

*Marcel Aymé*

# The man who could walk through walls

(Le Passe-Muraille)

By Marcel Aymé, 1943  
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In Montmartre, on the fourth floor of number 75½ Rue Orchamp, there once lived a fine fellow named Dutilleul who had the remarkable gift of being able to pass through walls with perfect ease. He wore a pince-nez and a small black goatee and he worked as a level three clerk in the Registration Ministry. In winter he would take the bus to work, and come summer he would walk, wearing his bowler hat.

Dutilleul discovered his power shortly after he turned forty-two. One evening, the electricity went out briefly while he was standing in the front hall of his small bachelor apartment. He groped around for a moment in the dark, and when the power came back on, he found himself standing on his fourth floor landing. Since the door to his apartment was locked from the inside, this gave him pause for thought. Despite the objections of his common sense, he decided to return home in the same way he left—by passing through the wall. This strange ability seemed to have no bearing on any of his aspirations, and he could not help feeling rather vexed about it. The following day was Saturday, and since he worked a five-day week, he sought out the local doctor and presented his case to him. The doctor satisfied himself that Dutilleul was telling the truth, and upon examining him he discovered that the problem was caused by a helicoidal hardening of the strangular membrane of the thyroid gland. He prescribed intensive overwork and told him to take two doses a year of tetravalent pirette powder containing a mixture of rice flour and centaur hormone.

Dutilleul took one dose, then put the medicine in the back of a drawer and forgot about it. As for intensive overwork, his activity as a civil servant followed fixed practices which did not lend themselves to any excess. He spent his free time reading the newspaper and working on his stamp collection; these activities did not require him to expend an unreasonable

amount of energy either. After a year then, he still retained the ability to pass through walls, but he never used it intentionally; he had little interest in adventures and he stubbornly resisted the impulses of his imagination. The idea never even occurred to him to enter his apartment any other way than by the door, and that after having duly opened it using the lock.

He might have lived out his life in his peaceable habits and never been tempted to put his gifts to the test if an extraordinary event had not suddenly disrupted his existence. Monsieur Mouron, the associate office director, left to take another position and was replaced by one Monsieur Lécuyer, who spoke in short, clipped sentences and wore a toothbrush mustache. From the very first day, the new associate office director was highly displeased to see that Dutilleul wore a pince-nez on a chain and a black goatee, and he made a great show of treating him as an obsolete nuisance or a slightly grubby antique.

Far more serious however, was his plan to introduce far-reaching reforms in the office; they seemed specially designed to disturb the peace of his subordinate. For twenty years, Dutilleul had begun all his letters with the following phrase: "In reference to your esteemed correspondence of the 12th of the present month, and furthermore in reference to our previous exchange of letters, I have the honor of writing to inform you that..." Monsieur Lécuyer replaced this with a turn of phrase that had a more American ring to it: "In response to your letter of the 12th, I inform you that..." Dutilleul could not adapt to these epistolary fashions. He couldn't help himself; he reverted to the traditional formula with a mechanical obstinacy that earned him the growing enmity of the associate director.

He began to find the atmosphere at the Ministry of Registration oppressive. He felt apprehensive on his way to work in the morning, and at night in his bed he often lay awake turn-

ing things over in his mind for a full fifteen minutes before he could fall asleep.

Monsieur Lécuyer was disgusted by this willful backwardness which was threatening the success of his reforms, so he had Dutilleul's desk moved to a small dim closet next to his office. It was only accessible by a low narrow door which opened onto the corridor and still bore the inscription "RUBBISH" in capital letters. Dutilleul accepted this unprecedented humiliation with resignation, but at home, whenever he would read in the newspaper about some gory incident, he found himself daydreaming, imagining Monsieur Lécuyer as the victim.

One day, the associate director burst into his closet brandishing a letter and bellowing, "Rewrite this stinking letter! You will rewrite this appalling piece of drivel which is dishonoring my department!"

Dutilleul tried to protest, but Monsieur Lécuyer, in a thunderous voice, called him a hidebound cockroach and as he left, he took the letter he had in his hand, crumpled it up into a ball, and threw it in his face. Dutilleul was modest but proud. He sat alone in his closet, steaming, when suddenly he had an inspiration. He rose from his chair and entered the wall which separated his office from that of the associate director. He was careful to move only partway through the wall, so that just his head emerged on the other side. Monsieur Lécuyer was seated at his work table, his ever-twitching pen shifting a comma in the text an employee had submitted to him for approval. Hearing a quiet cough in his office, he looked up, and discovered to his unspeakable alarm the head (just the head) of Dutilleul stuck to the wall like a hunting trophy. What's more, the head was alive. It looked over its pince-nez glasses at him with deepest hatred. And then it began to speak.

