THE WILL OF VILLON

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Winner of 1943 League of American Pen Women Prize

On a fall evening in 1462 the gray
began to creep up the narrow twisting
streets of Paris and filled with blackness the
carved mouths of the leering gargoyles
which danced on the lower wooden stories
of the houses. As the boy Jean called
"Bon soir," to his master, the keeper of the
hot baths, he could see over the roofs the
pointed towers of Notre Dame, tinted
scarlet by the setting sun. Paris was settling
for the evening, the criers, like himself,
were folding their wares and setting off for
home. The streets were filled with bourgeois
in cloth and furred velvet, with ladies in
their high coifs, with men-at-arms, ragged
and bearded, a juggler leading an ass with
cymbals, with monks and harlots and beg-
gars, all going off for the evening. Jean
was new in Paris and the noisy crowd
excited him, but it also slowed him and he
chose a back street which the master said
led to the Pomme de Pin.

But he frowned as he hurried up the
narrow street past a pair of bourgeois ladies
in tight-waisted bodices and heart-shaped
headdress. He was late for his appointment
with Pierre Metal at the tavern because he
had stopped after work to take one of the
hot baths he spent his day crying. But he
wasn't thinking of Pierre, though the pros-
pect of wine in a famous tavern like the
Pomme de Pin was exiting and he had
never been to any tavern. He was thinking
it would be wise for him to go straight
home and his steps slowed as he considered.
If he were late his father would beat him,
and besides it wasn't safe for a fellow to
go about alone at night if he didn't know
which street to take. He stopped and look-
ed around. He wasn't even sure which

street he was on now. Slowly he lifted
one foot to scratch the calf of his other leg,
thinking. Then suddenly, he felt a push on
the shoulder and lost his balance to sit
sprawling in the mud of the gutter.
"Mon dieu," he gasped, picking himself up
quickly.

As he stood up he saw that one of three
students in long black robes had pushed
him. The man had a thin dark face and a
long nose which creased as he laughed
down at the boy. "I didn't know cranes
had such bad balance," he cried to his
friends.

"Brat. Watch out for your betters,"
growled one of them.

"Poor child. Has fleas no doubt," said
the other, and he linked his arms through
his friends' and they went on laughing,
their thumbs thrust in their belts, their
hoods pulled low.

Jean, his face hot, quivered inside with
fury and looked after them. How could
they be so smug and cruel in their black
gowns. He would be in the University in
October but never, never would he behave
like that. The new breeches his mother
had made him were ruined and his father
would certainly beat him. His throat
tightened as he looked down and saw the
damage he had suffered. All of one leg, the
inside of the other and the seat of his
breeches were coated with the evil-smelling
blackness of the slime and his hands were
stiffening with it. Desperately he looked
up and down the darkening street but
there was no one in sight now save a beggar
dragging himself back to his hole and, in
the next block, a squad of the Guet Bourge-
ois going on night duty. The thud of their
feet tramping on the stones had a hollow sound in the settling quiet of the evening. "Mary help me," he thought miserably.

For a few minutes he stood there thinking. For fear of his father he couldn't go home now, but he would have to find some place to stay. Idly he watched some men light a smoky cresset at the corner.

"Fine night tonight, Jules," said one of them, looking up at the sky.

"Aye. Fine for a job like ours. But with the moon they won't need the light." "Maybe we could let it go and take a stroll in the Charmal des Innocents," said the other laughing as they moved off.

"Mopsies out by the score tonight." Jean stuck his thumbs into his belt the way the students did and swaggered on down the street. The only way to go around covered with mud was to pretend you didn't care. Perhaps they'd think he was from the Quartier.

For about a block he succeeded in making himself feel nonchalant and walk as though mud were a part of his regular costume. But then he began to be afraid again. The spectre of his long-chinned father sitting inside the door with a stick plagued him. And it seemed stupid that since he was out he couldn't be having a fine time at the Pomme de Pin with Pierre.

His legs began to be stiff and uncomfortable and he didn't know where he was. Oh, why had they ever come to this disease of Paris. Then he came out at an intersection in front of a walled enclosure with a gate. Over it were letters; St. Benoit de Bien-tourne, it said. Jean sighed. This must be a cloister of some sort, he thought. At least it was a definite place. He could stay here and in the morning ask someone how to get back to the baths.

In the square in front of the gate there was a canopied stone fountain, and he stopped to wash his hands. Then a young priest and a gallant in soft fawn Cordovan-leather boots came out of the gate and looked him over curiously and he felt his whole body grow hot with the shame of his filth. But they had left the gate a little open and Jean decided to go in. Pushing the gate cautiously he went in and up the paved road. Then he saw a stone seat with a carved head-piece under the lighted clock of the chapel of St. Benoit. He could spend the night here, he thought with a smile. It was exactly ten minutes less than nine o'clock, and the moon had risen.

For a long time he sat there, thinking. When he told his father he had been lost, perhaps he wouldn't beat him. It was a pleasant evening. It would be wonderful to go into the University in October. For five years he had been clerk to Father Mourne in the little village of Corbeil near Paris and the priest had arranged for his entrance. But in the meantime his father said that if thirteen were old enough for the University it was too old to be idle and until he started to school he must earn his living. So he had gotten him the job at the baths. Father Mourne had protested, but he had said it wouldn't be bad for the boy to get some taste of life.

