

# The Whole and the Sum

Joseph Tether

HENRI LAMBERT halted momentarily in his flight into the tunnel and looked behind him, trying to pry through the blackness. He breathed heavily, leaning against the cold steel of one of the supports for the roof. Condensation from the girders dripped incessantly onto the catwalk and rails below in a hollow musical toccata.

"Coward!" The sound of Henri's shout echoed coldly and returned like shadows in a wind. He tried to count the echoes, but they rapidly became inseparable.

"Maybe they never really stop," thought Henri. "Maybe they just keep bouncing around in here forever."

"Jacques Blesseau!" shouted Henri. He waited for the echoes to wither.

"You-are-a-coward!" The accusation returned to him until it was no longer intelligible, just a confused mass of sounds. "I wonder if he heard me," he thought. Then above the sound of lost whispers came the shuffling, tortured clatter of the footsteps that had followed him into the tunnel. Again Henri was running, bent over to avoid the steel supports.

"Jacques is a coward," thought Henri, gasping for breath. "He could have died a whole man, but he has chosen to live half a man. He should have died. But he is a coward. And like all cowards, he will outlive the brave." Henri was becoming tired.

"Henri!" Jacques' voice swirled around Henri and in his surprise, still running, he straightened up. In an instant his head smashed against one of the supports, and in agony he was spun to the catwalk. His thoughts slipped into a depthless vertigo, falling, turning. . . .

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Henri threw open the door of the section shack and looked inside. Jacques was asleep on a cot in the corner. His pudgy face was turned slightly toward Henri, the mouth deformed in sleep. An empty wine bottle lay on its side next to him on the cot.

Jacques was a much larger man than Henri, but Henri was too angry to worry about this.

"Wake up, you drunken pig!" screamed Henri.

"What in hell . . .?" Jacques struggled to one elbow and opened his eyes, bloodshot and fogged with wine. "What's wrong, little rooster?"

"I told you to keep your hands off Françoise, you filth!" Henri was raging.

"What, that little whore? Why, I'd as soon go to bed with you." He turned his back to Henri and lay back down.

"She's pregnant. You ought to know all about it. I talked to her brother."

"He's lying," tossed back Jacques, unconcernedly.

"You're the one who's lying! You've always been a liar. What about my last paycheck?"

"That's different. This is serious. I swear I had nothing to do with it. If you don't believe me, we will confront Françoise together. You will see."

"I've already asked her. When I mention you, all she does is cry."

Jacques laughed. "Don't you see? She has never loved you. If she did, she would have claimed you as the father."

"You know that's impossible."

"Yes, I forgot. I'm sorry. But she's a whore. Maybe it was her brother."

Henri picked up a hammer and started toward Jacques. "I'm going to kill you, Jacques."

"Oh, don't be dramatic. Everything will work out. She is nothing, Henri. Use your head."

Henri brought the heavy hammer down, just missing Jacques' face. Jacques caught the hammer on the downward swing and wrenched it from Henri's grasp.

"Now, get out of here, little fool! You don't know when you're well off. I could smash you like a termite, but you are just a fool. Get out and cool off."

Slowly, Henri backed away from Jacques, trying to hold back the tears of frustration that were welling up in his eyes.

"I'll kill you, Jacques. I don't know how yet, but scum like you should not live." He turned and ran out the door, tears now flowing freely down his face.

That night, Henri left for Strasbourg where he boarded the One A.M. Express for Paris. An idea was forming in the back of his mind. It would have to be a revenge that meant something. Nothing ordinary would do for something like Jacques. The entire affair was a play, a Greek tragedy. The punishment of Jacques would have to be symbolic, like punishment in the tragedies. As the train clacked over the Moselle bridge, the plan became clear in his mind.

It would have to involve perfect timing. Jacques was intelligent and now was wary. All would depend on the approach. If Jacques suspected anything, the plan would be ruined.

At five A.M. the train halted at Gare du \_\_\_\_\_, and Henri got off. He wandered for several hours through the quiet and lonely streets, coming to his old neighborhood where he found the solution to his problem.

Early in the morning he entered the shop of a boyhood friend, a pharmacist. His friend had grown fat with prosperity, and Henri barely recognized him as he scurried industriously around the shop.

"Bonjour, Charles," said Henri, examining an antique apothecary

cary jar and not looking at the druggist.

"Monsieur? May I . . . Henri! I did not recognize you! You have lost weight."

"Yes, I have not been as prosperous as you."

"You embarrass me, Henri. What are you doing now?"

"I am with the railroad. Sounds impressive, doesn't it? I live in a shack and repair the tracks in the Vosges between Strasbourg and Paris. You, perchance, have ridden over some of my handiwork."

"No, I have my car and . . . But what may I do for you?"

"You may sell me some sedatives, some very strong sedatives."

"Things are not that bad, Henri. Do you need money? Perhaps I could find you another job, something more suitable to your abilities."

"No, Charles. Things are not that bad. I have a dog who unfortunately has run a spike between the tendon and bone of one of his legs. He is too large for me to hold down, and I am afraid the wound will fester if the spike is not removed. As I passed by your shop, the thought occurred to me that you might have something to knock him out."

The druggist regarded Henri dubiously. Naturally, thought Henri, he would doubt that story. Only the wealthy in France can afford the luxury of dogs. Stray dogs were a delicacy for the poor during the war. Today's pet and tomorrow's potage. And not bad if one is hungry.

"Henri! A dog! And a large one at that. Certainly you can compose a more believable fable than that!"

Henri was losing his patience. "See here! Is it so unusual for a lonely man stranded on a desolate railroad siding to desire the company of a dog? Can you please give me something?"

"Pardon me, Henri. I can give you something, but I must ask that you tell no one where you got it." He disappeared into the rear of the shop and returned with a small package. "Add this powder to whatever he eats or drinks. It should take less than a minute to work."

"How long. . . ."

"It should last about three hours." The druggist handed the package to Henri, trying to catch his eye. But Henri refused to look up.

"Merci, Charles. You are very kind." Henri's hand shook with excitement. Three hours was just enough time. He turned and started to leave the shop.

"Bonjour, Henri. And please be careful. If you ever need anything. . . ."

"I know, Charles. Bonjour."

When Henri reached the shack the next morning, Jacques had already gone down the line with the rail crew. It would be late in the evening before he returned. And he would be thirsty. Henri

had brought Jacques a bottle of Moselle, his favorite. It would be a "peace offering." Henri had carefully removed the lead sheathing from the cork, pulled out the cork while heating the bottle so as not to damage the cork, added the powder, and replaced the cork and seal. It pleased Henri that everything had gone so well. It would have been difficult to have done anything else with the powder. An unsealed bottle would have made Jacques suspicious immediately.

At the back of the small storeroom attached to the shack, Henri placed a large wooden box through which he had cut two holes which would easily accommodate a man's hands. After some searching, Henri discovered half of an old circular saw blade which had originally been used to cut railroad ties. It was of good size and would serve his purposes perfectly. Henri carried it to the grinding wheel, seated himself, and proceeded to sharpen the broken edge. As he watched the sparks fly while he pumped the pedals of the rickety grinder, another idea entered Henri's mind.

Fire produces more terror in men than any other natural phenomenon. In the war Henri had seen men withstand hours of intensive bombardment without going mad. But fire. . . . No one can bear the thought of burning to death. Being blown up is quick if you die in the explosion. When contemplating suicide, many prefer an unsure death by drowning. But never fire.

Henri looked at the shack. It should burn nicely, he thought. The old timbers were very dry, like kindling, and tarpaper roofing would produce a great deal of heat. A man would be reduced to ashes in minutes by the inferno the shack would become.

The irony of the situation excited Henri. He was giving Jacques a chance to live, but if he lived it would be through cowardice. If he died, he would die a brave and a whole man having died the most horrible death to which a man can be subjected.

Henri tested the newly sharpened edge of the blade with his hand. It would do . . . with a heavy weight on it. He carried it into the storeroom, setting it down next to the box. He found five long angle-iron fence posts lying in one corner. Two of these would make an excellent track for his blade. He stood them up on either side of the box, braced them against the beams of the ceiling with blocks of wood, and placed the blade in position. For weight, he bent several sheets of soft lead over the top of the blade. The sheets, each weighing ten pounds, were used for sealing drains in the tunnel.

