

By the same author:

*The Voyeur*

*Jealousy*



IN THE LABYRINTH



A NOVEL BY ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET



TRANSLATED BY RICHARD HOWARD



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*This narrative is not a true account, but fiction. It describes a reality not necessarily the same as the one the reader has experienced: for example, in the French army, infantrymen do not wear their serial numbers on their coat collars. Similarly, the recent history of Western Europe has not recorded an important battle at Reichenfels or in the vicinity. Yet the reality in question is a strictly material one; that is, it is subject to no allegorical interpretation. The reader is therefore requested to see in it only the objects, actions, words, and events which are described, without attempting to give them either more or less meaning than in his own life, or his own death.*

A. R.-G.

I am alone here now, under cover. Outside it is raining, outside you walk through the rain with your head down, shielding your eyes with one hand while you stare ahead nevertheless, a few yards ahead, at a few yards of wet asphalt; outside it is cold, the wind blows between the bare black branches; the wind blows through the leaves, rocking whole boughs, rocking them, rocking, their shadows swaying across the white roughcast walls. Outside the sun is shining, there is no tree, no bush to cast a shadow, and you walk under the sun shielding your eyes with one hand while you stare ahead, only a few yards in front of you, at a few yards of dusty asphalt where the wind makes patterns of parallel lines, forks, and spirals.

The sun does not get in here, nor the wind,



nor the rain, nor the dust. The fine dust which dulls the gloss of the horizontal surfaces, the varnished wood of the table, the waxed floor, the marble shelf over the fireplace, the marble top of the chest, the cracked marble on top of the chest, the only dust comes from the room itself: from the cracks in the floor maybe, or else from the bed, or from the curtains or from the ashes in the fireplace.

On the polished wood of the table, the dust has marked the places occupied for a while—for a few hours, several days, minutes, weeks—by small objects subsequently removed whose outlines are still distinct for some time, a circle, a square, a rectangle, other less simple shapes, some partly overlapping, already blurred or half obliterated as though by a rag.

When the outline is distinct enough to permit the shape to be identified with certainty, it is easy to find the original object again, not far away. For example, the circular shape has obviously been left by a glass ashtray which is lying beside it. Similarly, a little farther away, the square occupying the table's left rear corner corresponds to the base of the brass lamp that now stands in the right corner: a square pedestal about one inch high capped by a disk of the same height supporting a fluted column at its center.

The lampshade casts a circle of light on the

ceiling, but this circle is not complete: it is intersected by the wall behind the table. This wall, instead of being papered like the other three, is concealed from floor to ceiling and for the greater part of its width by thick red curtains made of a heavy velvety material.

Outside it is snowing. Across the dark asphalt of the sidewalk the wind is driving the fine dry crystals which after each gust form white parallel lines, forks, spirals that are immediately broken up, seized by the eddies driven along the ground, then immobilized again, recomposing new spirals, scrolls, forked undulations, shifting arabesques immediately broken up. You walk with your head a little farther down, pressing the hand shielding your eyes closer, leaving only a few inches of ground visible in front of your feet, a few grayish inches where your feet appear one after the other and vanish behind you, one after the other, alternately.

But the staccato sound of hobnail boots on the asphalt, coming steadily closer down the straight street, sounding louder and louder in the calm of the frostbound night, the sound of boots cannot come in here, any more than other sounds from outside. The street is too long, the curtains too thick, the house too high. No noise, even muffled, ever penetrates the walls of the room, no vibration, no breath of air, and in the silence tiny



particles descend slowly, scarcely visible in the lamplight, descend gently, vertically, always at the same speed, and the fine gray dust lies in a uniform layer on the floor, on the bedspread, on the furniture.

On the waxed floor, the felt slippers have made gleaming paths from the bed to the chest, from the chest to the fireplace, from the fireplace to the table. And on the table, the shifting of objects has also disturbed the continuity of the film of dust; the latter, more or less thick according to the length of time the surfaces have been exposed, is even occasionally interrupted altogether: as distinct as though drawn with a drafting-pen, a square of varnished wood thus occupies the left rear corner, not precisely at the corner of the table but parallel to its edges, set back about four inches. The square itself is about six inches on each side, and in it the reddish-brown wood gleams, virtually without any deposit.

