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Piaf

A Passionate Life

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Extract

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Chapter One

Mon Coeur est au Coin d'une Rue

'I believed that when a boy sought out a girl, she should never turn him down. I genuinely thought it to be part of a woman's role in life.'

Edith Piaf loved to tell the tale of how she had been born on a policeman's cape in front of the steps of 72 Rue de Belleville – the building which contained her parents' tawdry room – during the early hours of 19 December 1915, adding that the gendarme had been summoned by a neighbour after the horse-driven ambulance had failed to turn up. Her birth-certificate, however, tells another story – stating that she was born at the Hôpital Tenon, at 4 Rue de la Chine in Paris, and at the bottom of the document, proving the fact, is the signature of the midwife, Jeanne Crauzier. Even so, Edith's account is sufficiently amusing to fit in with the subsequent legends which abounded throughout her tragically short life, some real, most of them figments of an overworked imagination.

Her father, Louis Alphonse Gassion, worked as a street acrobat and contortionist and came from a family of circus entertainers. Two sisters, Mathilde and Zéphoria, enjoyed a modest success in France and Belgium under the name Tante Zaza, and another sister, Louise, formed one third of Kragg's Trio, at that time popular on both sides of the Channel. Born in 1881 in Falaise, Normandy, Gassion was a far from handsome man who measured just 4 feet 11 inches, though what he lacked

in looks and stature he more than made up for in the virility stakes – fathering at least nineteen children, mostly to teenage girls. Of his many offspring, the future Edith Piaf was the only one not have been brought into the world a bastard.

Her mother, half-Italian, half-Berber, and born Annette Maillard in Leghorn, Italy, was professionally known as Line Marsa – though when not singing rowdy *revencharde chansons* in the local *beuglants* and *bal-musettes* she earned a more meagre living, selling nougat and working a roundabout at the fairground at Pantin, on the outskirts of Paris.

Gassion and Line Marsa had actually married on 14 September 1914, soon after Marsa's sixteenth birthday, and though they never got around to divorcing, neither did they spend much time together after Edith's birth. It has even been suggested that Gassion was a coward and conscientious objector, who only married in the first place because army regulations unofficially stated that any man about to be married was sent home on compassionate leave, and not always recalled to fight. If this was so, the plan backfired, though Gassion was allowed to return to Paris for the baby's birth and subsequent christening. The child was baptized Edith, after the heroic English nurse, Edith Cavell, recently executed by the Germans, and for a second name her mother chose Giovanna, so that she might always be reminded of her Italian ancestry. Edith hated both the name *and* the woman who had given her life, and never made a secret of the fact when asked. 'She might just as well have gone all the way and added Said Ben Mohammed,' she once said bitterly, referring to her equally loathsome maternal grandmother, though everyone in the district called her Mina, the name she had used whilst directing a flea-circus sideshow.

In January 1916, Louis Gassion returned to the Front, leaving the baby with his wife. Line Marsa likewise dumped Edith upon her mother, in order to fulfil a music-hall contract with an entrepreneur who had promised to make her a star. In 1974 I shared a jug of wine with an elderly couple in a Montmartre bar who had actually seen Line Marsa on the stage. Her performance, they recalled, had been tense but not unprofessional, her voice fully vibrant but harsher than those of her more celebrated contemporaries, Damia and Fréhel. Marsa also cut several records – 'Les filles de joie' and 'Une dernière cigarette'

are reminiscent of Yvonne George's later songs, with the voice trailing off at the end of each line or even breaking completely, as if she is desperately trying not to choke. She also sang 'De l'autre côté de la rue', one of Piaf's earlier hits, several weeks before her daughter, having persuaded a friend to steal the sheet music from the publisher. The only reason Line Marsa did not achieve lasting success, one must conclude, having listened to these scratchy recordings, was simply because luck was never on her side.

Home for the infant Edith was an indescribably filthy hovel in Rue Rebeval, not far from where she had been born, and such was Mina's stupidity that she put red wine in the child's feeding bottle to make her sleep, so that she could go off on benders with her cronies. Needless to say, Edith soon fell ill, and when Louis Gassion returned home in September 1917 he found her covered in eczema sores and crawling with fleas. Without further ado he had her sent to Bernay, a small town in Normandy, to be cared for by his own mother, Louise. Though the environment here was a great deal warmer, healthier and more opulent than the one she had been snatched from, there was one detail which could hardly be overlooked . . . the house at 7 Rue Saint-Michel, where Madame Gassion worked as head cook, was the region's most notorious bordello!