Henri's little guillotine was now complete except for its trigger mechanism. He first tried a small wooden prop, but the weight of the blade was too great. Finally, he discovered that two nails placed through holes in the sides of the metal posts would support the blade. He attached strings to the nails so that a man lying on the floor with his hands through the holes in the box could pull the nails out with his teeth.

Stepping back, he pulled the string. The blade rushed down its

track and bit into the floor with a satisfying slicing sound. Henri reset the mechanism and retired into the shack to wait.

His work had taken the entire day. Through the small window Henri watched the late evening shadows spilling down the side of the hill through which the tunnel ran. Presently, he heard the coughing sound of the hand car which Jacques would be riding. It came to a halt on the tracks outside, and he heard Jacques joking with the rest of the crew. "He can tell a good story," thought Henri. "Maybe he will tell me one when he wakes up with his hands in the box. Maybe he will tell me that Françoise is a whore. But no, he will tell me that she is an angel—that she is pregnant through immaculate conception. And I will laugh and set fire to the wall."

"You are back, Henri." Jacques came through the door and threw his tool box noisily into the corner. "Did you see Françoise?"

"No. I saw an old friend I knew from my old neighborhood."

"Ah ha! Another woman! Henri, you should be more discreet in your choice of confession priests. I have a big mouth." Jacques sat down on the bed and began taking off his boots.

"Think what you will, Jacques. It makes no difference." Henri stood up and took the wine bottle from the shelf behind him. "I brought you a present from Paris, something to show you that I am sorry for the way I acted."

Jacques looked up in surprise. "Mon dieu! You do not cease to amaze me. First you are going to smash my face with a hammer, and then you are bringing me tokens of your affection. It's probably poisoned."

"Nothing but the best. It is all poison to me." Henri handed him the bottle.

"Ah, Moselle! This *is* good poison. Henri, you are no Frenchman." He tore off the lead seal, not noticing the nicks that Henri had put in it by taking it off. "Throw me the corkscrew."

Henri watched him intently while he removed the cork. It would be bad if he had suspected anything. Henri held his breath as Jacques took a long drink from the bottle.

"It is very good. Perhaps a bit sour, but anything would taste good. It has been a hot day." He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and took another drink. It would not be long. Henri was sweating.

"What's wrong with you, Henri? You look nervous. Why not risk it and have a drink? I don't want to make a pig of myself." He took another drink. "It must have been a worse day than I thought. I am exhausted." He lay back on the bed, holding the bottle upright on his chest.

"Yes, it has been a bad day. Very hot. I'm glad I did not have to go out with you. Paris was very beautiful."

"Paris is always beautiful. Except for the police." Jacques' voice was growing sleepy and distant.

"Remember the time they caught us throwing trash on the Avenue de l'Observatoire?"

"Yes. They are proud of their clean streets. It's good for the tourists." His voice was dimmer. He talked for a few moments, drifting from subject to subject. "He is very strong," thought Henri. Finally he was quiet, and the bottle slipped from his grasp and tumbled to the floor.

Henri watched him for a moment to make sure he was really asleep, and then hurried into the storeroom. He picked up a bag of cement, carried it outside, and poured its contents into the mixing trough. Three hours, the druggist had said. That was just enough time for the cement to set.

When the cement was mixed, Henri shoveled it into a bucket and carried it into the storeroom where he set it down next to the box. Then he dragged Jacques in and, turning him over on his face, placed his hands through the holes. There was just enough cement in the bucket to cover his hands. While Henri poured, he watched Jacques, afraid that he might come to when the cold cement hit his hands. But the powder had worked. There was nothing to worry about. All he had to do now was wait until he awakened.

Henri sat on a nail barrel in the corner and watched Jacques whose bland expression might have been that of a priest in meditation. Henri watched him intently and, although it was not cold, an occasional shiver shook the length of Henri's small body.

He glanced at his watch. Only a small oil lamp lit the room, and for a moment it was difficult to focus on the tiny hands of the watch. It was ten minutes after midnight. Jacques had gone to sleep just after nine; at least three hours had interceded. Henri stood up and walked over to the box. The cement had set and was now hard enough to hold him no matter how hard he struggled.

