

The First Sunday

Historical · 8-character play · 5 women, 2 men, 1 either · 75 min · Intermediate

April 1945. In Bellegrange, women will vote on Sunday for the first time, and the mayor's list carries ten men's names, five of whom are still prisoners in Germany. At the wash-house, the women get it into their heads that one of their own could sit on the village council: Louise, who has run her farm for five years. They will have to write the ballots by hand, find paper, stand up to the mayor, and above all dare, alone in the polling booth, to leave her own name on the paper.

Bellegrange, a village in the Nièvre, in central France: the wash-house, the grocery, a farm kitchen, the schoolroom that serves as the polling station, on Saturday 28 and Sunday 29 April 1945.

Casting

LOUISE (Female role, Adult) 39, has run the Mercier farm alone since her husband, Paul, was taken prisoner in Germany.

AUGUSTINE (Female role, Senior) 71 (admits to 65), washerwoman at the village wash-house for fifty years, widowed since 1916.

SIMONE (Female role, Adult) 47, the grocer, whose husband is also a prisoner.

LUCIE (Female role, Young adult) 20, Simone's daughter; she will be old enough to vote in June.

AGATHE (Female role, Senior) 68, the mayor's wife.

CLAUDE (No gender marker, Adult) thirties, runs the post office, the telegraph and the only telephone in the village.

ARMAND (Male role, Senior) 67, mayor of Bellegrange since 1925.

VICTOR (Male role, Adult) 34, Paul's brother, sent home from the stalag in March on medical grounds; he sleeps at the farm.

ACT ONE : THE WASH-HOUSE

SCENE 1

(The village wash-house, a Saturday morning. The sound of running water. Augustine scrubs a sheet on the stone. Simone arrives with a basket of washing.)

SIMONE. You're here already.

AUGUSTINE. I'm always here already. It's the wash-house that turns up after me.

SIMONE. Is there any ash left?

AUGUSTINE. In the bucket. Not too much, it's mine. That soap from your shop, I washed a sheet with it, and the sheet came out dirtier.

SIMONE. It's the soap they deliver. I don't make it.

AUGUSTINE. I'm not accusing you. I'm observing.

(Simone kneels and starts washing. A pause.)

SIMONE. Have you seen the poster?

AUGUSTINE. What poster?

SIMONE. At the town hall. The list. For tomorrow.

AUGUSTINE. I don't read the town hall's posters, they always say the same thing: it is forbidden to. Forbidden to let your hens wander, forbidden to do your washing in the cattle trough.

SIMONE. This one says who's going to be elected.

AUGUSTINE. So it's written before anybody votes. How convenient.

(Lucie runs in, a sheet of paper in her hand.)

LUCIE. I copied it out. Word for word. Maman, you didn't read it to the bottom.

SIMONE. I read the top. The bottom's the same as the top.

LUCIE. "Republican Union and Reconstruction List. Armand Delorme, outgoing mayor. Fernand Bastien, farrier. Émile Bouchard, miller. Joseph Pichon, property owner." What property?

AUGUSTINE. The pond. He's always said the pond was his.

LUCIE. "Paul Mercier, farmer, prisoner of war. Marcel Garnier, grocer, prisoner of war."

(Simone stops scrubbing.)

SIMONE. They've put your father on it.

LUCIE. They've put all the prisoners on it. Five out of ten. Five men who are in Germany, we don't even know where, we haven't had a single letter since January, and we're going to elect them to the village council.

AUGUSTINE. They'll attend by post.

LUCIE. There's no post with Germany any more.

AUGUSTINE. Then they won't come often. That'll make for short meetings.

SIMONE. It's a tribute, Lucie. It's a way of saying we're waiting for them.

LUCIE. It's a way of saying there's no room for anyone else. Ten seats. Five for men who aren't here, four for gentlemen who've been on the council since 1925, and the last one for Victor Mercier, who came home a month ago. And not one woman.

SIMONE. There's never been a woman on the council.

LUCIE. There's never been a woman voting either. And tomorrow there are a hundred and sixty of them in this village who'll be putting an envelope in the ballot box. To elect ten men.

AUGUSTINE. A hundred and sixty? You counted them?

LUCIE. On the electoral roll. It's posted up right next to it. Your name's on it, by the way.

AUGUSTINE. With my age?

LUCIE. With your date of birth.

(Augustine drops her sheet.)

AUGUSTINE. Who put that up?

LUCIE. The town hall.

AUGUSTINE. You can't keep a thing to yourself in this country any more. They liberated France so they could post up women's ages.

SIMONE. And you, are you on it, the roll?

LUCIE. No. I'm still a J3, the youth ration card. J3 for bread, J3 for voting. I turn twenty-one on the sixth of June. I'm missing democracy by five weeks.

AUGUSTINE. I'm an A. Like everybody.

SIMONE. You're a V, Augustine, the old-age card. I've been cutting you V coupons since last year.

AUGUSTINE. V for valiant.

SIMONE. There'll be other elections.

LUCIE. Not first ones.

(A pause. They wash.)

AUGUSTINE. A hundred and sixty, you said?

LUCIE. A hundred and sixty-three.

AUGUSTINE. And the men?

LUCIE. A hundred and forty-nine registered. Minus the ones in Germany. Minus the ones in the cemetery that nobody's got round to crossing off.

AUGUSTINE. So there are more of us.

SIMONE. That doesn't mean anything. We're not all going to vote the same way.

AUGUSTINE. No. But we could.

SCENE 2

(Louise arrives, a basket of washing on her hip. She sets it down and looks at the other three, who are looking at her.)

LOUISE. What?

AUGUSTINE. Nothing.

LOUISE. You're looking at me the way you'd look at a cow that's eaten wet clover.

SIMONE. We were talking about the elections.

LOUISE. Oh. I'm talking about shirts. Victor goes through two a day, he got into the habit at the camp of washing all the time, I'm not going to hold it against him. But I've run out of blue for the rinse.

LUCIE. Have you seen the list, Louise?

LOUISE. I've seen the list. Paul's on it. The mayor came round on Tuesday to ask if I agreed. As if anyone could say no.

AUGUSTINE. You can always say no. It's the one thing you can always say.

LOUISE. To putting your husband's name on a poster? He said it was so the village wouldn't forget him. I told him there was no danger of the village forgetting him, it asks me every day, at church, at the mill, at Simone's: any news of Paul? No news. Since January, no news.

SIMONE. Same for Marcel.

LOUISE. I know.

(A pause. They scrub.)

LUCIE. There ought to be a woman on the list.

LOUISE. There ought to be soap, for a start.

LUCIE. I'm serious. Tomorrow we vote for the first time, and we're going to vote for the same thing as before. As if we weren't there. As if nobody had noticed who's been keeping this village going for five years.

LOUISE. The village keeps itself going, it's used to it.

AUGUSTINE. No. The village keeps going because you do the milk round every morning for the seven farms up the hill, because Simone does the ration coupons, because old Pichon thought he was in charge of the threshing and you were the one in charge of it.

LOUISE. It was simpler.

AUGUSTINE. That's what people say when they've done somebody else's job.

LUCIE. You could stand, Louise.

(Louise stops scrubbing.)

LOUISE. Me?

LUCIE. You know every farm. You've run Paul's farm, the milk round, the requisitions. You negotiated with the Germans over the horses.

LOUISE. I negotiated with an Austrian corporal who was frightened of horses. That's not politics, that's horsemanship.

LUCIE. That's exactly what politics is.

LOUISE. Lucie, Paul is on the list.

LUCIE. So?

LOUISE. So I'm not going to stand against my own husband. He's in a camp, we don't know which one, we don't know if he's eating, and meanwhile I'm out campaigning against him? What would people say?

AUGUSTINE. They'd say you've got nerve.

LOUISE. They'd say I'm not waiting for him to come home before I take his place. They say it enough already.

SIMONE. Who says that?

LOUISE. Nobody. Everybody. Ever since Victor came back and started sleeping at the farm.

SIMONE. He's his brother.

LOUISE. He's his brother, he's thirty-four, and he sleeps under my roof. That's enough for two or three conversations outside church after Mass.

(Augustine straightens up and wipes her hands on her apron.)

AUGUSTINE. I don't have a husband in a camp.

