

The Substitute

Francois Coppee

Table of Contents

<u>The Substitute</u>	1
<u>Francois Coppee</u>	2

The Substitute

Francois Coppee

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

HE was scarcely ten years old when he was arrested for the first time for vagabondage.

This is what he said to the judges:—

"My name is Jean François Leturc, and for the last six months I've been with the man who sings between two lanterns on the Place de la Bastille, scraping on a bit of catgut. I say the chorus with him, and then I cry out, 'Ask for the new song book, ten centimes, two sous!' He was always drunk, and he beat me. That's how the police found me the other night, in these ruined houses. Before that, I used to be with the man who sells brushes. My mother was a washerwoman; her name is Adèle. A gentleman had set her up on a ground floor, at Montmartre, long ago. She was a good worker and very fond of me. She made money because she had the custom of the café waiters, and they need lots of linen. Sundays, she put me to bed early to go to the ball; but week days, she sent me to the Brothers' school, where I learned to read. Well, at last the policeman whose beat was up our street used to stop before her window to talk to her,—a big man, with the Crimean medal. They got married, and all went wrong. He took a dislike to me, and set mamma against me. Everybody had a slap for me; and it was then that to get away I spent my days on the Place Clichy, where I got acquainted with the mountebanks. My stepfather lost his job, mamma lost her customers, so she went to the washhouse to support her husband. It was there she got consumption, from the dampness. She died at Lariboisière. She was a good woman. Since then I've lived with the brush seller and the catgut scraper. Am I going to be put in prison?"

He talked this way openly, cynically, like a man. He was a ragged little rascal, as tall as a top-boot, with his forehead hidden under a strange yellow mop of hair.

Nobody claiming him, they sent him to the reform school.

Not intelligent, lazy, especially clumsy with his hands, he could learn there only a poor trade,—to reseat straw chairs. Yet he was obedient, naturally quiet and taciturn; and he did not seem to be too profoundly corrupted by that school of vice. But when he was seventeen, and set free in the streets of Paris, he found there, for his misfortune, his prison comrades, wretched creatures, plying the lowest callings. Some were trainers of dogs for rat-catching in the sewers; some shined shoes in the Passage de l'Opéra, on the nights when there were balls; some were amateur wrestlers, letting themselves be thrown by the Hercules of the side shows; some used to fish from rafts out in the river. He tried one of these things and another; and a few months after he had left the house of correction, he was arrested again for a petty theft,—a pair of old shoes picked from out an open show window. Result: a year of imprisonment at Sainte-Pélagie, where he served as valet to the political prisoners.

He lived, astonished, among this group of prisoners, all very young and carelessly dressed, who talked loudly and carried themselves in such a solemn way. They used to meet in the cell of the eldest of them, a fellow of thirty locked up for a long time already and as though settled at Sainte-Pélagie,—a big cell, papered with colored caricatures, out of whose windows could be seen the whole of Paris, its roofs, its steeples, its domes, and far off, the distant line of the hills, blue and vague against the sky. On the walls there were a few shelves filled with books and all the old apparatus of a fencing school,—broken masks, rusty foils, leather jackets and gloves with the stuffing half out. It was there that the political prisoners had dinner together, adding to the inevitable soup and beef, fruit, cheese, and quarts of wine that Jean François was sent to buy at the canteen,—tumultuous repasts, interrupted by violent disputes, and with songs sung in chorus at the dessert, the "Carmagnole" and "Ça ira." But they took on an air of dignity the days when they made room for a newcomer, who was at first solemnly greeted as "citizen," but who was the next day called by his nickname. They made use of big words, Corporation, Solidarity, and phrases quite unintelligible to Jean François, such as this for example, that he once heard uttered imperiously by a hideous little hunchback who spent his nights scribbling:—

"Then it's settled. The cabinet is to be composed of Raymond in the Department of Education, Martial in the Interior, and I in Foreign Affairs."

The Substitute

When his time was up, he wandered again about Paris, with the eye of the police on him, much like the cockchafers that cruel children keep flying tied to a string. He had become one of those fugitive and timid beings whom the law, with a coquetry of its own, arrests and releases, turn and turn about, a little like those platonic fishermen who throw back into the water the fish just out of the net so as not to empty the pond. Without his suspecting that so much honor was done to so feeble a personality, he had a special docket in the mysterious archives of police headquarters; his name and surnames were written in a large backhand on the gray paper of the cover, and the notes and reports, carefully classified, gave him these graduated appellations: "the man named Leturc," "the accused Leturc," and finally, "the convicted Leturc."

