

The Chalk Circle Man

FRED VARGAS



VINTAGE CANADA

PRAISE FOR *THE CHALK CIRCLE MAN*
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PRAISE FOR FRED VARGAS

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The Guardian

ALSO BY FRED VARGAS

Have Mercy on Us All

Seeking Whom He May Devour

The Three Evangelists

Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand

This Night's Foul Work

Fred Vargas

The Chalk Circle Man

TRANSLATED
FROM THE FRENCH
BY
Siân Reynolds



Vintage Canada

MATHILDE TOOK OUT HER DIARY AND WROTE: 'THE MAN SITTING next to me has got one hell of a nerve

She sipped her beer and glanced once more at the neighbour on her left, a strikingly tall man who had been drumming his fingers on the café table for the past ten minutes.

She made another note in the diary: 'He sat down too close to me, as if we knew each other, but I've never seen him before. No, I'm sure I've never seen him before. Not much else to say about him, except that he's wearing dark glasses. I'm sitting on the terrace outside the Café Saint-Jacques, and I've ordered a glass of draught lager. I'm drinking it now. I'm concentrating as hard as I can on the beer. Can't think of anything better to do.'

Mathilde's neighbour went on drumming his fingers.

'Something the matter?' she asked.

Mathilde had a deep and very husky voice. The man guessed that here was a woman who smoked as much as she could get away with.

'No, nothing. Why?' he replied.

'Just that it's getting on my nerves, that noise you're making on the tabletop. Everything's setting my teeth on edge today.'

Mathilde finished her beer. Tasteless. Typical for a Sunday. Mathilde considered that she suffered more than most from the fairly widespread malaise she called seventh-day blues.

'You're about fifty, I'd guess?' offered the man, without moving away from her.

'Might be,' said Mathilde.

She felt annoyed. What business was that of his? Just then, she had noticed that the stream of water from the fountain opposite the café was blowing in the wind and sprinkling drops on the arm of the stone cherub beneath: one of those little moments of eternity. And now here was some character spoiling the only moment of eternity of this particular seventh day.

Besides, people usually thought she looked ten years younger. As she told him.

'Does it matter?' asked the man. 'I can't guess ages the way other people do. But I imagine you're rather beautiful, if I'm not mistaken.'

'Is there something wrong with my face?' asked Mathilde. 'You don't seem very sure about it.'

'It's not that. I certainly do imagine you're beautiful,' the man replied, 'but I won't swear to it.'

'Please yourself,' said Mathilde. 'At any rate, you're very good-looking, and I'll swear to that, if it helps. Well, it always does help, doesn't it? And now I'm going to leave you. I'm too edgy today to sit around talking to people like you.'

'I'm not feeling so calm, either. I was going to see a flat to rent, but it was already taken

What about you?’

‘I let somebody I wanted to catch up with get away.’

‘A friend?’

‘No, a woman I was following in the metro. I’d taken lots of notes, and then, suddenly, lost her. See what I mean?’

‘No, I don’t see at all.’

‘You’re not trying, you mean.’

‘Well, obviously I’m not trying.’

‘You are. You’re *very* trying.’

‘Yes, I am trying. And on top of that, I’m blind.’

‘Oh, Christ!’ said Mathilde. ‘I’m so sorry.’

The man turned towards her with a rather unkind smile.

‘Why are you sorry?’ he said. ‘It’s not your fault, is it?’

Mathilde told herself that she should just stop talking. But she also knew that she would never be able to manage that.

‘Whose fault is it, then?’ she asked.

The Beautiful Blind Man, as Mathilde had already named him in her head, reverted to his original position, three-quarters turned away.

‘It was a lioness’s fault. I was dissecting it, because I was working on the locomotive system of the larger cats. Why the heck should we care about their locomotive system? Sometimes I would tell myself this is really cutting-edge stuff, other times I thought, oh for God’s sake, lions walk, they crouch, they pounce, and that’s it. Then one day I made a fatal move with a scalpel ...’

‘And it squirted in your eyes.’

‘Yes. How did you know?’

‘There was this man once, he built the colonnade of the Louvre, and he was killed like that. A decomposed camel, laid out on a dissecting table. Still, that was a long time ago, and it was a camel. Quite a big difference, really.’

‘Well, rotten flesh is still rotten flesh. The ghastly muck went in my eyes. Everything went black. Couldn’t see a thing. Kaput.’

‘All because of a wretched lioness. I came across a creature like that once. How long ago was this?’

‘Eleven years now. She must be laughing her head off, the lioness, wherever she is. Well, she can laugh, sometimes, these days. Not at the time though. A month later I went back and I trashed the lab – I threw bits of rotten tissue everywhere, I wanted it to go in everyone’s eyes. I smashed up the work of the team studying feline locomotion. But of course it gave me no satisfaction at all. In fact, it was a big let-down.’

‘What colour were your eyes?’

‘Black, like swifts, the sickles of the sky.’

‘And now what are they like?’

‘Nobody dares tell me. Black, red and white, I should think. People seem to choke when they see them. I suppose it’s a nasty sight. I just keep my glasses on all the time now.’

‘I’d like to see them,’ said Mathilde, ‘if you really want to know what they look like. Nasty sights don’t bother me.’

‘People say that, then they regret it.’

‘When I was diving one day, I got bitten on the leg by a shark.’

‘OK, I suppose that’s not a pretty sight either.’

‘What do you miss the most from not being able to see?’

‘Your questions are getting on my nerves. We’re not going to spend all day talking about lions and sharks and suchlike beasts, are we?’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘Well, if you must know, I miss girls. Not very original, is it?’

‘The girls cleared off, did they, after the lioness?’

‘Looks like that. You didn’t say why you were following the woman.’

‘No reason. I follow lots of people, actually. Can’t help it, it’s an addiction.’

‘After the shark bite, did your lover clear off?’

‘He left, and others came along.’

‘You’re an unusual woman.’

‘Why do you say that?’ asked Mathilde.

‘Because of your voice.’

‘What do you hear in people’s voices?’

‘Oh, come on, I’m not going to tell you that! What would I have left, for pity’s sake? You’ve got to let a blind man have some advantages, madame,’ said the man, with a smile.

He stood up to leave. He hadn’t even finished his drink.

‘Wait. What’s your name?’ Mathilde asked.

The man hesitated.

‘Charles Reyer,’ he said.

‘Thank you. My name’s Mathilde.’