It wasn't a bad job, crier of the baths. He was learning about life with an almost dizzying rapidity, and even though his throat grew dry from chanting

\begin{verbatim}
Seignor, qu'or vous alez baignier
Et estuver sans delaier:
Li bain sont chaut; c'est sans mentir,
\end{verbatim}

there was no monotony to the work yet. And it wouldn't last long. In little more than a month he would be wearing a black robe and taking his minor orders in the church. That was the necessary prerequisite for enrollment. He picked up a stick and in the light of the flambeau under the clock began to write in the dirt. Jean
Poulet, he wrote, Student of the University. It would look well. Father Jean Poulet... Bishop of Paris, Jean de Poulet, he wrote. It would not be impossible. He would ride on a milk-white mule, purple-gloved and amethyst-ringed, blessing the people, with organs thundering and bells clashing and singing, and men chanting Tu es sacerdos. Then he laughed aloud. Jean Poulet, he wrote, Estuver, caller of the hot baths.

The sound of dry, racked coughing disturbed him and he looked up. A man had come in through the gate to the cloister and was leaning, bent against the wall, his whole body shaking with the cough, and Jean's muscles tightened hearing the pain of it. Then the man spat and gave his head a little shake. He began to pace up and down by the gate and Jean squirmed a little. He was a devilish-looking fellow in rusty black and he seemed to be muttering something. He walked disjointedly with a limp. Maybe he was mad. Then he gave a sort of shrug and came over to sit down by Jean. The boy wanted to go, but he was afraid that would be impolite, so he sat there and picked at the mud on his leg, studying the man out of the corners of his eyes.

He was a long man, and very thin, so thin and so limp on the bench, he looked like a skeleton. The skin was stretched tautly over the cheek-bones and hung around his jaw in folds, and there was absolutely no hair on his face. His eyes looked dreadfully sunken and bitter beneath his hairless brows. Jean stared at the man and was vaguely disgusted, but a little fascinated. He was whispering something in a language which sounded like French but which had almost no comprehensible words. Every once in a while his mouth twisted up in a smile. He had a scar on his upper lip.

"Levez au bec, que ne soiez greffiz,

he was muttering. "Eschec, esch—" suddenly he stopped and looked at Jean. "Well?" he demanded.

"W--well, Monsieur?" stammered Jean.

"I'm interesting, I hope," the man said. His voice was very deep and satiric.

"I - I'm sorry, Monsieur," said Jean and swallowed stiffly.

"It's poetry," said the man bitterly. "It boils in me, and when I can't write it down I grow mad."

"That's dreadful," said Jean, feeling something was expected of him. "Eschec, eschec, pour le fardis!" he said, and then ran his hand over his bald head. "Do you have any wine?" he asked.

"No, Monsieur," said Jean.

The man shook his head impatiently.

"No. No, of course you don't," he said. Then he put his elbows on his knees and leaned his chin in his palms, looking down at the ground. "Eschec, eschec, pour le far— Did you write that?" he demanded excitedly, pointing to the letters in the dirt. Jean flushed, thinking of the conceit of the words.

"You can write?" he demanded.

Jean thrust out his foot and quickly erased the lines. "No, Monsieur," he said and rose.

"I will pay you to write something for me," the man said.

"I'm sorry, Monsieur," said Jean.

But the man grabbed his arm with one hand and held out the other. "See", he said. Jean looked at it and his throat closed with horror. It was bent and stiff, the joints so enlarged they looked as if the bones were twisted into knots under stretched yellow skin. "I burn with words and I cannot write for long," the man said feverishly.

"I -- I can't," said Jean miserably. He wasn't afraid of the man any more, but he
wanted to get away from him.

"Please," cried the man. "I'll pay you. It won't be much, but I'll pay you!"

Jean hesitated. It was foolish to trust strangers in Paris, his father said, but this man wanted only a small thing, and perhaps it might lessen his father's anger if he came home with extra sous.

"You -- you want me to write for you?" he asked.

"Yes," said the man eagerly. "My -- testament." He smiled a bit like a boy thinking of a hidden treasure.

"Will it take long?" asked Jean, frowning.

The man shrugged. "A month, perhaps --" he said.

Jean's eyes bulged. "A month?" he gasped.

"Possibly longer. Possibly not so long. Some I can do myself."

"Monsieur, I can't stay away from home a month." His mother might be softened into agreement but his father would lock him in a monastery first.

"Come during the day," he said impatiently.

"Monsieur, I have a job and I go into the University next month."

"Vierge cochon!" he swore. "Come in the evening then. Or not if you wish. Diable, I don't care," he said with a fierce weariness, and he hid his face in those terrible broken hands. Then he began to cough again and spat a great mouthful of phlegm between his legs. His knees, too, were enlarged, Jean saw. His eyes widened. This man must have been stretched on the rack, he thought coldly.

The man looked up then. "Well, go on. Waddle!" he said. "Go on!"

Jean still hesitated. "I -- I can't," he said reluctantly.

"Why not?" sneered the man. "Afraid?"

"I'm lost," admitted Jean.

He made a pushing motion with his hand. "Aach," he snorted, "ask someone."

"I -- I've ruined my breeches with mud and I can't go home." Jean felt himself grow hot again and wondered why he'd said that. He scrubbed his toe in the dirt.

