

Chapter 7

Right after my arrest I was questioned several times, but it was just so they could find out who I was, which didn't take long. The first time, at the police station, nobody seemed very interested in my case. A week later, however, the examining magistrate looked me over with curiosity. But to get things started he simply asked my name and address, my occupation, the date and place of my birth. Then he wanted to know if I had hired an attorney. I admitted I hadn't and inquired whether it was really necessary to have one. "Why do you ask?" he said. I said I thought my case was pretty simple. He smiled and said, "That's your opinion. But the law is the law. If you don't hire an attorney yourself, the court will appoint one." I thought it was very convenient that the court should take care of those details. I told him so. He agreed with me and concluded that it was a good law.

At first, I didn't take him seriously. I was led into a curtained room; there was a single lamp on his desk which was shining on a chair where he had me sit while he remained standing in the shadows. I had read

descriptions of scenes like this in books and it all seemed like a game to me. After our conversation, though, I looked at him and saw a tall, fine-featured man with deep-set blue eyes, a long gray moustache, and lots of thick, almost white hair. He struck me as being very reasonable and, overall, quite pleasant, despite a nervous tic which made his mouth twitch now and then. On my way out I was even going to shake his hand, but just in time, I remembered that I had killed a man.

The next day a lawyer came to see me at the prison. He was short and chubby, quite young, his hair carefully slicked back. Despite the heat (I was in my shirt sleeves), he had on a dark suit, a wing collar, and an odd-looking tie with broad black and white stripes. He put the briefcase he was carrying down on my bed, introduced himself, and said he had gone over my file. My case was a tricky one, but he had no doubts we'd win, if I trusted him. I thanked him and he said, "Let's get down to business."

He sat down on the bed and explained to me that there had been some investigations into my private life. It had been learned that my mother had died recently at the home. Inquiries had then been made in Marengo. The investigators had learned that I had "shown insensitivity" the day of Maman's funeral. "You understand," my lawyer said, "it's a little embarrassing for me to have to ask you this. But it's very important. And it will be a strong argument for the prosecution if I can't come up with some answers." He wanted me to help him.

He asked if I had felt any sadness that day. The question caught me by surprise and it seemed to me that I would have been very embarrassed if I'd had to ask it. Nevertheless I answered that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself and that it was hard for me to tell him what he wanted to know. I probably did love Maman, but that didn't mean anything. At one time or another all normal people have wished their loved ones were dead. Here the lawyer interrupted me and he seemed very upset. He made me promise I wouldn't say that at my hearing or in front of the examining magistrate. I explained to him, however, that my nature was such that my physical needs often got in the way of my feelings. The day I buried Maman, I was very tired and sleepy, so much so that I wasn't really aware of what was going on. What I can say for certain is that I would rather Maman hadn't died. But my lawyer didn't seem satisfied. He said, "That's not enough."

He thought for a minute. He asked me if he could say that that day I had held back my natural feelings. I said, "No, because it's not true." He gave me a strange look, as if he found me slightly disgusting. He told me in an almost snide way that in any case the director and the staff of the home would be called as witnesses and that "things could get very nasty" for me. I pointed out to him that none of this had anything to do with my case, but all he said was that it was obvious I had never had any dealings with the law.

He left, looking angry. I wished I could have made

him stay, to explain that I wanted things between us to be good, not so that he'd defend me better but, if I can put it this way, good in a natural way. Mostly, I could tell, I made him feel uncomfortable. He didn't understand me, and he was sort of holding it against me. I felt the urge to reassure him that I was like everybody else, just like everybody else. But really there wasn't much point, and I gave up the idea out of laziness.

Shortly after that, I was taken before the examining magistrate again. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, and this time his office was filled with sunlight barely softened by a flimsy curtain. It was very hot. He had me sit down and very politely informed me that, "due to unforeseen circumstances," my lawyer had been unable to come. But I had the right to remain silent and to wait for my lawyer's counsel. I said that I could answer for myself. He pressed a button on the table. A young clerk came in and sat down right behind me.

The two of us leaned back in our chairs. The examination began. He started out by saying that people were describing me as a taciturn and withdrawn person and he wanted to know what I thought. I answered, "It's just that I don't have much to say. So I keep quiet." He smiled the way he had the first time, agreed that that was the best reason of all, and added, "Besides, it's not important." Then he looked at me without saying anything, leaned forward rather abruptly, and said very quickly, "What interests me is you." I didn't really understand what he meant by that, so I

didn't respond. "There are one or two things," he added, "that I don't quite understand. I'm sure you'll help me clear them up." I said it was all pretty simple. He pressed me to go back over that day. I went back over what I had already told him: Raymond, the beach, the swim, the quarrel, then back to the beach, the little spring, the sun, and the five shots from the revolver. After each sentence he would say, "Fine, fine." When I got to the body lying there, he nodded and said, "Good." But I was tired of repeating the same story over and over. It seemed as if I had never talked so much in my life.

