Violette Nozière

A STORY OF MURDER IN 1930s PARIS

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A “group of fathers” demands that the judge assign two lawyers to the protection of Baptiste Nozière’s memory: “The slimy press is having a ball destroying him, may you be damned in your heart as a father if you don’t do this.” The letters advance every hypothesis and point of view. A woman writes in pencil, on cheap notepaper (“Forgive my anonymity, Your Honor”) to suggest that Violette was a lesbian whose accomplice must have been female; a good number of men write in for the sheer pleasure of sharing their sexual fantasies about the young woman with the judge. The writers defend or denounce each of the principals in the case, and even the bit players, sometimes appearing to settle personal scores: “The jazzman from the Melodie’s [Club] . . . is the most disgusting character, all those of his race detest him, he’s a liar, thief and pimp, capable of anything.” They use the crime to get at personal enemies: “Go ask Gilbert Heime at 13 Rue de Bisson and his mistress Mathilde Lene what they know of Violette Nozière, who bought sleeping pills on July 28 [sic], you’ll find out some fine things all right.”

The existence and tone of these letters suggests that the case was not simply amplified by a scandal-hungry press: the Nozière story took on a life of its own because it touched a raw nerve in many contemporaries. How and why? Violette’s crime was certainly horrible: it is hard to imagine anyone planning so carefully the cold-blooded murder of a parent, even should they have an understandable motive. Yet the case involved no spectacular bloodshed, nor did it implicate anyone famous. A few months before Violette poisoned her parents, two maids in a provincial bourgeois home savagely butchered their mistress and her grown daughter, crushing bones and gouging eyes with household implements; a few months after her deed, a prominent Paris city council member and nightclub owner was strangled in his office by a gay lover. While the crime of the Papin sisters and the murder of Oscar Dufrenne—both are described in the next chapter—each garnered massive amounts of publicity, in the end neither rivaled the Nozière case in the reactions elicited among the public at large. Even at the time, commentators picked up on this paradox: “Some people are surprised at the extraordinary resonance of this case,” wrote one editorialist, “since its tragic and horrific elements have been equaled and surpassed before.” Why, he went on, was public opinion so “shaken up?”

Why and how do ordinary people become involved in a “big case” such as this one? A group of French sociologists, anthropologists, and historians recently proposed a model for understanding the effects of major public transgressions in different societies. Most such events, they argue,
fall into the category of either a "scandal" or an "affair." Scandal in its purest form is typical of homogeneous or premodern societies, in which most people adhere to collective norms. When a person transgresses those norms—committing a crime like murder, blasphemy, or infanticide, or behaving in ways that do not break laws but offend prevailing rules of decency—the entire community unites to condemn and punish the wrongdoer. A scandal is an event whereby a group reasserts its norms, united in its desire to see the wrongdoer punished either judicially (death, prison, banishment) or socially (ostracism, ridicule). Scandal in its purest form endures, of course, to this day.

Modern societies have seen the advent of the "affair," a form of scandal that divides the community instead of uniting it. Affairs are characteristic of pluralistic societies with modern media. A typical affair starts as a classic scandal, in which a villain stands accused of a heinous crime and is punished or facing punishment. The scandal turns into an affair, however, when a "defender" appears on the scene, insists that the accused is innocent, and turns the tables by indicting the accusers. In a diverse society with developed media, affairs can be deeply divisive, with forces lining up on moral, emotional, or other grounds either with the villain/victim or with the forces of authority. Because of the status of its public intellectuals, modern France had a tradition of such affaires. In the mid-eighteenth century, Voltaire touched off the Calas affair by rushing to the defense, in print, of an obscure man named Jean Calas, a Protestant wrongfully accused of the murder of his grown son. Calas had already been tortured and executed, but Voltaire got him posthumously pardoned and his family's name cleared by denouncing the anti-Protestant prejudice that had vitiated the original judgment. 5

A century and a half later, the Dreyfus affair revealed the endurance of religious bigotry in the land of the Rights of Man. In 1898 a Jewish army captain, Alfred Dreyfus, was framed and wrongfully accused of high treason, publicly disgraced, and sentenced to hard labor for life. When evidence of his innocence emerged, the French High Command covered it up, deeming it better to let a Jew rot in prison than to publicly tarnish the honor of the French military. Dreyfus's family, a small group of supporters, and the controversial novelist Émile Zola fought for and obtained a revision of Dreyfus's trial and cleared his name, in the process touching off bitter divisions that lasted for generations, between and within families. 6 Republican France over time made this sort of affaire, with the courageous intellectual battling the forces of darkness, into a national heritage. When police forces threatened to investigate Jean-Paul Sartre for his involvement with Algerian insurgents in 1960, de Gaulle, who personally disliked Sartre, intervened with the solemn pronouncement "One does not imprison Voltaire." 7 The Nozière case was sometimes referred to as "l'Affaire," a reference to the Dreyfus case, as in the cartoon that appeared on the front page of the September 17 issue of Le Journal (fig. 13).
Scandals reassert and shore up a society’s norms; affaires challenge and often change them. The first offer participants and witnesses the reassurance of collective wisdom, the second an occasion for cultural or political change. The Nozière case had elements of both, but in the end it does not fit either of these comfortably. How does one describe a case that should have been a straightforward scandal, never gelled as such, but did not evolve into a classic affair with partisans neatly aligned on either side of a rift between authority and emancipation? The controversy around Violette was constant and wrenching, yet never clearly burst into the open. It was disturbing in an entirely new way.

Certainly, the case began as a classic scandal, uniting France in its horror at the attack of a selfish girl upon the parents who had given her everything: “The Spoiled Child,” screamed the front page of France’s premier crime magazine, *Détective*, on August 31. Each time she was moved from jail to the courthouse and back, crowds assembled sometimes hours in advance and screamed for her head: “À mort!” (“Kill her!”). Hundreds congregated in front of La Petite Roquette prison, mobbing the windows of all the houses in the vicinity, hoping to catch a glimpse of the “monster,” to show their children the face of evil. On September 10, the journalist for *L’Événure* professed stupefaction at both the size and composition of the crowd. “There were children in the crowd, little girls mostly. They were seven, seven and a half, eight years old. A fair-haired tot of five was saying proudly to another little girl beside her: I’ve seen her three times!”—”Who?” we asked—”Why, Violette!” A mother was inconsolable: “If I’d had my Dédé with me, I’d have put him up front.” Other housewives in the crowd were chattering away between calls for Violette’s death: “Ah, those students!”—”You know, I take Véronal every day.” Some accounts suggest that the crowds may have been mostly made up of women, whom this domestic tragedy touched in a special way. As late as November 23, when Violette was brought to the Rue de Madagascar for the reconstitution of the crime, she faced an enormous booping crowd: “The people of Paris, representing in this instance the people of France with its brutal love of justice, its universal common sense, and its disdain for psychological complications and for half-measures, shouted its vindictive blame at the poisoner-girl.”

In many forms of popular culture, the line between villain and hero is easily blurred, and Violette’s notoriety made her into fodder for one of the most ancient of forms, the ballad. In the fall of 1933, verses about her crime, bearing the title of a well-known tune one could sing them to, were printed on individual sheets for sale. Before the spread of radio and the arrival of television, songs were central to the lives of ordinary French people, especially in the lower classes: you would hear them and sing along with the choruses in the cabarets known as *café-concerts*, sing along to an accordion or a phonograph—later in the thirties, perhaps a radio—in your boarding house or café, sing solo or in a group at work or at a wine-lubricated dinner.

The type of performance most evocative of the bygone world of prewar France was street singing, endemic in the popular districts of Paris. That was how the career of the *grande dame* of twentieth-century French song, Édith Piaf, began—as a nine-year-old urchin helping out her shiftless father, a contortionist. Édith’s childhood friend Simone Berteaut wrote of the experience of singing in the streets when both girls were in their teens: moving from one neighborhood to the next, applauded by bystanders, chased away by angry concierges, having slops or coins thrown down on them from courtyard windows, arrested and released by sympathetic policemen, and making up to a hundred francs for a day’s work in 1930. Crowds would assemble, and stay, and pay for another song. The girls bought sheets to look more professional. Even in the poorest neighborhoods, they gave money “for pleasure, because they were happy, not just to be charitable.” This was undoubtedly the kind of audience at which the Violette songs were pitched.

For centuries in France popular booklets known as *canards* had detailed the evil acts and well-deserved punishments of famous criminals, while the many who could not read heard of the misdeeds of assassins and bandits from songs called *complaintes*. One journalist remarked on the archaism of the form, the songs’ “fake innocence combined with great solemnity.” Composed and sung in twentieth-century Paris, their form evoked remote cottages where you sat by the fire cracking nuts, waiting for the peddler to come by with his stock of string, matches, tobacco, and new *complaintes* adorned with engraved portraits. The new “Violette” versions of these songs, the reporter went on, were not all that different.

A double crime, abominable
Was the act of a youthful girl
But the monster, imperturbable
Will say naught of this mystery
To every query, she says merely
I alone have done this deed.
Violette ballads follow the oldest of forms: verses that narrate the crime, a judgmental chorus, an ending that anticipates punishment and draws lessons for the listeners. “Violette Nozières, Her Parents’ Killer,” to be sung to the tune of “When You Are in Love,” begins:

Behold that sweet little girl
Babbling gently by their side
On her head with charming curls
Rests her parents’ hope and pride.

Its couplets are punctuated with the refrain

She poisoned her parents
Wicked Violette Nozières
Did it all for the money
Did it without a care.

Verses have the wicked ingrate partying and racking up boyfriends, the last one ending, “And now the whole world awaits / Her awful and well-deserved fate.”13 “The Assassin Violette Nozières” (tune: “A Song in the Night”) begins,

A hideous crime begets indignation
In families through the land
With its horror and its passion
Taxing our imagination.

The refrain evokes Violette’s compounding of her own scandal:

By good chance the poison
Left her mother live and clear
So that she could rise and rescue
Her dead husband from the smears.

The concluding lines are an admonition to young women:

O young girls behold this crime
Think about it every day
Guard your virtue whatever men say
Your old parents keep in mind.14

In the early days after the crime, the universal perception of the case fit into the melodramatic parameters of these songs: a promiscuous, grasping, cold-hearted child had poisoned, in one case fatally, parents of unmatched devotion and generosity. This was the stuff of classic scandal: who could imagine another side to the story, or any reason to excuse her act? Her own explanation of her deed was further proof of her villainy, and reprobation was universal: “The entire city,” Paris-Soir reported, “shares in the emotion that has gripped the Picpus neighborhood.”

As the investigation proceeded, however, it soon became clear that “public opinion” was not going to settle down into straightforward denunciation of Violette. At first, as we saw, the papers expressed the hope that Violette would kill herself and make the whole wretched business go away. But she didn’t and it didn’t. When Violette was arrested, many papers evoked a general sense of relief: “Some crimes are so horrible, so upsetting to everyone’s feelings and provoke such reprobation that they demand a clear solution, and there is no sense of justice until the criminal is captured.” Capture, as we have seen, solved nothing.

People in Paris gossiped and argued about the Nozière affair for weeks on end: “It has been a very long time since any case has caused people to react as passionately as they have to the odious parricide of Violette Nozières,” reported Paris-Midi. “In the street, in the metro, in cafés, everywhere there is commentary on the twists and turns and dreadful details of this crime. . . . It’s all there: premeditation, as shown by her previous attempts, the setup, the attempted cover-up, her flight—not away from guilt but to prolong her wretched existence in a life of pleasure—and finally the cowardly attack on her father’s memory.” The impact of the case extended throughout France, even outside cities and towns. The writer Jean-Louis Bory, fourteen at the time, later recalled how his classmates spoke of the crime in his rural school. His own family tried to avoid mentioning the affair in his presence, but at recess it was clear that his friends’ parents showed no such restraint. “They echoed their families’ opinions. Violette Nozière was a low tart, a sicko, had a heart of stone. . . . That was the general view in this collège in rural Beauce, where peasants have a strong sense of family (family is land) and a passion for savings. The fact that the miserable Violette pinched the paternal nest egg to support a vulgar little pimp who dreams of Bugatti and gold signet rings seemed to them as unforgivable as the murder itself.”

A great deal of what kept tongues wagging was the element of mystery in the case. Judge Lanoire’s assumption (she did it for the money) and
Violette's counternarrative of sexual abuse were both straightforward and coherent, but people could not shake the sense that there was more to it than that. Talk was most intense, of course, among those who had known Violette, like neighbors in the building: "Ever since her parents had to take her out of the Lycée Fénelon because she was running around the Latin Quarter with men, she wasn’t the same girl," one housewife declared. "She was proud and acted like some fancy lady." Interest was just as passionate on Violette’s other home turf, the bars around Saint-Michel: "Who didn’t know her in the Latin Quarter? Every conversation yesterday was about her adventure."20

They talked everywhere: at home, in cafés, at work, in stores. Several cartoons related to the case are set in a prime location for the exchange of news and opinion, a building’s entrance hall just outside the concierge’s lobby. (The concierge, who chatted with everyone going in and out of the building, served as a sort of human gossip and information switchboard.) In all these places, judgments and theories flourished. "Yesterday by chance I ran into one of my suppliers," a man wrote to Judge Lanoire. "Now, this supplier told me that the previous day he had taken a taxi whose driver lived in the same building as the Nozières, and that man declared to him that he thought Violette was an innocent victim because her parents were 'not much to speak of.'" According to this man, Germaine, who was especially "not much to speak of," slept with everyone on the street. A woman was equally negative about Mme Nozière: "Yesterday my landlords, who are wealthy jewelers, were saying that woman is a mother only in name. She dishonors those of us who are good mothers and really love our children." A shopkeeper ("Since I am in business, forgive me for withholding my name") wrote that she felt she had to contact Lanoire "because I need to tell you what I hear in my store about Violette Nozière." One of her customers, she went on, "who is a person of some consequence, was saying to my husband and me that Jean Dabin is her accomplice, it’s obvious. . . . If he was in Hennebont on the day of the crime, it was to escape trouble and give himself an alibi."21

Newspapers offer an occasional glimpse into the arguments that erupted around aspects of the affair. One hotly debated item was whether young André de Pinguet acted honorably in turning Violette in to the police. Despite the reportedly universal relief at her capture, there were plenty of voices to express dismay at Pinguet’s lack of gallantry: loathing of Violette was pitted against deep-seated standards of chivalry. Many, Paris-Midi reported, say about Pinguet, "Shame on him! A man does not do that to a lady, not even to that one. As soon as you have flirted, exchanged smiles and compliments, she becomes sacred. Your duty is to walk away in a hurry." That’s too easy, say others. What about the World War I spy Mata Hari? Her lovers refused to turn her in, but she was a menace to the country: "We need to be done with all this fake romantic chivalry!" But Violette was hardly a menace to society, "nothing suggests that she had any other parents left to poison." Nonsense! A criminal who goes unpunished is always a danger, if only because of the bad example she sets. So, the police would have caught her one way or another—that’s their job! "We offer shelter from the law to family members; we don’t ask a husband to turn in his wife, a father his daughter, or a brother his sister." Fine, do you want to extend that protection to any woman you’ve just met?22 The debates raged on and on.

Journalists and ordinary people fastened onto two sets of issues: who was technically guilty of the crime, and who should bear moral responsibility for what happened on August 21, 1933, at 9 Rue de Madagascar. The death of Baptiste Nozière was perceived both as a murder mystery and as a psychological puzzle involving a range of characters, soon erected into icons of different aspects of contemporary society.

As a whodunit, the case generated a series of possible narratives, almost always involving men who were really behind the crime. Some were unnamed and unknown: underworld bosses, Corsican gangsters, hypnotists. For a long time, suspicions focused heavily on Jean Dabin, since it seemed to contemporaries a small step from accepting money from a woman to pushing her into a crime of lucre. A twenty-seven-year-old named Gustave Lautel, an accountant living in the eighteenth who himself had been in trouble with the law, wrote to Lanoire: "I am revolted at the thought that her accomplice, Jean Dabin, is getting away with it, since he is by his own admission an actual procurer. Your honor, how can you allow this man to remain free? Here is a man who pushed a minor, Violette Nozière, to commit prostitution . . . and then got her to poison her father to get his hands on the couple’s money."23 But no matter how much people wanted to believe in Dabin’s guilt, no matter how often the judge cross-examined him, the case against him never stood up to scrutiny: on August 21 he had been in Hennebont in Brittany for five days in the company of his parents. Violette was adamantly that she had never mentioned her plans to him, much less acted on his instructions. Jean might have been wildly unpopular, but no case against him ever stuck.
More remarkable was the public’s obsession with Monsieur Émile as a possible key to the case. As soon as the name and tale of the distinguished but elusive industrialist emerged, Parisians jumped eagerly into the business of finding him; the case records contain more letters about Émile than any other protagonist of the affair. Nobody suggested that the wealthy sexagenarian, if he did exist, was a culprit or accomplice to the murder, though the occasional correspondent might assign him his share of blame.

"An indignant female reader" of the daily Le Matin wrote to Lanoire that she was appalled to learn that the judge had promised "discretion" in his handling of Émile. Why should he get special treatment, when the names of all the youths who had been her lovers had been splashed all over the papers? "Isn't this Monsieur E., who is said to have given one thousand francs a month to that kid, more responsible than anyone else for her misconduct?"

The Émile letters in the judge's file fall into two general categories: those that appear to be good faith tips and those designed to get an enemy in trouble, although in some cases the writer's wishful thinking blurs the line between the two. Émile-sporting was something of a sport in the fall of 1933, to judge from the number of missives that came in over the judge's transom. "Monsieur Émile owns a car with plate number 4906 RF; he is convalescing near Châteauroux," "Monsieur Émile is Émile Aubon, a hotel manager in Breteuil, well known to run around with the women," "You might want to look and see if a man named Émile living 7 Rue Volion is not the one you are after.... He's always after the young ones; he says he is a former businessman," "Another Émile, you will say, but if you don't look into this one you will be sorry. ... He is a merchant from Nantes who comes to Paris once a week.... This is not a joke," "M. Émile Bokend, a businessman in Les Lilas, has a car and a dice reputation," "M. Ernest Favre, a manager at the Printemps stores."

Some notes offer very long shots, probably from people desperate to get involved: ask Jeanne Recurt, a dancer at the Folies Bergère, wrote one eager correspondent, about the wealthy and distinguished Émile she dated twelve years ago. And then there are many, no doubt from nasty neighbors or bitter ex-lovers, designed to drag the authorities and a dose of scandal into someone's life. An illiterate, scrawled note on a scrap of paper informed the judge that "Mlle Buzy, a teacher at the elementary school on Rue de Buffon knows Monsieur Émile intimately." Another urged, "Try Ferdinand Delforit, from the Thaoon Laundry, 23 Rue de Mérignan in Paris. And do inquire about the child he had with his secretary back when he was in Thaoon—you will learn things that will surprise you. You are dealing with one lousy individual." Émile is no businessman, another writer insisted. "He is a crooked doctor who lives at 52 Rue Saint-Paul.... He says he is good at hypnotizing, and people say behind closed doors that there aren't four like him in Paris who can do what he did.... I was one of his many victims and would be in danger if I signed this."

Parisians saw Monsieur Émile everywhere because he was everywhere. The capital was full of older men with money and influence who enjoyed the favors of younger women. Sometimes the police followed up on tips about these aging Lotharios. A young man who signed himself "Martin" wrote, he said, to help with the investigation and get some things off his chest. He offered that he knew Violette a couple of years back in the Latin Quarter, where her "serious friend" was the head of the company that produced the famous Kalmine tablets. "Papa Kalmin," as they called him, had moved on to a nursing student, the daughter of the concierge at 7 Rue Boileau. The police found the concierge's daughter, who happened to have once worked in the same office as Violette's friend Madeleine Debize. "Papa Kalmin," now living with yet another nineteen-year-old, was Pierre Métadier, a fifty-year-old former judge in the colonies, now a sales representative for his brother's pharmaceutical business, which did indeed produce the famous tablets. Métadier was not Émile—different car, different girlfriend—but he could well have been.

Jacob Wulf Guirschovitz was not Émile either, nor did his description match that of Violette's friend in the least: he was short, walked with great difficulty, and spoke with a foreign accent. None of his six cars was a Talbot. He was known as Jacques—not Émile, as the tipster insisted—but, as a wealthy Jewish furrier, was likely to attract the authorities' attention, or at least warrant their willful inattention. The police went in on a long shot: the masseur of the wife of the tipster had worked on Guirschovitz, and had seen a young girl with him whom the old man might have called Violette. The driver who picked up the masseur said (and then denied, fearing for his job) that he went in to Paris often from their suburb of Asnières to pick up "the boss's chick." The police were infinitely more careful with Pierre Perret, a fifty-six-year-old high civil servant and officer of the Legion of Honor. A typewritten anonymous letter had informed them that Violette had served as a "beard" for Perret, whose tastes ran to young men. She went out with him to the cafés in Montparnasse and used her local contacts to find out the names and addresses of the men who struck his fancy, and whether they were "game." Lanoire wrote a note in
pencil on the tipster's letter, underlined three times: "Proceed with extreme discretion." Perret denied everything; of course, and the report by Inspector Verrier ended stiffly: "In light of M. Perret's attitude and of the information given, it appears that said letter presents nothing of interest in the matter of the case against the woman Violette Nozière." Though none of the leads apparently checked out, it is clear that some Émiles were much more interesting to the police than others.

Émile was the only character in the case besides Violette to warrant a song: "Where Are You, Émile?" to the tune of "Rosalie." Violette's disappearing swain had instantly become something between a joke and a game, represented in cartoons as a barrel-bellied old lecher with mustache, waistcoat, and pocket watch. A verse of the song has every street urchin in Paris chanting: "M. Émile hides away/Wearing a suit of checkered gray/Yellow gloves, fancy cane/Squinting hard at every dame." Want to find him? No problem, another verse taunts, take a tour of the Administration, the Ministry, the Chamber, or the Senate, and do check in your wife's bed: he changes names all the time.

The randy old bourgeois was a stock in trade of French boulevard comedy in a tradition stretching back to Molière, which is one reason Monsieur Émile became a favorite character in the case: he was reassuring in a way that the depraved Violette, the ambiguous Jean, and the hard-hearted Germaine were not. He also provided an occasion for easy cynicism about the authorities and social establishment, since most people were inclines to believe that the police could easily find him if they wanted to.

But there was more, no doubt, to the public's obsession with Émile than the thrill of the chase and the fun of jokes about old codgers and their young mistresses; the missing man was imagined as the key to the case. The fantasy endured that if he were found, all would become clear: whether or not Violette needed money, who this gentleman was to her, whether the incest, if it happened, was really incest and the murder really parricide. "Émile" embodied the hope that the story's troubling opacity could be neatly dispelled.

