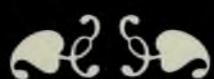

A novel by

Marguerite
Yourcenar



Coup de Grâce

With an introduction
by the author



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COUP DE GRÂCE



BY MARGUERITE YOURCENAR

Memoirs of Hadrian (1954)

Coup de Grâce (1957)

The Abyss (1976)



Coup de Grâce

MARGUERITE YOURCENAR

Translated from the French by Grace Frick
in Collaboration with the Author

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Preface

This short novel, translated from the French, has its setting in the aftermath of the War of 1914-18, and of the Russian Revolution. It was written in Italy, at Sorrento, in 1938, and was published just three months before the outbreak of the Second World War, thus some twenty years later than the incidents which it relates. The subject matter may now seem remote because so many episodes of other civil wars have been superposed upon those events in the intervening years, but it is close to us, too, because we are still plunged (and more deeply than ever) into the moral disorder depicted therein. The

story itself is authentic, and the three characters who are called Erick, Sophie, and Conrad, respectively, remain much as they were described to me by one of the best friends of the principal person concerned.

The whole episode was moving to me, as I hope it will be to the reader. Furthermore, and from a literary point of view alone, it seemed to me to encompass all the structural elements of classical tragedy, and therefore to fit admirably into the framework of traditional French récit, retaining, as this form does, certain characteristics of French classical tragedy, unity of time, of place, and, as Corneille once felicitously defined it, unity of danger. Likewise, the action limited to two or three persons, of whom one, at least, was sufficiently clear-sighted to strive to comprehend, and pass judgment on, himself. Finally, the episode contained within itself the inevitable tragic ending toward which passion always tends, but which ordinarily assumes, in daily life, more secret or more insidious forms. Even the setting, that faraway corner of Baltic territory, isolated by revolution and war, seemed to meet the requirements of tragic drama by freeing Sophie's and Erick's story from what would be for us the usual contingencies, and providing us with that remoteness in space which is almost the equivalent of distance in time. (Such was the reasoning of Racine, carefully set forth in his preface to Bajazet, a tragedy of

events close to his own time but occurring in what was then the closed world of the Ottoman Empire.)

It was not my intention in writing this book to re-create a particular social group or period, unless to do so incidentally. But the psychological truth which we seek is bound up too much today with what is individual and specific to allow us with good conscience, as did our classical models before us, to remain ignorant of, or to pass over, the external realities which govern a situation. The place which I call Kratovitsy has to be more than the stylized setting for classical tragedy, and the gory episodes of civil war have to be shown as more than a vague red backdrop for a love tale; for what had happened in that place had reduced these characters to a state of permanent despair which alone explains their actions. This young man and young girl unknown to me except for a brief résumé of their story could plausibly exist for us only if set in that exact lighting, and, in so far as possible, in circumstances historically correct. Thus this subject primarily chosen for its basic conflict between individual passions and wills eventually forced me to pore over ordinance maps, to seek out details given by other eyewitnesses, and to scan old illustrated magazines in order to catch the least echo or reflection which might have reached Western Europe at the time that those obscure military operations were taking place on a for-

gotten frontier. More than once since the book appeared, men who had fought in those Baltic wars have graciously volunteered to tell me that Coup de Grâce corresponds to their own memories of those years. Naturally, no critical article, however favorable, has ever reassured me more as to the substance of one of my books.

The account is written in the first person as if narrated by the principal character, a method to which I have often resorted because it eliminates the author's point of view from the book, or at least his comments, and allows a human being to be shown looking squarely upon his own life, trying first of all to recall it entire, and more or less honestly to explain it. Let us bear in mind, however, that a long oral recital made by the central figure of a novel to willing, silent listeners is, after all, a literary device: that the hero should tell his story with such precision of detail and such discursive logic is possible, say, in *The Kreutzer Sonata* or in *The Immoralist*, but not in real life: actual confessions are apt to be more fragmentary, or more repetitive, more confused or more vague. Such reservations hold, of course, for the narration which the hero of Coup de Grâce proffers to somewhat inattentive comrades during a long wait in a railway station.

Nevertheless, this initial convention once conceded, it depends upon the author of such a récit to put into it the whole of a being, with all his qualities and defects as

revealed in his own peculiarities of expression, with his judgments sound or false, his prejudices unknown to him, his lies, which may reveal truths, and his avowals, which may lie, his reticences, and even his lapses of memory.

But this literary form, more than any other, has the inconvenience of demanding strict collaboration from the reader, obliging him to rectify, as for objects seen through water, persons and events as presented to him by the character who is speaking. In most cases, this bias of a récit in first person favors the speaker; in *Coup de Grâce*, on the contrary, the inevitable deformation which occurs when one talks of oneself works to the detriment of the narrator. A man like *Erick von Lhomond* habitually questions his own motives; his horror of duping himself inclines him, in case of doubt, to offer the least favorable interpretation of his actions; his fear of exposing his feelings locks him in harshness like a cuirass, though no man truly harsh would ever don such a protection; his very pride makes him constantly play down his self-esteem. In consequence, a naïve reader might make a sadist of *Erick*, not recognizing in him a man resolved to confront even the most atrocious of his memories; or might see him merely as a brute in military brass, precisely forgetting that no brute would ever be haunted by recollections of having caused suffering.