To the right, a simple shape that is vaguer, already covered by several days' dust, can nevertheless still be recognized; from a certain angle it is even distinct enough so that its outlines can be followed without too much uncertainty. It is a kind of cross: an elongated main section about the size of a table knife but wider, pointed at one end and broadening slightly at the other,

cut perpendicularly by a much shorter cross-piece; this latter is composed of two flaring appendages symmetrically arranged on each side of the axis at the base of its broadening portion—that is, about a third of the way from the wider end. It resembles a flower, the terminal widening representing a long closed corolla at the end of the stem with two small lateral leaves beneath. Or else it might be an approximately human statuette: an oval head, two very short arms, and the body terminating in a point toward the bottom. It might also be a dagger, with its handle separated by a guard from the wide, rounded, double-edged blade.

Still farther to the right, in the direction indicated by the tip of the flower, or by the point of the dagger, a slightly dusty circle is tangent to a second circle the same size, the latter not reduced to its mere outline on the table: the glass ashtray. Then come uncertain, overlapping shapes probably left by various papers whose successive changes of position have blurred their outlines, which in some places are quite distinct, in others obscured by dust, and in still others more than half obliterated, as though by a rag.

Beyond stands the lamp, in the right corner of the table: a square base six inches on each side, a disk tangent with its sides, of the same



diameter, a fluted column supporting a dark, slightly conical lampshade. A fly is moving slowly and steadily around the upper rim of the shade. It casts a distorted shadow on the ceiling in which no element of the original insect can be recognized: neither wings nor body nor feet; the creature has been transformed into a simple threadlike outline, not closed, a broken regular line resembling a hexagon with one side missing: the image of the incandescent filament of the electric bulb. This tiny open polygon lies tangent at one of its corners to the inner rim of the great circle of light cast by the lamp. It changes position slowly but steadily along the circumference. When it reaches the vertical wall it disappears into the folds of the heavy red curtain.

Outside it is snowing. Outside it has been snowing, it was snowing, outside it is snowing. The thick flakes descend gently in a steady, uninterrupted, vertical fall—for there is not a breath of air—in front of the high gray walls whose arrangement, the alignment of the roofs, the location of the doors and windows, cannot be distinguished clearly because of the snow. There must be identical rows of regular windows on each floor from one end of the straight street to the other.

A perpendicular crossroad reveals a second street just like the first: the same absence of traf-

fic, the same high gray walls, the same blind windows, the same deserted sidewalks. At the corner of the sidewalk, a street light is on, although it is broad daylight. But it is a dull day which makes everything colorless and flat. Instead of the striking vistas these rows of houses should produce, there is only a crisscrossing of meaningless lines, the falling snow depriving the scene of all relief, as if this blurred view were merely badly painted on a bare wall.

Where the wall and ceiling meet, the fly's shadow, the enlarged image of the filament of the electric bulb, reappears and continues its circuit around the rim of the white circle cast by the lamp. Its speed is always the same: slow and steady. In the dark area to the left a dot of light appears, corresponding to a small, round hole in the dark parchment of the lampshade; it is not actually a dot, but a thin broken line, a regular hexagon with one side missing: another enlarged image, this one stationary, of the same luminous source, the same incandescent thread.

It is the same filament again, that of a similar or slightly larger lamp, which glows so uselessly at the crossroads, enclosed in its glass cage on top of a cast-iron pedestal, a gas light with old-fashioned ornaments that has been converted into an electric street light.

Around the conical base of the cast-iron ped-



estal that widens toward the bottom and is ringed by several more or less prominent moldings, are embossed the slender stems of a stylized spray of ivy: curling tendrils; pointed, five-lobed, palmate leaves, their five veins very prominent where the scaling black paint reveals the rusted metal. Slightly higher a hip, an arm, a shoulder are leaning against the shaft of the lamppost. The man is wearing a faded military overcoat of no particular color, perhaps once green or khaki. His face is grayish; his features are drawn and give the impression of extreme fatigue, but perhaps a beard more than a day old is largely responsible for this impression. Prolonged waiting, prolonged immobility in the cold may also have drained the color from his cheeks, forehead, and lips.

