France's tradition in the art of short-story writing is a fine one. Mérimeé and de Maupassant are only two of the outstanding short-story authors of French literature.

Georges Simenon, born about forty-five years ago in Lille, began his career as a journalist, first working for several years on the staff of "L'École du Nord," the largest French provincial paper, and later for several other newspapers, among them "Rêveur." After publishing some very successful detective novels, he gave up journalism and has since devoted himself entirely to writing. He has made a name for himself in the realm of short stories, and is also considered the best living French author of detective fiction.

In the following story, first published in French in "Gringoire," the reader will be able to discern some of the suspense one would expect from such an author. However, the appeal of the story lies in a wonderfully human rendering of the mind of a little boy in trouble.—K.M.

Why couldn't it have been true? Just because people say that all children tell lies? He maintained that he heard "before," that he opened his eyes wide, that he waited, almost breathlessly, that he foresaw the second at which the furious ringing of the alarm clock would go off.

If they didn't believe him, well, he couldn't help that! On this particular morning it was just as it was on other mornings. At half past five it was still dark. It was cold. There was probably frost on the windowpanes. The night-light in the corner of the fireplace threw out its syrupy, orange light. He had always slept with a light burning because of his habit of waking up suddenly, terror-stricken, so that he was left panting, with sweat on his forehead. It was a little brown, squat bottle, which had contained Heaven knows what and had now been capped with an oil wick. The least movement in the room was enough to make the flame waver.

He got up, his feet bare, in his long white shirt. In the bed his little brother went on sleeping, blowing out his upper lip. The mattress in the next room creaked: Father or Mother was turning over.

The chill of the linoleum under his feet; the frozen water in the basin; and the alarm clock which ticked off the seconds quicker than at any other moment during the day! These seconds were counted. His socks; his short trousers; his flannel shirt and the tight waistcoat buttoned up to the neck; the dampened comb in his fair hair which stood up in tufts on the top of his head.

Then the dark staircase. The nap overcoat which he took down from the bamboo coat-rack in the corridor. He had to grope his way. The key. At last the cold, damp air of morning. A darkness which was not quite the same as that of the night, and the chapel bells at the other end of the quartier—which at that very moment pealed the first stroke of the six-o'clock mass. In another minute, when he turned the corner of the street, other bells, those of the church
of Saint-Denis, whose clock was slow, would ring in their turn.

He walked quickly. He kept very close to the houses. He knew them all, but he was almost the only person to know their faces at this hour. In his own street he was not afraid. Nor in the Rue de l'Enseignement. It was rather as if he were still attached to his home by a cord.

Next he had to cross the Place du Congrès, with its black trees, its huge telegraph pole at the top of which hundreds of wires vibrated in the wind. He walked faster. He found himself running. All the shutters were closed. The shops were shut. He could hardly make out the signboard of Horisse's, the grocer's, whose son was in his class and was so afraid of dogs.

This was the second winter that he walked the same route, at the same hour, every day, except for the rare occasions when the alarm clock had not gone off.

The long Rue Pasteur, which looked like a canal from which the water had been emptied. He made a noise with his shoes, on purpose. At the end, down there, after the sixth gas lamp, it would be over. He would turn to the right and far away, in a sidestreet, there would be bicycles. He saw them every day. It was the employees of the gas factory going to work.

And suddenly . . . . He was sure . . . . He had been afraid of this moment for months. Thirty feet away from him, less than thirty feet, against the entrance gate of the aerated-water factory, someone was standing, someone who was waiting for him. It was too late to turn round. There was only one thing to do: make a dash for it, cross the street, reach the other sidewalk, run as fast as he could to the Hospital . . . .

"Hi, young fellow!"

Was he really running? He had no idea. He was dizzy. Just like in his worst nightmares, the ones which made him cry out, his legs went soft, he could no longer feel the soles of his feet, a languor overwhelmed him, a heaviness in all his limbs, like a paralysis.

"Listen!"

He really had been running, for he found himself in front of the door of the butcher's to whom his mother so often sent him to get chops. But the door was shut, like the others. In the whole street there was only one faint red light to be seen in an attic. And how could he have cried out? He no longer had any legs, any voice. He heard nothing but footsteps, faster than his. He foresaw the second, like with the alarm clock . . . .

It came! He found he could not move. A hand held him by the shoulder. His breathing burnt like fire. He wanted to stammer: "Don't kill me!"

Why he didn't do it, he never knew. His eyes opened wide. A man who seemed to him very tall was looking him over from head to foot, and he thought the man seemed embarrassed, out of breath, too. Probably he was not used to running.

