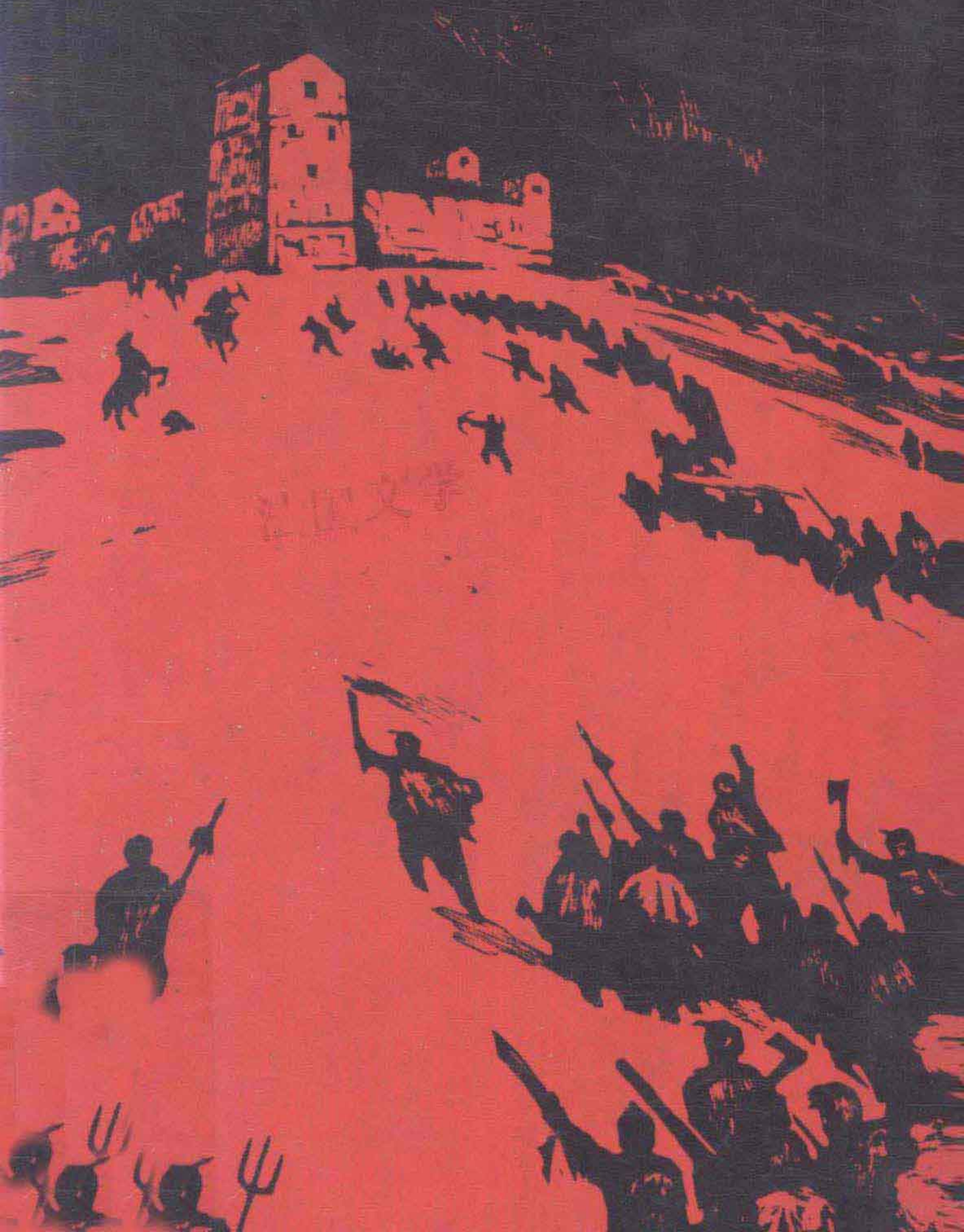
Penguin Modern Classics

André Malraux

Man's Estate



PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

MAN'S ESTATE

André Malraux, the distinguished novelist and politician, was born in France in 1901 and educated in Paris where he studied archaeology and orientalism. His first visit to Asia was in 1923, when he became involved in revolutionary activities in China. The visit resulted in his book *Les conquerants* (1928). This was followed by *La vie royale* (1930) and *La condition humaine* (1933).

