

In eighteenth-century France there lived a man who was one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era that knew no lack of gifted and abominable personages. His story will be told here. His name was Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, and if his name – in contrast to the names of other gifted abominations, de Sade's, for instance, or Saint-Just's, Fouché's, Bonaparte's, etc. – has been forgotten today, it is certainly not because Grenouille fell short of those more famous blackguards when it came to arrogance, misanthropy, immorality, or, more succinctly, wickedness, but because his gifts and his sole ambition were restricted to a domain that leaves no traces in history: to the fleeting realm of scent.

In the period of which we speak, there reigned in the cities a stench barely conceivable to us modern men and women. The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells stank of mouldering wood and rat droppings, the kitchens of spoiled cabbage and mutton fat; the unaired parlours stank of stale dust, the bedrooms of greasy sheets, damp featherbeds, and the pungently sweet aroma of chamber-pots. The stench of sulphur rose from the chimneys, the stench of caustic lyes from the tanneries, and from the slaughterhouses came the stench of congealed blood. People stank of sweat and unwashed clothes; from their mouths came the stench of rotting teeth, from their bellies that of onions, and from their bodies, if they were no longer very young, came the stench of rancid cheese and sour milk and tumorous disease. The rivers stank, the

aux Fers, scaling whiting that she had just gutted. The fish, ostensibly taken that very morning from the Seine, already stank so vilely that the smell masked the odour of corpses. Grenouille's mother, however, perceived the odour neither of the fish nor of the corpses, for her sense of smell had been utterly dulled, besides which her belly hurt and the pain deadened all susceptibility to sensate impressions. She only wanted the pain to stop, she wanted to put this revolting birth behind her as quickly as possible. It was her fifth. She had effected all the others here at the fish booth, and all had been stillbirths, or semi-stillbirths, for the bloody meat that emerged had not differed greatly from the fish guts that lay there already, nor had lived much longer, and by evening the whole mess had been shovelled away and carted off to the graveyard or down to the river. It would be much the same today, and Grenouille's mother, who was still a young woman, barely in her mid-twenties, and who still was quite pretty and had almost all her teeth in her mouth and some hair on her head and – except for gout and syphilis and a touch of consumption – suffered from no serious disease. who still hoped to live a while yet, perhaps a good five or ten years, and perhaps even to marry one day and as the honourable wife of a widower with a trade or some such to bear real children . . . Grenouille's mother wished that it were already over. And when the final contractions began, she squatted down under the gutting table and there gave birth, as she had done four times before, and cut the new born thing's umbilical cord with her gutting knife. But then, on account of the heat and the stench, which she did not perceive as such but only as an unbearable, numbing something – like a field of lilies or a small room filled with too many narcissi – she grew faint, toppled to one side fell out from under the table into the street, and lay there knife in hand

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marketplaces stank, the churches stank, it stank beneath the bridges and in the palaces. The peasant stank as did the priest, the apprentice as did his master's wife, the whole of the aristocracy stank, even the King himself stank, stank like a rank lion. and the Queen like an old goat, summer and winter. For in the eighteenth century there was nothing to hinder bacteria busy at decomposition, and so there was no human activity, either constructive or destructive, no manifestation of germinating or decaying life, that was not accompanied by stench.

And of course the stench was foulest in Paris, for Paris was the largest city of France. And in turn there was a spot in Paris under the sway of particularly fiendish stench: between the rue aux Fers and the rue de la Ferronnerie, the Cimetière des Innocents to be exact. For eight hundred years the dead had been brought here from the Hôtel-Dieu and from the surrounding parish churches, for eight hundred years, day in, day out, corpses by the dozens had been carted here and tossed into long ditches, stacked bone upon bone for eight hundred years in the tombs and charnel houses. Only later – on the eve of the Revolution, after several of the grave pits had caved in and the stench had driven the swollen graveyard's neighbours to more than mere protest and to actual insurrection – was it finally closed and abandoned. Millions of bones and skulls were shovelled into the catacombs of Montmartre and in its place a food market was erected.