The man looked at him a second and then began to laugh, and Jean shriveled inside. When he threw his head back, the boy saw he had very fine white teeth; but he hated him for his mockery. The croak of laughter ended in another coughing spell which left the man weak and panting. But his eyes still danced as he looked up at Jean. "You make me young again," he said weakly. "I spilled my first wine on my front and was afraid to go home."

It suddenly occurred to the boy that the man wasn't mocking him any longer. There was sympathy in his face. In spite of its decadence you could see it had been handsome in a lean way once. Jean was abruptly very sorry for him and the pity stuck in his throat like a lump.

The man pushed himself up with his palms. "Come with me," he said.

"Why?" asked Jean blankly.

"We'll get you dry and you can go along. It's too late for a child like you." Jean raised his chin. "I'm not a child," he said.

The man smiled. "Come on," he said.

Jean didn't know why he followed this stranger. He started without thought as if the man were his destiny, as though he'd followed him always. Then it did occur to him as strange but after all he had nothing a thief would want, and this offered a chance to clean his breeches. And maybe the man would show him which way to go home. He had to do something about it.

They went through the Cloister of St. Benoit, the main building a dark bulk against the sky, and crossed the grass under the trees to a little lane between houses. The air, in spite of the stench of Paris, had a spicy autumn smell and a leaf floated (7)
down to brush Jean's face as it fell. Then they came out of the cloister onto a street of larger houses, their windows gay orange squares, and across the street Jean saw the wide lighted door of a tavern, and dimly he could hear voices and singing. "The Mule," said the man with a sweeping gesture.

As they crossed the street a great man came to stand in the door. When he saw them he gave a loud whoop. "Villon!" he cried. Then to the people in the room behind him, "It's Francois Villon!"

"Hello Denis, you long-tailed frog," said the poet as they reached the door. Villon pushed Jean inside and followed to throw his arm about the boy's shoulder. Standing in the door he bellowed above the noise of the crowd, "Friends, this is my new clerk —" he looked at Jean and frowned. "My clerk, Fremin," he cried.


Jean pushed back the hood of his black robe and loosed the cloth at his neck. It was so hot inside the Mule you'd never know it was snowing outside. He tipped the tankard of mulled wine to his lips and looked around at the noisy, roaring crowd. It was early and no one was very drunk as yet, but they were noisy. There were other University students there, one of whom he knew, shouting lines from the Metamorphoses. One of them choked and had to be pounded loudly on the back, as Jean watched them. There were many of the evil-faced friends of Villon's thieving days, and looking at them Jean felt his throat tickle with laughter. Since he had been transcribing the Grand Testament for Villon, he couldn't look at these men without thinking of them in terms of the poet's mock will. Worn-out seat mats for funny little Pernet, the Bastard de la Barre; the fourteen casks of wine they'd stolen together for fat Denis Hesselin, cheating cards for the lean fingers of Chollet. And somewhere else he had left Chollet "my boots with uppers worn away." Captain Riou of the Archers was sitting with a frowsy girl at a corner chair. Jean smiled. Six wolves-head stewed in slop had been bequeathed to him.

Someone began to bellow a song in a thick voice and everyone took up the refrain. Jean looked at Villon, folded in the corner of the bench, his deep eyes moody and sullen as he peered out over the room. Now and then he shook violently with that ague which gripped him at intervals. What a strange man this Villon was, thought Jean. He was lewd, a drinker, a thief, afraid of God and of death, and by turns cruel and gay and melancholy. He had beaten Jean and laughed at him and wept on his shoulder these two months Jean had worked for him. And he'd spent the first week of November in the Chatelet being prosecuted for a small theft and another crime he'd committed years before. The old priest his foster-father had got him out of it and he'd come home, crawling with self-reproach, to write a bitter ballad which ended "Ill-gotten good is nobody's gain," and another with a verse that went something like:

Turn from your evil course I pray
That smell so foul in a decent nose.
Rhyme, rail, wrestle and cymbals play,
Flute and fool it in mummer's shows:
Along with the strolling players stray
From town to city without repose;
Act mysteries, farces, imbroglios:
Rob and ravish: what profit it?
Who gets the purchase, do you suppose?
Taverns and wenches, every whit!

Jean wasn't quite sure why he had left his home and his work to write for
Francois Villon, but the poet’s wit was so brilliant, his need of a clerk so great that Jean felt he couldn’t leave him. Besides there was a fascination to working for this great unpredictable man. However, the boy knew deep inside himself that when Villon was in prison he would have left him in spite of everything if it hadn’t been for the fact that his working for the notorious Villon gave him an aura of greatness at the University and even the older students cultivated him. It was rather fun to brag about the nights spent at all the famous averns, even though really no one paid any attention to him at the taverns and Villon let him have very little wine. He smiled. If his mother had known where he would spend much of his time and with what kind of people, she wouldn’t have been so willing to help him run away. She’d only thought of the degradation of having her son stand in the streets crying the virtue of hot baths.

Jean looked out over the room again. The rush-lights were guttering and the place already reeked with the odour of unwashed bodies and wine and greasy meat. Over-turned cups littered the tables and near him a young student had slipped to the floor and was snoring rhythmically, his head in a pool of wine. It was rather disgusting, decided Jean, but exiting. He smiled to see the expression of stoic endurance on the faces of two burgesses in a front corner.