He stayed out of prison two years, eating as best he could, sleeping in lodging houses, or sometimes in kilns, and taking part with his fellows in endless games of pitch and toss, on the Boulevards, out near the gates. He wore a greasy cap on the back of his head, carpet slippers, and a short white blouse. When he had five sous, he had his hair curled. He danced at Constant's at Montparnasse; for two sous he bought the knave of hearts or the ace of spades, used as return checks, to sell them again for four sous at the entrance to Bobino; he opened carriage doors when the chance came; he led broken-down horses to the market. He always had bad luck,—in the conscription he drew a good number. Who knows whether the atmosphere of honor which is breathed in the barracks, whether military discipline, might not have saved him? Caught in a haul, with a lot of vagabonds who used to rob the drunkards asleep in the streets, he denied energetically having taken part in their expeditions. Perhaps it was true. But his antecedents were accepted as proof, and he was sent up for three years to Poissy. There he had to make rough toys; he had himself tattooed on the chest; and he learned thieves' slang and the penal code. Another release, another plunge into the Parisian sewer, but this time very short, for at the end of scarce six weeks, he was again compromised in a theft by night, aggravated by violence, a doubtful case in which he played an obscure part, half dupe and half receiver. At the end his complicity seemed evident, and he was condemned to five years' hard labor. His sorrow in this adventure was to be separated from an old dog that he had picked up on a pile of rubbish and cured of the mange. This beast loved him.

Toulon, the ball on his ankle, work in the harbor, blows, wooden shoes without straw, soup of black beans dating from Trafalgar, no money for tobacco, and the horrible sleep on the filthy iron bed of the convict, that is what he knew for five horrid summers and five winters with the whistling wind. He came out stunned, and was sent under surveillance to Vernon, where he worked for a while on the river; and then, incorrigible vagabond as he was, he broke bounds and came back again to Paris.

He had his savings, fifty-six francs that is to say, time to reflect. During his long absence his old, horrible comrades had been scattered. He was well hidden; he slept in an attic, at an old woman's, to whom he had given himself out as a sailor, weary of the sea, having lost his papers in a recent shipwreck, and wanting to try another trade. His tanned face, his calloused hands, and a few sea phrases he let drop from time to time, made this tale fairly probable.

One day when he had risked a saunter along the streets and when the chance of his walk brought him to Montmartre, where he had been born, an unexpected memory stopped him before the door of the Brothers' school, in which he had learned to read. As it was very warm, the door was open; and with a single look the hesitating passer could recognize the schoolroom. Nothing was changed, not the crucifix over the desk, nor the regular rows of seats, with their leaden inkstands, nor the table of weights and measures, nor the map on which were still the pins pointing out the operations of some old war. Heedlessly, and without reflecting, Jean François read on the blackboard these words of Scripture, which a well-trained hand had traced as an example of handwriting:—

"Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, who need no repentance."

It must have been the hour for recreation, for the teaching Brother had left his chair, and sitting on the edge of a table, he seemed to be telling a story to all the children who surrounded him, attentive and raising their eyes. What an innocent and gay expression was that of the beardless young man, in long black robe, with white cravat, with coarse, ugly shoes, and with brown hair badly cut rising up at the back. All those pallid faces of children of the populace which were looking at him, seemed less infantine than his, especially when, charmed with a candid, priestly pleasantry, he broke out with a good and frank laugh, which showed his teeth sound and well-ordered,—a laugh so contagious that all the scholars broke out noisily in their turn,—and it was simple and sweet, this group in the joyous sunlight that made the clear eyes and the blond hair shine.

The Substitute

Jean François looked at it some time in silence, and, for the first time, in this savage nature, all instinct and appetite, there awoke a mysterious and sweet emotion. His heart, that rough and hardened heart, which did not start when the heavy cudgel or the weight of the whip fell on his shoulders, beat almost to oppression. Before this spectacle, in which he saw again his childhood, his eyes closed sorrowfully, and restraining a violent gesture, he moved away with large strides.

The words written on the blackboard came back to him.

