

EAT HIM IF YOU LIKE

A NOVEL BY
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THE BRETANGES ESTATE

‘What a beautiful day!’ declared the young man, pushing open his bedroom shutters. Muslin curtains fluttered on either side of the upstairs window of the seventeenth-century house. His gaze swept the countryside – a small corner of Limousin attached to Périgord as if by mistake. The parched landscape was dotted with oak trees. A clock struck one on the mantelpiece behind him.

‘What time do you call this? And you the new deputy mayor of Beaussac! When I was mayor, I got up much earlier!’ boomed a deep voice from under the ancient chestnut tree in the garden.

‘Father, I was putting the finishing touches to my project to divert the Nizonne.’

‘Amédée,’ said a woman’s voice from the shade of the tree, ‘stop badgering our son. At least he’s dressed. You look good in your summer suit, Alain,’ continued his mother, fanning herself. ‘Don’t forget your boater, it’s another scorcher today,’

Alain grabbed his straw hat from the rosewood table and went downstairs. The dark staircase smelt strongly

Eat Him If You Like

of wax polish and the tap of his soft leather boots on the stairs betrayed a slight limp. An old, worn tapestry hung in the entrance hall. Alain paused in front of a framed picture depicting the main square of a small, deserted market town.



‘You like that picture of Hautefaye, don’t you?’ exclaimed his mother, watching him through the open front door.

‘Yes, I do. Our neighbours are so friendly,’ replied Alain, leaving the house to join his parents who were sitting at the garden table about to have lunch. ‘I hope my drainage project will be approved and I hope they’ll all like it, as they did in Beaussac.’

‘You slept so late I thought you’d forgotten about the fair,’ muttered his father, his nose in the local paper.

‘Father, I’ve never missed the Hautefaye fair. All my friends will be there.’ Alain went over to embrace his mother, a dark-haired woman with blue eyes.

‘Oh, you’re such a wonderful boy, so helpful and uncomplicated. You were born to please, always smiling, always with an angelic look in your eyes,’ she gushed, stroking his cheek.

His father rolled his eyes, uncomfortable with this

The Bretanges Estate

excessive display of motherly love. Alain moved into the shade of the chestnut tree.

'It's so beautifully cool under here. Perfect on such a hot, muggy day. It's as though it were put here for this very purpose.'

'Well, stay under the tree then, instead of going to war,' said his mother, anxious all of a sudden. 'Dear Lord, you'll be in Lorraine next week fighting in this wretched war against Prussia. Why must you go when the medical board has already exempted you for having a weak constitution? Do you want me to die of worry? You could easily have exchanged your unlucky conscription number at Pons when you were in Périgueux. It would only have cost us a thousand francs. Alain, are you listening to me?'

'Magdeleine-Louise, he's already told you hundreds of times!' said his father in exasperation. 'He doesn't approve of a lottery to decide who goes to war. Especially because poor boys who draw a lucky ticket then sell it to wealthy boys who have an unlucky one.'

'Mother, everybody knows and likes me here in Nontron, and I would be so ashamed if I came across the parents of the boy who'd gone to fight in my place . . . Anyway, my limp won't be a problem, as I'll be in the cavalry.'

Alain shouted over to the household servant, who was dozing under an arbour, 'Pascal, would you saddle my horse, please?'

'Aren't you eating with us?' asked his mother, surprised. 'Look, we've got lentils with bacon and that soft cheese you like.'

'No, I'll have lunch at the fair, at Mousnier's inn. I'm

Eat Him If You Like

meeting the Marthon notary there.'

'Why?' asked his father.

'Before going to the front, I need to sort out some estate business. I promised to give our poor neighbour, old Bertille, a heifer to replace the cow that drowned in the Nizonne marshes. I also said I would help the farmer at Lac Noir re-roof his barn. It was hit by lightning in last week's storm and I want to try and find a carpenter in Hautefaye who'll be able to start working on it as soon as possible. I was thinking of Pierre Brut, that roofer from Fayemarteau. It's urgent and I'll have to make the necessary arrangements before I leave for Lorraine.'

Alain paused at the edge of the meadow to listen to the hornets buzzing and the cicadas chirring. A pretty little lark broke into song and then flew from its perch on a dry bush.

'My head's spinning,' said his mother, who was feeling unwell. Already suffering from poor health, she was badly affected by her son's enlistment.

'It's the heat, Mother.'

'What does the paper say, my boy? Does it mention Prussia? Did we beat them at Reichshoffen and Forbach? I don't have my glasses.'

Alain picked up the *Dordogne Echo*, which was lying beside his father's plate. His father was looking at it but said nothing.

'Is this really today's paper?' he asked. 'Tuesday 16 August 1870. Ah yes, this is it.'

Shocked by the headlines, he decided only to read out a small column from the bottom of the front page: