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LITTLE & BROWN

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THE THIBAUTS

ROGER MARTIN DU GARD

Translated from the French by

STUART GILBERT

LONDON

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD

Nobel Prize for Literature, 1937

‘LES THIBAUT’

The first six parts comprised in the present volume were first published in Paris by Gallimard under the following titles:

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Je dédie

‘LES THIBAULT’

*à la mémoire fraternelle
de*

PIERRE MARGARITIS

*dont la mort, à l'hôpital
militaire, le 30 octobre
1918, anéantit l'œuvre
puissante qui mûrissait
dans son cœur tourmenté
et pur.*

R.M.G.

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PART I

As they reached the school-buildings at the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard, M. Thibault, who, throughout the walk, had not spoken a word to his son, suddenly halted.

‘No, Antoine, I won’t stand it. This time he’s gone too far.’

The young man made no reply.

It was nine o’clock in the evening and the school was closed. A night porter held the little wicket in the entrance-gate ajar.

‘Know where my brother is?’ Antoine asked in a peremptory tone.

The porter stared at him with a puzzled air.

M. Thibault stamped his foot angrily. ‘Go and fetch Abbé Binot,’ he said.

The porter escorted M. Thibault and his son to the waiting-room, drew a taper from his pocket and lit the gas.

Some minutes elapsed. M. Thibault, who was out of breath, had settled down heavily into a chair. ‘Yes, this time we’ve had enough of it,’ he muttered through his clenched teeth.

‘Excuse me, please.’ The Abbé Binot had entered without a sound. He was a small, mouse-like man, and now, to put his hand on Antoine’s shoulder, had to draw himself up to his full height. ‘And how is our young doctor to-day?’ he asked, adding at once: ‘But what’s the trouble?’

‘Where is my brother?’

‘Jacques?’

‘Jacques has not been home all day,’ M. Thibault exclaimed, rising excitedly from his chair.

‘Where can he have been?’ the priest enquired, but without much show of surprise.

‘Why here, naturally! He was kept in.’

The priest slipped his hands under his girdle. ‘Jacques was not kept in.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Jacques did not put in an appearance at school to-day.’

The plot was thickening. Antoine gave the priest a searching look, and with a jerk of his shoulders M. Thibault swung round on the little man his

fat, puffy face, in which the eyes were almost always hidden by their heavy lids.

‘Jacques told us yesterday that he had four hours’ detention. He left home this morning at the usual time. Later on, at about eleven, it seems, while we were all at mass, he came back and found everyone out except the cook. He said he wouldn’t be back for lunch as he’d been given eight hours’ detention instead of four.’

‘Which was a pure invention,’ the Abbé put in.

‘I had to go out in the latter part of the afternoon,’ M. Thibault continued, ‘to hand in my monthly article to the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. It was the editor’s reception-day, and I didn’t get home till dinner-time. Jacques had not returned. At half-past eight, I began to get alarmed. I sent for Antoine, who was on duty at his hospital. So now we have come to you.’

The priest pursed his lips, as if in deep reflexion. Through his half-parted eyelashes M. Thibault flashed a keen look first at the Abbé, then at his son.

‘Well, Antoine, what do you make of it?’

‘Obviously, father,’ the young man said, ‘if he’s run away on purpose we can discard any theory of an accident—which is so much to the good.’

His attitude had a calming effect on M. Thibault, who drew up a chair and sat down again. His nimble mind was exploring several trains of thought, though his face, immobilized by its layers of fat, seemed perfectly expressionless.

‘Well,’ he repeated, ‘what’s to be done?’

Antoine reflected. ‘This evening, nothing. We can only wait.’

That there was no denying. But the impossibility of settling the business off-hand, by some drastic gesture, coupled with the thought of the Congress of Moral Science that was opening at Brussels in two days’ time, and the invitation he had received to preside over the French section of it, brought a flood of angry colour to M. Thibault’s temples. He stood up.

‘I’ll have the gendarmes on his track!’ he cried. ‘There is still a police service in France, isn’t there? And our criminals are sometimes caught, I suppose!’

His frock-coat flapped on each side of his paunch, the creases of his chin were nipped incessantly between the peaks of his stiff collar as he jerked his jaws forward like a horse chafing at the bridle. ‘The young ruffian!’ he was thinking. ‘If only he could be run over by a train!’ In a vivid flash of imagination he saw every difficulty smoothed out; no more trouble than about attending the Congress, of which, quite possibly, he might be given

the vice-presidency. But then, almost immediately, he visualized the boy brought home on a stretcher, a small corpse laid out on a bed and a grief-stricken father—himself—beside it, surrounded by his sorrowing friends. And he was ashamed.

He turned to the priest again. ‘It’s a terrible thing—yes, terrible—for a father to have to spend a night of such anxiety, to go through such an ordeal.’

He began moving to the door. The Abbé withdrew his hands from his girdle.

‘One moment, please,’ he said, lowering his eyes.

The lamplight fell on a forehead half concealed by a fringe of black hair and a weasel-like face that narrowed sharply down towards the pointed chin. Two pink spots began to show up on his cheeks.

‘We had been wondering,’ he said, ‘whether we ought to apprise you at once of a most regrettable incident that took place a day or two ago, and which concerns your boy. But, as things are, it might throw some light on. . . . Can you spare us a few moments, Monsieur Thibault?’

The Picardy accent seemed to emphasize his hesitations. M. Thibault, without answering, went back to his chair and sat down heavily, closing his eyes.

‘During the last few days,’ the priest went on, ‘we have become aware of certain offences, of a very special character, committed by your son . . . yes, particularly serious misconduct. In fact we had to threaten him with expulsion. Oh, of course, that was only to frighten him. He hasn’t said anything to you?’

‘Don’t you know what a double-dealer the boy is? No, he has kept it to himself—as usual.’

‘The dear lad,’ the Abbé protested, ‘may have his faults, but he isn’t bad at heart. No, we believe that on this last occasion it was weakness more than anything; he was led astray. It was the evil influence of another boy, one of those unhappy, perverted youngsters—of whom, alas, there are so many in Paris. . . .’

From the corner of an eye M. Thibault shot an apprehensive glance at the priest.

‘These are the facts, Monsieur Thibault, in the order of their happening. Last Thursday . . .’ He reflected for a moment, then went on in an almost cheerful tone. ‘No, I made a mistake, it was Friday, the day before yesterday, Friday morning, during the morning prep. Just before noon we entered the

class-room—abruptly, as we always do . . .’ He gave Antoine a mischievous wink. ‘We turned the handle noiselessly and flung the door open.

‘No sooner had we entered than our eyes fell on our little friend Jacques, whom we had placed just opposite the door on purpose. We went up to his desk and moved aside his dictionary. There it was—a book that had no business there! It was a novel translated from the Italian, by an author whose name we have forgotten. The book was called *Les Vierges aux Rochers*.’

‘Disgusting!’ M. Thibault exclaimed.

‘The boy was so perturbed that we concluded there was more behind it; we are used to that sort of thing. The luncheon bell was due to sound in a few minutes. When it rang we asked the master in charge to take the boys to the refectory. When they had gone we opened Jacques’ desk and found two more books there: Rousseau’s *Confessions* and something still more objectionable—I hardly like to name it—one of Zola’s abominable books, *La Faute de l’Abbé Mouret*.’

‘He’s dead to shame.’

‘We were about to close the desk when it occurred to us to feel behind the row of school-books, and we fished out an exercise-book in a grey linen binding, which at first sight looked innocent enough. But then we opened it and glanced through the first pages.’ The Abbé paused, his keen, ungentle eyes intent on M. Thibault and his son. ‘Well, we read enough then and there to make sure . . . We carried the book off to a safe place and, during the midday recreation, found time to study it at leisure. The books (they were in excellent bindings) had the initial “F” engraved on their backs. The grey exercise-book, the most damning piece of evidence, if I may put it so, contained a series of letters in different writings. There were letters from Jacques, signed “J,” and others in a writing we did not recognize, signed “D”.’ He continued in a lower voice. ‘I am sorry to have to say that the tone, the tenor, of the letters left no doubt as to the nature of the friendship. So much so, Monsieur Thibault, that for a while we took the firm, tall writing for that of a girl or, more likely, a somewhat older woman. But, presently, on studying the contents more carefully, we perceived that the unidentified script was that of a fellow-pupil of Jacques—not one of our boys here, thank God!—but some boy whom Jacques must have met at the Lycée. To make sure about it, we went that very same day to see the Principal, our worthy friend M. Quillard’—he turned towards Antoine as he gave the name—‘who is a man of the highest principles and knows only too well what goes on in boarding-schools. He recognized the writing at once. The miscreant who signed the letters with a “D” is a Third Form boy, a friend of Jacques’. His name is Fontanin, Daniel de Fontanin.’

‘Fontanin!’ Antoine exclaimed. ‘That explains it. You know, father, those people who spend the summer at Maisons-Laffitte; they’ve a house on the outskirts of the forest. Now that I come to think of it, several times this winter, when I got home, I’ve found Jacques reading books of poetry lent him by this Fontanin boy.’

‘What? Borrowed books? Wasn’t it your duty to let me know?’

‘Oh, I didn’t see much harm in them!’ Antoine glanced towards the priest as he spoke, as if to show that he was not to be intimidated. And suddenly his thoughtful face lit up with a quick smile that came and went, giving it a singularly boyish look. ‘It was only Victor Hugo,’ he explained, ‘and Lamartine. But I took away his lamp, to prevent him keeping awake till all hours.’

The priest’s lips had stiffened. Now he took his revenge.

‘But there’s worse to come. This Fontanin boy’s a Protestant!’

‘I knew! I knew it!’ There was an accent of despair in M. Thibault’s cry.

‘Quite a good pupil, however,’ the priest put in at once, as who should give the devil his due. ‘I can quote you M. Quillard’s exact words. “He’s one of the seniors and we all thought highly of him—in fact he thoroughly hoodwinked all those with whom he came in contact. His mother, too, produced an excellent impression on us.”’

‘Oh, his mother!’ M. Thibault broke in. ‘They’re impossible people, for all their airs and graces. Why, at Maisons, nobody has anything to do with them; they’re hardly nodded to on the street. Yes, Antoine, your brother can hardly boast of his choice of friends!’

‘Dangerous friends!’ the Abbé sighed. ‘Evil communications . . . Yes, we know only too well what lies beneath the sanctimonious airs of Protestants.’

‘Be that as it may, when we came back from the Lycée, we knew everything. And we had just decided to set a formal enquiry on foot when yesterday, at the beginning of preparation, our little friend Jacques burst into our study. Literally burst in. His teeth were clenched and he was very pale. He didn’t even say “Good-morning” but shouted at us from the threshold: “Somebody has stolen my books and papers from my desk!” We pointed out to him that it was most unbecoming, bursting in like that. He refused to listen. His eyes, which are usually quite pale, were black with anger. “It’s you who stole my exercise-book,” he shouted, “it’s you, I know it!” He even went so far as to say,’ the Abbé added with a rather vacuous smile, ‘that if we dared to read it, he would kill himself. We tried to appeal to his better feelings, but he would not let us speak. “Where’s my exercise-book?” he

kept on asking. "Give it back. If you don't I shall smash everything here!" Before we could stop him he picked up the crystal paper-weight on our desk—you remember it, Antoine? It was a souvenir some of our old boys had brought us from the Puy-de-Dôme—and threw it with all his might at the marble mantelpiece. Oh, that's a mere trifle,' the Abbé added hastily, noticing M. Thibault's embarrassed gesture of regret. 'I only mention this small detail to show you the state of excitement your dear boy was in. Next moment he dropped on the floor in a sort of hysterical fit. We managed to secure him and pushed him into a little retiring-room next the study, and locked him in.'

'Yes,' M. Thibault said, raising his clenched hands dramatically, 'there are days you'd think he was "possessed." Ask Antoine. How often we have seen him, when he's been crossed over some trifle, fall into such furious fits of temper that we've had to let him have his way! His face turns livid, the veins in his throat stand out, you'd think he was going to suffocate with rage.'

'Yes,' Antoine remarked, 'we Thibaults are a hot-blooded family.' He seemed to regret it so little that the priest felt compelled to smile indulgently.

'When we came to let him out an hour later,' he continued, 'he was sitting at the table, his head between his hands. He gave us a furious look; his eyes were tearless. When we bade him apologize, he did not answer. But he followed us quietly to our study. His hair was ruffled, his eyes were fixed on the ground and there was a stubborn look on his face. We got him to pick up the fragments of the ill-fated paper-weight, but nothing would make him utter a word. So then we took him to the chapel where we thought it fitting that he should remain for a while in solitary communion with his Maker. After an hour we came and knelt beside him. He looked as if he had been crying, but the chapel was so dark that we couldn't be sure of it. We said a rosary in a low voice, and then we remonstrated with him, picturing to him his father's grief at hearing that an evil companionship had endangered his dear son's purity. He kept his arms folded and held his head high, his eyes fixed on the altar, as if he did not hear us. Seeing that there was nothing to be done with him, we told him to return to the preparation room. There he stayed till the afternoon was over, at his place, with his arms folded and without opening a book. We thought it best to take no notice of this conduct. At seven o'clock he left as usual, but without coming to say good-night.

'So now you have the whole story, Monsieur Thibault.' The priest gave him a glance of eager curiosity. 'We had meant not to inform you of these facts till we knew what action has been taken by the Vice-principal of the

Lycée against that wretched young fellow, Fontanin—summary expulsion, we presume. But, seeing you so upset . . .’

‘*Monsieur l’abbé,*’ M. Thibault broke in; he was as out of breath as if he had been running upstairs. ‘*Monsieur l’abbé,* I am horrified—but you can guess for yourself what my feelings are. When I think what the future may have in store for us, now that Jacques’ evil instincts have shown themselves—yes, I’m horrified,’ he repeated in a pensive voice, almost in a whisper. He sat unmoving, his head thrust forward, his hands resting on his hips. His eyes were closed and had it not been for the almost imperceptible quivering of his underlip, that shook the short white beard under the grey moustache, he would have seemed asleep.

‘The young blackguard!’ he burst out suddenly, with a forward jerk of his chin. The vicious glance that shot forth from between the grey eyelashes showed what a mistake it would have been to take his inertia at its face value. Shutting his eyes again, he swung round towards Antoine. But the young man was in a brown study, tugging at his beard, his forehead wrinkled and his eyes fixed on the floor.

‘I shall go to the hospital,’ he said at last, ‘and tell them not to count on me to-morrow. The first thing in the morning I’ll go and see this Fontanin boy and put him through it!’

‘The first thing in the morning?’ M. Thibault repeated mechanically. He rose from his seat. ‘Meanwhile, I’ve a sleepless night before me.’ Sighing, he moved ponderously towards the door.

The Abbé followed. On the threshold M. Thibault extended to the priest a flabby hand. ‘It’s been a terrible blow,’ he murmured, without opening his eyes.

‘We will pray God to help us in our time of trouble,’ the priest replied in a polite tone.

Father and son walked a few steps in silence along the empty street. The wind had dropped and the night-air was mild. The month of May was beginning.

M. Thibault was thinking of the runaway. ‘Anyhow, if he’s sleeping out, he won’t find it too cold.’ Emotion made his legs go limp beneath him. He stopped and turned to his son. Antoine’s attitude made him feel less unsure of himself, and he felt drawn towards his first-born, and proud of him—especially so to-night, now that his younger son was more antipathetic than ever. Not that he was incapable of love for Jacques; to quicken his affection

it would have been enough had Jacques provided some satisfaction for his pride. But the boy's preposterous conduct and wayward impulses always galled him at his most sensitive point, his self-esteem.

'Let's only hope it doesn't cause too much scandal,' he muttered. Then he drew nearer to Antoine and his tone changed. 'I'm delighted that you were able to get off duty to-night.' The feeling he was trying to express made him feel almost bashful. Still more embarrassed than his father, the young man kept silent. 'Yes, Antoine, I'm glad to have you with me to-night, dear boy,' M. Thibault continued, and, for the first time perhaps, linked his arm with his son's.

2

ON that Sunday, Madame de Fontanin, when she came home at about midday, had found a note awaiting her in the hall.

'Daniel tells me he's been kept for lunch by the Bertiers,' she told Jenny. 'Then you weren't here when he came back?'

'No, I didn't see him,' Jenny replied without looking up. She had just dropped on all fours, trying to catch her dog, Puce, which was hiding under an arm-chair. It seemed to take her a long time, but at last she caught the dog up in her arms and ran off with it to her room, hugging and petting the little animal.

She did not reappear till lunch-time.

'I'm not a bit hungry,' she said, 'and I've got a headache. I'd like to go to my room and lie down in the dark.'

Her mother put her to bed and drew the curtains. Eagerly Jenny snuggled down between the sheets. But sleep would not come to her. The hours dragged on. Several times in the course of the day Madame de Fontanin came and laid her cool hand on the little girl's forehead. Towards evening, in a sudden rush of affection and anxiety, Jenny caught hold of her mother's hand and began fondling it, unable to keep back her tears.

'You're overstrung, darling. I'm afraid you must have a touch of fever.'

Seven o'clock struck; then eight. Madame de Fontanin was waiting for her son before beginning dinner. Never did Daniel miss a meal without telling her in advance; least of all would he have left his mother and sister to dine by themselves on a Sunday. Madame de Fontanin went out on to the balcony. The evening was mild, but at this hour there were few people about in the Avenue de l'Observatoire. The shadows were deepening between the dark masses of the trees. Several times she fancied she recognized Daniel by his walk, under a street-lamp. There was the roll of a drum in the Luxembourg Gardens. The gates were being shut. Now it was quite dark.

She put on her hat and hurried to the Bertiers' house; they had been in the country since the day before.

So Daniel had lied!

Madame de Fontanin was not unused to lies of that sort; but that Daniel, her Daniel, should have lied to her was appalling. His first lie. And he was only fourteen!

Jenny had not gone to sleep yet; she was listening intently to every sound. She called to her mother.

'Where's Daniel?'

'He's gone to bed. He thought you were asleep and didn't want to wake you.' She tried to speak naturally; there was no point in alarming the child.

After glancing at the clock Madame de Fontanin settled down in an arm-chair, leaving the door on the corridor ajar, so as to hear the boy when he returned.

So the night passed; a new day came. . . .

Just before seven Puce started growling. The bell had rung. Madame de Fontanin ran into the hall; she preferred to open the door herself; the less the servants knew, the better. An unknown bearded young man stood at the door. Had there been an accident?

Antoine gave his name, saying he would like to see Daniel before he left for the Lycée.

'I'm afraid . . . as it so happens, my son can't be seen this morning,' she stammered.

Antoine made a gesture of surprise. 'Forgive me if I insist, Madame, but my brother, who's a great friend of your son's, has been missing since yesterday. Naturally, we're very anxious.'

'Missing?' Her fingers tightened on the fabric of the light veil she had drawn round her hair. She opened the drawing-room door; Antoine followed her in.

‘Daniel, too, didn’t come home yesterday. And I’m feeling worried, too.’ She had lowered her eyes; she looked up as she added: ‘All the more so as my husband is away from home just now.’

There was a simplicity, a frankness, about her that Antoine had never seen in any other woman. Taken off her guard in this moment of anxiety, after a sleepless night, she made no effort to conceal her feelings from the young man; each successive emotion showed on her features in its natural colours. For a few moments they gazed at each other with all but unseeing eyes. Both were following the vagaries of their own thoughts.

Antoine had sprung out of bed with real detective zest. For he had not taken Jacques’ escapade tragically and only his curiosity was involved. So he had come here to put the other boy, Jacques’ accomplice, ‘through it.’ But now again it looked as if things would be more complicated than he had foreseen. And that by no means displeased him. Whenever, as now, he came up against the unforeseen, a steely look came into his eyes, and under the square-cut beard his chin, the strong Thibault chin, set like a block of granite.

‘What time yesterday morning did your son leave home?’ he asked.

‘Quite early. But he returned soon after.’

‘Ah! Was it between half-past ten and eleven?’

‘About that.’

‘Like his friend! Yes, they’ve run away together.’ His tone was brisk, he sounded almost cheerful about it.

At that moment the door, which till now had stood ajar, was flung wide open and a child’s body, clad only in a chemise, fell forward on to the carpet. Madame de Fontanin gave a cry. Antoine had already picked up the little girl—she had fainted—and was holding her in his arms. Madame de Fontanin showed the way, he carried her to her room and placed her on the bed.

‘Leave her to me, Madame. I’m a doctor. Some cold water, please. Have you any smelling-salts?’

After a few minutes Jenny came to. Her mother gave her an affectionate smile, but the child’s eyes were unresponsive.

‘She’s all right now,’ Antoine said. ‘All she needs is to have a sleep.’

Whispering ‘You hear, darling?’ Madame de Fontanin laid her hand on the child’s clammy forehead. Presently the hand slipped down over the eyelids and held them closed.

They stood for a while unmoving on either side of the bed. The fumes of sal volatile hovered in the air. Antoine, whose eyes had so far been fixed on the graceful hand and outstretched arm, now took stock discreetly of Madame de Fontanin. The lace wrapped round her head had come loose and he could see now that her hair was fair, sprinkled with strands of grey. He took her age for about forty, though her manner and the vivacity of her face were those of a much younger woman.

Jenny seemed on the point of sleeping; the hand that rested on her eyes withdrew, lightly as a feather. They went out on tiptoe, leaving the door ajar. Madame de Fontanin, who was walking in front, turned round.

‘Thank you,’ she said, holding out both hands towards Antoine. The gesture was so spontaneous, so masculine, that Antoine checked his first impulse courteously to press his lips to them.

‘She’s so nervous, poor child,’ Madame de Fontaine explained. ‘She must have heard Puce bark and thought her brother had come back. She hasn’t been at all well since yesterday morning; she’s had fever all night.’

They sat down. Madame de Fontanin slipped her hand inside her bodice and produced the note Daniel had written her on the previous day. As Antoine read it, she kept her eyes on him. In her relations with others she always let herself be guided by her first impressions, and from the very first she had felt that she could trust Antoine. ‘A man with a forehead like that,’ she thought, ‘is incapable of an unworthy act.’ He wore his hair brushed back and his beard came up rather high upon his checks; framed in dark auburn hair, the whole expression of his face seemed concentrated in the deep-set eyes and pale expanse of forehead. He folded up the letter and handed it back to her. He appeared to be turning its contents over in his mind; actually he was wondering how to break certain matters to her.

‘I think,’ he began tentatively, ‘we may infer a connexion between their flight and the fact that their friendship—well, their intimacy—had just been detected by their teachers.’

‘“Detected”?’

‘Yes. The correspondence they had been keeping up, in a special grey exercise-book, had just been found.’