"If it was not too late, after all?" he murmured. "If I could once more, like the others, eat my white bread honestly, sleep my sleep out with no nightmare? The police spy would be very clever to recognize me now. My beard, that I shaved down there, has grown again, thick and strong. A man can hide himself in this big ant-heap, and work is not lacking. Whoever does not break down soon in the hell of the prison, comes out agile and robust; and I have learned how to climb ladders with a load on my back. There is building going on everywhere, and the masons need helpers. Three francs a day,—I have never earned so much. If they will only forget me, that is all I ask."

He followed his courageous resolutions; he was faithful to it; and three months later, he was another man. The master for whom he labored cited him as his best workman. After a long day passed on the ladder, in the full sun, in the dust, bending and straightening his back to take the stones from the hands of the man below him and to pass them to the man above him, he came home to get a meal at the cheap eating house, dead tired, his legs heavy, his hands burning, and his eyelashes stuck together by the plaster, but satisfied with himself, and carrying his well-earned money in the knot of his handkerchief. He went out now with no fear of anything, for his white mask made him unrecognizable; and then he had observed that the suspicious glance of the policeman does not often fall on the real worker. He was silent and sober. He slept the good sleep of fatigue. He was free.

At last—a supreme reward—he had a friend.

It was a mason like himself, called Savinien, a little peasant from Limoges, red-cheeked, having come to Paris with his bundle on the end of the stick over his shoulder, who kept away from the liquor dealers and went to mass on Sunday. Jean François liked him for his wholesomeness, for his innocence, for his honesty, for all that he himself had lost long ago. It was a deep passion, reserved, and betraying itself by the care and forethought of a father. Savinien, himself easy-going and selfish, let things take their course, glad only that he had found a comrade who shared his horror of the saloon. The two friends lived together in a furnished room, fairly clean, but their means were very limited; and they had to take in a third companion, an old man from Auvergne, somber and rapacious, who found a way of saving out of his meager wages to buy land at home.

Jean François and Savinien scarcely ever left each other. The days of rest they went on long walks in the environs of Paris to dine in the open air in one of those little country inns where there are many mushrooms in the sauces and innocent enigmas on the bottoms of the plates. Jean François then had his friend tell him all the things which are unknown to those born in cities. He learned the names of the trees, the flowers, the plants, the date of the different harvests; he listened greedily to the thousand details of a farmer's labors, the autumn sowing, the winter work, the splendid feasts of harvest home and vintage, the flails beating the floor, and the sound of the mills by the edge of the water, the tired horses led to the trough, and the morning hunting in the mists, and above all, the long evenings around the fire, shortened by tales of marvel. He discovered in himself springs of an imagination hitherto unsuspected, finding a singular pleasure in the mere recital of these things, so sweet, calm, and monotonous.

One fear troubled him, however, that Savinien might come to know his past. Sometimes there escaped him a shady word of slang, an ignoble gesture, survivals of his former horrible existence; and then he felt the pain of a man whose old wounds open again,—the more particularly as he then thought he saw in Savinien the awakening of an unhealthy curiosity. When the young man, already tempted by the pleasures which Paris offered even to the poorest, asked him about the mysteries of the great city, Jean François feigned ignorance and turned the conversation; but he had then a vague doubt as to the future of his friend.

This was not without foundation; and Savinien could not long remain the innocent countryman he had been on his arrival in Paris. If the gross and noisy pleasures of the saloon were still repugnant to him, he was deeply troubled by other desires full of danger for the inexperience of his twenty years. When the spring came, he began to seek solitude, and he wandered at first before the gayly lighted entrance to the dancing halls, through which he saw the girls going in couples, without bonnets—and whispering with their arms around each other. Then one

The Substitute

evening, when the lilacs were in bloom, and when the appeal of the music was more entrancing, he crossed the threshold. And after that Jean François saw him change little by little in his manners and in his looks. Savinien became more careful of his dress and he spent more; often he borrowed from the poor savings of his friend, which he forgot to return. Jean François, feeling himself deserted, was both indulgent and jealous; he suffered and kept silent. He believed he had no right to reproach, but his penetrating friendship had cruel and unconquerable forebodings.

One night when he was climbing the stairs of his lodging, absorbed in his preoccupations, he heard a dialogue of irritated voices in the room he was about to enter, and he recognized one as that of the old man from Auvergne, who shared the room with him and Savinien. An old habit of suspicion made him wait on the landing, and he listened to learn the cause of the trouble.

"Yes," the man from Auvergne was saying angrily, "I am sure that somebody has broken open my trunk and stolen the three louis which I had hidden in a little box; and the man who did the trick can only be one of the two companions who sleep here, unless it is Maria, the servant. This is your business as much as mine, since you are the master of the house; and I will hale you to court if you do not let me at once go through the valises of the two masons. My poor savings! they were in their place only yesterday; and I will tell you what the louis were, so that, if you find them, you will not accuse me of lying. Oh, I know them, my three fine gold pieces. One was a little more worn than the others, of a gold a little greener, and that had the portrait of the great Emperor; another had that of a fat old fellow with a pigtail and epaulets; and the third had a Philip with side whiskers—I had marked it with my teeth. I am not to be cheated, not I. Do you know I need only two more to pay for my vineyard? Come, let us look through the duds of these two comrades, or I will call the police."

"Very well," said the voice of the man who kept the house. "We'll search with Maria. So much the worse if you find nothing and if the masons get angry. It will be because you forced me to it."

Jean François had his heart filled with fear. He recalled the poverty of Savinien, the petty borrowings, the somber manner observed the last few days. Yet he did not want to believe in any theft. He heard the hard breathing of the man from Auvergne in the ardor of the search; and he clenched his hands against his breast as though to repress the beatings of his heart.

"There they are!" suddenly screamed the miser, victorious. "There they are, the louis, my dear treasure! And in the Sunday waistcoat of that little hypocrite from Limoges. See there, boss! They are just as I told you. There's the Napoleon, and the man with the pigtail, and the Philip I had bitten. See the mark. Ah, the little rascal, with his air of innocence. I should more likely have suspected the other. Ah, the villain. He will have to go to prison!"

At this moment Jean François heard the well-known step of Savinien, who was slowly coming upstairs.

"He will betray himself," he thought. "Three flights. I have the time!"

And pushing the door, and pale as death, he entered the room, where he saw the man who kept the house and the stupefied servant in a corner, and the man from Auvergne on his knees amid the scattered clothes, lovingly kissing his gold pieces.

"Enough of this," he said in a dull voice. "It was I who took the money and put it in the comrade's trunk. But that is too disgusting. I am a thief and not a Judas. Go get the police. I shall not run. Only I must say a word in private to Savinien,—who is here."

The little man from Limoges had in fact just arrived, and seeing his crime discovered and believing himself lost, he stood still, with his eyes fixed and his arms falling.

Jean François sprang to his neck, as though to embrace him; he glued his mouth to Savinien's ear, and said to him in a low and beseeching voice:—

"Hold your tongue!"

Then, turning to the others:—

"Leave me alone with him. I shall not go away, I tell you. Shut us up, if you like, but leave us alone together."

And with a gesture of command, he showed them the door. They went out.

Savinien, broken with anguish, had seated himself on a bed, and had dropped his eyes without understanding.

"Listen," said Jean François, who came to take his hands. "I understand. You stole the three gold pieces to buy some trifle for a girl. That would have been worth six months of prison for you. But you do not get out of that except to go back again; and you would have become a pillar of the police courts and criminal trials. I know all about them. I have done seven years in the reform school, one at Sainte-Pélagie, three at Poissy, and five at

The Substitute

Toulon. Now, do not get scared. It is all settled. I have taken it on my shoulders."

"Poor fellow," cried Savinien; but hope was coming back to his cowardly heart.

"When the elder brother is serving with the colors, the younger stays at home," Jean François went on. "I'm your substitute, that is all. You love me a little, do you not? I am paid. Do not be a baby. You cannot refuse. They would have caught me one of these days, for I have broken my leave. And then, you see, that life out there will not be so hard for me as for you; I know it, and shall not complain if I do not render you this service in vain and if you swear to me that you will not do it again. Savinien, I have loved you dearly, and your friendship has made me very happy, for it is thanks to my knowing you that I have kept honest and straight, as I might always have been, if I had had a father to put a tool in my hands, a mother to teach me my prayers. My only regret was that I was useless to you and that I was deceiving you about my past. To-day I lay aside the mask in saving you. It is all right. Come, now, good-by! Do not weep; and embrace me, for I hear the big boots on the stairs. They are coming back with the police; and we must not seem to know each other too well before these fellows."

He hugged Savinien hurriedly to his breast, and then he pushed him away as the door opened wide.

It was the man who kept the house and the man from Auvergne who were bringing the police. Jean François went out on the landing and held out his hands for the handcuffs and said, laughing:—

"Forward, bad lot!"

To-day he is at Cayenne, a prisoner for life, as incorrigible.