“Monsieur,” it said, “you are a hoodlum, a boor, and a spoiled brat.”

Gaping with horror, Monsieur Lécuyer couldn't take his eyes off this apparition. At last, tearing himself out of his chair, he leapt into the corridor and raced to the closet. Dutilleul sat in his usual place, pen in hand, looking perfectly peaceful and industrious. The associate director stared at him for a long moment, mumbled a few words, and went back to his office. No sooner had he sat down than the head reappeared on the wall.

“Monsieur, you are a hoodlum, a boor, and a spoiled brat.”

In the course of a single day, the dreaded head reappeared on the wall twenty-three times, and it kept up the same pace over the following days. Dutilleul became rather good at this game, and he no longer contented himself with shouting abuse at the associate director. He uttered veiled threats; for example, he would cackle demoniacally and wail in a sepulchral voice:

“The Lone Wolf's on the prowl! Beware! (*laughter*)  
No one's safe—he's everywhere! (*laughter*)”

Whenever he heard this, the poor associate director grew a little paler and made a choking noise; his hair stood straight up on his head and the cold sweat of terror trickled down his back. He lost a pound that first day.

As the week wore on, you could practically see him melting away. He took to eating his soup with a fork and greeting policemen with a smart military salute.

At the beginning of the second week, an ambulance came to his residence and took him away to a sanitarium.

Now that Dutilleul was free of Monsieur Lécuyer's tyranny, he could return to his cherished phrases: "In reference to your esteemed correspondence of the 27th of the present month..." And yet, he was unsatisfied somehow. There was an unmet demand inside him, a new, urgent need, which was none other than the need to walk through walls.

He could certainly indulge this need easily, at home for example, and he didn't waste the opportunity. But a man possessed of brilliant gifts cannot satisfy himself for long by exercising them on a mediocre subject. Walking through walls cannot really serve as an end in itself. Rather, it is the first step in an adventure, which calls for continuation, development, and, in short, a payoff. Dutilleul understood this fully. He felt within him a need for expansion, a growing desire to fulfill and surpass himself, and a certain bittersweet pull which was something like the call of the other side of the wall. Unfortunately, what he lacked was a goal. He sought inspiration by reading the newspaper. He paid special attention to the sports and politics sections, as these seemed to be honorable activities, but in the end, he realized that they really didn't offer any opportunities for people who could walk through walls. That's when he settled on the police blotter, which turned out to be most suggestive.

Dutilleul's first burglary took place in an important financial institution on the Right Bank. He passed through a dozen walls and partitions and let himself into various vaults, where he filled his pockets with banknotes. As he left, he signed his work in red chalk, using the alias "The Lone Wolf", underlined with a distinctive flourish which made it onto the front page of all the newspapers the following morning. Within a week, the name The Lone Wolf had gained extraordinary celebrity. Public sympathy was unreservedly behind this prestigious burglar who so thoroughly flouted the police.

Every night he distinguished himself with some new exploit; sometimes his target was a bank, other times a jewelry store or some wealthy individual. From Paris to the provinces, there wasn't a woman who, in her daydreams, didn't nourish a fervent desire to belong to the fearsome Lone Wolf, body and soul. After the theft of the famous Burdigala Diamond and the break-in at the Crédit Municipal the same week, this enthusiasm reached a fever pitch. The Interior Minister was forced to resign, and he brought the Minister of Registration down with him. Nonetheless, Dutilleul, now one of the richest men in Paris, remained perfectly punctual at work; there was talk of awarding him the national medal for service to education. Every morning at the Ministry of Registration, he took great pleasure listening to his colleagues discuss his exploits of the night before. "That Lone Wolf," they would say, "a great man, Superman, a genius!" Dutilleul blushed with embarrassment to hear such praise, and he beamed with friendship and gratitude from behind his pince-nez on its chain.

One day this sympathetic atmosphere boosted his confidence so much that he thought he would not be able to keep his secret any longer. As his colleagues stood together around a newspaper reading about the burglary at the Bank of France, he studied them shyly, then announced in a modest voice, "As it so happens, I'm the Lone Wolf." Dutilleul's confession was greeted with loud and long laughter, and it earned him the derisive nickname "The Lone Wolf". At night when it was time to leave work, he was the butt of endless jokes from his colleagues, and life lost some of its luster for him.