LUCIE. You?

AUGUSTINE. I'm just saying. I'm saying that if you were looking for a woman with no husband to tiptoe around, no brother-in-law in the attic, who's known this village longer than the mayor has, who knows who owes what to whom because she's washed everybody's linen, you wouldn't have to look very far.

SIMONE. Augustine.

AUGUSTINE. I'm saying it as an example.

LUCIE. Do you want to stand?

AUGUSTINE. I didn't say that. I gave an example. An example is there to be followed, not for people to follow me.

LOUISE. You'd be very good, Augustine.

AUGUSTINE. I know. But it's you we need.

LOUISE. Why me, if you'd be very good?

AUGUSTINE. Because at my age, they vote for you out of politeness, the way you doff your hat to a funeral. For you, they'd vote for real.

LOUISE. Or against.

AUGUSTINE. That's for real too.

(A pause. Louise picks up her shirt again and wrings it.)

LOUISE. Anyway, the list is done. It's posted up.

LUCIE. We can make another one.

SIMONE. With what? You need ballot papers. They have to be printed. The printer's in Clamecy and he hasn't had any paper since Christmas.

LUCIE. We can write them.

SIMONE. By hand? Three hundred ballots?

LUCIE. There's all night.

SIMONE. There's all night for sleeping. I open at seven.

SCENE 3

(Claude arrives, a Post Office satchel slung across one shoulder, a few cards in hand.)

CLAUDE. Morning. No post from Germany. I'll say it straight away, so nobody has to ask.

SIMONE. Thank you, Claude.

CLAUDE. I've got the last of the voting cards. The town hall got them last night, they had to arrive before tomorrow. Simone Garnier. Louise Mercier. Augustine Roux.

(Augustine takes hers, looks at it, and hides it in her pocket.)

AUGUSTINE. It's wrong.

CLAUDE. What do you mean?

AUGUSTINE. The date. They've got the date wrong.

CLAUDE. It's the one from the register of births.

AUGUSTINE. The register gets things wrong too. It wrote down my husband as "died for France", when he died for nothing at all, in a hole, in February

'16.

(A pause.)

CLAUDE. You'll have to see the town hall. On Monday.

AUGUSTINE. Leave it. I'll vote with my six years too many.

LUCIE. Claude, if we wanted to make another list, could we?

CLAUDE. I don't deal with lists. I'm the Post Office.

LUCIE. But you know how it works.

CLAUDE. I know what it says in the circular I delivered to the town hall. That's not the same thing.

AUGUSTINE. And what does it say, this circular you delivered?

CLAUDE. It says that in a commune like ours, everyone brings their own ballot paper. Printed or handwritten, on white paper, with no marks on it. You can cross names out. You can add names. You need half the votes plus one to get in on the first round. Otherwise, there's a second vote on the thirteenth of May.

LUCIE. So we can write any name we like.

CLAUDE. Any name of a person who's eligible. Not the cow's.

AUGUSTINE. That's aimed at old Pichon. He voted for his mare in 1935.

SIMONE. And paper? Where do you find white paper on a Saturday, in 1945?

CLAUDE. The prefecture sent two reams for the ballots. For the whole commune.

LUCIE. Where are they?

CLAUDE. At the town hall.

LUCIE. Of course they are.

CLAUDE. I'm only saying where they are. I'm not saying what to do with them. I'm neutral.

AUGUSTINE. You've always been neutral. Even in '40, you delivered letters to both sides.

CLAUDE. That's my job. A letter doesn't vote.

(Milk churns clank together. Victor passes, a churn in each hand. The women fall silent. He stops.)

VICTOR. Morning.

SIMONE. Morning, Victor.

VICTOR. The Bouchards' milk has turned. I've put it aside, for the pigs. The pigs won't say a word.

LOUISE. Thanks.

VICTOR. What were you talking about?

AUGUSTINE. Soap.

VICTOR. You talk about soap in whispers now?

LUCIE. We were talking about the list. You're on it, Victor.

VICTOR. On what?

LUCIE. "Victor Mercier, farmer, former prisoner of war." The last one. Number ten.

VICTOR. Nobody asked me.

LUCIE. Nobody asked you?

VICTOR. The mayor shook my hand outside church on Sunday. He said he was counting on me. I said yes, the way you say yes to a man who's shaking your hand. I thought he meant the threshing.

AUGUSTINE. With Armand, it's always the threshing. And then at the end, it's the poster.

VICTOR. I don't want to be on the council. I want to sleep. I want one night without waking up to count the others.

(A pause. Nobody says anything.)

VICTOR. I'll tell him to take me off.

CLAUDE. It's printed, Victor. The poster's printed.

VICTOR. Then people can cross me out.

LUCIE. That's it. You need crossing out. And somebody else put in your place.

VICTOR. Who?

(All eyes turn to Louise. She wrings her shirt.)

LOUISE. Victor, will you take the churns back? They're waiting at the dairy.

VICTOR. I'm going.

(He picks up his churns. He looks at Louise, then goes.)

SIMONE. He's got even thinner.

LOUISE. He eats. He eats a lot. It doesn't stay down.

CLAUDE. I have to finish my round. If anyone has a telegram to send, the office opens at two.

AUGUSTINE. A telegram to who?

CLAUDE. I don't know. You never know. Some people have urgent things to say.

(Claude goes. A pause. Lucie folds her sheet of paper.)

LUCIE. Right. I'll ask Maman to keep the shop shut tonight, and we write.

SIMONE. I didn't say anything.

LUCIE. You didn't say no.

SIMONE. Is that how it works with you? Not saying no is saying yes?

LUCIE. Yes.

SIMONE. Good Lord, you get that from me.

(They gather up their washing. Augustine looks at Louise.)

AUGUSTINE. And you?

LOUISE. Me what?

AUGUSTINE. Did you say no?

(Louise sets her basket on her hip.)

LOUISE. I said Paul was on the list.

AUGUSTINE. That's not no.

LOUISE. No. That's not no.

(She goes. Augustine smiles, picks up her sheet and scrubs harder.)

ACT TWO : THE GROCERY

SCENE 1

(Simone's grocery, at noon. A counter, a set of scales, jars nearly empty. Simone is cutting ration coupons from a sheet. The shop bell rings. Armand comes in, hat in hand.)

ARMAND. Good day, Simone.

SIMONE. Monsieur le Maire.

ARMAND. Armand. We've known each other since you were six, you called me Armand when I gave you sugared almonds.

SIMONE. You don't give me sugared almonds any more.

ARMAND. There aren't any sugared almonds any more.

(He puts some sheets of coupons on the counter.)

ARMAND. Our April coupons. Agathe didn't have time. I'd need the oil, if you have the oil.

SIMONE. I've got the bottom of a can. I'm keeping it for the priority coupons.

ARMAND. Then keep it. I'm sixty-seven, I'm not a priority, I'm merely old.

(She weighs out some pasta, in silence. He looks at the jars.)

ARMAND. Any news of Marcel?

SIMONE. Nothing since January.

ARMAND. The Americans are freeing the camps by the thousand. There are trains every day.

SIMONE. I know.

ARMAND. He'll come home, Simone.

SIMONE. I know.

(A pause.)

ARMAND. Your daughter came by the town hall this morning.

SIMONE. Oh.

ARMAND. She asked for paper. To write ballots. Agathe told her the paper was reserved.

SIMONE. Lucie is twenty. She asks for what she likes.

ARMAND. She's right to ask. At her age, I asked too. I don't hold it against her.

SIMONE. Then why are you telling me?

ARMAND. Because Marcel is on my list. And if tomorrow there's another list, a women's list, it'll be a list against mine. So against Marcel. Against Paul. Against the five who are over there and can't say a word.

SIMONE. Nobody's said we're against them.

ARMAND. Nobody will say it. But when they come home, they'll look at the results. People always look at the results.

(Simone doesn't answer. She wraps the pasta. Armand pays, counting out his coins slowly.)

ARMAND. Do you remember, in '42, when the rationing inspectors came?

SIMONE. I remember.

ARMAND. They wanted to see your books. I was there. I told them your books were with me, at the town hall, being checked. They went away.

SIMONE. I thanked you.

