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MAN'S FATE

André Malraux

**A superb and enduring novel
on the Chinese revolution**



MAN'S FATE
(La Condition Humaine)

by André Malraux
Translated by Haakon M. Chevalier

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MAN'S FATE
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Principal Characters

CH'EN TA ERH, a Chinese terrorist.

KYO GISORS, half French and half Japanese, one of the organizers of the Shanghai insurrection.

OLD GISORS, Kyo's father, one-time Professor of Sociology at the University of Peking.

MAY GISORS, Kyo's wife.

BARON DE CLAPPIQUE, a Frenchman, a dealer in antiques, opium and smuggled wares.

KATOV, a Russian, one of the organizers of the insurrection.

HEMMELRICH, a German, a phonograph-dealer.

LU YU HSÜAN, his partner.

KAMA, a Japanese painter, Old Gisors' brother-in-law.

FERRAL, President of the French Chamber of Commerce and head of the Franco-Asiatic Consortium.

VALÉRIE, Ferral's mistress.

MARTIAL, Chief of the Shanghai Police.

KÖNIG, Chief of Chiang Kai-shek's Police.

VOLOGIN } Communist officials at Hankow.

POSSOZ }

PEI } young Chinese terrorists.

SUAN }

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MAN'S FATE
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Part One

March 21, 1927

Twelve-thirty midnight

SHOULD he try to raise the mosquito-netting? Or should he strike through it? Ch'en was torn by anguish: he was sure of himself, yet at the moment he could feel nothing but bewilderment—his eyes riveted to the mass of white gauze that hung from the ceiling over a body less visible than a shadow, and from which emerged only that foot half-turned in sleep, yet living—human flesh.

The only light came from the neighboring building—a great rectangle of wan electric light cut by window-bars, one of which streaked the bed just below the foot as if to stress its solidity and life.

Four or five klaxons screamed at once. Was he discovered?

Oh, what a relief to fight, to fight enemies who defend themselves, enemies who are awake!

The wave of uproar subsided: some traffic jam (there were still traffic jams out there in the world of men—). He found himself again facing the great soft smudge of gauze and the rectangle of light, both motionless in this night in which time no longer existed.

He repeated to himself that this man must die—stupidly, for he knew that he would kill him. Whether he was caught or not, executed or not, did not matter. Nothing existed but this foot, this man whom he must strike without letting him defend himself—for if he defended himself, he would cry out.

Ch'en was becoming aware, with a revulsion verging on nausea, that he stood here, not as a fighter, but as a sacrificial priest. He was serving the gods of his choice; but beneath his sacrifice to the Revolution lay a world of depths beside which this night of crushing anguish was bright as day. "To assassinate is not only to kill, alas. . . ." In his pockets, his fumbling right hand clutched a folded razor, his left a short dagger. He thrust them as deeply as possible, as though the night did not suffice to hide his actions. The razor was surer, but Ch'en felt that he could never use it; the dagger disgusted him less. He let go the razor, the back of which pressed against his clenched fingers; the dagger was naked in his pocket. As he passed it over to his right hand, his left hand dropped against the wool of his sweater and remained glued to it. He raised his right arm slightly, petrified by the continued silence that surrounded him, as though he expected some unseen thing to topple over. But no—nothing happened: it was still up to him to act.

That foot lived like a sleeping animal. Was it attached to a body? "Am I going mad?" He had to see that body—see it, see that head. In order to do that—enter the area of light, let his squat shadow fall upon the bed.

What was the resistance of flesh? Convulsively, Ch'en pressed the point of the dagger into his left arm. The pain (he was no longer aware that it was his own arm), the certainty of torture if the sleeper were to awaken, released him for an instant: torture was better than this atmosphere of madness. He drew close. Yes, this was the man he had seen, two hours before, in broad daylight. The foot, which nearly touched Ch'en's trousers, suddenly turned like a key, then turned back to its position in the silent night. Perhaps the sleeper felt his presence, but not enough to wake up. . . . Ch'en shuddered: an

insect was running over his skin! No!—blood trickling down his arm. And still that seasick feeling.

One single motion, and the man would be dead. To kill him was nothing: touching him was the impossible. And it was imperative to stab with precision.

