

THE FINAL ACT OF ARTHUR LESTABLES

(Excerpted from the novel *Sister Liberty*)

BY

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In 1885, at the age of fifty-three, a man named Arthur Pascal Lestables drowned his neighbor, Henri Deplouc, in a pond. The pond was fed by a clear, stony brook that descended from the mountains just to the north. To the south lay a clearing, dotted with chestnut trees, vineyards, peacocks, stone houses, thatch-roofed barns, mouse-colored cattle, stacks of hay, and napping cats.

The pond was well-lit--it was midday, early May--and scaled with bright algae. Into this pond did Arthur Lestables throw Henri Deplouc, who made a large splash followed by numerous bubbles followed by silence interrupted by the occasional *tweetle tweet* of a nearby family of swallows.

Arthur remained at the edge of the pond until Deplouc and his water-ballooned tunic sank below the surface. Then he rolled a cigarette and walked to the nearby village of Sanvisa, where he turned himself in to the constable.

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Days later, after a brief trial, the honorable magistrate Eugène Fermenté sentenced Arthur to hang to death, as was the accepted fashion of dispatching murderers in the village of Sanvisa, where they'd never managed to raise the funds to buy a guillotine.

Arthur Lestables' final act arrived on the drizzling afternoon of May 14th, 1885 while standing atop the shoulders of Junior Deplouc, the aggrieved son of the deceased Henri Deplouc Senior.

Arthur Lestables was standing on the shoulders of Junior Deplouc because, in an attempt to forestall her husband's death, Arthur's wife, Annie Lestables, had burned down the village gallows the week before. The act had earned her a two-month sentence in the Sanvisa jail, the first week of which she'd served in the same cell as her husband, Arthur.

That week had been bittersweet, made less sweet by the fact that the doomed couple shared the jail's cell with a constant parade of town tipplers, gamblers, and depressed symbolist poets.

In the rare moments when one of their cellmates was not weeping, vomiting, reciting, or otherwise rendering it impossible to converse, the couple collaborated to compose the Final Statement of Arthur Lestables. Speaking in his clusterbomb of a voice, Arthur would pace the cell's hardpacked floor while Annie tidied his grammar and rendered sensible the overall rhetorical shape of what would be his last words. These were the happiest moments of a marriage that had endured twelve years of famine and fatigue, had produced one child, and which was very nearly at its end.

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Shortly before noon on that mid-May day, a husky bailiff swung open the cell door. With breath that suggested a fondness for apple wine, and in a voice that teetered between apology and bravado, he said, "Monsieur Lestables, it's time."

"Let us not dally," said Arthur, unaccountably cheerful. He smiled toward Annie. "How do I look?"

How did he look? He was a mess, as always.

With maternal focus, she licked her fingers and flattened a cowlick that rose out of Arthur's scalp like the tail of an agitated squirrel. Hands on his shoulders, she held him at arm's length and tilted her head.

"Better?" said Arthur.

Annie reconsidered, reached forth, and returned his hair into its earlier state, a state that befitted this man who had always looked as if he'd just awoken from a nap in the wilderness.

"There," she said, finally. "You are as you should be, as you always have been."

Annie kissed her husband on the mouth and reached for her hat, which hung from a wooden post on the wall.

The bailiff said, "You'll stay here, Madame. Per local statues, 'Anyone who attempts or succeeds at the desecration of the village gallows shall be forever banned from attending public executions.'"

"Yes, but—"

"It's okay darling," said Arthur.

In a low voice, the bailiff said, "Madame, Monsieur, between you and me, nobody's gonna miss Monsieur Deplouc. But this man"--meaning Arthur--"committed a crime, and justice must prevail."

After the bailiff led Arthur away, Annie retreated to the wooden stool in the corner of the cell. There she remained, idly caressing the thin strands of Arthur's hair that had become stuck to her fingers.

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The entire county had gathered in a muddy field, facing the charred remains of the gallows. These gallows, built of unnecessarily massive timbers, had been the tallest structure in the village, a designation that, thanks to Annie's arson, had now reverted to the steeple that poked out of the village church.