The hypothesis that anyone else was involved in the crime proved hard to sustain in the face of Violette's unflagging insistence that she alone was the perpetrator. Her endorsement of full responsibility did not prevent people from writing in to the judge about her. Some offered clues and hypotheses: she would have had occasion to plant the famous cloth and obscene photos in the apartment; and if she was syphilitic, how come her father was not? Most just wrote to spew venom. Letters rolled in from friends of Baptiste, alleged acquaintances, railwaymen, fathers outraged at a daughter's act: "She is a lazy slut . . . She deserves severe punishment"; "Violette told me that if she could steal all of her parents' lolly, she would"; "She is smart, ingenious, and vicious enough to have set it all up in advance"; "Shame on murderous young girls who soil their fathers' memory when they are not there to defend themselves . . . We need a great reckoning for such a monstrous crime"; "Send that creature to the guillotine; neither the workers nor the bourgeois want to keep feeding that bitch." Rare was the letter, or indeed any public or private expression, like that of a woman who wrote around the end of the case: "If there is anyone I pity in this whole affair, it's that poor girl; I speak to you with a mother's heart."

Could Violette be exonerated, at least in part, if she suffered from a psychological affliction? Were her coldness and apparent lack of remorse, her very "monstrosity," not signs of such a condition? Nothing suggests that the general public thought anything of the sort, but medical and psychiatric experts were asked to weigh in from the first days of the case. As early as the first week of September, journalists were making the rounds of famous doctors and psychiatric experts, and on the fourteenth of that month, Violette's lawyer, René de Vésinne-Larue, wrote to the judge requesting that his client be examined by a team of forensic medical specialists, including a neurologist. He pointed out that his client had been constantly sick for the last six years with sinusitis, migraines, hemorrhaging, and other ailments, which, along with her vengeance obsession and suicidal thoughts, suggested a cerebral malfunction.

Vésinne-Larue was probably trying to place Violette's patterns of promiscuity and lies, and her incest accusation, within the context of an established tradition of diagnosing women like her as "hysterical" or "psychomaniacal." Hysteria had been the catchall diagnosis at the turn of the century for women, especially those with overly developed sexual appetites. A 1903 article by Dr. Paul Garnier, "Female Hysterical Accusers," argued that the female hysteric presents a "deep instinctive perversity that makes her by nature dangerous to the safety and honor of persons." Attention-hungry hysterics would do anything, even mutilate or accuse themselves, out of craving for attention. A case in point was twenty-two-year-old Camille D., whose hysteria could be traced back to an alcoholic grandfather. Camille first accused a priest of impregnating her and, when this proved baseless, moved on to accusing her father of incestuous designs and then threatening suicide. Acting on her "auto-suggestions," she
engaged in dramatic behavior, entering her father's room at night half-clad, carrying a stick and a lamp.30

No diagnosis was applied to Violette Nozière, both formally and informally, more frequently than that of mythomanie, the contemporary label for a form of mental illness in which the subject lies compulsively for the sake of self-aggrandizement, in the process sometimes subjecting others to calumny. At the beginning of the century, Dr. Ernest Dupré devoted a whole unit of study to this disorder in his courses in forensic and psychiatric medicine, explaining to students that mythomanes, compulsive liars, remained blocked at the stage of children, who fib for pleasure or out of vanity before the normal progress of adult intelligence and discernment curbs their self-serving fantasies.

Of all the variables governing mythomania, none was more significant than gender, since “little girls have more precocious, pronounced, and abundant tendencies toward falsehood than boys.” All normal children lie, but abnormal children, those touched by “degeneracy,” do so out of “moral idiocy,” acting on malicious instincts: “Thus do many little girls of weak intelligence accuse their father of raping them, their mother of beating them, and so on. These are malevolent little liars who become fake child-martyrs and draw sympathy from public gullibility.” Manifestations of mythomania were class- as well as sex-specific. Vanity is typical of “unbalanced mental retardation,” Dupré offered. “The simple retarded individual who does not suffer from unbalance usually stays in his place and remains in his rank”; “unbalanced” specimens will have delusions of social grandeur.31

A colleague of Dr. Dupré’s, René Charpentier, drew on Dupré’s work in a study of female poisoners published in 1906. Women who poisoned family members were typically “hysterical degenerates” impelled by “pathological selfishness” and vanity. Their altered sense of morality often expressed itself as mythomanie: “Their fertile imagination in the service of morbid selfishness is expressed in a need for fairy tales, for the extraordinary, a craving for attention, a bent toward performance that is utterly typical of hysterical degenerates.”32 Dupré and Charpentier were writing at the turn of the century, but their ideas were still common among specialists in Violette’s day. In 1929 a young student of forensic medicine published a psychiatric study of a trumped-up rape charge that drew heavily on Dupré’s assumptions and diagnostic categories: such accusations were often the work of attention-cravers, the author argued, “pathological mythomaniacs” of the “vain” or “malicious” sort, most of them prone to sexual overdrive. He concluded that it was vital for judges and magistrates to be aware of mythomania when dealing with women or girls who made accusations of sexual assault.33 In mid-September 1933, Paris-Soir carried a front-page article in which two different medical specialists diagnosed Violette as a mythomane. One surmised that Violette, a girl of premature sexual instincts, was unconsciously attracted to her father and accused him of acts that he did not commit but that she wished for in the depths of her being.34

He was not the only contemporary to put forth the “wishful thinking” hypothesis, and many an editorialist or casual commentator threw around the expression “Oedipal complex” when musing about the crime. They were wrong, of course, since what they meant was “Electra complex,” the correct Freudian terminology for a young girl’s romantic attraction to her father. Freudian diagnoses were mostly invoked, however, for the purpose of ridiculing them. French translations of Sigmund Freud’s works had begun to appear a decade earlier, starting in 1923, but both the medical establishment and the general public were hostile to what they knew of psychoanalysis. The French only opened up to Freud’s ideas in the 1960s, half a century after Americans did. Historians have suggested that American society, rootless, socially and geographically mobile, was fertile ground for approaches that focused on the deep self as the locus of both problems and possible solutions. French psychiatrists were far more likely to look to theories like that of “degeneration,” which emphasized neurology, heredity, and social environment. In the early twentieth century, French doctors may have cavorted with their mistresses after hours, but they expressed deep shock at a foreign theory that posited the existence of dark sexual impulses and secrets within the bourgeois family.35 Professor Henri Claude, head of psychiatric services at the prominent Saint-Anne Hospital in Paris—and thus institutional gatekeeper for the psychiatric profession—once lost his temper in public during a consultation alongside the Freudian analyst Marie Bonaparte: when Bonaparte suggested that a young girl’s phobias about a bar of soap had to do with fantasies about her father’s testicles, Claude shouted that his daughters would never think of such a thing.36 Freud’s name came up occasionally in editorials about Violette, nearly always in the context of churlish populist dismissal of the Viennese doctor. Thus Détective, on September 28, reported that after faiths and hypnotists, psychiatrists and “sexologists” had been consulted—the defense was that desperate—to establish whether the young girl was deranged. But keep in mind, the editorial continued, that she is a mythomane.
who lies every time she opens her mouth. "We at *Détective* believe that there has been too much Freudianism and mystification around this affair already."35

Journalists made the rounds of medical specialists, touting for authoritative insights about the case. The professional authorities, who knew nothing more than what they had read in the newspapers like everyone else, offered little but speculation and platitudes. Dr. Gilbert Robin, the country's leading specialist on family and youth psychiatry, pointed out that society as a whole and parents in particular should be alert to the symptoms of disturbed youth, concluding provocatively that "innocent people get killed because they bring it on themselves."36 Dr. Henri Toulouse, an advocate for criminal prophyrexy, also spoke of "preexisting morbid dispositions" in young delinquents. On the subject of incest, he was dismissive: "It's quite possible, such cases are frequent. But what does that mean? She put up with this assault on her privacy for six years. I would have understood a reaction of immediate revolt, whereas here the habit was established. And when she's eighteen, giving herself to every which one, she gets upset? It might be true, but it's not likely, and in any case it justifies nothing."37

That was also the opinion of the most famous sexologist in Europe, the German Magnus Hirschfeld, who was on hand to comment, having recently fled the rise of the Nazis in his homeland. Interviewed by the weekly *W*, Hirschfeld delivered a surprisingly moralistic assessment of both Violette and the society that produced her. Hirschfeld believed that only candid sexual education would counter the problem of half-knowledge, but in the meantime contemporary semiemancipation bred "venomous flowers" like Violette. The sixty-five-year-old professor deplored the contemporary "malaise of youth," the semiemancipation that produced corrupt types, gigolos instead of Don Juans, "demivirgins" and "demipimples." Hirschfeld concluded, like all of his eminent French colleagues, that "it would be dangerous to give credence to Violette Nozières' claims," since such accusations are frequently the fruit of the "erotic-hysterical imagination" of adolescent girls, and that even were there a psychosexual motive to the crime, that would in no way excuse it.39 Thirty years after Sigmund Freud backed away from his "seduction theory" because the notion that fathers in middle-class households could really be having sex with their daughters was too disturbing to his colleagues, the French medical establishment echoed their discomfort: it did not happen the way Violette said it had, and even if it were true, it would not matter.40 The only groups of people who believed Violette were, as we shall see, women and poets.

On November 6, the panel of three experts who had been assigned the task of evaluating Violette Nozières' mental health produced an eighty-one-page typed report. Its authors were among the most distinguished specialists in France: the panel was headed by the very same Dr. Henri Claude, professor in the Medical School of the University of Paris and head of psychiatric services at Saint-Anne, who so forcefully objected to psychoanalysis. Assisting him were the head of neurological medicine at Paris's famous Salpêtrière Hospital, Dr. Oscar Crouzon, and Claude's colleague at Saint-Anne, the psychiatric expert Dr. Victor Truelle. That so distinguished a trio had been set the task of evaluating a working-class teenager suggests the importance taken on by the Nozière case. Eyebrows were raised, however, at the presence of Truelle on the panel: that doctor had been the lead expert at the trial of the Papin sisters, and his evaluation a few months earlier that the wild-eyed, inarticulate sisters were perfectly sane and competent to stand trial had been greeted with much scorn and derision.42

Judge Lanoire assigned these three specialists to address three questions: did the accused offer evidence of insanity such as would warrant a defense as established by article 64 of France's penal code? Were the illnesses she suffered of a nature to affect her nervous system in a way that would notably alter her responsibility for her crime? Could the syphilis and sinus problems she suffered have occasioned brain damage?43

To all three questions the eminent doctors responded no, not just clearly and forcefully, but with judgmental venom. Their report reads less like a sober professional evaluation than like a vengeance indictment of the young woman. The first sections describe Violette's background, life, and education before August 1933, followed by the crime and its aftermath. The authors make no effort to conceal their bias, repeating the most damning comments of teachers and peers, scorning her suicidal gestures ("Far from contemplating suicide, she plunged back into her life of pleasure"), writing off any exculpatory evidence (her father's stash of pornography "was discovered under circumstances that do not exclude foul play")44 They went on to dismiss most of her reported illnesses as imaginary or exaggerated—except, of course, for the syphilis.

When the doctors reported on their questioning of Violette in person, their level of prejudice verged on the comically absurd: "When asked to explain how and why, instead of leading the quiet, studious, and honest
life appropriate to a girl of her age and social station, she indulged in the life of pleasures and vices that led to this tragedy,” she refused to respond.45 How on earth, one wonders, might she have answered such a question?

Violette’s nonresponses to a series of extremely loaded questions of this sort were cited in the report’s section on the subject’s “psychology and mentality.” Her silence bespoke a “devious and dishonest” personality, though her dissimulation was calculated rather than pathological. Neither did these experts accept the label of mythomanie, since that too implied pathology: her lies were not the fruit of an “overflowing, constantly changing and inventive, whimsical imagination,” not poetic and self-defeating in the style of the true mythomaniac. Violette’s falsehoods and inventions were calculated and utilitarian. They served the ends of cold, rational malice.46 Was she a pervert? Not, the good doctors opined, “one of those real perverts well known to psychopathology,” but more of an opportunistic pervert, not a slave to sex but a careful planner of her own pleasure. Her calm and self-mastery excluded the possibility of her being “unbalanced, impulsive or excited”; they bespoke, rather, “the mediocrity of her affect and sensibility.” The conclusion to the report was inevitable: no evidence indicated the slightest trace of psychopathology in this “devious, calculating and selfish girl devoid of moral sense and of filial affection.”47

Not until page 75 of the eighty-one-page text do the authors address Violette’s explanation of why she committed her crime. The matter is rapidly conflated with Freudian nonsense before being dismissed in a particularly convoluted passage: “It is possible to think that one might be in presence of a parent hatred resulting from one of those long-repressed psychosexual traumas that causes a more or less obscure psychic trouble and which results by way of compensation either in suicide or in murder, the latter being less a form of revenge than of self-punishment. Unless that hatred was but the visible mask of a very different feeling toward her father, repressed within the unconscious and hence obscured. These are fine matters for dissertations in the Freudian mode.”48 In other words, Dr. Henri Clauade, he of the pure daughters, did not want to think about it.

According to these experts, then, Violette was to blame and that was the end of it. But in a society where children had few rights, responsibility naturally fell to parents, and it was hence difficult to keep the blame from drifting back to those who raised her. People were loath to criticize the deceased victim, Baptiste, but it was also understood at the time that while fathers might lay down general principles for the household, the day-to-day supervision of daughters was the mother’s responsibility.49 Mme.

Nozière was unpopular among her neighbors, who found her cold, snobbish, and volatile. Even when she was in the hospital on the day after the crime, the building’s concierge described her as “abnormal” and “unbalanced”: “Sometimes she spoke to people she met, and sometimes she just walled herself in silence, for no reason.”50 As Germaine’s personality—her aloofness, vindictiveness, and penchant for histrionics—came publicly into focus, tongues and pens loosened up. It was not just that any mother should have done a better job of keeping her daughter off the streets, but that even more should be expected of a woman with a single child, a well-paid husband, and the luxury of staying home. Hostility to Germaine intensified—at least for some people—when she publicly turned her back on her daughter and wished her dead, and then launched the civil suit against her.

Some of the letters to the judge denouncing Germaine accuse her of specific faults or felonies. “Please give this letter to the Nozière woman” begins one. “Ask her about her relations with Henri, and other men.” Baptiste was not the girl’s father, he knew it: “You heartless woman, sending your daughter to the scaffold… She was beautiful and he took her and you’re dying of jealousy, that’s why you’re getting back at her.” Who do you think stood to profit from the crime? asked another. Look no further for Violette’s accomplice, it’s all a setup. Yes, chimed in another, the two women got Baptiste to write the grandfather that letter in order to stage his suicide.51 Crime novels and movies evidently fired up some people’s imaginations.

The largest group of letters about Germaine, however, is from women who denounce her for failing at her job as a mother: “A good mother keeps an eye on her daughter, down to the smallest details,” wrote one M.G. from Neuchâtel in Switzerland. “If her daughter went so far as to commit a crime, I am sorry for [the girl], but her mother is responsible. She is reaping what she sowed.” A “wife and mother” explained that she had been following the case with considerable anguish, feeling pity rather than reprehension toward Violette: “If her mother had kept an eye on her, would she be in this pass, if her father had asserted his authority too, they had only her as a child, they have no excuse.” A letter from an obviously well-educated woman suggests that instead of cursing her daughter Germaine should have asked her to forgive her mother for doing such a poor job of raising her: “When a little girl of twelve or thirteen becomes perverse, lies and steals, you get professional advice, get her medical help and even take her to hospital.” “An Old Mother” agreed, in another letter.
addressed to Germaine: it was your duty to find a neurologist or a psychiatrist. “How do you dare blame her for vices that developed before your very eyes as an educator?” That mother had her priorities wrong, another woman wrote to Lanoire; she “loved her husband too much and not enough her daughter, whom she neglected for the sake of her conjugal happiness.”

Criticism of Germaine was not confined to these private letters. The newspapers published similar pronouncements, as for instance in Détective’s interview of a “typical family woman”: “Of course Violette Nozière is a sad little creature. But what about that mother, letting her go in and out as she pleases and then complaining when she finds she’s corrupted?” And, this “average mother” went on, “Do you think a real mother could say to her daughter ‘I will forgive you when you’re dead’? ... [Mme Nozière] seems well outside the norm, and maybe that’s the explanation of the Nozière case.” The feminist magazine La Française also came down hard on Germaine Nozière’s “cry against nature.” Since she had entered the legal process as a plaintiff against her daughter, initial sympathy for the hysterionic widow had been crumbling fast: “The kaleidoscope now shows a diabolic image, that of a twisted, vindictive creature looking for help from society. ... All of her sentimental appeal is gone.”

Censure of Germaine as a mother was often mixed with resentment of her as a creature of privilege, at least compared to most among the legions of working-class and lower-middle-class Parisians who followed the case. Women who put in long days in factories and offices, some raising more than one child, came down hard on a full-time mother who could not even pull off that job, displaying their jealousy of the couple’s financial success. “[The mother] should have been strict and even, since her husband earned fifty thousand francs a year and they had one hundred sixty-five thousand saved up, it was her duty to say to her daughter you will no longer go out alone, only with me, and if you protest we will put you in a home until you are twenty-one,” one R.C. wrote to the judge, expressing compassion for Violette. The fact that the young girl did not work was a bone of contention among neighbors who could not afford to keep their teenage children out of the workforce. For the concierge at 9 Rue de Madagascar, Angèle Bourdon, Violette’s sexual misbehavior was linked to the fact that she did not have a job. Another neighbor agreed: “That big girl did nothing with her ten fingers, and idleness brings bad counsel.”

It was as if Germaine and Baptiste had failed their daughter as much by earning and saving too much and by giving her too much schooling as by letting her run around with men. A letter to the judge railed against Germaine (“That mother’s putting on an act ... She was dying and now she wakes up?”) and even Baptiste for their inability to control their girl and give her direction: “You will agree that a mother, instead of letting her go without working and giving her delusions of grandeur by saying that they had one hundred fifty thousand francs would have done better to set her straight by having her work.” The Spoiled Child” was the headline splashed across the first issue devoted to the case by Détective, France’s premier crime magazine. The lead article introduced the family with reference to Baptiste’s considerable savings (“He was one of those railwaymen who live off very little, with no bitterness”) and to the couple’s devotion to their daughter, blinded as they were by social ambition. The magazine was more pointedly critical in an editorial that ran a couple of weeks later: “It may be that, as we have intimated, the unfortunate parents can be blamed for their excessive kindness, indulgences, and treats, the effects of which are now dammingly clear.”

Détective was echoing the sentiments of the Nozières’ neighbors and of people of modest standing all over the city. Envy of Germaine and Baptiste, whose six-figure savings came up repeatedly, was laced with a strong shot of schadenfreude: they thought they were so high and mighty, with their money in the bank and their pampered child in the lycée, and look what happened. One woman of obviously higher status who wrote to the judge explicitly alluded to the social jealousies that ran through reactions to the case: “I do not mean to look down on the concierge and the neighbors, but they are small fry and are not very keen on people of their milieu rising in the world. I am not saying, please note, that Violette Nozière was really rising socially, but since people did not know what she was really up to and just seeing her clothes and attitude, they must have found her too stuck-up. And the father going to market with the mother, and adoring her.” With their financial success and their apparently happy marriage, the Nozière couple embodied an achievement that people around them both envied and resented. Deep in their hearts, many looked upon Violette’s behavior as punishment for the couple’s hubris. It was all somehow their fault for doing it too well.

The sharp ambivalence with which peers regarded Baptiste and Germaine Nozière is a reminder of how deeply people around them identified with their experience and ambitions. The Nozières stood as quintessential representatives of the new interwar middle classes, a group that one contemporary sociologist evaluated at one quarter of the nation’s forty million
inhabitants. Only after 1918, with the rise of white-collar work and the extension of education to large segments of the population, did it come to be generally understood that French society was made up of not just two classes, bourgeoisie and manual workers, but three. The classes moyennes, wrote Lucien de Chilly in 1924, could be thought of as a crossroads for people on the move. In the upper classes, capital and investments made it possible to live without working, and the maintenance of rank made it necessary to spend. The life of the middle classes, by contrast, revolved around two principles, hard work and saving. The tangible sign of that saving was what was known as a family's patrimony, patrimoine—the small hoard of money that was a talisman for future success: "Each generation leaves after itself more than it received, son following upon father; the patrimony is to be kept and increased."60

The shock caused by Violette's act must be understood in the context of the middle classes' new importance, and within their culture, of the centrality of saving to amass a patrimoine. Germaine and Baptiste had done this, perhaps too successfully for the taste of their peers. Violette's parricide was appalling, but so was her attack on financial patrimony: she poisoned her parents but also spent their money, shopping away the sacro sanct patrimoine. The phrase newspapers endlessly repeated, although there is no indication Violette ever actually uttered it, was that like many young people of her generation she wanted to "live her life," vivre sa vie: "This arrogant girl," went one typical entry, "unhappy with the modest station of the highest and simple workers who gave her life, simply decided to get rid of them in order to 'live her life' and squander in nightclubs the savings of her poor old parents."61

Every generation has fears and worries about its youth, and the interwar years in France were no exception. Children born, like Violette, during the Great War came of age at a time when educational opportunities were expanding dramatically, while a faltering economy limited the number of available jobs. In October 1932, the newspaper L'Intransigeant ran a series of ten articles about the problems created by the oversupply of students and the scarcity of good jobs awaiting them. "Latin Quarter 1932" surveyed the lives of the thirty-five thousand or so students jostling for survival in the Paris university system, living in cheap hotel rooms, desperate for a seat in the overcrowded Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, perennially overworked and tense about the competition.62 The Paris universities were already experiencing the stresses that would later affect the elite institutions of Oxbridge and the Ivy League: those brought on by the shift from socially limited finishing institutions mainly for the upper classes to more open, highly competitive meritocracies. L'Intransigeant noted the change in language that went with this shift: previously you simply "prepared" the baccalauréate, your undergraduate degree, your doctorate, now you "push" yourself, you need to "break out"—like a rash!63 The head of the university system, Rector Charléty, told the newspaper that ambitious parents had brought about this "tragic bottleneck." They crowded over their children's cribs, "My son will be a lawyer" or "My daughter will be a pharmacist," when the kids had one chance in a thousand of making it and would be more fulfilled as a carpenter, a grocer, or a seamstress.64

The question of who did and did not belong in the universities and the Latin Quarter was clearly in the air, and the Nozière case raised it with renewed urgency. The case, wrote one journalist, "has shone a spotlight on the ideas and habits of university youth... . That is no doubt one of the indirect reasons for its extraordinary resonance."65 Violette was an interloper in the quarter, a failed exemplar of those lower-middle-class children pushed too far by their parents. Jean Dabin did little more than pose as a student, cutting classes and spending his parents' and girlfriend's money in cafés and hotels: he was the perfect emblem of the social decay of the universities. Articles and editorials about student life ran in most of the major newspapers in connection with the case. Some of them portrayed the Latin Quarter as a louche environment peopled with ambiguous figures like Violette and Jean, while others hotly insisted that a vast majority of students were not like those two but, on the contrary, serious and hardworking.

The editorial in the September 3 issue of Le Journal had it that these two unsavory youths were typical: "There are [in the Latin Quarter] too many little adventurers who say they are students but are not; too many 'emancipated' girls who have much in common with prostitutes, too many young men with jackets of extremely narrow waist and coat-hanger shoulders, with Mexican-style trousers, too many gigolos who follow the 'course' only of their bad instincts."66 The journalist for Paris-Midi reached for overheated prose to conclude: "Violette Nozières will remain in our memories a sad and lovely ode to perversity. She is the inverted muse of youth, the scarlet idol of a capsized world, the flower of evil of our age."67 The left-wing press was quick to react to the implicit charge that lower-class students were responsible for all this decay. Le Peuple, L'Intransigeant, and L'Ére Nouvelle...
ran articles explaining that the most serious, determined, and hard-working young scholars around Saint-Michel were the scholarship students. For all the blandishments about the studious youths in "the other Latin Quarter," it was clear that the case had dredged up plenty of anxieties about the fates and behavior of parasitical, aimless young people in an era of constricted economic opportunity.