In the middle and late thirties Malraux became one of France's leading anti-Fascists, and organized a volunteer air squadron to fight for the Republicans in Spain. His novel dealing with the early part of the war in Spain, *L'espoir* (1937), was written close to the events.

After a distinguished career in the Second World War, Malraux became involved in the Gaullist movement. He was Minister of Information from 1945–46 and became Minister of State at the inception of the Fifth Republic in 1959.

A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an Honorary Doctor of Civil Law at Oxford, an Officier de la Légion d'Honneur and Compagnon de la Libération, Malraux is one of the most prominent European men of letters.

His later books include *Psychologie de l'Art* (1950); *Les voix du Silence* (1954); *La Metamorphose des Dieux* and *Les Chênes qu'on abat* (1972).

ANDRÉ MALRAUX

MAN'S ESTATE

Translated from the French by
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Part 1

21 MARCH 1927

12.30 A.M.

SHOULD Chen try lifting up the mosquito-net? Or should he strike through it? He felt desperate in his inability to decide. He knew he was strong really, but for the moment it was only a blank realization, powerless before that mass of white muslin which draped down from the ceiling over a body that was vaguer than a shadow; from which only a foot protruded, the foot of a sleeper, angular but still convincingly human flesh. What light there was came from the neighbouring building: a great rectangle of pale electric light, striped by the shadows of the window-bars, one of which cut across the bed just below the man's foot, as if to give it greater substance and reality. Four or five klaxons rasped out all together. Had he been discovered? If only he could fight, fight an enemy who was on his guard, who gave blow for blow – what a relief that would be!

The wave of noise receded: a traffic jam (so there still were traffic jams out there, in the real world . . .). Once more he was faced with the great shapeless splodge of muslin and the rectangle of light, fixed particles in a world grown timeless.

He kept telling himself that the man must die. It was foolish; for he knew that he was going to kill him. Whether he was caught or not, paid the penalty or not, mattered little. Nothing counted any more but that foot, this man whom his blow must paralyse before he could resist: there must be no resistance, or he would call out.

Chen's eyelids fluttered as he stood there, and the thought came to him, rose up till it sickened him, that he was not the

fighter he expected, but one performing a sacrifice. And to more than the gods of his own choosing. This was his offering to the Revolution, but in its train black horrors would rise from the abyss, till the crushing anguish of that night would pale into insignificance before them. 'Assassination isn't like ordinary killing: far from it. . . .' In his pockets his hands waited doubtfully; in the right he held a razor, closed; in the left a short dagger. He stuffed them in as far as possible, as though without that aid the darkness were insufficient to conceal his doings. The razor was safer, but Chen knew that he could never bring himself to use it: he was less revolted by the dagger. The back of the razor was digging into his clenched fingers, and he let go of it; the dagger lay naked in his pocket, without a sheath. He changed it over into his right hand, his left dropping down on to the woollen surface of his singlet, and clinging there. He raised his right arm a little, amazed that the silence remained unbroken around him, as if some catastrophe should have been precipitated by his gesture. But nothing happened, nothing at all: he was still in control.

That foot lay there like a sleeping animal. Was there a body on the end of it? 'Am I going crazy?' He must see that body. Have a look at it, look at its head; to do that he had to move into the light, let his squat shadow fall across the bed. How much resistance did flesh offer? Suddenly Chen jabbed the dagger into his left arm. He was almost beyond realizing that it was his arm, but the pain, the certainty of punishment if the sleeper should awake, brought him back to reality for a moment. Punishment was preferable to this atmosphere of insanity. He went closer. It was undoubtedly the man he had seen two hours earlier, with the light full on him. All at once the foot, which was almost touching Chen's trousers, turned round like a key in a lock; then went back to its old position, and was still again. Perhaps as he slept he could feel him there, though it didn't fully rouse him. . . . Chen shuddered: an insect was running over his skin. No; it was the blood which was

coming trickling out of his arm. The feeling of sea-sickness persisted.