ARMAND. You thanked me, yes. I'm not asking you for anything, Simone. I'm only saying that I know who you sell sugar to on Sundays, I know the people from Clamecy come by the woodland path, and I have never said a word about it to anyone. I never will say a word about it to anyone.

SIMONE. Then why are you telling me?

ARMAND. So that you know I know. That's all. It isn't a threat. I don't threaten people I watched being born.

SIMONE. No. You remind them they were born.

(A pause. Armand tucks his hat back under his arm.)

ARMAND. I held this village together for five years, Simone. With the Germans in the town hall twice a week, and the Resistance in the woods asking me for ration coupons at night. All I ask is that we don't smash, the

day before things get better, what we managed to keep standing.

SIMONE. And what if things got better with somebody else?

ARMAND. Then we'll see next time. When they're home. When we're all here.

SCENE 2

(The bell. Lucie comes in, empty-handed, and sees Armand.)

LUCIE. Oh. You're here.

ARMAND. Good day, Lucie.

LUCIE. The paper's under lock and key at the town hall. Your wife told me so very politely. She even offered me a biscuit.

ARMAND. Agathe makes biscuits with chestnut flour. They're as hard as the law.

LUCIE. Is it your paper?

ARMAND. It's the commune's paper. For the commune's ballots.

LUCIE. For the commune's list. Yours.

ARMAND. The two reams arrived on Thursday. My list's ballots were printed a fortnight ago, in Clamecy, on the printer's own paper. I haven't touched a single sheet from the prefecture. You're welcome to come and count them.

LUCIE. The printer hasn't had any paper since Christmas. The whole district knows that.

ARMAND. He had a little left. In '43, when the gendarmes were looking for his son to send him to work in Germany, I forgot to find his address. In April, he found some paper. That's how a village holds together.

LUCIE. That's how a mayor holds on.

ARMAND. Both, Lucie. Often it's the same thing.

LUCIE. Then why is the prefecture's paper under lock and key?

ARMAND. Because everything that's scarce is under lock and key. Sugar too.

(Simone puts a jar down a little too hard.)

LUCIE. You're afraid.

ARMAND. Of you?

LUCIE. Of a women's list.

ARMAND. Lucie, in 1925, at my very first council, I got a motion passed asking for women to have the vote. The only one in the district. Old Pichon walked out of the room. So don't come telling me I'm afraid of women.

LUCIE. I'm not saying you're afraid of women. I'm saying you're afraid of them voting now.

ARMAND. I'm not afraid. I think it isn't the right moment.

LUCIE. When is the right moment?

ARMAND. When the men are home. When we can all vote together, on an equal footing, and not while half the village is behind barbed wire.

LUCIE. Women have waited a hundred years for the right moment. Meanwhile, the men were voting. Even the ones who didn't know what they were voting for. Even old Pichon, for his mare.

ARMAND. The mare was a protest.

LUCIE. Against what?

ARMAND. Against me. She got three votes.

(Lucie laughs. Armand smiles.)

ARMAND. Do you want me to tell you what frightens me? Not women. What frightens me is a man coming home from Germany, weighing ninety pounds, getting off the bus in front of the church and finding that his place has been taken. His place on the council, his place at the table, his place everywhere. Feeling that the village went on without him. There are some who'll never get over it.

LUCIE. And a woman who's kept his place for five years, and who's told: thank you, now hand it all back, go back to the wash-house, how does she get over it?

ARMAND. She gets over it. Women get over things.

LUCIE. That's what people always say about the ones nobody listens to.

(A pause. The bell. Agathe comes in, a shopping bag on her arm.)

AGATHE. Armand. The soup.

ARMAND. Coming.

AGATHE. It won't wait, you know. Good day, Simone. Good day, Lucie. Have you

finished your biscuit?

LUCIE. It's in my pocket. I'd need a hammer.

AGATHE. Young people have no teeth any more. We gave everything to the war, even our teeth.

(Armand picks up his packet of pasta. He hesitates at the door.)

ARMAND. Lucie. Tell Louise to think it over carefully. I'm not saying it for my sake.

LUCIE. For whose, then?

ARMAND. For hers. A prisoner's wife who stands for election, with her husband's brother under her roof, people will talk. It won't be me. It'll be the baker's wife, the priest, the Bouchards. I don't want that for her.

SIMONE. Nobody wants that for her. That's why everybody's talking about it.

ARMAND. I know. I'm only warning her.

AGATHE. You're warning a lot of people today.

ARMAND. It's my job.

AGATHE. Yes. The soup's your job too. It's getting cold.

(Armand goes out. Agathe stays a moment, looking at the empty jars.)

AGATHE. You've no blue left, Simone? For the washing?

SIMONE. Not since February.

AGATHE. Pity. There are some things that only come out with blue.

(She makes to leave. Lucie stops her.)

LUCIE. Madame Delorme. The key to the cupboard at the town hall, does your husband have it?

AGATHE. My husband has never had a key in his life. He loses them. I'm the one with all the keys.

LUCIE. So you could...

AGATHE. I could do a great many things. I've been at the town hall every day for twenty years. Enjoy your soup, ladies.

(She goes out. The bell.)

SCENE 3

(A pause. Simone puts away Armand's coupons. Lucie takes the biscuit out of her pocket and bangs it on the counter. The bell: Louise comes in, followed by Augustine.)

AUGUSTINE. She's got something to say. I found her outside the town hall, reading the poster. She'd been reading it for a quarter of an hour. It's ten lines long.

LOUISE. I wasn't reading it. I was looking at it.

LUCIE. At what?

LOUISE. "Paul Mercier, farmer." Farmer. Paul hasn't farmed so much as a beetroot since June '40. The farm, I'm the one who farms it. The seventeen acres, the two cows we've got left, the horse we hid in the Bouchards' barn. On the poster, he's the farmer. Me, I'm nothing. I'm not on the poster, I don't even have a trade.

AUGUSTINE. Say the rest.

LOUISE. Let me say the rest. I thought to myself: if Paul came home tomorrow and read that, he'd laugh. He'd say: farmer, me? That's Louise. He would say that. That's how he is. So I thought...

(She stops.)

LUCIE. You're standing?

LOUISE. I've got nothing to lose. If I'm not elected, I go back to my cows, they don't read the results.

AUGUSTINE. She's standing.

LOUISE. But I'm not making a list against Paul. I'm not making speeches. I'm not marching up to the church with a flag.

LUCIE. We haven't got a flag.

LOUISE. Good.

LUCIE. Then we need a list. Louise. Augustine.

AUGUSTINE. Since you insist.

LUCIE. Nobody insisted.

AUGUSTINE. I'm getting in first.

LUCIE. And Maman.

(A pause. Simone wipes the counter, which is already clean.)

SIMONE. No.

LUCIE. Maman.

SIMONE. I can't, Lucie.

LUCIE. This morning you said you hadn't said no.

SIMONE. Well, now I'm saying no. There, that's clear. You like things clear.

LUCIE. What did he say to you?

SIMONE. Who?

LUCIE. The mayor. How long had he been here when I came in?

SIMONE. He came to buy pasta.

LUCIE. It took him half an hour to buy pasta?

SIMONE. It's bad pasta. You have to choose carefully.

LOUISE. Leave your mother alone, Lucie.

LUCIE. No, I won't leave her alone. Papa's on the mayor's list, Papa's in Germany, and Maman's scared. Is that it?

SIMONE. I have a shop, Lucie. I have a shop and a daughter who thinks life is made of principles. Life is made of ration coupons, and the coupons go through the town hall. I won't be on your list. I'd sell you paper, if I had any. I haven't.

LOUISE. Simone, I'm not asking you for anything. But tomorrow night, when they count, I'd like you to be in the room. Not on the list. In the room. So that Marcel knows, when he comes home, that his wife was watching.

SIMONE. I'll shut the shop.

(A pause.)

AUGUSTINE. That makes two. Is two a list?

LUCIE. Two is a start.

SCENE 4

(The bell, violently. Claude bursts in at a run, out of breath, a blue form in hand.)

CLAUDE. Louise. I've just come from the farm. Nobody there. Victor said you were here.

(Claude holds out the form. Nobody moves. Simone puts down her cloth.)

LOUISE. What is it?

CLAUDE. A telegram.

LOUISE. I can see it's a telegram.