‘What correspondence?’

‘They used to write letters to each other during lessons. Letters, it seems, of a . . . a very special nature.’ He looked away from her. ‘So much so that the two offenders had been threatened with expulsion.’

‘“Offenders”?’ Really I’m afraid I don’t follow. What was wrong about their writing to each other?’

‘The tone of their letters was, I gather, so very . . .’

‘“The tone of their letters”?’ Obviously she still did not understand. But she was too sensitive not to have noticed Antoine’s growing embarrassment. Suddenly she shook her head.

‘Anything of that sort is out of the question,’ she said in a strained voice that shook a little. It was as if a gulf had suddenly opened out between them. She stood up. ‘That your brother and my son may have planned some sort of schoolboy prank together is quite possible, though Daniel has never uttered in my presence the name of . . .’

‘Thibault.’

‘Thibault!’ The name, it seemed, surprised her. ‘That’s curious. My little daughter had a bad dream last night and I distinctly heard her pronounce that name.’

‘She may have heard her brother speaking of his friend.’

‘No, I tell you that Daniel never . . .’

‘How else could she have learnt the name?’

‘Oh, these “supernormal” phenomena are fairly common, really.’

‘What phenomena?’

‘The transmission of thought.’ There was an intense, almost other-worldly look on her face.

Her explanation and the tone in which she spoke were so new to him, that Antoine looked at her curiously. There was more than earnestness on Madame de Fontanin’s face; it was illuminated, and on her lips there flickered the gentle smile of the believer who is used to braving the scepticism of the rest of mankind.

For a while they were silent. Then Antoine was struck by an idea that rekindled his detective enthusiasm.

‘May I ask you a question, Madame de Fontanin? You say your daughter spoke my brother’s name. And that all day yesterday she was suffering from an inexplicable attack of fever. Mayn’t that be because your son confided in her before going away?’

Madame de Fontanin smiled indulgently. ‘You’d realize that such a suspicion is absurd, Monsieur Thibault, if you knew my children and the way they behave with their mother. Never has either of them hidden anything from——’ She stopped abruptly, stung by the thought that Daniel’s recent conduct gave her the lie. ‘Still,’ she went on at once, but with a certain stiffness, moving towards the door, ‘if Jenny isn’t asleep you can ask her about it, yourself.’

The little girl had her eyes open. Her delicately moulded profile showed against the pillow; her cheeks were flushed. The black muzzle of the little dog peeped comically from between the sheets beside her.

‘Jenny, this is Monsieur Thibault—the brother of one of Daniel’s friends, you know.’

The child cast at the intruder a look that, eager at first, darkened with mistrust.

Antoine went up to the bed, took her wrist and drew out his watch.

‘Still too quick,’ he said. Then he listened to her breathing. He put into each professional gesture a rather self-complacent gravity.

‘How old is she?’

‘Almost thirteen.’

‘Really? I wouldn’t have thought it. As a matter of principle one can never be too careful about these feverish attacks. Not that there’s anything to be alarmed about, of course,’ he added, looking at the child and smiling. Then, moving from the bedside, he said in a different tone:

‘Do you know my brother, Mademoiselle? Jacques Thibault?’

Her forehead wrinkled; she shook her head.

‘Really and truly? Your brother has never talked to you about his best friend?’

‘Never.’

‘But, Jenny,’ Madame de Fontanin insisted, ‘don’t you remember? When I woke you up last night you were dreaming that Daniel and his friend Thibault were being chased along a road. You said “Thibault” quite distinctly.’

The child seemed to be searching in her memory of the night. Then ‘I don’t know the name,’ she said at last.

‘By the way,’ Antoine went on after a short pause, ‘I’ve just been asking your mother about a detail she can’t remember; we’ve got to know it if we are to find your brother. How was he dressed?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Then you didn’t see him yesterday morning?’

‘Yes, I did. Quite early—when he was having his coffee and rolls. But he hadn’t dressed then.’ She turned to her mother. ‘You’ve only to go to his wardrobe, and see what clothes are missing.’

‘There’s something else, Mademoiselle, something very important. Was it at nine o’clock, or ten, or eleven that your brother came back to leave the

letter? Your mother was out then, so she can't say.'

'I don't know.'

Antoine caught a hint of annoyance in Jenny's voice.

'What a pity!' He made a gesture of disappointment. 'That means we'll have trouble in getting on his track.'

'Wait!' Jenny said raising her arm to make him stay. 'It was at ten minutes to eleven.'

'Exactly? Quite sure about it?'

'Yes.'

'You looked at the clock while he was with you, I suppose.'

'No. But that was the time when I went to the kitchen to get some bread-crumbs—for my drawing, you know. If he'd come before that, or if he'd come after, I'd have heard the door and gone to see.'

'Yes, of course.' He pondered for a moment. What use was it to tire her with more questions? He had been mistaken, she knew nothing. 'Now,' he went on, 'you must make yourself comfy, and shut your eyes, and go to sleep.' He drew the blankets up over the little bare arm, smiling to the child. 'A nice long sleep, and when we wake up we'll be quite well again, and our big brother will be back at home.'

She looked at him. Never afterwards could he forget all that he read at that instant in her gaze; an inner life quite out of keeping with her years, such indifference towards all human consolation, and a distress so deep, so desperately lonely, that he could not help being shaken by it, and lowered his eyes.

'You were right,' he said to Madame de Fontanin, when they had returned to the drawing-room. 'That child is innocence itself. She's suffering terribly, but she knows nothing.'

'Yes,' she replied in a musing tone, 'she is innocence itself; but—*she knows!*'

'You mean . . . ?'

'Yes.'

'How can you think that? Surely her answers . . . ?'

'Her answers?' she repeated in a slow, meditative voice. 'But I was near her and I felt it somehow. No, I can't explain it.' She sat down, stood up again at once. Her face was anguished. 'She knows, she knows—now I'm certain of it.' Then suddenly, in a louder voice: 'And I'm certain, too, that she would rather die than betray her secret.'

After Antoine had left and before going to see M. Quillard, the Principal of the Lycée (as Antoine had advised her to do), Madame de Fontanin yielded to her curiosity and opened a 'Who's Who.'

'THIBAULT (Oscar-Marie). Chevalier of the Légion of Honour. Some time Member for the Eure. Vice-president of the League for the Moral Welfare of the Child. Founder and President of the Social Defence League. Treasurer of the Joint Committee of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Paris. Residence: 4A, Rue de l'Université, Paris VI.'

3

TWO hours later, after her interview with the Principal of the Lycée, whom she had left abruptly, without a word, her cheeks aflame, Madame de Fontanin, not knowing where to turn, decided to go and see M. Thibault. Some secret instinct warned her against the visit, but she overruled it, as she often overruled such premonitions—prompted by a fondness for taking risks and a temperamental wilfulness that she mistook for courage.

At the Thibaults' a regular family council was in session. The Abbé Binot had arrived at the Rue de l'Université at an early hour, but only a few minutes in advance of the Abbé Vécard, private secretary to His Grace the Archbishop of Paris. This priest was M. Thibault's confessor, and a great friend of the family. A telephone-call had secured his attendance.

Seated at his desk, M. Thibault had the air of a presiding judge. He had slept badly and the unhealthy pallor of his cheeks was even more pronounced than usual. M. Chasle, his secretary, a grey-haired, bespectacled little man, was seated on his employer's left. Antoine alone had remained standing, leaning against a bookcase. Mademoiselle, too, had been convoked, though it was the hour when normally she attended to her housekeeping. Her shoulders draped in black merino, she sat perched on the edge of her chair, silently observing the proceedings. Under the grey coils of hair looped round her yellow forehead the fawn-like eyes strayed constantly

from one priest to the other. The two reverend gentlemen had been installed on each side of the fireplace, in high-backed chairs.

After laying before them the results of Antoine's enquiries M. Thibault launched into a jeremiad. He liked to feel that he was being approved of by those around him, and the words that came to him, when depicting his anxiety, quickened his emotions. But the presence of his confessor urged him to examine his conscience once again; had he fulfilled all his duties as a father towards the miserable boy? He hardly knew what to answer. Then his thoughts took a new turning; but for that wretched little heretic nothing would have happened.

Rising to his feet, he gave rein to his indignation. 'Should not young blackguards like that Fontanin boy be locked up in suitable institutions? Are we to allow our children to be exposed to such contamination?' His hands behind his back, his eyelids lowered, he paced the carpet behind his desk. Though he did not refer to it, the thought of the Congress he was missing rankled bitterly. 'For over twenty years I've been devoting myself to the problem of juvenile criminality. For twenty years I've been fighting the good fight, by means of pamphlets, Vigilance Societies and detailed reports addressed to various Congresses. But I've done more than that!' He turned towards the priests. 'Haven't I created in my reformatory at Crouy a special department where depraved children belonging to a different social class from that of the other inmates are given a special course of moral re-education? Well, you'll hardly believe it, but that department is always empty! Is it for me to force parents to incarcerate their erring sons there? I've moved heaven and earth to get the Ministry of Education to take steps about it. But,' he concluded, shrugging his shoulders and letting himself sink back into his chair, 'what do those fine gentlemen who are ousting religion from our French schools care about public morals?'

At that moment the parlour-maid handed him a visiting-card.

'That woman!' he exclaimed, turning to his son. Then, addressing the maid, he asked, 'What does she want?' and, without waiting for an answer, said to his son: 'Antoine, you attend to this.'

'You can't very well refuse to see her,' Antoine pointed out, after glancing at the card.

On the brink of an outburst, M. Thibault mastered his feelings and turned again to the two priests.

'It's Madame de Fontanin! What's to be done? A certain consideration is due to a woman, whoever she may be, isn't it? And we mustn't forget, this one is a mother.'

‘What’s that? A mother?’ M. Chasle murmured, but the remark was only for himself.

M. Thibault came to a decision. ‘Show the lady in.’

When the maid brought the visitor up, he rose and bowed ceremoniously.

Madame de Fontanin had not expected to find so many people there. She drew back slightly on the threshold, then took a step towards Mademoiselle, who had jumped from her chair and was staring at the Protestant with horrified eyes. The softness had gone out of them and, no longer fawn-like, she looked like an outraged hen.

‘Madame Thibault, I presume?’ Madame de Fontanin said in a low voice.

‘No,’ Antoine hastened to explain. ‘This lady is Mademoiselle de Waize, who has been with us for fourteen years—since my mother’s death—and brought us up, my brother and myself.’

M. Thibault introduced the men to her.

‘Excuse me for disturbing you, Monsieur Thibault,’ Madame de Fontanin began. All the men’s eyes converging on her made her feel uncomfortable, but she kept her self-possession. ‘I came to see if any news. . . . Well, as we are both undergoing the same anxiety, Monsieur, I thought the best thing for us might be to . . . to join forces. Don’t you agree?’ she added with a faint smile, cordial if a little sad. But her frank gaze, as she watched M. Thibault, found no more response than a blind man’s stare.

She tried to catch Antoine’s eye; despite the slight estrangement that the last phase of their conversation on the previous day had brought about, she felt drawn towards the young man whose pensive face and forthright manners were so different from the others’. He, too, as soon as she entered, had felt that a sort of alliance existed between them. He went up to her.

‘And how is the little invalid now, Madame?’

M. Thibault cut him short. His impatience betrayed itself only in the way he kept on jerking his head to free his chin. Slewling himself round to face Madame de Fontanin he began addressing her with studied formality.

‘It should be unnecessary for me to tell you, Madame de Fontanin, that no one understands your natural anxiety better than myself. As I was saying to my friends here, we cannot think about those poor lads without feeling the utmost distress. And yet I would venture to put you a question: Would it be wise for us to “join forces” as you propose? Certainly something must be done, they have got to be found; but would it not be better for us to keep our enquiries separate? What I mean is: we must beware of possible

indiscretions on the part of journalists. Don't be surprised if I speak to you as one whose position obliges him to act with a certain caution as regards the Press, and public opinion. Not for my own sake. Anything but that! I am, thank God, above the calumnies of my adversaries. But might they not try to strike at the activities I stand for, by attacking me personally? And then I have to think of my son. Should I not make sure, at all costs, that another name is not linked with ours in connexion with this unsavoury adventure? Yes, I see it as my duty so to act that no one may be able in the future to throw in his face certain associations—quite casual, I grant you—but of a character that is, if I may say so, eminently . . . prejudicial.' He seemed to be addressing the Abbé Vécard especially as, lifting for once his eyelids, he added: 'I take it, gentlemen, that you share my opinion?'

During the harangue Madame de Fontanin had turned pale. Now she looked at each priest in turn; then at Mademoiselle, then at Antoine. Their faces were blank and they said nothing.

'Ah yes, I understand!' she cried. The words stuck in her throat, and she had difficulty in continuing. 'I can see that M. Quillard's suspicious. . . .' She paused, then added: 'What a wretched creature that man is, a miserable, miserable creature!' A wry smile twisted her lips as she spoke.

M. Thibault's face remained inscrutable. Only his flabby hand rose towards the Abbé Binot, as if calling him to witness, inviting him to speak. With the zest of a mongrel joining in a dog-fight, the Abbé flung himself into the fray.

'We would venture to point out to you, Madame de Fontanin, that you seem to be dismissing the lamentable conclusions come to by M. Quillard, without even having heard the charges brought against your son.'

Madame de Fontanin cast a quick glance at the priest; then, relying as usual on her intuitions as regards the characters of others, she turned towards the Abbé Vécard, whose eyes met hers with an expression of unruffled suavity. His lethargic face, elongated by the fringe of scanty hair brushed up round his bald patch, gave her the impression of a man in the fifties. Conscious of the heretic's appealing gaze, he hastened to put in an amiable word.

'None of us here, Madame, but realizes how painful this conversation is for you. The trust you have in your son is infinitely touching . . . and laudable,' he added as an afterthought. With a gesture that was familiar with him, he raised a finger and held it to his lips while he went on speaking. 'But unfortunately, Madame, the facts, ah yes, the facts. . . .'

As if his colleague had given him the cue, the other priest took him up, and went on with greater unction. ‘Yes, the facts, there’s no denying it, are . . . crushing!’

‘I beg you,’ Madame de Fontanin began, looking away.

But now there was no holding the priest.

‘In any case, if you want proof of our assertions, here it is!’ Dropping his hat on to the floor, he drew from his girdle a grey, red-edged exercise-book. ‘Please cast a glance over this, Madame. However cruel it may seem to kill your illusions, we feel it our bounden duty, and we are convinced that you will yield to the evidence.’

He moved towards Madame de Fontanin as if he were going to force the book on her. She got up from her chair.

‘I refuse to read a line of it. The idea of prying into the secrets of this child behind his back, in public, without giving him a chance to explain—it’s revolting! I have never treated him in such a manner, and I never will.’

The Abbé Binot gazed at her, his arm still holding out the book, a sour smile on his thin lips.

‘Have it your own way,’ he said at last, with a derisive intonation. He placed the book on the desk, picked up his hat and sat down again. Antoine felt a great desire to grasp him by the shoulders and put him out. His disgust was visible in his eyes, which, meeting Abbé Vécard’s eyes, found them in accord.

Meanwhile Madame de Fontanin’s attitude had changed; she raised her head defiantly and walked up to M. Thibault, who had not risen from his chair.

‘All this is beside the point, Monsieur Thibault. I came here only to enquire what you propose to do. My husband is away from Paris at the moment and I have to act alone. What I really came for was to tell you that in my opinion it would be a great pity to call in the police.’

‘The police!’ M. Thibault shouted, so exasperated that he rose from his chair. ‘But, my good lady, don’t you realize that the police in every Department of France are after them already? I telephoned myself this morning to the private secretary of the Chief of Police, asking that every possible step should be taken, with the utmost discretion, of course. I have also had a telegram sent to the Town Council at Maisons-Laffitte, in case the truants have had the idea of hiding in a neighbourhood they both know well. All the railway companies, frontier posts and ports of embarkation have been advised. And, Madame, if it weren’t for the scandal, which I want to avoid at all costs, I’d say it would be a very good thing to give those two

young ragamuffins the lesson they need, and have them brought home in handcuffs, escorted by the police. If only to remind them that even in these degenerate days there's still a semblance of justice in France, some deference to parental rights.'

Without replying, Madame de Fontanin bowed and moved towards the door.

M. Thibault regained his self-control.

'Anyhow, Madame, you may rest assured that, if we get any news, my son will communicate with you at once.'

She acknowledged the remark with an almost imperceptible nod. Antoine and, after him, M. Thibault, escorted her to the door.

'The Huguenot!' Abbé Binot jeered, as soon as she was out of sight. The Abbé Vécard could not repress a gesture of reproach.

'What? A Huguenot?' M. Chasle stammered, and recoiled as if he had just trodden in some revolting offal from Saint Bartholomew's shambles.

4

ON her return Madame de Fontanin found Jenny lying half asleep in bed. Her fever showed no signs of going down. She lifted her head, gave her mother a questioning look, then shut her eyes again.

'Please take Puce away, mother. The noise hurts me.'

As soon as Madame de Fontanin was back in her room a fit of dizziness came over her; she sank into a chair, without even taking off her gloves. 'Am I, too, in for a spell of fever?' she wondered. 'Just when I most need to keep my head, to be strong and confident.' She bowed her head in prayer. When she raised it, she had settled on her line of action; the great thing was to find her husband, bring him back.

Crossing the hall, she paused in front of a closed door, then opened it. The room was cool and had evidently not been used for some time; a faint bitter-sweet tang of verbena and citronella hovered in the air—a scent of perfumed soaps and hair-oils. She drew aside the curtains. A writing-desk occupied the centre of the room; a layer of fine dust covered the blotter.

There were no papers lying about, no addresses, no clues. All the keys were in the locks. The man who used the room was certainly of a trusting nature. She pulled out a drawer in the desk and saw a number of letters, a few photographs, a fan and in a corner, screwed up in a ball, a shabby black silk glove. Her fingers tightened on the edge of the table. A memory floated up into her mind and, in her daydream, she seemed to be gazing at a half-forgotten scene.

One summer evening two years ago, as she had been going in a tram along the bank of the Seine, she had caught a glimpse of something that made her stiffen up abruptly. Yes, she had recognized Jerome, her husband, bending over a girl who was sitting on one of the benches on the riverside. The girl was crying. How often since then her fancy had cruelly enlarged on that brief glimpse, taking a sad pleasure in elaborating the details: the young woman shamelessly parading her grief, with her hat clumsily askew, and hastily extracting from her skirt a large, coarse handkerchief! And Jerome's expression, above all! How sure she was of having guessed aright the feelings that possessed him then! A little pity, to be sure, for she knew that he was weak and easily moved; and a good deal of exasperation at being involved in such a scene in public; and, behind it all, cruelty. Yes, in his very attitude as he bent forward solicitously but without real tenderness, she could see only too clearly the shallow compunction of the lover who has 'had enough of it,' who is perhaps already in quest of new adventure, and who, despite his pity, despite a secret shame, has decided to exploit the woman's tears to make the breach between them absolute. All this had been revealed to her in a flash of insight, and each time the haunting memory returned she felt the faintness she was feeling now.

She left the room hastily and locked the door.

A definite plan had suggested itself . . . that young maid she had had to dismiss six months ago—yes, she must see Mariette. Madame de Fontanin knew the address of her new place. Mastering her distaste, without further hesitation, she went there.

The kitchen opened on to a service staircase, on the fourth floor. It was the unsavoury hour of washing-up. Mariette opened the door. She was a bright little thing with golden curls and candid eyes—hardly more than a child. When she saw her former mistress, she blushed, but her eyes lit up.

'It's very nice seeing you again, ma'am. . . . Is Miss Jenny all right?'

Madame de Fontanin hesitated, an anguished smile on her lips.

'Mariette—please tell me my husband's address.'

The girl blushed scarlet; her large, puzzled eyes filled with tears. The address? She shook her head, she didn't know—not where he was *now*. The Master hadn't been living at the hotel where . . . No, he had dropped her almost immediately. 'Then you don't know, ma'am?' she added innocently.

But Madame de Fontanin was moving away towards the door, with lowered eyes; she could not bear hearing any more. There was a short silence. The water in a saucepan was boiling over, hissing as it fell on to the range. Without thinking, Madame de Fontanin pointed to it.

'Your water's boiling over,' she said. Then, still moving towards the door, she added: 'Are you happy here, my dear?'

The girl made no reply. When Madame de Fontanin looked up, it seemed to her that there was something of the animal in the eyes and the keen teeth that showed between the young, parted lips. After a pause that seemed interminable to both, the girl brought herself to speak.

'Couldn't you ask . . . Ma-Madame Petit-Dutreuil?' she stammered.

Madame de Fontanin did not hear the burst of sobbing that followed. She was hurrying down the stairs as if the house were on fire. That name had cast a sudden light on a number of coincidences she had hardly noticed at the time and had forgotten immediately. Now they all came back, and each fell into place in a chain of damning evidence.

An empty cab was passing; she jumped into it—the sooner she was home, the better. But, on the point of giving her address, an uncontrollable impulse gripped her—she fancied she was obeying a prompting from above.

'Rue de Monceau,' she told the driver.

A quarter of an hour later she was ringing at the door of her cousin, Noémie Petit-Dutreuil.

A fair-haired little girl of about fifteen opened the door. Her eyes smiled a greeting to the visitor.

'Good-morning, Nicole. Is your mother at home?'

She was conscious of the child's stare of astonishment.

'I'll go and fetch her, Aunt Thérèse.'

Madame de Fontanin waited in the hall. Her heart was beating so rapidly that she pressed her hand to her breast, and dared not take it away. She tried to bring her emotions under control. The drawing-room door was open and the sun was bringing out the sheen of the velvet curtains and the colours of the carpet. The room had the careless elegance of a bachelor's 'den.' 'And they said her divorce had left her penniless, Madame de Fontanin murmured. The thought reminded her that her husband had not sent her any

money for two months; how was she to meet this month's bills? And, following it, another thought crossed her mind: could Noémie's unexpected opulence have come from—him?

Nicole did not return. Not a sound could be heard. More and more ill at ease, Madame de Fontanin entered the drawing-room and sat down. The piano was open, a fashion paper was lying on the sofa, there was a bunch of red carnations in a vase. The more she looked around her, the more disturbed she felt. What could it be?

Because *he* was here, and his presence filled the room. It was he who had pushed the piano at that angle to the window, exactly as in her own home. It was he who had left it open or, if not he, it was for his sake that music lay scattered on it. It was he who had insisted on that wide, low sofa and the cigarette-box within easy reach. And it was he whom she now pictured there, lolling amongst the cushions, spruce and debonair as usual, gay eyes flashing under the long lashes, an arm dangling over the sofa-edge, a cigarette between his fingers.