The eyelids are gray, like the rest of the face; they are lowered. The head is bowed. The eyes are looking at the ground, that is, at the edge of the snow-covered sidewalk in front of the base of the street light and the two heavy marching boots with rounded toes whose coarse leather shows scratches and other signs of wear and tear, more or less covered by the black polish. The layer of snow is not thick enough to yield visibly underfoot, so that the soles of the boots are resting—or virtually resting—on the level of the white snow extending around them. At the edge of the

sidewalk, this surface is completely unmarked, not shining but smooth, even, delicately stippled with its original granulation. A little snow has accumulated on the upper edge of the last projecting ring that encircles the widening base of the lamppost, forming a white circle above the black circle by which the latter rests on the ground. Higher up, some flakes have also stuck to other asperities of the cone, accenting the successive rings and the upper edges of the ivy leaves with a white line, as well as all the fragments of stems and veins that are horizontal or only slightly inclined.

But the bottom of the overcoat has swept away several of these tiny agglomerations, just as the boots, changing position several times, have trampled the snow in their immediate vicinity, leaving in places yellower areas, hardened, half-raised pieces and the deep marks of hobnails arranged in alternate rows. In front of the chest, the felt slippers have cleared a large gleaming area in the dust, and another one in front of the table at the place that must be occupied by a desk chair or an armchair, a stool or some kind of seat. A narrow path of gleaming floor has been made from one to the other; a second path goes from the table to the bed. Parallel to the housefronts, a little closer to the walls than to the gutter, a yellowish-gray straight path also indicates



the snow-covered sidewalk. Produced by the footsteps of people now gone, the path passes between the lighted street light and the door of the last apartment house, then turns at right angles and disappears in the perpendicular cross street, still following the line of the housefronts about a third of the way across the sidewalk, from one end of its length to the other.

Another path then leads from the bed to the chest. From here, the narrow strip of gleaming floor which leads from the chest to the table, joining the two large areas cleared of dust, swerves slightly in order to pass closer to the fireplace whose grate contains a heap of ashes, without andirons. The black marble of the mantelpiece, like everything else, is covered with gray dust. But the layer is not so thick as on the table or on the floor, and it is uniform on the entire surface of the shelf; now no object encumbers the shelf, and only one has left its outlines, clear and black, in the exact center of the rectangle. This is the same four-branched cross: one branch elongated and pointed, one shorter and oval, the continuation of the first, and two small flaring appendages set perpendicularly on each side.

A similar design also embellishes the wallpaper. The wallpaper is pale gray with slightly darker vertical stripes; between the dark stripes, in the middle of each lighter stripe, runs a line

of small dark-gray identical designs: a rosette, some kind of clove, or a tiny torch whose handle consists of what was just now the blade of a dagger, the dagger handle now representing the flame, and the two lateral flaring appendages which were the dagger's guard now representing the little cup which keeps the burning substance from running down the handle.

But it might be a kind of electric torch instead, for the tip of what is supposed to produce the light is clearly rounded like an oblong bulb instead of being pointed like a flame. The design, reproduced thousands of times up and down the walls all around the room, is a simple silhouette about the size of a large insect, of a uniform color so that it is difficult to make it out: it reveals no greater relief than the incandescent filament which must be inside the bulb. Besides, the bulb is hidden by the lampshade. Only the image of the filament is visible on the ceiling: a small, open hexagon appearing as a luminous line against the dim background, and farther to the right an identical small hexagon, but in motion, silhouetted against the circle of light cast by the lamp, advancing slowly, steadily, along the inner rim until it reaches the vertical wall and disappears.