One move and the man would have ceased to live. To kill him was nothing; it was touching him that was impossible. And the blow had to be delivered with the utmost precision. The sleeper, lying on his back in his European style of bed, wore only a short pair of pants; but his ribs were invisible under the loose flesh. Chen would have to take aim from the position of the man's nipples. He knew how difficult it is to strike directly downwards. He held the blade of the dagger up in the air, but the left breast was the farther from him; with the mesh of the mosquito-net in the way he would have to strike at arm's length – following a curve, like the swing in boxing. He altered the angle of the dagger, so that now the blade was horizontal. To touch this motionless body was as difficult as touching a corpse; possibly for the same reasons. As if invoked by the thought of a corpse, the man's breath rattled in his throat. Chen could not even draw back, his legs and arms had ceased to obey him. But the rattling noise became rhythmical: not a death-rattle, the man was snoring. At once he was alive again, vulnerable; and simultaneously Chen's sense of bafflement returned to him. The body slipped fractionally over to the right. Was he going to wake up at this point? With a blow hard enough to pierce a plank, Chen stopped him short, to the screech of slit muslin and a dull thud, commingled. Physically conscious to the tip of the steel blade, he felt the body jerk towards him, rebounding off the spring mattress. Furiously he stiffened his arm to hold it there; the legs swung up together to the chest, as if tied to it – then suddenly stretched out straight. He ought to strike again, but how was he to draw out the dagger? The body still lay on its side, unstably, and despite the convulsion that had just shaken it Chen had the impression of holding it down to the bed with his arm, on which he was still leaning the whole of his weight. Through the wide tear in the mosquito-net he could see the body quite clearly; the eyelids

were open – could he have woken then? – and the eyes themselves showed white. Blood began to seep along the blade of the dagger, looking black in this unreal light. There seemed to be life in the very weight of this body, ready to fall to right or left. Chen could not let go of the dagger. Along its blade, up his stiffened arm, across his smarting shoulder, a sensation of the utmost horror found its way, from the body, deep into his chest; to his thumping heart, the only thing that moved in all the room. He stayed absolutely quiet; the blood which still flowed from his left arm seemed to belong to the dead man. For although there was no external change, he knew for certain that the man was dead. Scarcely breathing, he held this thing still on its side in the dim, unaltered light, in the emptiness of the room. There was nothing to indicate a struggle – not even the rent in the muslin, which seemed to have been split into two strips; only the silence and an overpowering tipsiness in which he clung to his weapon, foundering, far from the world of the living. His fingers clenched tighter and tighter, but the muscles of his arm relaxed and its whole length swung loose, like a rope. It was not fear that possessed him, it was a frightful and at the same time solemn sensation of panic such as he had not known since childhood; he was alone with death, alone in a place where no man was, feebly overcome at once by horror and by the taste of blood.

He managed to open his hand. The body rolled gently over on to its stomach; as the hilt stood crooked, a dark stain began to spread on the sheet, growing like a living thing. And next to it, becoming larger too as it became larger, he saw the shadow of two pointed ears.

The door was a good way off, the balcony closer; but it was from the balcony that shadows came. Although Chen did not believe in evil spirits he stood rooted where he was. Something miaowed; he gave a start. Half-way to deliverance, he now dared to look. A gutter cat glided in from the balcony on silent pads, its eyes fixed on him. A furious rage shook Chen as this

shadow advanced towards him, anger not against the animal itself but against its presence here; nothing that had life ought to enter this strange region into which he himself had sunk; this thing that had observed him knife in hand barred the way of his return to reality. He opened the razor, took a step forward; the creature fled through the window. Chen dashed after it – and found himself face to face with Shanghai.

To his tortured mind the night seemed to froth up into an enormous swirl of black smoke, full of sparks; then, as his breathing came more smoothly, it took shape, and through the rifts in the clouds stars clicked into place, dragging him back as he met the colder outdoor air, to all the ordered universe that they implied. A siren droned up the scale, then gave way to utter peace. Down below, right down, in the lights of midnight which the glistening tarmac and the pale lines of rails threw back through a yellow fog, throbbed the world which does not kill. There were millions of lives in that world, and each one had cast him out: but what did their puny outlawry avail against the relief he felt that death was leaving him, the feeling that it welled out from him in long gushes, like that man's blood? All those shadows, flickering or still, went to make up Life; like the river, like the sea that was too far off to be visible – the sea. . . . At last he breathed as deep a breath as he could take, and as his chest expanded he felt with immeasurable relief that Life had received him again – relief that was near to tears, that was almost as shattering as all that he had just passed through. 'Best get out of this . . . ' He remained, watching the cars go by, and the people moving quickly past in the lighted street underneath; like a blind man who sees again, like a starving man eating. Greedily, madly he wanted Life; he would have liked to touch those bodies. The screech of a siren split the air, on the far side of the river: the night-shift coming off duty at the Arsenal. If the Workers were stupid enough to go and turn out arms that were destined to kill the men who fought for them – then let them! Was that brightly

lit town to be held for ever by her military dictator, be farmed out for ever, like so much livestock, to War Lords and Western commerce? His murderous deed was worth many days' output from the arsenals of China. The approaching attempt to place Shanghai in the hands of the Revolutionaries would not have two hundred rifles behind it. If the short carbines (almost three hundred in number) which the dead entrepreneur had just arranged to sell to the Government were thrown in too, the chances of the rebels would be doubled, for their first step would be to seize the arms of the police for their own troops. But during the last ten minutes, Chen had not once thought about that.

And he hadn't got the paper yet – the paper for which he had killed that man. He went back, as though he were going back to prison. The clothes were hanging at the foot of the bed, beneath the netting. He went through the pockets. A handkerchief, some cigarettes. . . . No wallet. The room looked just the same: mosquito-net, white walls, clear-cut rectangle of light; so murder doesn't make any difference to things. . . . He felt under the pillow, shutting his eyes. The wallet was there, very small, hardly bigger than a little note-case. Distraught (was it fear or shame?), for the sensation of the head gently pressing down the pillow was horribly eerie, he reopened his eyes: there was no blood on the bolster, and the man didn't look in the least dead. For a moment he almost thought he would have to kill him again. But a glance at the staring eyes and the blood on the sheets reassured him. He drew back into the light, to examine the wallet: the light came from a restaurant, full of people gambling. He found the paper, put it back in the wallet, then almost ran across the room, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket. A corridor of the hotel – he tried to walk slower – with no lift there at the end. Should he ring? He walked down. Down below, where the dancing went on, and the bar and billiard-rooms were to be found, ten or a dozen people stood waiting for the lift, which was coming

down. He mingled with them. 'The little piece in red is an absolute peach!' said the man next to him, in English. He was Burmese or Siamese by the look of him, and rather drunk. Chen wanted both to strike him, to make him hold his tongue, and to embrace him because he was alive. He mumbled an incoherent answer; the other man leered at him, and tapped him on the shoulder. 'He thinks I'm drunk too. . . .' But the man was starting to speak again. 'I don't know foreign languages,' said Chen, in Pekinese. The other man said no more, but gazed with interest at this young man who wore a neat woollen sweater, but no collar. Chen was opposite the mirror inside the lift. His face showed no signs of the murder. . . . There was nothing but fatigue in his face: the features were unchanged, more Mongolian than Chinese: strongly marked cheekbones, nose very flattened, but with a slight ridge like a beak; even his massive shoulders and thick, dominating lips betrayed nothing untoward; only his arm, sticky when he bent it, and hot. . . . The lift stopped. He got out with the others.

1.30 A.M.

He bought a bottle of mineral water, and called a taxi: a closed one, in which he washed his arm and bound it up with a handkerchief. A faint gleam came from the deserted tramlines and the puddles left by the showers of the afternoon. It was a reflection of the glow in the sky. Without knowing why, Chen looked up at it: how much nearer he had been to it a moment before, when he had first noticed the stars! As his exaltation diminished and he came gradually back to ordinary life, they seemed to become more and more remote.