A few days later, the Lone Wolf got picked up by the night patrol in a jewelry shop on Rue de la Paix. He had affixed his signature to the sales counter and was singing a drinking song while smashing various display windows using a solid gold antique goblet. It would have been easy for him to slip into

a wall and escape the night patrol, but in all likelihood he wanted to be arrested, probably with the sole intent of getting even with his colleagues; their disbelief was mortifying.

Indeed, his colleagues were most surprised the next day when the newspapers published Dutilleul's photograph on the front page. They bitterly regretted underestimating their brilliant comrade and they all saluted him by growing little goatees. A few of them were so carried away with remorse and admiration that they tried to get their hands on the wallets or heirloom watches of their friends and acquaintances.

Now you may well think that letting himself get picked up by the police to astonish a few colleagues shows a great recklessness unworthy of such an exceptional man. But although this act appears willful, his volition had very little to do with the decision. Dutilleul believed that by giving up his freedom, he was giving in to a prideful desire for revenge. In reality, though, he was simply sliding down the slope of his destiny. When a man is able to walk through walls, one can't really speak of a career until he's tried prison at least once.

When Dutilleul was taken inside the La Santé prison, he felt as though fate had smiled upon him. The thickness of the walls was a veritable treat for him. The very first morning after he was imprisoned, the astonished guards discovered that the prisoner had driven a nail into his cell wall, and from it he had hung a gold pocket watch belonging to the prison warden. He could not or would not reveal how this object had come into his possession. The watch was restored to its rightful owner, but the next day it was found again on the Lone Wolf's nightstand, along with the first volume of *The Three Musketeers* which he had borrowed from the warden's private library. The prison personnel were under great pressure. Moreover, the guards complained of receiving mysteri-

ous kicks in the behind which seemed to come from nowhere; it seemed that the walls didn't just have ears anymore, but feet as well. The Lone Wolf had been in jail for one week when the warden found the following letter on his desk upon entering his office in the morning.

“Dear Monsieur the Warden,

In reference to our exchange of the 17th of the present month, and furthermore in reference to your general instructions of May the 15th preceding, I have the honor of informing you that I have just completed reading the second volume of *The Three Musketeers* and that I expect to escape tonight between 11:25 and 11:35 p.m.

Most respectfully yours,  
The Lone Wolf.”

Despite being under close surveillance that night, Dutilleul escaped at 11:30. When the news hit the streets the following morning, it was greeted everywhere with great enthusiasm. Nonetheless, once Dutilleul had carried out a fresh burglary which raised his popularity to new heights, he didn't seem very concerned about hiding, and he roamed freely through Montmartre taking no precautions at all. Three days after his escape he was arrested in Rue Caulaincourt at the Café du Rêve a little before noon, as he was enjoying a glass of white wine and lemon with friends.

Dutilleul was taken back to the La Santé Prison and triple locked in a dingy solitary cell; he escaped from it that same evening and spent the night at the warden's apartment, in the guest room. The following morning around nine o'clock, he rang for the maid to bring him his breakfast. The guards were summoned, and they seized him where he sat in bed,

putting up no resistance. The warden was outraged; he posted a guard at the door of Dutilleul's cell and placed him on bread and water. Around noon, the prisoner went off to have lunch at a restaurant near the prison, and when he finished his coffee, he phoned the warden.

"Hello! Monsieur the Warden, I hate to bother you, but just now when I went out, I neglected to bring along your wallet, and now here I am at the restaurant and I've come up short. Would you be so good as to send someone along to settle the bill?"

The warden showed up in person immediately and lost his temper, shouting threats and insults at Dutilleul. Dutilleul's pride was wounded; he escaped the following night, never to return.

This time he took a few precautions. He shaved off his black goatee and traded his pince-nez on its chain for a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. A billed cap and a checked suit with golf trousers completed his transformation. He settled into a small apartment in Avenue Junot; he had moved some of his furniture there along with his most prized possessions long before his first arrest.