A soft, rustling sound made her start. Noémie had just entered, in a lace-trimmed dressing-gown, her arm resting on her daughter's shoulder. She was a tall, dark and rather plump woman of thirty-five.

'Good-morning, Thérèse; you must excuse me, I've had such a frightful headache all day, it's laid me out completely. Nicole dear, will you pull down the blind.'

The sparkle of her eyes and the healthy pink cheeks gave her the lie. Her volubility betrayed the embarrassment she felt at Thérèse's visit, an embarrassment that grew to alarm when the latter, turning towards the child, said gently:

'There's something I want to talk to your mother about, darling; would you leave us alone for a few minutes?'

'Run off to your room, Nicole, and do your lessons there.' Noémie turned to her cousin with a high-pitched, unnatural laugh. 'Children of that age are so annoying—aren't they?—always wanting to show off in the drawing-room. Is Jenny like that? I'm afraid I was just the same, do you remember? It used to drive poor mother to despair.'

The object of Madame de Fontanin's visit had only been to get the address she required. But, now she was here, Jerome's presence had made itself so strongly felt, the injury done her seemed so flagrant, and the sight of Noémie flaunting her rather vulgar beauty in this room offended her so deeply that once again she gave way to impulse and came to a sudden, desperate decision.

‘Do sit down, Thérèse,’ Noémie said.

Instead of sitting down, Thérèse walked towards her cousin and held out her hand. The gesture was not in the least theatrical; it was too spontaneous, too dignified for that.

‘Noémie, give me back my husband!’ The words came with a rush. The smile froze on Madame Petit-Dutreuil’s lips. Madame de Fontanin was still holding her hand. ‘You needn’t answer. I’m not blaming you—I know only too well what he is.’ She paused for a moment, breathless. Noémie did not take advantage of the moment to defend herself, and Madame de Fontanin was glad of her silence, not that it was tantamount to a confession but because it showed that she was not so hardened as to be able to parry such a home-thrust on the spur of the moment.

‘Listen, Noémie,’ Madame de Fontanin continued. ‘Our children are growing up. Your daughter . . . and my two children as well. Daniel’s over fourteen now. You know the terrible effects of bad examples, how contagious evil is. Things can’t go on like this any longer—I’m sure you agree. Soon I shan’t be the only one to watch him . . . and to suffer.’ A note of pleading came into her voice. ‘Yes, give him back to us, Noémie.’

‘But, Thérèse, I assure you. . . . Why, you must be off your head!’ The younger woman was recovering her self-composure, but there was a glint of anger in her eyes, and her lips were set. ‘Yes, you must be mad, Thérèse, to think of such a thing. It was silly of me to let you go on talking like that, but I couldn’t believe my ears. You’ve been dreaming—or else been listening to a lot of ridiculous gossip. Now I want you to explain.’

Madame de Fontanin gave her cousin a pensive, almost affectionate glance, that seemed to say: ‘Poor stunted soul! Still, your heart is better than your way of living.’ But then her eyes fell on the smoothly rounded shoulder, the soft voluptuous flesh that seemed fluttering, like a trapped dove, beneath the gauzy lace. And the picture that rose before her eyes was so realistic that she had to close them. A look of hatred, then of grief, flitted across her face. She felt her courage failing, and decided to put an end to the interview.

‘Well, perhaps I’m mistaken. But do, please, give me his address. No, not his address. I only ask you, let him know that I have need of him.’

Noémie stiffened up. ‘Let him know? Do you think *I* know where he is.’ She had gone very red. ‘Look here, Thérèse, I’ve had about enough of your nonsense. I admit Jerome comes to see me now and then. Why not? We make no secret of it. After all, we’re cousins. Why shouldn’t we?’ Instinct gave her the words that would cut deepest. ‘He’ll be *so* tickled when I tell

him that you came and made this absurd scene. I wish you could be here then!’

Madame de Fontaine drew back. ‘You’re talking like a prostitute.’

‘Very well then, do you want to hear the truth?’ Noémie retorted. ‘When a woman’s husband leaves her, it’s her own fault. If Jerome had found in your company what he gets elsewhere, you wouldn’t have to go running after him, my dear.’

Madame de Fontanin could not help asking herself: Can it be true? Her nerves were at their breaking-point and she felt inclined to leave at once. But she could not face the prospect of being back at home again, without the address, without any means of getting in touch with Jerome. Her eyes softened once more.

‘Noémie, please forget what I said just now and listen to me. Jenny’s ill, she’s had a temperature for two days, and I’m alone. You are a mother, you must know what it is to watch at the bedside of a child who’s starting an illness. For three weeks now Jerome hasn’t been home, not once. Where is he? What’s he doing? He *must* be told his daughter’s ill; he must come back. Do tell him that.’ Noémie shook her head, wholly unmoved by the appeal. ‘Oh, Noémie, it’s not possible you’ve grown so heartless. Listen, I’m going to tell you everything; it’s true that Jenny’s ill and I’m dreadfully worried about her; but that’s not the worst.’ Her voice was humbler yet. ‘Daniel has left me; he’s run away.’

‘Run away?’

‘Yes. Enquiries will have to be made. I simply can’t remain alone at such a time—with a sick child on my hands. Surely you understand that? Noémie, do please tell him he must come back.’

For a moment Madame de Fontanin thought the younger woman was about to give way; there was a look of sympathy on her face. But then she turned abruptly away and cried, raising her arms to emphasize the words:

‘But, good heavens, what do you expect me to do about it? Didn’t I tell you just now I can’t help you in any way?’ And when Madame de Fontanin disgustedly refrained from answering, she swung round on her with blazing cheeks. ‘You don’t believe me, Thérèse, eh? So much the worse for you; now you shall know everything. He’s let me down again—bolted, I don’t know where! Run away with another woman. So now you know! Well, do you believe me?’

All the colour had left Madame de Fontanin’s face. Unthinking, she repeated: ‘Run away with another woman!’

‘Oh, if you only knew how he’s made me suffer! I’ve forgiven him too often, so he thinks I’ll go on forgiving him all the time. He’s greatly mistaken. Never again! The way he’s treated me is positively atrocious. Under my eyes, in my own house, he seduced a little slut of a maid I had here, a wretched brat of nineteen. She decamped, bag and baggage, a fortnight ago without giving notice or anything. And, would you believe it, he was waiting for her at the street-door, with a cab!’ Her voice grew shrill and she jumped up from the sofa. ‘In the street where I live, at my own door, in broad daylight, with my own servant. Did you ever hear of such a thing?’

Madame de Fontanin had gone to the piano and was steadying herself against it; she was feeling on the verge of collapse. A picture was taking form before her, of Mariette as she had seen her a few months earlier, of all the little things she had noticed then, their furtive contacts as they brushed against each other in the hall, her husband’s surreptitious expeditions up to the sixth floor, where the maid’s bedroom was; until that day when it had become impossible to overlook what was going on, when she had had to dismiss the girl who, overcome by remorse, had begged her mistress’s forgiveness. And she remembered the glimpse she had had of that little shopgirl in black, drying her eyes, beside the river bank. And now, looking up, she saw Noémie in front of her, and she averted her eyes. But her gaze drifted involuntarily back to the handsome woman sprawling across the sofa, the bare shoulder shaken by spasms of sobbing, and the gleam of white flesh under the filmy lace. And the picture that rose before her then was the most horrible of all.

Noémie’s voice was reaching her consciousness by fits and starts.

‘But it’s over now! I’m through with him. He can come back, he can go down on his bended knees, I won’t give him a look. I hate and despise him. I’ve caught him lying time after time without the faintest reason, just to amuse himself, because he’s built that way. He can’t open his mouth without lying. He doesn’t know what it means to tell the truth.’

‘You’re unjust to him, Noémie.’

The younger woman sprang up in amazement. ‘You of all people! *You* defend him!’

But Madame de Fontanin had regained her self-control; when she spoke again her voice had changed.

‘You haven’t got the address of that . . . that maid?’

Noémie reflected for a moment, then, bending towards her, answered with a confidential air:

‘No. But the concierge, perhaps. . . .’

Thérèse cut her short with a quick gesture, and began to move towards the door. To hide her discomfiture Noémie buried her face amongst the cushions and made as if she did not see her going.

In the hall, as Madame de Fontanin was drawing aside the front-door curtain, she suddenly felt Nicole's arms hugging her passionately; the little girl's face was wet with tears. She had no time to say anything to the child, who kissed her again, almost hysterically, and ran back into the flat.

The concierge was only too glad to gossip. 'Yes, ma'am, I readdress her letters to the place in the country where she comes from. It's Perros-Guirec, in Brittany; her folk send them on to her, I expect. If you'd like to know the address. . . .' She opened a greasy, well-thumbed address-book.

On her way home Madame de Fontanin entered a post-office, and filled in a telegraph form.

*Victorine Le Gad. Place de l'Eglise. Perros-Guirec.
Please inform M. de Fontanin that his son Daniel disappeared last Sunday.*

Then she asked for a letter-card.

*Pastor Gregory,
Christian Science Group,
2, Boulevard Bineau,
Neuilly-sur-Seine.*

DEAR JAMES,

Daniel left home two days ago without saying where he was going. I have had no news from him and I am terribly worried. To make things worse, Jenny is ill; she has a high temperature, but we don't know yet what's wrong. And I cannot let Jerome know as I don't know where he is.

I am feeling very lonely, my dear friend. Please come.

THÉRÈSE DE FONTANIN.

Two days later, on a Wednesday, at six o'clock in the evening, a tall, ungainly, grotesquely thin man, whose age it was impossible to guess, made his appearance at the building in which Madame de Fontanin's flat was situated.

The concierge shook her head. 'The poor young lady's dying, and the doctors are with her. They won't let you see her.'

The pastor climbed the stairs. The door on the landing was open. The hall seemed full of men's overcoats. A nurse came running up the hall.

'I am Pastor Gregory,' he said to her. 'What's wrong? Is Jenny . . . ?'

The nurse stared at him, murmured, 'She's dying,' and turned off into one of the rooms.

He shook all over as if he had been dealt a blow. It seemed to him the air had suddenly become unbreathable, stifling. Going into the drawing-room, he opened both windows wide.

Ten minutes passed. People were moving to and fro in the passage; doors opening and shutting. There was a sound of voices. Madame de Fontanin appeared, followed by two elderly men in black. When she saw Gregory she ran towards him.

'Oh, James! At last you've come! Please, please don't leave me now.'

'I only got back from London to-day,' he explained.

She drew him aside, leaving the two doctors to their consultation. In the hall Antoine, in his shirt-sleeves, was plying a nail-brush over a basin the nurse was holding in front of him. Madame de Fontanin grasped the pastor's hands. She had changed out of recognition; her cheeks were pale and haggard, her lips were quivering.

'Please stay beside me, James. Don't leave me alone. Jenny is . . .'

A sound of moaning came from the far end of the flat and, without ending the phrase, she hurried back to the bedroom.

The pastor went up to Antoine; his anxious look voiced an unspoken question.

Antoine shook his head. 'I'm afraid there's no hope.'

'Come, come! Why talk in that way?' Gregory sounded indignant.

'It's meningitis,' Antoine said with a certain emphasis, raising his hand to his forehead. 'What a rum bird!' he was thinking, as he looked at the English pastor.

Gregory's face was peaked and sallow; his long black hair, lustreless as a dead man's, straggled over a high, straight forehead. He had a long, pendulous nose flushed an unhealthy red and the eyes, jet-black, almost

without whites, deep-set beneath heavy brows, had an oddly phosphorescent glow. They brought to mind the eyes of certain monkeys; they had the same restlessness, the same melting softness combined with the same obduracy. Yet more unusual was the lower half of his face. He seemed to be perpetually laughing, but with a laugh that expressed no known emotion and twisted his chin into all sorts of unexpected shapes. The chin was no less odd; it was hairless, and drawn skin-tight over the bones like a wrapper of old parchment.

‘Was it sudden?’ the pastor asked.

‘The fever began on Sunday, but the symptoms became definite only yesterday morning. I arranged for a consultation at once. Everything possible has been done.’ His face grew earnest. ‘We shall hear what my colleagues have to say, but in my opinion—well, I’m afraid the poor child is . . .’

‘Don’t!’ the pastor exclaimed in English, in a hoarse, harsh voice. His eyes were fixed on Antoine’s; their indignation contrasted quaintly with the laugh that never left his mouth. As though the air had grown unbreathable, he raised an emaciated hand towards his collar, spreading out the fingers stiffly. The hand looked like some hideous spider resting on his throat.

Antoine was studying the pastor with a professional eye. ‘Remarkably asymmetrical, that face,’ he was thinking, ‘what with that silent laugh, that vacant maniacal grimace and the rest of it.’

Gregory addressed him in a formal tone. ‘Might I know if Daniel has returned?’

‘No, and there’s no news of him.’

His voice grew tender. ‘Poor, poor lady!’ he murmured.

Just then the two doctors came out of the drawing-room. Antoine went up to them.

‘She’s dying,’ the elder of the two said in a nasal voice, placing his hand on Antoine’s shoulder. Antoine turned and glanced at the pastor.

The nurse came up and asked in a low voice, ‘Really, doctor, do you think there’s no . . .’

Gregory moved away so as to hear no more. The oppression in the air was more than he could endure. Through the half-open door he saw the staircase; he hurried down it into the open air. Crossing the avenue he began to run straight ahead under the trees, his hair fluttering in disorder, his spidery fingers splayed across his chest. Eagerly he inhaled the cool evening air, his mouth still gaping in a preposterous laugh. ‘Those accursed doctors!’

He was as devoted to the Fontanins as if they had been his own family. When he had landed in Paris, sixteen years before, without a penny in his pocket, it was Pastor Perrier, Thérèse's father, who had befriended him. And he had never forgotten. Later on, during his benefactor's last illness, he had thrown up his work to hasten to his bedside, and the old pastor had died with one hand in his daughter's and the other in that of Gregory—his son, as the old man always called him. It all came back to him so poignantly at that moment that he turned on his heel and strode rapidly to the house. The doctors' carriage was no longer standing in front of it. He ran upstairs.

The front-door had been left ajar. A sound of moans guided him to Jenny's room. In the semi-darkness he could hear the child whimpering, gasping for breath. It was all that Madame de Fontanin, the nurse and maid could do between them to keep the little body still. It was twisting convulsively like a fish dying on a river bank.

For a few moments Gregory did not speak, but watched them with a surly look on his face, pinching his chin between his fingers. At last he bent towards Madame de Fontanin.

'They'll kill your child between them!'

'Kill her? What ever do you mean?' she exclaimed, as she clutched at Jenny's arm, which kept on slipping from her grasp.

'If you don't drive them out'—he spoke with deep conviction—'they'll kill Jenny.'

'Who will?'

'Every one of them!'

She stared at him blankly—could she believe her ears? His sallow face bending above her looked terrifying.

One of Jenny's hands was fluttering outside the sheets; he gripped it and, stooping over the bed, began talking to her in a low, crooning voice.

'Jenny! Jenny darling! Don't you know me?'

Her distraught eyes, that had been staring up at the ceiling, swung slowly round towards the pastor's. Then, bending still nearer, he let his gaze sink deep into hers, and such was its insistence that the child ceased suddenly to whimper.

'Stop holding her!' he said to the three women, and, as none of them complied, he added, without moving his head, in a voice that admitted no denial: 'Give me her other hand. All is well. Now, go!'

They moved away from the bed. Alone at the bedside, he bent over the dying child, mastering her with the hypnotic fixity of his eyes. The child's

arms struggled convulsively in his grip for a few moments, then gently sank towards the sheets. For a time the legs went on twitching, then they too relaxed. And, subdued at last, the tired eyes closed. Still bending over her, Gregory signed to Madame de Fontanin to approach.

‘Look,’ he murmured, ‘she’s quiet now, she’s calmer. Drive them away, I tell you, drive away those sons of Belial. Error alone dominates them, and Error had all but killed your child.’

He laughed, with the soundless laugh of a mystic who is in sole possession of the eternal verities, for whom the rest of the world is composed of madmen. Without shifting his gaze, still fixed on Jenny’s eyes, he went on in a lower voice:

‘Woman, I tell you *There is no Evil*. It’s you who bring it into being and give it its baneful power—because you fear it, because you admit its existence. Now, for instance—those men have given up hope. They all say: “She is . . .” And you think the same thing. You all but said it just now. “Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.” Poor little one, when I entered this room, there was nothing round her but the void, nothing but the Negative. . . . But I deny the Negative, I say: “*She is not ill.*”’

The violence with which he spoke was so compelling that the women were carried away by his conviction.

‘She is well!’ he added. ‘But leave me alone with her now.’

With the dexterity of a conjuror, he gradually relaxed his hold on the child’s wrists, finger by finger; then gave a little backward jump, leaving her limbs free. She lay, relaxed and docile, on the bed.

‘Life is good!’ he chanted, ‘and all things are good. Good is wisdom, and good is love. All health is in Christ and Christ is in us all.’

He turned to the maid and nurse who had moved away to the far end of the room. ‘Please go, and leave me with her.’

‘Yes, go!’ Madame de Fontanin said. But Gregory had drawn himself up to his full height and his outstretched arm seemed to be hurling an anathema at the table with its medicine-bottles and compresses and the bowl of crushed ice. ‘First take these things away!’ he commanded.

The women obeyed.

No sooner was he alone with Madame de Fontanin than he cried cheerfully: ‘Now, open the window. Open it as wide as you can, my dear.’

Outside in the street a cool breeze was rustling in the tree-tops. Sweeping into the room, it seemed to hurl itself on the polluted air, driving it

aloft in eddying flurries and in a final onslaught whirling it outside the window. And then it laid its cool caress on the sick child's burning cheeks. She shivered.

'Won't she catch cold?' Madame de Fontanin murmured.

A cheerful grin was his first rejoinder. At last he spoke.

'Yes, you can shut it now. Yes, all is well. And now light all your lights, Madame Fontanin. We must have brightness round us, we must have joy. And in our hearts too we must have light, and joy abounding. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"' And, raising his hands, he added: 'Thou hast granted me to come before the accursed hour.'

He drew up a chair to the bedside. 'Be seated,' he said. 'You must be calm, perfectly calm. Hold on to the Personal Control. Listen only to the promptings of Our Lord. I say to you it is Christ's will that she shall recover. Let us share His will. Let us invoke the mighty power of Good. Spirit is everything, everything is spirit. The material is dominated by the spiritual. For two days this poor child has been exposed to the influences of the Negative. With what disgust those men and women inspire me! Their minds are bent upon the worst, and they can evoke nothing but the powers of ill. And they think that "all is over" when they have come to the end of their wretched, puling little "certainties"!'

The moans set in again and Jenny began tossing about on the bed. Suddenly she threw back her head and her lips parted as if she were about to breathe her last. Madame de Fontanin flung herself on the bed, her body stretched above the child's, and cried out passionately:

'No, no! For pity's sake!'

The pastor advanced on her, as if he held her responsible for the sudden crisis.

'Afraid . . . ? So your faith has failed you? Fear is of the body only. In God's presence there is no fear. Put aside your carnal being, it is not truly you. Hear what Saint Mark says: "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them." Now, have done with fear and—pray!' She knelt down. 'Pray!' he repeated sternly. 'Pray first of all for yourself, oh doubting soul! May God restore to you trust and peace. It is in your perfect trust that the child will find salvation. Call on God's Holy Spirit. I unite my heart with yours. Now, let us pray.'

He communed with himself for a while, then began the prayer. He was standing up, his feet together, his arms folded, his closed eyes turned heavenwards; wisps of hair straggled on his forehead like an aureole of black flames. At first it was only a faint murmuring, but gradually the words

became distinct, and, like the deep, rhythmic drone of a church organ, the laboured breathing of the child accompanied the invocation.

‘Omnipotent, creative Breath of Life, Thou who art everywhere, in every tiny atom of all Thy creatures, I call upon Thee from the depths of my heart. Fill with Thy peace this sorely afflicted home. Drive far away from this couch all that is not a thought of life. Evil lies only in our weakness. O Lord, cast out of us the Negative.’

‘Thou alone art Infinite Wisdom, and all Thou doest with us is according to the Law. Therefore this woman commends to Thee her child, on the threshold of death. She makes her daughter over to Thy Will; Thy Will be done. And if it must be that this young child be snatched from her mother, she bows to Thy decree.’

‘Oh, James, please don’t say that,’ she moaned. ‘Not that! Not that!’

Gregory did not move from where he stood, but she felt his hand fall heavily on her shoulder.

‘Oh, woman of little faith,’ he said, ‘can this be you, you on whose heart the heavenly spirit has breathed so often?’

‘Oh, James, these last three days have been more than I could bear. I can’t, I can’t bear any more!’

He stepped back a pace. ‘I look at her—and it is no longer she. I can no longer recognize her. She has let Evil enter into her soul, into the holy temple of the Lord. . . . Pray, poor soul, pray!’

The child’s limbs were twitching under the bedclothes, racked by violent discharges of pent-up nervous force. Her eyes seemed starting out of their sockets, as they roved round the room, staring at each lamp in turn. But Gregory paid no attention to her. Claspings the little girl tightly in her arms, Madame de Fontanin did her best to keep down the convulsions.

‘All-powerful Force,’ the pastor intoned, ‘Thou who art the Truth and the Life, Thou hast said: “Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself.” So be it. If this mother is to be bereaved of her child, she bows herself to Thy will.’

‘No, James, no!’

The pastor bent towards her.

‘Renounce! Renunciation is the leaven; as leaven works in dough, so does renunciation with all evil thinking, making the Good rise.’ He drew himself up. ‘And so, O Lord, if it is Thy will, take her daughter from her. She yields her child to Thee. And if Thou hast need of her son also . . .’

‘No! No!’

‘. . . and if Thou hast need of her son also, let him, too, be reft from her! May he never cross again his mother’s threshold!’

‘My Daniel! Oh, for pity’s sake!’

‘Lord, she yield’s her son to Thy wisdom, with her free consent. And, if her husband must be taken from her, let him be taken, too!’

‘Not Jerome. No. . . .’ Her voice was broken with emotion and she had sunk on to her knees.

‘May he, too, be taken from her!’ the pastor cried, his voice rising in a wild ecstasy. ‘May he be taken, without cavil, and in obedience to Thy Will alone, O fountainhead of Light, Source of all Good, Spirit Divine!’

For a while he was silent; then, without looking at her, he asked: ‘Well, have you made the sacrifice?’

‘Please have some pity, James. I can’t, I can’t . . . !’

‘Then pray.’ After some minutes had passed, he spoke again. ‘Well, have you made the sacrifice, the sacrifice of *all* you love?’

