lollipop in step! One! Two! The curly chick, give him a haircut! Yes! One! Two! Ha-won! Ha-won!"

We moved off into the darkness with long strides, we marched all the way across the yard . . . the sergeant hollered after us . . . from far away . . . from the depth of the blackness . . . He was picking up echoes . . . He was still shouting orders . . .

"You'll be passing by the armory again, Meheu! . . . Me . . . heu . . . heu . . . ! Check the do-oo-ors! And the gate to the manure heap! . . . Get it? See to the bolt! . . . Understa-a-nd? Ha-won! Ha-twoo! . . . Ha-won! Ha-twoo!"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"You won't forget about the fodder man-n-n?"

"No Sergeant . . ."

Meheu shouted back the same way, towards the far end of the yard. It came through the noise made by the sabers, the spurs, which clattered as we marched and jerked along . . .

"There's a fancy riding hack on the Nansouty course. . . . I hear it! . . . You'll know me! When I pass by! My booooootes!"

"Yes, Serge-an-ant!"

It reverberated five, six times! . . . it kicked around from wall to wall through the night, the downpour, all the racket . . .

Our little troop, keeping cadence. — “One! two! Ha-won! two! . . .”— forced its freezing way past the shabby buildings into the rain. It was pouring from everywhere now, in cataracts, crashing down from the gutters, the roofs themselves, even off the walls . . . We were drowned, carried away, bounced violently around on the stones, flogged erect by squalls . . . Things weren’t getting any better . . .

Even further away now, the N.C.O. had started calling out his instructions again . . . a tiny light down there, which twinkled, pricking into the total blackness. He had more to bawl about . . .

“The trough man! Le Meheuheu!”

“Yes, Serge-an-ant!”

The echo rose up to the trees . . . over the buildings . . . up to the shadows, to the huge sets put up above everything . . . on the front of the sky . . . pitch black, rumbling, all swollen, monsters whose whisper terrifies . . . fears which come from the leaves . . . from the living night.

Louis-Ferdinand Céline

tr. *Jacob Fuchs*