The Beautiful Blind Man said that was a rather classy name, that there was a queen called Mathilde who had reigned in England in the twelfth century. Then he walked off, guiding himself with a finger along the wall. Mathilde couldn’t care less about the twelfth century, and she finished the blind man’s drink, with a frown.

For a long time afterwards, for weeks during her excursions along the pavements of Paris, Mathilde looked out for the blind man, out of the corner of her eye. But she didn’t find him. She guessed his age as about thirty-five.

HE HAD JUST BEEN APPOINTED TO PARIS, *COMMISSAIRE* OF THE police headquarters in the 5^e *arrondissement*. And on day twelve, he was on his way to his new office, on foot.

Paris had been a stroke of luck. The only city in France for which he could feel affection. For a long time, he had thought that where he lived was a matter of indifference, like the food he ate, the furniture around him, or the clothes he wore – all either donated or inherited, or picked up here and there.

But in the end, deciding where to live wasn't so simple. As a child, Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg had run around barefoot in the stony foothills of the Pyrenees. He had lived and slept there, and later, after becoming a policeman, he had been obliged to work on murders committed there, murders in the stone-built villages, murders on the rocky paths. He knew by heart the sound of pebbles underfoot and the mountain's way of gripping you and clutching you to its heart like a muscular old man. In the police station where he had started working at twenty-five, they had called him 'the wild child'. Perhaps this was a reference to his being primitive, or solitary – he wasn't sure. He found it neither original nor flattering.

He had asked the reason once, from one of the younger women inspectors – his direct superior, whom he would have liked to kiss, but since she was ten years older than him he hadn't dared. She was embarrassed and had said: 'Work it out, look at yourself in the mirror, you'll get there on your own.' That evening he had looked – without any pleasure, since he liked tall pale people – at his small, solid, dark-complexioned figure, and the next day he said: 'I stood in front of the mirror and looked, but I still didn't understand what you meant.'

'Oh, Adamsberg,' the inspector had said, rather wearily and with some exasperation, 'what do you say things like that? Why do you ask questions? We're working on a case about stolen watches, that's all there is to know. I'm not going to start talking about your body.' She had added: 'I'm not paid to talk about your body'.

'OK,' Jean-Baptiste had said. 'No need to get worked up about it.'

An hour later, he heard the typewriter stop and the inspector had called him in. She was looking cross. 'Let's just have it out once and for all,' she said. 'You have the body of a child of nature, that's what it is.' He had replied, 'Do you mean it's primitive? Ugly?' She looked even more exasperated. 'Don't push me to tell you that you're good-looking, Adamsberg,' she had said. 'But you have a certain grace about you that's unique – you'll just have to get used to that in your life.' And there had been both weariness and tenderness in her voice, of the kind he had been sure. So that, even now, he recalled the conversation with a pleasurable shiver, especially since it had never reached that degree of intimacy again. He had waited for it to go further, with his heart racing. Perhaps she was going to kiss him. Perhaps. But she kept her distance and never spoke of it again. Except once, in despair: 'You're not cut out for the police, Jean-Baptiste. There's no room for wild creatures like you in the police.'

Well, she had been wrong. Over the next five years, he had solved, one after another, for

murders in a way that his colleagues had found uncanny, in other words unfair and provocative. ‘Don’t get above yourself, Adamsberg,’ they’d said. ‘You sit around daydreaming, staring at the wall, or doodling on a bit of paper as if you had all the time and knowledge in the world, and then one day you swan in, cool as cucumber, and say “Arrest the priest. He strangled the child to stop him talking.”’

So the wild child who had solved four murders found himself promoted to inspector, the title to *commissaire*, but he was still inclined to doodle for hours, resting pieces of paper on his knee, scoring the fabric of his nondescript trousers. Two weeks ago, he had been offered a posting to Paris. He had left behind him office walls covered with graffiti which he had scribbled there over the last twenty years, without ever getting tired of life.

But how weary of other people he sometimes felt! It was as if, all too often, he knew in advance exactly what he was going to hear. And every time that he thought: ‘This person is going to say such-and-such now’, he hated himself, especially when the person in question did say exactly that. Then he suffered, begging some god to give him a surprise one day, instead of foreknowledge.

Sitting in a café across the street from his new office, Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg stirred his coffee. Did he know now why they called him the wild child? Yes, it had become a little clearer, but people weren’t very careful how they used words. He was particularly bad at that himself. What was certain was that Paris was the only place that could provide him with the mineral surroundings that he realised were important to him.

Paris, city of stone.

There were trees, of course, inevitably, but you could ignore them, you just had to avoid looking at them. And there were parks, but you simply kept out of them, and that was fine too. By way of vegetation, Adamsberg preferred straggling shrubs and root crops. What also seemed certain was that he hadn’t changed much over the years, since the expressions on the faces of his new colleagues reminded him of his fellow officers in the Pyrenees twenty years ago: the same discreet bafflement, the same whispers behind his back, nods of complicity, pulled faces, fingers splayed in gestures of surrender. So many silent communications that seemed to say: ‘Who is this character?’

He had gently smiled and shaken hands, gently explained and listened. Adamsberg did everything gently. But he was eleven days in now, and his colleagues were still not approaching him without that look: one that suggested they were trying to work out what kind of species they were dealing with, what it should be given to eat, how it should be spoken to, how one might amuse or interest it. For eleven days, the 5th *arrondissement* station had been plunged into whispers, as if some fragile mystery had suspended ordinary police routines.

The difference between this situation and Adamsberg’s early days in the Pyrenees was that nowadays his reputation made things a bit easier. However, that still didn’t alter the fact that he was an outsider. The day before, he had overheard the oldest Parisian in the team saying in a low voice: ‘Ah well, he’s from the Pyrenees – pretty much the edge of the known world.’

He ought to have been at the office half an hour ago, but Adamsberg was still sitting across the road, stirring his coffee.

It wasn't that he permitted himself to turn up at work late just because, nowadays, at the age of forty-five, he had won the respect of those around him. He had already been turning up late at twenty. Even for his own birth, he had been sixteen days late. Adamsberg didn't wear a watch, but he was unable to say why, and he had nothing against watches. Clocks. Umbrellas. Or anything else, really. It wasn't so much that he did as he pleased, more that he was unable to force himself to do something if he was in a contrary mood at that moment. He had never been able to do that, even in the days when he had wanted to attract the beautiful police inspector. Even for her. People had said resignedly that Adamsberg was a lost cause and he sometimes thought the same himself. Not always, though.