Suddenly Villon sat up and pounded on the table with his fist. “I have a new Ballade du Jargon,” he bellowed over the noise of the room, and the shout doubled him up with the cough.

“Wine! Wine for Villon!” shouted the Bastard de la Barre.

“Wine and he’ll sing!” cried someone else and in a moment the whole room was roaring, “Wine for Villon!”

Jean smiled and held out his tankard but a rouged young woman with lines in her forehead snatched the mug from him. With a seductive swing of the hips she slid to Villon and, with one hand behind his head, held the tankard to his lips. “Wine for Villon — ” Jean heard her murmer as she pressed herself against him. He felt his neck grow hot.

The poet took a great gulp of the liquor, looking up sardonically at the woman, and then fiercely seized her around the waist and bent her back over his knee. As he kissed her violently, someone shouted “Vive Perette!” and Jean laughed with the rest. But his insides crawled. This was one thing he hadn’t got used to.

Then Villon lifted the girl onto the table and climbing on a stool, his right foot up beside her, began to sing, and the woman waved her tankard wildly to the rhythm.

The poet had taught Jean a little of the jargon of the streets since they had worked together and it was somewhat comprehensible to him, but he still couldn’t write it. Villon sat by the fire and painfully with his stiff hands scribbled some of his poems out himself. This one Villon had translated to him. Jean remembered the strange lines he’d hear him whisper that day on the bench. Eschec, eschec pour le fardis, he’d said. That meant Watch out, watch out for the hangman’s rope.

Wise in crimes
   Who at all time
   Have your hands in pockets deep,
      (Always tight)
   And in the night
   Shear the wool from the poor sheep,
   Only to live and care to keep:
   Your comrades are deprived of care.
   For all our prayer
   None hears us where
   We’re left in dungeons night and day
   By friends who are so far away.
But fear of the boots
And scolding coots
Forbid this toil and drudgery
So, happily,
You'll risk no more the dungeons grey
For friends who are so far away.

After the first verse the whole room was rocking back and forth to the swing of the words and on the second envoi everyone bellowed the lines. Jean laughed as he sang and the faces in the room began to slip a little. He was rather glad he had given up his wine. Villon's face seemed very large and distorted like a devil's as he looked at him. And the man who could write such jargon could also turn out a poem of pious prayer for his old mother which had the carved beauty of a rosary. He was unbelievable. It suddenly occurred to Jean that it was wicked for one sworn in the minor orders of the Church to sit in this brawling room with such a man. Eschec, eschec pour le fardis. Villon was the occasion of sin. Villon was the devil. He felt a little ill and shut his eyes.

After a while he felt better and looked up again. Villon was folded into his corner of the bench staring at the fire and absently rubbing the back of Perette's neck as she sat on the floor beside him. Why on earth he ever bothered with women Jean couldn't understand. He looked away delicately and began to cut pictures in the table with his thumbnail. Villon must have had a great many women, he thought. But just yesterday he'd written, "no more desire in me is hot. I've put my lute beneath the seat." Jean look back at his master and bit his lip. Why did Villon have to be such a fool.

But the poet suddenly thrust his foot into Perette's back and pushed her over. "Come on, Fremin," he snarled and started for the door. Jean was startled but he jumped up to follow him. The girl sat up on the floor and cried "Francios!" but Villon had already disappeared. Philosophically she shrugged and went to perch on Denis Hesselin's knee.

The poet was all the way across the street and Jean picked up the skirt of his robe and ran through the snow after him. "Wait, Villon," he called. Francois slowed to wait for him.

"Where are we going?" asked Jean.
"I'm hungry," said Villon.
"So am I," said Jean.

Francois fingered his chin thoughtfully. "Robin Dogis said he was giving supper to a couple of fellows tonight, didn't he? Let's go there," Dogis was fat and jolly and Jean rather liked him. But the other two, Hutin du Moustier and Roger Pichart, were rat-faced little men, and the boy knew they suffered the reputation of being rank bad hats. He wished Villon would keep away from people like those. His past had brought enough trouble and he was weak.

They were quiet as they made their way through the silent streets. Once Villon said, "Fremin, I'm sad tonight."

"Are you Monsieur?" asked Jean. The poet's face looked drawn and ill in the light of the Windows they passed. "What am I going to do, Fremin?" he asked then, desperately. "I never get out of one scrape but I'm in another."

"Eschec, eschec pour le fardis," murmured Jean suddenly. Then he cried, "Let's go home, Monsieur. It's your friends who get you in trouble."

Villon struck him, a slap that sent the blood stinging to his face and rocked him on his feet. Tears started to his eyes with the pain and he blinked. "I'm sorry Monsieur," he said.

Villon looked like a man who has kicked a dog in the dark. "Oh, Fremin," he cried, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he ran his hand over the top of his head in a futile gesture. "I -- I
don't know what I'm doing. I'm no good. Oh, Dieu, what will become of me?" The poet was almost weeping and Jean swallowed stiffly.

"It's all right, Monsieur. I forgive you. I spoke out of turn."

Villon sighed. "Sometimes I don't see how I can be such a wretch ... Fools that fat on cates have grown: Wine by the cask I can compare: I know all save myself alone';" he murmured. Then he straightened his shoulders. "I'm hungry. Let's hurry."