CLAUDE. It came in at ten past twelve. I took it off the wire myself. I read it over three times. Take it, Louise.

LOUISE. You read it.

CLAUDE. I'm not allowed. It's yours.

LOUISE. Claude. You've read it three times.

(A pause. Claude unfolds the telegram.)

CLAUDE. "Freed fourteenth April. Repatriation centre. Good health. Home within eight days. Kiss Victor. Paul."

(Louise doesn't move. Then she sits down on the empty flour sack by the counter.)

LOUISE. Good health.

CLAUDE. That's what it says.

LOUISE. He paid for two words to say good health. Paul never pays for one word too many.

AUGUSTINE. So it's true.

(Louise laughs, then hides her face in her apron. Augustine puts a hand on her shoulder.)

SIMONE. Is there nothing else, Claude?

CLAUDE. Nothing else, Simone. Nothing for Marcel. Not yet.

SIMONE. Not yet.

CLAUDE. The trains are coming in. There are some every day.

SIMONE. You say that to everybody.

CLAUDE. I say it to everybody because it's true for everybody.

(A pause. Claude closes the satchel.)

CLAUDE. For five years, I've climbed the hills of this village with telegrams. In the farmyards, the dogs would bark, and then the women would come out, and they'd see me with the blue paper, and they knew. They knew before I opened my mouth. There was one, at the Bouchards', who shut the door. She didn't want me to give it to her. I waited outside for an hour. This one, I ran with. All the way from the office. I've never run with a telegram before.

LOUISE. Thank you, Claude.

CLAUDE. Don't thank me. I'm the Post Office.

(Lucie, who hasn't said a word, comes closer.)

LUCIE. It's wonderful, Louise.

LOUISE. Yes.

LUCIE. He'll be here for the second round, if there is one.

(A pause. Louise stands, unties her apron and folds it.)

LOUISE. Lucie. I'm not standing.

LUCIE. What?

LOUISE. I'm not standing. He's coming home in eight days. He'll get off the bus in front of the church, and the first thing he'll see is his wife on a list against his? The whole village will tell him I didn't wait for him. No.

LUCIE. You've waited for him for five years!

LOUISE. Exactly. I can wait eight more days.

AUGUSTINE. It isn't eight days, Louise. It's six years. It's the next elections.

LOUISE. Then it'll be in six years.

LUCIE. You said earlier he'd laugh. Farmer, me? That's Louise. You said it.

LOUISE. I don't know what he'd say. I don't know any more. It's been five years. Maybe he's changed. Victor has changed. He washes four times a day and he counts the people in the kitchen, at night.

(She goes towards the door.)

LOUISE. I'm going to do his room. It needs airing. I need to kill a hen. I need to find some real coffee, Simone, have you got any?

SIMONE. I've been keeping a packet. I'll give it to you.

LOUISE. I'll pay you for it.

SIMONE. You won't pay me a thing.

(Louise goes out. The bell. Silence.)

LUCIE. There. It's over.

AUGUSTINE. Nothing's over. There's still one candidate.

LUCIE. Who?

AUGUSTINE. I'll let you guess. She's sixty-five.

CLAUDE. Seventy-one.

AUGUSTINE. You, go and deliver your post.

ACT THREE : THE NIGHT

SCENE 1

(The town hall, the same evening. A desk, a locked cupboard, registers. Agathe sits at the desk, pen in hand. Armand paces up and down, hands behind his back.)

ARMAND. "Monsieur le Préfet." No. "Monsieur le Préfet, I have the honour to inform you."

AGATHE. Got it.

ARMAND. "... that tomorrow's elections in Bellegrange will be conducted in calm and dignity."

AGATHE. In calm.

ARMAND. And dignity.

AGATHE. Are you sure about the dignity?

ARMAND. Why?

AGATHE. Lucie Garnier walked past the town hall three times this afternoon. The third time, she spat on the steps.

ARMAND. She spat?

AGATHE. She pretended to. But with great conviction.

ARMAND. Put "in calm". We'll see about the dignity.

(Agathe writes. Armand stops in front of the cupboard and touches the lock.)

ARMAND. The reams are still in there?

AGATHE. Under lock and key.

ARMAND. And the key?

AGATHE. In its place.

ARMAND. Meaning?

AGATHE. In the place where you never look for it.

(Armand smiles and resumes his pacing.)

ARMAND. "A rival list may be put forward." No. Don't put that.

AGATHE. I hadn't.

ARMAND. Do you think they'll do it?

AGATHE. I think they've no paper.

ARMAND. That's not what I asked.

(A pause. Agathe puts down her pen.)

AGATHE. What are you afraid of, Armand? Not Louise. Louise wouldn't hurt a fly, except the hens.

ARMAND. I'm sixty-seven. If I lose tomorrow, what am I? The old man who was mayor during the war. The one who shook the German commandant's hand on the church steps. I shook it, Agathe. To keep the village's horses. They'll say it all the same. They'll say: he shook the hand, and then the women threw him out.

AGATHE. Nobody's saying that.

ARMAND. Not yet. I want to hand over the keys when Paul and Marcel are home. Not have them snatched from me the day before.

AGATHE. You don't have the keys.

ARMAND. It's a manner of speaking.

AGATHE. No. It's a manner of writing.

(A pause. He looks at her.)

ARMAND. Louise would make a good councillor, you know. I mean it. In six years.

AGATHE. And me?

ARMAND. You?

AGATHE. If it were me, on their list.

(Armand laughs softly. He comes behind her and puts his hands on her shoulders.)

ARMAND. You don't need to be on the council. You're in all my papers.

AGATHE. Yes. Under your name.

(He kisses her on the forehead. He looks at the clock.)

ARMAND. Nine o'clock. I'm going up. Are you coming?

AGATHE. I'm going round to my sister's. I promised her.

ARMAND. Give her my love.

AGATHE. I certainly will.

(Armand goes out. Agathe rereads the letter and folds it. Then she takes a key out of her bodice, opens the cupboard and takes out a ream of white paper.)

SCENE 2

(The Merciers' farm kitchen, that evening. A long table, an oil lamp, an inkwell. Through the window, the light from the barn. Augustine sits at the end of the table, a sheet of paper in front of her. Lucie is sharpening a pencil with a knife.)

LUCIE. Did she say yes to the table?

AUGUSTINE. She said: take the table, take the ink, take whatever you like, I'm plucking a hen. That means yes.

LUCIE. That means she's washing her hands of it.

AUGUSTINE. Her hands are full of feathers. She'll wash them afterwards.

(Augustine stands, picks up the sheet and holds herself very straight.)

AUGUSTINE. Listen.

LUCIE. What?

AUGUSTINE. My election address. A candidate has to say something.

LUCIE. We haven't got time for speeches, we've got three hundred ballots to write.

AUGUSTINE. We'll write better after a speech. Listen. "Women voters, men voters of Bellegrange."

LUCIE. That's good.

AUGUSTINE. I put the women first. The men have had a hundred years at the front, they can go to the back for one Sunday.

LUCIE. Go on.

AUGUSTINE. "My name is Augustine Roux. You all know me. I have washed your sheets, your shirts, your nappies, and your shrouds as well. I know who wets the bed in this village, and at what age he stopped. I will never tell. That is my first promise."

LUCIE. That's a threat.

AUGUSTINE. It's a promise. Depends who's listening. "My second promise: a roof over the wash-house. For fifty years, we've done the washing in the rain, and for fifty years the council has voted a roof for the church. The church is very well roofed. The good Lord doesn't get wet. We do."

LUCIE. Now that's good.

AUGUSTINE. "My third promise: respect for the register of births. I propose that the town hall stop posting up the dates of birth of its female citizens. A woman's age is something you say, not something you post up."

LUCIE. Augustine...

AUGUSTINE. I've put it at the end, it's not the most important. "I am not a learned woman. I have never been on the council. But I have sixty-five years of common sense."

LUCIE. Seventy-one.

AUGUSTINE. I have six years of common sense I keep to myself.

(A knock. Claude comes in, satchel in hand.)

CLAUDE. Evening. I shut the office at seven. You can see the light from the road, up here.

LUCIE. Good. We're not hiding anything any more.

CLAUDE. I haven't seen anything. I'm just passing.

AUGUSTINE. Passing, with your satchel?