And today his mood pushed him to sit stirring his coffee, slowly. A textile merchant had been killed three days earlier, in his own warehouse. His accounts had looked so irregular that three inspectors were going through the customer files, convinced that the murderer's name would be found there.

Ever since he had seen the dead man's family, Adamsberg had not felt too concerned about this case. His inspectors were searching for a client who'd been cheated, and they even had one serious lead, but he had been keeping an eye on the murdered man's stepson, Patrick Vernoux, a fine-featured, romantic-looking young man of twenty-three. That was what Adamsberg had done: keep an eye on him. He had already called him in three times to the station on different pretexts, getting him to talk about this and that: what did he think of his stepfather's bald patch – did it disgust him? Did he like the textile business? What did he think when the electricity workers went on strike, why did he think so many people were interested in their family tree?

The last time, the day before, it had gone as follows:

'Do you think you're good-looking?' Adamsberg had asked.

'It's hard to say no.'

'You're right.'

'Can you tell me why I'm here?'

'Yes. Because of your stepfather, of course. You did tell me you didn't like to think of him sleeping with your mother.'

The young man shrugged.

'Nothing I could do about it, was there? Except kill him, and I didn't do that. But yeah, it did make me feel a bit sick. My stepfather was gross, he was hairy, he even had hair coming out of his ears, like a, well, a wild boar. Tell you the truth, monsieur, I couldn't stomach that. Would you?'

'Oh, I don't know. One day I walked in on my own mother in bed with one of my schoolfriends. And yet, poor woman, she was faithful on the whole. I closed the door, and I remember that the only thing I thought was that the boy had an olive-green mole on his back, but perhaps my mother hadn't seen it.'

'Don't see what that has to do with me,' said the boy, sulkily. 'If you can take that kind of thing better than me, that's your business.'

'Never mind – it doesn't matter. Is your mother upset, do you think?'

‘Naturally she is.’

‘OK. Fine. But don’t go and see too much of her for now.’

And he had let the boy go.

Adamsberg walked into the station. Of his inspectors at present, his favourite was Adrien Danglard, a man who dressed impeccably in order to compensate for his unprepossessing looks and pear-shaped figure. Danglard liked a drink and didn’t seem too reliable after about four in the afternoon, or even earlier sometimes. But he was real, very real, and Adamsberg hadn’t yet found any other way of defining him to himself. Danglard had prepared a summary of the inquiry into the textile firm’s customer files.

‘Danglard, I’d like to see the stepson today – the boy, Patrice Vernoux.’

‘Again, *monsieur le commissaire*? Why do you keep going after the poor lad?’

‘Why do you call him a poor lad?’

‘Because he’s shy, he keeps combing his hair, he tries to help, he’s doing his best to satisfy what you want, and when he’s waiting in that corridor and doesn’t know what you’re going to ask him next, he looks so lost that I feel sorry for him. That’s why I call him a poor lad.’

‘You didn’t notice anything else, Danglard?’

Danglard shook his head.

‘Have I told you the story about the dog that drooled?’ Adamsberg asked.

‘No, I must say you haven’t.’

‘When you’ve heard it, you’ll think I’m a mean bastard. You’ll have to sit down: I can’t talk fast, I have trouble finding the right words and I sometimes lose the thread. I’m not very articulate, Danglard. So anyway, I went out of our village very early one morning to spend the day in the mountains – this was when I was about eleven. I don’t like dogs and I didn’t like them when I was little, either. And this one, a big dog with drooling chops, was just standing in the middle of the path, looking at me. It drooled all over my feet and hands, but it was just a friendly, sappy old dog. I said to it: “Look, dog, I’m going for a long walk, what I’m trying to do is get lost and then find my way back. You can come with me if you want, but stop drooling all over me, it’s disgusting.” Well, the dog seemed to understand and started following me.’

Adamsberg stopped, lit a cigarette, and took a scrap of paper out of his pocket. He crossed his legs and rested the paper on his thigh to scribble a drawing, then went on, after a glance at his colleague.

‘Can’t help it if I’m boring you, Danglard, but I do want to tell you the story about the dog. So this dog and I set off, chatting about whatever interested us – the stars in the sky or juicy bones – and we stopped at an old shepherd’s hut. And there we came face to face with half a dozen kids from another village, I knew who they were, we’d had fights in the past. The oldest said, “This your dog?” I said: “Just for today.” Then the smallest of them got hold of the dog by its long fur, because this dog was as cowardly and soft as a hearthrug, and he pulled it to the edge of an overhang. “Don’t like your fucking dog,” he said. “Stupid fucking dog.” The biggest dog was whining, but it wasn’t reacting, it’s true that it was stupid. And this tiny kid gave it

big kick up the backside, and the dog went over the edge. I put my bag down slowly. I carried everything slowly. I'm a slow man, Danglard.'

Yes, Danglard felt like saying, I had noticed. A vague man, a slow man. But he couldn't say that, since Adamsberg was his new boss. And anyway, he respected him. Danglard, like everyone else, had heard rumours of Adamsberg's famous cases and, like everyone else, had admired the way he had solved them, something which today seemed to him incompatible with the man himself, as he had turned out on his arrival in Paris. Now that he had seen him in the flesh, he was surprised, and not only by his slow movements and way of talking. He was also disappointed by the unimpressive appearance of Adamsberg's small, thin, young compact body, and by the generally casual manner of this person who had not even turned up at the appointed time to meet the staff and who, when he did, had evidently hastily knotted on a necktie over a shapeless shirt stuffed negligently into the waistband of his trousers.

And then Adamsberg's charm had started to work, rising like the water level. It had started with his voice. Danglard liked to listen to him: it calmed him – indeed, almost put him to sleep. 'It's like a caress,' Florence had said, but then Florence was a woman, and anyway she was responsible for her choice of words. Castreau had snorted: 'Don't go telling us next time he's good-looking.' Florence had looked puzzled. 'Wait a bit, I need to think about that,' she had said. As she always did. She was a scrupulous person who took time to think before she spoke. Not feeling sure, she had murmured, 'No, but it has to do with a kind of grace. I'll think some more about it.' When the other colleagues had laughed at her serious expression, Danglard had said, 'Yes, Florence is right, it's obvious.' Margellon, a young officer, had seized the opportunity to call Danglard a poof. Margellon had never made an intelligent remark in his life. And Danglard needed intelligence as much as he needed drink. He had shrugged his shoulders, thinking briefly that it was a pity Margellon wasn't right, because he had always had bad luck with women, and perhaps men would have been less fussy. He had heard it said that men were bastards, because once they had slept with a woman they passed judgement on her, but women were worse, because they refused to sleep with you unless everything was exactly right. So not only were you weighed up and judged, but you never got to sleep with anyone.