She made no answer but fell forward, fainting, on to the bed. . . .

Nearly an hour had passed. There was no movement from the bed; only the child’s swollen head kept tossing to and fro upon the pillow. Her cheeks were red and each intake of the breath seemed to rasp her throat. And her unclosing eyes had the blank stare of madness.

Suddenly, though Madame de Fontanin had not moved or spoken, the pastor gave a start as if she had called his name; then went and knelt beside her. She drew herself up, her features were less strained. For a long while she gazed at the young face lying on the pillow.

Stretching out her arms, she cried: ‘Not my will, but Thy Will be done, O Lord!’

Gregory had never doubted that these words would be spoken, at their due hour. His eyes were closed; with all his fervour he was invoking the grace of God.

The night wore on. At times it seemed as if the child were at her last gasp, that what little life remained to her was flickering out, as intermittently her eyes grew dim. Now and again her body was racked by spasms of pain; each time this happened Gregory took her hand in his and raised his voice in humble prayer.

‘We shall gather in our harvest. But prayer is needed. Let us pray.’

Towards five o'clock he rose, replaced a blanket that had slipped on to the floor and flung the window open. The cold night air poured into the room. Madame de Fontanin, who was still on her knees, made no movement to restrain him.

He went out on to the balcony. There was little sign of dawn as yet. The sky was still a dim metallic grey and the avenue a long tunnel of darkness. But, beyond the Luxembourg Gardens there was a faint sheen on the horizon, and wraiths of mist were drifting up the avenue, swathing the black tree-tops in fleecy vapour. To keep himself from shivering, Gregory stiffened his arms and clenched his hands on the balcony rail. Waves of coolness borne on the light breeze bathed his moist forehead and pale cheeks, on which the long vigil and the strain of fervent prayer had left their mark. Gradually the roofs were turning blue, and bright rectangles of venetian blinds taking form upon the drab, smoke-framed walls.

The pastor gazed toward the sunrise. From sombre depths of shadow a flood of light was surging up towards him, a rosy glow that slowly permeated all the sky. Nature was waking, millions of dancing atoms sparkling in the morning air. And suddenly his chest seemed swelling with a breath of new-born life, a preternatural energy penetrated him, filling him with a sense of incommensurable vastness. In a flash he grew aware of boundless possibilities; his mind controlled the universe, nothing was forbidden him. He could bid that tree, 'Tremble!' and it would tremble; say to that child, 'Arise!' and, lo, she would rise from the dead. He stretched forth his arm and suddenly, as if in answer to the gesture, the foliage of the avenue began to quiver and a cloud of birds rose twittering with joy into the brightening air.

He went back to the bed and laid his hand on the head of the mother, who was still kneeling at the bedside.

'Now all things have been made clean, let us rejoice, my dear. Hallelujah!'

He moved to Jenny's side.

'The shadows are cast forth. Give me your hands, sweetheart.'

For two days the child had hardly understood a word, but now she gave her hands to him.

'Look at me!' he bade her, and the haggard eyes, which had seemed to have lost the faculty of seeing, gazed into his eyes.

'"For He shall redeem thee from death . . . and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee." You are well, my little one. The shadows all have fled. Glory be to God! Now, pray!'

The light of understanding had come back to the child's eyes, her lips were moving.

'And now, darling, let your eyelids close. Quite softly. That's right. . . . Now sleep, for all your troubles are over. Now you must sleep—for joy!'

Some minutes later—for the first time in fifty hours—Jenny fell asleep. Quiet at last, her head nestled upon the pillow, her eyelashes cast tranquil shadows on her cheeks, and through the parted lips her breath flowed in an even cadence. She was saved.

6

IT was a school exercise-book bound in plain grey cloth which Jacques and Daniel had selected as being least likely to catch the master's attention when they passed it to and fro. The first pages were filled with queries jotted down in haste.

What are the dates of Robert the Pious?
Which is it, *rapsody* or *rhapsody*!
What's the trans. of *eripuit*?

And so forth. Then came some pages filled with notes and corrections, presumably referring to poems Jacques had written—on separate sheets.

Presently, however, the two boys settled down to a steady exchange of letters.

The first letter of any length was written by Jacques.

Paris, Lycée Amyot, Form IIIa, under the suspicious eye of QQ, alias Hogshair. Monday, March 17; the time being 3 hours, 31 minutes and 15 seconds P.M.

Is your prevailing mood one of indifference, of sensuality, or of love? I rather think it must be Number Three, which is more natural to you than the others.

Personally, the more I study my feelings, the more I realize that man's a BRUTE, and love alone can rescue him from that state. That is the cry of my stricken heart and my heart speaks true! Without

you, best beloved, I should be a hopeless fool, a dunderhead. If there's a spark of understanding in me, I owe it to you alone.

I shall never forget the moments, too few, alas, and too brief, when we are entirely one another's. You are my only love. I shall never love again; for a thousand memories of you would bar the way. Good-bye, I feel feverish, my forehead is throbbing, my eyes are going dim. Nothing shall ever separate us, promise me. Oh, when, when shall we be free? When shall we be able to live together, go abroad together? How I shall enjoy foreign lands! Think of travelling together, gathering our romantic first impressions and transmuting them into poems, while they are still fresh and fiery!

I hate waiting. Write to me as soon as you possibly can. I want you to be sure and answer this before four, if you love me as I love you.

My heart clasps your heart, as Petronius clasped his divine Eunice.

Vale et me ama!

J.

Daniel's reply followed on the next page.

I feel that, were I to live alone beneath another sky, the utterly unique bond that links your soul and mine would somehow make me know what is becoming of you. And it seems to me that the lapse of time means nothing to our mutual affection.

It is impossible to tell you the pleasure your letter gave me. You were my friend already and you've become far more than that—the better part of me. Have I not helped to shape your soul, as you have helped to shape mine? Good God, how real I feel that is when I'm writing to you! I am alive then! And everything in me is alive—body, mind, heart, imagination—thanks to your devotion, which never shall I doubt, my true and only friend.

D.

P.S.—I've induced mother to get rid of my old boneshaker. Good biz! It was falling to pieces.

Tibi,

D.

Another letter from Jacques.

O dilectissime!

How do you manage to be so cheerful at times and so sad at others? Personally, even in my moods of maddest gaiety, time and again I feel myself the prey of sombre thoughts. And I know that never, never again shall I be able to be gay, light-hearted. Always there will rise up before me the spectre of an unattainable ideal.

Ah, sometimes I understand the ecstasy of those pale nuns with bloodless faces who spend their lives remote from this too, too real world! How pitiable to have wings if it is only to break them against prison bars! I am alone in a hostile universe; my father, whom I love, does not understand me. I am not so very old but already how many fair flowers of hope lie broken, how many dews have turned to floods of rain, how many pleasures have been frustrated, what despairs have embittered my life!

Forgive me, beloved, for being so lugubrious—I suppose my ‘character is being formed.’ My brain is in a ferment; my heart even more so, were that possible. Let us remain united for ever. Together we will steer clear of the rocks and reefs, and of the whirlpool men call pleasure.

Everything has turned to ashes in my hands; but there remains the supreme delight of knowing I am yours, and of our SECRET, O chosen of my heart!!

J.

P.S.—I end this letter in great haste as I have my recitation to learn by heart and I don’t know a word of it yet, drat it!

O my love, if I hadn’t got you, I really think I’d kill myself!

J.

Daniel had replied immediately.

So you are suffering?

Why should you, dearest of friends, why should you, who are so young, curse life? It’s sacrilege! You say your soul is tethered to the earth. Well then—work, hope, love, read books!

How can I console you for the sorrow that is preying on your soul? What remedy can I offer for your cries of despair? No, my friend, the Ideal is not incompatible with human nature. No, no, it is not a mere childish fancy, a phantom born of some poet’s dream. For me the Ideal (it’s hard to explain), for me it’s the mingling of what is greatest with the humblest earthly things; it is to bring greatness into

all one does; it is the complete development of all those divine faculties that the Creative Breath has instilled in us. Do you understand me? That is the Ideal as I feel it in the depths of my heart.

And then, if you will but trust a friend who is faithful unto death, who has lived much because he has dreamed and suffered so much; if you will trust your friend who has never wished anything but your happiness, let me remind you once again that you don't live for those who cannot understand you, for the outside world that despises you, poor boy, but for someone—it is *I* that 'someone'—who never ceases thinking of you, and feeling like you, with you, about all things.

O my friend, may the sweetness of our wonderful love be like a holy balm on your wounds.

D.

Instantly Jacques had scribbled in the margin:

Forgive me! It is the fault of my violent, extravagant, fantastical nature, dearest love!! I pass from the depths of despair to the most futile hopes; one moment I am in the abyss and the next carried aloft into the clouds! Am I then never to love anything continuously? (If it be not you!!) (And my ART!!!) Yes, such is my destiny—let me confess it . . . to you!

I adore you for your generosity, for your flower-like sensitiveness, for the earnestness you impart to all your thoughts, to all your actions, even to the delights of love. All your tender emotions I share with you, at the selfsame moment as you feel them. Let us thank Providence that we love each other and that our lonely, suffering hearts have been able to mingle thus, indissolubly, flesh to flesh!

Never forsake me.

And let us both remember eternally that each has in the other
the passionate object of

HIS LOVE

J.

There followed two long pages from Daniel, written in a bold, firm hand.

Tuesday April 7.

MY FRIEND,

To-morrow I shall be fourteen. Last year I used to whisper to myself; 'Fourteen!' It was like some lovely, impossible dream. Time passes and marks us. But in our depths nothing changes. We are always ourselves. Nothing has changed except that I feel weary and grown old.

Yesterday evening as I was going to bed I took up a volume of Musset. The last time I read it I began to tremble, at the first verse, and sometimes even wept. Yesterday for long sleepless hours I struggled to feel a thrill but nothing came. I found the phrases well-turned, harmonious. . . . Oh, what sacrilege!! Only at the end did the poetic emotion revive in me and, with a torrent of delicious tears, I felt that thrill.

Oh, if only my heart doesn't dry up! I so fear that life may blunt my heart and senses. I am growing old. Already those great ideas of God, the Spirit, Love, are ceasing to make my bosom throb as once they did, and at times I feel Doubt gnawing at my heart. How sad it all is! Why can't we live with all the might of our souls, instead of reasoning? *We think too much!* I envy the vitality of youth which blindly flings itself into every danger without taking thought. How I would love to sacrifice myself, with closed eyes, to a sublime Idea, to an ideal and immaculate Woman, instead of being always thrown back on myself. How dreadful they are, these longings which have no outlet!

You congratulate me on my earnestness. You are wrong; it is my curse, my evil destiny! I am not like the questing bee who goes to suck the honey from flower to flower. I am like the beetle that installs itself in the bosom of a single rose, in which it lives till the petals close about it and it dies suffocated in that last passionate embrace—the embrace of that one flower singled out from all the rest.

My devotion to you, my dear, is like that—faithful till death. You are that tender rose which, in the desolation of the earth, has opened its heart to me. In the depths of your loving heart bury my black despair!

D.

P.S.—You can write to my house without danger during the Easter hols. My mother never interferes with my letters (not that they're anything very special!).

I have just finished Zola's *La Débâcle*, I can lend it to you. I haven't yet got over the emotions it produced. It has such wonderful power, such depth! I am going to begin *Werther*. There, my dear, we have at last the book of books. I have also taken Gyp's *Elle et Lui*, but I shall read *Werther* first.

D.

Jacques replied in a severe tone.

For my friend's fourteenth birthday.

In the universe there is a man who by day suffers unspeakable torments and who cannot sleep of nights, who feels in his heart an aching void that sensual pleasure cannot fill and in his head a fearful chaos of his faculties; who in the giddy whirl of pleasure, amongst his gay companions, feels, of a sudden, solitude with dark wings hovering above his heart. In the universe there is a man who hopes for nothing, and fears nothing, who loathes life and has not the strength to leave it; 'tis HE WHO DOES NOT BELIEVE IN GOD!!!

P.S.—Keep this. You will read it again when you are utterly forsaken and lift your voice in vain amid the darkness.

'Have you been working during the hols.?' Daniel asked at the top of another page.

Jacques' answer followed.

'I have just completed a poem in the same style as my *Harmodius and Aristogeiton*. It begins rather neatly.

Hail Caesar! Lo, the blue-eyed maid from Gaul
Dancing for thee the dance of her dear land,
Like a river-lotus 'neath the snowy flight of swans.
A shudder passes through her swaying form.
Hail Emperor! . . . See the huge blade flash
In the fierce sword-dance of her far-off home. . . .

And so on. . . . Here's the end.

Caesar, thou growest pale! Alas, ah thrice alas!
Her sword's fell point has pierced the lovely throat.
The cup falls from her hand, the blue eyes close,
All her white nakedness is red with blood,
Red in the pale light of the moon. . . .
Beside the great fire flaring on the lakeside
Ended is the dance
Of the white warrior maid at Caesar's feast.

I call it 'The Crimson Offering' and I have a mimed dance to go with it. I would like to dedicate it to the divine Loie Fuller, and for her to dance it at the Olympia. Do you think she'd do it?

Still, some days ago I took an irrevocable decision to return to the regular metres and rhymed verse of our great classics. (Really I think I 'despised' them because they are more difficult.) I have begun an ode in rhymed stanzas on the martyrdom I spoke to you about. This is the beginning.

*Ode to Father Perboyre, who died a martyr's
death in China, Nov. 20, 1839, and was
beatified in January, 1889.*

Hail, holy priest, at whose most cruel fate
All the world shuddered through its length and breadth!
Thee would I sing, to Heaven predestinate,
And faithful unto death.

But since yesterday I have come to think that my true vocation will be to write, not poems, but stories and, if I have patience enough, novels. A great theme is fermenting in my mind. Listen!

A young girl, the daughter of a great artist, born in a studio, and herself an artist (that's to say, rather unstable in character and finding her ideal not in family life but in the cult of Beauty), is loved by a sentimental but bourgeois young man, whom her exotic beauty fascinates. But their love changes to bitter hatred and they part. He then marries a harmless little provincial girl, while she, heart-broken for lost love, plunges into debauchery (or dedicates her genius to God—I don't yet know which). That's my idea; what does my friend think of it?

The great thing, you know, is to produce nothing that's artificial, but to follow one's bent. Given the instinct to create, one should regard oneself as having the noblest and finest of missions there can

be, a great duty to fulfil. Yes, sincerity is all that matters. Sincerity in all things, always. Ah, how cruelly that thought torments me! A thousand times I have fancied I detected in myself that insincerity of the pseudo-artist, pseudo-genius, of which Maupassant discourses in *Sur l'Eau*. And my heart grew sick with disgust. O dearest, how I thank God that He has given you to me, and how greatly we shall need each other, so as to know ourselves truly and never fall into illusions about the nature of our genius!

I adore you and I clasp your hand passionately, as we did this morning, do you remember? With all my being, which is yours, whole-heartedly, passionately!

Take care! QQ has given us a dirty look. He can't understand that one may have noble thoughts and pass them on to one's friend—while *he* goes mumbling on over his Sallust!!

J.

Another letter, almost illegible, seemed to have been dashed down without a pause.

Amicus amico.

Too full, my heart is overflowing! What I can capture of the flood, I commit to paper.

Born to suffer, love and hope, I hope and love and suffer! The tale of my life can be told in two lines: *What makes me live is love, and I have but one love, YOU!*

From my early youth I always felt a need to outpour the emotions welling up in my heart into another, into an understanding heart. How many letters did I write in those days to an imaginary person who matched me like a brother! But, alas, it was only my own heart, carried away by its emotion, speaking, or, rather, writing to itself!! Then suddenly God willed that this Ideal should become Flesh, and it took form in You, my love! How did it begin? There is no telling; step by step, I lose myself in a maze of fancies without ever tracing it to its origin. Could anyone ever imagine anything so voluptuous, so sublime as our love?? I seek in vain for comparisons. Beside our great secret everything else turns pale! It's a sun that warms, enlightens our two lives. But no words can describe it. Written, it is like the photo of a flower.

That's enough!

Perhaps you are in need of help, of hope or consolation, and here I am sending you not words of affection but the sad effusions of a heart that lives only for itself. Forgive me, my love! I cannot write to you otherwise! I am going through a crisis, my heart is more parched than the stones of a dry watercourse. I am so unsure about everything, unsure of myself; can crueller suffering be??

Scorn me! Write to me no more! Go, love another!! No longer am I worthy of the gift you make me of yourself!

What irony is in this implacable destiny that urges me . . . to what goal? To nothingness!!!

Write to me. If you were lost to me, I should kill myself!

Tibi eximo, carissime,

J.

The Abbé Binot had slipped in between the last pages of the book a note intercepted by the form-master, on the eve of their flight. It consisted of an almost illegible pencilled note from Jacques.

On all who accuse basely and without proof, on all those persons, shame!

Shame to them! Woe to them!

Their machinations are prompted by vile curiosity, they want to nose out the secrets of our friendship. What a foul thing to do!

No sordid truckling to them! We must face out the storm together! Death rather than defeat!

Our love is above calumny and threats!

Let us prove it!

Yours FOR LIFE,

J.

THEY had reached Marseilles on Sunday, after midnight. The first flush of their enthusiasm had waned. They had slept doubled up on the wooden seats of an ill-lighted carriage, and the noise of turntables and the sudden halt had waked them with a start. They had stepped on to the platform, blinking their eyes, dazed and apprehensive. The glamour had departed.

The first thing was to find somewhere to sleep. Opposite the station was a white globe of light inscribed 'Hotel'; at the uninviting entrance the proprietor was on the watch for custom. Daniel, the more confident of the two, had boldly asked for two beds for the night. Mistrustful on principle, the man put them some questions. They had their story pat. At the Paris station their father had found he had forgotten a trunk, and had missed the train. He would be arriving in the morning without a doubt, by the first train. The hotel-keeper hummed and hawed, eyeing the youngsters. At last he opened a ledger.

'Write your names there.'

He addressed Daniel not only because he seemed the older of the two—he looked sixteen—but, even more, because there was something distinguished in his looks and general demeanour that compelled a certain respect. On entering the hotel he had taken off his hat, not out of timidity, but because he had a way of taking off his hat and letting his arm drop to his side—a gesture that seemed to imply: 'It isn't specially for you I'm doing this, but because I believe in observing the customs of polite society.' His dark hair came down to a neat point in the exact centre of his forehead, the skin of which was white as a young girl's. But there was nothing girlish in the firmly moulded chin which, though quietly determined in its poise, had no suggestion of aggressiveness. His eyes had countered, without either weakness or bravado, the hotel-keeper's scrutiny, and he had written without hesitation in the ledger: *Georges and Maurice Legrand*.

'The room will be seven francs. We always expect to be paid in advance. The night train gets in at 5.30. I'll see you're up in time for it.'

They did not dare to tell him they were faint with hunger.

The furniture of the room consisted of two beds, a chair and a basin. As they entered a like shyness came over them both—they would have to undress in front of each other! All desire for sleep had fled. To postpone the awkward moment they sat down on the beds and began checking up their resources. Their joint savings came to 188 francs, which they shared equally between them. Jacques, on emptying his pockets, produced a little Corsican dagger, an ocarina, a twenty-five centime edition of Dante and, last of all, a rather sticky slab of chocolate, half of which he gave to Daniel. Then they

sat on, wondering what next to do. To gain time, Daniel unlaced his boots; Jacques followed his example. A vague feeling of apprehension made them feel still more embarrassed. At last Daniel made a move.

‘I’ll blow out the candle,’ he said.

When he had done so, they hastily undressed and climbed into bed, without speaking.

Next morning, before five o’clock, someone started banging loudly on their door. Wraithlike in the pale light of the breaking day, they slipped into their clothes. The proprietor had made some coffee for them, but they refused it for fear of having to talk to him. Hungry and shivering, they visited the station bar.

By noon they had made a thorough exploration of Marseilles. With freedom and the broad daylight, their daring had come back to them. Jacques invested in a note-book in which to record his impressions; now and then he stopped to jot down a phrase, the light of inspiration in his eye. They bought some bread and sausages and, going to the harbour, settled down on a coil of rope in front of stolid, stationary liners and dancing yachts and smacks.

A sailor told them to get up; he needed the cable they were sitting on.

Jacques risked a question. Where were those boats going?

‘That depends. Which of ’em?’

‘That big one.’

‘Her? She’s off to Madagascar.’

‘Really? Shall we see her sail?’

‘No, she ain’t sailing till Thursday next. But if you want to see a liner going out, you’d best come back here this afternoon. The *La Fayette* there is sailing for Tunis at five.’

At last they had the information they wanted.

Daniel, however, pointed out that Tunis was not Algeria.

‘Anyhow it’s Africa,’ Jacques said, biting off a mouthful of bread. Squatting against a heap of tarpaulins with his shock of coarse red hair standing up, like a tuft of autumn grass, from his low forehead; with his angular head and protruding ears, his scraggy neck and queer-shaped little nose that kept on wrinkling, he brought to mind a squirrel nibbling beechnuts. Daniel had stopped eating. He turned to Jacques.

‘I say! Supposing we wrote to *them* from here, before we——!’

The glance the younger boy flashed at him cut him short.

‘Are you mad?’ he spluttered, his mouth half full of bread. ‘Just for them to have us arrested the moment we land?’

He scowled furiously at his friend. In the unprepossessing face, which a plentiful crop of freckles did nothing to improve, the blue, harsh, deep-set, imperious eyes had a curiously vivid sheen. Their expression changed so constantly as to make them seem inscrutable. Now earnest, and a moment later gay and mocking; now soft and almost coaxing, they would suddenly go hostile, almost cruel. And then, unexpectedly, they would grow dim with tears; though oftenest they were shrewd and ardent, seemingly incapable of gentleness.

On the brink of a retort Daniel checked himself. His face expressed a meek submission to Jacques’ outburst and, as if to excuse his last remark, he smiled. He had a special way of smiling; the small, pursed mouth would suddenly open on the left, showing his teeth, in a quaint, twisted grin that lent a charming air of gaiety to the pensive face.