He began to grow tired of his newfound fame, and ever since his stay at La Santé Prison, he had become rather blasé about the pleasure of walking through walls. Even the thickest and most imposing walls now seemed to him nothing more than simple folding screens, and he dreamed of plunging into the heart of some massive pyramid. So while he developed his plan for a trip to Egypt, he was leading the most peaceable of lives, dividing his time between his stamp collection, the movies, and long walks through Montmartre. Clean-shaven now, and wearing his horn-rimmed glasses, his metamorpho-

sis was so complete that he could pass by his best friends without being recognized. Only the painter Gen Paul, who would never fail to notice any sudden change in the countenance of a longtime neighbor, finally unraveled his true identity. One morning he found himself nose to nose with Dutilleul on the corner of the Rue de l'Abreuvoir, and he blurted out in his rough slang:

"Hey daddy-o, I dig the new drape and sky piece! You're togged to the bricks! With threads like that you must be stachin' so you don't get tapped by the fuzz." Which means, more or less, "I see that you have adopted an elegant disguise so as to escape the attention of the police detectives."

"Ah," murmured Dutilleul, "you've recognized me!" This made him uneasy and he decided to move up his departure for Egypt. On the very same afternoon he fell in love with a blonde beauty whom he met in Rue Lepic twice in the space of fifteen minutes. He immediately forgot about his stamp collection and Egypt and the pyramids. As for the blonde, she looked at him with great interest. Nothing captures the imagination of young women today like a pair of golf pants and horn-rimmed glasses. That movie producer look sets them dreaming about cocktail parties and Hollywood nights.

Unfortunately, Dutilleul learned from Gen Paul that this beauty was married to a violently jealous man; moreover, he led a rough-and-tumble existence on the streets of Paris and spent his nights on the town. Every night he would abandon his wife from ten at night to four in the morning, but before he would leave, he always made sure to double-lock her in her room and padlock the shutters. During the day he kept a close eye on her; sometimes he would even follow her through the streets of Montmartre.

“Hey, I see you’re still chasin’ that skirt. Take it slow, daddy-o. That chick is fine dinner, but her main on the hitch gets evil if he focuses some cat tryin’ to score his barbecue.”

But Gen Paul’s warning only inflamed Dutilleul’s passion further. The next day he saw the young woman in Rue Tholozé. He boldly followed her into a dairy, and while she was waiting in line, he told her that he loved her respectfully and that he knew about everything—the cruel husband, the locked door and the shutters—but that he would be in her bedroom that very night. The blonde blushed; the milk bottle trembled in her hand and her eyes grew moist with tenderness. She gave a muffled sigh. “Alas Monsieur, that is impossible.”

The evening of that glorious day around ten o’clock found Dutilleul standing like a sentry in Rue Norvins, watching an imposing garden wall; he could only see the weather vane and the chimney of the small house which sat behind it. A door in the wall opened, and a man stepped out. He carefully locked the door behind him and walked off towards Avenue Junot. Dutilleul waited until he was out of sight, until he was all the way down at the bend in the street at the foot of the hill, and then he counted to ten. Then he rushed forward and strode like an athlete into the wall, running straight through the obstacles until he penetrated the bedroom of the lovely recluse. She greeted him ecstatically and they made love late into the night.

Unfortunately, the next day Dutilleul had a terrible headache. He was certainly not going to let something so trivial make him miss his rendezvous. Nonetheless, since he discovered some tablets scattered at the bottom of a drawer, he took one in the morning and one in the afternoon. By evening his headache was tolerable, and in his intense excitement he forgot about it altogether. The young woman was waiting

for him, full of impatience aroused by her memories of the previous night; that night they made love until three o'clock in the morning. When he left, Dutilleul passed through the walls of the house and felt an unusual rubbing sensation against his hips and shoulders.

He didn't think it merited much attention, though. In fact, it was only when he entered the garden wall that he felt a definite resistance. He felt as though he were moving through some gel-like substance that was still fluid but was growing thicker; it became firmer the more he struggled. Once he was entirely embedded in the thickness of the wall he realized that he was no longer moving forward. Terrified, he remembered the two tablets that he taken that day. He had thought they were aspirin tablets, but in fact they contained the tetravalent pirette powder that the doctor had prescribed the year before. The effect of the medication combined with intensive exertion produced quite a sudden reaction.

Dutilleul was immobilized inside the wall. He is there to this very day, imprisoned in the stone. When people go walking down the Rue Norvins late at night after the bustle of Paris has died down, they hear a muffled voice which seems to come from beyond the grave; they think it's the sound of the wind whistling through the streets of Montmartre. It's Lone Wolf Dutilleul lamenting the end of his glorious career and mourning his all too brief love affair. Sometimes on winter nights the painter Gen Paul takes down his guitar and heads down to the lonely, echoing Rue Norvins to console the poor prisoner with a song. Its notes take flight from his numb fingers and penetrate to the heart of the stone like drops of moonlight.