Sad, really.

Yes, women were complicated. And in Danglard's life there had been plenty of women who had found him wanting. To his considerable distress at times. But at any rate, he knew that serious-minded Florence was right about Adamsberg, and Danglard had so far allowed himself to succumb to the charm of this little man a foot shorter than himself. He was beginning to understand how the vague desire to unburden yourself to him might explain why so many murderers had told him about their crimes: absent-mindedly, almost. Just like that. In order to chat to Adamsberg.

Danglard, who had a reputation for being handy with a pencil, did caricatures of his colleagues. So he knew something about faces. He had got Castreau off to a T, for instance. But he knew in advance that he would never be able to pin Adamsberg down, because it was as if sixty faces had been mingled to make one. The nose was too big, the mouth was crooked, mobile, and no doubt sensual, the eyes were vague and elusive, the jawbone was too prominent, so it looked as if it would be easy to caricature this mixed-up face, throw

together with disregard for classical harmony. It was as if God had run out of raw material when he had made Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg: he had had to look in the back of the drawer and put together features that should never have been combined if he'd had more choice. But after that, it looked as if God had been aware of the problem and had taken special care, a great deal of care, in fact, and in the end had created an inexplicable masterpiece out of the face. And Danglard, who could not remember ever having seen a face like it, considered that trying to make a rapid sketch of it would be a travesty, that swift pencil strokes would not bring out its originality: on the contrary, a sketch would destroy all its grace.

So at that moment, Danglard was wondering what sort of things God kept in the back of the drawer.

‘Are you listening, or have you gone to sleep?’ Adamsberg asked. ‘Because I’ve noticed that I sometimes send people to sleep, really, they do go to sleep. Perhaps I don’t speak loud enough, or fast enough, I don’t know. Remember where we’d got to? The dog had gone over the edge. I took my tin water bottle off my belt and banged the little kid hard on the head.

‘And then I set off to find the stupid dog. It took me three hours to reach it. And by then the dog was dead, anyway. The point of this story, Danglard, is the evidence of cruelty in that little kid. I’d known for a long time before this happened that there was something wrong with him, and that was what it was: cruelty. But I can assure you his face was quite normal, he didn’t have wicked features at all. On the contrary, he was a nice-looking boy, but he oozed cruelty. Just don’t ask me any more, I can’t tell you any more. But eight years later, he pushed a grandfather clock over on top of an old woman and killed her. And most premeditated murders require the murderer not only to feel exasperation or humiliation, or to have some neurosis, or whatever, but also cruelty, pleasure in inflicting suffering, pleasure in the victim’s agony and pleas for mercy, pleasure in tearing the victim apart. It’s true, it doesn’t always appear obvious in a person, but you feel at least that there’s something wrong, that something else is gathering underneath, a kind of growth. And sometimes that turns out to be cruelty – do you see what I’m saying? A kind of growth.’

‘That’s against my principles,’ said Danglard, a bit stiffly. ‘I don’t claim my principles are the only ones, but I don’t believe there are people marked out for this or that, like cows with tags on their ears, or that you can pick out murderers by intuition. I know, I’m saying something boring and unexciting, but what we do is we proceed by following clues, and we arrest when we’ve got proof. Gut feelings about “growths” scare me stiff. That way you start off following hunches, and end up with arbitrary sentences and miscarriages of justice.’

‘You’re speechifying, Danglard. I didn’t say you could see it in someone’s face, I said it was something monstrous that was gathering inside someone. It’s a kind of secretion, Danglard, and sometimes I sense it oozing out. I’ve seen it on the lips of a young girl, just as clearly as you might see a cockroach run across this table. I can’t help sensing when something’s not right. It might be enjoyment of crime, but it could be other things, less serious things. Some people secrete their boredom or their unhappy love lives, Danglard, and it can be sensed, whether it’s the one or the other. But when it’s something else, you know, the crime thing, well, I think I know that too.’

Danglard looked up and his posture was less shambling than usual.

‘Yes, but you still believe you can see something by looking at people, that you can see

cockroaches on their lips, and you think these impressions are revelations because they're yours, you think other people are oozing pus, and it's not true. The truth is boring and banal, it's that all human beings can have hate inside them, like they all have hair on their heads and anyone can make a false step and kill someone. I'm certain of that. All men are capable of rape and murder, and all women are capable of slashing someone's legs with a razor, like that one in the rue Gay-Lussac the other week. It just depends what sort of life you've had, it depends how much you want to plunge into the swamp and take other people with you. You don't have to be oozing pus from birth to want to suppress the whole world because you're sick of it.'

'I did tell you, Danglard,' said Adamsberg, frowning, as he stopped his drawing, 'that when I'd told you the story of the big dog you'd think I was a mean bastard.'

'Dangerous, let's say,' muttered Danglard. 'You shouldn't think you've got some superior powers.'

'There's nothing superior about being able to see cockroaches. What I'm telling you about is something that I can't help. In fact, it gives me enormous trouble in my life. If only I could be wrong about someone once in a while, about whether he was an upright citizen or not, or sad, or intelligent, or untruthful, or troubled, or indifferent, or dangerous, or timid – all that do you see, if I could just be wrong one time, for a change? Can you imagine what a drag it is? I sometimes pray that people will surprise me when I start to predict how it will all end. All my life I've always had beginnings, and I've been full of hope. And then, very soon, I start to see what's going to happen, like in some suspense film where you guess who's going to fall in love with whom, or who's going to have an accident. You go on watching all the same, only it's too late – it's just depressing.'

'OK, let's admit you have some special intuition,' said Danglard. 'You're a policeman with flair, that's as far as I'll go. But even then it's not right to use it, it's too risky, it's wicked. Not even after twenty years you can never know everything about another person.'

Adamsberg rested his chin on his palm, smoke from his cigarette making his eyes water.

'Well, if it's a gift take it away from me, Danglard. Get rid of it. I'd like nothing better.'

'People aren't insects,' Danglard went on.