On such occasions it seemed odd that the tall, mature-minded youngster did not rebel against the ascendancy of his childish friend. His education and experience, the liberty he had enjoyed, gave him an uncontestable advantage over Jacques. Not to mention that, at the Lycée where they had met, Daniel had proved a good pupil, Jacques a slow-coach. Daniel’s nimble wits were always ahead of any demand that was made on them; Jacques, on the other hand, was a poor worker, or rather did not work at all. It was not that his intelligence was at fault. The trouble was that it was directed towards matters that had no connexion with his studies. Some demon of caprice was always prompting him to do the most ridiculous things. He had never been able to resist temptation and seemed quite irresponsible, to follow only the promptings of that inner voice. But the oddest thing was that, though he was at the bottom of his form in most subjects, his fellow pupils and even the masters could not help feeling a certain interest in him. Among the other youngsters, whose personalities were kept in somnolent abeyance by habit and discipline, among the sedulous masters, whose natural gifts seemed to have gone stale on them, this dunce with the unpromising face but given to outbursts of sudden candour and caprice, who seemed to live in a world of daydreams created by and for himself alone, who launched without a second thought into the most preposterous adventures—this odd little creature, while he thoroughly dismayed them, compelled their tacit admiration. Daniel had been amongst the first to feel the attraction of Jacques’ mind, less developed than his own but so fertile, so lavish of surprises, and so remarkably instructive. Moreover, he too had in him a strain of

waywardness, a like bias towards independence and revolt. As for Jacques, a day-boarder in a Catholic school, the offspring of a family in which religious exercises bulked so largely—it had been for the sheer excitement of another evasion from the narrow life at home that he had gone out of his way to attract the Protestant boy's attention; for even then Jacques had guessed that Daniel would reveal to him a world far different from his own. But, in a few weeks, their comradeship had blazed up into an all-absorbing passion, and in it both had found a welcome relief from the moral solitude from which both boys, unconsciously, had been suffering so long. It was a chaste, almost a mystical love, in which the two young souls fused their common yearnings towards the future, and shared all the extravagant and contradictory feelings that can obsess the mind of a fourteen-year-old boy—from a passion for silkworms or secret codes to the most intimate heart-searchings, even to that feverish desire for Life which seemed to intensify with every day they lived through.

Daniel's silent smile had soothed Jacques down, and now he was munching away again at his bread. The lower part of his face was rather gross; he had the characteristic Thibault jaw, and an over-large mouth, with chapped lips. But, though ugly, the mouth was expressive and suggested a strong-willed, sensual nature. He looked up at his friend.

'You'll see, I know the ropes!' he boasted. 'Life's easy in Tunis. Anybody who applies is taken on for the rice-fields. You can chew betel—it's delicious. You earn wages right away and you get all the grub you want—dates and tangerines and so on . . . and, of course, lots of travelling.'

'We'll write to them from there,' Daniel suggested.

'Perhaps,' Jacques corrected, with a toss of his red poll. 'Once we've found our feet and they realize we can get on without them.'

They fell silent. Daniel had finished his meal and was gazing at the big black hulls, the busy scene on the sunlit wharves, and the luminous horizon glimpsed through the forest of masts. He was struggling against himself, trying to fix his mind on what he saw, so as not to think about his mother.

The great thing was somehow to get on board the *La Fayette* that evening.

A waiter pointed out to them the offices of the Messageries Line. The fares were posted up. Daniel went to the ticket-office window.

'Please, my father has sent me to get two third-class passages to Tunis.'

'Your father?' The old clerk went on placidly with his work. All that could be seen of him was the top of his forehead, rising above a pile of papers. He continued writing for a while. Then, without looking up, he said

to Daniel: ‘Very well, go and tell him to come here himself—and to bring his identity papers with him, don’t forget!’

They grew aware that the other people in the office were staring at them, and fled without another word. Jacques, who was boiling with rage, thrust his hands deep in his pockets. His imagination was suggesting to him a series of expedients. They might get taken on as cabin-boys, or as cargo—in crates well stocked with food; or hire a row-boat and go by easy stages along the coast to Gibraltar and thence to Morocco, halting each night at a port where they would play the ocarina and pass the hat round on the terraces of the little inns.

Daniel was pondering; that inner voice had once again made itself heard, warning him. He had heard it thus several times since they had run away. But this time he could no longer turn a deaf ear; he had to take heed of it. And there was no mistaking the disapproval manifest in that still small voice.

‘Why not lie low in Marseilles for a bit?’ he suggested.

‘We’d be spotted before two days were out,’ Jacques retorted scornfully. ‘Oh yes, you can be sure the hunt is up already: they’re on our tracks all right.’

Daniel pictured the scene at home: his mother’s anxiety as she plied Jenny with questions, and, after that, her visit to the Principal to ask if he knew anything about her son.

‘Listen,’ he said. He was breathing with an effort. Then he noticed a bench near by and made Jacques sit beside him. Taking his courage in both hands, he went on: ‘Now or never, we’ve got to think things out. After all, when they’ve hunted for us high and low for two or three days, don’t you think they’ll have been punished enough?’

Jacques clenched his fists. ‘No! I tell you! No!’ he shouted. ‘Have you forgotten everything so soon?’ Such was the nervous tension of his body that he was no longer sitting on the bench, but lying propped against it, stiff as a board. His eyes were aflame with rage against the school, the Abbé, the School, the Principal, his father, society, the world’s injustice. ‘Anyhow they’ll never believe us!’ he cried. His voice went hoarse. ‘They’ve stolen our grey letter-book. They don’t understand and they can’t understand! If you’d seen the priest, the way he tried to make me confess things! His Jesuit tricks, of course. Just because you’re a Protestant, he said, there’s nothing you wouldn’t do, nothing. . . .!’

Shame made him turn away. Daniel’s eyes dropped and a pang of grief shot through his heart at the hideous thought that their foul suspicions might

have been imparted to his mother.

‘Do you think they’ll tell mother?’ he muttered.

But Jacques was not listening.

‘No!’ he exclaimed again. ‘No, I won’t hear of it. You know what we agreed on. Nothing’s changed. We’ve gone through enough persecution. Good-bye to all that! When we’ve proved by deeds the stuff we’re made of, and that we don’t need them, you’ll see how they respect us. There’s only one thing to do, and that’s to go abroad and earn our living without them. After that, yes, *then* we can write and say where we are, and state our terms, and tell them we intend to remain friends, and be free, because our friendship is for life and for death!’ He stopped, steadied his nerves, and went on in a normal tone. ‘Otherwise, as I’ve told you, I shall kill myself.’

Daniel gazed at him with a scared expression. The small pale face, mottled with yellow blotches, had a look of deadly earnest, exempt from any bravado.

‘I swear to you,’ Jacques continued, ‘that I’m quite determined not to fall into their clutches again. Before that happens I’ll have shown them what I am. Either we win our freedom or—see that?’ Raising the edge of his waistcoat, he let Daniel see the handle of the Corsican dagger that he had filched, on the Sunday morning, from his brother’s room. ‘Or this might be better.’ He drew from his pocket a small bottle done up in paper. ‘If you dared to refuse, now, to embark with me, I’d . . . I’d make short work of it. Like this!’ He made the gesture of drinking off the bottle. ‘And I’d drop down dead.’

‘What . . . what is it?’ Daniel murmured, terrified.

‘Tincture of iodine,’ Jacques replied, still watching Daniel’s face.

‘Look here, Thibault! Do please give me that bottle!’ Daniel pleaded.

Horrified though he was, he felt a thrill of love and admiration; once more he was carried away by his friend’s extraordinary charm. And again the project of adventure tempted him. Meanwhile Jacques had put the bottle back in his pocket.

‘Let’s walk,’ he said, scowling at Daniel. ‘One can’t think properly sitting down.’

At four o’clock they were back at the quay. The *La Fayette* was the focus of an animated scene. A steady stream of dockhands, with crates and boxes on their shoulders—like ants rescuing their eggs—was passing along the gangplanks. The two boys, Jacques in front, followed them. On the freshly scrubbed deck sailors were operating a winch above a yawning gulf, lowering baggage and cargo into the hold. A small, sturdy man with a

beaked nose, hairy black hands and cheeks, and a smooth pink skin, was directing operations. He was wearing a bluejacket with gold braid on the sleeves.

At the last moment Jacques backed out.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ Daniel began, slowly removing his hat, ‘are you the Captain?’

‘Why do you want to know that?’ the man enquired with a laugh.

‘I’ve come with my brother, sir. We’d like to ask you . . .’ Even before the end of the phrase Daniel was conscious he had taken a wrong line, that he’d bungled it beyond redress, ‘. . . to—er—take us to Tunis on your ship.’

‘All alone like that, eh?’ the man asked with a sort of leer. There was something in his bloodshot eyes—a glint of unsavoury effrontery, almost maniacal—that suggested more than the words conveyed.

Daniel realized that there was nothing for it but to go on with their preconcerted story.

‘We came to Marseilles to join our father; he’s been given a job in Tunis, on a rice-farm and—er—he has written to us to join him there. We have the money for our fares.’ That improvised addition to their story, he realized, once he had made it, sounded as lame as all the rest.

‘Right. Who are you staying with at Marseilles just now?’

‘With . . . with nobody. We’ve only just come from the station.’

‘You don’t know anyone at Marseilles?’

‘N-no.’

‘And so you want to come on board to-day?’

Daniel was on the point of answering ‘No’ and bolting without more ado. But he answered feebly:

‘Well, yes, sir.’

‘See here, my young beauties,’ the sailor grinned, ‘you’re mighty lucky the Old Man didn’t find you here. He don’t have much time for jokers like you, that he don’t, and he’d have clapped you into irons and sent you off to the police, just to find out what your little game may be. And, now I think of it, I’m damned if that ain’t the best thing to do with little scallawags like you,’ he suddenly roared, catching Daniel by the sleeve. ‘Hi there, Charlot! You nab the little chap, while I . . .’

But Jacques, who had seen his gesture, took a wild leap over the packing-cases, dodged Charlot’s outstretched arm with a wriggle and was at the gangway in three strides. Slipping like a monkey between the dockers coming up it, he jumped on to the quay, turned left and started bolting for

dear life. Then suddenly he remembered Daniel, and looked back. Yes, Daniel was escaping too. Jacques watched him thread his way between the antlike file of dockhands, dash off the gangway and swerve to the right, while the supposed captain, leaning on the bulwarks, roared with laughter at their panic. Jacques started running again. He and Daniel could meet later; for the moment the thing to do was to hide amongst the crowd and to get away, to get away at all costs!

A quarter of an hour later, out of breath, in a deserted street on the outskirts of the city, he stopped. At first he felt a cruel glee in fancying Daniel had been caught. If he had been, he deserved it. Wasn't it his fault their plans had come to grief? He hated him now and was half inclined to make off into the country and carry on the escapade alone, without bothering about Daniel. He bought cigarettes and began smoking. However, after making a long détour through a modern quarter of the town, he found himself back at the quayside. The *La Fayette* was still there. From where he was he could just see the three decks lined with people, packed like sardines; the liner was getting under way. He ground his teeth and turned on his heel.

Then he began to look for Daniel, feeling he must vent his anger on somebody. After wandering through various streets, he entered the Cannebière, followed the stream of loiterers for a time, then turned on his tracks. The air was oppressive; a storm was brewing. Jacques was bathed in sweat. How was he to find Daniel amongst all those people? His desire to get in touch with his companion became more and more insistent, as his hopelessness of doing so increased. His lips, parched by the unaccustomed cigarettes and the fever in his blood, were burning. Without caring whether he attracted attention, or troubling about a distant growl of thunder, he started running desperately along the streets, peering in all directions till his eyes ached. Then a sudden change came over the city. The façades of the buildings stood out pale against a livid sky and a grey light seemed rising from the cobbles. The storm was rapidly approaching. Great drops of rain began to star the pavement. A violent clap of thunder, close at hand, set him trembling. He was walking past some steps, beneath a pillared entrance which he discovered was the porch of a church. The door was open; he ran in.

His steps echoed under the high roof and a familiar scent assailed his nostrils. Immediately he felt a vast relief, a sense of security. He was no longer alone, the presence of God was round him, sheltering him. But at the same moment a new fear gripped him. Since leaving home he had not once thought of God. And suddenly he felt hovering above him the unseen Eye that sees and penetrates the most secret places of the heart. He knew himself

for a miserable sinner whose profanation of this holy place might well bring down on him God's vengeance. Rain gushed down the roof, violent flashes lit up the windows of the apse, the thunder roared incessantly, echoing round him as he cowered in the incense-laden darkness; almost he fancied that the fires of heaven were seeking out the offender! Kneeling at a *prie-dieu*, Jacques humbled himself before the altar, with bowed head, and hastily recited a Paternoster and some *Aves*.

At last the crashes began to space out, a spectral light glimmered across the stained-glass windows; the storm was passing. All immediate danger was over. He had a feeling that he had cheated, had eluded just reprisals. Deep down in him the sense of guilt persisted, but tempered by a thrill of perverse arrogance at having escaped the hand of justice. And, though he had qualms about it, it gave him a certain pleasure. Night was closing in. Why was he lingering here? With the passing of his fear a curious apathy had come over him and, staring at the wavering candle-flames upon the altar, he was conscious of a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, almost of resentment, as though the church had been secularized. A sacristan came to close the doors. He fled like a thief, without the merest apology for a prayer, without a genuflection. He knew well that he was not taking away with him God's pardon.

A brisk wind was drying up the pavements. Few people were about. Jacques began to wonder where Daniel might be. He pictured the mishaps that might have befallen him and his eyes filled with tears, blurring the road ahead. He tried to keep them back by walking more quickly. At that moment had he seen Daniel crossing the street and coming towards him, he would have swooned with joy and affection for his friend.

A clock struck eight. Windows were lighting up. Feeling hungry, he bought some bread; then continued walking straight before him, haunted by his despair, without so much as troubling to scrutinize the people he encountered.

Two hours later, thoroughly fagged out, he noticed a seat under some trees in a deserted avenue. He sat down. From the branches of a plane-tree heavy drops fell on his head. . . . A peremptory hand was shaking his shoulder. He realized he must have fallen asleep. He saw a constable examining him, and felt like fainting; his legs seemed giving way beneath him.

‘Get home now, my lad; and look sharp about it!’

Jacques fled into the darkness. He had ceased wondering about Daniel, had ceased thinking about anything. His feet were sore. Whenever he saw a

policeman he slunk out of his sight. He made his way back to the harbour. Midnight was striking. The wind had fallen; coloured lights, two by two, were dancing on the water. The wharf was deserted. He all but fell over the legs of a beggar snoring in a nook between two bales. Stronger than his fears, there came on him an irresistible desire to lie down, to sleep, no matter where, at all costs. He took a few steps, lifted the corner of a big tarpaulin, stumbled over boxes smelling of sodden wood, fell down and was asleep at once.

Meanwhile Daniel was hunting high and low for Jacques. He had roamed round the station, round the hotel where they had slept and the offices of the shipping company; all in vain. He went back to the harbour. The *La Fayette's* berth was empty, the port seemed dead; the storm was sending the loiterers home.

With lowered head he started back to the centre, the rain beating on his shoulders. After buying some food for Jacques and himself he took a seat at the café which they had visited in the morning. It was coming down in torrents in this part of the city. At every window the sun-blinds were being hauled in and the waiters at the café, with napkins on their heads, were rolling up the large awnings above the terraces. Trams sped past, their trolleys flashing vivid sparks along the wires against the leaden sky, their wheels cutting like ploughshares through the torrent on the road and throwing the water up on either side. Daniel's feet were sopping, his temples throbbing. What could have become of Jacques? Even more painful to him than the fact that he had lost touch with the younger boy, was the thought of his anxiety and distress, all alone. He told himself that he would catch sight of him just over there, at that corner by the bakery, and watched intently. With his mind's eye he pictured Jacques trudging through the puddles, his face ghastly white and his eyes desperately hunting for his friend in every direction. Time and time again he was on the point of calling out—but it wasn't Jacques, only an unknown little boy dashing into the baker's and emerging with a loaf tucked under his coat.

Two hours passed. The rain had stopped and darkness was falling. Daniel dared not go; he felt sure Jacques would turn up the moment he left the place where he was waiting. At last he made a move towards the station. The white globe above the door of their hotel was lit up. It was a badly lighted neighbourhood; would they be able to recognize each other, he wondered, if they met in this obscurity?

A voice cried: 'Mummy!' He saw a boy of his own age crossing the street and joining a lady, who kissed him. She had opened her umbrella to protect herself from the drips off the roofs. Her son linked his arm with hers; affectionately talking, they disappeared into the darkness. An engine whistled. Daniel felt too exhausted to fight down his depression.

Ah, what a fool he had been to follow Jacques! Only too well he knew it now; indeed, he had been conscious of it all the time, from the very start, since their early-morning meeting at the Luxembourg, when they had decided on the mad adventure. No, never for a moment had he been able to shake off the idea that if, instead of running away, he had hastened to explain things to his mother, far from reproaching him, she would have shielded him from everything and everybody, and no harm would have come to him. Why had he given way? He simply could not understand what had possessed him to act as he had done.

He saw himself again, that Sunday morning, in the hall. Jenny, hearing his footsteps, had run up to him. On the tray had lain a yellow envelope with the Lycée stamp—notifying his expulsion, he assumed. He had hidden it under the tablecloth. Silently Jenny had gazed at him with her keen eyes; she had guessed that some alarming event had happened, and followed him to his room. She had seen him pick up the wallet in which he kept his savings. Then she had thrown herself on him and clasped him in her arms, kissing him, holding him so tightly that he could hardly breathe. 'What's the matter? What are you going to do?' He had confessed that he was running away, that he was in trouble at school, he was falsely accused and all the masters were leagued against him; that it was essential he should disappear for a few days. 'Alone?' she had asked. No, he was going with a friend. 'Who is it?' Thibault. 'Take me with you!' He had drawn her to him as he had used to do when they were little, and had asked in a low voice: 'What about mother?' She had burst into tears. Then he had said: 'Don't be afraid, and don't believe anything they may say. In a few days I'll write, and I shall come back. But swear to me, swear that you will never tell mother, or anyone else—never, never—that I came home and you saw me and you knew I was going away.' She had given a quick nod. Then he had tried to kiss her, but she had run off to her bedroom, sobbing bitterly. Her last cry of utter, heart-rending despair still rang in his ears. . . . He stepped out more briskly.

Walking straight ahead, without looking where he was going, he soon found himself at some distance from the city, in the suburbs. The pavements were deep in slush, and street-lamps few and far between. Black gulfs of darkness yawned on either side: the entrances of yards and evil-smelling alleys. Children swarmed in the squalid tenement-houses, and in a sordid

tavern a gramophone was grinding away. Turning, he walked for some time in the opposite direction. And now he realized that he was dead-tired. A lighted clock-tower showed up, and he knew that he was back at the station. The hands marked one. A long night lay before him; what was he to do? He looked round for some place where he could stop and take breath. A gas-lamp was burning at the entrance of a blind alley; crossing the tract of light, he crouched down in the darkness. A high factory wall rose on his left; resting his back against it, he closed his eyes.

A woman's voice woke him with a start. 'You don't propose sleeping there all night, do you? Where do you live?'

She led him out under the light. He stared at her, tongue-tied.

'I can see,' she went on. 'You've had a dust-up with your dad, and you daren't go back home. That's it, eh?'

Her voice was gentle. He saw no need to undeceive her.

'Yes, Madame,' he said politely, hat in hand.

'"Yes, Madame!"' she laughed. 'That's good! Well, well, you'll have to go back home, there's no two ways about it. I've been through it myself, and I *know*. And, as you'll have to do it, what's the use of waiting? The more you put it off, the worse it is.' Puzzled by his silence, she asked in a lower voice: 'Are you afraid of getting a hiding from your dad?' Her manner of asking it was that of a fellow-conspirator, friendly but inquisitive.

He still said nothing.

'Ain't he a card!' she laughed. 'And that pig-headed he'd rather spend the night out in the street! Oh well, come along then. There's no one at my place and I can give you a shake-down on the floor. I couldn't bring myself to leave a poor kid out all night in the street.'

She looked decent enough, and he felt a vast relief at having someone to talk to at last. He would have liked to say, 'Thank you, Madame,' but he said nothing, and followed her.

They came to a low door. She rang the bell but the door was long in opening. The hall smelt of washing. He stumbled against the bottom step of a flight of stairs.

'I'll lead the way,' she said. 'Give me your hand.'

The lady's hand was gloved and warm. He followed her meekly. The air, too, was warm inside the house. Daniel was glad to be no longer out-of-doors. They went up several flights of stairs; then she produced a key, opened a door and lit a lamp. He saw an untidy room, an unmade bed. He remained standing, blinking in the sudden light, worn out and half asleep.

Without waiting to take off her hat, she pulled a mattress off the bed and dragged it into another room. Turning, she began laughing again.

‘Why, he’s half asleep already, poor kid. . . . Look here, you’d better take your shoes off, anyhow.’

He complied, with nerveless hands. His project of returning next morning to the station buffet, at exactly five, in the hope that Jacques might have the same idea, was haunting him, like an obsession.

‘Would you please wake me very early?’

‘Don’t you worry! I’ll see you’re up in time,’ she laughed.

He vaguely felt her helping him to take off his tie, and undress. Then he dropped like a log on to the mattress, and lost consciousness at once. . . .

When Daniel opened his eyes, it was already day. He thought at first that he was in his bedroom at home. Then he was struck by the colour of the light filtering through the curtains. A young voice was singing in the next room, the door of which was open. Then he remembered.

Glancing into the room, he saw a little girl (or so she seemed) washing her face over a basin. Turning, she saw him lying on the mattress, propped on an elbow.

‘Ah, so you’re awake. Good for you!’ she laughed.

Could this be the lady of the night before? In a chemise and short skirt, her arms and legs bare, she looked like a child. Now that she was not wearing a hat he noticed that she had short brown hair, cut like a boy’s and brushed vigorously back.

Suddenly a memory of Jacques appalled him.

‘Good heavens, and I’d meant to be at the buffet first thing!’

But the warmth of the blankets she had tucked round him while he was asleep made him disinclined to move. And anyhow he did not dare to get up while the door stood open. Just then she came in, carrying a steaming cup and a hunk of buttered bread.

‘Look here! Get your teeth into this, and then clear off. I don’t want to have your pa coming round and making trouble for me.’

He felt embarrassed at being seen by her half-dressed, in his shirt and with his collar open, and even more embarrassed at seeing her come towards him, for her neck, too, was bare and so were her shoulders. She bent towards him. Lowering his eyes, he took the cup and, to hide his bashfulness, began to eat the bread-and-butter. Shuffling her slippers and singing, she moved from one room to the other. He dared not lift his eyes from the cup, but, when she passed close by, he could not help noticing her naked, slender,

blue-veined legs almost level with his eyes and, gliding above the deal floor, her reddened heels emerging from the slippers. The bread stuck in his throat. He felt unnerved, incapable of facing this new day, big with unpredictable events. It flashed across his mind that at home, at the breakfast-table his chair was empty.

A sudden burst of sunlight flooded the room; the girl had just thrown the shutters open, and her young voice trilled in the bright air like bird-song.

Ah, si l'amour prenait racine
J'en planterais dans mon jardin!