(Claude puts the satchel on the table, opens it and takes out a bundle of forms.)

CLAUDE. Telegram forms. Two hundred. The backs are blank.

LUCIE. Claude!

CLAUDE. They're counted. I'll pay them back out of my own pocket. It's not a gift, it's a loan to the Post Office from the Post Office.

AUGUSTINE. I thought you were neutral.

CLAUDE. I am. I lend paper to everybody. If the mayor wanted some, I'd lend him some too.

AUGUSTINE. He's got printed ones.

CLAUDE. That's not my fault.

(Lucie takes a form, turns it over and starts writing. Claude looks over Lucie's shoulder. A pause.)

CLAUDE. Ah.

LUCIE. What do you mean, ah?

CLAUDE. The ballot has to be white. No distinguishing marks. If you hold it up to the lamp...

(Lucie holds the form up to the lamp.)

LUCIE. You can see the printing through from the other side. "Postal Administration."

CLAUDE. That's a distinguishing mark. The ballot's spoilt.

AUGUSTINE. You couldn't have thought of that before you climbed the hill?

CLAUDE. I thought of it climbing the hill. But I already had the satchel.

LUCIE. So we've got nothing. We've got a table, a lamp, ink, a candidate, and not one sheet of paper.

AUGUSTINE. We've got a candidate, at least. That's the main thing.

LUCIE. A list of one, on no paper.

(Augustine folds her election address and tucks it into her bodice.)

AUGUSTINE. I'll keep it. For next time.

LUCIE. We'll have to go and get Maman. She's got wrapping paper.

AUGUSTINE. Brown paper? To vote on?

LUCIE. It's better than nothing.

CLAUDE. It's spoilt too. It has to be white.

LUCIE. Then I'm going anyway. If she won't come for the paper, she'll come for the handwriting. She has the best handwriting in the district. Come on, Augustine.

AUGUSTINE. Why me?

LUCIE. Because if I ask, she'll say no. If a candidate asks, she won't dare.

(Augustine stands and straightens her hat. They go out. Claude stays a moment, then puts the forms back in the satchel, one by one, counting them. At the last one, Claude stops, looks at it, and slips it into a pocket.)

SCENE 3

(Louise comes in by the back door, a plucked hen in her hand, feathers on her apron. She sees Claude.)

LOUISE. They've gone?

CLAUDE. To fetch Simone. And paper. There isn't any paper.

LOUISE. Good.

CLAUDE. You don't mean that.

LOUISE. I mean what I like, in my own kitchen.

CLAUDE. True. Goodnight, Louise. About Paul, it warms my heart. I wanted to say so.

LOUISE. I know, Claude.

(Claude goes out. Louise puts the hen on the empty table. She sits down. Victor comes in, a lantern in his hand.)

VICTOR. The cows are in. The black one's still limping.

LOUISE. I'll look at her tomorrow.

VICTOR. Tomorrow's Sunday.

LOUISE. The cows don't know it's Sunday.

(He puts down the lantern. He looks at the hen.)

VICTOR. Is that for Paul?

LOUISE. She'll keep a week somewhere cool. There isn't another hen that lays less.

VICTOR. He'll be pleased. He used to talk about chicken in the pot. In the camp, they all talked about cooking. In the evening, in the hut, one of them would tell a recipe, and the others listened. A recipe could last an hour. They put everything in. They even put in things that had never been in it.

LOUISE. Did he talk about me?

VICTOR. He read your letters.

LOUISE. To you?

VICTOR. To everybody. To the whole hut. Forty men. He read them out loud, on Sundays, except for certain bits. He skipped certain bits.

LOUISE. Which bits?

VICTOR. I don't know, he skipped them.

(A pause. Louise looks at her hands.)

LOUISE. There was nothing interesting in my letters. The cows, the milk round, the price of hay.

VICTOR. The Austrian corporal and the horses. Old Pichon's threshing. The day they came to requisition the mare, when you told the lieutenant she had glanders and he backed away all the way to the gate. They cried laughing, Louise. There was a schoolteacher from Lille who asked for the next instalment every week.

LOUISE. I didn't know.

VICTOR. They'd given you a name, in the hut.

LOUISE. What name?

VICTOR. Madam Mayor.

(Louise laughs, then stops.)

LOUISE. They were making fun.

VICTOR. They were holding on.

(A pause. Louise gets up, goes to the window and looks at the barn.)

LOUISE. Do you want to know the worst of it, Victor?

VICTOR. If you want to say.

LOUISE. The worst of it is that I liked it. Not the war. Not the nights. Not the letters that didn't come, or watching for the post from the window. But the mornings, at five o'clock, when I went out into the yard, and I knew what there was to do, and I was the one who decided. The hay's on Tuesday. The black one, we keep. The horse, we hide at the Bouchards'. Nobody to say to me: wait, we'll see. Five years with nobody saying to me: we'll see. And now he's coming home, and I'm happy, I swear to you I'm happy, and there's a little voice asking: and in the mornings, at five o'clock, who's going to decide? I'm ashamed of that voice.

VICTOR. You mustn't be.

LOUISE. That's what you say.

VICTOR. In the camp, we all had a little voice like that. Mine asked if I really wanted to come home. If it wasn't simpler over there, with soup at fixed times and nobody to explain things to.

LOUISE. And?

VICTOR. And I came home. So did the voice. There are three of us living together now.

(A pause. Victor sits down at the table. Louise comes back and sits facing him.)

VICTOR. In the camp, we had a vote.

LOUISE. A vote?

VICTOR. For the man of confidence. The one who talks to the Germans on everyone's behalf, who gets the Red Cross parcels, who shares them out. We

voted on cigarette papers. Paul stood.

LOUISE. Paul? He never talks.

VICTOR. He talked, over there. There was a sergeant from Nevers up against him, who wanted the job. We counted the papers on a blanket. Paul won by one vote.

LOUISE. By one vote.

VICTOR. That evening, he said to me: you know who voted for me, the vote that made the difference? Me. I put myself down. He said: if I don't vote for me, I don't see why anyone else should.

(A long pause. Louise touches the hen.)

LOUISE. And you, who did you vote for?

VICTOR. The sergeant.

LOUISE. Victor!

VICTOR. He had tobacco. But Paul won anyway. Thanks to himself.

(Louise laughs. Victor smiles.)

LOUISE. I can't stand against him, Victor.

VICTOR. Then don't stand against him. Put him on your list.

LOUISE. On my list?

VICTOR. Put all five. Paul, Marcel, the others. The prisoners don't belong to Armand. They don't belong to anybody. Put everybody on. Copy out his poster.

LOUISE. And change just one name.

VICTOR. Which one?

LOUISE. His.

VICTOR. The mayor's.

VICTOR. That way, nobody can say you're against the prisoners, or against Bastien, who's been shoeing horses for nothing for five years. You're not against anybody. You're against one name. Just one. And he's had twenty years to get ready for it.

LOUISE. And you? You wanted to be crossed out.

VICTOR. If you cross me out, people will say it's because of the gossip. I'm staying. I don't want to preside over anything, I never want to vote on a blanket again, but I'm staying. I'll sleep through the meetings.

(A pause.)

VICTOR. And there's something else. From tonight, I'm sleeping at Augustine's.

LOUISE. At Augustine's?

VICTOR. She's had an empty room since 1916. I asked her earlier. She said: at last a man under my roof, people will talk, and about time too.

LOUISE. You don't have to.

VICTOR. I do. For Paul. For you. So that tomorrow, when they watch you go into the polling booth, the only thing they think about is the booth.

(He gets up and takes his lantern.)

LOUISE. Victor.

VICTOR. Yes.

LOUISE. Will you still count the people at night, at Augustine's?

VICTOR. There'll only be her. It won't take long.

(He goes out. Louise is alone. She takes the telegram out of her pocket, rereads it, turns it over. She dips the pen in the inkwell and writes on the back, slowly. She looks at what she has written, then puts the inkwell in the middle of the table.)

SCENE 4

(A pause. The door. Augustine comes in, followed by Lucie, then by Simone, who is holding a wooden pen box against her chest.)

AUGUSTINE. She came.

SIMONE. I came to write. I'm not on the list. I hold the pen, that's different.

LUCIE. That's very different. A pen doesn't vote.

SIMONE. You, be quiet.

(They see Louise, standing, the inkwell in the middle of the table.)

AUGUSTINE. Have you finished your hen?

LOUISE. I've finished my hen.

AUGUSTINE. And?

LOUISE. And I'm standing.

(A silence. Lucie lets out a cry and claps her hand over her mouth.)

SIMONE. And Paul?

LOUISE. Paul's on the list. On ours. Everybody's on ours: we copy out the mayor's poster, line for line, and we change just one name. His. I'm not taking Paul's place. I'm taking Armand's.

SIMONE. And Marcel?

LOUISE. Marcel too. Your husband will be on both lists, Simone. He can't lose.

(Simone puts down her pen box. She sits.)

SIMONE. He's never been on two lists. He'll be unbearable.

AUGUSTINE. And me?

LOUISE. There's only one name to change, Augustine. If we change two, it's not the mayor's list with a woman on it any more. It's the women's list against the mayor.

AUGUSTINE. If we changed two, I'd be the second.

LOUISE. You'd be the second.

AUGUSTINE. Second. That's the one who stands in for the first when she's got the flu.

LOUISE. I never get the flu.

(Augustine takes the election address out of her bodice, looks at it, and puts it back.)

AUGUSTINE. Then I'll be nobody's second. Keep your name on its own, it'll show up better. My election address can wait till 1951. I'll be younger.

LUCIE. We've got a candidate, ten names, a table, a pen, and no paper.

(A knock. They all freeze. The door opens: Agathe, a parcel wrapped in brown paper under her arm.)

AGATHE. Good evening. I'm not disturbing you?

LOUISE. Madame Delorme.

AGATHE. Armand's asleep. He's been asleep by nine since the Liberation. During the Occupation, he didn't sleep at all. He's catching up.

(She puts the parcel on the table and undoes the string. A ream of white paper.)

LUCIE. Is that...

AGATHE. A ream from the prefecture. Five hundred sheets. The other one stays at the town hall, for the blank ballots.

SIMONE. Does he know you're here?

AGATHE. He knows I've gone out. He thinks I'm at my sister's. My sister died in '38, but he doesn't notice that sort of thing.

AUGUSTINE. Why are you doing this?

AGATHE. Because it's the commune's paper. And in an election, you need paper for two lists. Otherwise it isn't an election, it's a christening.

LOUISE. He'll be furious.

AGATHE. Armand is never furious. He's disappointed. It lasts much longer.

(She sits at the end of the table and takes off her gloves.)

LUCIE. Are you going to write with us?

AGATHE. No.

LUCIE. We'll never finish with four of us.

AGATHE. I can't write, Lucie. My handwriting, the whole village knows it. The town hall's posters, the certificates, the birth and death registers, the ration cards, the letters to the prefect, the replies to the Germans. For twenty years. Armand signs. He has a very handsome signature. It's the only thing he writes. And when he's asleep, I do that too.

(A pause.)

SIMONE. Was it you who wrote my books? In '42, when he took them away to be checked?

AGATHE. I copied them out. Yours had sugar stains.

(Simone lowers her eyes. Augustine sniggers.)

AUGUSTINE. So you're the mayor.

AGATHE. No. The mayor is the one who signs. I'm the handwriting.

AUGUSTINE. And the poster with the women's ages, was that you too?

AGATHE. The register of births is me.

AUGUSTINE. I'll never forgive you.

AGATHE. I'm sixty-eight, Augustine. It's written right next to yours. We're even.

(Lucie hands out the sheets. Simone opens her pen box and gets the nibs ready. Louise dips her pen.)

LUCIE. The mayor's poster, in order, except the first line. Louise Mercier. Fernand Bastien. Émile Bouchard. Joseph Pichon. The five prisoners. Victor Mercier. Ten names. On every sheet.

SIMONE. Ten names, three hundred sheets. Three thousand names.

AUGUSTINE. With four of us, that's five hundred each.

LUCIE. Seven hundred and fifty.

AUGUSTINE. I don't count past five hundred, it tires me out.

(They write. The scratching of the nibs. Agathe watches them, hands folded.)

SIMONE. Augustine, you've written your own name.

AUGUSTINE. Where?

SIMONE. At the bottom. After Victor. With two Rs in Roux.

AUGUSTINE. It's my hand. It's used to it.

SIMONE. There are ten seats. The eleventh name doesn't count.

AUGUSTINE. It's always the same ones who don't count.

AGATHE. And two Rs is a spelling mistake.

AUGUSTINE. Two Rs is so people notice me.

(Augustine does her sheet again. A pause. The nibs.)

LOUISE. It's strange.

LUCIE. What is?

LOUISE. Writing your own name. I've written it thirty times. By the thirtieth, you don't know if it's a name any more. It's just a word. Louise. It doesn't mean anything any more.

AGATHE. That's why Armand only signs once per page.

(A pause. The nibs. Lucie yawns, lays her head on her arms and keeps writing with one hand.)

SIMONE. Lucie, you're asleep.

LUCIE. I'm writing.

SIMONE. You're writing in your sleep. Your Garnier ends in a snore.

(Lucie falls asleep for good. Simone takes the pen from her, covers her with her shawl, and picks up the sheet where she left off.)

AGATHE. I'll go home. He wakes up at four to check I'm there.

LOUISE. Madame Delorme. Thank you.

AGATHE. Don't thank me. Tomorrow, I'm voting for my husband.

(She puts her gloves back on and goes out. The nibs. The lamp burns low. Louise writes her name, stops, looks at it, and goes on.)

ACT FOUR : THE SCHOOLROOM

SCENE 1

(Sunday 29 April, five to eight. The schoolroom. The desks pushed against the walls, a table in the middle with a wooden ballot box fastened by two padlocks. In one corner, a curtain hung on a rail: the polling booth. Armand, in his Sunday suit, sets out the printed ballots on the table. Agathe is sorting envelopes. Claude waits, voting card in hand.)

ARMAND. Two padlocks. One key for me, one key for the first assessor. Agathe, the envelopes?

AGATHE. Three hundred and twelve. One per registered voter. Counted twice.

ARMAND. Claude, will you vote first?

CLAUDE. The telegraph opens at nine, even on Sundays. I'll vote and go straight down.

ARMAND. We need to set up the polling station first. I preside. The assessors are the two oldest and the two youngest of the voters present. We have to wait until somebody turns up.

(The door opens. Augustine comes in, in black, a hat with a veil, a basket on her arm. She puts the basket on the table: handwritten ballots, in stacks.)

AUGUSTINE. Good morning, Monsieur le Maire. I'm making a deposit.

ARMAND. A deposit of what?

AUGUSTINE. Our ballots. Next to yours. That's the rule, Claude said so, the circular said so. Everybody brings their own.

(Armand picks up a ballot, looks at it, turns it towards the window.)

ARMAND. That's the prefecture's paper.

AUGUSTINE. It's white paper.

ARMAND. It's the prefecture's paper. I know the grain. It was under lock and key.

(He turns to Agathe. She goes on counting the envelopes.)

AGATHE. Three hundred and ten, three hundred and eleven, three hundred and twelve.

ARMAND. Agathe.

AGATHE. It was under lock and key. I have the key. I've had all the keys, Armand, for twenty years. You gave them to me the day you lost the one to the church.

ARMAND. You might have told me.

AGATHE. You'd have said no.

ARMAND. Yes.

AGATHE. You see. It saved us time.

(A pause. Armand puts the ballot down next to his own and lines up the two stacks.)

ARMAND. Very well. Two lists. It's an election.

AGATHE. That's what I said last night.

ARMAND. Last night, you were at your sister's.

AGATHE. My sister sends her regards.

(Armand looks at the clock.)

ARMAND. Eight o'clock. Voters present: Agathe, Claude, Madame Roux, and myself. I preside. For youth, we have Claude. The two eldest, Agathe and Madame Roux. The key goes to the eldest: Agathe, sixty-eight. Agathe, you hold the second key.

AUGUSTINE. No.

ARMAND. No?

AUGUSTINE. The second key is there to keep an eye on the first. I'm not letting the mayor's wife keep an eye on the mayor. It's like letting the fox count the hens.

AGATHE. Thank you, Augustine.

AUGUSTINE. It's nothing against you. It's against foxes.

ARMAND. The law says the eldest. You admit to sixty-five, Augustine. I wouldn't presume to count any more than that.

AUGUSTINE. I'm seventy-one.

(A pause.)

ARMAND. I beg your pardon?

AUGUSTINE. Seventy-one. I'm the eldest. I'm older than you, Armand, by four years. I carried you on my back when you were three, at the Midsummer fair, because you were crying. I am the old age of this polling station. I sit at the table and I hold the second key.

CLAUDE. It's the date in the register. I did say.

AUGUSTINE. You, you're the youth of this polling station. Be quiet and sit down.

(Armand holds out the second key to Augustine. She takes it and clenches it in her fist.)

ARMAND. And I suppose that's not to leave this room.

AUGUSTINE. It's posted up on the wall of the town hall, Armand. It can leave.

(They take their places. Armand opens the two padlocks with Augustine, shows that the box is empty, and closes it again.)

ARMAND. The ballot box is empty. The poll is open.

SCENE 2

(Eleven o'clock. The sun has come into the classroom. Armand, Augustine, Agathe and Claude sit behind the table. An invisible queue moves forward. Lucie leans against the doorframe, outside, looking in.)

CLAUDE. The telegraph's shut. For the first time since '39, on a Sunday, it's shut.

ARMAND. If somebody dies, it'll wait till Monday.

CLAUDE. Nobody dies by telegram any more. Now they come home.

AUGUSTINE. A hundred and twelve voters. Sixty-one of them women. I'm counting them separately.

ARMAND. There's no column for that in the register.

AUGUSTINE. There's a column for it in my head.

(Victor comes in, in a clean jacket. He shows his card. Agathe checks it.)

AGATHE. Victor Mercier.

VICTOR. Present.

(He takes a printed ballot, a handwritten ballot, an envelope. He goes into the booth. The curtain. He comes out again almost at once and puts the envelope in the box.)

ARMAND. Has voted.

VICTOR. It's quicker than at the camp. There's no sentry.

ARMAND. That was quick, Victor.

VICTOR. I crossed out one name. It doesn't take long, a name.

ARMAND. Which one?

VICTOR. The secret ballot, Monsieur le Maire. You wrote it on the poster yourself.

AGATHE. I wrote it.

(Victor nods to them and goes out. He passes Lucie.)

VICTOR. Aren't you coming in?

LUCIE. I'm not allowed in the booth. I'm allowed to look at the door.

VICTOR. In a month, you'll be allowed.

LUCIE. In a month, there'll be nothing left to vote for. They'll have voted for everything without me.

VICTOR. There'll always be something to vote for. It's like the washing.

(He goes. Simone comes in, her shopping bag on her arm. She shows her card, looks at Armand, and, right under his eyes, takes one printed ballot from his list, just one.)

SIMONE. Good morning, Monsieur le Maire.

ARMAND. Armand.

SIMONE. Good morning, Armand.

(She goes into the booth. A pause. We hear her rummaging in the bag. She comes out and puts the envelope in the box.)

ARMAND. Has voted.

SIMONE. I'm going back to the shop. It's closed, but there are coupons to cut.

(She goes out without looking at Lucie. Lucie watches her go. A pause. Louise appears at the door, in her Sunday dress, wearing a hat nobody has ever seen on her. She stops on the threshold, next to Lucie.)

LUCIE. You've got a hat on.

LOUISE. It was my mother's. For her wedding.

LUCIE. Are you going in?

LOUISE. The Bouchards are in the yard. And the baker's wife. And the priest, who doesn't vote, but who watches.

LUCIE. What difference does that make?

LOUISE. They'll watch me go behind the curtain, and they'll count. How long I take. If I take a long time, it means I'm hesitating. If I'm quick, it means I'd made up my mind. Either way, they'll know.

LUCIE. They won't know a thing. That's what the curtain's for.

LOUISE. You've never lived in a village, Lucie. You were only born in one.

LUCIE. Are you going in?

LOUISE. I'm going in.

(She doesn't go in.)

LUCIE. Louise.

LOUISE. I'm going in.

(She goes in. She shows her card. Agathe checks it and says nothing. Louise takes a printed ballot, a handwritten ballot, an envelope. She looks at the booth.)

AUGUSTINE. It doesn't bite, it's a curtain.

LOUISE. I know.

(She goes into the booth. The curtain closes. A pause. A long pause. Armand looks at the clock. Augustine looks at the curtain.)

CLAUDE. There are people waiting out in the yard.

ARMAND. They'll wait.

(Another pause. We can see Louise's feet under the curtain, not moving.)

AUGUSTINE. You know how to write your name, Louise, you wrote it three hundred times last night.

ARMAND. Madame Roux. No talking to the polling booth.

AUGUSTINE. I'm not talking to the polling booth. I'm talking to the curtain.

(The curtain opens. Louise comes out, envelope in hand. She puts it in the box.)

ARMAND. Has voted.

(Louise stays standing in front of the table. Armand looks at her.)

ARMAND. Paul is on my list, Louise.

LOUISE. He's on mine too. Everybody's on mine, except you.

ARMAND. I saw. It's well done. You're not against anybody. Only against me.

LOUISE. I'm not against you. I'm beside you.

ARMAND. In the same spot, then. There's only one chair.

LOUISE. You went to see Simone yesterday.

ARMAND. I bought some pasta.

LOUISE. You talked to her about the sugar. You talked to Lucie about Victor, knowing she'd repeat it to me. And to me, on Tuesday, you talked about Paul, for the poster. You never threaten anybody, Monsieur le Maire. You warn. You've warned the whole village, one person at a time.

ARMAND. I held this village together for five years by warning people. That's how you avoid the worst.

LOUISE. I held it together too. The seven farms up the hill, the milk round, the threshing. I didn't warn anybody. I did things.

ARMAND. I know what you did. Nobody knows it better than I do. That's why I wanted you to wait. So that Paul would see you doing it, and it wouldn't frighten him.

LOUISE. You think I'm going to frighten him?

ARMAND. I think everything that moved while he was away is going to frighten him. The farm, his brother, his wife. I wanted to leave him one thing that hadn't moved. The council. Me.

LOUISE. And what's left for me?

(A pause. Armand doesn't answer.)

ARMAND. You took your time, behind the curtain.

LOUISE. The secret ballot, Monsieur le Maire. It's written on your poster.

AGATHE. On my poster.

(Louise goes out. Augustine leans towards Agathe.)

AUGUSTINE. Did you see her face?

AGATHE. She has the face of somebody coming out of a polling booth.

AUGUSTINE. She has the face of somebody who's done something crooked.

SCENE 3

(Six in the evening. The light has turned. The table is covered in opened

envelopes. Claude unfolds the ballots and reads them out; Augustine and Agathe tick them off on two tally sheets. Armand keeps watch. In the room, standing against the desks: Louise, Simone, Lucie, Victor.)

CLAUDE. Delorme list, untouched.

AUGUSTINE. Delorme, untouched.

CLAUDE. Mercier list, untouched.

AGATHE. Mercier, untouched.

CLAUDE. Delorme list. Pichon crossed out.

AUGUSTINE. A lot of people are crossing out Pichon.

ARMAND. It's the mare. They never forgave him.

CLAUDE. Delorme list. Pichon crossed out. Added by hand: "Louise Mercier".

AUGUSTINE. That one wants the mayor and Louise.

ARMAND. That's allowed. There are ten seats.

AGATHE. That's the second one like that.

(Claude unfolds the next ballot and stops.)

CLAUDE. Mercier list. Everything crossed out. And at the bottom, by hand, a single name: "Augustine Roux".

(A pause. Everyone looks at Augustine.)

AUGUSTINE. Well, what? There's a woman voter with taste.

LUCIE. It's you.

AUGUSTINE. The ballot is secret.

LUCIE. It's written with two Rs in Roux.

AUGUSTINE. There are people in this village with too many Rs, that proves nothing.

CLAUDE. Augustine Roux: one vote.

AUGUSTINE. One vote. You always start with one.

(Claude unfolds the next ballot, holds it up to the lamp, and puts it down.)

CLAUDE. A telegram form. You can read "Postal Administration" against the

light. Distinguishing mark. Spoilt.