Some inhabitants of the Latin Quarter were alarming because they did not fit accepted and acceptable categories: they were not bourgeois students headed for their allotted slot in the elite, or legitimate hardworking scholarship students, or even "real" men or women. Anxieties about youth, class, and masculinity converged upon Jean Dabin, the single most reviled character in the affair outside of Violette herself. As one commentator put it on September 4, "It is no longer Violette Nozière who is on trial before public opinion but the young man with the tortoiseshell glasses." L'Œuvre introduced him thus: "The most perfect specimen of this underwater fauna is a dried fruit, a student who has not managed in three years to pass the examinations for his law degree. His physique is of the sort that makes young women swivel around in the street. He is elegant like a gigolo." Dabin's physique and dress were the object of endless description and caricature: all a cartoonist had to do was sketch a figure in a fitted suit with flared pants, sporting a wide tie, pocket handkerchief, and round glasses, for readers to know who this was.

It quickly appeared that Dabin could not have been in any way directly implicated in the crime. All he had done was to have a brief affair with a sexually available young woman: why then was he so universally despised? The left-wing papers singled him out as their target of choice because of his past connection with the ultranationalist Action Française. For the Communist L'Humanité, Dabin was no exception but one of those "boys from good families who look like they have forgotten their hanger in their jacket...[a] member of the Latin Quarter bohemia, which will spawn highly decorated judges and doctors." For Le Populaire, the political violence in Dabin's background went hand in hand with his compromised sexual morality. In defense of God and king, "he loved to wield a club—ten to one, of course—against 'kraut-loving pacifists' or 'judeo-masonic Marxists' as much as he enjoyed receiving discreetly under the table from a lovely hand a sweetly scented banknote with which to pay the bill." Le Peuple commented, as did others, on the irony of this unscrupulous creature being, at least officially, a law student. Occasionally one of his kind would actually make it and end up "as a judge whose strictness will be legendary." L'Œuvre echoed the sentiment: you could imagine the station-master's son as a future prosecutor with a penchant for cases involving young adventurers of the sort he exploited in the past. People disliked Dabin for his social ambiguity: the Left tried to make him into a typical representative of overprivileged bourgeois youth, but everybody knew that as the son of a station master he hardly qualified as upper-crust: like Violette and her parents, he was socially neither here nor there. And like Violette, he was undermining his parents' social ambitions by failing at his studies: he too came from "an honorable family that spared nothing to give him, thanks to education, the means to attain a higher station." The single greatest sin he committed, however, was to break the rules of middle-class masculinity by accepting money from his lover. Soon after the affair came into the open, Jean was expelled from the university for misconduct, and while specific reasons were not given, his tarnished sexual reputation was clearly the issue.

Technically nobody could pin anything on the young man, but letters to the judge, as well as articles in all the papers, made it clear that he was considered morally implicated in Violette's crime. Some people believed that Jean had encouraged Violette to get rid of her parents, while others pointed out that as a law student he would have known that she could not inherit the money until she was twenty-one. Jean's unquestioned transgression in everyone's eyes was that in taking Violette's money he behaved exactly like a pimp. Contemporaries saw little difference between sending a woman out on the street to work for you and paying for meals with your girlfriend's money. The reference in L'Œuvre to "underwater fauna" was a pointed one: French slang for a pimp is maquereau (mackerel) or by extension poison, and fish references and jokes proliferated around the unfortunate Dabin. Since the term écailles means both tortoiseshell and fish scales, many a wit commented, like the writer in Le Populaire, that "the scales are not all on his glasses." The legal term for procuring was vagabondage spécial, a particular form of homeless parasitism a man could be charged with for living off the proceeds of a woman's work; the expression was applied constantly to Dabin. As L'Ère Nouvelle explained, "It is the very same business, whether in a dive in the slums where you play cards while waiting for the streetwalkers to get back, or in a Latin Quarter café where you are slipped a hundred-franc note, earned in a hotel, under the tablecloth from purse to wallet. A man who lowers himself in this way is always to be despised and punished."
In some contexts, pimps are considered ultravirile because they control, often violently, both the work and the sexual services of one or more women. In Jean's case, the opposite was true, and this applied to his friends as well: these foppish, idle middle-class students, who saw nothing wrong with accepting a woman's money, were wanting in masculinity and probably gay: "ambiguous youths," Paris-Soir called them. Descriptions of Jean Dabin often included telling references to his "special beauty," his long and elegant fingers, the smoothness of his clean-shaven face. One of Lanoire's correspondents went on at some length about "those young gentlemen of the Latin Quarter... who make such a show of being gallant with the ladies in order to hide all their vices: a woman looks so good on the arm of a pretty boy."

In a city where specific populations were expected to remain in their own districts, the presence of alleged pimps and homosexuals among the intellectual elites of the Latin Quarter amounted to a violation of social turf. An editorialist in L'Événement evoked an earlier generation, the 1880s and 1890s, when gangsters from the northern districts set up brasseries in the Latin Quarter that were staffed by prostitutes. The university wanted this population out of the neighborhood, and when the police declined to intervene, students launched a ten-month guerrilla war against the pimps, beating them up and throwing them in the fountains of the Luxembourg Gardens, until they finally moved out of the area. Another writer in the same paper remembered that in his youth students had dealt in the same way with sexual transgressors: "When we learned of the presence of a homosexual or an 'Alphonse' in our midst, we seized the unwelcome fellow and dunked him in the Luxembourg fountain. After this, we ceremonially escorted the comrade to the Saint-Michel Bridge and asked him to cross over for good to the Right Bank, where society was a bit more mixed. Thus did we excommunicate those heretics in love who made the mistake of preferring men to women, or of accepting money from the ladies."

Anthropologists have long noted that ambiguous figures—such as pimps, prostitutes, and homosexuals—are usually perceived as carriers of pollution; hence Parisian students a century ago "cleaned up" their neighborhood by ceremonially washing and expelling the uncanny. A generation had passed since then, but someone like Jean Dabin, a man of indistinct social class, sexuality, and educational status, could still be cast as the perfect scapegoat for the anxieties generated by the case. The endless censure and mockery directed at Dabin can be connected to a substantial body of writings in the 1920s and 1930s which claimed that male homo-sexuals (in the language of the time inverts, inverts), once confined to specific milieus at the very top and bottom of society, were now covertly present in all social circles. A writer claimed in 1938 that, in contrast to the nineteenth century, "pederasts flourish in all milieux and there are more of them than ever."

Dabin was not the only man in the case to be heavily censured. This story about a woman was also, as contemporaries increasingly noted, a story about men. A cartoon in the September 9 edition of Paris-Midi made this clear. It is framed as an elongated frieze, like a rolling film, of male figures in the case (fig. 14). From left to right are Judge Lanoire searching for Émile with a lantern; Émile himself, a short, fat man in a three-piece suit; Dabin wearing high-heeled shoes and idly strumming his long fingers; the musician Pierre as a grinning Sambo, hands clenched in front of his crotch; an Arab carpet-seller, standing for the likes of Atlan and Fellous; Count de Pinguet with brow furrowed, wearing a crown around his bowler hat; and finally an everyman as "poet," fantasizing about Violette. L'Humanité made the same point in class terms: "What the Nozière affair reveals is the decay of the bourgeoisie, with its cavalry officers, its high civil servants, and its little pimps, all of them good patriots in the manner of Jean Dabin."

Violette's lovers and associates were treated differently by the authorities and the press. Pierre Camus, her early medical-student boyfriend, was generally held to be a decent sort: he had not had any recent contact with the young girl and so could not be held in any way responsible, but also this son and grandson of doctors probably radiated the kind of affability that is often bred of social self-confidence.

More surprisingly, despite the racist caricatures in Paris-Midi, neither the public nor the newspapers expressed any hostility toward Violette's black and Arab lovers, nor is there any evidence that the police treated them any differently from anyone else. The Petit Parisien described the black musician Pierre as "a decent fellow," an "athletic negro" elegantly dressed in a blue suit and light-colored hat, and sympathized with the Tunisian Fellous when he joked that "some people win a million in the lottery and I have to meet Violette Nozière and give her my address!" L'Événement concurred in describing Pierre as both attractive and likeable and the Algerian Atlan as an elegant businessman whose affairs seemed to be going well. Male elegance was damning for some, it seems, but redemptive for others. Nor did Violette herself come in for censure for engaging specifically in cross-racial affairs; her behavior in this respect was surprisingly but clearly not an issue. One of the few references to the matter, in
the conservative *Le Matin*, remained in the mode of light irony: "There is one thing one cannot blame Violette Nozière for, namely harboring racial prejudices."

On the other hand, the man who, after Dabin, attracted the most scorn and censure was a scion of the traditional elites, Count André de Pingue. One might expect hostility from a left-wing newspaper like *Le Populaire*, which declared that Pingue was "the most sickening" of all her suitors. "He sees Violette, recognizes her, trifles with her for hours, giving her a gallant rendezvous, then sends in the police inspectors in his stead, with that typically French gallantry that was always the privilege of our aristocracy." But the mainstream press similarly disparaged him, both for doing the police’s work and for floating widely accepted norms of gallantry. *Detective* dismissed Pingue as an "operetta-style Sherlock Holmes" and a publicity hound. As we have seen, his role in handing Violette over to the authorities proved extremely controversial. Some people, reported *Marianne*, believed that he did his duty in turning her in, while others, even though they considered Violette a monster, were revolted by his duplicity and astonished at his "mentality." But Pingue had not done much for his image by trying to peddle his story to several newspapers. But, as an aristocratic snitch, he also disturbed categories in the same way as Dabin: turning in a fugitive violated widely held norms of antipolice solidarity, doubly

so if the criminal was female and had been approached flirtatiously. The fact that the count, a bona fide aristocrat, had acted like a vulgar police informer, gave rise to a telling pun: the joke went around that Pingue was an *homme donneur*—a "man of honor" (*homme d’honneur*) but really, since *donneur* or "giver" meant snitch, the most dishonorable of creatures. An aristocratic snitch, a middle-class pimp, a teenage female parricide, a mother with a death wish for her child: all these oxymoronic characters were deeply disturbing because they upended people’s expectations about gender- and class-appropriate behavior.

These were the issues and characters debated in public. The central and most explosive matter was one that newspapers approached only tentatively, obliquely, using roundabout phrases like "odious accusation." As we have seen, the initial certainty that Violette was lying about her father’s incestuous activities to minimize her crime was dented when the elements of proof she offered—her boyfriends’ testimony, the stained rag—proved reasonably convincing, if not necessarily conclusive. But after a flurry of speculation in mid-September, around the time the Nozières’ apartment was searched, the matter died down. An editorialist in *Gringoire* wrote a commentary on September 22 to the effect that anything was possible in this world and that "those who are ravaged by these sorts of passions don’t shout it out over the rooftops or confide in their colleagues." He carefully protested that he had no opinion of the Nozière case specifically.
column was an exception: the silence in the press on the subject of incest was deafening.

One wonders whether people talked about it among themselves, at home or among neighbors and friends. Judging from the sheaf of letters Lanoire received on the subject, there is no question that the issue of sexual abuse in the family had deep resonance for many people, reluctant as they might be to raise the matter in public. Some people wrote in to disprove the incest: a few letter-writers believed that Baptiste was not Violette’s father, several pointed out that her father was not infected with syphilis, and one woman, “a mother,” ventured that a woman who did all her family’s laundry would have noticed if something like that had been going on when her daughter was young. A couple of others confirmed Violette’s allegations. A gentleman from Normandy said he had met her near the Printemps department store and that in the hotel they went to she had confided to him about the abuse. A barely literate writer sent a letter to Violette’s lawyer, Henri Géraud, from Germaine’s village, Neuzy: “One day going to work I was seized by the call of nature and went on the other side of the hedge and found Nozière with his daughter. Nozière begged me for his wife and his family to say nothing ever. Since 1929 I think I said nothing, but Mme Nozière’s denial of her daughter forces me to tell the truth.” We cannot know, of course, whether the man from Normandy really met Violette or if the correspondent from Neuzy had actually seen what he described.

Violette’s claims triggered the strongest response from one category of letter writers: women who reported that they had themselves been abused, either by their fathers or by other relatives, and who wrote to the judge begging him to believe her, or to Germaine asking for her pity and understanding. In the process, the writers pour out their own stories, often mentioning that they have never told a soul before. Trust me, many of them wrote, a man can do this and still be considered a paragon by everyone who knows him. A highly literate lady explained, “As for the neighbors, how would they know anything? All of this is hidden, nobody knows about these sorts of family dramas.” Let me tell you a story I know from close up, she continued: it is about a bourgeois family in which the father keeps trying to attack the eighty-year-old grandmother, “yet this man is a ministerial officer and legal professional, held in the highest esteem.” My father was highly esteemed among his acquaintances, his workers, the entire town,” wrote F.R., “Oh, Mr. X is such a good man, but he acted badly with me.” The writer, aged sixty, had been raped by her father when she was fifteen and never told her mother for fear of forcing a parental separation. “I have known the same thing,” confided another, hiding behind the third person. “When the child was older she went in for the worst debauchery thanks to the bad example of the man who had been abusing her since she was nine. She dared not say anything to her mother, and the whole thing was only discovered much later. . . . So do you really think, Your Honor, that you will know anything about Nozière’s honesty by asking his friends and relatives? Do you think that these individuals are going to boast about their vice to their colleagues? They pose as real patriarchs, setting themselves up as examples.”

Some letters are long, pathetic autobiographies. One is even signed, by a Mme Parry Hochstrasse in Saint-Dizier. The facts are spelled out in detail: she was fourteen, in bed with her sister, and felt a hand touching her; she grabbed the hand and stared at her father. “It caused profound disgust in me, and I understood things I should not have known until much later. And in spite of my decision to tell my mother everything, I did not dare, I was ashamed, and was seized with such self-disgust that I wanted to kill myself, but I loved my poor mother too much.” Later, when her father exposed himself to her, she did tell her mother but was not believed: “She cursed me out to the whole family, and since that time I was known as a little pervert and liar. My poor mother wished me dead. I wept to her to give me back her love, but my tears and entreaties had the opposite effect—what a Calvary it was for my whole life. I am now fifty-eight and I remember this as if it were yesterday.”

There are letters written to Mme Nozière, like the one with the cover note that comments, “She is so cruel to her child I need to let her know what I suffered and what her child might be suffering.” This letter is handwritten in pencil on a huge sheet of something that might be wrapping paper, with spelling that is nearly phonetic. “Madame, do not believe that it is impossible, a father can be a good man but weak.” The writer grew up in the country in a family of six children, and when her father asked her to share his bed, it made her happy because she was so fond of him. When it happened, she could not believe it and did not say anything. When she was older and there was company, she had to share his bed again “and in the night it was the same thing such a horror from a father especially since my sister and her husband were in the room and I was terrified that they would hear something. I resented my father as since he knew his own passion he should have slept on a mattress on the ground.” The letter ends with an appeal to Germaine: “Madame, if really your child went through
this torture it is horrible, forgive her, protect her, she has suffered enough, this is an unhappy mother and grandmother begging you.”

At the other end of the social scale, a woman “from the best society” pleaded with to Lanoire to believe “that poor little Violette” because her own youth was ruined by her father's abuse and by the hostility of a mother who refused to believe her and wanted to lock her up. “I beg you with all my heart, Sir, to believe that poor child who is hated by all of Paris, and I hope that my courage will bring her good luck. For I am fifty years old, and still ashamed to have had such a father... I ask you to publish this letter in the newspapers, and I beg women who have gone through what I have to do as I am doing. I beseech you to take pity on that child, if she fainted in front of her mother she must really love her.” Of course, no such appeals were ever published.

A case that prompted a dozen women to write to a man they did not know and tell him intimate stories they may not have told anyone else in the world does not fit neatly into the categories of “scandal” or “affair.” The Nozière story never settled into a classic scandal because the objects of indignation it offered were unstable: the unquestioned villain was Violette at first, but then maybe not entirely, and then other villains emerged to compete with her: the mother who raised her so badly and then wished for her death, the boyfriend who exploited her, the upper-class snitch who turned her in, even the father who at best should have looked out for her virtue and at worst may have done the unspeakable. If the function of scandal in society is to generate “indignation that unites,” the Nozière case hardly fits the bill. But then neither was it an affair, since nobody—except, as we shall see, a group of avant-garde poets in a foreign publication—emerged in public to take Violette’s defense. Women’s groups in the 1930s were preoccupied with reproductive rights and the suffrage that French women would achieve only in 1945. Sexual abuse in the family would not gain public recognition as an issue for decades, and in any event Violette, a promiscuous spendthrift and cold-blooded parent-killer, was hardly a good poster child for any cause.

The Nozière case did resonate strongly with contemporaries, however, because it involved matters that got to the heart of everyday experience for many thousands: the perils of upward mobility, the ingratitude of children, the responsibility of parents, and the proper behavior of young men and women. And the truth of it was always just beyond reach. Could anyone ever know what went on behind the closed doors of a “good” family any more than they could know what went on in the mind of a beautiful but opaque young woman?

All of this explains the universal fascination with a story that generated thousands of pages of print but also impelled women and men of all social classes in Paris and beyond to share their anger, anxiety, or excitement with the Judge Lanoire. In early September the novelist Pierre Drieu La Rochelle attempted to explain in a magazine article the hold of the case over contemporaries.80 Most people, he surmised, think sometimes about high politics, sometimes worry about the 1924 election or the rise of Hitler. Most of the time, though, “they think about the three or four themes that govern their individual fates: family, love, money and death... It is because they think so much about family that little Violette hit them so hard.” When the Nozière case broke out, people’s first reaction was: “She killed. This is no ‘affair.’” Then the questions started: how many people did she want to kill? Who helped her? Whom in fact did she kill, who was her father? And then people took positions and started arguing, and the case became a sort of “political” case, Drieu argued, not in the sense that we usually understand the word, but rather a politics that does not divide people according to their interests, their class, or their culture. “Women especially need to find out about what they need to know, right now: about the way things go for other people, compare this with what goes on for them; and then fit what seems so particular, so strange and solitary, into the general rhythm of breathing.” The story made members of the public take out positions, defend them, and change them, caused them to think over and revise the matters that touched them most closely.

A whole constellation of contemporary experience was packed into the story of Violette and her parents. Drieu observed, and as a result much was projected onto the elusive anheorine of the crime: “Every time Violette Nozière makes a move, something shifts, sending out waves, and in the circles expanding from one face to the next we discover a hundred of the secrets we all keep.” Some famous crimes are given meaning by the commanding voice of a Voltaire, a Zola, or a Darrow; others, more quietly, by the buzz of a thousand anonymous conversations.
It would be absurd, of course, to label any historical period “the age of crime”; fascination with tales of violence is inevitably present in all times because acts of evil delineate the outer limits of every generation’s moral and social landscape. What matters in historical terms is the specific nature and shape of that fascination: What sorts of crime and which criminal populations draw attention in a given period? How are murder and mayhem “sold” and “consumed”? In Germany between the wars, for instance, both the general public and the literary and artistic communities were intensely preoccupied with what was known as Lustmord—sexual murders by serial killers—a phenomenon that echoes the late-nineteenth-century British obsession with Jack the Ripper but has no real French equivalent.²

Beginning in the later nineteenth century, crime as a commodity in France had a new format, the fait divers. The term, which has no real counterpart in English, comes from journalistic practice. Newspapers carried items of substance, such as political and economic news, as well as reporting on more entertaining fare, such as culture and sports. As the newspaper press developed, editors were at pains to find a designation for items of great interest that had no obvious relevance to the public world, such as sordid private criminality. These were corralled into a section labeled faits divers, “diverse” or “miscellaneous” happenings. It is tempting to equate faits divers with what we call the crime rubric, but the category is more capacious and includes bizarre or tragic coincidences: a person killed by a suicide’s jump from a tall building, a man who “killed after his own death” (the coffin fell on the priest), an executioner who dies on the way to carrying out his function.³

By the 1930s squalid private crime had been an item in the newspapers for many decades. The term and concept of the fait divers goes back at least to 1869, when reports of the foul deeds of Jean-Baptiste Troppmann, cold-blooded killer of an angelic family of six, increased tenfold the circulation of Le Petit Journal and made it into the capital’s leading daily.⁴ Stories of “everyday crime” were not new, but the 1920s and ’30s in France could be called the “age of the faits divers” because of the intense interest in and coverage of these kinds of crimes. Before the mid-nineteenth century, crime reporting was embedded in the practices of an oral culture: crime narratives were broadcast by street criers and singers, or printed on one-sided handbills called canards, which were posted where people could congregate and discuss their contents.⁵ The stories retailed in these archaic modes were often those of larger-than-life criminal figures, such as

IT IS EASY TO IMAGINE Violette Nozière as a film noir heroine, as she was indeed portrayed by the great French actress Isabelle Huppert in Claude Chabrol’s 1978 movie about the case: long, dark silhouette, tilted hat, fur stole, pale skin, and scarlet lips. Indeed, as a character, she fits a classic description of the film noir woman as a “femme fatale who is fatal to herself”: “Frustrated and deviant, half predator, half prey, detached yet ensnared, she falls victim to her own traps.”¹ On the one hand, the Nozière case was, in its particulars, intensely real to contemporaries: brain in oil sauce for lunch and soup for supper, card games and dirty rags, cheap hotels and department store shopping. From another angle, however, Violette’s story fits into a rolling succession of crime narratives and a cultural environment in which dark, inexplicable deeds were given pride of place in both literary and mass culture. This was the age of the first hugely successful French crime weeklies, of the literary birth of Inspector Maigret, of killers like Henri Landru and the Papin sisters, whose names still resonate in France. High literary culture fully partook in the cult of the bizarrely violent. André Gide, arguably the most admired and influential writer of the years after World War I, produced novels in which characters committed unexplained killings and suicides, and the dominant avant-garde movement of the time, Surrealism, drew much of its creative energy from fantasies of sadistic transgression.

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A Culture of Crime
the outlaws Mandrin and Cartouche or the would-be regicide Damiens in the eighteenth century, or in the early nineteenth the intellectual dandy and murderer Pierre Lacenaire, who entertained the cream of Parisian society in his prison cell and cultivated his image as a doomed poet onto the very steps of the guillotine. In the nineteenth-century city, crime also became a sociological rather than individual category. With increasing migration from the countryside and separation of classes in the city, workers appeared strange and alarming to the middle classes. During the Belle Époque, the good bourgeois shivered as they read of the violent acts of Parisian street gangs. These youths pouring into the center of the city were dubbed Apaches by a sensation-hungry journalist. Around 1900, reports of “Apache” violence for years fueled readers’ paranoia that an “army of crime” controlled the city, even as stories about the Apache “queen” Casque d’Or (“Golden Helmet”) stoked their fantasies.