The soldier is carrying a package under his left arm. His right arm, from shoulder to elbow,



is leaning against the lamppost. His head is turned toward the street, showing his growth of beard and the serial number on the collar of his overcoat, five or six black figures in a red diamond. Behind him the double door of the corner apartment house is not completely closed—not ajar either, but one leaf simply pushed against the fixed one, which is narrower, leaving perhaps an inch or two of space between them, a vertical stripe of darkness. To the right is the row of ground floor windows interrupted only by the doors of the buildings, identical windows and identical doors, the latter similar to the windows in shape and size. There is not a single shop in sight from one end of the street to the other.

To the left of the door that is not closed tight, there are only two windows, then the corner of the building, then, at right angles, another row of identical windows and doors which look like the reflection of the first, as if a mirror had been set there, making an obtuse angle (a right angle increased by half a right angle) with the plane of the housefronts; and the same series is repeated: two windows, a door, four windows, a door, etc. . . . The first door is ajar on a dark hallway, leaving between its two unequal leaves a dark interval wide enough for a man, or at least a child, to slip through.

In front of the door, at the edge of the side-

walk, a street light is on, although it is still daylight. But the dim and diffuse light of this snowy landscape makes the light from the electric bulb apparent at first glance: somewhat brighter, a little yellower, a little more localized. Against the base of the street light a bareheaded soldier is leaning, his head lowered, his hands hidden in his overcoat pockets. Under his right arm is a package wrapped in brown paper that looks something like a shoe box, with a white string doubtless tied in a cross; but only that part of this string around the length of the box is visible, the other part, if it exists, being hidden by the overcoat sleeve. On this sleeve at elbow level are several dark stains that may be the remains of fresh mud, or paint, or grease.

The box wrapped in brown paper is now on the chest. It no longer has its white string, and the wrapping paper, carefully folded back along the shorter side of the parallelepiped, gapes a little in a sharp fold narrowing toward the bottom. At this point the marble top of the chest shows a long, almost straight crack passing diagonally under the corner of the box and reaching the wall toward the middle of the chest. Just over it is hung the picture.

The picture framed in varnished wood, the striped wallpaper, the fireplace with its heap of ashes, the table with its lamp and its glass ash-



tray, the heavy red curtains, the large day bed covered with the same red velvety material, and finally the chest with its three drawers and its cracked marble top, the brown package on top of it, and above that the picture, and the vertical lines of little gray insects rising to the ceiling.

Outside, the sky remains the same dull white. It is still daylight. The street is empty: there is no traffic, and there are no pedestrians on the sidewalks. It has been snowing; and the snow has not yet melted. It forms a rather thin layer—an inch or so—which is quite regular, however, and covers all the horizontal surfaces with the same dull, neutral whitish color. The only interruptions visible are the straight paths parallel to the housefronts and the gutters (made even more distinct by their vertical curbs which have remained black) separating the sidewalks into two unequal strips for their entire length. At the crossroads, at the base of the street light, a small circle of trampled snow has the same yellowish color as the narrow paths that run alongside the buildings. The doors are closed. The windows show no figure either pressed against the panes or even looming farther back in the rooms. The flatness of this entire setting, moreover, suggests that there is nothing behind these panes, behind

these doors, behind these housefronts. And the entire scene remains empty: without a man, a woman, or even a child.

The picture, in its varnished wood frame, represents a tavern scene. It is a nineteenth-century etching, or a good reproduction of one. A large number of people fill the room, a crowd of drinkers sitting or standing, and, on the far left, the bartender standing on a slightly raised platform behind his bar.

The bartender is a fat, bald man wearing an apron. He leans forward, both hands resting on the edge of the bar, over several half-full glasses that have been set there, his massive shoulders turned toward a small group of middle-class citizens in frock coats who appear to be engaged in an animated discussion; standing in various attitudes, many are making expansive gestures that sometimes involve the whole body, and are doubtless quite expressive.