His self-control gave way. The sunshine, her careless joy—at the very moment when he was fighting down his despair! His eyes filled with tears.

'Come along! Hurry up!' she cried gaily, picking up his empty cup.

Then she saw he was crying.

'Feeling low?' she asked.

She had a kind, big-sisterly voice; he could not keep back a sob. She sat down on the edge of the mattress, slipped her arm round his neck and, with a mothering gesture of consolation—the final argument of women all the world over—pillowed his head upon her breast. He dared not make the slightest movement; he could feel, across her chemise, the rise and fall of her breast, and its soft warmth against his cheeks. He felt his breath failing him.

'You silly boy!' Drawing back, she hid her breast with her bare arm. 'It's seeing that, is it, that makes you go all funny! Why, I'd never have believed it of you—at your age! By the bye, how old are you?'

The lie came out automatically after his practice during the last two days.

'Sixteen.'

'Sixteen?' She sounded surprised.

She had taken his hand and was examining it absent-mindedly. Pushing back the sleeve, she uncovered his arm.

'My word, the kid's skin is as white as a girl's,' she smiled.

She had raised the boy's wrist and was fondling his hand with her cheek. The smile died from her face. Taking a deep breath, she dropped his hand. Before he realized what she was doing, she had unfastened her skirt.

'I'm cold. Warm me up!' she whispered, slipping between the blankets. . . .

Jacques had slept badly under the tarpaulin stiffened by the cold rain. Before dawn he crept from his hiding-place and began to wander aimlessly in the dim light of daybreak. 'It's certain,' he mused, 'that if Daniel's free, he'll have the idea of going to the station buffet as we did yesterday.' He was there, himself, before five o'clock. At six he still could not make up his mind where to go.

What was he to think? What should he do? He ascertained where the prison was. Sick at heart, he hardly dared to raise his eyes to the closed entrance-gate.

CITY GAOL

There, perhaps, Daniel . . . He dared not complete the thought. He walked all round the endless wall, stepped back to judge the height of the barred windows; then, seized with sudden fear, he fled.

All that morning he scoured the town. The sun was blazing hot and the bright colours of the linen hanging out to dry made the crowded streets seem gay with bunting. On doorsteps gossips laughed and chattered in acrimonious tones. The sights of the street, its freedom and adventurous possibilities, gave him a brief exhilaration. But at once his thoughts harked back to Daniel. He held the bottle of iodine clutched in his hand, deep down in his pocket; if he did not find Daniel before the night, he would kill himself. He swore it, raising his voice a little to bind himself more strongly; inwardly he wondered if he would have the necessary courage.

It was not till nearly eleven, when he was passing for the hundredth time in front of the café where, the evening before, they had asked the way to the shipping office, that . . . Yes! There he was!

Jacques charged down oh him between the tables and chairs lining the terrace. Daniel, more self-controlled, had risen.

'Steady on!'

People were staring at them. They shook hands, Daniel paid, and, leaving the café, they turned down the nearest side-street. Then Jacques clutched his friend's arm and, clinging to him, hugged him passionately. Suddenly he began to sob, his forehead pressed to Daniel's shoulder. Daniel was not crying, but he was very pale. He walked steadily on, his gaze untender and focussed far ahead, but he was pressing Jacques' small hand to his side. His upper lip, drawn back across his teeth on one side of his mouth, was trembling.

Jacques described his adventures. 'Just think, I slept on the quay like a thief, under a tarpaulin! What about you?'

Daniel was embarrassed. His respect for his friend and for their friendship was immense; yet now, for the first time, he was bound to conceal something from Jacques, something of vital importance. The enormity of the secret that had come between them overpowered him. He was on the point of letting himself go, of telling everything; but no, he could not. He remained ill at ease and tongue-tied, unable to expel the haunting memory of all that had befallen him.

‘What about you?’ Jacques repeated. ‘Where did you spend the night?’

Daniel made a vague gesture. ‘On a seat, over there. But most of the time I just mooned about.’

After a meal, they talked things over. To stay in Marseilles would be imprudent; their movements would be bound to arouse suspicion, sooner or later.

‘In that case . . . ?’ Daniel murmured tentatively.

‘In that case,’ Jacques replied, ‘I know what to do. We must go to Toulon. It’s only ten or twenty miles from here, over there on the left, along the coast. We’ll go on foot; they’ll think we’re schoolboys out for a walk. At Toulon there are any number of boats and we’ll manage somehow or other to get on board one.’

While he spoke, Daniel could not take his eyes off the loved face that he had found again, the freckled cheeks, the frail, almost transparent ears and the blue eyes in which pictures seemed to come and go of the things he was describing: Toulon and ships and the vast horizons of the sea. But, however great his desire to share Jacques’ fine tenacity of purpose, his common sense made him sceptical; he felt sure they would never set out on that voyage. . . . And yet was it really so impossible? At times almost he hoped he was wrong, that dreams might prove truer than common sense.

They bought some food and started for Toulon. Two women of the town stared at them, and smiled. Daniel blushed; their skirts no longer hid from him the secrets of their bodies. Fortunately Jacques was whistling, and noticed nothing. Daniel felt that that experience, the mere memory of which made his heart beat faster, would be from now on a barrier between them. Jacques could never now be his friend in the fullest sense; he was only a ‘kid.’

After passing through the suburbs they reached at last a road ribboning the windings of the coast like a line traced in pink chalk along the seashore. A slight breeze met them, with a tang that had an after-taste of brine. Their shoulders scorched by the sun, they trudged through the white dust. The nearness of the sea intoxicated them; they left the road and ran to it crying:

‘*Thalassa! Thalassa!*’ and reaching eager hands towards the sparkling blue waves. But the sea proved less easy of access than they had hoped. At the point where they approached it, the shore did not shelve down to the water’s edge along the reach of golden sand their eagerness had pictured. It overhung a deep gulf of equal width throughout, in which the sea was breaking over dark, jagged rocks. Immediately below them a mass of tumbled boulders projected like a Cyclopean breakwater; waves were charging furiously against the granite ledges, only to slip back in impotent confusion, foam-flecked, along its smooth, steep flanks. They had joined hands and, bending over the abyss, forgot everything in contemplation of the seething eddies faceted with broken lights. And in their wordless ecstasy there was a certain awe.

‘Look!’ Daniel said.

A few hundred yards out a boat, a miracle of dazzling whiteness, was gliding over the dark blue expanse. The hull was painted green beneath the water-line, the bright green of a young leaf, and the boat was moving forward to a strong rhythm of oars that lifted the bows clean out of the water and with each stroke displayed a streaming glint of green, vivid as an electric spark.

‘Ah, if only one could describe all that!’ Jacques murmured, crushing the note-book in his pocket between his fingers. ‘But you’ll see!’ he cried, with a jerk of his shoulders. ‘Africa is even more lovely! Come along!’

He dashed back, between the rocks, on to the road. Daniel ran beside him, and for the moment his heart was care-free, emptied of regret, all eagerness for adventure.

They came to a place where the road climbed and turned off at a right angle, to reach a group of houses. Just when they came to the bend, a terrific uproar made them stop abruptly; they saw charging down at break-neck speed towards them, zigzagging across the road, what seemed to be a confused mass of horses, wheels and barrels. Before they could make a movement to get out of the way, it had crashed, fifty yards off, against an iron railing. A large, heavily laden dray, coming down the slope, had not been braked in time. The momentum of its downward rush had swept the four horses drawing it off their feet and, rearing, struggling, tripping over each other, they had fallen at the turn. Wine was gushing out on to the road and an excited crowd of men, shouting and swearing and waving their arms, was gathering round a hideous, inextricable tangle of bleeding nostrils, hoofs and cruppers floundering in the dust. Suddenly across the thuds of steel-shod hoofs against the iron apron, the clank of chains, jangling bells, the neighing of the other horses and the imprecations of the drivers, there

sounded a hoarse, grating cough that dominated all the other sounds. It was the death-rattle of the leader, a grey horse on which the others were trampling and which, its legs pinned under him, was suffocating, strangled by the harness. A man dashed in amongst the maddened horses, brandishing an axe. They saw him stumble, fall, and rise again; now he was holding the grey horse by an ear and desperately hacking at its collar. But the collar was of iron and he merely dented the edge of his axe upon it. The man drew himself up, his features convulsed with helpless rage, and flung the axe against the wall, while the rattle rose to a strident gasping, that grew shriller and shriller, while a stream of blood gushed from the dying horse's nostrils.

Jacques felt the world reeling around him. He tried to grasp Daniel's sleeve, but his fingers went stiff and his nerveless legs gave way under him. People gathered round the boys; Jacques was helped to a seat in a little garden, beside a pump, and a kindly soul began bathing his forehead with cold water. Daniel was as pale as he.

When they returned to the road, the whole village was busy with the barrels. The horses had been extricated. Of the four only one had escaped unscathed; two, their forelegs broken, were kneeling on the road. The fourth was dead and lay sprawling in the ditch into which the wine was flowing, his grey head pressed to the earth, his tongue lolling, his glazed eyes half shut, and his legs neatly doubled up beneath him—as if, before dying, he had tried to make himself as portable as could be for the knacker. The utter stillness of the shaggy grey bulk, smeared with blood and wine and road-dust, was in striking contrast with the heaving flanks of the other horses, standing or kneeling, unheeded, in the middle of the road.

They watched one of the cartmen go up to the dead horse. The old, weathered face with the sweat-matted hair was convulsed with rage, yet had a certain gravity ennobling it and proving how much he took to heart the disaster. Jacques could not take his eyes off him. He watched him place between his lips a cigarette he had been holding, then bend over the fallen horse and feel the swollen tongue already black with flies, and insert his finger in the mouth, baring the yellow teeth. He remained for a few moments, stooping, running his fingers over the mottled gums. Then he straightened himself up and sought some friendly eye. His gaze met that of the two boys and, without troubling to wipe his hands, smeared with sticky froth in which flies were crawling, he replaced the cigarette between his lips.

‘He weren't seven, that poor 'oss,’ he said with an angry jerk of his shoulders. Then he turned to Jacques. ‘The best 'un of the team, he were, the hardest worker of the lot. I'd give two of my fingers, these two, to have him back.’ He looked away, a wry smile screwing up his lips, and spat.

The boys began to walk away, and now their gaiety had given place to a profound dejection.

‘Have you ever seen a real corpse, a human being’s, I mean?’ Jacques suddenly enquired.

‘No.’

‘You’ve no idea, old chap, how strange it looks. . . . I’d been thinking about it for a longish while; then one Sunday, at catechism time, I rushed off there.’

‘Where?’

‘To the Morgue.’

‘What? By yourself?’

‘Of course. You simply can’t imagine, Daniel, how pale a corpse can be. Just like wax, or plaster of Paris. There were two corpses there that day. One had its face all gashed about, but the other looked almost alive. . . . Yes, it looked alive,’ he repeated, ‘but at the very first glance you couldn’t help knowing the man was dead. There was something about him—oh, I don’t know what. You saw that horse just now; well, it was just the same thing. . . . One day, when we’re free,’ he added, ‘some Sunday, you must come with me there, to the Morgue.’

Daniel had ceased to listen. They had just passed below the balcony of a house from which there came the tinkle of a piano; a child was playing scales. Jenny! And suddenly there rose before him Jenny’s delicately moulded features, the expression of her face when she had cried to him, ‘What are you going to do?’ while the tears welled up in her grey eyes, large with wonder.

‘Aren’t you sorry you haven’t got a sister?’ he asked after a while.

‘Yes, rather. An elder sister’s what I’d like. I have a—a sort of little sister.’ Seeing Daniel’s puzzled look, he added: ‘Mademoiselle is bringing up at home a little niece of hers, an orphan. Gise is ten. Her name’s Gisèle, but we call her Gise for short. She’s just like a little sister to me.’

Suddenly his eyes grew moist. Then his thoughts took a new turning. ‘You, of course, were brought up in a quite different way. For one thing, you’re an ordinary day-boy, you’re almost free, you have much the same life as Antoine. . . . But, then, you’re such a sensible chap—that makes all the difference.’ There was a hint of regret in his tone.

‘Meaning—you’re *not* a sensible chap?’ There was no irony in Daniel’s tone.

‘I “sensible”!’ Jacques’ eyebrows puckered. ‘Don’t I know that I’m . . . unbearable! And there’s nothing to be done about it. Sometimes I have fits of rage, you know, when I lose my grip on things completely—I storm about and break things, I shout most horrible words; when I’d be quite capable of jumping out of a window or knocking somebody down. I’d rather you knew everything about me, that’s why I’m telling you all this.’ It was evident that he took a morose pleasure in accusing himself. ‘I don’t know if it’s my fault or not. I rather think that, if I lived with you, I shouldn’t be like that. But I’m not so sure.

‘At home, when I come back in the evening—if you only could imagine what they’re like!’ he went on, after a while, staring into the distance. ‘Father has never taken me seriously. The Abbés tell him I’m a perfect terror at school; that’s to suck up to him, of course; to make out they’re having no end of trouble, bringing up the son of Monsieur Thibault, who has a lot of influence with the Cathedral people. But Papa is kind, you know,’—his voice took on a sudden fervour—‘awfully kind, really. Only—I don’t know how to explain it. He’s so wrapped up in his public duties, his committees, in his lectures and religion. And Mademoiselle, too; whenever something goes wrong with me, it’s always God who’s punishing me for my sins. Do you understand? After dinner Papa always shuts himself up in his study, and Mademoiselle hears my lessons—I never know them!—in Gise’s room, while she puts her to bed. She won’t even let me stay alone in my room. They’ve unscrewed my switch—would you believe it?—to prevent me using the electric light.’

‘What about your brother?’ Daniel asked.

‘Oh Antoine, he’s an awfully good sort; only he’s always out. I rather think, though he’s never said anything to me about it, that he, too, doesn’t much like being at home. He was quite grown up when mother died; he’s exactly nine years older than I—so Mademoiselle never managed to get much of a hold over him. It’s different for me, of course; she’s looked after me all my life.’

Daniel said nothing.

‘You can’t imagine what it’s like,’ Jacques repeated. ‘Your people know how to treat *you*: you’ve been brought up quite differently. It’s the same with books. *You* are allowed to read everything; all the bookshelves are open in your home. But I’m never allowed to read anything except rotten old picture-books, bound in red and gold, Jules Verne and all that sort of rubbish. They don’t even know I write poetry. It’s just as well. They’d make such a song about it, they wouldn’t understand. And very likely they’d ask the masters to keep an eye on me and give me a putrid time at school.’

There was a rather long silence. Swerving from the sea, the road began to climb towards a grove of cork-trees.

Suddenly Daniel drew nearer Jacques and took his arm.

‘Listen,’ he said, and his voice, which was just breaking, had a low, sonorous emphasis, ‘I’m thinking of the future. One never can tell. We might be separated from each other one day. There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you for a long time; something that would . . . would seal our friendship, for always. Promise that you’ll dedicate your first book of poems to me. Oh, you needn’t put the name. Just, *To my Friend*. Will you, Jacques?’

‘I swear it,’ Jacques said, and it seemed to him that he had suddenly grown taller. . .

Entering the wood, they sat down under the trees. Over Marseilles the sun was setting in a blaze of fire. Feeling his ankles swollen and painful, Jacques took off his boots and socks and lay down on the grass. Daniel looked at him absent-mindedly; then suddenly he averted his eyes from the small bare feet with the reddened heels.

‘Look, there’s a lighthouse!’ Jacques exclaimed, pointing towards the horizon. Daniel gave a start. Far away, on the coast, an intermittent gleam raked the dusk. Daniel made no comment.

The air was cooler when they started off again. They had intended to sleep out under the trees, but it looked like being a bitterly cold night.

They walked on for half an hour without exchanging a word. Presently they came to a newly whitewashed inn, with arbours overlooking the sea.

The lights were on in the main room; it was apparently empty. They eyed each other doubtfully. A woman, who had seen them hesitating near the entrance, opened the door. She held up to their faces a glass lamp, the oil in which gleamed like a topaz. She was a short, elderly person, with two gold pendants dangling from her ears along her scraggy neck.

‘Excuse me, Madame,’ Daniel said, ‘could you let us have a room with two beds for the night?’ Without giving her time to put any questions, he went on. ‘My brother and I are on our way to meet our father at Toulon; only we left Marseilles too late to reach Toulon to-night.’

‘That’s a good one!’ the woman laughed. She had merry, surprisingly youthful eyes and gesticulated freely as she talked. ‘You were going to Toulon on foot, were you? Tell that to the marines, my lad! Anyhow, it’s all the same to me. Yes, you can have a room for two francs—cash down, of course.’ And, while Daniel was bringing out his note-case, she added: ‘I’ve some soup on the fire. Like a couple of platefuls?’

Both said 'Yes.'

The room was an attic and there was only one bed, the sheets of which showed signs of having already been used. Prompted by the same unspoken motive, they rapidly took off their shoes and slipped into bed, fully dressed, back to back.

It was long before they fell asleep. The moon shone full through the window. Rats were scampering about in an adjoining loft. Jacques saw a hideous-looking spider crawling on the clingy grey wall and, as he watched it vanish into the darkness, vowed he would stay awake all night. Daniel's mind was full of pictures of the sensual pleasure of the morning, and imagination was already adding its lascivious glamour to his memories. Sweating, thrilled with delight, disgust and curiosity, he dared not move.

Next morning, when Jacques was still asleep, Daniel was on the point of getting up, to get some respite from the phantoms of his imagination, when he heard a disturbance in the inn-parlour below. So vivid had been his nightlong obsessions that his first idea was that the police were coming to arrest him for his licentious conduct. And, no sooner did the door open (the bolt had broken off), than it was a policeman who appeared, accompanied by the proprietress. As he came in he hit his forehead on the lintel, and knocked off his *képi*.

'The youngsters fetched up here last evening, covered with dust.' The woman was still laughing, her ear-drops swaying to and fro. 'They told me all sorts of fancy yarns—that they wanted to walk all the way to Toulon, and the good knows what else! And that young scamp'—she extended a long arm jingling with bangles towards Daniel—'gave me a hundred-franc note to pay the four francs fifty for their room and supper.'

The gendarme was dusting his *képi* with an air of bored indifference.

'Come along, me lads, up with you!' he grumbled. 'Now then, give me your surnames, Christian names, and the rest of it.'

Daniel hesitated. But Jacques jumped off the bed in his knickerbockers and socks, aggressive as a young fighting-cock. For a moment it looked as if he would try to lay out the tall, stalwart gendarme.

'I'm Maurice Legrand!' he shouted in the man's face. 'And this is Georges, my brother. Our father's at Toulon. And you shan't stop us going to meet him there, I defy you to!'

A few hours later they were entering Marseilles in a farm-cart, with two gendarmes and a miscreant in handcuffs beside them. The lofty prison-gate

opened, then clanged-to behind them.

‘Go in there,’ a policeman told them, opening the door of a cell. ‘Now turn out your pockets. Yes, hand it all over. You’ll be left together till dinner-time, while we check up on your story.’

But long before then a sergeant came and took them to the Inspector’s office.

‘It’s no use denying it, my boys; you’re nabbed. We’ve been looking for you since Sunday. You’ve come from Paris; the big boy’s name is Fontanin, and you are Thibault. Fancy boys like you, from decent families, taking to the roads like little vagabonds!’

Daniel had assumed an air of outraged dignity, but inwardly he felt vastly relieved. Thank goodness, it was over! His mother knew by now that he was alive and safe, and she was awaiting his return. He would beg her forgiveness, and that would blot out everything—yes, everything!—even what he was thinking of with such horror at that moment. *That*, anyhow, he would never dare to confess to anyone in the world.

Jacques gritted his teeth and, remembering his bottle of iodine and the dagger, clenched his fists ragefully in his empty pockets. A host of schemes for vengeance or escape flashed through his mind. But just then the officer spoke again.

‘Your poor parents are in a terrible state.’

Jacques cast a furious glance around him; then suddenly his face seemed to crumple up and he burst into tears. He had pictured his father, Mademoiselle, little Gise. . . . His heart overflowed with affection and regret.

‘Now go and have a sleep,’ the Inspector went on. ‘We’ll fix things up for you to-morrow. I’m waiting for instructions.’

8

FOR two days Jenny had been in a comatose state; the fever had gone down, leaving her very weak. Standing at the window, Madame de Fontanin was keenly on the alert for every sound that came from the avenue. Antoine

had gone to Marseilles to fetch the runaways and was due to bring them home that evening. Nine o'clock had just struck; they should be here by now.

She gave a start. That surely was a cab pulling up in front of the house!

In a flash she was out on the landing outside the entrance of her flat, claspings the banisters. The dog had run out after her and was barking to greet the homecomer. Madame de Fontanin leaned over the rail. There, suddenly, queerly fore-shortened by the height—there he was coming up the stairs! That was his hat, with the brim hiding his face; that was the way he had of moving his shoulders as he walked. He was in front; Antoine followed, holding his brother by the hand.

Looking up, Daniel saw his mother. The landing lamp, just above her head, made her hair seem snow white, and plunged her face in shadow, yet it seemed to him he had seen her every feature. With lowered eyes he continued on his way up the stairs, intuitively conscious that she was coming down to meet him. Suddenly he felt incapable of taking another step, and, just as he was taking off his hat, still not daring to raise his head and hardly daring to breathe, he found himself clasped in her arms, his forehead on her breast. Yet he felt little of the joy he had expected. He had longed so intensely for this moment that when it came he had no more feeling left, and when at last he freed himself from her embrace, his face was shamefast, tearless. It was Jacques, with his back against the staircase wall, who burst out sobbing.

Madame de Fontanin took her son's face between her hands and drew it to her lips. Not a word of reproach; a long kiss. But the agony of mind she had endured during that terrible week made her voice tremble when she spoke to Antoine.

'Have the poor children had any dinner?'

Before Antoine could reply, Daniel had murmured: 'Jenny? How is she?'

'She's out of danger now; she's in bed and you shall see her, she is waiting for you.' Daniel freed himself at once and ran into the flat. She called after him: 'Gently, dear! Don't forget she's been very ill. You mustn't excite her.'

Jacques' tears were quickly dried, and now he could not refrain from casting a curious glance around him. So this was Daniel's home, this was the staircase he climbed each day when he came back from school; that was the hall he entered and this the lady he called 'Mother' with that strange tenderness in his voice.

'What about you, Jacques?' she smiled. 'Will you kiss me, too?'

‘Speak up, Jacques!’ Antoine laughed, giving his brother a slight push.