"Listen, young chap—"

And the little boy had no idea that at that moment his features were angular, his eyes sharp, his manner—in spite of his fear—actually brazen.

"I must ask you something. It's three days now and more that I have seen you passing along here."

It was impossible to think. It was all too quick. It was too frightening. Three days and more that, in that corner . . . .

"Suppose you were offered a big present, a wonderful present, what would you like best?"

To go! To be able at last to ring the bell, while he stood on tiptoe, at the heavy varnished door of the Hospital!

"Speak, don't be afraid."

In half an hour, in twenty minutes, it would be daylight, and people would begin to live again, windows and doors would open, while the first tram would pass with its lamps still lit.
A policeman—there was one right at the end of the street, more than three hundred yards away, near the bridge.

"Hurry up and answer. I'm not going to hurt you."

How would he have described the man anyway? It was not someone from the quarter, perhaps not even from the city? He was very tall and very thin. He had a curious voice, and no overcoat in spite of its being winter. Perhaps he was rough? In any case, his hand was still clutching the boy’s shoulder and hurting it.

George said to him: "You're hurting me!"

He was surprised at having spoken.

"Answer me! What would you like?"

"A bike!"

Where had that come from? He had no idea. Perhaps from the intensity of his fear? And he raised his head at the end of his thin neck and looked the man in the eyes.

"You shall have it! I promise you that you'll get it, do you hear? But listen to what I am going to say to you. Before you go into the Hospital chapel, what is there on the right?"

"A door."

"On that door there is a bolt. When you pass it, just draw it back."

There was silence. The light in the distant attic had gone out.

"Swear that you will draw it back."

"I swear."

"If you forget, if you don't draw it back, I shall find you again, and then—"

"I swear! Let me go!"

Did the man let him go? Did the child free himself by a sudden movement? He ran so fast that he nearly fell. From far off he saw the Hospital clock which showed five minutes to six. He was two minutes late. Usually it was seven minutes to six when he reached that spot.

Now he only had to lift himself up on the edge, reach the bell, and set off the pealing which resembled that of a convent. Then, in the silence of the vast porch, he heard a mouse-like trotting. A key turned in the well-oiled lock. The concierge smiled, without saying anything.

In his joy the boy nearly knocked into a hearse standing under the arch. At the end of this arch, as if by a miracle, a vague glimmer of morning was already lighting up the courtyard of the Hospital where, among the trees, the buildings stretched away endlessly.

He walked past the kitchens in the basement, and another smell enveloped him, warm and slightly nauseating.

_Swear that you will draw it back—_

The chapel was to the right, in the courtyard. In front of its entrance there was a porch which, afterwards, he could not remember having crossed. There was the door which gave onto the boulevard, barred by a heavy bolt.

He was trembling. He thought someone had spoken behind him, and he blushed as if he had already been caught
in the act. He did not think about the bicycle. It was different. It was an order to which he was submitting, a will stronger than his own which was guiding him. His hand touched the bolt. It was so carefully oiled that it slid back without the least effort.

"Hurry up, Georget."

He never knew whether Sister Adonie, the vestry sister as she was called, had seen his movement. One second more or less—

What he saw on crossing the chapel was a catafalque. So then it was a final benediction and he was going to earn three francs. The candles were not yet lighted. There were two robes ready in the vestry, one red and one black, and he mechanically put on the black one, because of the catafalque.

"The red one, Georget! You can change after the mass. It isn't a requiem. I have brought you a bar of chocolate, for there will be three final benedictions."

Three final benedictions in one day! At any other time he would have trembled with joy. Nine francs!

The chaplain glided in. It was his way of walking. He was tall, thin, and pallid, and looked as if he were part of a stained-glass window. He smiled, without saying anything. Then he bent over his vestment, kissed it, and said a short prayer.

Sister Adonie went from one side of the altar to the other, with the long candle-lighter in her hand, and, as she moved along, the candles lit up. From the chapel came the sound of felted footsteps.

The nuns took their places in the gallery above. The patients, dressed in washed-out woollen uniforms, their feet in big slippers, scraped back the chairs; some walked with crutches, some were pushed in little carriages, and there was one girl who was brought in every morning on a stretcher and looked almost transparent.

A sign from the chaplain—the boy rang his bell and hurried forward. Genuflexion. And already Sister Adonie was lighting the coals in the incense-burner in preparation for the final benedictions.

"Dominus vobiscum."

"Et cum spiritu tuo," came the boy's response.