What happened at Bernay remains an integral part of the Piaf legend. The prostitutes, eight in all, adopted Edith as their mascot – they made her dolls, took her on outings, and dressed her in pretty clothes. She was also taught how to play the piano, for the bordello owned one of those wonderful mechanical instruments which, later on, would regularly turn up in her songs. 'Le vieux piano', written by Henri Contet in 1960, came about only after she had told him about her childhood in Bernay.

> Qu'il était beau, le piano, bon piano,
> Vieux piano, à l'époque des copains . . .
> Vers trois heures du matin
> Quand elle buvait son demi d'oubli . . .
>
> [How lovely it was, the piano, good piano,
> Old piano, when there were pals around . . .

Around three in the morning
When she was drinking herself into oblivion . . .]

And of course the song ends, in true Piaf-fashion, with the now old woman drinking alone at the bar, seeing imaginary fingers on the keyboard, whilst kids in jeans talk about an outdated bar, its has-been piano, and the soldier who once walked in . . .

The prostitutes at Bernay were surprised to discover Edith had an astonishing ear for music – even at the age of three she was able to tackle several basic chords, and whenever anyone put a record on the wind-up gramophone she only had to hear the song a few times to pick up the melody. Then, quite suddenly, she fell ill, developing cataracts on her eyes, and the bordello doctor diagnosed conjunctivitis. Though we will never know for sure if she lost her sight completely, witnesses have described how for some time she would wander around with her eyes glued shut, constantly bumping into things, and Edith referred to her 'years of darkness' many times in interviews. Also, considering her lifelong faith and devotion towards the saint who she claimed had restored her sight – almost certainly a 'miracle' effected by medicine as opposed to divine intervention – there is absolutely no reason why she should have wanted to fabricate *this* story. Indeed, such was the intensity of her superstitious nature that she would never have *dared* tamper with fate!

Initially, the prostitutes paid for Edith to see a specialist: he applied silver nitrate directly to her eyes, a horrendously painful procedure which did not effect a cure. She was then seen by the local doctor who visited the bordello each week, a man who was more used to treating colds and venereal diseases and who joked that the establishment might be better off spending its money on a white stick. Therefore, as a last resort the girls closed shop for the day and took her on a pilgrimage to Saint Thérèse's shrine at Lisieux – something of a 'risk' considering that Thérèse Martin, the watchmaker's daughter from Alençon who had died in a Carmelite convent aged just twenty-four, eighteen years before Edith's birth, was not actually canonized until 1925.

Edith later claimed that her sight had returned on 21 August 1921, and few people ever doubted her – for the rest of her life

Thérèse, with her shower of roses, would remain the key figure in her personal and religious development, a curious mixture that embraced Catholicism, superstition and instinct. She *always* wore the saint's talisman around her neck, and on one occasion actually believed herself to be close to death after it had been misplaced. Saint Thérèse's picture also shows up in many of Edith's later off-scene photographs – most of them sadly taken when she was in some hospital bed or other – wedged between the Bible and the essential bottle of pills. She also confessed to 'speaking' to her before going on stage – once she had performed the obligatory ritual of kissing the floorboards and making the sign of the cross.

There was a major problem, however, now that Edith could see, for she had suddenly become aware of her surroundings, even if she did not understand why the 'ladies' greeted a steady succession of soldiers, sailors and businessmen in the salon, only to see them off again an hour or so later. Louis Gassion was therefore served with an ultimatum by the priest at the local École Paul Bert, where Edith had been registered a few months before – unless Gassion took his daughter away from the bordello, she would be forced to leave the school. Gassion ignored the priest's threats, and over the next few years father and daughter – in their ramshackle caravan – toured the provinces, entertaining in streets and market-squares with a fair amount of success.