Directly behind the remains of the gallows loomed a chestnut tree with a symmetrical, bell-shaped canopy whose height far exceeded that of any man-made structure within two hundred miles. The tree was sufficiently ancient to have been used many hundreds of years prior as a meeting place for sexually curious Roman adolescents.

Just beyond the tree lay the entrance to the village cemetery, seven hectares decorated with tombstones, crypts, wooden crosses, and one freshly dug grave.

Dangling from a branch that extended horizontally from the great tree's trunk was a hemp rope that ended in a noose, or, as the locals called it, *la cravate infidèle*. Below the noose was a stepladder. The bailiff led Arthur to the foot of this ladder.

Here, the widow of Henri Deplouc stepped from the crowd. A tall woman with poor posture, Euphémie Deplouc declared, "I wish to exercise my right to bind the wrists of the man who drowned my husband."

She uncoiled a length of string and began wrapping it around Arthur's wrists behind his back. Arthur could not see her, but he knew that three of Euphémie's fingers were askew, having been snapped by her dead husband only hours before Arthur had chucked him into the pond. Euphémie grunted as she knotted the string with her broken fingers. Arthur winced sympathetically.

Done, the widow whispered sotto, "There is a place for you, Arthur, always." She retreated into the crowd.

The bailiff nodded to Arthur, who expertly ascended the ladder and balanced himself neatly upon the uppermost rung. He leaned forward, dipped his head, and slipped it into the dangling noose. Rain dripped from the chestnut's leaves, droplets spiraled their way down the length of the rope and darkened Arthur's tunic.

Another figure emerged from the crowd, Junior Deplouc, the adolescent son of the deceased. Junior stood straight upon the muddy ground directly before the stepladder, his back to Arthur.

Arthur carefully stepped off the ladder and onto the wet shoulders of this young man who had accepted his hereditary right to fulfill the role traditionally reserved for a horse, as was the regional custom when a proper gallows was not available.

Thus did the attending audience witness the scrawny shit Junior Deplouc quivering under the hulking weight of Arthur Lestables. Arthur was doing a remarkable job of maintaining his balance considering his hands were tied behind his back and a noose was dangling around his neck.

The town vicar, clad in a woolen robe and, in spite of the gloomy weather, sweating like a glass of lemonade, dragged the stepladder thru the mud so it now faced the uncertain totem formed by Junior and Arthur.

The vicar climbed the ladder, leaned forward, and offered Arthur the customary final cigarette, which he accepted by eager lips. Before the vicar could ignite the cigarette, a drop of rain slid from the tip of Arthur's nose and landed upon the rolling paper. The water soaked thru and the cigarette broke in half, spilling tobacco upon Arthur's beard.

The vicar withdrew his hands into his robe and skillfully rolled another cigarette. Upon producing it, he covered it with one hand so as to keep it dry and held it out to Arthur's side-

turned mouth. Here, the vicar ran out of hands. For, even with the cigarette secured in Arthur's mouth, the vicar still needed one hand to block the rain from the cigarette, one hand to hold the matchbox, and yet another hand to strike the match. Meanwhile, Junior Deplouc's bare feet were beginning to sink into the mud.

Sensing the nature of the situation, the honorable magistrate Eugène Fermenté hustled forward, climbed the now precarious ladder to stand just below the vicar, and withdrew a match from his own robe.

In this intimate formation, the vicar's left hand shielded Arthur's cigarette and his right hand shielded the honorable magistrate Fermenté's match. After several attempts, the magistrate successfully ignited a flame and held it to the tip of the cigarette. Arthur took one deep drag and then spat the cigarette toward the earth, shouting, "I beseech you and your murderous sticks of fire!"

The spitting of the cigarette had been pre-planned, a part of the performance as rehearsed in the jail with Annie. The performance, even in spite of the rain, was going swimmingly. It would have continued to go swimmingly had a gust of wind not redirected the falling cigarette's trajectory in such a way that it curved back toward the young man upon whose straining shoulders Arthur was perched.