Jean sighed and quickened his step and the falling snow felt cool on the hottness of his cheek.

The supper was as bad as Jean had anticipated and he drank more wine and grew sleepy. But Villon had suddenly turned very gay.

"Little Fremin," he cried, "I will now teach you how you can eat though your purse is flat as a sucked egg."

Jean laughed a little fuzzily. "If I had to live on what you pay me, I'd be empty as an egg all the time," he said. There was a strange tight feeling in the back of his neck and he felt as if he were weaving a little in his chair. He nodded and his head felt very heavy.

"Wine's easy," said Villon judicially.

"Many's the time you've fooled old Robin Turgis," laughed Moustier.

"He's a well-filled egg."

Item: "If Robin Turgis come to me, I'll pay him fairly for his wine: But soft; if where I lodge find he, He'll have more wit than any rine;" quoted Villon dreamily. All the men laughed loudly and Jean almost fell off his seat. Just as the table was slipping away from him, he grabbed its edge. He looked at the faces of the men around the table and they all had a tendency to slide. All this frightened him a little and he pushed his tankard away. "I don't want to learn how to get any more wine," he said.

Villon laughed. "Well, fish then. You like fish."

Jean considered. His stomach felt queasy but he usually liked fish. "Fish — no thank you," he decided.

"Why not?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You're drunk," said Moustiers, "have some more wine."

"No thank you," said Jean, and Pichart pushed him and he floated down onto the floor and banged his head. But the floor was nice and soft and he was feeling strange turnings in his stomach, so he lay there quietly. Above him he heard the talk going on but it was growing blurred and Jean felt as though his stomach were leaving him, being pulled slowly down and down into blackness, and the rest of him with it.

Some time later Jean was aware that he was being propelled down a street between two men while two more did a staggering sort of dance in front of him. They kicked their legs and reeled from one side of the walk to the other in a way very disturbing to Jean's stomach. "Don't do that," he said crossly after a moment.

"Oh, so you're awake," asked the big man on his right whose voice was vaguely familiar.

"No," said Jean.

The man on the other side of him stopped to cough deeply and jarringly, and Jean knew that was Villon. But the fat one had gone on and by the pull of his walking, jerked the boy's arm from around Villon's neck. He staggered to his knees. "I'm drunk," he said then, "my father wouldn't like that. My father's a pious man."

Villon came up and hoisted his arm back around his neck. "Yes," he said, "and you'll go home after this in the evening. I've no patience with a man who can't hold his liquor. I didn't learn to till too late. But you're me too and you will, my child."
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Forbid this toil and drudgery
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The supper was as bad as Jean had anticipated and he drank more wine and grew sleepy. But Villon had suddenly turned very gay.

“Little Fremin,” he cried, “I will now teach you how you can eat though your purse is flat as a sucked egg.”

Jean laughed a little fuzzily. “If I had to live on what you pay me, I'd be empty as an egg all the time,” he said. There was a strange tight feeling in the back of his neck and he felt as if he were weaving a little in his chair. He nodded and his head felt very heavy.

“Wine's easy,” said Villon judicially.

“Many's the time you've fooled old Robin Turgis,” laughed Moustier.

“He's a well-filled egg.”

Item: “If Robin Turgis come to me I'll pay him fairly for his wine: But soft; if where I lodge find he, He'll have more wit than any rine,” quoted Villon dreamily. All the men laughed loudly and Jean almost fell off his seat. Just as the table was slipping away from him, he grabbed its edge. He looked at the faces of the men around the table and they all had a tendency to slide. All this frightened him a little and he pushed his tankard away. “I don't want to learn how to get any more wine,” he said.

Villon laughed. “Well, fish then. You like fish.”

Jean considered. His stomach felt queasy but he usually liked fish. “Fish — no thank you,” he decided.

“Why not?”

“I'm not hungry.”

“You're drunk,” said Moustiers, “have some more wine.”

“No thank you,” said Jean, and Pichart pushed him and he floated down onto the floor and banged his head. But the floor was nice and soft and he was feeling strange turnings in his stomach, so he lay there quietly. Above him he heard the talk going on but it was growing blurred and Jean felt as though his stomach were leaving him, being pulled slowly down and down into blackness, and the rest of him with it.

Some time later Jean was aware that he was being propelled down a street between two men while two more did a staggering sort of dance in front of him. They kicked their legs and reeled from one side of the walk to the other in a way very disturbing to Jean's stomach. “Don't do that,” he said crossly after a moment.

“Oh, so you're awake,” asked the big man on his right whose voice was vaguely familiar.

“No,” said Jean.

The man on the other side of him stopped to cough deeply and jarringly, and Jean knew that was Villon. But the fat one had gone on and by the pull of his walking, jerked the boy's arm from around Villon's neck. He staggered to his knees. “I'm drunk,” he said then, “my father wouldn't like that. My father's a pious man.”

Villon came up and hoisted his arm back around his neck. “You'll go home after this in the evening. I've no patience with a man who can't hold his liquor. I didn't learn to till too late. But you're me too and you will, my child.”
"I'm not a child," said Jean.

Villon snorted. Pichart and the other man in the uniform began to sing raucously and dance that disturbing dance again. Jean shut his eyes. The man on his right started to sing with the others and Jean suddenly remembered his name was Dogis. Robin or Robert Dogis. And the second little man was Hutin du Moustier, Sergeant of the Archers. He smiled and opened his eyes again. Then suddenly a window above Pichart opened and a boot came hurtling down. A night-capped head appeared in the casement and a voice bawled, "Be still down there. Let decent Christians sleep."