In spite of what has been said or written, Edith never sang with her father: it was her job to unroll his tattered piece of matting on the pavement and act as his stooge. Gassion would bawl to passers-by, 'Mesdames et messieurs, you are about to see the finest *contortioniste-antipodiste* in France! My little girl, Edith, will make the collection and afterwards, providing you pay well enough, she will execute her perilous somersault!' But although Edith always made the collection, she never performed the somersault – her father always came up with the excuse that she was frail, or under the weather. By and large, the couple lived reasonably well. They slept in hotels, and whenever they stayed in any particular town for a number of weeks Gassion sent his daughter to school – not because he was interested in Edith getting a good education, but so that she could take advantage of the concessionary handout of shoes and clothes.

He was not, however, a patient man. Although Edith remembered him as a loving, caring father, she was often the butt of his temper whenever things were not going according to plan, and occasionally felt the back of his hand. Louis Gassion was also a very heavy drinker: for the poorer classes in France between the two world wars there was little else to do if one was not employed, and needless to say the alcohol was rough and cheap, as absinthe had not yet been outlawed by the government. As her father was very much a womanizer, Edith learned about sex perhaps earlier than she should have done, particularly as there was only ever one bed in their hotel room . . .

The mighty singing career began quite by chance one December day in 1926 when Louis Gassion fell ill and had to be confined to his bed. There was no money for food, and the concierge had already threatened the pair with eviction if they did not cough up their rent. Edith simply shrugged her shoulders, put on a dirty overcoat which was several sizes too big for her, and descended to the local square where she sang the only song she knew all the way through, 'La Marseillaise'. In fact, she earned as much singing this *one* song as her father had made over three days! Then on, whenever Louis Gassion was 'busy' with one of his mistresses, Edith would go out into the streets and sing. She very quickly put together a repertoire of *chansons-réalistes* popularized by the great stars of the day: Damia, Fréhel and Yvonne George were her favourites. Damia (Marie-Louise Damien, 1890–1978) was known as *La Tragédienne de la Chanson*, and as such was the most popular singer in France after Piaf. She was the first of the *réalistes* to sing entirely in black, with the spotlight directed on her face, and she had a big hit with 'Just a gigolo' in Europe and the United States. Another famous song was 'Gloomy Sunday', which was also sung by Billie Holiday. Fréhel (Marguerite Boul'ch, 1891–1951) sang in the café concerts and later became a friend. Yvonne George (Yvonne de Knopf, 1896–1930) had amassed a cult gay following in France, though she was hopelessly addicted to cocaine and the bottle, and she had an overt fondness for bisexual American sailors. It was after spending the night with several of these that she was found dead of a suspected drugs overdose in a Swiss hotel room in May 1930, though some contemporary

reports stated that she had actually died of the consumption which had ravaged her frail body over the years. Edith is alleged to have witnessed her funeral at the Père Lachaise cemetery, and learned Yvonne's most famous song by heart – to 'cash in' on the pathos that same evening. It is a great pity that she never recorded 'Pars' later in her career.

Mon désespoir reste mon secret,
Nous ne sommes que deux étrangers,
Pars, sans un mot d'amour,
Pars, laisse-moi souffrir . . .

[My hopelessness stays my secret,
We are but two strangers,
Go, without a word of love,
Go, leave me to suffer . . .]

At the age of fifteen, and allegedly no longer a virgin, Edith left her father to make her own way in life. It was at this time that she met the young woman whom she would later call 'my demon spirit', and who would many years later broadcast to the world, 'I am Piaf's sister'. Her name was Simone Berteaut, but as Edith always shortened the names of her loved ones – unless they had done something to displease her – she always called her Mômone. Over the next thirty or so years their relationship would be in turn stormy and embarrassingly compassionate. They were together at every major stage of Edith's life and career, fought and made up in public with equal vociferousness, and once faced each other in a fierce courtroom drama which would have done justice to any song, only to emerge arm in arm and head for the nearest bar!

When she published her famous book, in 1969, Mômone herself was on the receiving end of countless injunctions and threats from those who accused her of being a charlatan, until she was forced to confess to a packed courtroom that she had made up the 'family connection'. Yet if she was not Piaf's half-sister, in the singer's eyes she was as good as. In 1930, Louis Gassion – approaching fifty and apparently terrified of dying alone – had placed an advert in a newspaper lonely hearts column, and this had resulted in a brief but fruitful liaison with

Georgette L'Hôte, a young woman just six years older than Edith, but with a temperament far removed from that of Line Marsa. Ten months later their daughter Denise had been born, and like Simone Berteaut she would cash in on her sibling's fame by publishing *two* biographies. Whilst Môme's tome was a smash hit all over the world, Denise Gassion's white-washed accounts of Piaf's 'no-drugs, no-alcohol' life were barely noticed outside of France.