In the wake of World War I, this preoccupation with dangerous classes and armies of crime was displaced by fascination with offenses committed by “people just like us.” Fears of the unknown gave way to fears of the known, of the violence that might be committed by the normal-looking person next door or even an intimate. To put it another way, the cultural framework of crime moved from the melodramatic to the “noir” mode. A 1936 article in the crime magazine Déetective evoked the melodramatic romance of Belle Époque Parisian crime, at once titillating and reassuring, since criminals clearly came from elsewhere: the piece evoked the era when bad boys from the northern districts and their molls with hair piled high on their heads came down to the center city to settle scores at knife-point and eat snails at L’Ange Gabriel, the “Maxim’s of the Apaches.” “It is hard for us, remembering the prewar underworld, to separate our memories from the images in the popular pageantry of successful melodramas, or of songs in the style of [Aristide] Bruant.” Before the war, there were crimes of passion, of course, but no “improvised criminals.” Felons belonged to a certain milieu and had rules and codes of honor. They might be violent, but they did not cheat. Now, the journalist continued, with social mobility and the influx of foreigners, all that is gone and you can hardly tell who is a criminal: “You see boys from good families, like Gaucher, like Dabin, become would-be pimps and would-be gangsters.” Evil could be right beside you, and you would not know it.

Melodrama as a genre was born in the eighteenth century and flourished in the nineteenth. Displacing older religious traditions, it located the struggle between good and evil in the social world, making morality easily legible to the larger, socially mixed audiences of plays and early movies, or to readers of cheap popular fare. It took little sophistication to figure out what the mustache-twirling villain, gothic monster, or white-clad virgin was up to; but melodrama was also morally comforting, since evil was depicted as external and radically “other.” The aesthetic that has come to be known as “noir,” by contrast, locates evil within or beside us. The literary critic Jonathan Eburne observes: “Could not the standard noir plot twist be described as the uncanny realization that an evil ‘out there’ against which the protagonists so gallantly attempt to safeguard themselves, is suddenly revealed to have been in their midst all along?”

Although melodramatic and noir conventions and sensibilities often coexist, it is the latter that typically informed crime reporting during the interwar years in France. The Nozière story is emblematic of the 1930s fait divers: not only did it happen to “people just like us,” not only was the evil it portrayed chillingly intimate, but, hatred of Violette notwithstanding, it became increasingly difficult as the case proceeded to identify an entirely guilty party or an entirely innocent one.

Melodramatic conventions are easily pressed into the service of the us-against-them spirit of political ideologies: good French against evil Germans, pure proletarians versus wicked capitalists, and so on. What is striking about the fait divers is its detachment from broad ideological and political patterns: the significance of these bizarre, morally opaque stories lay precisely in their lack of obvious meaning. And this in turn must be understood in relation to the political vacuum of the time. The horrific absurdity of the First World War—millions killed for reasons nobody could, in the end, quite fathom—combined with the violence of the Russian Revolution left a generation disillusioned with grand systems of belief, such as nationalism and socialism. The cronyism and graft rampant among the Third Republic leadership alienated ordinary French people from the political process: the big battles against the Church and for universal education had been won in previous generations, leaving in their wake only complacent mediocrity. Little wonder that so many sought diversion and meaning in sensational, fragmentary, ambiguous tales of private tragedy.

In 1928, France got a new magazine devoted entirely to crime, Déetective, subtitled “The Great Fais-Divers Weekly.” The periodical’s genealogy is interesting, since Déetective’s origins were in the world of high literary publishing. The person who brought the magazine into being was one of
France's legendary publishers, Gaston Gallimard, whose name adorns what is still today the country's most prestigious literary imprint. Born in 1881, Gallimard, the son of a book-loving Parisian architect, was a brilliant and charming man of the world who did not do much of anything until age thirty, when he was recruited by the rarefied group of intellectuals around André Gide to launch a press as a spin-off of their successful literary periodical, the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. The choice was a stroke of either luck or genius, since Gallimard turned out to possess both an excellent business sense and an extraordinary flair for literary quality. The upshot—the NRF Press—was a collaboration between the period's best writers and its best editor that, while it made literary history, was also famously rocky. Tensions erupted at regular intervals between Gallimard, a pillar of the social scene who loved comedy actresses, flashy cars, and long lunches and did not despise money, and the group around Gide, high-minded intellectuals, several of Protestant or Jewish descent, whom Parisians sometimes mocked as the "Calvin Follies." One contemporary later marveled that Gide and Gallimard had been able to work together for thirty years: "Gaston is weak and irascible, Gide is oblique and treacherous." In 1939 Gallimard went on to create his own publishing house. He was to discover and promote such canonical French writers as Louis Aragon, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, and Albert Cohen, snap up the journalist-turned-crime writer Georges Simenon, and publish Dos Passos, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck in translation. He continued to work closely with the *Nouvelle Revue Française* group, publish their works, and help them out. When Gide committed the epic literary mistake of turning down Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* ("Too many duchesses, not our style"), it was Gallimard who pulled the chestnuts out of the fire for him, eventually wooing Proust back from the competition.

By the late 1920s, Gallimard had the most prestigious list in France but was facing severe financial difficulties linked to the incipient international economic crisis. Since he scorned neither the profit motive nor middlebrow culture, Gallimard was receptive when the brothers Kessel came to him in 1928 with an intriguing proposition. Joseph and Georges were two of the three sons of a Russian Jewish doctor, Samuel Kessel, who had immigrated to France via Argentina. The eldest Kessel brother, Lazare, one of France's most promising young actors, committed suicide in 1920. Joseph was both a highly successful novelist (later elected to the Académie Française) and an international adventurer-journalist who became a cult figure between the wars, flying his own plane to exotic places and shaping his travels into tales of virile adventure. He and Georges shared burly good looks and a taste for high living, drugs, and women. Georges, twenty-five years old in 1928, was a well-dressed and witty dilettante with a rich wife but whose weakness for horse races and poker left him in chronic need of cash.16

Joseph and Georges came to Gallimard with a proposal: since readers obviously hungered for the *faits divers* section of newspapers, why not bypass the "serious" news and devote a whole magazine to crime? Gallimard recognized the idea's potential. Georges, the prime mover for the initiative, recruited two journalist-friends of his, Marius Larique and Marcel Montaron, between horse races at the Saint-Cloud track where he was gambling away most of Gallimard's start-up money.17 Somehow the first issue of *Détective* got produced under the wire and on borrowed money. Dated November 4, 1928, and with a cover story on "Chicago, Capital of Crime," it was a huge success, reportedly selling three hundred and fifty thousand copies. Two years later, the editors claimed that they produced six hundred thousand copies of each weekly issue and had a readership of about one million, or one in every forty French people.18 Though these figures were probably exaggerated, there is no question that the magazine had a huge audience, which it retained well into the 1930s. The magazine's success produced a rash of imitators over the next few years: *Police Magazine*, *Faits Divers*, *Police et Reportages*, and *Scandales*, none of which, however, seriously dented *Détective*'s sales or threatened its status as the iconic publication in the genre. Gallimard was later to remark that *Détective* was his greatest commercial success, its heyday the only time his publishing house made serious profits.20

The magazine's staff was made up of reporter-journalists with serious credentials, most of whom moonlighted for *Détective* while keeping their jobs at established dailies like *Le Journal*. The 1920s in France were the heyday of the romanticized danger-courtting reporter, a figure soon to be immortalized in the comic-strip character Tintin. Some of the newsmen who worked for *Détective*—Larique, Montaron, Paul Bringuier, Henri Danjou, and Georges Simenon—were skittish about being associated with the pointy-headed intellectuals at the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and Gallimard. They liked to think of themselves in the tradition of the great Albert Londres, who had achieved glory by exposing the abuses of France's overseas penal colonies in the 1920s, and they carefully cultivated a reputation as the *enfants terribles* of the Gallimard house. The magazine's reporters...
held shooting practice sessions in the warehouse they were given for an office, and even faked a William Tell scene once when the Gallimard brass came for a visit. Bringuier pulled a bottle off his head with an invisible string when a colleague fired a blank at him, while the others shot real bullets into luxury editions of the works of the highbrow Catholic writers Charles Péguy and Paul Claudel. At first the enterprise was very much part-of-the-pantry. At the beginning, before the magazine had its own photographers, the journalists pursued whatever shots they could from other agencies and archives and tried to fit them to their stories: "We were the ragpickers of the fait divers," Montarron later reminisced.22

Détective covered "crime" in the broadest possible sense, not just criminal acts but also criminal and dangerous milieus. Especially in the early years, pride of place was given to exotic overseas locales, allowing the editors to make claims about the educational value of their publication. Cover stories often dealt with foreign crime and especially punishment: torture and chastisement in Afghanistan, the Antipodes, the Philippines, or China, where, decapitations and crucifixions notwithstanding, the article reported, "death is the least feared of punishments." A January 1929 article on foot-flogging and ceremonial strangulation in Afghanistan piously concluded a report destined for armchair voyeurism: "Barbaric customs, rituals one might believe long abandoned, that is what I believed it my duty to reveal to the readers of this great magazine." Nor was all this exotic cruelty third-world based. American legal and extralegal brutality got plenty of coverage too, in features about the police techniques known as le grillage and vigilante violence or la loi de Lynch.24

Most of the reporting naturally focused on France, much of it dealing with criminal or carceral underworlds. Prisons, especially women's prisons, and France's harsh penal colonies in Guyana and elsewhere got plenty of attention. So did the Parisian underworld, the milieu, whose argot, score-settling, and crime bosses were evoked in rich detail: you could almost hear the strains of the accordion and make out through the cigarette smoke the gangsters known as marlous, in their striped jerseys and wide pants, keeping an eye on their heavily made-up venal girlfriends, the pierreuses. Since some of the readership was provincial, the underworlds of other cities in France were awarded their own articles, sometimes plausibly (Marseille), other times less so (Dijon).25

The magazine's readers probably covered a wide swath of society. For most of the 1930s, Détective cost one franc fifty, a small luxury for an unskilled worker making one hundred francs a week and a very affordable indulgence for office workers making twice or three times that amount. The magazine also appealed to middle-class intellectuals seeking ammunition for their fiction: André Gide, the novelist Paul Nizan, the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, the playwright Jean Genet, and poets from the Surrealist group all looked at it at least occasionally. The best clues as to who read the magazine are offered by the one or two pages of advertising in each issue. Ads for the books of literary figures like Gide, Drieu la Rochelle, or Erich Maria Remarque point to the publication's origins in the Gallimard high culture world and flattered readers' cultural ambitions. Beside these, notices appeared weekly for astrologers, tarot readers, and private eyes. The biggest ads in Détective were for the sort of newly available consumer goods that would be particularly appealing to families rising in the world: furniture for art deco bedrooms or faux-Renaissance dining rooms, purchaseable on credit from department stores; traditional household goods like linens and pan sets; and the spoils of modernity, cameras, radio consoles, phonographs and bicycles.

Most revealing are the frequent ads for educational and vocational self-improvement. The issue of May 15, 1930, for instance, included half a page touting a new "autodidactic encyclopedia" and reminding readers: "It is known that the best positions go to those who have acquired in their schooling the components of the literary, scientific and practical baggage of the 'Great Schools'... TO KNOW is already TO SUCCEED." Other issues carried publicity for the Écoles Pigier, which offered training for white-collar jobs, illustrated with vignettes of well-dressed young men and women seated at desks. "You are young! You are ambitious! Succeed!" trumpeted an October 1930 advertisement for a private vocational school. To succeed one might have to transform one's appearance—or so one might surmise from the frequent ads for diet products, facial treatments, bespoke clothing, and tattoo removal services that also graced Détective's pages.

Judging from the advertisements it carried, then, Détective was pitched at families exactly like the Nozières: lower-middle-class urban households with some educational background and a strong desire to better themselves. The editorial in the very first issue evokes the isolation of new urban families eager to experience the world vicariously. Détective, the editors announced, would be the readers' eyes and ears. Partons, pour vous was the magazine's motto: everywhere for everyone. Like a private eye, Détective "will spy, stalk criminals, follow the police. Sometimes wearing canvas shoes, sometimes elegant pumps, he will wield a blow-torch if need be to
force open secrets. . . . With him you will be at the world’s center, at the heart of life’s great dramas: the nights of Chicago, the slums of Singapore, the Whitechapel ghettos, the secrets of the North Pole. . . . You will have your weekly film at home.” All of this was promised in the name of “a team of ten, twenty, maybe one hundred young and experienced men, ready for any adventure”; half a dozen was closer to the truth, at least initially. 27  
"Détective" proposed to its readers something like what television was to offer a few decades later: a “film at home” made up of sensationalized information, a mixture of the exotic and the familiar available for consumption right in one’s own living room. To the housewives, civil servants, and office workers who read it, "Détective" trumpeted its literary respectability as a scion of the house of Gallimard, while offering thrills and a sense of connection within an increasingly atomized world.

"Détective" reassured readers about whom they were not. They could read, as their nineteenth-century forebears did, about the capital’s dangerous classes, the frightening population of slum dwellers in la zone on the edges of the city. Depictions of life in this no-man’s-land of the wretchedly poor were horrible in a conventionally Zolaesque way, a catalogue of brawls, knifings, prostitution, family violence, alcohol, and incest. 28 More innovative was the sensationalizing of rural crime for the benefit of urban readers. An overview in April 1932 entitled “Villages of Crime” explained that rural folk, living close to nature, had primitive instincts and their limited horizons made them grasping and self-interested. An article later that year recounted the murder of an ancient farmer by a young woman who may have been his mistress. The old man’s widow hisses at the reporter, “You don’t know! You can’t know! It’s infernal here! This place is the village of hatred!” 29  
Men burn down their enemies’ farms and shoot their families; a farmer beats both of his girlfriends and has them wear metal chastity belts; the dissolute Louise et bludgeons her married paramour to death under what the article’s title blithely says “The Apple Tree of Passion.” 30  
Many urban workers spent their summer vacations, as did the Nozicres, in these villages of “hatred,” “fear,” and “passion,” but this apparently did not blunt their interest in the sordid goings-on in someone else’s grandmother’s village. The articles in "Détective" probably reminded them of why they were right to have left such claustrophobic and impoverished places.

The bread-and-butter of the magazine, as of the faits divers of the big daily papers, was the reporting of day-to-day urban crime. In 1931 Paul Bringuier contributed to "Détective" an article in the form of a memoir ex-

plaining how he learned the trade of a fait divers reporter. As a young man, he applied for a position on the crime beat at a leading newspaper, whose editor-in-chief delivered his usual discouraging speech: “You need an overpowering vocation, the energy of a brute to stay in the game. Talent? Doesn’t matter. . . . You know how to write? Don’t answer, I’m telling you that you don’t. You got university degrees? Actually I don’t give a damn, I only ask because of spelling. There, I got good again, another clumsy tube we have to train. Jeez. Here, guys, you show him the ropes, I’m dying here.” His new colleagues toss him a cigarette and explain that Paris is divided for the job into eight sections, each assigned to one reporter. His task is to make the rounds of a dozen police stations, trawling for news. Young Bringuier makes his way to a first police station, where he’s told that nothing’s going on. As he starts to leave, a gendarme stops him: “Nothing. It’s a manner of speaking. You want an eighty-year-old man who shot himself seven times in the head? Didn’t die, by the way. Yes? The report’s over there on the desk, that one there, you can copy it out. Do you play poker, by the way?” Bringuier tells of autopsies in village cemeteries, of provincial train stations in the dead of night, of crowding into a Montmartre crime scene with the police, blood on everyone’s shoes, of articles scribbled on cardboard or butcher’s paper in the back of a taxi. He makes the job sound frenetic and also romantic.

"Détective"s tone of obligatory high seriousness—pathos, indignation, something verging on hucksterism for the foreign articles—sometimes broke down when the story warranted it. In 1936, for instance, Marcel Montarron reported on the trial of a pudgy fiftyish grocer in the dreary suburb of Vauréal-sur-Oise who tried to supplement the faltering income from his small business by operating a salon for sadomasochistic practices on the side. The trial of the grocer and his equally dowdy wife (“Madame Rod” for professional purposes) was a local sensation even though, Montarron regretfully reported, there was no reconstitution of the offense. Best of all, some clients were dragged into court to testify. A stammering Monsieur K. explained that he became a client because “I was curious about the underside of Parisian life.” The prosecutor exploded: “You call this Parisian life? Vauréal-sur-Oise?” 31  
"Faits divers" magazines lived for the “big crimes” that would provide a sustained run of news. “Monsters” like the family-slaying Troppmann or the pedophile Soleil could boost sales for weeks at a time. In the early 1920s all of France was in thrall to the deeds of Henri Landru, the “Bluebeard of Gambia.” Landru was a middle-aged engineer with a
heavy black beard and a sideline in stolen goods who between 1935 and 1939 lured ten women out to his country house on the outskirts of Paris. His newspaper ad indicated an interest in marriage, an effective bait at a time when most young men were at the front (he kept the letters of over two hundred others who had written in). All ten women, and the teenage son of one of them, simply disappeared, though some of their effects were found in the villa. Landru, who had probably incinerated their bodies, dared the prosecutors to prove him a killer. Complicating matters further were the existence of Landru’s estranged but respectable wife and four children, and his longtime and tenderly devoted mistress. Landru insisted he was innocent right up to his execution in February 1922.33

After a series of smaller cases in the 1920s, in 1933 an extraordinary run of “big crimes” began, their importance magnified by the *faits divers* press. The novelty of this later period was how much importance was invested in the crimes of apparently ordinary folks. Just six months before the Nozière affair, French readers were shocked by one of the most grisly and inexplicable murders in modern French history. The crime of the Papin sisters can be considered the archetypal *faits divers* because the sisters’ exceptionally violent act could never be made to fit any of the contexts invoked to contain it. No case better evokes the essence of the interwar *faits divers*: the mysterious power vested in an obscure and ultimately inexplicable private event.

Christine and Léa Papin were respectively twenty-eight and twenty-two when they committed their crime in February 1933.34 They worked as cook and housemaid for an archetypal family of the provincial bourgeoisie in the western French town of Le Mans. Their employers were the Lancelins—a retired lawyer, his wife, and their twenty-one-year-old daughter Geneviève. Christine and Léa’s existence had been grim, consisting mostly of poverty and neglect. Their parents, Gustave and Clémence Papin, uneducated small-town laborers, had three daughters and a wretched marriage that ended when the children were young amid rumors that Gustave, a violent alcoholic, had sexually abused the eldest daughter, Émilie. Clémence, in charge of the girls after her divorce, showed a distinct lack of maternal affection: she placed the two eldest ones in an orphanage and sent Léa, then two, to live with a brother. Émilie eventually entered a convent, and Clémence placed the two younger girls as servants as soon as they were of age, always demanding a large cut from their wages. At first they worked in separate households, but eventually they managed to get hired together. Christine and Léa, alone in the world (they broke off relations with their mother in 1929), developed an intense symbiotic relationship in which the older girl acted as the younger one’s mother. They showed no interest in the outside world and communicated only with each other. The Lancelins hired them in 1927.

Relations between masters and servants in the Lancelin household were fairly typical of the time and place, chilly but not abnormally fraught. The Lancelins were formally “good masters”: they paid their servants a decent wage and a half month extra at Christmas, fed them well, and did not make unusual demands. Much was later made of an episode in which Madame pinched Léa’s shoulder and forced her to go on her knees and pick up a scrap of paper from the carpet, but the maids never described their treatment by the Lancelins as harsh or unfair. The interactions between servants and masters can hardly have been called warm: M. Lancelin never addressed the maids directly, and Geneviève barely talked to them at all. The household seems to have been a universe of smug propriety in which Madame gave orders and everyone knew their place. The Lancelins were actually very satisfied with their household help, even bragging about the sisters to their acquaintances. Christine and Léa also insisted, after the fact, that they had no complaints about their employers. Certainly, master-servant relationships in the house involved their share of tensions and oddities: there had been an incident a few months earlier in which the sisters wandered into the town hall looking somewhat deranged and complained about persecution by their employers; they sometimes called their mistresses “Maman” and their mother, while they still spoke to her, “Madame.” But what lives, what relationships, would not offer up some element of the bizarre when subjected to the kind of scrutiny that follows an act of extraordinary violence?

In the early evening of February 3, 1933, a fuse blew in the Lancelin house. The electric iron had recently come back from the repair shop, its breakdown attributed to the maids’ carelessness. When Mme Lancelin and Geneviève came home from visiting at the end of the afternoon, the ironing was still not done and the house was plunged in darkness because the iron had short-circuited and blown a fuse. Mme Lancelin reproached the maids, who reacted with crazed savagery: with Christine taking the lead, they threw themselves on the two women and tore out their eyebrows with their naked fingers, then fetched household implements—a pewter jug, hammer, and knife—with which they battered and cut their mistresses to death. Some of the cuts, on the victim’s naked buttocks and thighs, seemed sadistically sexual in nature. Surveying the bloody damage,
Christine dryly commented, “Eh bien, c’est du propre”—“Well, this is a fine mess.” Christine and Léa locked the front door, went upstairs to their bedroom, washed and put on their dressing gowns, then waited huddled together in bed, by the light of a candle, for the arrival of the police. They immediately confessed to the crime, describing it in detail but giving no explanation.

Predictably, many commentators and contemporaries rushed to embrace a narrative of class exploitation: it would have been reassuring to believe the murders were just an uncommonly feral response to years of abuse by harsh masters and a cruel social order. The Communist L’Humanité naturally promoted this view of the matter, titling its summary at the time of the sisters’ trial “Seven Years of Slavery”: “The true reasons for this murder can be found in the hell these two servants lived through with this bourgeois family... It is not the Papin sisters who should be on trial, but the sacrosanct bourgeois family, which nurtures not only the most shameful secrets but cruelty and contempt for those who earn their keep serving it.” The left-leaning Marianne echoed the sentiment: “Let’s not forget that for bourgeois like the women who were murdered, a servant is less than an animal... a creature of another species, marginal to society, basement-dwellers to those honorable social strata that give birth to lawyers, notaries, the salt of the earth.” Intellectuals like the young Beauvoir and Sartre, exiled to entry-level teaching positions in dull provincial towns, took sides in a flash: “In Rouen, as in Le Mans, perhaps among the mothers of my students,” wrote Beauvoir, “there were certainly women like that, who deducted the price of a broken plate from their maid’s wages and pulled on white gloves to discover traces of dust on the furniture: in our view, they were the ones deserving death a hundred times over.”