Pichart laughed shrilly. "Give us the other one, father," he called stooping unsteadily to pick up the boot, "Then we'll have a pair!"

They went on a moment and turned the corner. Jean heard Villon say, "Well, the Rue St.. Jacques. It won't be long."

The boy wondered why he sounded breathless.

Then suddenly Pichart gave a sort of whoop. "Look," he cried and Jean opened his eyes to see the little man was pointing to a middle-sized house with gargoyles by the doors and a light in the window. It was the house of the distinguished and pompous Master Francois Ferrebourg which stood next to Mule tavern.

"What is it," asked Hutin du Moustier thickly.

"Ferrebourg's still up." He ran in staggering little steps to the lighted window and looked in. Jean blinked and wished they'd get on. But they'd all stopped.

"Well," cried Roger Pichart heavily. He hiccuped and went on, "So the slaves of M. Ferrebourg work all night. Pap-fed blue-livers, work all night." Jean shut his eyes again. This was very silly. He'd known Villon shouldn't go to supper with those men. They all smelled dirty too. Even now in the open street Dogis smelled dirty. "Seignhor, qu'or vous alez baing-nier . . ." he thought, and began to chant it softly.

But a rising uproar from inside the house made him look up again. Pichart was still taunting M. de Ferrebourg's clerks but Jean couldn't hear what he said because the men inside had opened the casement and were shouting too now, and the invective buzzed in his ears. But then Pichart hoisted himself on the window-sill and spat into the room. Jean saw that quite clearly, and he heard the outraged shout of the clerks. Then Villon was bracing him against the wall and running, long-legged, to Pichart. "What are you trying to do, fool?" he cried as he ran. "You know I can't get mixed up in a brawl."

Pichart laughed his shrill laugh and began to dance again. He was like a Satan's imp and Jean wished for a confessor. It seemed to him that he had had a very wicked evening.

Then the door opened and Jean could see some men with a lighted candle. "What do you want, pigs?" demanded the foremost clerk.

Pichart gave a howl of rage. "Pig, you call me?" he screamed. "Do you want to buy any flutes?" And he danced forward jerkily, like a puppet.

"Fight?" sneered the clerk. "You certainly deserve a drubbing."

Apparently Pichart struck him, and then the clerks were tumbling down the steps and the sound of thudding blows and scuffling bodies on the crunching snow dazed Jean's ears. The men were grappling each other and weav ing back and forth, cursing and grunting. Jean slipped slowly down with his back to the wall to sit in the snow. There was too much movement. He felt sick. Then someone was knocked down into his lap, a pug-nosed little man with a lace collar and pimples. Because he felt he ought to do something to help
his friends, he doubled up his fist and began to pound the face of that man rhythmically, with his eyes on the fight.

With a shout two of the clerks dragged Hutin du Moustier up the steps of the house. "First blood! First booty!" shouted the clerks joyously.

But Hutin du Moustier struggled drunkenly with them and screamed. They picked him bodily off the ground and carried him by the arm-pits into the house kicking and shrieking, "Murder! They are killing me! I'm dead!"

Dogis bellowed "Hutin!" and dashed up the steps after them, but at that moment Maitre Francois Ferrebourg himself appeared in the door. He was a tall, grave man and he had on a long green velvet robe and a nightcap. Calmly he stood on the steps waiting for the man to rush up to him and then thrust out his hand and simply pushed Dogis back down the steps again. The big man sprawled backwards into the gutter and Master Ferrebourg followed him down to the street, very dignified, the light shining emerald on the back of his robe.

Then, like a wounded bear, Dogis had picked himself up and was rushing toward the Maitre with a knife in his hand, and the next thing Jean knew Dogis was stumbling past his feet, almost falling on the body of the clerk whose head he held, and Ferrebourg was lying on the ground.

The clerks chased after Dogis and in a moment the street was still again. Jean closed his eyes dizzyly for an instant and then looked to where Master Ferrebourg lay in the snow. Carefully as eggs he pushed the man in the lace collar off his legs and pulled himself up.

Very slowly he crept up to the body in the green robe, and his legs had a tendency to want to collapse under him. But he made them take him to the thing and he stood for a while staring down at it. The green robe was turning brown and there was a sticky crimson pool on the snow. The grave face was twisted a little and the mouth hung open, the jaw loose and crooked.

Then suddenly Jean heard voices in the street behind him and he stepped over the body and began to run, the snow crunching dryly beneath his feet.

Villon lived just across the street and he could have run home, but his horror was a sickness in his throat and he couldn't see the poet again. He'd go home, but he didn't know the way. There was nowhere to go—And as he ran he began to be afraid. That man was dead and men he knew had killed him. He had beaten the face of one of his supporters. Maybe—maybe that man had been dead too. He couldn't tell. Mon Dieu, what have I done, he thought desperately as he ran. I've killed a man. I'm a murderer—And sobbing, he stumbled on and on through the dark pursued by a twisted pimpled face with a crooked jaw. And the snow began to fall again and he didn't notice, and he grew sicker and sicker and the tears froze on his cheeks. Eschec, eschec pour le fardis, rang a dirge in his ears.