She extended her arms towards him. Jacques slipped between them, pillowing his head where Daniel’s had lain a little while before. Pensively Madame de Fontanin stroked the boy’s red hair; then turning towards the elder brother, she tried to smile. As Antoine remained standing by the door, evidently anxious to leave, she held out to him, over the head of the boy whose arms were round her now, both her hands in token of her gratitude, and said to Jacques:

‘Go, my dear; your father, too, must be longing to see you.’

Jenny’s door stood open.

Kneeling at the bedside on one knee, his head resting on the sheets, Daniel was pressing his lips to his sister’s hands, clasped within his own. Jenny had been crying; to reach out towards him she had twisted herself sideways on the pillow, and the strain showed on her face. It was so emaciated as to seem expressionless, but for the eyes. In their look there still was something morbid, and a trace of hardness, almost obstinacy; they were almost the eyes of a grown woman, and they had a dark inscrutability, wise beyond her years, as if the light-heartedness of youth had long forsaken her.

Madame de Fontanin went up to the bed. On the point of bending down and gathering the two children in her arms she remembered that she must take care not to tire Jenny. She made Daniel get up and come with her to her own room.

The room was brightly lit and cheerful. In front of the fireplace Madame de Fontanin had set out the tea-table, with toast and butter and honey. Kept hot under a napkin was a mound of boiled chestnuts, one of Daniel’s favourite dishes. The kettle was purring, the room was very warm and the air so stuffy that Daniel felt almost nauseated. He waved away the plate his mother held out to him. A look of disappointment settled on her face.

‘What is it, dear? I hope you’re not going to deprive me of the pleasure of a cup of tea with you this evening?’

Daniel gazed at her. Something about her had changed; what was it? She was drinking her tea as she always did, in little scalding sips, and he could see her face with the light behind it smiling through the steam rising from her cup. Yes, for all its traces of exhaustion, it was the face that he had always known. But there was something in the smile, the lingering gaze—no, he could not bear its too-much-sweetness! Lowering his eyes, he helped himself to buttered toast and, to keep himself in countenance, pretended to be eating it. She smiled all the more, lost in her wordless happiness, and

found an outlet for her rush of emotion in gently stroking the head of the little dog, that was nestling in the folds of her dress.

Daniel put down his toast. Without raising his eyes, he asked:

‘What did they tell you at the Lycée?’ His cheeks had gone pale.

‘I told them—it wasn’t true.’

At last Daniel’s brows relaxed. Raising his eyes, he met his mother’s gaze; there was trust in it but, none the less, a silent question, as if she sought for confirmation of her trust. And happily Daniel’s candid eyes confirmed it beyond all manner of doubt. Her face was shining with joy as she went up to him.

‘Why,’ she whispered, ‘oh why didn’t you come and tell me about it, my big boy, instead of . . . ?’

She left the question unended, and stood up. There was the jingle of a bunch of keys in the hall. She stood unmoving, looking towards the opening door. The dog began wagging its tail and ran, without barking, to meet the old friend who had entered.

It was Jerome.

He was smiling.

Wearing neither overcoat nor hat, he came in so naturally that one could have sworn he had just walked across from his own room. He glanced at Daniel, but went up at once to his wife and kissed her extended hand. A faint perfume of verbena and citronella hovered round him.

‘Well, darling, here I am! What’s been happening? Really, I’ve been dreadfully worried.’

Daniel went up to him delightedly. Little by little he had come to love his father, though, in early childhood, he had for many years displayed an exclusive, jealous affection for his mother. Even now he accepted with unconscious satisfaction the fact that his father was so often away and left them to themselves.

‘So you’re back, Daniel, after all? What’s all this they’ve been telling me about you?’ Jerome was holding his son’s chin and observing him frowningly.

Madame de Fontanin had remained standing. ‘When he returns,’ she had said to herself, ‘I shall refuse to let him stay.’ Her resentment had not weakened, nor her resolve; but he had surprised her unawares, had taken everything for granted with such airy unconcern that she was at a loss. She could not take her eyes off him; she would not admit to herself how profoundly she was affected by his presence, how touched she still was by

the winning charm of his look, his smile, his gestures; would not admit that he was the one love of her life. The money problem had just crossed her mind, and she fell back on it to justify her weakness. That morning she had had to broach the remnants of her savings, and now was practically at her last penny. Jerome, of course, knew it; probably he was bringing the money needed to tide over the month.

At a loss how to answer, Daniel had turned to his mother, and just then he saw a look flitting across the calm, motherly face, a look of something—he could not have put it into words—something so significant, so intimate, that he turned away with a feeling of bashfulness. At Marseilles he had lost even the innocence of the eye.

‘Ought I to scold him, sweetheart?’ Jerome’s lips parted in an insinuating smile that showed his flashing teeth. ‘Must I play the heavy father?’

She did not reply at once. Then, with an undertone of bitterness, of a desire to punish him, she blurted out: ‘Do you realize that Jenny very nearly died?’

He let go his son and took a step towards her and such was the consternation on his face that she was ready to forgive him on the spot, if only to wipe out the distress that she had deliberately caused him.

‘But she’s much better now. The danger’s past!’ she exclaimed.

She forced herself to smile, so as to reassure him the sooner, and the smile was tantamount to a capitulation. She was aware of it. Everything seemed to be conspiring against her dignity.

‘Go and see her,’ she added, noticing that Jerome’s hands were shaking. ‘But please don’t wake her.’

Some minutes passed. Madame de Fontanin sat down. Jerome came back on tiptoe, shutting the door very carefully. His face was radiant with affection; no trace of apprehension remained. He was laughing again, and his eyes twinkled.

‘Ah, if you’d seen her just now! Charming! She’s lying on her side, her cheek resting on her hand.’ His fingers sketched in air the graceful outlines. ‘She has grown thinner, but that’s almost a good thing, really; it makes her all the prettier, don’t you think so?’

She did not answer. He was staring at her with a puzzled air.

‘Why, Thérèse, you’ve gone quite white!’

She rose, and almost ran to the mirror above the mantelpiece. It was true; in these two days of anxiety, her hair that till then had been fair, with a

light silver sheen, had turned completely white over the temples. And now Daniel understood what, since his homecoming, had seemed to him different, inexplicable. Madame de Fontanin scanned her reflected self, uncertain of her feelings but unable to stifle a regret. Then, in the mirror, she saw Jerome's face smiling towards her and unwittingly she found a consolation in his smile. He seemed amused, and lightly touched a vagrant silver lock that floated in the lamplight.

'Nothing could suit you better, sweetheart; nothing could better set off—what shall I call it?—the youngness of your eyes.'

When she answered, the words, seemingly an excuse, served to mask her secret pleasure.

'Oh Jerome, I've been through some awful days and nights! On Wednesday we'd tried everything, and we'd lost hope. I was all alone. I was so frightened!'

'Poor darling!' he cried impulsively. 'I'm dreadfully sorry, I could so easily have come back. I was at Lyons on that business you know about.' He spoke with such assurance that for a moment she began to search her memory. 'I'd completely forgotten that you hadn't my address. And besides, I'd only gone away for twenty-four hours; I've even wasted my return ticket.'

Just then it flashed across his mind that he had given Thérèse no money for a long while. Annoying! He had no money coming in for another three weeks. He reckoned up what he had on him and unthinkingly made a grimace—which, however, he promptly explained away.

'And to think that all my trouble was practically wasted—I just couldn't put that deal through! I went on hoping till the last day, but here I am back again, with empty pockets! Those fat Lyons bankers are infernally hard to deal with, an unbelieving lot.' He launched into a story of his experiences, letting his fertile imagination run away with him, without a trace of embarrassment; he had the born story-teller's delight in his inventions.

Daniel, as he listened, felt for the first time a sort of shame for his father. Then, for no reason, without any apparent relevance, he thought of the man the woman at Marseilles had told him about, her 'old boy' as she had called him—a married man, in business, who always came in the afternoon, she had explained, because he never went out in the evening without 'his missus.' In the face of his mother, who was listening too, there was something that baffled him. Their eyes met. What did the mother read in her son's eyes? Did she see far within, into thoughts to which as yet Daniel

himself had given no definite form. When she spoke there was an abruptness in her tone that betrayed her annoyance.

‘Now run away to bed, my dear; you’re absolutely tired out.’

He obeyed. But just as he stooped to kiss her, a picture rose before him of his mother so cruelly forsaken while Jenny was on her death-bed. And his affection was enhanced by a realization of the distress he had caused her. He embraced her tenderly, murmuring in her ear:

‘Forgive me.’

She had been waiting for those words since his return, and now she could not feel the happiness she would have felt, had he uttered them sooner. Daniel was conscious of this, and inwardly blamed his father for it. Madame de Fontanin, however, could not help feeling a grievance against her son; why had he not spoken sooner, while they were alone together?

Half in boyish playfulness, half out of mere gluttony, Jerome had gone up to the tray and was examining the ‘spread’ with comically pursed lips.

‘My word, and who are all these nice things for?’

His laughter never sounded quite natural; he would throw back his head, slewing round his pupils into the corners of his eyes, and then emit in quick succession three rather theatrical Ha’s: ‘Ha! Ha! Ha!’

He had drawn up a stool to the table and was already busy with the teapot.

‘Don’t drink that tea, it’s almost cold,’ Madame de Fontanin said, and lit the spirit-lamp under the kettle. When he protested, she added, but unsmilingly: ‘No—I insist!’

They were alone. To attend to the tea, she had come up to the table and the bitter-sweet perfume of the lavender and verbena scent he used came to her nostrils. He looked up at her with a half smile; his look conveyed at once affection and repentance. Keeping his slice of buttered toast in one hand, like a hungry schoolboy, he slipped an arm round his wife’s waist with a free-and-easy deftness that showed long experience in the amorous art. Madame de Fontanin freed herself abruptly; she knew her weakness, and dreaded it. When he withdrew his arm she came back to finish making the tea, then moved away once more.

She wore a look of dignity and sadness; but somehow his complete insouciance had taken the sting out of her resentment. She studied his appearance, surreptitiously, in the mirror. His amber-coloured skin, his almond eyes, the graceful poise of his body, the slightly exotic refinement of

his dress and his languid airs gave him an Oriental charm. She remembered having written in her diary, during their engagement: *My Beloved is beautiful as an Indian Prince*. And even to-night she was seeing him through the same eyes as in those far-off days. He was sitting slantwise on a stool that was too low for him, and stretching his legs towards the fire. Daintily his fingers, tipped by well-manicured nails, were taking up slices of toast, one after the other, and gilding them with honey. As, bending above the plate, he ate them, his white teeth flashed. When he had finished eating, he drank his tea at a gulp, rose with a dancer's suppleness and ensconced himself in an arm-chair. He behaved exactly as if nothing had happened and he were living here now just as he had always done. The dog jumped on to his knee and he began patting it. His left ring-finger bore a large sardonyx ring left him by his mother, an ancient cameo on which the milk-white figure of a Ganymede rose from a deep black background. The gold had worn down with the years and the ring kept on slipping to and fro as he moved his hand. His wife watched all his gestures intently.

‘Do you mind if I light a cigarette, sweetheart?’

Incorrigible he was—but how charming! He had a way of his own of pronouncing that word ‘sweetheart,’ letting the syllables flutter on his lips, like a kiss. His silver cigarette-case shone between his fingers, she recognized so well the little brittle click it made, and, yes, he had still that habit of tapping his cigarette on the back of his hand before putting it to his mouth. And how well she knew them, too, those long, veined hands that the lighted match changed suddenly to two transparent, flame-red shells!

She steeled herself to calmness as she cleared the tea-table. This last week had broken her, and she realized it just at the moment she needed all her courage. She sat down. She knew no longer what to think; she could not clearly discern what the Spirit wished of her. Was it God's will that she should stay beside this sinner who, even in his worst lapses, always remained amenable to the promptings of his kindly heart, so that she might guide him one day towards a better life? No, her immediate duty was to safeguard the home, the children. Little by little she was vanquishing her weakness, and it was a relief to find herself more resolute than she had foreseen. The decision she had come to during Jerome's absence—when, after prayer, a still small voice within had counselled her—held good.

Jerome had been watching her for some time with meditative eyes. Now his face took on an expression of intense sincerity. Only too well she knew that seeming-timid smile, that look of circumspection; and they dismayed her. For, though she had a knack of deciphering at any moment, almost without conscious effort, what lay behind her husband's frequent changes of

expression, all the same her intuition always ended by being held up at a certain definite point, beyond which lay a quicksand of uncertainties. How often she had asked herself: What kind of man is he really, under the surface?

‘I see how it is.’ There was a touch of rather perfunctory regret in Jerome’s voice. ‘I can see you judge me severely, Thérèse. Oh, I understand you—only too well. If another man behaved like that, I’d judge him as you do. I’d think of him as being a scoundrel. Yes, a scoundrel—why mince words? Ah, how on earth can I make you understand . . . ?’

‘What’s the good?’ she broke in miserably, casting him a naïvely beseeching look. Never, alas, could she conceal her feelings!

He was smoking, lying well back in the arm-chair; he had crossed his legs, and the ankle of the leg he was indolently swinging was well in evidence.

‘Don’t worry, Thérèse; I’m not going to argue about it. The facts are there, and the facts condemn me. And yet . . . perhaps there are other explanations for it all than the all too obvious ones.’ He smiled sadly. He had a weakness for expatiating on his faults, and invoking arguments of a moral order—a procedure which perhaps appeased what was left of his Protestant upbringing. ‘Often,’ he said, ‘a bad deed springs from motives of a different kind. One may seem to be out merely to gratify, quite shamelessly, one’s instincts, but sometimes, indeed quite often, one is actually giving way to an emotion that is not a bad one—to pity, for instance. When one causes suffering to someone whom one loves, the reason sometimes is that one’s sorry for someone else, someone who’s in trouble, or of a lower walk of life—to whom a little kindness might mean salvation.’

A picture rose before her of the girl she had seen sobbing by the riverside. And other memories took form, of Mariette, of Noémie. . . . Her eyes were held by the movement of his patent-leather shoe, swinging to and fro, now lit up by the lamplight, now in shadow. She remembered the early days of their marriage—those ‘business dinners,’ so urgent and so unforeseen, from which he had come back at dawn, only to shut himself up in his room and sleep till evening. And all the anonymous letters she had glanced through, then torn up, burned, or ground under her heel, but without being able to stamp out their rankling maleficence. She had seen Jerome seduce her maids, and turn the heads of her friends, one by one. He had made a void around her. She remembered the reproaches which at first she had ventured to address to him, and the many occasions on which, without making any ‘scene,’ she had spoken to him frankly but with indulgence—only to find herself confronted by a being at the mercy of his every impulse,

self-centred and evasive, who began by denying everything with puritanical indignation and, immediately after, vowed smilingly that he would never do it again.

‘Yes, indeed,’ he was saying, ‘I’ve treated you abominably. Abominably! Don’t let’s be afraid of words. And yet I love you, Thérèse, with all my soul, I look up to you and I’m sorry for you. There’s been nothing in my life, nothing which at any time, even for a moment, could stand beside my love for you, the only truly deep and permanent love I’ve ever felt.

‘Yes, my way of living is disgusting, I don’t defend it, I’m ashamed of it. But indeed, sweetheart, you’re doing me an injustice; yes, for all your sense of justice, you’re unfair if you judge me by my acts. I admit my . . . my lapses, but they aren’t all of me. Oh, I’m explaining myself badly, I know; I feel you aren’t listening to me. It’s all so terribly complicated, far more so than I can ever explain, in fact. I only get glimpses of it myself, in flashes. . . .’

He fell silent and leant forward, his eyes focussed on the void, as if he had worn himself out in a vain effort to attain for a moment the uttermost truth about his life. Then he raised his head and Madame de Fontanin felt his gaze lingering on her face, that careless glance of his, seemingly so light, but endowed with a strange power of fascination for the eyes of others. It was as if his gaze drew their eyes towards it, and held them trapped unescapably for a moment, then released them—like a magnet attracting, lifting and letting fall a weight too heavy for it. Once again their eyes met and parted. She was thinking: Yes, very likely you are better than the life you lead. But she merely shrugged her shoulders.

‘You don’t believe me?’ he murmured.

‘Oh, I’m quite ready to believe you.’ She tried to speak in a detached tone. ‘I’ve done it so many times before . . . but that isn’t the point. Guilty or not, responsible or not, Jerome, you have done wrong, you are doing wrong every day, and will go on doing so. And that state of things can’t be allowed to last. Let us part for good.’

The fact that she had been thinking it over so assiduously during the last four days imparted to her voice an emphasis and harshness that Jerome could not ignore. Seeing his amazement and distress, she hastened to add:

‘It’s the children I’m thinking of. So long as they were small, they didn’t understand, and I was the only one who . . .’ On the point of adding ‘suffered,’ a sense of shame prevented her. ‘The wrong you’ve done me, Jerome, no longer concerns me only and my . . . personal feelings. It comes in here with you, it’s in the very air of our home, the air my children breathe.

I will not allow this state of things to go on. Look what Daniel did this week! May God forgive him, as I've forgiven him for hurting me so cruelly. He is sorry for it; his heart is still uncorrupted.' Her eyes lit with a flash of pride that was almost a challenge. 'But I'm sure it was your example that led him astray. Would he have gone off so light-heartedly without a thought for my anxiety, if he hadn't seen you so often going away from us . . . on "business"?' She rose, took an uncertain step towards the fireplace and saw in the mirror her white hair; then, bending a little towards her husband, without looking at him, she went on speaking. 'I've been thinking deeply about it, Jerome. I have suffered a great deal this week and I have prayed and pondered. I've not the least wish to reproach you. In any case, I'm feeling so dreadfully tired to-night, I don't wish to talk about it. I only ask you to face the facts. You'll have to admit I'm right, that there's no other way out. Life in common'—she caught herself up—'what remains to us of our life in common, little though it is, is still too much. Yes, Jerome, too much.' She drew herself erect, rested her hands on the marble mantelpiece and, stressing each word with a movement of her head and shoulders, said gravely: '*I will not bear it any longer.*'

Jerome made no answer but, before she could retreat, had slipped to her feet and pressed his face against her knee, like a child pleading to be forgiven.

'How could I possibly separate from you?' he murmured abjectly. 'How could I live without my children? I'd rather blow my brains out!'

She felt almost like smiling, so naïvely melodramatic was the gesture with which he aimed his forefinger at his forehead. Thérèse's arm was hanging at her side; grasping her wrist, he covered it with kisses. Gently she freed her hand and listlessly, hardly knowing what she was doing, began to stroke his forehead with her finger-tips. The gesture, seemingly maternal, was one of utter, unchangeable detachment. He misinterpreted it and raised his head; but a glance at her face showed him how grievously he was mistaken. She moved away at once, and pointed to a travelling-clock on the bedside table. 'Two o'clock. It's terribly late. No more to-night, please. Tomorrow, perhaps. . . .'

He glanced at the clock and from it to the double bed with its solitary pillow, made ready for the night.

'I'm afraid you'll have trouble in finding a cab,' she said.

He made a vague, puzzled movement; obviously the idea of going out again that night had never entered his head. Was it not his home here? His bedroom was, as ever, awaiting him, just across the passage. How often had

he returned like this, in the small hours, after a five or six days' escapade! On such occasions he would appear next morning at the breakfast-table in pyjamas, but very spick and span, joking and laughing rather loud, so as to quell his children's unspoken mistrust, which he felt but did not understand.

Used to his ways, Madame de Fontanin had followed on his face the trend his thoughts had taken; but she did not waver, and opened the door leading into the hall. He walked out, inwardly discomfited, but heroically keeping the appearance of an old friend saying good-bye to his hostess.

While he was putting on his overcoat, it occurred to him again that his wife must be short of money. He would have handed over to her such little money as he had, readily enough—though he was not in a position to put himself in funds again. But the thought that such an incident might create an awkward situation, that, after taking the money, she might no longer feel at liberty to show him out so firmly, offended his sense of delicacy. Worse still, Thérèse might suspect him of an ulterior motive.

'Sweetheart,' he said simply, 'I have a great deal more to say to you.'

A thought flashed through her mind, first of her intention to break with him, then of the money she needed. Hastily she answered:

'To-morrow, Jerome. I'll see you to-morrow, if you'll come here. We'll have a talk.'

There was nothing for him but to take his leave, and he did so with good grace, clasping her hand and pressing his lips to it. Even then both hesitated for a moment. But she quickly withdrew her hand and opened the door of the flat.

'Well, *au revoir*, sweetheart. Till to-morrow!'

Her last glimpse of him as he began going down the stairs was his smile and courteous gesture as he raised his hat, bowing towards her.

The door closed. Left to her solitary musings, Madame de Fontanin leaned her forehead on the door-jamb; the clang of the closing street-door jarred the whole building and she could feel the vibration in her cheek. A light-coloured glove was lying on the carpet almost under her eyes. Without thinking she picked it up and pressed it to her lips. Across the smell of leather and tobacco smoke she seemed to detect a subtler, familiar perfume. Then, seeing her gesture reflected in a glass, she blushed, let the glove fall again, switched off the lights almost angrily, and, freed from her own reproachful gaze by the kindly darkness, groped her way hastily to the children's rooms, and stayed a little while in each, listening to their tranquil breathing.

ANTOINE and Jacques were back in the cab. The horse's hoofs rattled on the roadway like castanets, but they made slow progress. The streets were in darkness. A smell of musty cloth pervaded the rickety old vehicle. Jacques was crying. Utter weariness and the kiss he had just received from the lady with the mothering smile had at last filled him with contrition. Whatever was he going to say to his father? He felt at his wits' end; unable to conceal his anguish, he sought consolation from his brother, pressing himself against his shoulder. Antoine put his arm round him. For the first time the barrier of their mutual shyness was withdrawn.

Antoine wanted to say something, but could not overcome his distaste for effusion, and when he spoke there was a forced heartiness in his voice that made it sound almost gruff.

'Now then, old man! Buck up! There's no need to get into such a stew about it, you know. It's all over now.'

For a moment he pressed the boy to him affectionately, without speaking. But he was unable to restrain his curiosity.

'What came over you, Jacques?' His voice was gentler now. 'What really happened? Did he persuade you to run away?'

'Oh no. He didn't want to a bit. It was all my idea.'

'Then why . . . ?'

No answer. Antoine fumbled for his words as he continued.

'You know, Jacques, I know all about these school . . . intimacies. You needn't mind telling me. I know how it is; one lets oneself be led on.'

'He's my friend, that's all,' Jacques whispered, still pressing against his brother's shoulder.

'But,' Antoine ventured, 'what exactly . . . what do you do together?'

'We talk. He consoles me.'

Antoine did not dare to ask more questions. 'He consoles me!' Jacques' tone cut him to the heart. He was on the point of saying: 'Are you so unhappy, old man?' when Jacques burst out, almost truculently:

'Well, if you want to know "everything"—he corrects my poems.'