With Môme, Edith began singing in the streets on a regular basis. They earned a lot of money, and spent it without so much as thinking where their next meal would be coming from. They slept in cold, rat-infested cellars and disused buildings, and were not always choosy about their company. They were gloriously content, however, because for the first time in their lives they were able to please themselves. Môme's mother was little better than Edith's had been, and so long as the girl paid her a weekly allowance out of the 'salary' she earned working for Edith, she did not create too much of a fuss over the fact that both girls were breaking the law because they were minors.

Edith's first serious love affair began on an auspicious date: 21 March 1932. Louis Dupont, whom I met in 1975, told me that he had been enjoying a first day of spring stroll through the streets of Romainville, on the outskirts of Paris, when he had stumbled on this scruffy little kid, singing her heart out:

> The song was Damia's 'J'ai le cafard', a rather depressing piece for one so young, and she really did look as though she had just stepped out of a dustbin, and for weeks afterwards I kept asking myself what she'd had to make me fall head-over-heels in love with her. I guess it must have been her personality, or her cheek. And as for her temper – let me tell you, when Edith got out of bed the wrong side on a morning, *everyone* darted for cover!

According to Dupont, Edith baptized him P'tit Louis not because he was small – on the contrary, he was over six-feet tall – but so that he would never be confused with her father. He was handsome, naturally – throughout her life, with one exception (Marcel Cerdan), Edith managed to ensnare only those men she regarded as having 'Valentino qualities', though

none of them was quite as poor as Louis Dupont, who worked part-time as a delivery boy. His first move, once he had decided that he and Edith were about to become an item, was to take her to meet Madame Georgette, his formidable, alcoholic mother. Needless to say, Edith took an instant dislike to this woman who, she said, reminded her of her own mother, and instead of living with Madame Georgette in Romainville the couple rented a room in the inaptly-named Hôtel de l'Avenir, on Rue Orfila, in Edith's native Belleville, at that time one of the most run-down districts of Paris. And neither was it an ideal love-nest . . . for Edith insisted that Mômone move in with them, even though the room only possessed one bed.

Almost at once, P'tit Louis began putting his foot down. He was decidedly against Edith's singing in the streets, claiming than this amounted to little more than common vagrancy. She was so infatuated with the young man – at nineteen, he was two years her senior – that for a while she relented and accepted a job in Taupin et Masquet's clog factory. The money was good, but even so she missed the freedom of the streets, and when she became ill she was convinced that it was due to the lack of fresh air. In fact, she was pregnant, and as soon as the factory manager was told this – by Mômone – she was dismissed for breaking one of the house rules!

Edith's next job was in another factory, varnishing army boots – this time she was fired for swearing at the boss. Mômone then found them both a job in a wreath factory, and she actually went into labour whilst on duty. Her daughter was born on 11 January 1933 – Ste Marcelle's Day – at Hôpital Tenon, and was baptized Marcelle Dupont a week later at the church in Belleville. The factory employees then had a whipround to pay for the child's first layette, and for the rest of her short life Marcelle never wore anything that was not brand-new. Neither Edith nor her two companions were in any way domesticated, and Edith never would be. If anything needed washing, it was thrown out and replaced.

Now that she had become a mother, P'tit Louis *forbade* Edith to ever sing in the streets again, and on top of this his mother began interfering in their relationship. Further complications occurred with Mômone, though Edith refused to give her friend her marching orders when told to do so. Edith then took her

revenge on her lover by joining forces with a young couple named Zéphrine and Jean, who had already enjoyed some success in café-concerts and some of the local *salles des beuglants* – quite literally the bawling halls, which were famed for the atrocious behaviour of their clientele. When Edith became their 'central vocalist' they took up entertaining in the army barracks, and through this Edith developed her lifelong passion for men in uniform. Her favourites were the *légionnaires* and the *coloniales*, both of whom featured in famous songs, and the re-named trio Zizi, Zozette and Zouzou were so popular in some quarters that they often caused near-riots and mass-hysteria in the mess-halls. This was a two-year-long episode of one-night stands and broken promises, and all the time Louis Dupont was going frantic with worry over his 'wife' and daughter – for wherever Edith and Mômone went, Marcelle went with them.