Then he saw he was at the river and the spired bulk of Notre Dame rose in front of him. He staggered on across the Pont Notre-Dame and on up the paved street until the vastness of the cathedral was above him. And he stumbled up the steps and into the nave and fell panting on his face. Never, never would he see that man again. Never!

The January sun was pale yellow over the roofs of Paris and pallid in the streets as Jean went slowly down the street from church, his mother leaning stiffly on his arm. "Father Froguet is a good man," she said.

"Yes," said Jean.
"Some day you'll be like Father Froguet, Jean," she said looking up at him. It was nice to have your mother look up at you. Made you feel like a man, though of course she wasn't very tall herself. "Someday maybe I'll be Bishop of Paris, mother," he said, and grinned inside remembering Jean de Poulet, Bishop of Paris scribbled in the dirt. Well, it still wasn't impossible, though you had to laugh to think it.

The sun on the Pont Notre-Dame was almost warm as they walked along between the high-gabled houses. When he'd first come to Paris they had seemed strange and beautiful with their ornate fronts and carved door-jambs. Now they were commonplace. Pigeons were making soft cooing sounds in the eaves and waddling stiff-necked in the street. Men and women, laughing and loud-voiced, bustled by but the birds unconcernedly avoided them. Between the peaked gables of the houses Jean could see gulls sailing against the white-blue sky. There was a rare spring quality to the sun, but the wind was cold. He pulled his cloak tight about his neck.

As they approached the end of the bridge, a Royal crier stopped in the square and blew a minor note on his curved horn. "Well, I wonder what's happened now," said Jean's mother and they stopped with the rest of the crowd to hear the news. Jean wasn't very interested and he stood watching the pigeons scrabble for a piece of bread. They were like the bravos of the Pomme de Pin, he though, grabbing with dirty fingers for the meat in the center bowl.

The crier, after the usual preface, was shouting the usual sort of news. Fish would be taxed a sou on each member. Jean sighed. That meant they wouldn't have fish so often now. He grinned. Of course there was always Villon's way.

"Notice on pain of imprisonment," the crier was bellowing, "Francois de Montcorbier, dit Villon of the city of Paris is hereby banished by order of his Most Gracious Majesty Louis XI, from the said city of Paris for a period of ten years. Any one after five o'clock of the third day hence, Wednesday—"

But Jean lost the rest of it in a wave of blankness. He hadn't heard anything definite of Villon for almost two months and to hear his name like that, out of the blueness of the winter sky, so to speak, took him by surprise. He shut his eyes trying to think. The last he'd seen of Villon was the sight of him wrestling like a bear with one of the clerks, the bodies rocking back and forth as they staggered in the snow. And that was before Hulin du Moustier had been captured. But Villon certainly hadn't been there at the end of the fight so he must have ducked out sometime previously. Of course Jean had reasoned all this out before, and even if he hadn't been unable to keep from asking questions, his friends at the University would have told him Villon was in prison again. But because the trials hadn't been public he hadn't been able to find out what had happened. Some said he was to be hanged, others that he had been released and had gone to the country. In spite of the fact that he had determined not to see the poet again, the thought of his going away had left a strange empty feeling in the boy. But perhaps he had been in prison these months. Jean shuddered, and his mother said. "Cold, son?"

He shook his head. At the trial they must have thought him so unimportant a witness that it wasn't even necessary to call him. Perhaps the men thought he had been unconscious, or had even forgotten about him. But how horrible if Villon had been in a cell all this time. He had lain in a dungeon at Meun for five years and things he had told the boy of the tortures
they had put him through and the horror of the dark and crawling hell of the place had given Jean more than one nightmare. And it must have been worse this time because it was unjustified. He had run away. Jean's mind was suddenly filled with chasing impressions of the poet coughing and bent with despair in a damp and airless cage, undergoing the water-torture and writhing with fear. And how would he live without Paris. It was his soul, his entire existence, the city with its life, the flux and mystery of it, wine and laughter and song. Jean was dimly aware of all those things as he stood on the bridge and watched the crier come to the end of his scroll and move on to another corner.

"Villon's that poet isn't he?" Jean's mother asked as they began to move off the bridge again.

"Yes," said Jean absently.

"He seemed pleasant enough when I spoke to him, but there was something—"

"I know."

"And he was such an ugly young man. He looked dissipated."

"Yes."

"He probably deserves it though he did have nice manners. I'm glad you left him Jean."

"Yes," said Jean.

"Too bad they're raising the tax on fish. You like fish so well. So do the rest of us for that matter."

Jean stopped. "Mother," he said, "would you mind going on home alone. I'll like to — to say goodbye to M. Villon."

His mother looked up at him. "But — to the prison?"

"He'll be home by now. I must see him."

"Well — I don't think you should — You're sure you can find your way?"

"I've done it often enough."

"Of course. Well — If you must, go on then," she said, but she frowned in a troubled way.

He bent to kiss her on the cheek gently.

"Goodbye mother," he said.

"Don't be late," she called after him.

The old priest was with Francois when Jean went in to the familiar room in the house with the Porte Rouge, but he left them together and went down stairs to read his breviary. Villon looked rather dreadful. He was more ragged and thin than he had been before, but his eyes were dancing with life.