Here, then, on the most putrid spot in the whole kingdom, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille was born on 17 July 1738. It was one of the hottest days of the year. The heat lay leaden upon the graveyard, squeezing its putrefying vapour, a blend of rotting melon and the fetid odour of burnt animal horn, out into the nearby alleys. When the labour pains began, Grenouille's mother was standing at a fish stall in the rue

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Tumult and turmoil. The crowd stands in a circle around her, staring, someone hails the police. The woman with the knife in her hand is still lying in the street. Slowly she comes to.

What has happened to her?

'Nothing.'

What is she doing with that knife?

'Nothing.'

Where does the blood on her skirt come from?

'From the fish.'

She stands up, tosses the knife aside, and walks off to wash.

And then, unexpectedly, the infant under the gutting table begins to squall. They have a look, and beneath a swarm of flies and amid the offal and fish heads they discover a newborn child. They pull it out. As prescribed by law, they give it to a wet nurse and arrest the mother. And since she confesses, openly admitting that she would definitely have let the thing perish, just as she had with those other four by the way, she is tried, found guilty of multiple infanticide, and a few weeks later decapitated at the place de Grève.

By that time the child had already changed wet nurses three times. No one wanted to keep it for more than a couple of days. It was too greedy, they said, sucked as much as two babies, deprived the other sucklings of milk and them, the wet nurses, of their livelihood, for it was impossible to make a living nursing just one babe. The police officer in charge, a man named La Fosse, instantly wearied of the matter and wanted to have the child sent to a halfway house for foundlings and orphans at the far end of the rue Saint-Antoine, from which transports of children were dispatched daily to the great public orphanage in Rouen. But since these convoys were made up of porters who carried

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bark baskets into which, for reasons of economy, up to four infants were placed at a time; since therefore the mortality rate on the road was extraordinarily high; since for that reason the porters were urged to convey only baptized infants and only those furnished with an official certificate of transport to be stamped upon arrival in Rouen; since the babe Grenouille had neither been baptized nor received even so much as a name to inscribe officially on the certificate of transport; since, moreover, it would not have been good form for the police anonymously to set a child at the gates of the halfway house, which would have been the only way to save the other formalities . . . thus, because of a whole series of bureaucratic and administrative difficulties that seemed likely to occur if the child were shunted aside, and because time was short as well, officer La Fosse revoked his original decision and gave instructions for the boy to be handed over on written receipt to some ecclesiastical institution or other, so that there they could baptize him and decide his further fate. He got rid of him at the cloister of Saint-Merri in the rue Saint-Martin. There they baptized him with the name Jean-Baptiste. And because on that day the prior was in a good mood and the eleemosynary fund not yet exhausted, they did not have the child shipped to Rouen, but instead pampered him at the cloister's expense. To this end, he was given to a wet nurse named Jeanne Bussie who lived in the rue Saint-Denis and was to receive, until further notice, three francs per week for her trouble.

A few weeks later, the wet nurse Jeanne Bussie stood, market basket in hand, at the gates of the cloister of Saint-Merri, and the minute they were opened by a bald monk of about fifty with a faint odour of vinegar about him – Father Terrier – she said, 'There!' and set her market basket down on the threshold.

'What's that?' asked Terrier, bending down over the basket and sniffing at it, in the hope that it was something edible.

'The bastard of that woman from the rue aux Fers who killed her babies!'

The monk poked about in the basket with his finger until he had exposed the face of the sleeping infant.

'He looks good. Rosy pink and well nourished.'

'Because he's stuffed himself on me. Because he's pumped me dry down to the bones. But I've put a stop to that. Now you can feed him yourselves with goat's milk, with pap, with beet juice. He'll gobble up anything, that bastard will.'

Father Terrier was an easy-going man. Among his duties was the administration of the cloister's charities, the distribution of its moneys to the poor and needy. And for that he expected a thank-you and that he not be bothered further. He despised technical details, because details meant difficulties, and difficulties meant ruffling his composure, and he simply would not put up with that. He was upset that he had even opened the gate. He wished that this female would take her market basket and go home and let him alone with her suckling problems. Slowly he straightened up, and as he did he breathed the scent of milk and cheesy wool exuded by the wet nurse. It was a pleasant aroma.