It has to be remembered that in spite of her 'family' status, Edith was still legally a minor. On top of this, Jean was wanted by the police because he had refused to pay a fine for stealing, and Zéphrine was on a good-behaviour bond after being bound over for under-age importuning. Their association ended abruptly when Louis Gassion filed a search petition with the commissariat in Place des Fêtes.

> One evening we slept rough in an alleyway which stank of dustbins. Zéphrine was frightfully ugly, and she had mumps. Suddenly the beam of a pocket-torch fell on our faces and a surly voice ordered us to get up. We had been surprised by a police sergeant and two officers on bicycles, but as luck would have it the sergeant looked into Zéphrine's seductive eyes. It was a tough sacrifice to make, but our only chance of evading prison. Zéphrine went off into the night with the sergeant, and Jean and I were let off the hook . . .

Edith's adventure, typically perhaps, did not end there. The incident caused a heated argument between Jean and Zéphrine – this resulted in the girl walking out on him and returning to the family home, in effect a caravan in the gipsy camp at Pantin, on the northern edge of the city. Edith was given the ubiquitous task of reuniting the couple, but the moment she entered the

camp she was set upon by Zéphrine's family. When Jean saw the state she was in, he decided to declare war, and the whole of that afternoon was spent touring the cafés and bars of Belleville and Montmartre gathering an army of drop-out friends, most of whom had at some time in their young lives been in trouble with the law. During the ensuing scrap at Pantin, several people were badly injured and someone called the police. Edith and Jean were arrested, with some forty others, and herded in single file along the peripheral zone which bordered Paris in those days. Aware that they would almost certainly be sent to a correction house if found guilty, they decided to make a break for it across the wide expanse of scrubland which was the forerunner of today's concrete metropolis. The police shot at them, and missed. Edith scratched her legs on the brambles, and twisted her ankle. They eventually ended up at P'tit Louis' house, but instead of finding her lover Edith was confronted with his angry mother. Madame Georgette had never forgiven Edith for taking her son away from her. Although blind drunk, she grasped a poker and would have hit the hapless girl with it had she not lost her balance and crashed to the floor, banging her head on the coal scuttle. At that moment – and Madame Georgette's injuries were apparently fatal – her son barged into the room and yelled that he never wanted to see Edith again as long as she lived. Edith fled, and for the rest of the night lay low in a friend's café, hiding from the police. When she returned to the Hôtel de l'Avenir the next morning, Mômone broke the most terrible news to her – Louis Dupont had taken away their little daughter.

Unable to face singing in the streets any more, and still in fear of being picked up by the police, Edith secured herself a job in Le Tourbillon, a *bal-musette* in the heart of Pigalle's red-light district. Here she washed glasses and mopped the floor, and occasionally sang a couple of songs if any of the resident acts failed to turn up. She also changed her name to Denise Jay, and had fallen in love with a *légionnaire*, hoping that the news of the affair would bring Louis Dupont to his senses, and that she would be asked back into the fold. Little is known of this man, other than the fact that he was 'incredibly handsome', but a few years later their brief affair would form the basis of one of her most famous songs. And Edith was right in one respect

– the association would bring P'tit Louis back to her, but in the most tragic circumstances.

In the summer of 1933 Edith left Le Tourbillon, changed her name to Huguette Hélia, and took up as *chanteuse-en-résidence* at one of the most notorious gay bars in Paris, the Juan-les-Pins in Pigalle. This was run by a huge butch lesbian named Lulu, a woman not without powerful contacts in the Parisian underworld. Yet despite its clientele of criminals, thugs and drug-addicts who mixed freely with the toffs and gangsters, the Juan-les-Pins was much favoured by respectable artistes such as Maurice Chevalier, Mistinguett, Suzy Solidor and Charles Trenet, who many years later recalled 'a little thing in a blue satin sailor's suit' singing 'Nous irons à Valparaiso', a vulgar sea-shanty popularized a few years earlier by Yvonne George.