To their right, that is, in the center of the scene, several groups of drinkers are sitting at tables that are irregularly arranged—or rather, crammed—in a space too small to hold them all comfortably. These men are also making ex-



travagant gestures and their faces are violently contorted, but their movements, like their expressions, are frozen by the drawing, suspended, stopped short, which also makes their meaning uncertain; particularly since the words being shouted on all sides seem to have been absorbed by a thick layer of glass. Some of them, carried away by their excitement, have half risen from their chairs or their benches and are pointing over the heads of the others toward a more distant interlocutor. Everywhere hands rise, mouths open, heads turn; fists are clenched, pounded on tables, or brandished in mid-air.

At the far right a group of men, almost all workers judging from their clothes, like those sitting at the tables, have their backs to the latter and are crowding around some poster or picture tacked on the wall. A little in front of them, between their backs and the first row of drinkers facing in the other direction, a boy is sitting on the floor among all these legs with their shapeless trousers, all these clumsy boots stamping about and trying to move toward his left; on the other side he is partially protected by the bench. The child is shown facing straight ahead. He is sitting with his legs folded under him, his arms clasped around a large box something like a shoe box. No one is paying any attention to him. Perhaps he was knocked down in the confusion. As

a matter of fact, in the foreground, not far from where he is sitting, a chair has been overturned and is still lying on the floor.

Somewhat apart, as though separated from the crowd surrounding them by an unoccupied zone—narrow, of course, but nevertheless wide enough for their isolation to be noticeable, in any case wide enough to call attention to them though they are in the background—three soldiers are sitting around a smaller table, the second from the rear on the right, their motionlessness and rigidity in marked contrast to the civilians who fill the room. The soldiers are looking straight ahead, their hands resting on the checkered oilcloth; there are no glasses in front of them. They are the only men whose heads are not bare, for they are wearing low-peaked fatigue caps. Behind them, at the extreme rear, the last seated drinkers are mingled with others who are standing, forming a confused mass; besides, the drawing here is vaguer too. Under the print, in the white margin, someone has written a title: "The Defeat of Reichenfels."

On closer examination, the isolation of the three soldiers seems to result less from the narrow space between them and the crowd than from the direction of the glances around them. All the figures in the background look as if they are passing—or trying to pass, for the space is



cramped—behind the soldiers to reach the left side of the picture, where there is probably a door (though this hypothetical exit cannot be seen in the picture because of a row of coat racks covered with hats and coats); every head is looking straight ahead (that is, toward the coat racks), except for one here and there who turns to speak to someone who has remained in the rear. Everyone in the crowd gathered on the right is looking toward the right wall. The drinkers at the tables are represented in natural poses, turning toward the center of each group or else toward one neighbor or another. As for the middle-class citizens in front of the bar, they too are completely absorbed in their own conversation, and the bartender leans toward them without paying any attention to the rest of his customers. Among the various groups circulate a number of persons not yet settled, but obviously about to adopt one of several probable attitudes: either walking over to examine the bulletin board, sitting down at one of the tables, or else going out behind the coat racks; a moment's scrutiny is enough to reveal that each man has already determined what he is going to do next; here, as among the groups, no face, no movement betrays hesitation, perplexity, inner vacillation, or contradiction. The three soldiers, on the contrary, seem forsaken. They are

not talking to each other; they are not looking at anything in particular: neither glasses, nor bulletins, nor their neighbors. They have nothing to do. No one looks at them and they themselves have nothing to look at. The position of their faces—one full face, the other in profile, the last in a three-quarters view—indicates no common subject of attention. Besides, the first man—the only one whose features are completely visible—betrays no expression whatever, merely a fixed, vacant stare.

The contrast between the three soldiers and the crowd is further accentuated by a precision of line, a clarity in rendering, much more evident in their case than in that of other individuals the same distance from the viewer. The artist has shown them with as much concern for detail and almost as much sharpness of outline as if they were sitting in the foreground. But the composition is so involved that this is not apparent at first glance. Particularly the soldier shown full face has been portrayed with a wealth of detail that seems quite out of proportion to the indifference it expresses. No specific thought can be discerned. It is merely a tired face, rather thin, and narrowed still further by several days' growth of beard. This thinness, these shadows that accentuate the features without, on the other hand, indicating the slightest individual