After a short silence, he stood up and told me that he wanted to help me, that I interested him, and that, with God's help, he would do something for me. But first he wanted to ask me a few more questions. Without working up to it, he asked if I loved Maman. I said, "Yes, the same as anyone," and the clerk, who up to then had been typing steadily, must have hit the wrong key, because he lost his place and had to go back. Again without any apparent logic, the magistrate then asked if I had fired all five shots at once. I thought for a minute and explained that at first I had fired a single shot and then, a few seconds later, the other four. Then he said, "Why did you pause between the first and second shot?" Once again I could see the red sand and feel the burning of the sun on my forehead. But this time I didn't answer. In the silence that followed, the magistrate seemed to be getting fidgety. He sat down, ran his fingers through his

hair, put his elbows on his desk, and leaned toward me slightly with a strange look on his face. "Why, why did you shoot at a body that was on the ground?" Once again I didn't know how to answer. The magistrate ran his hands across his forehead and repeated his question with a slightly different tone in his voice. "Why? You must tell me. Why?" Still I didn't say anything.

Suddenly he stood up, strode over to a far corner of his office, and pulled out a drawer in a file cabinet. He took out a silver crucifix which he brandished as he came toward me. And in a completely different, almost cracked voice, he shouted, "Do you know what this is?" I said, "Yes, of course." Speaking very quickly and passionately, he told me that he believed in God, that it was his conviction that no man was so guilty that God would not forgive him, but in order for that to happen a man must repent and in so doing become like a child whose heart is open and ready to embrace all. He was leaning all the way over the table. He was waving his crucifix almost directly over my head. To tell the truth, I had found it very hard to follow his reasoning, first because I was hot and there were big flies in his office that kept landing on my face, and also because he was scaring me a little. At the same time I knew that that was ridiculous because, after all, I was the criminal. He went on anyway. I vaguely understood that to his mind there was just one thing that wasn't clear in my confession, the fact that I had hesitated before I fired my second shot. The rest was fine, but that part he couldn't understand.

I was about to tell him he was wrong to dwell on it, because it really didn't matter. But he cut me off and urged me one last time, drawing himself up to his full height and asking me if I believed in God. I said no. He sat down indignantly. He said it was impossible; all men believed in God, even those who turn their backs on him. That was his belief, and if he were ever to doubt it, his life would become meaningless. "Do you want my life to be meaningless?" he shouted. As far as I could see, it didn't have anything to do with me, and I told him so. But from across the table he had already thrust the crucifix in my face and was screaming irrationally, "I am a Christian. I ask Him to forgive you your sins. How can you not believe that He suffered for you?" I was struck by how sincere he seemed, but I had had enough. It was getting hotter and hotter. As always, whenever I want to get rid of someone I'm not really listening to, I made it appear as if I agreed. To my surprise, he acted triumphant. "You see, you see!" he said. "You do believe, don't you, and you're going to place your trust in Him, aren't you?" Obviously, I again said no. He fell back in his chair.

He seemed to be very tired. He didn't say anything for a minute while the typewriter, which hadn't let up the whole time, was still tapping out the last few sentences. Then he looked at me closely and with a little sadness in his face. In a low voice he said, "I have never seen a soul as hardened as yours. The criminals who have come before me have always wept at the sight of this image of suffering." I was about to say that that was

precisely because they were criminals. But then I realized that I was one too. It was an idea I couldn't get used to. Then the judge stood up, as if to give me the signal that the examination was over. He simply asked, in the same weary tone, if I was sorry for what I had done. I thought about it for a minute and said that more than sorry I felt kind of annoyed. I got the impression he didn't understand. But that was as far as things went that day.

After that, I saw a lot of the magistrate, except that my lawyer was with me each time. But it was just a matter of clarifying certain things in my previous statements. Or else the magistrate would discuss the charges with my lawyer. But on those occasions they never really paid much attention to me. Anyway, the tone of the questioning gradually changed. The magistrate seemed to have lost interest in me and to have come to some sort of decision about my case. He didn't talk to me about God anymore, and I never saw him as worked up as he was that first day. The result was that our discussions became more cordial. A few questions, a brief conversation with my lawyer, and the examinations were over. As the magistrate put it, my case was taking its course. And then sometimes, when the conversation was of a more general nature, I would be included. I started to breathe more freely. No one, in any of these meetings, was rough with me. Everything was so natural, so well handled, and so calmly acted out that I had the ridiculous impression of being "one of the family." And I can

say that at the end of the eleven months that this investigation lasted, I was almost surprised that I had ever enjoyed anything other than those rare moments when the judge would lead me to the door of his office, slap me on the shoulder, and say to me cordially, "That's all for today, Monsieur Antichrist." I would then be handed back over to the police.