"Jacques?" Henri nudged Jacques' side with his shoe, but there was no response. "Wake up, you filth!" This time, he kicked him squarely in the ribs. The reaction was instantaneous.

"What . . . ! Jesus God!" Jacques rolled sharply away from Henri and uttered a cry of pain. The movement had broken his left wrist. "What in Hell have you done to me? Where. . . ."

Still not realizing that he could not get his hands free, he jerked back violently and again screamed with pain. This time, a piece of splintered bone forced its way through the skin of his rapidly swelling wrist. "I would advise you not to thrash around. No matter what you do, you cannot free yourself. Your hands are embedded in cement, and the box is nailed to the floor. Look above you. If you happen to hit either of those posts, the blade will fall. Although you may *want* it to fall in a few minutes."

"What do you mean? What are you going to do? Oh, God! My hand . . . ! It's broken!"

"You are lying, filth! You are the scum of the gutter. And, as such, you do not deserve life. Life is for the clean, the good. But as a coward, you may live. Do you see the string? Pull it and you may live. But you will bear the mark of a coward for the rest of your

life. If you choose to die, you will have, at least, my respect—respect for a man who has died bravely. But nothing more.”

Jacques was crying, tears falling in dusty droplets to the floor. “Henri, you can’t mean this. Say it is a bad joke and get me out of here. My hand! Henri, for God’s sake have some mercy. I’ll give you anything. I’ll confess. Is that what you want? You want me to confess about Françoise? All right. It *was* me! Me and Françoise all the time. I mean, she is pregnant by me. You see, I told you. I would have told you anyway when you cooled down. But this! Get me out of this thing!”

“No, Jacques! Don’t you see? I must do it now. Even if you had not told me. But now, it is for Françoise. Did you hear me? Shut up! You are a coward, Jacques. And you will die a coward!”

“No! In the name of God! You can’t. . . . What are you doing?”

Henri had picked up a can of petrol and begun pouring it along the wall. “Do you remember in the war, Jacques, how horrible it was to hear men burning to death inside a tank? Do you remember the bombed buildings with the women and children? I can still hear them. Sometimes I wake up screaming with their voices in my ears. It was fire!”

“Mother help me! Henri, you are crazy. Stop! Don’t. . . . You can’t do it! Oh, no, no, . . .” Jacques was now lying still, weeping, with his head lowered between his outstretched arms.

When the can was empty, Henri picked up the lamp and flung it into the corner. The glass smashed and the wall was aflame immediately. “Goodbye, Jacques. Françoise and I will see you in Hell.” He turned and ran out the door, Jacques’ screams following him.

It was pitch dark outside the shack, and Henri fell down the steps, tearing his knee on a rock. He quickly recovered himself and hurried, limping slightly, toward the tunnel. Just outside the entrance of the tunnel, Henri stopped and looked back. He had to know. Through one of the windows of the shack, he could see the flickering light of the fire as it climbed slowly up the walls of the storeroom where Jacques was lying. There was no sound except the metallic crackling of the fire which was still confined to the storeroom. Henri waited.

It took some moments for the first flames to escape into the crisp night air. Henri watched as several tiny tongues of flames shot through the bird-stops under the eaves of the storeroom and licked up over the edge of the roof. As the flames quickly made an exit for themselves, Henri could almost hear the rush of air through the open door of the shack. How like men are fires, thought Henri. The more they have, the more greedy they become.

Now the flames were rapidly spreading to the shack itself, leaping along the edges of the tarpaper roof and sending dense black columns of smoke into the sky. From where he stood, almost one hundred yards away, Henri could feel the heat of the fire.

It would not be long now. Then he heard a sharp crack of wood splitting, a rending scraping sound, the smashing of glass, and a resounding crash as one of the beams of the storeroom fell to the floor. Seconds afterward, he heard another noise and then a scream. Jacques had pulled the string!

Only his intense curiosity kept Henri from running on into the tunnel. From the shack, over the roar of the flames, he heard the tortured moans of Jacques as he struggled from the burning storeroom. Finally, Jacques' form was silhouetted in the flaming doorway of the shack. Most of his clothing was on fire. Jacques paused for a moment and then plunged headlong down the steps, rolling sideways in an effort to extinguish the flames.