AUGUSTINE. Who votes on a telegram?

(A silence.)

CLAUDE. I do.

LUCIE. You knew it would be spoilt!

CLAUDE. That's why. A vote for somebody is a vote against somebody else. The Post Office votes against nobody.

AUGUSTINE. You shut the telegraph to spoil your vote?

CLAUDE. I wanted to put an envelope in the box. What's inside it is the Post Office's business.

ARMAND. Spoilt. Next.

(Claude opens the next envelope. A small square of paper falls out. Claude picks it up.)

CLAUDE. There's a bread coupon in the envelope. With the ballot.

ARMAND. A coupon?

CLAUDE. A bread coupon, April. Category A. An object in the envelope is a distinguishing mark. The ballot ought to be spoilt.

(A silence. Simone doesn't move. Armand takes the coupon and looks at it for a long time.)

ARMAND. It isn't a mark. It's a bread coupon. Everybody in this country has bread coupons in their pockets. It fell in. The ballot is valid.

CLAUDE. Monsieur le Maire...

ARMAND. The presiding officer decides. Read it.

CLAUDE. Mercier list, untouched.

(A pause. Armand lays the coupon on the table, perfectly flat.)

SIMONE. It's mine.

LUCIE. Maman.

SIMONE. I put them everywhere. In my bag, in my pockets, in my books. I rummaged for the right paper and two things came out. I took his ballot

right under his eyes, and I put in the other one.

ARMAND. I know, Simone. I saw you take mine this morning, just the one, under my nose. People who vote for me don't need me to watch them do it.

SIMONE. You knew, and you kept it valid.

ARMAND. You can take your coupon back. That's valid too.

(Simone steps forward and takes back the coupon. Lucie takes her hand.)

LUCIE. You were scared, and you did it anyway. Me, I'm never scared of anything. It doesn't count the same.

SIMONE. It will in a month. You'll see, your hand shakes.

(Claude unfolds the next ballot, looks at it, hesitates.)

CLAUDE. Mercier list. "Louise Mercier" crossed out. And at the bottom, by hand: "Augustine Roux".

(Augustine raises her head. She looks at Louise. Louise looks at her shoes.)

AUGUSTINE. Two votes.

LUCIE. You again?

AUGUSTINE. No. Not this time.

(A pause. Augustine ticks it off, without taking her eyes off Louise.)

AUGUSTINE. I've got a voter. A real one. Who isn't me.

LOUISE. It isn't me.

AUGUSTINE. I didn't ask.

(Claude unfolds the next one. Looks at it. Turns it towards the lamp.)

CLAUDE. Delorme list. "Armand Delorme" crossed out. Added by hand: "Louise Mercier".

VICTOR. One more.

CLAUDE. It's the handwriting.

ARMAND. What handwriting?

CLAUDE. The handwriting on the posters. The town hall's. On the voting cards.

SIMONE. The handwriting in my books.

(Everyone turns to Armand.)

VICTOR. You crossed yourself out, Monsieur le Maire?

(Armand doesn't answer. He takes the ballot out of Claude's hands. He looks at it. Then he looks at Agathe. Agathe puts down her pencil.)

AGATHE. No. It was me.

ARMAND. You told me you were voting for your husband.

AGATHE. I voted for your farrier, for your miller, for your Pichon, for your five prisoners, for Victor who doesn't want it. I voted for your whole list, Armand, except one name. The one I've been writing at the bottom of your letters for twenty years.

ARMAND. Why?

AGATHE. Because it's the first time anyone has asked my opinion with an envelope. The other times, you asked me at the dinner table, and then you did the opposite.

ARMAND. Not always.

AGATHE. Not always. The motion in 1925 was my idea.

(A pause. Armand puts the ballot down in front of Claude.)

ARMAND. Valid. Carry on.

(The light fades. Time passes. The piles dwindle. When the light returns, the lamp is lit. Claude puts down the last ballot. Augustine and Agathe add up. Armand stands, the tally sheets in his hand.)

ARMAND. Registered voters: three hundred and twelve. Votes cast: two hundred and eighty-one. Blank and spoilt: three. Valid votes: two hundred and seventy-eight. Absolute majority: one hundred and forty.

LUCIE. Read them out.

ARMAND. Paul Mercier: two hundred and seventy-seven. Elected.

(Louise closes her eyes.)

ARMAND. Marcel Garnier: two hundred and seventy-six. Elected.

SIMONE. He's got one less. He'll spend the rest of his life looking for it.

ARMAND. The three other prisoners: elected. Fernand Bastien, Émile Bouchard: elected. Joseph Pichon: one hundred and ninety-one. Elected.

AUGUSTINE. The mare has forgiven him.

ARMAND. Victor Mercier: two hundred and fifty-one. Elected.

VICTOR. No.

ARMAND. Yes.

VICTOR. I crossed my name out.

AUGUSTINE. And two hundred and fifty-one people left it in. You've been sleeping at my place since yesterday, it's done wonders for your reputation.

ARMAND. Armand Delorme: one hundred and thirty-nine.

(A pause.)

ARMAND. Louise Mercier: one hundred and thirty-nine.

(Total silence.)

ARMAND. Augustine Roux: two.

AUGUSTINE. Two.

ARMAND. Nine elected out of ten. Madame Mercier is one vote short. I am one vote short. The last seat will be decided in the second round, on Sunday the thirteenth of May, by simple majority. The man with the most votes is elected. Or the woman.

LUCIE. And if it's a tie again?

(Armand doesn't answer. Augustine puts down her pencil.)

AUGUSTINE. In a tie, the elder goes through. That's the law. I read it this morning, because of the key.

LUCIE. The elder is...

AUGUSTINE. Him. By twenty-eight years. The one time age is good for something, it has to be good for him.

(A pause.)

AUGUSTINE. Louise is one vote short. I know where it is.

AGATHE. And Armand is one vote short. I know where that one is too.

ARMAND. The poll is closed. Thank you, everyone. The session is over.

SCENE 4

(The room empties. Victor goes out with Simone and Lucie. Agathe pulls on her gloves and waits by the door. Claude puts away the empty envelopes, counts them, then goes out. Augustine stays seated, the key still in her fist. Louise hasn't moved. Armand gathers the unused ballots into a pile.)

ARMAND. There are a lot left over. Of yours.

LOUISE. We wrote too many. We were afraid of running short.

ARMAND. You'll keep them for the thirteenth.

LOUISE. Paul will be home by the thirteenth.

ARMAND. He'll vote.

LOUISE. He'll vote however he likes. So will I.

(Louise goes to the end of the table, where the town hall's ream still lies. She takes a white sheet, sits in Claude's place and picks up the pencil.)

ARMAND. In a tie, it's me, Louise.

LOUISE. I can count. I do the milk round for seven farms.

ARMAND. In 1925, it took me twenty minutes to leave my own name on the paper. I've never told anyone.

LOUISE. I'm against you, on the thirteenth.

ARMAND. You're against my name. It isn't the same. And besides, if I have to lose, I'd rather lose to someone who voted for herself. Otherwise you never know who you lost to.

(He puts his hat back on. Agathe, at the door, offers him her arm.)

AGATHE. Are you cross with me?

ARMAND. I'm disappointed.

AGATHE. That's going to take a while.

ARMAND. A fortnight. Until the thirteenth.

AGATHE. And after that?

ARMAND. After that, you'll tell me who to vote for.

(They go out arm in arm. A pause. Augustine gets up, comes over, and looks at the white sheet in front of Louise.)

AUGUSTINE. You crossed yourself out.

LOUISE. I gave you my vote.

AUGUSTINE. I didn't want it. Well, I did. But not that one. That one was yours.

LOUISE. I had the pencil, I saw my name at the top, and I heard the whole village behind the curtain. Who does she think she is. Who does she take herself for.

(A pause. Louise writes.)

LOUISE. For Louise Mercier.

AUGUSTINE. And underneath?

LOUISE. What do you mean, underneath?

AUGUSTINE. On the town hall's poster, under the name, they put the trade.

(Louise looks at the sheet. She writes again.)

LOUISE. Farmer.

(She puts down the pencil. Augustine opens her fist, looks at the key to the ballot box, and puts it in Louise's pocket. Blackout.)



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