At the end of the street were machine-guns, almost as grey as the puddles, and a bright barrier of bayonets, carried by

silent shadows. It was the picket which showed where the French Concession began. The taxi went no farther. Chen showed his faked passport, passing himself off as an electrician at work in the Concession. The official just glanced at it ('It certainly doesn't show what I've just done'), and let him pass. In front of him rose up the Avenue des Deux-Républiques, which marked the boundary of the Chinese town. Alone in the silence. Laden with all the noises of the largest town in China, waves of sound came rumbling up and died away, like vibrations coming from the depths of the earth, to lose themselves at the bottom of a well: the noises of men in arms, and the last fretful tossings of a multitude which has no wish to sleep. But men were far away; the world made no contact here. There was only the night, and Chen gave himself up to it instinctively, as if to a sudden offer of friendship. Murder was quite in keeping with that restless world of the night; a world in which men played no part, a timeless world. Would there ever be another dawn? Would those crumbling tiles ever see the light again, or all those passages in whose depths lanterns gave a glimpse of windowless walls, mazes of telegraph wires? Murder had absorbed him into a world of its own, and he found it as hard to escape from it as from the heat itself. There was no sign of life. Not the least movement, no noise anywhere near; not even the cries of hawkers, not even the barking of stray dogs.

At last he came to a miserable little shop: *Lou You Shen and Hemmelrich, gramophones.* He must come back to reality now. . . . He waited for a few minutes, but something of the spell still remained. Then he knocked on one of the shutters. The door opened almost at once. The place was full of gramophone records, carefully arranged, so that it looked like a sort of little library: beyond, in the back part of the shop, large and bare, sat four men in shirt-sleeves. The lamp swayed as the door was shut: the faces disappeared, appeared again: on the left Lou You Shen, completely rotund; then Hemmelrich, a battered hulk of a boxer, with shaven head, broken nose, and sagging

shoulders. Behind, in the shadow, Katow. On the right, Kyo Gisors; as the lamp swung over his head it showed up his mouth in strong relief, drooping at the corners like a Japanese print: when it swung away the shadows shifted, and the face which had looked half-caste became almost European. The lamp grew gradually steadier, and Kyo's two faces reappeared one after the other, less and less dissimilar.

Desperately anxious for information, they all looked at Chen with pathetic earnestness, but no one spoke. He looked down at the stones in the floor, spattered with sunflower seeds chewed and expectorated. He could give these men information, but he could never put into words all that was in his mind. The way the body had resisted the knife obsessed him, it was so unlike his own arm: surprise had given it impetus at the last moment, or the weapon would not have gone in very far. 'I should never have thought it would be so hard.' . .

'It's all right,' he said.

In the room, face to face with the body, once full realization had come to him, he had been quite certain: he had *felt* Death.

He held out the order for the delivery of the arms. It was very long-winded. Kyo started to read it.

'Yes, but . . .'

They all waited. Kyo showed no impatience or irritation; he hadn't moved; perhaps he looked just a little tense. But every one knew that he had discovered something which shook him to the core. At last he got the words out.

'They haven't been paid for. *Payable on Delivery.*'

Chen felt a sudden rage, as if he had stupidly let some one steal something from him. He had been convinced that that piece of paper was the one he was looking for, but had had no time to read it. In any case, he couldn't have done anything about it. He took the wallet out of his pocket and gave it to Kyo: some photos and receipts; nothing else.

'I think we'll be able to fix it up with one of the Shock Sections,' said Kyo.

'As long as we can manage to climb on board,' answered Katow, 'it'll be all right.'

Silence. Their presence was breaking down Chen's ghastly feeling of isolation. It yielded gently, like an uprooted plant which still clings to the ground with a few slender threads. And as he gradually drew nearer to them it seemed to him that he suddenly knew them for the first time – as he had known his sister after his first visit to a brothel. They had the feeling of strain which comes to gamblers at the end of a night's play.