'No, they're not. I like people, and I don't give a damn about insects, don't care what they want or what they think. Still, insects want things too, no reason they shouldn't.'

'True,' said Danglard.

'Danglard, have you ever been party to a miscarriage of justice yourself?'

'Have you read my file?' said Danglard, with a sideways glance at Adamsberg who was still smoking and doodling.

'If I say no, you'll accuse me of claiming supernatural powers. But no, I haven't read it. What happened?'

'It was this teenage girl. There'd been a break-in at the jeweller's shop where she worked. I was absolutely convinced it was an inside job, done with her collusion. Everything seemed to point to it. Her prevarications, her mannerisms, all that set off my policeman's intuition, OK? She got three years, and she committed suicide in her cell two months later, in a particular

ghastly way. But in fact she hadn't been involved in the robbery, as we discovered not long afterwards. So now do you see why I won't have anything to do with your blasted hunches and cockroaches on women's lips? Finito. After that, I decided guesswork and intuition were no match for doubt and ordinary police routine.'

Danglard stood up.

'Wait,' said Adamsberg. 'The stepson, Vernoux – don't forget to bring him in.'

Adamsberg fell silent. He was embarrassed. His decision was awkward coming after this kind of discussion. He went on in a lower voice.

'Pull him in for questioning for twenty-four hours.'

'You're not serious, *commissaire*,' said Danglard.

Adamsberg bit his lower lip.

'His girlfriend's protecting him. I'm convinced they weren't actually together in the restaurant on the evening of the murder, even if their two versions tally. Question them again, separately. How long between the starter and the main course? Did a guitarist come and play? Where was the wine, on the left or the right of the table? What kind of wine was it? What did the glasses look like, or the tablecloth? And so on – every little detail you can think of. They'll end up saying different things, you'll see. And then check out the boy's shoes. You can ask the cleaning woman who comes in and looks after him – his mother pays her. There'll be a pair missing, the ones he wore on the night of the murder, because round the warehouse the ground's very muddy, what with the building site alongside it, and the mud there is clay – it sticks like glue. He's not stupid, our young man, he's probably chucked the shoes away. Have someone check the drains near where he lives. He could have walked back the last stretch in his socks, between the drain and his front door.'

'If I understand what you're saying,' Danglard said, 'the poor lad, as I call him, is oozing something.'

'I'm afraid so,' said Adamsberg quietly.

'And what is he supposed to be oozing?'

'Cruelty.'

'And to you that's obvious?'

'Yes, Danglard.'

But the last two words were almost inaudible.

Once the inspector had left, Adamsberg pulled across his desk the pile of newspapers that had been prepared for him. He found what he was after in three of them. The phenomenon hadn't reached the headlines yet, but it was surely only a matter of time. Clumsily, he tore out one short article and put it on the desk in front of him. He always needed to concentrate hard in order to read, and if he had to do it out loud it was even worse. Adamsberg had never shown up at school, since he couldn't really understand why they were making him turn up there at all, but he had tried to give the impression of being conscientious so as not to upset his parents, and in particular so that they would never find out that he didn't really care for book learning.

Is this a practical joke, or the work of some half-baked philosopher? Whatever it is, the blue chalk circles are still sprouting like night-time weeds on the capital's pavements, and they're starting to attract the attention of Parisian intellectuals. The circles are turning up at an increasing rate. Sixty-three have been spotted since the first ones were found four months ago in the 12th arrondissement. This new distraction, the equivalent of an urban parlour game, has provided plenty of material for the chattering classes, of whom there is no shortage. So the circles are the talk of every café in town

...

Adamsberg stopped reading and jumped to the end to read the byline. 'That pretentious prat,' he muttered. 'What can you expect?'

... People will soon be jostling for the honour of finding a circle outside their door, on the way to work in the morning. Whether the circles are the work of a cynical con artist or a genuine madman, if it's fame he's after the creator of the circles has certainly got what he wanted. Galling, isn't it, for people who've spent a lifetime trying to become famous? All you have to do to be Parisian celebrity of the year is go out at night with some blue chalk! If he's ever tracked down, they'll have him on a TV chat show in no time (I can see it now: 'The cultural sensation of the fin-de-millennium'). But he's an elusive character. Nobody's yet caught him in the act of chalking his circles on the tarmac. He doesn't venture out every night, and he seems to strike at random in one district of Paris after another. What's the betting there are some night-owls out there trying to catch him, just for kicks? Well, good hunting!

A more thoughtful article had appeared in a provincial paper:

Paris haunted by harmless maniac

Everyone thinks this is good for a laugh, but perhaps 'weird' is a better description. For the last four months, somebody – a man, probably – has been going out at night and drawing large circles in blue chalk around whatever rubbish is lying on the pavements of Paris. The only 'victims' of this curious obsession are the items that this character encloses within the circles, never more than one at a time. There are about sixty examples so far, which makes it possible to draw up a very peculiar list: twelve bottle tops, an orange-box, four paper clips, two shoes, a magazine, a leather handbag, four cigarette lighters, a handkerchief, a pigeon's claw, a spectacle lens, five notebooks, a lamb-chop bone, a ballpoint pen, an earring, a dog turd, part of a car's headlight, a battery, a Coca-Cola can, a piece of wire, a ball of wool, a keyring, an orange, a tube of stomach pills, a pool of vomit, a hat, the contents of a car's ashtray, two books (The Metaphysics of the Real and The Fun-to-Cook Book), a metal label, a broken egg, an 'I love Elvis' badge, a pair of tweezers, a doll's head, a twig, a vest, a roll of film, a vanilla yoghurt, a candle, and a swimming cap. This may seem a tedious kind of list, but it certainly reveals the unexpected treasures lying on the city's pavements if one goes looking for them. Since the well-known psychiatrist René Vercors-Laury has taken an interest in this case from the start, and has been keen to find out what lies behind it, people are now talking about the 'revisited object'. The 'chalk circle man' has become a subject of cocktail-party gossip, putting the poor graffiti artists in the shade – their noses must be really out of joint! Everyone is asking what kind of compulsion drives the chalk circle man. One of the most intriguing aspects of the case is that around the edge of every circle, written in beautiful copperplate, indicating therefore an educated hand, is the following inscription, which has the psychiatrists scratching their heads: 'Victor, woe's in store, what are you out here for?'

An indistinct photo was attached.