Some journalists sought to “tame” the case by means of the fear and contempt of rural folk felt by many city dwellers. L’Intransigeant went straight for the clichés: “Christine and Léa Papin are country girls, stubborn, limited, jealous, vindictive, but normal and responsible for all that.” Vu tagged them the “bad sheep” of the Bon Pasteur (Good Shepherd) Orphanage; Detective headlined “The Rabid Sheep” (fig. 15). Le Journal revealed the unfamiliar expressions they used to describe their acts of violence, the language of the slaughterhouse and the butcher shop: “Je l’ai alourdie” (“I weighed her down”) for the skull fracturing, “Je lui ai fait des enciselures” (“I cross-hatched her”) for the knifing. George Imam in Candide shared with readers the “peasant brutality” of Christine’s first declarations to the police: “When Madame came in, I reported to her that

Figure 15. Christine and Léa Papin in a Detective photomontage of February 9, 1939, with objects like the ones they used for their crime. (Courtesy Éditions Gallimard and Bibliothèque des Littératures Policières, Paris.)
the iron was broken. She wanted to attack me, and that is when I jumped at her and ripped out her eyes with my fingers."\(^{39}\)

However much journalists and commentators tried to press the case into a familiar mold—cruelly exploited workers, bestial country people—these efforts were insufficient. Pent-up anger at a demanding employer, even coupled with a particularly wretched background and life story, came far short of explaining why one would tear out eyeballs, bash in skulls, slice flesh to ribbons, and then barely seem to register the carnage. The obvious explanation was that the women were severely deranged, a diagnosis that Christine's behavior seemed to confirm: in prison the older sister babbled incoherently, licked the ground and walls as if in penance, experienced a monthlong fit during which she threatened to tear out her own eyes, and finally had to be placed in solitary confinement in a straightjacket. The rages were apparently triggered by separation from Léa—the latter remained mute and catatonic—whom Christine on at least one occasion called "my husband." After a seizure, she hallucinated that she saw Léa hanging from a tree with her legs cut off.\(^{40}\)

A panel of specialists, composed of two local experts and the same Dr. Victor Truelle from Saint-Anne who later weighed in on Violette's mental capacities, was convened to evaluate the sisters' sanity. There is no telling what caused the medical experts to deliver their astonishing verdict, though it is easy to surmise that the shock at so hideous a violation of quasi-familial relations made the pressure for retribution overwhelming. It was not that long ago, in prerevolutionary France, that the penalty just for stealing from one's master had been death.\(^{41}\) The three specialists concluded that there was nothing in the women's physical state, heredity, or mental competence of a nature to diminish their responsibility. "The Papin girls are not sick," the prosecutor argued, following their lead. "They are not mad dogs, just bad dogs."\(^{42}\) Despite a rebuttal by another specialist called in by the defense, the prosecution's case prevailed. It took a jury of middle-aged local men forty minutes to judge the sisters guilty on all counts, with mitigating circumstances allowed to Léa Papin, who was clearly not the prime instigator of the violence. Christine Papin was condemned to death—though her life was eventually spared—and Léa to ten years of hard labor.\(^{43}\) When she heard the verdict, Christine fell to her knees, apparently in gratitude.

The experts' diagnosis caused considerable skepticism and debate. Some newspapers commented that the sisters' passive behavior and clinical description of their crime did indeed suggest complete sanity. Spectators at the trial, however, were heard complaining that the report was biased, based on two half-hour interviews. Sartre and Beauvoir were disgusted, having come to believe that the sisters were clinically paranoid. Janet Flanner, writing for the *New Yorker*, pointed out that the Papins' father was a "dipsomaniac rapist," their mother a money-grubbing hysteric, and that various cousins had hanged themselves or died in mental asylums: "In other words, heredity O.K., legal responsibility one hundred percent."\(^{44}\)

The Papin case caused a big stir both around the time the murders were committed, in February 1933, and then at the time of the trial in late September, when it overlapped with the Nozière affair. The crime of the "savage sheep" of Le Mans received less coverage and evidently affected contemporaries less, however, than the case of the teenage parricide. Christine and Léa's act was grotesquely violent, but the issues and characters involved fell within a narrow range: were the women crazy or, as the prosecution put it, angry souls who gave in to their worst impulses against people who had treated them decently, and then faked madness to escape punishment? Were the Lancelins good masters or cold bourgeois prigs? The story did not offer a vast amount of fodder for debate.

What the Papin case did generate was a rich intellectual and literary legacy. Both the Surrealist group and the psychiatrist Jacques Lacan would draw inspiration from its most sensational features. The case later served as the basis for at least two major plays, Jean Genet's 1947 masterpiece *The Maids (Les Bonnes)* and Wendy Kesselman's 1982 *My Sister in This House*. Since 1963, at least four movies have depicted the case either explicitly or in modified form. The story of two troubled female servants caught in a possibly homosexual and incestuous fantasy world of their own and violently killing a mistress both hated and revered has all the elements of a primal allegory. It evokes other disturbing stories, such as the 1954 case of the New Zealand teenagers Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker, who, absorbed in mutual passion and the shared fantasy worlds they had created, planned and carried out the gruesome bludgeoning death of Parker's mother.\(^{45}\)

The Papin case was full of "mirrors, fusions, and splittings": Christine and Léa, conjoined in their folie à deux, violently attacked two other women.\(^{46}\) The sisters may have been lovers, and their mistress merged with their hated and longed-for mother. Their cruelty seemed both gratuitous and laden with symbolism and ceremony: eyes were torn out so that the all-seeing mistress/mother and her favored daughter would not contemplate the desecration, and the crime was followed by careful washing.
(the murder weapons were cleaned and put back in their places) and the
expectation of punishment. Both Beauvoir and Flanner picked up on the
unsettling nature of the sisters’ bond: “The newspapers informed us that
they were in love,” Beauvoir remembered, “and we imagined the nights of
carests and hatred they shared up in the desert of their attic.” Flanner got
it in a nutshell: “The Papis’ was the pain of being two where some mys-
terious unity had been originally intended.” The maids’ twisted path-
way of desire—for each other and their absent mother—led through a
bloodbath.

The Nozière and Papin cases fascinated contemporaries for some of the
same reasons: the two crimes were committed in utterly mundane set-
ing by women whose motivations remained controversial or opaque to
the end. Both stories were quintessential faits divers because neither fit any
known, reassuring plot line. By contrast, the early thirties offered plenty of
more familiar criminal cases—stories that, while sometimes very lurid,
did have obvious precedents.

Writing in the New Yorker, Janet Flanner coupled Violette Nozière’s
crime with that of Germaine d’Anglemont, the better to draw a sharp con-
trast between the “mediocre murder” committed by Violette and the “sty-
lish assassination” carried out by Germaine. Mme d’Anglemont was forty-
five when she killed her paramour, and Flanner wrote tongue-in-cheek
about the “decline in the younger generation. Mme d’Anglemont shot her
lover like a lady, because she was jealous; Violette Nozière killed her father
like a cannibal, because she wanted to eat and drink up the savings that
were his French life and blood.” Our grandmothers might be right, Flan-
ner ironized—there looked to be a sharp drop in standards among female
murderesses.

Flanner’s sarcasm hinted at the fact that Germaine d’Anglemont’s story
was as classically French as the Hall of Mirrors or truffled foie gras. Arm-
ande Huot (such was her real name) was born in 1888 to a working-class
single mother in a poor district of central Paris. Shunted off, like the Papin
sisters, to a religious orphanage, she was returned at age thirteen to her
neglectful mother and soon took a predictable turn toward prostitution.
By seventeen, she was living a script straight out of Zola, down to her “pro-
fessional” name, Nini. Pretty, ambitious, and fond of reading, Nini Huot
believed that she deserved better than the men she picked up in smoky
accordion bars. An author of popular novels with whom she slept sug-
gested that she change her name to something aristocratic-sounding,
and together they came up with Germaine d’Anglemont. The fake nobil-
ity of a courtesan did not fool anyone, nor was it meant to: it was a con-
vention going back centuries—Louis XV’s mistress Mme du Barry had
also been a high-end prostitute—that merely signaled that one was on
one’s way up. And up she went like a rocket, first snagging a wealthy
Dutch merchant, then casting him aside for bigger fry. She became a fix-
ture of the Belle Époque establishment, was almost engaged to Prince
Franz Josef of Bavaria, dated the president of Mexico, and reportedly
received ten million francs from a Polish count. Her early life was similar to
that of her contemporary Coco Chanel, but without the talent and busi-
ness acumen.

Many luxury apartments, townhouses, furs, and jewels later, Germaine
settled down, more modestly, with a French politician, Jean Causseret, the
prefect of Bouches-du-Rhône. It was a perfect, and perfectly normal, ar-
angement that went on for years; he was married, and on his frequent
trips to the capital from Marseille, he stayed in her luxurious apartment.
The letters between them suggest there was love on both sides of this clas-
cic French “second marriage.” But eventually, when Germaine was in her
midforties, it all became too much like a proper marriage; Jean began to
stray, and Germaine hired a woman to tail him. On March 7, 1933, Causseret
told his lover he was going off to work at the ministry, but a phone call from
the spy reported that he was in fact picking out luxury gifts of a silkline va-
riety, clearly not intended for his middle-aged companion, at the Printemps
department store. When he returned, there was an argument, one of the
guns Germaine kept for protection went off, and Causseret was dead.
D’Anglemont insisted, implausibly, that the shooting was a complete acci-
dent unconnected to any domestic discord.

The trial in April 1935 resulted in a mere two-year prison sentence for
the woman once again known as Armande Huot. Flanner, who admired
d’Anglemont’s style, believed that a light sentence was inevitable because
the jury “saw, all around the court, the visiting politicos who would de-
mand and obtain her pardon.” That is likely, and so is the possibility
that the prosecution antagonized the jury by repeatedly describing Ger-
maine as Causseret’s overly clingy “old mistress”: a wife had social status
and the law to protect her, but only an utter cad would threaten to aban-
don a vulnerable longtime mistress. Mostly, though, Germaine’s crime
fell within the classic parameters of the female “crime of passion,” for
which the courts often found excuses. In 1914, a jury had acquitted Henriette
Caillaux, wife of the former prime minister Joseph Caillaux, for the shoot-
ing death of the editor of Le Figaro. The latter had published intimate
letters between Henriette and Joseph before their marriage, and her crime was in the end deemed an understandable female emotional response to a humiliating invasion of privacy. The leniency of juries in the Caillaux and d'Angelen cases stemmed from a long-standing French tradition of going easy on those who killed while in the grip of romantic turmoil—a husband, for instance, was always let off if he committed murder upon the discovery of his wife with another man.

The story of Germaine d'Angelen, unlike those of Violette Nozière and the Papin sisters, had plenty of precedents and models, both in the universal tale of a courtesan's ascent and decline (as in William Hogarth's "Harlot's Progress") and in the more specifically French narrative of the crime of passion. Looking back from the 1950s on the courtroom culture of the interwar years, the prominent lawyer Maurice Garçon deplored the leniency of Parisian juries toward crimes of passion, which he viewed as the result of confusion between life and fiction. The theater was mostly to blame, especially the advent of nineteenth-century romantic drama by the likes of Alexandre Dumas, but the movies did not help correct the jury's misapprehension that a crime of passion was a good cathartic story, which deserved applause rather than retribution. They forget, chided Garçon, that on stage the victim can get up and take a bow, while in real life he cannot. Juries went easy or acquitted when murders conformed to a well-worn narrative: the murderer acted impulsively, then called the police and wept over the victim. If there was any evidence of premeditation or even of ex post facto calculation, all leniency would evaporate from the courtroom.

Another big case came at the end of September, hard on the heels of the Nozière affair, in a remarkable autumn of fait divers news. It might have been a crime of passion but was more likely what is known in France as a crime crapuleux, a crime for gain. A prominent man killed and robbed in his office by a prostitute: such a tale would have warranted attention in any case, but in this instance the victim was not any man, and the killer no ordinary streetwalker. Oscar Dufrenne, the victim, had a remarkable biography. He was born forty-eight years earlier to a modest family of artisans specialized in carpets and upholstery in the northern city of Lille. Working occasionally on theater sets with his parents, young Oscar soon caught the acting bug, which sent him off to Paris. He played on small, then bigger stages, made some money, started directing. He and an associate made a small fortune with a "realist" melodrama that they took out on tour, Flower of the Sidewalks. A combination of skill and charm even-

tually landed him the successive directorship of major Parisian theatres—Château d'Eau, Mayol, and Ambassadeurs. In 1923 he founded his own music-hall-cum-cinema, the Palace, and the following year the aptly named Empire.

There was more to Dufrenne than his growing entertainment empire. Close to the ruling Radical Republican Party, he won a place on the Paris City Council representing the tenth arrondissement, belonged to various of the capital's boards for the arts, and in 1932 ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the National Assembly. Dufrenne was, in short, a prominent personality. He was also gay, and his friend and business associate of twenty years, Henri Varna, chief mourner at the funeral along with Dufrenne's sister, may have been his companion in private life, though Dufrenne also had a charged relationship with his secretary, Serge Nicolèsco, who quarreled loudly with him and had recently attempted suicide. Burly and gregarious, Dufrenne was liked, even loved, by his employees and associates, and was known for helping people when they were in trouble. The chorus of praise in the newspapers after his death seems heartfelt, and many thousands of people, ordinary Parisians as well as dignitaries from the worlds of politics and the arts, attended his September 27 funeral.

Whatever the nature of Dufrenne's relationships with Varna and Nicolèsco, his death was certainly the result of a gay assignation. During the penultimate week of September, Dufrenne boasted to a friend that he had "met a handsome sailor." On the evening of Sunday, September 24, he ate dinner and played cards in his apartment with his sister and Nicolèsco, then returned to his office at the Palace around nine thirty, saying he was going to work. Around ten Dufrenne came down to the theater gallery, where a young man in his mid-twenties dressed in a sailor suit was watching the movie with other patrons, having gained admission thanks to a complimentary pass signed by Dufrenne himself. The two men went up to Dufrenne's office together. At half past midnight an employee found Dufrenne's body rolled in a carpet under a mattress. It bore traces of strangulation and seventeen stab wounds; Dufrenne's expensive watch and a great deal of cash were missing. The perpetrator had fled, and over the next few weeks the sailor became as iconic a cartoon figure as Jean Dabin (wide pants, narrow waist), and as elusive but repeatedly sighted as Monsieur Émile. It was as if one casebled into the next one.

Dufrenne's friends and colleagues may have grieved, but for all of its sensationalism the murder was not of a sort to deeply touch or disturb most readers: what did they have in common with the sleaze and glamour of the
"inverted" denizens of the world of show business? The gay nightlife scene was a recurrent topic for features in Déetective, as exotic as foreign lands and penal colonies. Reporting on the cross-dressed carnival ball at the Magic Palace in 1932, Marcel Montaron fully indulged his readers' voyeurism: "With laughter that sounded like women being tickled, the troubling revelers hailed each other by their female names, pelting each other not with confetti but with the flowers from their corsets: 'Look at Susie, she's so nervous tonight...?" A few years later, in early April 1936, the Dufrenne assassination was echoed by the similarly sordid murder of another gay show business personality, Louis Leplée, the impresario who discovered Edith Piaf and had the genius to preserve and market her street urchin persona. Déetective noted that it was Dufrenne who had given Leplée his first big break in the business. Leplée certainly had talent, the magazine noted, sometimes sharing a stage with Maurice Chevalier; but his appetite for young men ("which others called his vice, but he called his taste") also served him well, gaining him access to "that strange milieu of homosexuals and snobs, which is a hermetic freemasonry." The only mystery in the Dufrenne case concerned the identity and whereabouts of the sailor, though the press did its best to play up other possible angles. Le Populaire mused darkly about pressure and blackmail on the part of the fraternity of men, some in very high places in government and business, who went in for "the love that nowadays dare perfectly well speak its name." The judicial authorities charged down a predictable series of blind alleys, while the newspapers solemnly explained to readers—many of them surely chuckling out loud—that there were sailors and then there were sailors. L'Intransigeant reported that the police were investigating in two directions because sailors could be (1) members of the national fleet, or (2) "those who wear the blue collar and headgear with a pompon out of a concern for refinement and elegance that is hard to explain but has nothing whatsoever to do with our national fleet." The Dufrenne case illustrates the complex status of male homosexuality in Parisian culture at this time. On the one hand, with sodomy decriminalized since the French Revolution (as long as it did not involve minors or disturb the public order), gay nightlife was licit and more open in France than elsewhere in Europe. On the other hand, Gallic cultural universalism dictated that gays should blend in with the dominant French heterosexual culture and exposed them to ridicule or worse if they did not. Throughout the Dufrenne affair, the press maintained a tone of joking complicity with readers who were always presumed straight.

After many months, a young male prostitute named Paul Laborie was arrested and charged with Dufrenne's murder, though the trial resulted in an acquittal for lack of sufficient evidence. (As the proceedings started, the judge warned the packed courtroom that the case was ripe with obscene details, and advised women and minors to leave. Nobody moved.) The Dufrenne murder happened just in time to feed an appetite among the public for crime whetted by the Papin and Nozière affairs. Cases overlapped, so that at the end of September 1933 a cartoon in a daily newspaper showed a concierge declaring to a housewife, "I'll tell you something, Mme Michu, all of this business at the Palace is a setup so that there will be no more discussion of Monsieur Émile and the Nozière affair." But the Dufrenne case, like the crime of Mme d'Anglemont, was ultimately more sensational but less disturbing than the Nozière affair. The script was already in place for Oscar Dufrenne, as it was later for Leplée, about whom Déetective commented: "Louis Leplée was vulnerable, as are all aging and notorious peddlers, who as time go on demand pleasure from ever more lowly types." As for Germaine d'Anglemont, her story had been written many times before, most notably by Balzac, Zola, and Dumas. Whatever real sympathy people might feel for Oscar Dufrenne or the former Nini Huot, there was something inevitable and implicitly right about the downfall of an ambitious and successful sexual outlaw. They led glamorous, dangerous lives and paid the price, affording readers a glimpse of worlds very different from their own.

Why so many "big crimes" at this particular moment? The extraordinary convergence of 1933 was probably coincidental, but the period between about 1930 and 1936 as a whole saw the flowering of a particular interest in crime, notable because it bridged the worlds of high culture and mass culture. The journal Déetective remains the most potent symbol, as both a cause and a symptom, of the cross-class appeal of the fic divers.

Since the nineteenth century, practitioners of what is known as "realist" fiction—novelists who depict ordinary people in richly detailed everyday settings—have looked to the daily papers for their material. Stendhal's 1830 The Red and the Black, for instance, follows closely the real story of one Antoine Berther, a young seminarian from a poor background sentenced to death in 1828 for shooting in church a woman who was his former employer and lover. Balzac, Zola, and Proust all drew on contemporary crime stories, and the tradition is of course not unique to France, since famous instances of such borrowing can be found in the works of novelists as diverse as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Theodore Dreiser, and Joyce Carol
Oates. Writers between the wars in France, many of them readers of *Détective*, used contemporary crime as the basis of their fiction. But they also departed radically from the conventions of plot and motivation that have been at the heart of realist fiction since its beginnings.

André Gide was probably the most admired writer in France in the twenties and thirties. His novels about rebellious young men broke all the rules of fiction, earning him a passionate following among the educated youth of his day, and as the founder and guiding spirit of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, he was the unofficial arbiter of “serious” literature in France. Gide, the son of a law professor and grandson of a judge, had a sustained interest in tales from the courtroom. He collected and asked friends to send him clippings of *faits divers* from the newspapers and from 1926 to 1928 published these snippets along with correspondence from readers about them in the *NRF*. His two most famous novels, *Lafacadio’s Adventures* (1914) and *The Counterfeiters* (1927), drawn on actual crimes and incidents and include self-conscious references to the genre. In the former novel, when the hero sets out to rescue a family from a fire, the narrator comments: “Lafacadio, my friend, you are going in for the *faits divers* and my pen must take leave of you.” The plot of *The Counterfeiters* grew out of two separate *faits divers*, one in which the children of a good family were caught circulating counterfeit gold coins, and another in which a group of lycée students formed a secret society and convinced one of their members to commit suicide after they all drew lots.

In 1912 Gide took notes on his experiences serving as juror for two weeks at the Assize Court in Rouen, and he later published accounts of two famous cases from early in the century: the Redureau affair, in which, in a prefiguring of the Papin murder, a fifteen-year-old farm servant slaughtered seven members of the family he served, apparently in response to a routine scolding by his master; and the case of Blanche Monnier, sequestered in a filthy unlit room for decades by her well-to-do provincial family in the town of Poitiers. In 1930 Gide published his notes on the Assize cases, the Redureau and Monnier affairs, and other fragments about *faits divers* in a volume whose title was taken from the words of Christ: *Ne jugez pas (Judge Not).*

The title says it all: the more he sat in the courtroom, the more Gide was struck by the opacity of the motivations that lead people to act. He became acutely aware of the ways in which judges, lawyers, and juries imposed motives on criminals who might themselves be unaware of the meaning of their act. Young Redureau was not mad but could not explain, any more than the Papins, what caused his bloodletting rampage; and though the press at the time of the Poitiers case had explained the sequestration as an instance of provincial meanness visited on a vulnerable soul, the closer the courtroom honed in on the matter the less those stereotypes stood up to scrutiny. Who could explain the reasons behind any crime, or even if every crime had to have a motive? The possibility of an unmotivated *faits divers* long obsessed Gide and became the most memorable event in *Lafacadio’s Adventures*: the free spirit Lafacadio dares himself on the spur of the moment to push a man to his death from a train, and does so. “What seems to me so interesting about this affair,” Gide wrote of the Poitiers sequestration case, “is that the more we know of the circumstances, the deeper the mystery becomes, taking leave of the facts to settle in the personalities, that of the victim, in fact, as much as that of the accused.” Stories that took place on farms and in bourgeois provincial homes seemed at first entirely recognizable, but the more you stared at them the less they revealed beyond their own familiarity magnified into weirdness. As Gide’s friend Jean Paulhan put it, in these matters the end does not justify the means, “it stifles and swallows [them].”

Paulhan, who edited the *Nouvelle Revue Française* from 1925 to 1940, wrote an essay in the form of a dialogue, published in 1930, which explored the reasons why contemporary writers and philosophers saw in the *faits divers* the key to a new way of writing. *Faits divers* bizarre happenings whose meaning may not be obvious, provide anecdotes around which readers are impelled to construct wider contexts, Paulhan observed. Because the *faits divers* are by definition segregated in the newspaper from grand ideological and political narratives—any number of contexts can be made to fit it, but a plurality of contexts and explanations will eventually cancel each other out, revealing the mysterious irreducibility of the perfectly mundane. *Faits divers* expose what Paulhan calls “the illusion of totality,” the tendency to generalize from a fragment, as when an Englishman, first setting foot on French soil, sees a redhead and concludes that all Frenchwomen have red hair. The headlines of tabloids like *Détective*—which Paulhan cites—offer one instance after another of the failacies of common emplotments. “He killed for a [mere] hundred francs!” screams one title, implying that only a truly depraved murderer would take a life for so little. The headline imposes an intention on the murderer, Paulhan points out, that was probably not his own: he only found a hundred francs in the house of the woman he strangled; had he found a million, would his guilt be any less? Quoting the poet Paul Valéry, Paulhan observes that
the more shapeless the object of our passion—a god, a lover, a doll—the more we invest in it, and the more we expect the life we project onto it to nourish us in return.  

Faits divers, fragments of other peoples’ lives, act as a goad to our fantasies and fallacies, only to confront us with their adamantine resistance to our understanding.

In 1927 the writer François Mauriac published a short masterpiece of a novel that explicitly refers to the sequestration case that obsessed Gide and in certain ways prefigures the crime of Violette Nozière: Thérèse Desqueyroux evokes Violette because it too is the story of a troubled young woman, straining against a claustrophobic family environment, who resorts to poison. The book is set among the prosperous bourgeoisie of landowners on the southwestern coast of France near Bordeaux, where the wild beauty of pine forests and sand dunes serves as a backdrop for the scheming materialism of the social elites. When we meet Thérèse at the start of the book, she has recently been freed from police custody. Her husband, Bernard, to whom she administered poison, albeit without fatal results, has declined to press charges for fear of scandal, and now on the train back home to him Thérèse faces a prison of guilt and ostracism far worse than any penal institution.