The sleeper, lying on his back in the European-style bed, was wearing only a pair of short drawers, but his ribs were not visible under the full flesh. Ch'en had to take the nipples as gauging points. He tried holding the dagger with the blade up. But the left breast was the one away from him: he would have to strike at arm's length through the mosquito-netting. He changed the position of the dagger: blade down. To touch this motionless body was as difficult as to stab a corpse, perhaps for the same reason. As if called forth by this notion of a corpse, a grating sound suddenly issued from the man's throat. Ch'en could no longer even draw back, for his legs and arms had gone completely limp. But the rattle became regular: the man was not dying, he was snoring. He again became living, vulnerable; and at the same time, Ch'en felt himself ridiculed. The body turned gently towards the right. Was he going to wake up now? With a blow that would have split a plank Ch'en struck through the gauze. Sensitive to the very tip of the blade, he felt the body rebound towards him, flung up by the springs of the bed. He stiffened his arm furiously to hold it down: like severed halves drawn to each other, the legs sprang together towards the chest; then they jerked out, straight and stiff. Ch'en should have struck again—but how was he to withdraw the dagger? The body, still on its side, was unstable, and instead of being reassured by the convulsion which had just shaken it, Ch'en had the impression of pinning it down to the bed with this short blade on which his whole weight rested.

Through the great gash in the mosquito-netting, he could see very clearly; the eyelids open—had he been able to wake up?—the eyeballs white. Around the dagger the blood was beginning to flow, black in that deceptive light. In its balanced weight the body still held life. Ch'en could not let go the handle. A current of unbearable anguish passed between the corpse and himself, through the dagger, his stiffened arm, his aching shoulder, to the very depth of his chest, to his convulsive heart—the only moving thing in the room. He was utterly motionless; the blood that continued to flow from his left arm seemed to be that of the man on the bed. Although outwardly nothing had happened, he was suddenly certain that this man was dead. Scarcely breathing, he held the corpse down—as firmly as ever—on its side—held it thus in the dim motionless light, in the solitude of the room.

Nothing bore witness to the struggle—not even the tear in the gauze, which seemed to have been divided into two strips—nothing but the silence and the overpowering intoxication into which he was sinking. Cut off from the world of the living, he clung to his dagger. His grip became increasingly tighter, but his arm-muscles relaxed and his entire arm began to tremble. It was not fear—it was a dread at once horrible and solemn, which he had not experienced since childhood: he was alone with death, alone in a place without men, limply crushed by horror and by the taste of blood.

He managed to open his hand. The body sagged gently, face down, pressing the handle sideways. A dark blot began to spread on the sheet, grew like a living thing. And beside it, growing too, appeared the shadow of two pointed ears.

The door was at a distance, the balcony was nearer; but it was from the balcony that the shadow loomed.

Although Ch'en did not believe in spirits, he was paralyzed, unable to turn round. He jumped: mewling! Half relieved, he dared to look: it was an alley-cat. Its eyes riveted on him, it stalked through the window on noiseless paws. As the shadow advanced, an uncontrollable rage shook Ch'en—not against the creature itself, but against its presence. Nothing living must venture into the wild region where he was thrown: whatever had seen him hold this dagger prevented him from returning to the world of men. He opened the razor, took a step forward: the creature fled by way of the balcony. Ch'en pursued it. . . . He found himself suddenly facing Shanghai.

In his anguish the night seemed to whirl like an enormous smoke-cloud shot with sparks; slowly it settled into immobility, as his breathing grew less violent in the cooler outside air. Between the tattered clouds, the stars resumed their endless course. A siren moaned, and then became lost in the poignant serenity. Below, far down, the midnight lights, reflected through a yellow mist by the wet macadam, by the pale streaks of rails, shimmered with the life of men who do not kill. Those were millions of lives, and all now rejected his; but what was their wretched condemnation beside death, which was withdrawing from him, which seemed to flow away from his body in long draughts, like the other's blood? All that expanse of darkness, now motionless, now quivering with sparks, was life, like the river, like the invisible sea in the distance—the sea. . . .