The third article was less detailed and very short, but reported that the previous night another circle had been found in the rue Caulaincourt in northern Paris, this time around a dead mouse, with the same legend: 'Victor, woe's in store, what are you out here for?'

Adamsberg pulled a face. It was just as he had feared.

He slipped the articles under his desk lamp and decided he was hungry, although he had no idea of the time. He went out, took a long walk along the still-unfamiliar streets, absently minded ordered a sandwich and drink, bought a packet of cigarettes, and made his way slowly back to the station. In his trouser pocket he could feel at every step the crumpled letter from Christiane which had arrived that morning. She wrote on thick expensive notepaper, which was awkward to stuff into your pocket. Adamsberg disliked the paper.

He would have to give her his new address. She wouldn't find it difficult to come and see him often, since she worked in Orleans. But her letter suggested she was looking for a job in Paris. Because of him. He shook his head. He'd think about that later. Since he had met her six months ago now, it was always the same, he'd think about it later. She wasn't a stupid woman, quite bright in fact, though she did tend to have predictable opinions. A pity, but not too serious, since that was a minor failing and after all nobody's perfect. Ah, but perfection, the impossible, the unpredictable, the softest skin, the perpetual movement between gravity and grace, had come to him only once, eight years earlier, with Camille and her ridiculous pet monkey, a marmoset called Richard III. She used to let the monkey relieve itself in the street, telling any passers-by who objected, 'But you see, Richard III has to go outside to pee.'

The little monkey, who smelled of oranges for some reason, although it never ate them, would sometimes jump onto their arms and make a great show of looking for fleas on their wrists, with a concentrated expression and neat little movements. Camille and Jean-Baptiste joined in the game, scratching at the invisible prey on their forearms. But she had run away with his *petite chérie*. And he, the policeman, had never been able to trace her, despite all the time he had spent searching: a whole year, such a long year, and afterwards his youngest sister had said, 'Come on, you don't have any right to do this, leave her in peace!' '*Ma petite chérie*' Adamsberg had said. 'You want to see her again?' his sister had asked. Only the youngest of his five sisters dared talk to him about his *petite chérie*. And he had smiled and said, 'With a my heart, yes, even if it's just for an hour before I die.'

Adrien Dangelard was waiting for him in the office, a plastic cup of white wine in his hand and a combination of mixed emotions on his face.

'The Vernoux boy's boots were missing,' he said. 'Ankle boots with buckles.'

Adamsberg stood silently for a moment. He was trying to respect Dangelard's irritation.

'I didn't mean to give you a demonstration this morning,' he said. 'I can't help it if the Vernoux boy's the killer. Did you look for the boots?'

Dangelard produced a plastic bag and put it on the table.

'Here they are,' he sighed. 'The lab's started doing tests, but you can see at a glance it's the mud from that building site on the soles, so sticky that the water in the drain didn't wash off. Pity. Nice shoes.'

'They were in the drain then?'

'Yes, twenty-five metres down from the nearest grating to his house.'

'You're a fast worker, Dangelard.'

Silence fell between the two men. Adamsberg was biting his lip. He had picked up a cigarette, taken a pencil stub out his pocket, and flattened a bit of paper over his knee. H

was thinking: He's going to give me a lecture now, he's angry and shocked, I should never have told him the story of the dog that drooled, or told him that Patrice Vernoux oozed cruelty like the little kid in the mountains.

But no. Adamsberg looked at his colleague. Danglard's long shambling body, which took the shape of a melted bottle when he sat on a chair, was looking relaxed. He had plunged his large hands deep in the pockets of his elegant suit, and put the wine on the floor. He was staring into space, but even like that Adamsberg could see that he was formidably intelligent. Danglard said:

'Congratulations, *commissaire*.'

Then he got up, as he had done earlier, first bending the top half of his body forward, then lifting his backside off the chair and finally standing up straight.

'I have to tell you,' he added, with his back half-turned to Adamsberg, 'that after four in the afternoon I'm not good for much – best you should know that. So if you want to ask me to do anything, mornings are best. And if you want people for a manhunt, shooting, any of that kind of rubbish, forget it, my hand shakes and my knees give way. Apart from that, my legs and head are usable. I think the head works reasonably well, even if it works very differently from yours. A supercilious colleague told me one day that if I was still in my job as inspector, with the amount of white wine I drink, it's because my bosses have turned a blind eye to it, and because I have two sets of twins at home, which makes four children to bring up as a single parent, on account of my wife having run off with her lover to study the statues on Easter Island. When I was young, twenty-five that is, I wanted to write either a masterpiece or nothing: something as good as Chateaubriand's memoirs. You won't be surprised to learn that that didn't work out. OK. Now I'm taking the boots, and I'm going to interview Patrice Vernoux and his girlfriend who are waiting next door.'

'Danglard, I like you,' said Adamsberg, still doodling.

'I think I'd gathered that,' said Danglard, picking up the plastic cup.

'Ask the photographer to make sure he's free tomorrow morning and go along with him. I want a description and some clear pictures of the blue chalk circle that may be drawn somewhere in Paris tonight.'

'A circle? You mean this nutter who draws rings round bottle tops? "*Victor, woe's in store for you, what are you out here for?*"'

'That's exactly what I mean, Danglard.'

'But it's stupid. What ...'

Adamsberg shook his head impatiently.

'I know, Danglard, I know. Just do it. Please. And don't tell anyone for the time being.'

After that, Adamsberg finished the sketch that he had been resting on his knee. He could hear raised voices from the next room. Vernoux's girlfriend was cracking. It was obvious that she had had nothing to do with the murder of the elderly businessman. Her only error of judgement, but it had been a serious one, was to have been sufficiently in love with Vernoux or sufficiently obedient to him, to back up his false alibi. The worst thing for her wouldn't be the court appearance: it was what was happening right now, as she discovered her lover

cruelty.

What on earth had he eaten at midday to give him such a stomach-ache? He couldn't remember. He picked up the telephone to arrange an interview with the psychiatrist, René Vercors-Laury. Tomorrow at eleven, the receptionist suggested. He had given her his name, Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg, and it had opened doors. He was not yet accustomed to this kind of celebrity, although it had been attached to him for some time. But Adamsberg had the feeling that he had no contact with his public image: it was as if there were two of him. Still, since childhood he had always felt there were two people inside him: Jean-Baptiste on the one hand and Adamsberg on the other – both watching what Jean-Baptiste got up to, following his movements with amusement. And now there were three: Jean-Baptiste, Adamsberg, and the public figure with the same name. A holy but shattered trinity. He got up to fetch a coffee from the machine next door, where he would often find Margellon helping himself. But it so happened that just then everyone was there, with a woman who seemed to be causing a loud disturbance. Castreau kept repeating patiently, 'Madame, I think you should leave.'