The replies fluttered back and forth, the light of the candles danced, the mind of the boy kept wandering off; he came, he went, forgetting his replies, forgetting the mass, thinking of the bolt, of the bicycle, of the patient on the stretcher. Twice the priest had to wait, for the choirboy even forgot the vessels, and Sister Adonie from the vestry called him to order with a wan smile.

"Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi."

"Dona eis requiem."

He had made a mistake again. The Dona eis requiem was for masses for the dead, and today there were only final benedictions.

"Agnus Dei, qui tollis . . . ."

He trotted to and fro on his short, eleven-year-old legs, whose knees were always blue with cold; he brought the vessels, he went off again, grasped his bell with its three notes.

"Ite missa est . . . ."

He felt the melted chocolate in his pocket, and something rankled in him. Where was he? In the vestry already. Sister Adonie helped him to change his red robe for the black one, and put a surplice over it.

"You won't be too hungry, Georget?"
She went off in her voluminous gray wool dress to light the candles around the catafalque. The patients left. Most of the nuns too. Some men brought in the first coffin. The boy, without knowing what he was doing, blew on the ashes of the incense-burner, and his cheeks became purple.

Still nothing had happened, and yet he had pulled back the bolt. No doubt it was happening now, during one of the final benedictions—

A sign from the chaplain—he grasped the great black Cross. He walked ahead, kicking his robe.

"Liberam, Domine . . . ."

Sister Adonie, who made a draft with her gown as she walked, was already at the organ, and the child wanted to cry, just as he did every time he served at a final benediction. Tears without sadness, solemn, almost happy.

"Pater Noster . . . ."

This was the moment he liked best. These two words thrown up to Heaven like a supreme appeal by the chaplain, who grasped the sprinkler and, in the absolute silence, paced slowly around the coffin.

Then the incense-burner—

"Et ne nos inducat tentationem . . . ."

"Sed libera nos a malo. . . ."

Why had he been promised a bicycle? He still hadn’t eaten his chocolate. He turned it around in his pocket, through the opening in his choirboy’s robe.

"Requiescat in pace!"

"Amen!"

Commotion. There were not many helpers, but their soles crunched on the grey stone tiles. They were taking away the coffin. Another body was brought in. Again the organ:

"De profundis clamavi . . . ."

This was a poor man’s coffin, without any decoration, a white wooden box supplied through public charity. There was only one nun praying in a corner, near the confessional.

"Requiescat in pace . . . ."

The third! And no one afterwards! The wheels of the second hearse could be heard outside.

"De profundis . . . ."

Why should the man give him a bicycle for a present? He had lied! He would never give him a bike. You don’t give bicycles to people you don’t know!

For years, ever since he had been going to school, he had wanted a bike, but—

"Pater Noster . . . ."

He made a mistake and held out the incense-burner instead of the sprinkler, and was on the verge of bursting into tears. He would go and confess tomorrow. No, today, for if he died in the meantime—

"Et ne nos inducat . . . ."

It was broad daylight. The sun was shining. He suddenly became aware of it when the door was opened for the third coffin to be taken away.

"You were absent-minded today, Georget."

He looked at the vestry sister and wondered for a moment if it would not be best to confess everything to her.

"Did you eat your chocolate?"

Why did he lie? He said yes, while all the time the chocolate was no more than a paste in his pocket, underneath his handkerchief.

Sister Adonie fumbled in the folds of her wide gown, her rosary clicking, and drew out from some mysterious hiding-place some one-franc pieces which she laid in a row on the table.

"Here’s nine francs, Georget. Be in time tomorrow morning."

He wouldn’t be, he knew. He would never come again. He was sad. Sunlight came in from outside and tarnished the flames of the candles.

Would he dare to leave the Hospital? He ran all the way home, fell into a chair in front of the kitchen table and, since he could think of nothing to say to his
astonished mother, burst out with: "I'm hungry!"

The main thing was that he must not tell anyone about it. Nobody! Not for anything! It was for this reason that during recreation, after the arithmetic lesson, he chose the friend he cared for least, Gallet, a pale boy with a big head, the most vicious of tattletales.

"I'm going to have a bike!"

"You're not!"

"What'll you bet that I'm going to have a bike?"

"Your parents are too poor."

"It's not my parents who are going to buy it."

"Who is it then?"

Just the same, he didn't believe in the bicycle.

"What'll you bet? A bike with two speeds, with chromium-plated mudguards."

Next came the geography lesson. Then, almost at once, at half past eleven, the pupils left for home by the big green door.

He wandered around in the streets on purpose, kicking his heels against the doorsteps of the houses. He stopped for a long time in front of the shopwindow of Luska, who sold toys.