And such a reader would mistake for a professional anti-Semite this aristocrat whose habitual irony toward Jews is a matter of caste, but who reveals his admiration for the courage of the Jewish moneylender, and who elevates her son, Gregory Loew, to the heroic circle of friends and enemies already lost in death.

This disparity between what the narrator tells of himself, and what he truly is, or has been, is most marked, as might be expected, in the complex relations where both love and hatred are at play. If Erick seems to relegate Conrad de Reval to second place, offering only a rather vague portrait of this friend so ardently loved, it is because, first of all, he is not one to insist upon what he cares for most, and next because there is not much to say to these indifferent auditors about a comrade lost young, before reaching adulthood. Possibly, in a few of Erick's allusions to his friend, an alert listener would have caught that tone of assumed unconcern, or of barely perceptible irritation, that one feels for someone too deeply cherished. If, on the contrary, he gives first place in his narrative to Sophie, depicting her sympathetically even in her errings and her tragic excesses, it is not merely because the young girl's love flatters or reassures him; it is because his code obliges him to treat with respect that adversary that every woman becomes for a man whom she loves but who does not love her.

Other such slantings are less voluntary on Erick's part. This man ordinarily so lucid in his thinking unintentionally rationalizes the fervors and refusals which were those of early youth: perhaps he had been more in love with Sophie than he says; he was surely more jealous of her than his vanity allows him to admit. On the other hand, his repugnance and his revolt in presence of the young girl's compelling ardor are less rare than he supposes them to be, and are almost routine effects of shock from a man's first encounter with love's terrifying force.

Beyond the story of the girl who offers herself and the young man who holds himself aloof, the central subject of Coup de Grâce is the community of temperament and of destiny shared by these three beings subjected to the same privations and the same dangers. Erick and Sophie especially are alike in their intransigence, and in their passion to carry experience through to its end. Sophie's violence stems from the need to surrender herself body and soul to another, much more than from desire to be possessed by some chance lover, or to seduce him. Erick's devotion to Conrad is more than physical or even sentimental; his choice is really aligned with a certain ideal of austerity, born of chivalric dreams of comradeship, and is part of his whole view on life; even his concept of love is one aspect of his discipline.

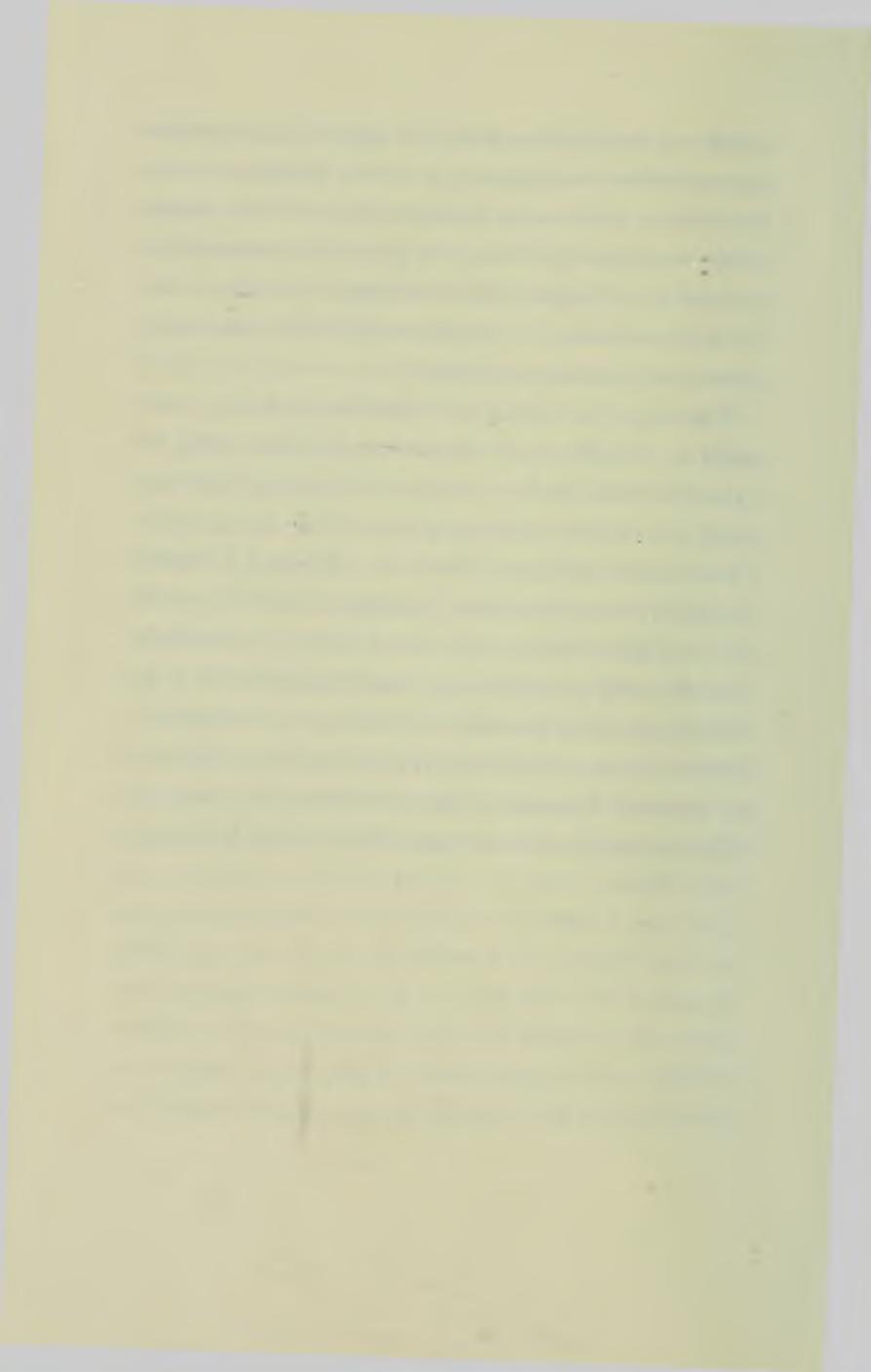
When Erick and Sophie meet again at the end of the