> Nous irons à Valparaiso, all-away!
> Pour la saler, pour faire la paix,
> Pour foutrer les filles
> Et quelques mat'lots!
>
> [We're going to Valparaiso, all-away!
> To fleece it, to make peace,
> To fuck the girls
> And a few sailors!]

It was at the Juan-les-Pins, one evening after the show, that P'tit Louis informed Edith that their daughter had been taken to Hôpital Tenon, where doctors had diagnosed spinal-meningitis. By the time Edith reached the hospital, Marcelle had been given a lumbar-puncture and the doctor told her that the next nine days would be critical – in fact she died on the tenth day, just as the parents were growing confident that she had got over the worst. Edith was devastated, but in spite of her grief she would have nothing more to do with Louis. Returning to the Hôtel de l'Avenir she consoled herself in the arms of her légionnaire . . . and even Mômone had the sense to stay away.

Edith's friends did not desert her in her hour of need. The staff and clientele of the Juan-les-Pins clubbed together to pay for the child's funeral. Even so, she was ten francs short and, terrified of insulting everyone's generosity by asking for more,

she went out on the beat. She picked up a man not far from the nightclub, and this stranger took her to his hotel room. Ten francs was not a great deal of money, though in her shabby state Edith probably could not have demanded much more. However, when she told her 'client' *why* she needed the money, he gave her the ten francs and asked her to leave. Many years later, Edith regretted this dreadful occasion.

> In my career I have earned millions of francs, and I have squandered it all away because being a spendthrift was so much fun! It was my revenge on myself for having slept on the pavement as a child. I have conquered my own destiny, which caused me to be born at the bottom of the social scale – in the gutter where hope hardly exists at all. But even the greatest of my triumphs would never compensate for the most atrocious memory of them all – the night when I was so poor that I wanted to sell myself for ten francs.

A few weeks after Marcelle's death, a new man entered Edith's life. His name was Albert, and he was a handsome, irascible but menacing pimp – so menacing, in fact, that within hours of meeting her he told her that she would be expected to go on the beat. She should have ended the whole thing there and then, but her daughter's demise had left her confused and wondering what to do next. Though she refused to work as a prostitute, she did agree to hand over a modest proportion of her earnings to Albert in return for his protection. This is not as unusual as it seems – even established entertainers like Damia and the British star Harry Fragson doled out protection money to pimps. Even so, when Edith returned to the Juan-les-Pins in September 1935 Albert was not satisfied that she was earning enough, and he forced her to work as a 'prospector'. This involved visiting some of the better class nightclubs and bars and making a mental note of where all the wealthy women hung out. This information was passed on to Albert, who then lay in wait for them and robbed them of their jewels and cash. Another girl who worked for Albert was not as submissive as Edith: her name was Nadia, and when she disobeyed Albert's instructions, he informed her that she would have her face 'rearranged'. A

few days later Nadia was fished out of the Canal Saint-Martin, and in desperation Edith tried to break free of her mentor. This resulted in a nasty confrontation in a bar opposite the Juan-les-Pins where Albert pulled a gun on her and fired. The bullet missed, grazing her neck . . .

This unfortunate episode should have taught Edith a valuable lesson, but it did not. Albert was the first of many leeches – some claiming to be lovers or friends – who would ultimately bleed Edith dry. What is so utterly remarkable is that she hardly ever seemed to mind, so long as she was getting something in return. In later life that 'something' almost invariably came in the form of a song, and she always had to fight to hang on to a man. In 1935, however, there were no songs other than the ones she had picked up whilst hanging around outside *café-concerts*, and the men were often more trouble than they were worth.

Following the incident with the gun, Albert was arrested by the police – no doubt more to do with the muggings he had perpetrated than for what he had done to Edith, for in her then small world, such was the *loi du cercle* that problems were usually dealt with internally, by fellow thugs, without involving the police. And yet she boldly states in her memoirs that she immediately took up with *two* men, both infinitely worse than Albert – Léon, one of the regulars from the Juan-les-Pins, and a young sailor named Pierre, whom she had met whilst working with Zéphrine and Jean.

Louis Dupont could not remember Léon, but he knew Pierre well, as he explained:

> Everyone called him Le Balafré [Slasher] because he always walked around with a cutthroat razor in his pocket. He was very good-looking, almost like a girl, and he would sleep with absolutely anyone – any age, either sex, so long as they could afford the going-rate, which was high. Edith, of course, always charmed him into giving it her for free . . . well, in exchange for the commission he charged on her earnings. Le Balafré's hang-out was Gerny's, an expensive cabaret near l'Étoile. He was knocking off the owner, Louis Leplée . . .