"Your mother's looking for you!" shouted Ledoux, a neighbor, who ran by.

"She's not!"

Because the bicycle—

Well, the bicycle was there. He saw it in the corridor, still partly wrapped in packing paper. He saw his mother and father awkwardly contemplating the machine.

"I tell you it's Mathilde!" declared his mother, who always felt the need of assuming a sad air at the happiest moments. "The poor girl is sorry for what she has done to us. She has remembered that Georget's first communion is coming soon. After all, she's his godmother."

"A lot she's bothered about that till now!"

"I don't pretend that Mathilde has not been mistaken, but — Don't touch, Georget! You'll spoil it! Who would have sent the child a bicycle if not Mathilde?"

"I don't see how she could have, since she is in Cairo."

"As if she couldn't have written to the Nouvelles Galeries to deliver a bicycle in Georget's name!"

"It's just that it isn't like her, not to let us know that it's from her."

"Perhaps the letter will still come."

They went on arguing, because the handlebars were not yet attached and no one knew how to put them on.

"We only have to get young Dupain to come round. He's the one who repairs all the bicycles in this street."

They were surprised to see that Georget ate nothing.

"He's too excited. We oughtn't to have shown it to him so suddenly."

"I'm not excited. And besides, I knew."

"You knew what?"

"That I was going to have a bike."

His mother sighed as if to say: Look at him lying again!

His father looked at his watch, for he had to go to office and he would have liked to try the bicycle first.

"Hurry up! You're going to be late for school."

As if school mattered any more! He went there because he had to. He announced to that filthy beast of a Gallet: "I've got my bike!"

"You're lying!"

"You'll see it at four o'clock."

He would have liked to have added more. His tongue was itching to say, for instance: I earned it myself! My parents think it's a present from Aunt Mathilde, but it isn't. This morning, a man—
THE CHOIRBOY AND THE BICYCLE

He wouldn’t tell a soul! Never! Never! Who knows? Perhaps soon some policemen would be waiting for him to arrest him after school!—Who pulled back the bolt of the little door?—It wasn’t me!—Sister Adonie saw you.—Sister Adonie is a liar!—All right, then explain how you got the bike?

He raised two fingers insistently. It was urgent! Hardly had he reached the lavatory when he vomited everything he had eaten for lunch, and it tasted of tomatoes. He did not remember having eaten tomato sauce with the remains of the stew.

“Well, what’s the matter with you?”

“Me, sir? Nothing, sir.”

“You’re quite pale.”

“There’s nothing the matter, sir.”

“Suck this.”

It was a mania of the teacher to distribute peppermint pastilles, not whole ones but cut up into quarters.

I FORBID you to touch the bicycle before your father comes home.”

He did his homework, under the lamp. He learnt his lesson aloud. It was a history lesson on Philip the Handsome. They had supper. He could still taste the peppermint.

“I think we ought to write to Mathilde to thank her.”

“And what if it isn’t her?”

“If it isn’t her—which is impossible—then she’ll take the hint. She will remember that she has a godson who is going to have his first communion.”

“Well, you write, she’s your sister.”

“What do you want me to write to her?”

The father dictated. The mother wrote. Four or five sheets of lined paper were torn up.

“What I’m wondering is, why did she choose a bicycle? Usually a godmother is much more likely to give a watch to a first communicant.”

Suddenly they remembered Georget.

“Good heavens! He’s not yet in bed and he gets up at half past five!”

Then he announced: “I’m not going to the Hospital any more.”

“Why not?”

He went scarlet and felt the blood throbbing in his temples.

“Because!”

“Why aren’t you going to the Hospital any more? You were the one who wanted it. You know it’s for your savings account.”

“I don’t want to go there any more!”

“Did they do something to you? Aren’t the nuns nice to you?”

He did not answer.

“Go to bed. Tomorrow I shall go and see Sister Adonie.”

The next day he woke up a few seconds before half past five. He lay there with his eyes open, waiting for the click of the alarm clock, which he had not wound up. Then he went to sleep again and dreamed of monstrous bolts which two men could not manage to draw back.

At breakfast his mother scolded him. “I don’t understand how, when a child can put aside nine francs by serving at three final benedictions—”

His father had gone to get the newspaper from the letterbox. He finished his coffee, his feet under the kitchen range, while he smoked his first cigarette of the day. The little brother was eating a boiled egg in his nightshirt, sitting in a ray of sunshine.

“Listen to this, Germaine.”