"Jean!" he cried, "Petit Fremin!" and much to Jean's embarrassment threw his arms around the boy.

"I'm sorry you were put in prison, Monsieur," said Jean formally, disengaging himself.

"But you didn't come to see me," reproached the poet.

"I'm — I'm sorry. I didn't even know where you were."

"Well, that's all past. I'm free, Fremin. And the sun is green-gold on the roofs." He laughed. "A pretty bit of sentiment. You should write it down."

"But don't you mind leaving?" asked Jean curiously.

Villon shrugged. "One stays, one goes. And there's a little girl named Chouquette in Lyons—"

"Oh," said Jean. Somehow he was disappointed. He had come to make a great gesture and the man only prattled of girls.

Villon went to the carved-faced cabinet and pulled out the pile of parchment that was the Testament. "I've got new verses to add now," he said, and his face darkened as he stared down at them a moment. All the life had left his voice as he added, "I wrote them in prison."

"May I read them?" Jean asked more from politeness than curiosity. He wished he hadn't come.

Villon gave him a rather strange look,
satiric and bitter, and began to read abruptly in the middle of a verse, taking lines here and there, his scarred lip twisting up a little,

"'You see us five or six hung up to cure,
With all this flesh that once we fed too well
Sun dried, black to caricature;
Magpies and crows have had our eyes to rive
And made of brows and beards their nouriture.

Always we swing like clapper of a bell
Pitted as thimble is our bird-pecked skin . . ."

He looked up. "Do you like it?" he demanded harshly.

"I -- I don't know," said Jean weakly.
"Well, here's another. Maybe you'll like it better.

I am Francois that's here shown,
Born of Paris, near Pontoise town.
Now in a six-foot noose of brown,
My neck will know what my nates weigh down."

Jean flushed hotly. He had wronged the man. Villon had suffered and was suffering now. "Let me see," he begged. Villon shrugged and tossed the poems into the boy's lap. They were horrible things, tortured and despairing, and they made his skin crawl. But there was a weird beauty too, and sincere faith in them that even Father Froguet would have approved. Jean could see the horror of the imagery in the death poem; the withered corpses against the moon, the writhing of the tortured souls, but the rest of the verse left him bewildered and awed, moved almost without comprehension of the cause.

He looked up at the poet, to meet his thoughtful gaze. "What shall I do without you, Fremin. Those few lines took me two months. And my hands are more painful now because of the dampness of the cell."

"There are other boys," said Jean.
"But I'm used to you."
"It won't be hard to find someone else," he said uncomfortably.

Villon examined his hands and chewed his lip a moment. "I depend on you, Fremin." Then he looked up. "Why don't you come with me?" he asked.

Jean had almost known he was going to ask that from the first, but still it took him by surprise. "Leave Paris?" he asked blankly.

"I'll take to the lute and pay you a good wage," said the poet eagerly.
"You - you can't play the lute with those hands."
"I'll teach you."
"I -- I couldn't leave home and my mother. I won't go, so let's stop arguing."

Villon sat down and looked into the fire, and his face was lighted with it and with a sort of flame from within him. "Think of it, Fremin," he said softly, his voice deep and beautiful. "Think of it, a wood in the spring, the trees green and scented, birds singing above you, the grass soft and fragrant beneath your back. And there's a good cold lunch of venison and wine and white bread . . . Then there're the cities. You know you have a better time with me. The lights dim in the room, the moon pale through the window, good talk and warm smells and laughter and wine warm as spice on your throat. Taverns in Lyons and Marseilles. Why, there's all France, boy, and you've not been fifty rods from Paris."

His voice wove a sort of spell for Jean. He'd lived most of his life in a suburban village and he really loved the country.
PORTRAIT OF BILL
BY EDMUND BRUCKER

John Herron Art Museum
Wm. Forsyth from "The Jury" by Wayman Adams

John Herron Art Museum
And life with Villon had an excitement and glamour such as he'd never known before. The University was as dead and dusty as the Latin in which the texts were given, and Villon was life. Besides, the poet really needed him. They understood each other.

"Monsieur, I really can't," he said with difficulty.

"I'll be lonely, Fremin," said Villon softly, looking at him.

"I -- I'm sorry."

"Very well then," he said coldly and stood up. "Now get out. I've made my last appeal to you."

Jean stood up very slowly. "You're sure there's nothing I can do for you," he asked wistfully.

"No!"

"Well — goodbye, Monsieur Villon. Good luck." he held out his hand but the poet ignored it and stared into the fire with a set mouth.

Jean went very slowly out of the room and down the narrow boxed stairs. His throat ached with tears as he thought of Villon's thin slouched figure going lonely off into the night. But he couldn't leave. Why, it would blast all his mother's poor hopes for him and destroy forever the vision of the purple robe and the amethyst ring. "I'll be lonely, Fremin," he had said softly, he who never let people see the softness of the heart of him.

Swiftly he turned and ran back into the house and up the steps. When he burst into the room, Villon was coughing dismally, his thin body bent painfully over the fire. The boy waited a moment. Then he said. "If you will talk to my mother, perhaps I can go with you Monsieur."

Villon turned, his eyes wet from the pain of his cough. For just a second he stared at Jean, almost as if he were sorry. Then he came over and clapped the boy on the shoulder. "You can make her a copy of that ballad I made for my mother," he cried gayly. "I'll give her that."