Adamsberg served himself a coffee and looked round. The woman was speaking in a husky voice; she was both angry and sad. Clearly she was exasperated with the cops. She was dressed in black. Adamsberg decided that she had an Egyptian profile, or perhaps she had other origins that had produced one of those dark aquiline faces you never forget but carry round in your head ever after – not unlike his *petite chérie*, in fact.

Castreau was now saying:

'This isn't a lost-property department, madame. Please be reasonable, and leave now.'

The woman was no longer young. Adamsberg put her somewhere between forty-five and sixty. Her hands were tanned and energetic, with short nails, the hands of a woman who had spent her life somewhere else, using them to search for something.

'So what's the point of the police, then?' the woman was saying, shaking back her dark shoulder-length hair. 'You could make a bit of an effort. It wouldn't kill you, would it, to give me some idea where to look? It might take me ten years to find him, but you could do it in a day!'

This time Castreau lost his cool.

'Look, I don't give a damn about your private life!' he shouted. 'He's not listed as a missing person, is he? So please just go away and leave me in peace – we don't do lonely hearts here. If you go on making a fuss I'll call the boss.'

Adamsberg was leaning against the wall at the back of the room.

'I *am* the boss,' he said, without moving.

Mathilde turned round. She saw a man with hooded eyes looking at her with uncommon gentleness, she registered his shirt, stuffed into one side of his trousers, loose on the other; she saw that his thin face didn't match his hands which seemed to have come from a Rodin statue, and she immediately understood that things would now improve.

Detaching himself from the wall, Adamsberg pushed the door of his office and beckoned her in.

‘It’s true, of course,’ Mathilde said, seating herself, ‘this isn’t the lost-property office. It’s been a bad day. And not much better yesterday, or the day before either ... A whole section of the week gone to pot. I hope you’ve had a better section than I have.’

‘A section?’

‘Well, the way I see it, Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday, that’s section number one of the week. What happens in section number one is different from what happens in section number two.’

‘And that’s Thursday-Friday-Saturday?’

‘Of course. If you pay attention, you’ll see there are more serious surprises in section one as a rule – note that I’m saying as a *rule* – and more fun and distractions in section two. It’s a question of rhythm. It never switches over like the parking in the street, where you have to park one side one week and the other the next. Why do they do that, anyway? To give the street a rest? Let it lie fallow? No idea. Anyway, sections of the week don’t change. First section: you’re alert, you believe all sorts of stuff, you get things done. It’s a miracle of human activity. Second section: you don’t find anything you’re looking for, you learn nothing new, it’s pretty much a waste of time. In the second section there’s a lot of this and that, and you drink quite a bit, whereas the first section is more important, obviously. In practice, section number two can’t go far wrong, because it doesn’t really matter, so to speak. But when a section number one goes haywire, like this week, it’s really horrible. And another thing: the special today in the café was beef and lentils. Beef and lentils is a dish that really depresses me to the point of despair. Right at the end of a section one. Just no luck at all, a wretched plate of lentils.’

‘What about Sundays?’

‘Oh, Sundays, that’s section three. Just that one day takes up a whole section – see how important that is? And section three is the pits. If you get beef and lentils combined with section three, you might as well go hang yourself.’

‘Where were we?’ asked Adamsberg, having the sudden, not unpleasant impression that his thoughts could wander even further talking to this woman than when talking to himself.

‘We hadn’t got anywhere.’

‘Right, OK, we’ve got nowhere.’

‘It’s coming back to me,’ said Mathilde. ‘Since my section one was practically a write-off, and I was passing your police station I thought I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, so I’d give it a go. But you see, it doesn’t work – trying to rescue a section one might be tempting, but it gets you nowhere. What about you, anyway?’

‘Oh, it’s not been a bad week so far,’ Adamsberg admitted.

‘Now if you’d seen my section one last week, that was terrific.’

‘What happened?’

‘I can’t just tell you like that, I’d have to look it up in my notebook. Still, tomorrow we start a section two, so we can relax a bit.’

‘Tomorrow I’m going to see a psychiatrist. Is that a good start for a section two?’

‘Good Lord! On your own account?’ asked Mathilde in surprise. ‘No, of course not, stupid of me. I get the feeling that even if the spirit moved you to piss against all the lamp-posts down one side of the road, you’d say to yourself, “That’s the way it is, and God help the lamp-posts,” but you wouldn’t go and consult a psychiatrist. Sorry, I know I’m talking too much, I’m fed up. I’m getting on my own nerves.’

Mathilde took a cigarette from Adamsberg, saying ‘May I?’ and pulled off the filter.

‘Perhaps you’re going to see the psychiatrist about the chalk circle man,’ she went on. ‘Don’t look at me like that – I haven’t been snooping. It’s just that you’ve got those newspaper cuttings about him tucked under the base of your lamp, so naturally I wondered.’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ Adamsberg admitted, ‘it is about him. Why did you come into the station?’

‘I’m looking for this man I don’t know.’

‘Why are you looking for him, then?’

‘Because I don’t know him! What a question!’

‘Touché,’ said Adamsberg.

‘I was following this woman in the street, and I lost her. So I ended up in a café, and that’s how I met my beautiful blind man. There are an amazing number of people walking round on the pavements. You just can’t imagine it, you would have to follow everyone to do any good. So we chatted for a few minutes, the blind man and I, about something or other which I’ve now forgotten – I’d have to check in my notebook – but I liked him. Generally, if I like someone, I don’t worry, I’m sure to bump into them again. But in this case, no, nothing. Last month, I followed twenty-eight people and got close to nine of them. I filled two and a half notebooks. So I’ve covered a lot of ground, OK? But not a whisker of my beautiful blind man. That was disappointing. He’s called Charles Reyer, and that’s all I know about him. Tell me something: do you keep doodling all the time like that?’

‘Yes, all the time.’

‘I suppose you won’t let me see.’

‘No, that’s right. You don’t get to see.’

‘It’s funny when you turn round on your chair. Your left profile is tough and your right profile is tender. So if you want to intimidate a suspect, you turn one way, and when you want to soften him up, you turn the other way.’