Gerny's, one of the most fashionable nightclubs in Paris, stood on Rue Pierre-Charron, just off the Champs-Elysées, and Louis Leplée – a nephew of the great comic, Polin, who had died in 1927 – was its sixty-year-old director. He was also a man with a shady reputation, as Louis Dupont confirmed:

> For years he'd made his living as a drag-artiste, working the halls until taking over the reins at Chez Liberty, in the twenties home to some of the most notorious perverts in Paris. He was never interested in any man older than twenty-five, and of course he had the money to pay whatever they asked, and not always honestly earned. Leplée ran a crime-ring which peddled drugs and under-aged prostitutes, and Gerny's was merely a cover. And neither was the meeting between himself and Piaf an accident – it was engineered by Le Balafré, so that he could screw Edith for more money. Contrary to popular belief, she was no longer an unknown street-singer. Though she had never done more than four or five songs in any one performance, she was popular with the Pigalle crowd and had developed quite a following in that part of town. She didn't have to sing in the streets, not any more, but she did so because to her the smell of the traffic was like a drug. She couldn't stand to be cooped up. Even when she was the biggest star in France she would occasionally put on old clothes and go out there for the sheer hell of it!

According to Edith, and the legend she innocuously instigated, she and Mômone were working the junction of Rue Troyon and Avenue MacMahon, near the Champs-Elysées, when Louis Leplée just 'happened' to be passing. Indeed, had it not been for the arrangement with Le Balafré, they would never have ventured near the area known as l'Étoile: despite its opulence, the pickings here were virtually non-existent because the locals did not wish to identify with the poverty that was rife on the other side of town, whereas in Belleville, everyone helped everyone else.

The song was 'Les deux ménétriers', a Damia number which had proved popular at the Juan-les-Pins, and at first Edith ignored her elderly admirer, as Le Balafré had instructed her

to. He was wearing smart clothes, but what really annoyed her once he began chatting to her was the fact that he was wearing gloves and carrying a cane. Leplée asked her why she was ruining her voice by singing in a dusty street, and she replied, sarcastically, that she did not have a contract to sing elsewhere! Then, scribbling his name and address on a scrap of paper and folding this inside a banknote, he asked her to attend an audition at his club the next day, so they would go through her repertoire. Edith and Mômone then took the Métro back to Belleville, where Le Balafré was waiting. Their little plan had worked, Leplée had been none the wiser, and though Edith was not sure that she would secure an engagement at Gerny's, her lover certainly was.

Edith's repertoire was more extensive than Leplée could possibly have imagined: besides the dramatic works of Damia, Yvonne George and Fréhel, to name but a few, there were several operatic arias! Neither was she impressed with Gerny's. She could not abide snobs, and loathed the fact that it cost the same for a bottle of champagne in such an establishment as could feed a poor family for a week. What she did look forward to was the chance to prove herself in front of a cabaret crowd who had most likely never known what it had been like to go without food or shoes. Louis Leplée introduced her to his pianist, Jean Urémer, and the young musician was amazed that this girl's untrained voice was so pure that even the flaws within it became qualities. Leplée asked her her name, and she replied that she had several: the latest was Tania, she said, though she had always preferred Huguette Hélia because she thought it sounded artistic. The entrepreneur may not have sounded very flattering when he told her that, in his opinion, she looked more like a bedraggled sparrow who had spent the night in the gutter than any exotic artiste. When Jean Urémer suggested that maybe she should call herself La Môme Moineau, Edith told him that there was already an entertainer by that name – a topless singer-dancer who had risen to prominence during the early twenties and who had since married and left the stage. Leplée thought about this. The slang word for 'sparrow' is *piaf*, and he told her, 'From now on you'll be known as "La Môme Piaf"!'

She had been baptized for life!