It was the father’s habit to address his wife at every opportunity to read her passages from the newspaper. As she knew that they were not always suitable for the children, she remarked: “Georget is here.”

“Never mind. It is about the bank robbery. Do you remember? Giovanni, the one who was caught and who died of pleurisy at the Hospital—well, they buried him yesterday. Georget must have served at his final benediction.”
She made signs at him, but in vain.  
"He always refused to give the names of his accomplices or to tell where he had hidden the money."

She coughed, resigned. It couldn’t be helped if he wouldn’t understand that a child’s mind—

"This is what they say in the paper: ‘Strange Theft at the Edith Cavell Hospital. Yesterday a theft as gruesome as it was unexpected was committed at the Edith Cavell Hospital shortly before or after the funeral of Giovanni, one of the participants in the robbery at the Bank of L’ert et Chauvin. It is known that this theft, committed with skill and boldness, required the collaboration of at least three accomplices. It is also known that it yielded the participants a booty of more than six hundred thousand francs which have not been retrieved. Giovanni was the only one to have been caught. Already in bad health, he was stricken in prison with pleurisy and had to be taken to hospital where he soon succumbed. It need scarcely be added that he was closely watched."

"However, yesterday, during the obsequies, an unknown person got into the morgue of the Hospital where the dead man’s clothes were waiting to be taken to the steamroom. One single shoe, the left, is missing, taken away by the thief. This has led to the assumption that this shoe contained the secret of the bandit whom the police could not force to talk.

"Was it only a question of the list of accomplices? Was it not rather informa-
tion concerning the place where the money was hidden?"

"Do you hear? A shoe!" repeated the father while he relit his cigarette. "Just think that things like that are happening all around us, that it was Georget who served at the final benediction . . . . What are you waiting for, Georget, why aren’t you going to school?"

Without answering, the boy snatched up his satchel, threw his nap overcoat over his arm, and went off into the corridor where his bicycle always stood. The street door slammed. Later on, during class, he sent over a piece of paper to Gallet on which he had written: "I’ve won. You owe me two suckers."

Suppose Sister Adonie—

O NEDay . . . Two days . . .

"Did you see Sister Adonie?"

"She was pretty sure the child would not stay long. They find it amusing for a certain length of time. They are all the same. So—"

They did not allow him to ride his bicycle before the spring, so as not to spoil it.

Finally a card arrived from Aunt Mathilde, a postcard showing the Suez Canal against a dark-blue sky:

"I was glad to get your news. So our little misunderstandings have been cleared up. Hector is well, the children too. Berthe is going to school next year. We are sure to spend our next leave at Vichy. Love, Mathilde." Then, squeezed into a corner: "Best wishes to my godson for his first communion."
"What did I tell you?"
"Of course. But still—"
"As I know Mathilde, tactful as she is, she preferred to send a present to Georget before writing to us."

And Georget said nothing. He said nothing to his enemy Gallet. He said nothing to anybody. Even at confession he found some vague formula: "I accuse myself of having sinned by imprudence and of not having always told all the truth."

ONLY much later, when he was eighteen... His father was dead. Mathilde was living in poverty, for her husband had abandoned her with her three children to follow some woman or other who was only spoken of in hushed tones.

Georget was alone with his mother, in the kitchen where nothing had changed, except that he himself had some downy hairs on his chin and a slightly raucous voice and that, instead of leaving for school, he left, at almost the same time, for his bank.

"Listen, Mother. I've been wanting to tell you for a long time. Speaking of Aunt Mathilde—you remember the bike?"

For years he had been waiting for this moment, and now it had come. He was more or less the head of the family. It was he who kept the household going. Now he could afford to—

"What's the matter with Aunt Mathilde? You are going to get like your poor father, who couldn't stand her just because occasionally she may have had her faults."

"But it's about—"

She poured the coffee into the cups, took the sugar-bowl from the cupboard, and sat down opposite her two sons. "Mathilde is much kinder than you think. The best proof is the bicycle, which she sent without saying a word. Perhaps, I have often wondered, without telling her husband, who didn't like our family. What have you still got against her?"

On the mantlepiece, above the range, the alarm clock which used to wake him at half past five ticked noisily.

"Nothing, Mother. I..."

What was the use! The bicycle, now, was rusty, too small for him and even for his brother. Who was listening now, at quarter to six, to the first stroke of the mass at the Hospital? What little boy was sneaking out into the dark morning, keeping close to the walls, counting the greatest possible number of final benedictions at three francs apiece?

"Pass me the jam!" was all he said, with a sigh.

Then he picked up a man's bicycle to go to work like a grown-up.