Junior shifted his hips in an attempt to dodge the incoming cigarette, which dropped neatly thru the collar of his shirt where it came to a smoldering rest in his navel. He performed several quick hops while batting at his belly. For a moment, and only a moment, Arthur rode the bouncing shoulders of the hot-bellied youth. The honorable magistrate dove off the wobbling ladder to land in the mud. This caused the ladder to tip over, sending the vicar mudbound as well.

Junior, in a voice that was at once aggrieved and agonized, shouted, “Accursed fuckmeister!” and lurched out from under the boots of the man whose life he had been temporarily preserving.

As the vicar and the honorable magistrate pressed themselves upward, Junior hastened to pluck the cigarette from his smoldering belly button, and Arthur commenced to strangling.

He would have died there and then but for the broken fingers of Henri Deplouc’s widow, Euphémie. Again, it was Henri who had crushed those fingers. Immediately before Arthur had pushed him into the pond, Henri had claimed the injuries had occurred while he was demonstrating to Euphémie how to churn butter. The truth was rather more awful than that.

Due in some part to her injuries, Euphémie had been unable to cinch the string securely. And so, as Arthur dangled on the noose, legs flailing, he was able to liberate his hands from their bondage and, using his legendary upper body strength, reach to the rope above his head and haul himself upward until the noose slacked against his neck. Here, with a face as red as a pustule, Arthur gasped several times and twisted hypnotic circles on the wet, creaking rope.

The townsfolk accepted his stare in mute idiocy, vaguely aware of the injustice that was playing out before their rheumy eyes. Everyone knew Henri Deplouc had been a lousy *salaud*, but, unlike Arthur Lestables, they’d been entirely uninspired to do a goddamned thing about it.

Junior, with his shirt rolled up over his scrawny, smoldering gut, held the remains of Arthur's discarded cigarette between two fingers, watching the man swing. The honorable and muddy magistrate Eugène Fermenté, who had endured quite enough of this horseplay, said to Junior, “Get your shoulders back underneath that son of an ox or I’ll see that you hang with him.” He added, in a slightly less contemptuous tone, “Boy, if this execution is not conducted

with the grace it deserves, these people"--he gestured to the assembled crowd--"will be mightily dissatisfied."

As Junior took a reluctant step toward the dangling feet, Arthur said, hoarsely, "This guppy will not serve as my final toehold on this world." He kicked Junior in the ear, sending the youth to splat upon the mud and sending Arthur spinning round and round.

Compelled now to prove his manhood, as was the custom in those parts after one had been publicly humiliated, Junior pushed himself upright, shook the water out of his lengthy hair, and took a swing at one of Arthur's spinning ankles. He missed. But trying is half the battle, and having won that half, Junior retreated safely out of kicking range, where he raised his chin and feigned dignity.

The townsfolk began to mutter amongst themselves. "'Tis most unconventional, this hanging," or, "I had thought it would be over by now," or, "You wouldn't have a spare umbrella, perchance?" That sort of thing.

Here, Arthur began to hand-over-hand his way up the rope until he was grasping a branch that grew out of the great limb above. He dangled this way for several moments, the branch bending perilously. His eyes darted here and there as he considered his future.

The honorable magistrate Eugène Fermenté reached into his muddied robe and withdrew a revolver. He aimed it at the condemned man's torso.

Arthur's meticulous plan had been going haywire ever since the cigarette had blown down Junior's shirt. Nevertheless, he remained alive, and, with the noose slackened, he had a voice.

Dangling from the limb of the old chestnut tree, he looked into the face of every person in attendance, twisting himself left and right so he could achieve a panoramic view. None held his

gaze except the honorable magistrate Eugène Fermenté, who pulled back the hammer on his revolver and, in a deliberate voice, offered forth, “This execution shall conclude with no further nincompoopery. Arthur Lestables, for the drowning murder of Henri Deplouc Senior, and, furthermore, for being a troublesome pain in the groin at this very moment, you shall die by whatever goddamned means is most convenient to me. But first, as a man of honor, I recognize your right to a final proclamation. I suggest you curtail your proclivity for longwindedness. The annual Festival of Strawberries shall commence in one hour and ain’t nobody here wants to miss the crowning of this year’s Strawberry Queen.” He gestured to the onlookers. “These folks came here to see a man die, not to see him climbing ropes like some sort of a nitwit.”