"Henri, where are you?" screamed Jacques. "Help me, for God's sake!" Jacques continued to roll about, obviously in agony from his burns and the loss of his hands.

To Henri, the scene was unreal. It was as if he were watching a play, a fantasy. Maybe it was all a dream.

"It's nothing but a dream, Jacques." Henri watched Jacques struggle into a standing position. "Don't you see? When you wake up, it will all have been a dream."

"Where are you?" Jacques stumbled forward, but in the wrong direction. He was blind! Henri felt a sudden wave of fear, of cold nausea. It was not a dream.

Henri could not resist. "I'm over here, Jacques. By the tunnel. Don't you see me?"

Jacques screamed and roared like an animal. He turned toward Henri, but stumbled and fell heavily to the gravel at the side of the tracks. Slowly he fought his way up and started forward again.

"I wish Françoise could see you now, Jacques," shouted Henri. "You could have died honorably, but you were a coward. You are not even half a man now. You can't even stand up." Henri laughed as Jacques once again tripped and sprawled into the gravel.

Now Jacques was close enough for Henri to see him clearly. Jacques' face was no longer a face. All the hair was gone and the features were indistinguishable. Blood was slowly oozing from the blackened stumps of his arms and spattering his smoldering clothing. It was Henri who was now afraid. In terror, he turned and ran into the dark tunnel.

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"Henri . . ." Jacques' voice was filling Henri's ears in a flood of echoes. Henri sat up and shook his head. A large oblong lump was already forming across his forehead. There was no way of telling how long he had been unconscious. Quickly he got to his feet and began hurrying along the catwalk, more carefully this time.

"I am coming for you, Henri." The voice was all around Henri. Suddenly, Henri stopped. Am I going in the right direction, he thought. He grasped for the wall. To his horror, he could not remember. He could see nothing.



"Why did you do this. . ." That came from the right, thought Henri. Yes, from the right. He turned around and started back the other way.

"You are a coward!" Henri shouted into the blackness. "Why don't you die? You are no better than a mole, a dirty mole. You see nothing and you . . ." Henri tripped over something and fell forward onto the catwalk. It was Jacques. With a delighted whimper, Jacques leapt on Henri as he was struggling to his feet.

"Get away from me!" Henri kicked frantically but the stumps of Jacques' arms were solidly locked around his legs. Henri pitched sideways onto the railing. The rotten wood gave way and both men tumbled to the tracks below. Henri's arm was twisted beneath him and pain shot through it immediately. He knew it was broken. The fall had not loosened Jacques' grip on his legs, and once more Henri tried to free himself.

"You are going to die with me, Henri. Listen!" But Henri had already heard it. The One A.M. Express from Strasbourg was approaching the mouth of the tunnel. Henri reached out with his one good arm and felt for the rail. Painfully, he dragged himself forward pulling Jacques with him. The train was now in the tunnel and bearing down on them rapidly. Henri heaved himself onto the rail and grasped the edge of one of the ties, pulling himself forward at the same time. The noise of the engine and the brilliancy of the flashing headlight were terrifying.

Henri reached out again but found only gravel. A few more inches and . . . But it was too late for that.

Lying beside the tracks, after the train had passed, Henri prepared himself to die. It was funny, Henri thought. Together, Jacques and he would make a whole man.

## The Courtship of Dan \*

David Dawson

\* *First place, short story division, University Writing Contest, 1963.*

DAN STEPPED slowly from the bottom step of the dingy, cracked-plaster hallway; hesitated; looked up at the door with its varnish peeling off in scaly flakes; and walked on in a slow, deliberate prod. He walked into the street which was deserted at this early hour in the morning. Who would want to get up at five o'clock in the morning if he didn't have to? He did, though. Every day—except Sunday, of course.

The street-light gave out a ghostly yellow pool of light on the corner; newspapers shuffled into the gutters with the wind's prodding; and a trash can overflowed its rusty edge with contents of green-blue edged orange peelings, tin-cans with red labels, and broken beer bottles, brown, glinting from the dew drops. Dan approached