'Did it go well?' asked Katow, at last putting down his record and moving into the light.

Chen looked at that honest, comic, Russian face, but did not answer: those mocking little eyes and upturned nose, which even that light could not make impressive. *He* knew what death meant, if the other didn't. Katow got up; he went and looked at the cricket asleep in its tiny cage; Chen might have reasons for his silence. Chen was watching the light swinging; it relieved the strain. The cricket had been woken up by his arrival, and its shrill chirping joined in, as the swaying shadow wobbled to a standstill.

The memory of the hardness of that body haunted him; he felt an urge to press his arm hard up against the first thing he came across. Speech would shatter the intimacy of his communion with death.

'What time did you leave the hotel?' asked Kyo.

'Twenty minutes ago'

Kyo looked at his watch: twenty to one.

'Good. Let's get things settled here, and move on.'

'I want to see your father, Kyo.'

'You know that it is probably arranged for tomorrow?'

'All the better.'

They all knew what *it* meant: the arrival of the revolutionary troops at the railway termini, which was to be the signal for the rising.

'All the better,' said Chen again. Like all violent sensations

murder and danger left a void behind them: he burned to experience them anew.

'Still – I want to see him.'

'Go along there tonight: he never goes to sleep before dawn.'

'I'll go about four o'clock.'

Whenever he sought support and sympathy, Chen instinctively went to old Gisors. He knew that he made a very painful impression on Katow by doing so – the more so because it had nothing to do with conceit. He knew it, but it had no effect on him. Kyo was one of the organizers of the revolt, a man trusted by the inner council; Chen no less; but he would never take life in cold blood. Katow was nearer to him, Katow who had been condemned to five years' penal servitude in 1905 when a medical student, for having attempted to blow up the prison gates at Odessa. Still . . .

The Russian was eating little sugar sweets, one after another, without taking his eyes off Chen; and Chen had a sudden feeling of greed. Now that he had killed a man, he had the right to feel anything he wanted. The right. Even if the feeling was a childish one. He put out his spade-like hand. Katow thought that he wanted to leave, and gave it a shake. Chen stood up. Perhaps it was just as well: he couldn't do anything more; Kyo had all the information – it was for him to act on it. As far as he, Chen, was concerned, he knew well enough what he wanted now. He went to the door, but came back again.

'Pass me some of the sweets.'

Katow gave him the bag. He wanted to divide them; no paper. He poured them out into the palm of his hand, crammed them into his mouth and went out munching.

'It must have been a pretty tricky business,' said Katow.

He had been a refugee in Switzerland from 1905 till 1912, when he returned secretly to Russia, and though he spoke French without any trace of a Russian accent, his vowels were blurred at times, as if by way of compensation for the precise

articulation which became necessary when he talked Chinese. When he stood almost underneath the lamp like that, the light hardly touched his face. Kyo liked him best that way: the whimsical, ingenuous expression which Katow's small eyes and even more his upturned nose gave him struck him all the more forcibly because it differed so completely from his own features: it often irritated him.

'Let's get it over,' he said. 'Have you got the records, Lou?'

Wreathed in smiles, bobbing up and down in his anxiety to please, Lou You Shen submitted two records to Katow for examination, then placed one on each gramophone. It was essential to start them off together.

'One, two, three,' counted Kyo.

The scratching of the first record rendered the other one inaudible; suddenly it stopped – and they heard: send. Then it went on again. Another word came through: thirty. More scratching. Then: men. Scratching.

'Excellent,' said Kyo. He stopped them, then started off the first record alone. Scratch, silence, scratch. Stop.

'Good. Label that as a dud.'

Now the other one: Third lesson. To run, to walk, to go, to come, to send, to receive. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, one hundred. I saw the men running. There are twenty women here. Thirty . . .

Those imitation language-records were excellent: the counterfeit label was beautifully done. Kyo was worried though:

'Didn't my voice record well?'

'Excellently, splendidly.'

Lou began to smile; Hemmelrich didn't seem to be taking any notice. From upstairs came the cries of a child in pain.

Kyo couldn't make it out:

'Then why has it been changed?'