Breathing at last to the very depth of his lungs, he seemed to be returning to that life with infinite gratitude—ready to weep, as much upset as he had been a few moments before. "I must get away. . . ." He remained, watching the stir of the cars, of the passers-by running

beneath him in the lighted street, as a blind man who has recovered his sight looks, as a starved man eats. Avidly, with an unquenchable thirst for life, he would have liked to touch those bodies. A siren filled the whole horizon, beyond the river: the relief of the night workers, at the arsenal. Stupid workers, coming to manufacture the fire-arms destined to kill those who were fighting for them! Would this illuminated city remain possessed like a field of battle, its millions hired for death, like a herd of cattle, to the war-lords and to Western commerce? His act of murder was equal to incalculable hours of work in the arsenals of China. The insurrection which would give Shanghai over to the revolutionary troops was imminent. Yet the insurrectionists did not possess two hundred guns. Their first act was to be the disarming of the police for the purpose of arming their own troops. But if they obtained the guns (almost three hundred) which this go-between, the dead man, had negotiated to sell to the government, they doubled their chances of success. In the last ten minutes, however, Ch'en had not even given it a thought.

And he had not yet taken the paper for which he had killed this man. He went back into the room, as he would have returned to a prison. The clothes were hanging at the foot of the bed, under the mosquito-netting. He searched the pockets. A handkerchief, cigarettes . . . No wallet. The room remained the same: the mosquito-net, the blank walls, the clear rectangle of light; murder changes nothing. . . . He slipped his hand under the pillow, shutting his eyes. He felt the wallet, very small, like a purse. In shame or horror—for the light weight of the head through the pillow was even more disturbing—he opened his eyes: no blood on the bolster, and the man did not look at all dead. Would he have to kill him again

then? But already his glance, encountering the white eyes, the blood on the sheets, reassured him. To ransack the wallet he withdrew towards the light, which came from a restaurant filled with gamblers. He found the document, kept the wallet, crossed the room almost on the run, locked the door with a double turn, put the key in his pocket. At the end of the hotel corridor—he made an effort to slow his pace—no lift. Should he ring? He walked down. On the floor below, that of the dance-hall, the bar and the billiard-room, ten or more persons were waiting for the lift which was just stopping. He followed them in. “The dancing-girl in red is damned good-looking!” said the man next to him in English, a slightly drunk Burman or Siamese. Ch’en had the simultaneous impulse to hit him in the face to make him stop, and to hug him because he was alive. Instead of answering he mumbled incoherently; the other tapped him on the shoulder with a knowing air. “He thinks I’m drunk too. . . .” But the man started to open his mouth again. “I don’t know any foreign languages,” said Ch’en in Pekingese. The other kept silent and, intrigued, looked at this young man who had no collar, but who was wearing a sweater of fine wool. Ch’en was facing the mirror in the lift. The murder left no trace upon his face. . . . His features—more Mongolian than Chinese, sharp cheekbones, a very flat nose but with a slight ridge, like a beak—had not changed, expressed nothing but fatigue; even to his solid shoulders, his thick good-natured lips, on which nothing unusual seemed to weigh; only his arm, sticky when he bent it, and hot. . . . The lift stopped. He went out with the group.

He bought a bottle of mineral water, and called a taxi, a closed car, in which he bathed his arm and bandaged

it with a handkerchief. The deserted rails and the puddles from the afternoon showers shone feebly. They reflected the glowing sky. Without knowing why, Ch'en looked up: how much nearer the sky had been a while back, when he had discovered the stars! He was getting farther away from it as his anguish subsided, as he returned to the world of men. . . . At the end of the street the machine-gun cars, almost as gray as the puddles, the bright streaks of bayonets carried by silent shadows: the post, the boundary of the French concession; the taxi went no farther. Ch'en showed his false passport identifying him as an electrician employed on the concession. The inspector looked at the paper casually ("What I have just done obviously doesn't show") and let him pass. Before him, at a right angle, the Avenue of the Two Republics, the limit of the Chinese city.

Isolation and silence. From here the rumbling waves carrying all the noises of the greatest city of China sounded infinitely remote, like sounds issuing from the bottom of a well—all the turmoil of war, and the last nervous agitations of a multitude that will not sleep. But it was far in the distance that men lived; here nothing remained of the world but night, to which Ch'en instinctively attuned himself as to a sudden friendship: this nocturnal, anxious world was not opposed to murder. A world from which men had disappeared, a world without end; would daylight ever return upon those crumbling tiles, upon all those narrow streets at the end of which a lantern lighted a windowless wall, a nest of telegraph wires? There was a world of murder, and it held him with a kind of warmth. No life, no presence, no nearby sound, not even the cry of the petty merchants, not even the stray dogs.

At last, a squalid shop: *Lu Yu Hsüan & Hemmelrich*,