The townsfolk murmured their approval. Indeed, the opening ceremony of the Strawberry Festival was not a thing to be missed.

Arthur, whose face was returning to its normal shade of sun-battered beige, declared, wheezily, “Fellow townsfolk, remember and reflect upon these words, though they represent a truth beyond the capacity of your tiny minds.”

The magistrate said, “Say the damned words, Arthur.”

Arthur nodded gravely. “I am prepared to die in the name of human goodness. Do any of you understand human goodness?”

Here, the magistrate said, “I’ll have no rhetorical questions out of you, Lestables.”

Arthur continued. “Human goodness is a concept for which I, today, will die gladly. I, Arthur Pascal Lestables, represent only the tip of the eagle’s beak in the army of positive progression. The wisdom engendered by scientific progress will bring a day, not distant, but soon, whenupon your faulty morals and misguided religions will be replaced by decency and well-measured wisdom. As my mentor, Monsieur Isidore Marie Auguste François Xavier Comte,

was wont to say, ‘*Science, d’où prévoyance; prévoyance, d’où action.*’ As *I* say, you can stop me, but you cannot erase me. Nor can you hinder the inevitable mechanisms that will render your laws and superstitions into relics of a shameful and savage past.”

The audience was making no sense of this.

“Penultimately, to my loving wife, who cannot hear me because she languishes in a cell, I say, love is the principle, order is the foundation, and progress is the goal. Ever onward!”

The magistrate removed a fob watch from his pocket. “Wrap it up.”

With his neck tendons taught as cello strings, Arthur Lestables bellowed, “Friends, we all know Henri Deplouc was a reprehensible creature. Cruel to his wife, a devil to his livestock, and a stain upon the very concept of table manners. We all know this, and yet only I, Arthur Lestables, was willing to intervene. But remember this, honorable townsfolk, ‘twas not *I* that killed the deceased. ‘Twas *his* inability to swim.”

This elicited much laughter.

Satisfied that he’d landed his punch line, Arthur Lestables released his hands from the branch, allowing his body to drop. His fall was arrested by the noose, which snapped his neck and clamped his jaw shut against his tongue, the tip of which landed with a moist *thwap* upon the muddy ground at the feet of Junior Deplouc.

Arthur Pascal Lestables swung for several minutes, chest pumping, arms twitching, legs dancing a frantic jig accompanied stage left by the customary accordionist, who had worn a black suit for the occasion. This continued in a diminishing fashion for a full quarter of an hour, until Arthur arched backward grotesquely so his heels touched the back of his head. After a moment, the muscles released and he hung limp, urine mingling with the rain that ran from his

pantlegs. By this point, the townsfolk had grown weary, and, led by the sweating, soiled vicar, had begun the uphill trek to the village square for the coronation of the Strawberry Queen.

The magistrate and Junior Deplouc were the second- and third-to-last people to see Arthur Lestables' body.

Junior wiped his hands on the front of his trousers and said, "I'd say his murderous days are concluded."

The magistrate put his arm on Junior's shoulder. "Son, if justice weren't blind when you woke up, it surely is now, for that was a damned ugly spectacle." He slid his pistol back into his robe. "Come along. I must attend to the judging of preserves."

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The very last person to see Arthur Lestables was his eleven-year-old son, Auguste, who earlier that year had taken employment as the village gravedigger.

And so it was that young Auguste Lestables had the privilege of cutting down his father, dragging his corpse a hundred yards thru the cemetery to the Lestables family plot, and rolling him into the muddy hole he'd dug that morning for that very purpose.

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It had been a miserable, sweltering shitty rainy day, and so it would remain.