From the start, Thérèse has no control over her own story. In the opening pages of the novel, she stands on the sidelines while her father and her lawyer discuss how to “spin” the affair in the local press. Go on the offensive in the daily, advises the lawyer, “or would you rather I did it? We need a title like ‘The Scurrilous Rumor.’” Thank goodness, her father ruminates, we have nothing to fear from the publisher of the conservative newspaper, we have a hold on him because of “that business with the little girls.” They discuss, within earshot of her, the explanations she gave of how and why she acted, her father carping, “How many times did I say to you, ‘Find something else, you miserable creature, find something else.’”

Revisiting the past on her train ride, Thérèse tries to reconstruct the events that led to the poisoning, but she comes up with a train of contingencies rather than causes. She had acquiesced, for the sake of family property, to an arranged marriage to smug, narrow-minded Bernard. Shortly after their marriage, Bernard’s sister and Thérèse’s close friend Anne forms an inappropriate attachment to a pimply, intense young man, a Jewish would-be intellectual bound for Paris. Thérèse helps mediate an end to the love affair, perhaps because she is jealous of the passion Anne feels for her Jean. The unsettling effect of this episode is compounded by depression after the birth of her daughter. Bernard is taking medicine for anemia that contains arsenic, and one day in distraction he takes twice the prescribed dose and falls ill. Thérèse observes this but fails to intervene or tell anyone, then begins experimenting with the dosage out of “curiosity.” Eventually, like Violette, she fakes a prescription. Why? Find something else . . .

After the fact, those around her try to fit the events into a sense-making framework. Thérèse muses that her husband believes she fell in love with Anne’s boyfriend Jean: “Like all beings profoundly ignorant of love, he believes that the act I am accused of can only be a crime of passion.” Bernard then changes his mind and accuses her of greed for the land. Next, she would have poisoned the child. Thérèse is incensed: “Among the thousand secret sources of her act, that imbecile has not been able to find a single one, so he invents the lowest motive.” Bernard can think no further than the conventional dichotomy in French criminal law between the crime of passion and the crime of lucre. Finally the family falls back on the nonexplanation that she is a monster, a verdict that Thérèse takes on with aggressive irony: “Thérèse has read that desperate people take their children with them in death; decent folk will put down their newspapers: ‘How is something like that possible?’ Because she is a monster, Thérèse has a deep understanding that this is possible, that it would take very little . . .”

Forever swathed in the smoke of the cigarettes she consumes nonstop, Thérèse is every bit as much as Violette the opaque heroinist of a film noir. Eventually, though, Thérèse’s depression threatens to evoke another kind of story, which could damage her family’s sacrosanct reputation, especially now that Anne has agreed to a possible engagement with the son of a prominent family. Bernard consigns his wife to her room in their country house while he lives in town; the family spreads the rumor that she is a neurasthenic recluse. Falling in with the script, Thérèse stops getting up and washing. She barely touches food, and the servants mostly abandon her. When Bernard returns weeks later, accompanied by Anne’s desirable prospective fiancé, he is panicked by the sight of his emaciated, filthy wife: “In a flash that colored image from Le Petit Parisien came back to him . . . [He] stared, as he had done as a child, at the red and green drawing that showed The Sequestered Woman of Poitiers.” He realizes that Thérèse could be seen as the heroine of another story, in which she would be not the perpetrator but the victim, a helpless woman locked up by her own family. “Thérèse was a source of drama—worse than a drama, a fait divers.” Because a fait divers can be more damaging to a family’s good name than a tragedy, the relatives soon dispatch her, with her consent, to live alone in
Paris. Thérèse Desqueyroux has much in common with a later and even more famous fictional character, Albert Camus's Meursault, who in *The Stranger* (1942) commits a random murder for too many reasons and no reason at all, and fails to recognize his own life story when it is narrated in the courtroom.

*Faits divers* fired the imagination of novelists in the twenties and thirties and, as we shall see in the next chapter, of poets as well. French intellectuals both before and after the Second World War were mesmerized by bizarre and violent events that seemed to resist the logic of conventional causality, itself under assault from the avant-garde since the aftermath of the Great War: Gide, Paulhan, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Georges Audier, Roland Barthes, and many others found in these private crimes a means of coming to terms with what one critic calls “the elusive laws of chance and obsession.” Classic Western notions of rationality, widely accepted before 1914, had it that actions could be explained by discoverable patterns of causality, and that effects were commensurate with causes. But what happens to that logic when millions of men die because a teenage fanatic murders a head of state in a remote corner of Europe?

What fascinated thinkers about the *faits divers* was the autonomy conferred on it by its form: a newspaper will present a fragment of reality that departs strikingly from the social norm either because of its violence or because of its bizarre nature: “A man spared the death penalty commits suicide,” “A bishop ordains his own father.” Such shreds of life disrupt the common order of things; they are both meaningless because ripped out of context and overcharged with meaning because they force our attention and invite an abyss of explanation. Our focus on them invests them with a hyperreality that makes them less understandable the more we stare. They are, in short, the written equivalent of the surrealist object: a thing that at once demands and resists our gaze.

Discrete and shocking events also reintroduced an element of myth and the sacred into modern lives devoid of wonder. *Faits divers* often acquire their salience because of a strong element of fate, which harks back to archaic forms of understanding. “Modern” thought could not explain why a person gets killed by a suicide's jump or a burglar unknowingly kills a member of his own family, any more than it could truly make sense of why an unremarkable comment about a blown fuse or a boy's laziness should lead to carnage. Only destiny can cause such intersections and, as in the case of Oedipus unknowingly killing his own father, elevate them to the status of myth. An avatar of chance and fate that invested ordinary reality with extraordinary resonance, the *faits divers* was the means whereby the sacred re-entered the disenchanted realms of modern life.

The year 1933 marked the apogee of a distinctive form of “crime culture” in France, one that bridged the worlds of the urban masses and of the intellectual elites. Like the *faits divers* itself, this culture was born of a coincidence. Between a lackluster Republican establishment and left-wing parties and unions in disarray, politics were at a low ebb in France in the late twenties and early thirties. Though Hitler's name appeared almost daily in the press, few in France could yet imagine what his growing power portended. “In January 1933 we saw Hitler become chancellor, and on February 27 the Reichstag fire paved the way for the destruction of the Communist Party,” Simone de Beauvoir reminisced. They read about all of it, the book burnings, the growing anti-Semitic persecution, not unmoved but without alarm. “Writing today, I am astounded that we witnessed these events with relative serenity.” She and her friends were indignant, of course, but everyone concurred that there was no way this madman could succeed and that another war was out of the question. In those years, she and Sartre found more significance in crime news, which they read with great care. They believed, following the surrealist André Breton, that each soul harbors an “unbreakable kernel of night,” buried under layers of social routine and conversational commonplace, which only an explosive act of violence could bring into view. Obscurely worried about Sartre’s growing influence over her, Beauvoir fantasized, while poring over the *faits divers* rubric, about committing a violent crime that would ensure her separate identity. Sartre himself found in the Papin case evidence of “prelogical thought” and of a “magical mentality” in the modern world.

The preoccupations of intellectuals came together with the culture of the urban masses—the factory hands disenchanted with the unions, the new ranks of office and service workers for most of whom politics meant, at that juncture, very little. For these readers too, crime was what moved newspapers; isolated in their small city dwellings among their new consumer goods, they found in *faits divers* a titillating entrée into another world (as in the DuFrenne case), a shock of recognition (as in the Nozière case), and fodder for debating right and wrong with the concierge and the neighbors. A publication like *Détective*, rooted in the world of the Gidean literary elites but most obviously aimed at modest households, was the perfect bridge between those realms and the quintessential expression of its time.
At the very height of the Nozière affair, the end of this era came abruptly into view. In the late fall of 1933, newspapers began carrying reports of the deeds of Serge Stavisky, a con artist of Russian Jewish origin specializing in financial deals, who had close connections with many members of the center-left Republican establishment. Stavisky, a handsome man-about-town with a wife who once modeled for Chanel, had been indicted for fraud more than once, but the cases always somehow vanished from the docket. This time, the scandal was a big one: Stavisky had worked with local republican politicians to set up a municipal credit institution in the provincial town of Bayonne. Millions of francs’ worth of bonds accepted by banks turned out to have no backing. There were many powerful people, it seems, who had an interest in keeping “handsome Serge” from testifying, and when he fled to the Alps in December and the police “found him dead,” few believed the official story of a suicide: “he shot himself from a distance of twenty meters” was how Parisian wags put it.

Efforts to squelch the affair did not work. Political parties on the left and right pilloried the government, but it was the right wing that reacted violently when Prime Minister Camille Chautemps dismissed one of their own, the police chief of Paris, Jean Chiappe. The actions of the corrupt republic and its foreign Jewish allies were deemed intolerable. On Saturday, February 6, 1934, right-wing activists, including veterans’ organizations and paramilitary leagues, took to the street outside the National Assembly in a long night of rioting that left fourteen dead. Chautemps resigned but the Republic survived, though many had feared it would not. The Stavisky affair was no fait divers: an explosively political episode, it strengthened both the Left and the Right, prompting Communists and Socialists to bury their differences in the face of what they saw as a homegrown fascist threat. Both the Popular Front of 1936 and the Vichy regime were to trace at least some of their roots to the riots of February 1934.

With the Stavisky affair, political ideologies came to the fore in ways not seen since the height of the Dreyfus case. The heyday of the fait divers was over, but its intellectual and artistic legacy would be considerable.

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BY EARLY OCTOBER 1933, coverage of the Nozière case was dwindling, displaced in the newspapers by the salacious details of Oscar Dufrenne’s murder and the search for his sailor-assassin. Readers knew to expect a hiatus of many months before Violette’s trial. When something did happen, the case still made for front-page news. Hopeful rumors surfaced now and then of an “Émile” discovery, none of which amounted to anything, and Violette’s scheduled judicial “confrontation” with Jean Dabin on October 18 provided a small jolt of excitement. This time fully anticipating “nervous breakdowns,” the judge had medical personnel on hand. The principals behaved with restraint, however, until the reliably dramatic Germaine Nozière, who was also present, spotted on Dabin’s finger a signet ring decorated with a cheap gemstone: “That’s my poor husband’s ring, I looked for it everywhere!” she gasped. Violette quickly intervened to say she had given the ring to Jean as a love token, and the young man eagerly offered that he had brought it that day intending to return it, but the ring incident satisfied the many who believed in a Dabin-as-mastermind version of the crime.

Before the end of the year, a writer named Jacques Niger had churned out an opportunistic pamphlet, Le Secret de l’empoisonneuse (The Secret of the Girl-Poisoner), which revealed no secrets whatsoever. Instead, it directed equal parts moralism and prurience at the young woman, described as “a
The Trial

In December 1933, the same month the Surrealists published their book of poems and artwork, Judge Lanoire completed his investigation. On December 16, the judge, the accused; and her lawyers met for a final round of questioning, which took the form of a preliminary indictment. Addressing Violette, Lanoire laid out his view of the case. In spite of repeated demands that she tell the truth, the accused had given only the most implausible explanations; if the incest had taken place, why did she say nothing for six years, even to the mother whom she claimed to love? And anyway, at age eighteen, she could have found a job and left home “like other young girls of your condition.” Lanoire launched into a long tirade about Violette’s loose morals (“despite your frigid nature”), and especially her social ambition: “Your vanity and mythomania had steadily increased. You lived in a milieu somewhat above your condition and wanted to maintain yourself there.... You could no longer go back down to the mediocrity of your real situation, of which your parents’ presence served as a constant reminder. Their existence could expose your lies; with them gone, you could continue to play the role that flattered your imagination.” In response to Lanoire’s long expository questions, Violette was allowed only the briefest answers: “My parents left me quite free. And thanks to Monsieur Émile, I did not need money”; “Those are not the motives that made me act.” On this occasion, Violette was a mere supporting player: the final indictment was Lanoire’s last chance at the spotlight during this case, and he made the most of it.

Eager to keep the presses rolling, newspapers whipped up anticipation of the next act. In December 1933, after the last interrogations, La République had expressed hope that the trial might take place early in the new year. The journalist eagerly anticipated the courtroom drama: “Will she speak?... Will she dare to repeat in front of twelve jurors accusations that may be odious but which—we cannot but shudder at the thought—also seem unquestionably likely?” Debates would be impassioned, he continued, because passion marked every page of this “formidable dossier”: “Incest, adultery, love both venal and ‘against nature’ make up what one could call a Baudelairean rosary.” Monsieur Émile, the “tutelary faun,” might finally appear! Who knows what other mysteries might be revealed about this strange family in which the father had for his daughter the eyes of an old lecher? The journalist need not have worked himself into such a sweat. Violette’s lawyers were allowed to appeal the indictment, which they did, and it took another seven months before the case came to trial on October 10, 1934.

Political conditions may have played a part in delaying the case’s progress to the courtroom. By the time the official writ of indictment against Violette was drawn up at the end of February 1934, much had happened to distract Parisians and the country at large from the previous year’s succession of spectacular faits divers. The climax of the Stavisky scandal at the end of 1933 fed into public exasperation with the Republican status quo, which increasingly restless groups on the extreme right eagerly exploited to their advantage. Repercussions from the affair had forced the resignation of one cabinet, and in early February the new prime minister, the leftist Republican Édouard Daladier, attempted to flex his political muscle by dismissing the popular Paris chief of police, Jean Chippe, a Corsican strongman with known ties to the Far Right. In response, the leading royalist, paramilitary, and fascist-leaning groups organized a rally denouncing the Chamber of Deputies.5

The night of the rally, February 6, witnessed the worst violence in Paris since the Paris Commune half a century earlier. On the Place de la Concorde, thousands of demonstrators faced off with mounted police guarding the Chamber of Deputies: protesters tore up nearby parks and hurled railings and rocks at the police. They slashed the bellies and tendons of horses with razor blades attached to poles, and the police fired back into the crowd while deputies fled the chamber through the back door. The
rampage left fifteen dead, over fourteen hundred wounded, and political tensions at their highest ebb since the Dreyfus case. Socialists and Communists managed to put aside the rancor that had divided them since 1920 and unite—albeit at the very last minute—for a common counter-demonstration on February 12. In March, a group of antifascist intellectuals created a committee that laid the foundations for France's first, and short-lived, Socialist government, the Popular Front. The sclerotic Third Republic survived the crisis but was increasingly overtaken by more vital forces on its right and left.

Despite France's increasingly fraught political climate, the Nozière trial, set to begin during calmer days, on October 10, 1934, would be sure to make headline news. In the days before the trial, leading newspapers ran new versions of Violette's story on their front pages in case readers had forgotten the details: "Is She a Monster or a Madwoman? Will Violette Nozière Finally Give Up Her Secret?" screamed one front-page piece. Le Journal ran a headline reporting that the famous criminal was picking out an outfit for the big day. Paris-Soir sent its reporter to Neuilly, where he failed to secure an interview with Germaine and got angrily shoed away by her in-laws.

Yet another dramatic event, however, blew the trial off the front page at the very last minute. On October 9, the king of Yugoslavia, Alexander I, arrived in Marseille aboard the steamer Dubrovnik for an official visit. Eager to shore up alliances in Central Europe, the French government had invited the monarch and dispatched their foreign minister, Louis Barthou, to meet him in Marseille and escort him by train to Paris. As the king's motorcade made its way through Marseille, a Bulgarian nationalist named Vlado Chernezevski broke through the crowd despite heavy police protection, jumped onto the running board of Alexander's car, whipped out a gun, and fired, killing the king, Barthou, and several other people before being gunned down himself. For a day or two, not even the trial of France's most famous young criminal could compete with the ensuing national grief and humiliation.

The political assassination was very much on people's minds when Violette's trial opened on October 10. The presiding judge, Counselor Peyre, began proceedings with a somber speech honoring the victims, several other officials followed suit, and then proceedings were temporarily suspended in deference to the mood of national mourning. There were further delays while two alternate jurors were added to the impaneled group of twelve men, and the audience in the Palais de Justice must have been getting restless. Crowds had begun to assemble before dawn on the square in front of the courthouse, the Place Dauphine, in the medieval heart of Paris. Fifty republican guards were on hand to control the press of spectators, a majority of whom were reportedly female. Those in attendance had read about Violette for many months, but most had never laid eyes upon her. What drew the crowds, wrote the Paris-Soir reporter, was the youth and reputed beauty of the star character in the drama: "The public will always take more interest in a beautiful girl than an ugly one, even, as in this case, when the seductive wrapping hides a diseased body and a stupefying amoralit." The anticipation was intense.

The penalty for premeditated murder, especially parricide, was automatically death on the guillotine unless the defense could prove the existence of mitigating circumstances. In 1934 the guillotine was still a fixture of the French political and cultural landscape. The early twentieth century had seen a vigorous abolitionist movement, culminating in a raging debate in the Chamber of Deputies in 1908. The bill calling for the abolition of the death penalty ended in defeat, however, and the following years saw a reversal of the abolitionist tide. Whereas at the turn of the century the annual total of executions was in the single digits, by the interwar period some twenty people a year were decapitated. The legendary Anatole Deibler, the Paris executioner who held the position for forty years, had carried out his grim functions close to four hundred times when he retired in 1939. Executions were still public, held on city streets and squares, and sometimes degenerated into mob scenes.

Ostensibly, Violette did not have to fear going under the blade. The French Third Republic authorities balked at the idea of executing a woman, and though women were still sentenced to the guillotine, since the 1870s that punishment was routinely commuted by presidential pardon to life in prison. (Pétain's reactionary regime was to bring back the death penalty for women, half a dozen of whom were guillotined in the early 1940s, mostly for providing illegal abortions.) The paradoxical upshot of gender-determined clemency was that juries felt free to sentence women to death as a gesture, knowing that they would not have to live with the gruesome consequence of their decision. Violette and her defenders were well aware of all this but must still have been fearful: over the last fourteen months many voices had called for the custom of sparing women to be suspended in the case of the "monster" Nozière.

The French system of criminal justice is technically known as "inquisitorial," in contrast to the Anglo-American "accusatory" approach. In
the English tradition, the accused is presumed innocent, and the facts of the case are established in an open court. The modern French system, as first established in 1808, took shape as a Napoleonic compromise between the Old Regime tradition of top-down secrecy and the Revolution's principles of openness and democracy. In the system that prevailed under the Third Republic, many elements of which survive today, considerable power was vested in the juge d'instruction, who investigated the case thoroughly and recommended for or against an indictment. Though the case then went before a twelve-man jury in a public courtroom, the private pretrial investigation carried considerable weight, since an indictment amounted to a presumption of guilt for the accused. That bias was reinforced by the status of the public prosecutor, the avocat général, within the courtroom. He entered and exited the room alongside the presiding judge, the président de chambre, and sat with him on a slightly raised platform; these courtroom mechanics sent a strong signal that the judge and prosecutor were allied against the defense.

Before the trial began, the court impaneled a jury of twelve men. Only enfranchised citizens could serve as jurors, and French women were not granted the vote until 1945. Jurors were chosen by the Ministry of Justice from lists of men of upstanding character supplied by the office of the state's representative, the departmental prefect. In the past, all jurors had been wealthy men, but provisions for lodging and remuneration introduced in 1907 and 1908 made it easier for working-class men to serve on juries. While the exact identities of the jurors who were to decide on Violette's guilt are not known, the list of thirty-six names from which they were randomly drawn has survived in the case records. This master list includes some men of obviously bourgeois status (an architect, a factory manager, an industrialist, an academic inspector, and a "property owner"), but most are of modest but respectable standing: a cobbler, a carpenter, a tailor, a locksmith, a mechanic, several office workers, and many salesmen and shopkeepers. They range in age from thirty-three to sixty-seven, with the largest group, twenty-four of them, in their forties and fifties. The median age is forty-seven. Baptiste Nozière could very easily have been on this list of lower-middle-class worthies; he was forty-eight when he died.

The 1808 Code enjoined jurors to base their decision on "moral proof" rather than technicalities: "The law does not ask the jury to account for the means by which they are convinced. It does not prescribe to them rules on which they must particularly base the fullness and sufficiency of proof.... It only asks them this one question, comprising the full measure of their duties: 'Are you thoroughly convinced?'" Juries were asked to evaluate not just a specific crime but a fully documented portrait of the criminal—his or her background, character, and previous activities and possible misdeeds, all of which were detailed in the prosecution's case: hence, for instance, Violette's promiscuity, scholastic failures, rebellion against her parents, and chronic lying could legitimately be brought to bear upon her crime.

While commentators in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries railed against jury verdicts as erratic and biased, jurors were doing their task as implicitly defined by the law: bringing social morality to bear upon their decision. Third Republic juries paid close attention to motive and circumstance. They were famously merciful toward crimes of passion, usually deciding, as they did in Germaine d'Anglemont's case, that a betrayed spouse or lover who killed in the heat of the moment should not be severely punished. In general, French juries leaned toward leniency: in the face of a procedure that heavily implied the defendant's guilt, they convicted in only 70 percent of the cases and found mitigating circumstances for eight out of ten crimes. But juries were typically severe in some instances: when criminals killed for money or with premeditation and in cases of multiple murders or the murder of a police officer, a child, or a parent. Three days before the trial, a journalist named Emmanuel Bourrier published in a women's magazine an article entitled "If You Were a Juror in the Nozière Case" that did not bode well for the accused. After reminding readers that they as women could not be in that hypothetical situation, he first surmised that a male jury would side with the male victim, but then added that women jurors would likely show no pity for Violette either. And a good thing too, he concluded: "If I myself were, God forbid, a juror in the Nozière case, I would condemn Violette without a moment's hesitation. Even if she had been the victim of her father. For she could leave him and earn a living instead of killing him, defaming him, and robbing him."