Leplée engaged Edith to open at Gerny's on Friday 26

September 1935, allowing her just three days to learn four new songs: 'Les mômes de la cloche', 'La valse brune', 'Nini peau d'chien', and Lucienne Boyer's recent success, 'Si petite'. She was also given extensive last-minute publicity, and was apparently so concerned over the cost of this that she admitted to Leplée that he had been duped into hiring her. According to Louis Dupont, Leplée at once summoned Le Balafré to his office, but instead of bawling him out gave him a *reward* for having such intuition! He knew secretly, of course, that if the venture failed he would become the laughing-stock of the Parisian social set, particularly as he had invited a host of celebrities to the première.

It was at this stage that Edith panicked, for she had nothing to wear for her opening night. The songs also caused her a number of problems: she did not think 'Nini peau d'chien' realistic enough for what she had in mind, and she was not keen on emulating anyone else, least of all Lucienne Boyer. The first problem was easily remedied when a friend loaned her some money to buy wool and needles to knit a dress. The songs she was stuck with, for her new mentor would not compromise. Edith went out and purchased several large hanks of black wool, gave half of it to Mômone, and her new stage garb began to take shape. Two important precedents were thus set: the black dress which would rapidly become her trademark, and a mania for knitting – though she would begin knitting sweaters for almost every one of the men in her life, she allegedly never finished a single garment! Neither did she finish this one – Friday came, and literally minutes before her performance Leplée discovered her in the lavatory, frantically knitting the second sleeve of her dress. She then began unravelling the other sleeve, declaring that she would sing with her arms bare, in the Damia tradition. Leplée would not hear of such a thing. Her arms, he declared, were like matchsticks and in any case there was only one Damia, just as there would only be one Piaf. Again, the situation was given a comic touch when Yvonne Vallée, the then wife of Maurice Chevalier, walked into the lavatory whilst Edith and Leplée were arguing what to do about the missing sleeve. By tradition, *chanteuses-réalistes* usually wore white or red scarves. Yvonne Vallée gave Edith her own violet silk scarf: henceforth Edith's favourite colour would be violet.

There then followed another panic-attack, for if Chevalier's wife was in the auditorium, then surely the great man himself must have been there too? He was, sitting at the same table as his ex-lover, the awesome Mistinguett!

Leplée introduced her personally. 'I was strolling past Rue Troyon the other day when I heard this young girl singing. Her voice overwhelmed me, and I am presenting her to you now as I first saw her – unkempt, and without make-up. La Môme Piaf!' Her reception was decidedly frosty when she walked on to the bare stage, but by now most of her first-night nerves had gone. The resident accordionist at Gerny's was a young man by the name of Robert Juél, and he had re-arranged Edith's four songs to suit the harsh timbre of her voice. Her opening number, 'Les mômes de la cloche', had actually been written for Mistinguett by Vincent Scotto some twenty years before; the great star had sung it in a revue at the Folies-Bergère, when she had played a motherless waif. And now, the champagne-and-glitter set were about to be entertained by a *real-life* guttersnipe, and many of them felt ill at ease as Juél and Jean Urémer struck up the first bars of Piaf's first song. Not sure what to do with her hands, Edith kept them planted firmly on her hips – another future trademark – and sang from the guts.

> C'est nous les mômes, les mômes de la cloche,
> Clochards qui s'en vont sans un rond en poche!
> C'est nous les paumées, les purées d'paumées,
> Qui sommes aimées un soir, n'importe où . . .
>
> [We're the kids, the guttersnipes,
> Tramps who roam around broke!
> We're the outcasts, the clapped-out outcasts,
> Who are loved for one night, no matter where . . .]

Halfway through the first verse of the song, those customers who had ordered meals began eating. During the second verse when those sitting closest to the stage observed that Chevalier and Mistinguett had set down their knives and forks, everyone else followed suit. By the third verse she had them in the palm of her tiny hand. Then, as the song was finishing Edith forgot herself and raised her arms: Yvonne Vallée's beautiful silk scarf

slithered from her shoulders, revealing her missing sleeve. Not one person laughed. Mistinguett is said to have begun dabbing her eyes – though insincerely, for in the future she would never disguise her contempt for Piaf, at her politest referring to her as 'cette petite en noir' – and Chevalier shouted encouraging words. King Faud shook hands with her after the performance, and Jean Mermoz, the world-famous aviator, invited her to sit at his table . . . where she was treated to her very first glass of champagne, and the entire basket of violets from the flower-girl.

Paris had a new star! La Môme Piaf had taken it by storm!