book, through the few words they find worth exchanging I have tried to show that particular intimacy or affinity which is stronger than either conflicts of political allegiances or physical passions, and even stronger than rancors of wounded vanity or frustrated desire. This fast bond unites them, whatever they may do, and explains the depths of their wounds. At the point where they now stand it matters little which of the two deals death to the other, or which one is the victim. It even matters little whether or not they loved or hated each other.

One reason for choosing to write *Coup de Grâce* (though I know that I inscribe myself against contemporary fashion in saying so) is the intrinsic nobility of its characters. Let us be clear, however, about the meaning of this word, which signifies for me total absence of self-interest or calculation. Of course, there is danger of equivocation in speaking of nobility in a book where the three principal characters belong to a privileged caste, of which they are the last representatives. We know only too well that the two concepts of moral nobility and aristocracy of class are not always superposed upon each other, far from it. On the other hand, we fall into current popular prejudice in denying that the notion of nobility of blood (however artificial the ideal) has sometimes helped to develop in certain natures those qualities of independence or pride, loyalty and disinterestedness

which are, by definition, noble. In any case, this inherent dignity (which contemporary literature by sheer convention seldom grants to its characters) is so little a matter of social origin that Erick, in spite of his prejudices, concedes it to Gregory Loew, but denies it to the scheming Volkmar, who is nevertheless of Erick's same background and political associations.

With regret for having to underline, in closing, what ought to be apparent, I should mention that Coup de Grâce does not aim at exalting or discrediting any one group or class, any country or party. The very fact that I have deliberately given Erick von Lhomond a French name and French ancestors (perhaps in order to credit him with that sharp lucidity which is not a particularly German trait) precludes any interpretation of him as either an idealized portrait or a caricature of one type of German officer or aristocrat. It is for value as a human, not political, document (if it has value), that Coup de Grâce has been written and accordingly should be judged.



COUP DE GRÂCE



It was five in the morning, and pouring rain; Erick von Lhomond sat waiting in the station buffet at Pisa for the train which was to take him back to Germany. He had been wounded at Saragossa, and was just off an Italian hospital ship. Though nearly forty, he seemed young, as if his kind of hard, youthful elegance would never change; the narrow profile bespoke French ancestry, but his mother was Balt and his father Prussian, hence the pale blue eyes, the tall stature, the arrogant smile and the heel-

click, the latter now in abeyance, of course, because of his fractured and bandaged foot. It was close to that hour between dark and dawn when men of feeling confide and criminals confess, and when even the least loquacious among us try to fend off sleep by story after story, or by summoning up the past.

Von Lhomond was one of those men who were too young in 1914 to have done more than brush with danger, but who were transformed into soldiers of fortune by Europe's post-war disorders, and by their personal anxieties as well, their incapacity for satisfaction or resignation, either one. Any cause half-lost, half-won attracted them. Neither by birth nor by inclination was Erick disposed to the leftist side: he had taken part in the various movements in Central Europe which culminated in the rise of Hitler, and had turned up in the Chaco and in Manchuria before serving under Franco in Spain; and much earlier he had led a corps of volunteers against the Bolsheviks in Kurland. Now his wounded foot, virtually swaddled, was resting across a chair, and as he talked he absently fingered an old-fashioned gold watch of such size and style that the wearer could only be admired for his courage in displaying the heirloom on his wrist. On his right hand he wore a massive ring,

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