With the jury impaneled and the mood of national mourning acknowledged, proceedings finally began in the trial of Violette Nozière. The appearance of the accused was a moment of high drama in a trial such as this, and Violette finally emerged, wearing the same sort of outfit she had favored at the time of her crime: a black fur-collared coat, and this time a
narrow-brimmed black felt hat tilted sideways instead of the beret she had previously worn (fig. 19). She moved quickly to the witness stand, eyes to the ground, her face unreadable. Violette had become such a mythical creature since her crime—the very symbol of glamorous depravity—that in the flesh she could not fail to disappoint, especially since fourteen months in prison had apparently damaged her looks. *Paris Midi* reported on the "great disappointment" the audience felt upon seeing her: "The star of this show may be almost as pretty as predicted, but she walks bent forward, slack, defeated by prison and blemished by illness. No trace of the femme fatale: no cruelty etches the features of Violette Nozière." *L'Œuvre* went for complete demystification: "She's an ordinary little woman like many others, not bad-looking of course, but pretty close to insignificance: a woman friend you could have a beer with."\(^{15}\)

Proceedings began with the solemn reading of the *acte d’accusation*, the formal writ of indictment filed with the Paris Assizes Court on February 24 after the end of the investigation. The document recorded Judge Lanoire's conclusions and refuted Violette Nozière's defense: it noted her long-standing depravity, recorded the first poisoning incident in March 1933, described her vanity and social fantasies, and made liberal use of the word *prostitution*. It opined that Monsieur Émile never existed, described her incest allegations as an "inane defense," and again harped on Violette's deplorable fibs about her social status. She was formally accused of two crimes, the attempted poisoning in March and its successful repetition in August.\(^{16}\)

The next procedural step was the questioning of the accused by the presiding judge based on the information in the investigation file. In theory the judge was supposed to act impartially at this stage, since the purpose of the questioning was to inform the jury of the facts of the case, but in practice most *président de salle* were so clearly prosecutorial in their interrogation that the Ministry of Justice had occasionally to rein them in.\(^{17}\) Président Peyre fell right into the pattern; in fact he opened proceedings with a disquisition that, in the form of an address to Violette, warned the jury not to believe a word she said: "Violette Nozière, if I did not fear that my admonition would be for naught, I would exhort you to tell the truth. One of your personality traits is a taste for lying. You lie not only out of self-interest but sometimes for no reason at all. You have lied for a very long time to your parents, your friends, your lovers. Today you stand before those who will judge you. Are you ready to tell the truth?" In response, Violette proffered an almost inaudible "Yes, sir."\(^{18}\)
Violette at first gave the same barely audible answer to Peyre’s barrage of hostile questions and observations. “You had many lovers?” “Yes, sir”; “Their names were Willy, Bernard, and others?” “Yes, sir”; “You did not hesitate to be intimate with men you had just met?” “Yes, sir.” Eventually, though, she began to give fuller answers, explaining her motives and feelings. When the judge pointed out that she cut classes when enrolled at the Lycée Fénelon, she answered that she was discouraged because she felt unable to keep up with the work; when he berated her for her promiscuous behavior over the last year, she simply said, “I was in a depression.” As the questioning became more intimate, Violette showed increasing signs of agitation. Asked about her feelings for Jean Dabin, she answered with considerable emotion, “He was the only one I ever really loved!” The judge commented sardonically, no doubt smirking at his colleagues, “He was a law student,” and the prosecutor followed up with an obscure joke in Latin. Peyre also made his skepticism about Monsieur Émile’s existence perfectly clear. When Violette protested in response to a question that she had no need of money because of her “protector,” the judge responded, “All we know about him is that he had a white mustache and a blue coat,” with a look on his face that set off laughter in the room.

Eventually questions came around to the issue the audience was most anticipating and Violette was probably dreading. It is one thing to narrate the intimate details of incest with a parent to a sympathetic policeman or even a room full of legal officials, quite another to do so at the bar in front of a large and mostly hostile audience, knowing that every word will be repeated in the newspapers. Peyre pressed her on the subject: “Come on, tell us all! Explain yourself! Violette could not do it: “I beg you, M. le Président, don’t ask me about that.” The reporter for Le Populaire showed her no mercy: “So she’s prudish now? . . . She doesn’t want to talk about it! After all she has done and said?” The judge nonetheless went through all the details, showing the audience the rag and the obscene drawings, getting Violette to admit that her father was free of the venereal disease she carried.

Questioning proceeded to the night of the crime, which Peyre quizzed the defendant about in detail. For the jury’s sake, he lingered over the moment when Violette handed her parents the glasses of “medication” and coaxed them to drink: “And nothing moved you to stop them . . .” At this point Violette let out a guttural cry and fell to the ground. When guards approached to help her, she pushed them away, screaming, “Leave me, leave me alone!” and continued to moan for a while “like an animal.” Le Populaire described this turn of events as a blantly theatrical ploy: “This was more of less predictable: La Petite Roquette has its traditions, just like the Comédie Française.” A doctor appeared and had Violette sniff some ether. She was allowed outside for a few minutes, returning hatless and with her hair in disorder, which, according to the same journalist, “gave her a bit of a wild-child look, which suited her very well.”

The judge went on relentlessly through the details of the night, the following day, and her week of hiding in Paris. “Why,” he concluded, “this second attempt against your parents’ lives! Tell the gentlemen of the jury.” In response Violette collapsed again and was once again ministered to by the court physician, Dr. Sicard. The judge asked the doctor whether the accused was in a state to continue the session, and Sicard answered, “Oh, she’s talking. She said, ‘It’s hard.’ I answered, ‘It’s a tough pill to swallow.’” The room broke out in laughter again. Journalists, magistrates, and audience members were convinced that Violette’s courtroom collapse was yet another instance of her well-known habits of role-playing and deceit. It does not seem to have occurred to anyone to consider what effect several hours of harsh interrogation in front of a hostile audience might have on a young body and mind weakened by months in prison.

Peyre’s questioning finally came to an end. He summed up his conclusion in a question that served as a signal to the jury: “I have searched in vain, in the records of this case, for an element that could be considered a mitigating circumstance in your favor; I searched because I wanted to find one. But it was in vain! If such a circumstance exists, state it here, daughter Nozière.” (Fille Nozière was Violette’s official identity for administrative purposes, but it also underscored her relationship to Baptiste.) In response, Violette delivered a short speech, no doubt carefully prepared: she expressed remorse and asked everyone for forgiveness, especially her mother, whom she invoked twice. The judge’s final statement went to the heart of the court case, since the issue was not Violette’s actions, which she acknowledged, but the existence of considerations—her health, the deeds of an accomplice, her father’s possible guilt—that might spare her a death sentence. Even with Peyre bluntly stating on the opening day what he expected the verdict to be, not a single journalist complained or even commented on a possible bias. In fact, Le Populaire went out of its way to describe the judge as “impartial” and “impersonal.”

The reporters who covered the event had already decided that the Nozière trial would be a three-act play: day one would feature Violette, day two the other main characters, and day three would be the dramatic
climax, when the verdict would be handed down. As if keenly aware of the dramatic pacing of the event, the court spent the rest of the first day hearing the testimonies of various minor players: the neighbor M. Mayeul, Dr. Deron, and the various policemen and firemen called in on the night of the crime. Notably absent from the list of persons questioned was Superintendent Marcel Guillaume, the first person to talk to Violette after her arrest and the one individual among all the officials involved who had most unequivocally stated his belief that the incest took place.

The second day, October 11, began with an expected dramatic highlight: the testimony of Germaine Nozière. Taking a break from mongering conspiracy rumors about the recent political assassination (“Who profits from the crime? Fascism! Beware of provocations!”), the writers for *L’Humanité* had in recent days ratcheted up their ideological reading of the story in anticipation of Mme Nozière’s testimony. The objective reality of what went on in this case, *L’Humanité* explained, was that the capitalist baron Émile, whom the police deliberately refused to identify, had used Violette to transfer the money he made from the exploitation of workers into the pockets of young bourgeois like Jean, “the same young men who beat and shoot workers in the name of morality and integrity.”

The Marxist version of the story—Violette as a sexual pawn in a series of power plays among men—is not without merit, but in the end it was still impossible to make Dabin technically responsible for anything that happened on August 21, 1933. In any case, the French Communist Party was on thin ice waxing moralistic about the manipulation of a vulnerable woman, given their blatant exploitation of Germaine’s grief and anger for political ends. While everyone anticipated that Germaine would likely follow the part of her script that involved going after Jean Dabin, her attitude toward her daughter was far less predictable. Would she give a repeat performance of her shocking role as the unnatural mother, wishing death upon her child? Or would the passage of time and the criticism she had weathered cause her to change her tune?

Germaine appeared in court leaning upon the arm of a friend, her face covered, as it had been the previous fall, by a waist-length opaque mourning veil—an archaic sartorial choice that was already excessive right after her husband’s death, let alone over a year later (fig. 20). She had been allowed to enter through the magistrates’ door to avoid the press of gawkers, thus giving the impression that she was at one with the prosecution. Once she arrived at the witness’s bar, the judge asked her to lift her veil, which she did, revealing an emaciated face. The judge immediately announced that he had a preliminary question to put to her: “Tell us, why did you, an affectionate mother and faithful wife, choose to file this suit?” He intended to give Germaine a chance at the outset to dispel the hard feelings her vindictive words and actions had created among the public. She came back on cue with a well-rehearsed statement delivered in a monotone: “I chose to become a plaintiff in order to discover accomplices in the crime and to defend my husband’s memory. I never sought to condemn my daughter, toward whom I feel no hatred.” In the stand Violette dropped her head into her hands and started to sob—although reporters noted caustically that she emitted no convincing sounds.

The judge’s questions to Germaine focused on the night of the crime, and Germaine delivered once again the familiar narrative: the argument about Jean, the letter from “Dr. Deron,” the powders diluted in glasses of water. Germaine seemed to have forgotten her very recent statement that she had no desire to “condemn” her daughter when, prompted by Peyre,
she told a riveted audience about the moment she and Baptiste drank their drafts:

**JUDGE PEYRE:** When she asked you to swallow the powder, did your daughter not say to you and your husband: "You don't think I want to poison you?"

**MME NOZIERE:** Yes, and my husband said: "I don't think you have sunk that low." *(Sensation)*

Amid the gasps and murmurs that followed this exchange, a juror jumped up and asked Germaine if it was not true that she had drunk only half of her glass and thrown away the rest. She answered in the affirmative, then went on to promote the accomplice thesis by reminding the audience and jurors that she had collapsed on the floor and awakened in her bed. The atmosphere became increasingly tense as Violette's lawyer, René de Vésinne-Larue, intervened to question Germaine about the notorious rag. A "storm" of murmured protests erupted, and the judge waded in to interrupt the attorney: "I think that's enough. The gentlemen of the jury understand, and if any one of them does not, let him raise his hand. *(Laughter)*

Whenever Germaine appeared in public, melodrama seemed to break out, as it did now. Winding down his interrogation, the judge asked Violette if she had any questions for her mother. Violette rose and exclaimed "Maman, Maman, forgive me, Maman!" to which Germaine responded by stretching her arms out toward her daughter and proclaiming, "Violette, I cannot forget that you are my daughter. What you said about your poor father is a lie and an abomination, but you are my daughter! I cannot forget that you are my daughter!" By this time both women were weeping loudly, Violette punctuating her sobs with cries of "Maman, Maman!" while Germaine rounded out the scene by wailing: "Pity for my child!" Germaine evidently assumed that "pity" was someone else's responsibility: she had just spent the last hour recounting details that would likely earn her child a sentence of death or prison for life.

The audience must have been relieved that this lurid scene was followed by medical technicalities. Up next were Dr. Paul, the forensic specialist who examined the victims, Dr. Kohn-Abrest, a leading expert in poisons, and Dr. Henri Claude, head of the panel that had filed the report on Violette's physical and mental health for the investigation a year earlier. The first two delivered the requisite scientific information, including a lecture on poisoning methods by Kohn-Abrest. *Le Populaire* politely commented that "these interesting dissertations gave the jury members a chance to recover from their emotions." Claude repeated the conclusions of his report: where science was concerned, Violette could be considered fully sane and responsible. Vésinne-Larue pounced once again: wasn't one of the panel members Dr. Victor Truelle, the man who had declared the Papin sisters perfectly sane, only to have his conclusions refuted several months later? Attacking the credibility of a prominent medical specialist was a risky move, and it drew fire from the prosecution. Gaudel snapped back that there was no need to retry the Papin case, that he was fully confident in the judgment of the experts, and that at any rate one of the Papin sisters was recognized to be fully sane and had been sentenced to death. The word *death*, wrote one journalist, "landed like a warning, or even a threat." Vésinne-Larue backed down. *L'Événement* commented that Violette's lawyer, who had not even called to the bar another medical expert he had recruited, seemed by now to be completely adrift.

For the audience, there was one more treat in the offering for the day: the questioning of Violette's lovers, especially the famous Jean Dabin. The prosecution raised the issue of Violette's many paramours and "indisputable prostitution," and when Vésinne-Larue protested that all this was overstated, Violette was asked to give the names of all the men she had slept with. Gaudel smirked, "This is going to take a while" to appreciative laughter from the room. As the newspapers had done during the investigation, the courtroom was now going to dispense moral judgment on these young men. One of Violette's men friends had already been, as *L'Événement* put it, "consigned to oblivion" that day: asked about Monsieur Émile, Police Inspector Gipoi had declared on the stand that the older man was just as imaginary as Dr. Deron's sister, a convenient fiction to obscure Violette's gains from venal lovemaking.

Georges Legrand, known as Willy, was called up first. He was now an office worker in an architectural firm, and he squirmed as he admitted that shortly before the crime he had pressed Violette for the return of the three hundred fifty francs that Jean Dabin had lent him. Bernard Piebourg, who came next, sported the same fashionable attire as Willy, the outfit that had been lampooned in countless cartoons of Jean Dabin: jacket with "coat-hanger" shoulders, wide pants, round tortoiseshell spectacles. (Willy's version of the look included a wide bottle-green tie and matching pocket handkerchief.) Newspapers described Piebourg as yet another *éphèbe* (pretty boy), and the judge cracked several jokes at his expense but gained no new information.
Jean Dabin, when he finally appeared, was wearing not the uniform of these Latin Quarter dandies but that of the French Army. By signing up, he had taken the only course of action that would remove him from scrutiny and public shame. Shipped off to Algeria, he was recalled for the trial, to which he would offer nothing beyond himself as an object of scandal and a target for moralism. Dabin was greeted by an “ironic ovation” from the audience, and then proceeded, in response to questions from the judge, to describe once again his liaison with Violette, especially the financial advantage he gained from it. L'Œuvre commented on the continuing silence of the defendant’s counsel: “One would have liked at this point to have heard something from Maître de Vésin-Larue, but he seems to have gone forever mute.” Nor did the Communist Party try at this stage to push their thesis via Germaine’s lawyer, Boitel, although L’Humanité speculated that Dabin might have funneled Violette’s money to the Camelots du Roi and asked, “How many Dabins were on Place de la Concorde last February?”

The judge felt it incumbent upon him to deliver a formal lecture to the young man, telling Dabin that at the very least he was guilty of “thoughtlessness and amorality” in taking Violette’s money, that his actions were widely condemned, and that it was to be hoped that the army would straighten him out. When Dabin failed to come up with an appropriate attitude of remorse and instead made a show of ironic indifference, Peyre worked himself up into a lather of moralistic outrage: “Do you not realize what people in this room, including myself, think of you? You have brought shame on your upstanding family. You have lived off this wretched woman here, whose punishment I will be calling for shortly. You yourself are not answerable to formal justice, but to something else. I will tell you this to your face: you are answerable to public contempt.” Paris-Soir commented that the judge had “relieved people’s consciences” by shaking up Dabin, giving some satisfaction to the thousands of people who believed that the young man was morally guilty if legally untouchable.

Peyre’s attitude toward the various witnesses mirrored that of his predecessor, Lanoire, most notably in the apparent class bias that led them to privilege the only one of Violette’s lovers who belonged to their social world, the medical student and doctor’s son, Pierre Camus. Although Camus’s testimony—that Violette told him her father sometimes forgot she was his daughter—was the most substantial single piece of evidence in support of Violette’s incest allegations, judges and journalists never questioned his memory or integrity and indeed could not stop heaping praise on him. “He is well mannered, precise, and speaks in a measured way,” wrote one journalist. Peyre extracted some acknowledgment from Camus that Violette often told lies, then launched into a flurry of praise: “You alone, sir, of all these little young men, have behaved correctly. I need to make this clear.”

Drawing the line between the real bourgeoisie and lower-middle-class impostors evidently mattered above all else.

The newspapers described the testimonies of Willy, Piebourg, Dabin, and Camus, and mentioned Violette’s right-bank lovers Atlan and Fellous. Anyone who was not actually present in the courtroom would not have known that several other men were questioned that day. The testimony of those whose recollections tended to confirm Violette’s allegations went unreported in the daily press, but Germaine’s lawyer, Maurice Boitel, did mention them, if only to refute them, in the plea he delivered on October 12, which remained unpublished for many months. Jean Leblanc, the man who had slapped Violette when she revealed her secret to him, was now stationed in Syria and deposed in absentia. He repeated that Violette had told him in 1932 that her father had abused (violences) her or raped (violes) her, he could not remember which. André Tessier and Roger Endewell did appear in court on October 11, though Boitel dismissed the first as “imprecise” and tried to poke holes in the story told by the second. Camus had mentioned Violette’s incest allegations too, but he pointed out, but his testimony was “vague.” As Germaine’s lawyer and a Communist Party member like the late Baptiste, Boitel was every bit as eager as everyone else to discredit Violette’s claims, but his published speech unwittingly confirms that the reporters for the major dailies actively colluded in presenting only one side of the story.

For all that, the public interrogation of Violette’s lovers had delivered no major surprises, and the parade of secondary characters—Madeleine Debise, Atlan and Fellous, Baptiste’s colleagues—that rounded off the day proved similarly anticlimactic. The newspapers concluded that while the play’s first act had delivered as expected, the middle section had been a dud. Le Populaire complained that this judicial spectacle seemed like a poorly structured show: after the first day’s delectable drama, things had gone flat in the second act, with day two ending in a “morose” litany of predictable depositions. Even the morning’s histrionic interactions between mother and daughter struck journalists as somehow stilted and overly theatrical, like a play performed by amateurs. The reporter for L’Œuvre complained of Germaine that “there was something so mechanical in her attitude that she struck people as not natural.” He noted that she spoke
“like a legal brief” and shrewdly concluded, “There is a gaucheness in this family, a sort of awkwardness that cancels out pathos and makes everything, on the face of it, seem fake.” A family in which a daughter can hand her parents glasses of a lethal mixture and ask, “Do you really think I want to poison you?” is indeed one in which any sense of emotional truth has long been lost. On stage as themselves, the Nozières were not convincing.

The final day of the trial, October 13, could hardly fail to deliver drama. On the one hand, the judge had made it clear that he could see no possible extenuating circumstances, and Vésinie-Larue had so far done a poor job of defending his client. On the other, the defendant was uncommonly young and good-looking, not a hardened woman of the streets but a schoolgirl. Who could predict how much indulgence to expect from the middle-aged men in the jury, many of them probably fathers? Would they use the verdict to express their full outrage at Violette’s monstrously ungrateful attack on her devoted parents, or would they think of their own daughters and show some mercy? Did the defense have any aces in the hole? Would Vésinie-Larue finally snap out of his torpor and deliver a convincing plea? Would the sentence be the one that applied in theory to any crime of premeditated parricide—death—or would the jury entrust some possibility that Violette was not entirely or not alone to blame, and spare her the worst?

A verdict and sentence were expected on Friday, October 12, the closing day of the trial.29 That day the defense was allowed to call “morality witnesses” to the stand, but since the prosecution had already recruited all the major players for their case, Violette’s side was left with only her very first boyfriend, Raymond Rierciardelli, who to the audience’s delight “could not remember” if he had had sexual relations with her, and a schoolteacher who, instead of creating sympathy, belittled the child she knew long ago. With these last formalities out of the way, pleading by the prosecution and the defense could begin.

Procedure dictated that the opening plea go to the partie civile if there was one, with the victim’s lawyer speaking first. Maurice Boitel, whose enormous size always triggered in journalists the same clichés (“he looks like a kindly giant”) accordingly took the floor. His was a well-defined if somewhat complicated task: he needed all at once to lay to rest for good all of the “calumnies” against the late Baptiste; to salvage something of the party’s increasingly quixotic attempt to implicate Dabin in the crime; and at the same time to join his client in requesting mercy for Violette. He acquitted himself competently of his multiple agenda: “Mme Nozière,” he intoned, “cannot believe that her daughter carried this out alone; she has always maintained that an accomplice must have counseled, guided, manipulated, and pushed her, and then helped her to dress up the crime as a suicide. In any case, the motive of the crime is money! And everything else is a lie!”30

Boitel’s argument against the incest allegation was lengthy and impassioned, his case for a possible accomplice equally long but considerably less exciting, consisting of twenty-two questions divided into multiple subquestions. Anticipating one of the defense’s story lines, Germaine’s lawyer insisted that there was nothing wrong with Germaine and Baptiste’s ambitions for their daughter. So what if Baptiste dreamed of making his daughter a mathematics teacher? “Let he who has never thought to give his child a better social position than himself cast the first stone!”31 These were the healthy ambitions of modest folk, but in other quarters the power of money was gawking away at a corrupt old society. Boitel built up his political-rally-length speech to a peroration in the best Communist tradition: “We are in the midst of a period of transition in which the Old World trembles on its base. . . . Altars and thrones are tottering. . . . We are witnessing, one shudder at a time, the dawning of a New Society in which men will no longer be driven by sordid self-interest, by ferocious self-interest.”32 Stepping back suddenly from the cusp of political apocalypse, Boitel remembered to mention in closing that Germaine had asked the jury to be merciful to her daughter.

Germaine’s belated plea for pity for her daughter was a classic case of too little too late, especially delivered in conjunction with her lawyer’s lengthy encomia of Baptiste. Merciful dispositions would also likely be challenged by the vehement allocation offered next by the prosecutor Gaudel, who made his intentions clear from the start: “When we have jointly traveled the length of this horrible tragedy, I will ask you, gentlemen of the jury, to return a death penalty against this miserable girl who, not content with killing, has poured upon the grave of her victim, of her own father, a hideous flow of calumnies and lies sprung right from her perverse imagination.” Gaudel rehearsed Violette’s “life of debauchery,” sketching for audience and jury “in a masterful hand the silhouettes of her best-known lovers” except for one, Monsieur Émile, whose existence was now, he noted, proven to have been a complete fiction. There were no accomplices involved, not a single attenuating circumstance. In his concluding remarks, the prosecutor empathized with the jury, explaining that faced with the monstrous crime of this very young girl, he too had had to struggle with
the competing demands of “my conscience and my sensibility.” But there was a well-established way, he reminded them, of sending a message of ultimate condemnation without having to live with its most dreadful judicial consequence: “Gentlemen of the jury, you know that for fifty years women have no longer gone to the guillotine. Do not hesitate. Do your duty as I did mine.”

After a brief recess, the starring role in the proceedings would now devolve to Violette’s defense team. How much did the jury know of the political leanings of Violette’s lawyers? If the partie civile was a mouthpiece for the Communist Party, the defense was made up of lawyers whose sympathies lay on the far right of the political spectrum, although, unlike Boitel, they did not put their political beliefs on display. At the start of the affair, Violette’s case had been entrusted by the legal hierarchy to a celebrity of the French bar, Henri Géraud. At sixty-one, Géraud carefully cultivated his image as “the Moses of the bar” by sporting a waist-length split beard; a lifelong bachelor, he never returned home later than six in the evening for fear of causing his mother anxiety. Géraud had initially made his fame in 1919 with his participation in the defense of Raoul Villain, the right-wing nationalist who killed Jean Jaurès; to the disgust of the Left, Villain won acquittal. Géraud was unable to repeat that judicial feat in 1932 when assigned the defense of the presidential assassin Paul Gorguloff, who died on the guillotine. Was it a coincidence that Géraud took on the defense of two men who had murdered prominent Third Republic politicians? After 1940 Géraud collaborated with Pétain’s government and faced trial at the end of the war. Although he was acquitted, the stain on his reputation caused him to resign from the Order of Barristers in 1947.