Adamsberg smiled.

‘What if I keep turning from side to side?’

‘Then they won’t know where they are. Heaven and hell.’

Mathilde burst out laughing. Then she controlled herself.

‘No, stop,’ she said again. ‘I’m talking too much. I’m ashamed of myself. I’ve got a friend who’s a philosopher, who says to me, “Mathilde, you play fast and loose with language.”’ She said, well, in that case, tell me how to play slow and tight.’

‘Look, let’s see what we can do,’ said Adamsberg. ‘Do you have a work address?’

‘You’re not going to believe me. My name is Mathilde Forestier.’

Adamsberg put his pencil back in his pocket.

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘Mathilde Forestier. Famous oceanographer. Am I right?’

‘Yes, but don’t let that stop you doing your doodling. I know who you are too, your name on the door, and everyone’s heard of you. But it doesn’t stop me rambolling on about one thing and another, at the end of a section one, what’s more.’

‘If I find your beautiful blind man, I’ll tell you.’

‘Why? Who would you be doing the favour for?’ asked Mathilde, suspiciously. ‘For me, or for the famous underwater specialist whose name is in the papers?’

‘Neither one nor the other. I’m doing a favour for a woman I asked into my office.’

‘OK, that suits me,’ said Mathilde. She remained for a moment without speaking, as if hesitating to take a decision. Adamsberg had brought out his cigarettes and a piece of paper. No, he wouldn’t forget this woman, a fragment of the earth’s beauty on the point of fading. And he was unable to guess in advance what she was going to say.

‘Know something?’ Mathilde asked suddenly. ‘It’s at nightfall that things start happening under the ocean the same as in the city. They all start stirring, the creatures who are hungry or in pain. And the searchers, like you, Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg, they start stirring then too.’

‘You think I’m searching for something?’

‘Absolutely, and quite a lot of things at the same time. So, anyway, the chalk circle man comes out when he’s hungry. He prowls, he watches, and suddenly he draws his circle. But I know him, I started looking for him right at the beginning, and I found him, the night there was a cigarette lighter in the circle, and the night of the doll’s head. And then again, last night, in the rue Caulaincourt.’

‘How did you manage that?’

‘I’ll tell you some other time. It’s not important, it’s my little secret. And it’s a funny thing, but you’d think he was allowing me to watch him, the chalk circle man, as if he was letting himself be tamed from a distance. If you want to see him some night, come and find me. But you must only watch him from a distance. No going up to him and bothering him. I’m not telling the famous policeman about my secret, I’m just telling the man who asked me into his office.’

‘That suits me,’ said Adamsberg.

‘But why are you looking for the chalk circle man? He hasn’t done anything wrong. Why are you so interested in him?’

Adamsberg looked at her.

‘Because one day it’ll get bigger. The thing in the middle of the circle, it’ll get bigger. Please don’t ask me how I know, I beg you, because I can’t tell you. But it’s inevitable.’

He shook his head, pushing back his hair from his eyes. ‘Yes, it will get bigger.’

Adamsberg uncrossed his legs and began aimlessly reorganising the papers on his desk.

‘I can’t forbid you to follow him,’ he added. ‘But I really don’t advise it. Be cautious, take very good care. Don’t forget.’

He was uneasy, as if his own conviction made him feel unwell. Mathilde smiled and left.

Coming out of his office a little later, Adamsberg took Danglard by the shoulder and spoke quietly to him.

‘Tomorrow morning, try to find out if there’s been a new circle in the night. And if so, give it a thorough examination. I’m counting on you. I told that woman to watch out. This thing is going to get bigger, Danglard. There have been more circles over the last month. The rhythm’s picking up. There’s something horrible underneath all this, can’t you feel it?’

Danglard thought for a moment, then answered with some hesitation.

‘A bit unhealthy that’s all. But perhaps it’s just some long-drawn-out practical joke ...’

‘No, Danglard. There’s cruelty oozing out of those circles.’

CHARLES REYER WAS ALSO JUST LEAVING HIS OFFICE. HE WAS FED up with working for the blind, checking the printing and perforations of all those wretched books in Braille, the billions of tiny holes that communicated their meaning to the skin of his fingertips. Above all, he was fed up with the desperate attempts he made to be original, on the pretext that he ought to become exceptional in some way, to distract people from his loss of sight. That was how he had behaved towards that woman the other day, now he thought of it, the warm-hearted one who had accosted him in the Café Saint-Jacques. An intelligent woman she had been, a bit eccentric perhaps, though he didn't really think so, but a kind-hearted and lively person obviously. And what had he done? As usual, he'd begun showing off, trying to be original. To impress her by his conversation, to say out-of-the-way things, just so that a stranger would think, hey, this man may be blind, but he's certainly not ordinary.

And she'd gone along with it, the woman. She'd tried to play the game, to respond as quickly as she could to his mixture of false confidences and stupid remarks. But she had been sincere. She'd told him about the shark, just like that, she'd been generous, sensitive, helpful, willing to look at his eyes and tell him what they really looked like. But he had been entirely taken up with the sensational effect he wanted to produce; he regularly stopped any heartfelt conversation by pretending to be a lucid and cynical thinker. No, Charles, he thought, you're going the wrong way about things. All this palaver ends up with your being unable to say whether your brain's still working or not.

And then there's your habit of walking alongside people in the street just to frighten them, to exert some kind of silly power over them, or going up to someone at a traffic light with your white stick, and saying 'Can I help you cross the road?' What's all that about? Just to embarrass other people, of course, and then to take full advantage of your untouchable status. Poor souls, they don't dare say any thing, they just stand on the pavement, feeling bad. What you're doing is you're taking revenge on the rest of the world. You may be over six feet tall, but you're just a mean little bastard really. And that woman, Queen Mathilde, she's there, she's real, and she even told me I was good-looking. And that made me feel pretty good, but of course I couldn't bring myself to show it, or even say thank you for her kind word.

Feeling his way, Charles stopped at the edge of the pavement. Anyone standing alongside him would have been able to see those rolls of sacking that they put in the Paris gutters to channel the water, without realising how lucky they were to witness this sublime sight. Damn that bloody lioness. He felt like unfolding his white stick and asking 'Shall I help you across the road?' with a mean smile. Then he remembered Mathilde saying to him without any malice at all: 'You're *very* trying', and he turned his back on whoever might be there.

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