Géraud was at Violette’s side for much of the pretrial investigation but withdrew voluntarily from the case in March 1934, for reasons never made clear, leaving the defense in the hands of a much younger colleague, René de Vésinne-Larue. Behind the latter and the other young lawyer who was to join him, Jean Vincey, stood an eminent figure in the legal profession, the sixty-five-year-old Émile de Bruneau de Saint-Auban, who at the time occupied the revolving position of bâtonnier, or president, of the order. Saint-Auban’s politics were much more conspicuous than Géraud’s. Descendant of an ancient aristocratic family, a fervent Catholic nationalist and outspoken anti-Semite, Saint-Auban had first come to prominence at age thirty, when he defended a politician and editor accused of personal attacks on a Jewish government minister, David Raynal. “Yes, he has a burning faith!” Saint-Auban had thundered of his client, “Yes, he is fighting, and will fight, the Jewish moneyed interests!” Saint-Auban later represented France’s most famous anti-Semitic writer, Édouard Drumont, voiced virulent opposition to Captain Dreyfus and his supporters, and offered his legal services whenever needed to Catholic orders and organizations, ranting throughout against the evil power of the Jews and Freemasons who had taken over France. Even after World War I, he believed that reconciliation with Germany was possible and desirable because France’s hereditary enemy was really Britain. In the years after World War I, Saint-Auban’s political activism was less pronounced, though he spoke out frequently against materialism and socialism, became an enthusiastic Wagnerite, and wrote that Hitler was a Christ-like figure, the “German Redeemer.”

Émile de Saint-Auban was present in the courtroom throughout Violette’s trial but spoke only briefly at the end; mostly, he served as the éminence grise behind the defense team he had set up. Assisting Henri Géraud in the Nozière case was an assignment that could make a beginning lawyer’s career, and this plum appointment had been Saint-Auban’s to dispense. In early October 1933 the bâtonnier entrusted the job of junior counsel in the case to a thirty-year-old lawyer who was serving at the time as his secretary—the equivalent of a law clerk. Naming René de Vésinne-Larue to a coveted role in the cause célèbre of the day reportedly made for a good deal of jealousy among others of his age and stage. The young lawyer made a great show of modesty when questioned by the right-wing weekly Candide, explaining that he got the assignment because he happened to be in Paris at the time the case broke in August 1933, while most of his colleagues were on vacation. In cases where nobody else was on hand, it was traditional for the bâtonnier to designate a close associate, he said with a smile. That was hardly the whole truth of it, since rivals for the assignment had taken the first train to Paris from their beaches and country homes, only to be crushed with the news that the job was already filled. Vésinne-Larue was not just a close collaborator of the older man but also a distant relative.

Journalists at the trial noted the physical contrast between René de Vésinne-Larue and his opponents in court: Boitel and Gaudel were very big men, whereas Vésinne-Larue, short, slight, and boyish, reportedly looked like a jockey. He spoke loudly in a strange nasal voice, which earned him in the law courts the affectionate nickname “the Duck,” and his combination of energy and eccentricity charmed many of his colleagues: “a personality that few will soon forget” was the phrase used in his professional obituary.
Like Géraud, Vésin-Larue was a lifelong bachelor, except for a marriage that mysteriously ended in midhoneymoon. A brilliant polymath who held advanced degrees in mathematics, economics, and physics and could converse in Latin, he joined the bar in 1931 and was soon singled out by the powerful Saint-Auban. They undoubtedly had a good deal in common, starting with a distant family relationship, aristocratic names, and royalist sympathies: the younger lawyer was obsessed with Marie-Antoinette, as he later would become obsessed with a real-life young, beautiful, and tragic woman. Like Saint-Auban, Vésin-Larue was a man of the right with strong Catholic leanings; after the war, in which he fought bravely and was wounded, he took pride in his high-profile defense of General Henri Dentz, a Pétainist officer sentenced to death for his collaboration with Axis powers.\(^{41}\)

The story of Vésin-Larue's involvement in the Nozière case was to be a remarkable tale of devotion. His family joked that he had a crush on the young woman, and one wonders if he saw himself as a chivalric defender of womanhood in peril, in the mode of the dashing Count Fersen trying to save Marie-Antoinette from the guillotine.\(^{42}\) In October 1933, Violette wrote a letter to Saint-Auban from prison, asking if she could have permission to see Vésin-Larue as an honorarium to express her gratitude. She was extremely touched by his devotion, particularly the fact that he had recently, despite being extremely ill, made a point of being present to support her during the “confrontation” involving herself, her mother, and Jean Dabin. Even when she allowed to give him money, she wrote, “I will never be able to prove my full gratitude to him, it is so overwhelming.”\(^{43}\) On the eve of the trial, Paris-Soir mentioned that Vésin-Larue had visited her daily in prison throughout her stay.\(^{44}\)

Vésin-Larue, only a decade or so older than his client—and younger-looking than his real age—was the mainstay of Violette's defense over fourteen months, with Saint-Auban hovering in the background. At the last minute, he was assigned a colleague, a young man exactly his age, Jean Vincey. Precisely when Vincey was recruited to the case is not clear, but at the trial he told the jurors that he had “entered the affair at the same time as they did.”\(^{45}\) Vincey, one of the original disappointed candidates for the Nozière assignment, also fit the profile of Saint-Auban's young protégés. The son of an agronomist and a lawyer since 1929, Vincey was a young firebrand in the Croix de Feu, an ultranationalist Christian movement with fascist leanings originally made up of World War I veterans. He delivered rousing speeches at rallies, tried with little success to recruit working-class members to the movement, and was put in charge of propaganda by the movement's leader, Colonel de la Rocque.\(^{46}\) Did Saint-Auban attend a Croix de Feu meeting and hear Vincey speak, or was he merely aware of the young man's reputation as an orator who could hold a crowd of thousands spellbound? Did the older man have doubts about Vésin-Larue's courtroom abilities? As it turned out, in the context between these two thirty-year-old lawyers, Vincey did, by all accounts, outshine the man who had devoted much of the last year to Violette Nozière.

During the prosecutor's speech calling for the death penalty, Violette had seemed understandably agitated, and the doctor was once again sent to see to her. The young woman had focused her anxieties on what she called her lucky key, a small rusty object for which she was frantically searching: “It must have fallen under the bench.”\(^{47}\) We are not told whether she found the key, but an ultimate chance for her luck to change was in the offering, since the defense had planned to bring on one last surprise witness before their speeches. The last witness called to the bar was a young man named Paul Ronfard, a student who said he had volunteered to come forward to “free his conscience.” His bourgeois pedigree was impeccable, his father serving at the time as the French consul in Warsaw. Ronfard testified that two years earlier, in 1932, Violette had told him explicitly about her father's sexual abuse; he said that other students of his acquaintance knew even more about the matter, and that he was disgusted that they did not have the courage to come forth and testify. Gaudel immediately cast doubt on Ronfard's account—why did he wait so long to share this information?—and the room was soon abuzz with different reactions, audience members arguing among themselves and shouting comments at the officials. The judge called for order so that the defense speeches could start.\(^{48}\)

It was difficult to predict what tack the defense would take. Since Violette had admitted to murder with premeditation, there was no chance of an acquittal. As the judge's opening remarks made clear, the argument between prosecution and defense would center on the presence of attenuating circumstances. When Violette first made her accusation against her father, hostile journalists had claimed that she was “already preparing her defense.” But even proven incest—proven how, one wonders?—would not have outweighed her crime: the French penal code did not officially recognize incest as a crime, and comments about the case in the newspapers mostly inclined to the view that even if were it true, her father's wrongdoing would explain
but not excuse her act. Violette's lawyers might argue for the likelihood of the incest claim to establish a strong attenuating circumstance, though blaming the victim would be a high-risk strategy; or they might focus their defense on the defendant's physical and mental health.

The themes that surfaced most conspicuously in the defense's arguments turned out to be neither of those, but issues of class and social ambition. That these matters were very much on some people's minds is suggested by the front-page article by a reporter named Alexis Danan in Paris-Soir on the eve of the verdict. The key to the whole case, he wrote, could be found in Violette's fantasies "that she was a student and the daughter of bourgeois." As the reporter proceeded, however, he seemed to be pointing the finger at the tasteless mediocrity of her parents' life: "At home, in her real life, there was a sickening affluence of frugal workers who have paid in small monthly installments for their sewing machine and beaded lampshade, for the pitch-pine mirrored armoire, the radio, and the gold-framed copy of Millet's Angelus, and her dream placed her on one or two floors above this unpleasant bric-a-brac." Violette's lawyers would evoke her social world as well, looking to free her of some of the blame by pointing beyond her to the background and the parents that made her what she was.

Vézinne-Larue's speech was going to be closely watched, Le Journal pointed out, by all those members of the lawyerly confraternity whose "vigilant hatred" had been aroused by his appointment to Violette's defense. Rapidly glossing his speech, the paper reported that Vézinne-Larue had "made an effort that commanded esteem," begging the jury to show indulgence to his client on the grounds that she had been driven to her crime by illness and depression. But for the past two days the papers had been reporting that Vézinne-Larue seemed to be flailing, and others did not even grant the young lawyer Le Journal's belittling praise for "effort." According to Le Populaire, Vézinne-Larue faced a difficult task and was not up to it. "This exceptional affair was beyond him. He did make a few sound arguments here and there, but they were lost in the whole of his flaccid speech." L'Œuvre lamented that Saint-Auban had done the accused a bad turn by appointing a relative for her defense, and mockingly cited a couple of astoundingly gauche sentences from his speech: "She lost her virginity because she was incompetent," or to the prosecutor, "The defendant is not up to the level of your plea." A later account of the trial reported that those who expected to see the lawyer organize his defense around incest and go into lurid details were disappointed. Instead, Vézinne-Larue argued that Violette never wanted to kill her mother, once again attacked Dr. Truelle's expertise, and made the case that Violette's venereal disease could have had deleterious effects on her psyche. Mostly, though, he stigmatized her parents for their incomprehension of a sensitive child, their lack of vigilance, and the ambition that drove them to try to make her into a "bluestocking." She was just a child, he pleaded; she should be forgiven.

By all accounts, Jean Vincéy, who spoke next, utterly stole the show from his colleague. The newspapers fell all over themselves praising his oration. Vincéy was "a revelation" said one newspaper, while another commented on his excellent phrasing and voice (no doubt in pleasing contrast to "the Duck"). According to Paris-Midi, Vincéy's performance was enough to establish him as "one of the great young hopes of the courtroom." Like his colleague, Vincéy cast doubt on the conclusions of the psychological experts. He skirted the issue of incest by emphasizing instead a general "mystery" about the affair: "I do not believe that Violette Nozière now knows exactly why she killed... I do not understand. There is a mystery here that we do not understand." He too pointed an accusing finger at Violette's parents: her "vain" family was to blame because instead of giving her a proper education (by that he meant appropriate to her class), they made of this sickly child "a wreck floating through the Latin Quarter."

Once Vincéy had finished his much admired plea, Saint-Auban got up to speak. Instead of focusing on the defendant, he delivered a speech in praise of his two junior colleagues. It was, as L'Œuvre noted in disgust, as if he had given an examination topic to his two best students and was now proceeding to hand out prizes. The elder statesman had shown off his young protégés, and Vincéy had delivered a career-making performance. The only one of the three lawyers who cared about the defendant, and cared deeply, had apparently fallen down on the job.

Themes of social class had dominated the end of the trial, possibly by default: nobody wanted to get too close to the matter of incest, especially since the judge had made it clear that he thought it an unseemly matter for discussion in open court. It is tempting to read the courtroom dynamic through the prism of ideology. The Left, in the person of Boitel speaking for Germaine, took the position that Violette was the victim of the young bourgeois rakes who had debauched and exploited her, while Violette's upper-class right-wing defenders argued that her parents should be blamed for having ambitions above their station in life, which unbalanced their fragile offspring. Contemporary reactions and commentaries certainly
reflect a general view that the crime was somehow linked to Violette's trajectory, triggered by her parents' ambitions, through the neighborhoods and social worlds of Paris.

The journalist for *Le Populaire* reacted angrily to Vincy's criticism of Violette's parents. "What a mistake! It is in fact a matter of pride in working-class environments to be able to give one's children a higher education." The strength of a nation, he continued, comes from recruiting its leaders from the elite of "the people": look at two recently slain and revered political leaders, President Paul Doumer, son of a construction worker from the south, and Louis Barthou, grandson of a skilled artisan. "It was not the legitimate ambition of the Nozières that ruined Violette," he insisted.97 But it was precisely their ambition that got under the skin of others, especially members of the literary elites. The American writer Janet Flanner, reporting for the *New Yorker*, indulged in particularly egregious snobbery: "Though her doting parents had educated her over their heads and means in a Paris private school, in her brief career Violette Nozière had learned merely how to drink bad cocktails with penniless collegiates... and certainly never met any member of the government until, on trial for parricide, she made the acquaintance of her judge." Reporting for her companion on the trial, the cosmopolitan and bisexual Flanner showed no mercy to the upstart Violette: "At the trial it was brought out that she was not only a nympho— but also a mythomaniac—or a natural tart and a born liar."98 It is likely that Flanner was echoing the judgment of members of the French and expatriate cultural elite with whom she habitually consorted.

The French did not read Flanner's appraisal—written months after the trial, in any event—but many did see the controversial editorial penned by another famous bisexual woman writer, an acquaintance of Flanner's, Colette. Aged sixty at the time, Colette had been since the turn of the century a literary celebrity with a personal life as shocking as her scandalous noëls (in addition to her several husbands and her affairs with women, she had in the previous decade engaged in a conspicuous liaison with her teenage stepson).99 Invited by *L'Intransigeant* to comment on the trial, Colette created a brief blast of controversy with a front-page article that began: "These are little people. Mother and daughter do not hail from some dark underworld but from dreadful, narrow lodgings, the sort of Parisian dwelling that dishonors family intimacy. They come from that hell where beside the conjugal bed a little cot is unfolded at night and put away in the morning." She went on to mock Violette's way of speaking, noting that in calling Émile "my protector," the girl was using the language of "a courtesan of yesteryear," and circled back to the theme that this family did not have enough class to star as the heroes of a real criminal drama: "Little people, unfortunately yes. What a difference with the feral glow, the glamour of the underworld... A mediocre world comfortable with lies, compromises, and reticence."99

There was something supremely distasteful about a wealthy and famous woman who had made her name flouting proprieties—in her youth Colette had danced on stage practically naked—displaying such contempt for "little people" whose tight living quarters forced them into "hypocrisy" about sex. Louis Laloy, writing in the left-wing paper *L'Ére Nouvelle*, pounced on the expression "little people": "So this family blighted by an atrocious crime is disappointing to her because they lived in a confined space with ready-made furniture from a department store, and therefore could not play their roles as expansively as required by the drama in which they were actors? What did they lack that they failed to find words and gestures appropriate to the situation?" Surely, he went on, the home of a railway worker was less impressive than the fancy hotels and studios where some people lounged around with their famous cats, but for "little people," the strenuous saving that produced a clock, an armchair, or a vase invested such objects with a wealth of meaning. And maybe one would voluntarily forgo a larger apartment to give a child the education that ensured access to a decent life.61 Her snobbery exposed, Colette immediately reversed course, offering a contorted and unconvincing explanation that she had really meant *chétir* rather than *pétit*, an expression from the patois of her native province that referred to criminality rather than class.62 Themes of class apparently came to the fore, then, at the conclusion of the trial, as various commentators joined Violette's lawyers in decrying the mediocrity of the Nozière household and the family's unseemly ambitions, while others protested that the railway worker and his wife represented all that was decent and admirable in the patterns of social mobility of the time. Arguments about class seemed to have displaced debate about whether or not Baptiste Nozière had violated his daughter, a matter the judge had early on declared unmentionable.

It turns out, however, that newspapers failed to report on what really transpired in the courtroom. The very brief accounts in the press of Vésine-Larue's unsuccessful defense of his client completely obscured the fact that he actually did mount a detailed argument that Violette was
the victim of her father’s sexual abuse. The lawyer’s speech was published the year after the trial in a legal periodical edited by Saint-Auban himself, which carried the pleas delivered in famous court cases. Like his colleague Vinceny, like Flinn and Colette, Vésinne-Larue had sounded themes of misplaced ambition in his speech. What did Violette get from her parents? "Contempt for her own status, honorable as it was, a concealed desire to vault oneself into some kind of bourgeois existence, the focus of their every effort." The three of them lived in a space devoid of privacy, where promiscuity took the place of hygiene, but there was a bookcase full of literature and mathematics textbooks because these people wanted their daughter to be a bluestocking, a fille savante. "Nothing," he continued, "would ever daunt her parents’ ambition." 63

But Vésinne-Larue did not just intend, as Vinceny and others did, to ask for compassion for a young girl pushed too hard and too far by her parents. He also drew a careful and convincing picture of the psychological dynamics of the household and highlighted all the elements in the case that made the incest charge plausible. Violette’s parents, he argued, were hardly the paragons some people described. Germaine, the lawyer pointed out, rarely went out or spoke to anybody, and neighbors described her as a strange, conceited, and volatile woman. As for Baptiste, his own father led a scandalous private life, and he himself was strangely tolerant of his daughter’s notorious liaisons with men. Why? Why did he never stop her? What secret made it impossible for him to object to Violette’s loose morals? The prosecution had justly praised Pierre Camus as the only decent and trustworthy young man among Violette’s acquaintances. Why, then, did they not give credence to what he actually said? Was it not notable that he had extracted her confession about the incest from her with great difficulty, when she was in a state of profound depression and unlikely to be telling tales for her own advantage?

Turning to the eve of the crime, Vésinne-Larue, emulating a mystery-novel writer, assembled all the facts into a new and very plausible explanation of events. Violette insisted that she had told her father in July about her love for Dabin and her plans to marry him, and that Baptiste had responded that he would not let her go. Unfortunately, only she could testify to that conversation. But why not believe her, and accept that it was at this stage that hatred for her monstrous father had turned to murderous intent? Skeptics pointed to the evening of the crime and asked why Violette would have gone through with her criminal plans when her parents had just assented to an engagement. The lawyer laid out his interpre-

tation of what had happened on August 21, 1933. Why, he asked, had the parents suddenly discovered Violette’s correspondence with Jean? Baptiste knew she was planning to leave town, knew the real reason why, and wanted to stop her. It was he, no doubt, who instigated the search for her belongings for evidence of a liaison, which duly turned up. Baptiste knew that his wife would either put a stop to the relationship or insist that the young people get engaged and married. But Dabin, only twenty years old and having not yet carried out his military service, would not likely welcome an engagement. (Vésinne-Larue did not even mention, perhaps because he did not know it, the detail that Baptiste had insisted that the Dabins be told of Violette’s venereal disease.) The likely outcome of the scene was the end of Violette and Jean’s relationship and closer scrutiny by Germaine of her daughter’s outside activities—exactly what the possessive incestuous father wanted. 64

Vésinne-Larue also challenged the financial motive for the crime by reminding the jury of the very plausible case for the existence of a real Monsieur Émile. What about all those who saw the couple—the floor manager at the Hôtel Moderne where they met, the waiter who exactly described the menu of their lunch on August 17, just as Violette remembered it? What about the letter signed "Émile" that arrived at Les Sables d’Olonne, where she was supposed to go on vacation? What about Violette’s insistence to Jean that she could get money for a car from her "aunt," the same aunt she always met in a hotel? He then tried another angle: was it likely that she would kill her parents for money if she knew that she could not inherit for another three years? The only explanation that made sense of all the facts of the case was the one Violette had offered: that her new love for Jean had made the horror of her situation with her father untenable. The only thing that explained her act was a horrific symmetry: "The excuse for this crime against nature is that it was triggered by a violation of the laws of nature." 65

None of these arguments were reported in the press, which embraced Vinceny’s performance and his conclusion that the case would ever be a "mystery" as the superior defense of the two, and dismissed Vésinne-Larue’s speech as rambling and “flaccid” without mentioning its content. 66 Three years later, after Vésinne-Larue’s plea was published, a prominent academic who had been present at the trial wrote to L’Évèque to complain that it, along with all other newspapers, had failed to report on the lawyer’s explicit argument about sexual abuse. 67 Throughout the trial, incest was a subject that was not to be mentioned. When it was brought up by
Violette's defender, the issue was expunged from the newspaper coverage, just as the Surrealists' volume had been seized by the police. The consensus in the press was that despite Vincé's fine speech, Violette's defense had been a fiasco, and that behind Vésinė-Larue's failure was the vanity of the old bâtisseur Saint-Auban, who cared more about dispensing perks to his young acolytes than he did about the fate of the young defendant.68

Once the last speech for the defense was over, things went very fast.69 Violette, asked if she had anything to say, answered: "I ask for forgiveness, and I thank my mother for forgiving me." The jury withdrew to deliberate and came back after barely one hour with a verdict that they announced to the court in the absence of the accused: they unanimously found the defendant guilty of parricide with premeditation, with no attenuating circumstances. The verdict carried an automatic sentence of death. The judge called Violette back into the room and read the details of her punishment, the death penalty modified by an archaic ceremonial reserved for parricides, following article thirteen of France's penal code: the condemned was to be put to death "in one of the public places of the City of Paris," having been led to the place of execution "in a shift, barefoot, head covered by a black veil" and exposed to the public as a bailiff read the sentence.70 Violette showed no reaction when she heard the verdict and the sentence. She rose to leave, and Vésinė-Larue approached her with a sheaf of paper, asking her to sign the petition for an appeal, which had to be filed within three days.

At that moment, Violette's self-control fell apart. "No!" she shrieked, as her lawyer pressed her to sign. As the tension of the three previous days finally broke, Violette became a fury: "Leave me alone! You're a bunch of bastards, you have no shame! . . . You're without pity! I told the truth! To hell with my father! To hell with my mother!" Suddenly feral, she struggled with the guards, flailing around, until she was finally forced out of the room. A few minutes later, still furious, she regained her composure and shook the guards off: "Do you think I can't walk? And what about my handbag, what did you do with it?" A few minutes later, she had calmed down enough to sign the appeal. Most newspapers commented that she had shown her true face at the end.

Outside the courtroom, Violette was rapidly ushered into a car that was to take her back to La Petite Roquette. Jean Dabin watched her get in and, turning to Willy, remarked, "Well, she always wanted her own car and now she has it." Willy stared at him and said, "You bastard." Still, they went off together to share a drink.71

On the face of it, the trial forced the Nozière affair back into the mode of melodrama. Trials are by their very nature melodramatic: they take complicated events with messy motivations and force them into simple, clashing story lines. The dynamics of the courtroom often wring overwrought performances from participants, as this trial did with Violette's and Germain's histrionics and the judge's paternalistic show of outrage at Jean Dabin. Adding to the courtroom's radical simplification of the case was the fact that the trial was dominated by a prosecution closely allied with both the investigating magistrate, Lanoire, and the presiding courtroom judge, Peyre. On the other side, the two thirty-year-olds assigned to the defense, one of them recruited at the last minute, were hard pressed to stand up to the phalanx of senior professionals who preemptively declared Monsieur Émile a fiction and ruled the incest allegation unmentionable.

Violette was denied extenuating circumstances by a jury not of her peers but of her father's peers, and judges and prosecutors did their best to declare the matter over and done with. Their very efforts at shaping the story suggest that the case would not so easily come to rest. René Vésinė-Larue gave no ground in a courageous plea that failed to resonate in the courtroom and was glossed over in the press. What people did read about, the defense's argument that the crime could be traced back to the unseemly ambitions of "little people," touched off an ultimate round of debate. The story of Violette in the years after the verdict suggests that for many people the clarity of the death sentence in no way resolved the ambiguities of the Nozière affair.