'Good for you!' Antoine smiled. 'I'm delighted to hear that. Do you know, I'm very glad you're a poet!'

'Honour bright?' the boy asked.

‘Yes, honour bright. I knew it anyhow. I’ve seen some of your poems; you left them lying about, you know, and I had a squint at them. I never spoke about it to you. As a matter of fact, we never do seem to talk together, I can’t think why. Some of your poems struck me as damned good, d’you know! You’ve quite a gift for that sort of thing, and you must make the most of it.’

Jacques nestled up to his brother.

‘Yes, I’m awfully keen on poetry,’ he whispered. ‘There are some poems that I love more than anything else in the world. Fontanin lends me books—but you won’t tell anyone, will you? It’s thanks to him I’ve read Laprade and Sully-Prudhomme and Lamartine and Victor Hugo and Musset. Musset’s wonderful! Do you know this one, I wonder?’

Pâle étoile du soir, messagère lointaine
Dont le front sort brillant des voiles du couchant. . . .

‘And this one:

Voilà longtemps que celle avec qui j’ai dormi,
O Seigneur, a quitté ma couche pour la vôtre,
Et nous sommes encor tout mêlés l’un à l’autre,
Elle à demi vivante et moi mort à demi.

‘And Lamartine’s *Le Crucifix*, do you know it?’

Toi que j’ai recueilli sur sa bouche expirante,
Avec son dernier souffle et son dernier adieu. . . .

‘It’s lovely, isn’t it? So . . . so wonderfully limpid. Each time I read that, the beauty of it almost hurts me.’ And now he poured out his heart without reserve. ‘At home they don’t understand a thing; I’m certain I’d be plagued if they knew that I write poems. You’re not like them’—he pressed Antoine’s arm against his breast. ‘Somehow I’ve felt you weren’t, for ages. Only you never said anything, and, besides, you’re not often there. Oh, if you only knew how happy I am! I feel that now I’m going to have two friends instead of one.’

Antoine recited, smiling, a line of one of Jacques’ own poems.

Hail Caesar! Lo, the blue-eyed maid from Gaul . . .

Jacques moved away suddenly, exclaiming: ‘You’ve read our exercise-book!’

‘But, old chap, why ever . . .?’

‘Has father read it too?’ So piteous was the cry that Antoine dared not tell the truth.

‘I don’t really know. A page or two, perhaps.’

Before he could say more Jacques had recoiled to the far end of the cab; he sat there rocking himself to and fro, his head between his hands.

‘It’s foul! That Abbé is a Jesuit, a filthy beast! I shall tell him so, I’ll shout at him in the middle of the class-room, I’ll spit in his beastly face. They can expel me, I don’t care a damn, I’ll run away again. I’ll kill myself!’

His whole body was shaking with fury. Antoine dared not breathe a word. Suddenly the boy stopped shouting and sank back into the corner pressing his hands to his eyes. His teeth were chattering, and his silence alarmed Antoine even more than his outburst of rage. Fortunately the cab was entering the Rue des Saints-Pères; they were almost home.

Jacques got out first. Antoine, as he paid the cabman, never took his eyes off his brother, fearing he might make a sudden rush into the darkness. But now the boy seemed utterly exhausted; the elfish little face was drawn and haggard with fatigue and disappointment, and the eyes, fixed on the ground, were dry.

‘Ring the bell, will you?’ Antoine said.

Jacques said nothing and did not move. Antoine gently coaxed him towards the door. Jacques followed his brother, lamb-like, through the hall, without even trembling to think that the curious eyes of the old concierge, Mme. Frühling, were watching him. He had realized his helplessness and had no heart left to resist. The lift whisked him up, more dead than alive, to face his father’s righteous indignation. He was trapped again in the prison-house of the Family, of the social order—unescapably.

And yet, when he stood again on the landing, when he saw all the lamps lit in the hall as on the evenings when his father gave his all-men dinner parties, somehow he could not help finding a certain restfulness in the familiar home life closing in again around him. When he saw Mademoiselle come limping up the hall, thinner and shakier than ever, he felt his rancour passing and a sudden impulse to throw himself into the embrace of the stumpy black-sleeved arms stretched out towards him. She pressed the boy to her, fondling him affectionately, but all the time scolding him in a shrill, quavering monotone. ‘Oh dear! What wickedness! The cruel, heartless boy! Did you want to make us die of grief? Bless and save us, what wickedness! Haven’t you any heart at all?’ The litany of reproach went on, while large tears brimmed over from her llama-like eyes.

The door of the study opened. Jacques saw his father standing on the threshold, looking down the hall.

His eyes fell at once on Jacques, and he could not check an impulse of affectionate emotion. But then he halted, let his eyelids close; he seemed to be waiting for the culprit to fling himself at his feet, as in the Greuze picture, a copy of which hung in the drawing-room.

Shyness prevented Jacques from moving towards his father.

The study, too, was lit as if for some festivity, and the two maids had just appeared at the kitchen door. Moreover, M. Thibault was in a frock-coat, though it was the hour when he usually wore a smoking-jacket. The boy felt paralysed by the queerness of it all. He freed himself from Mademoiselle's embrace, shrank back, and stood, with bowed head, waiting for he knew not what, so flustered by a rush of pent-up feeling that he felt an uncontrollable impulse to weep and, in the same breath, burst out laughing.

But M. Thibault's first words seemed to ban him from the family circle. Jacques' attitude, in the presence of witnesses, had effectively dispelled any inclination to indulgence which he might have felt. The better to bring the young rebel to heel, he feigned complete detachment.

'Ah, so you're back!' He addressed the words solely to Antoine. 'I was beginning to wonder. Did everything go off all right?' When Antoine nodded, shaking the flabby hand his father held out to him, he continued: 'I'm very grateful to you, my dear boy, for sparing me a distasteful task. Most distasteful indeed!'

He paused, still hoping for some gesture of contrition from his younger son. But the boy was staring sullenly at the carpet. M. Thibault glanced first at the culprit, then at the maids. Now he was definitely angry.

'We'll decide to-morrow on the best course to adopt, to prevent the repetition of such scandalous misconduct.'

Mademoiselle made a step towards Jacques, to urge him towards his father's arms—a movement Jacques was aware of, though he did not raise his eyes. Indeed he had been waiting for it, his last forlorn chance of reconciliation. But M. Thibault stretched out a peremptory arm.

'Let him be! He's a young scoundrel, with a heart of stone. Was he worth all the anxiety we've gone through on his account?' He turned again to Antoine, who was watching for an opportunity to intervene. 'Antoine, dear boy, do us the service of looking after this miserable boy for one night more. To-morrow, I promise you, you shall be freed from all responsibility for him.'

There was still a moment of indecision. Antoine went up to his father; Jacques timidly raised his head. But now M. Thibault was speaking again, in a tone that brooked no controversy.

‘Now then, Antoine, you heard what I said? Take him off to his room. This revolting scene has lasted quite long enough. Take him away.’

Steering Jacques in front of him, Antoine vanished down the corridor; the maids shrank back against the walls, as if they were watching victims on their way to execution. M. Thibault, his eyes still closed, went back to his study and shut the door behind him.

He went straight across it into the room where he slept. The furniture had come to him from his parents, and the room was exactly like their bedroom as he had known it in his early childhood, in the dwelling-house attached to his father’s factory near Rouen. After his father’s death he had brought it, lock, stock and barrel, to Paris, where he had come to study law. He had kept everything as it was: the mahogany chest of drawers, the old-fashioned chairs, the blue repp curtains, the bed in which his father and his mother had died. Before the *prie-dieu*, the upholstery of which had been embroidered by Mme. Thibault, hung the crucifix which he himself, at a few months’ interval, had placed between their folded, lifeless hands.

Alone now, he could be himself again: he let his shoulders droop, and yet the mask of fatigue seemed to have slipped from the heavy features, leaving them with a simple, almost childish look that recalled the portraits of him as a boy. He went to the *prie-dieu* and, kneeling down, gave himself up to prayer. His puffy hands moved rapidly to and fro—a habit with him when he was by himself; there was something unconstrained, yet curiously clandestine, in all his gestures now he was alone. He raised his expressionless face and the eyes, under the half-shut lids, went straight to the crucifix.

M. Thibault was committing this new burden laid upon him, his disappointment, to God’s mercy, and now that his heart was purged of anger, prayed fervently and with a father’s love for his erring son. From the arm-rest on which he kept his books of devotion he took a rosary which had been given him for his first communion; after forty years’ polishing the beads slipped effortlessly between his fingers. He had shut his eyes again, but his head was still lifted, as if he were gazing at the crucifix. That smile, coming from the heart, that look of candid happiness, was never seen on his face in ordinary life. The words he was murmuring made his heavy cheeks quiver and the little jerky movements of his head which he made at regular intervals to free his neck from the stiff, tight collar, somehow brought to mind a censer swayed before the altar of his God.

Next morning Jacques was left to himself. Sitting on his unmade bed, he wondered what to do with himself this Saturday morning. It wasn't the holidays—quite the contrary—and yet here he was, it seemed, spending the day in his room. He thought of School, the History Class, Daniel. The domestic sounds he heard outside his door sounded familiar and vaguely hostile; a broom rasping the carpet, doors creaking in the wind. He was not depressed; exalted, rather; but his inactivity, coupled with the mysterious threat brooding over the house, made him feel almost unbearably ill at ease. What a relief it would have been if he could have found an opportunity for some sacrifice, some heroic and absurd act of devotion, which might have given vent to the pent-up emotions that now were suffocating him! Now and then a gust of self-pity caused him to raise his head and he felt a brief thrill of morbid pleasure, a mingled thrill of frustrated love, of pride and hatred.

The door-handle turned. It was Gisèle. Her hair had just been washed and her black curls were drying on her shoulders; she was in a chemise and knickers. Her brown neck, arms and legs gave her the look of a little Algerian lad—what with her flapping drawers, with her fuzzy mop of hair, her ripe, young lips and melting, dog-like eyes.

‘What do you want?’ Jacques asked in a peevish tone.

‘I've come to see you.’ She looked at him intently.

During the last week little ten-year-old Gisèle had guessed more than her elders suspected. And now her Jacquot had come back! But things at home had not resumed their normal course. Just now her aunt, when doing Gisèle's hair, had suddenly been called away to see M. Thibault, and had left her in her room, her hair ‘all anyhow,’ after making her promise to ‘be good.’

‘Who was it who rang?’ he asked.

‘The Abbé.’

Jacques frowned. She climbed on to the bed beside him.

‘Poor Jacquot!’ she whispered.

Her affection did him so much good that, to show his gratitude, he took her on his knees and hugged her. But his ears were on the alert.

‘Run! There's someone coming!’ He pushed her towards the door.

He had only just time to jump off the bed and open a grammar book when he heard the voice of Abbé Vécard behind the door, talking to Gisèle.

‘Good-morning, my dear. Is Jacquot here?’

Entering, he stopped on the threshold. Jacques looked down. The Abbé came up to him and playfully tweaked his ear.

‘Here’s a pretty kettle of fish!’ he began.

But the stubborn look on the boy’s face made him change his tactics. With Jacques he always proceeded warily. He felt for this so often erring member of his flock a particular regard, not unmixed with curiosity and a certain esteem, for he had realized the vigour of the boy’s personality.

Sitting down, he called Jacques towards him.

‘The least thing you could do was to ask your father’s forgiveness. Have you done so?’ Needless to say, he knew perfectly well the state of affairs, and, furious with his deceit, Jacques cast him a furtively indignant look, shaking his head. For a while neither spoke.

Then the priest began in a low, somewhat ill-assured voice. ‘My child, I won’t conceal from you that I have been deeply grieved by what has happened. Till now, for all your unruliness, I’ve always stood up for you. I have often said to your father, “Jacques has a good heart, everything will come right, only we must be patient.” But now I hardly know what to say and, worse still, I have learnt things about you which never, never could I have brought myself to suspect. We’ll come back to that. And yet, I said to myself, “He will have had time to reflect, he will return to us repentant, and there is no sin that cannot be atoned for by sincere contrition.” Instead of that I find you with a stubborn face, without a semblance of regret, without a tear. Your poor father, this time, has really lost heart, and I am grieved for his sake, too. He asks himself how far you have sunk in perversity, whether your heart is utterly hardened. And, upon my word, I ask myself that question, too.’

Clenching his fists in his pockets, Jacques pressed his chin hard against his chest so that no sob might escape from his throat, no muscle of his face betray him. He alone knew how bitterly he had suffered for not having asked forgiveness, what exquisite tears he would have shed, had he had Daniel’s welcome. No! Since it was thus, he would never let anyone see what he felt for his father; that almost animal attachment, tintured with rancour, seemed to have become even keener, now that there was no hope of its being returned.

The Abbé paused. The studied calm of his features made his silence all the more telling. Then, his eyes fixed on the middle distance, without a word of introduction, he began speaking, or, rather, intoning words that Jacques knew well.

‘“A certain man had two sons. . . . And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, and came to himself he said, I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy . . .”’

Before the priest could utter the last word, Jacques’ self-control broke down and he burst into tears.

The priest continued in a different tone.

‘Yes, my child, I felt sure you were not utterly corrupted. This morning I said my mass for you. Well, like the Prodigal Son, arise and go to your father, and he will have compassion. And he, too, will say, “Let us be merry, for this my son was lost and is found.”’

Then Jacques remembered how the hall had been lit up for his homecoming, how M. Thibault had worn his frock-coat, and it made him still more contrite to think that perhaps he had ‘let down’ their preparations to welcome him.

‘There’s something else I want to say to you,’ the priest went on, stroking the boy’s hair. ‘Your father has just come to a grave decision about you.’ He hesitated and, as he groped for his words, mechanically passed his hand to and fro over Jacques’ protruding ears, laying them flat against his cheeks, then letting them spring back. Jacques felt his ears burning, but dared not move his head. ‘I approve of his decision,’ the Abbé added, putting his forefinger on his lip and riveting his gaze on the boy’s eyes. ‘He intends to send you, for a while, away from home.’

‘Where?’ The word was a stifled cry.

‘He will tell you, my child. But whatever you may think at first, you must accept the punishment with a contrite heart, as a measure taken for your good. At the start, perhaps, it will sometimes be a little hard, when you find yourself alone for hours on end; but remember at those moments that there is no solitude for the true Christian, and that God never forsakes those who put their trust in Him. Come, my boy, come with me and ask your father’s forgiveness.’

A few minutes later Jacques was back in his room, his face swollen with tears, his cheeks blazing. He walked over to the looking-glass and gave his reflected self a look of concentrated ferocity; it was as if he felt the need of some living human form to act as the target of his malevolence, his imprecations. But just then he heard a step in the passage. Glancing at the door, he saw the key had been removed. He piled a barricade of chairs against it. Then, running to the table, he scribbled a few lines in pencil, pushed the letter into an envelope, wrote the address, stuck on a stamp, and rose. He seemed at his wits' end. To whom could he entrust the letter? Here, everyone was an enemy. He opened the window. The morning was grey, the street deserted. After a while an old lady and a child came slowly past; Jacques dropped the letter; it fluttered slowly down and came to rest on the pavement. When he ventured to look out of the window again, the letter had disappeared, the lady and the child were almost out of sight.

And now he gave way to his despair; with a whimpering cry, the moan of a trapped animal, he flung himself on to the bed, his feet pressing against the boards, his body arched convulsively, his limbs quivering with baffled fury. To stifle his cries, he clenched his teeth on the pillow, for, in the chaos of his mind, one thought was clear: he must not let the others gloat over his despair.

That evening Daniel received the letter.

To you, My Friend,

To you, the only person in the world whom I love, the daystar of my life.

This is my last will and testament to you.

They are severing me from you, from everything; they are going to put me in a place—I dare not tell you what it is, I dare not tell you where it is. I am ashamed for my father's sake!

I feel that I shall never see you again, you who are all to me, you who alone could make me kind and good.

Good-bye, my dear, good-bye.

If they make me too miserable, too angry with everything, I shall kill myself. Then you must tell them that I killed myself deliberately, because of them. And that yet I loved them.

But my last thought on the threshold of the next world will have been for you! For you, my friend!

Farewell!

PART II

DURING the year which had elapsed since the day when Antoine brought back the two young truants, he had not gone to see Madame de Fontanin again. The maid, however, recognized him and, though it was nine o'clock, showed him in immediately.

Madame de Fontanin was in her room, the two children with her. Sitting very straight under the lamp, in front of the fire, she was reading aloud. Jenny, snugly ensconced in an easy-chair, was toying with her plaits and, as she listened to her mother, gazing at the flames. Daniel was sitting a little way off, his legs crossed, a drawing-board on his knee, finishing a charcoal sketch of his mother. As he paused for a moment on the dark threshold of the room, Antoine was uncomfortably conscious that his visit was ill-timed; but it was too late to retreat.

Madame de Fontanin's greeting was rather chilly, but principally she seemed surprised to see him. Leaving her children to themselves, she led Antoine to the drawing-room. On learning the reason of his visit, however, she went out again to fetch her son.

Daniel looked seventeen now (though actually he was two years younger), and an incipient moustache darkened the curve of his upper lip. A little disconcerted, Antoine looked the youngster full in the face, in the rather blustering way he had; now his look seemed to imply: 'There's no shilly-shally about me, I'm one of those fellows who always go straight to the point.' As on his previous visit, an unavowed instinct led him to exaggerate this pose of 'downrightness,' once he was in Madame de Fontanin's presence.

'This is it,' he said. 'Our meeting yesterday set me thinking and I've come to talk things out.' Daniel looked surprised. 'Yes,' Antoine went on, 'we scarcely exchanged two words—you were in a hurry and so was I; but it struck me—I don't quite know how to put it. Well, for one thing you didn't enquire about Jacques, from which I drew the conclusion that he'd been writing to you. I was right, wasn't I? What's more, I suspect he tells you things I don't know, and which I ought to know. No, wait please, and hear what I have to say. Jacques left Paris last June; it's the beginning of April now, which makes it almost nine months he's been away. I haven't seen him, he's never written to me, but father sees him often. He tells me Jacques is fit and working well; that the solitary life and discipline have already done him a world of good. I sometimes wonder if he isn't deceiving himself, or being

deceived. Since seeing you yesterday I've been feeling worried about it. I got an idea that perhaps he's unhappy in his present surroundings, but as I'm in the dark about it, there's nothing I can do to help him. And I can't bear to think that. That's why I decided to come and talk it over frankly with you. I appeal to your affection for him. It's not a question of betraying confidences, but I'm sure he tells you what his life is like in that place. You're the only one who can either reassure me, or prompt me to take active measures about it.'

Daniel heard him out impassively. His first impulse had been to decline the interview altogether. Holding his head high, he gazed at Antoine, and his very indecision gave a certain aloofness to his look. At a loss, he glanced towards his mother. She had been watching him, wondering what he would do. After some minutes of suspense she smiled towards him.

'Tell the truth, old chap,' she said, with a decisive gesture. 'One never has reason to regret it when one tells the truth.'

With a gesture curiously like his mother's, Daniel began to speak. Yes, he had had letters from Thibault, now and then; letters that had become shorter and shorter, less and less communicative. Daniel knew, of course, that his friend was boarding with a tutor somewhere in the country—exactly where he did not know. The postmarks on the envelopes showed that they had been posted on a train, somewhere on the Northern Railway. Was it a sort of crammer's Jacques was at?

It was an effort for Antoine to conceal his amazement at the pains Jacques had evidently taken to hide the truth from his closest friend. Why had he done it? Perhaps it was the same feeling of shame as that which led M. Thibault to convert, for the benefit of the world at large, the reformatory colony where he had confined his son, into 'a religious institution on the banks of the Oise.' A suspicion that perhaps his brother had been compelled to write such letters crossed his mind. Perhaps the poor little chap was being terrorized! He remembered the campaign run by a Beauvais newspaper of the scurrilous sort, and the lurid charges it had brought against 'The Social Defence League.' True, M. Thibault had won his libel action against the newspaper, all along the line—yet could one be so sure . . . ?

Antoine felt that, in the last resort, he could rely only on his own judgement.

'I say, might I see one of the letters?' he asked. Noticing that Daniel was blushing, he excused his abruptness with a belated smile. 'Just one letter,' he explained. 'Whichever you care to show me.'

Without answering, without waiting for a lead from his mother, Daniel rose and left the room.

Now that he was alone with Madame de Fontanin, Antoine was conscious of the same feelings as he had had before: curiosity, a sense of an unfamiliar atmosphere, and a certain attraction. She was looking in front of her and did not seem to be thinking of anything. But her mere presence seemed enough to stimulate Antoine's mental processes and quicken his uptake. It was as if the air around her were charged with a peculiar conductivity. And, at that moment, unmistakably, Antoine felt an atmosphere of disapproval. He was not far wrong. Though she had nothing definite against M. Thibault, or Antoine—she had no idea what had become of Jacques—the one glimpse she had had of their home life had left her with a most distasteful impression. Antoine guessed her feelings and was inclined to agree with her. If anyone had ventured to criticize his father's conduct, he would certainly have protested vigorously; but at that moment, in his inmost self, he was on Madame de Fontanin's side against his father. He had not forgotten how, the year before, after his first experience of the atmosphere of the Fontanins' home, he had for several days found that of his own home almost unbreathable.

Daniel returned. He handed Antoine a cheap-looking envelope.

'That's the first. It's the longest letter, too.' He went back to his chair.

MY DEAR FONTANIN,

I write to you from my new home. You mustn't try to write to me, it's absolutely forbidden. Apart from that, everything is all right. My tutor is nice, he is kind to me and I am working hard. And I have met quite a lot of nice fellows here. My father and brother come to see me on Sundays. So you see I'm quite all right. I beg you, my dear Daniel, in the name of our friendship, do not judge my father too harshly; you don't know all the facts. I know he is kind and good, and he has done well to send me away from Paris, where I was wasting my time at the Lycée; I see it myself now, and I'm glad. I don't give you my address—to make sure you won't write, for if you did so it would be terrible for me here.

I will write to you again when I have a chance, my dear Daniel.

JACQUES.

Antoine read the letter twice. Had he not recognized his brother's writing, he would have had difficulty in believing it came from him. Someone else had written the address on the envelope—obviously a more or

less illiterate person—and there was something mean and furtive about the handwriting. Form and contents disturbed him equally. Why those lies? About the ‘nice fellows,’ for instance. Jacques was living in a cell in the famous ‘special annexe’ which M. Thibault had provided for boys of good family, and which was always empty. Jacques, he knew, never spoke to a soul except the servant who brought his meals and took him for walks, and a tutor who came from Compiègne two or three times a week. ‘My father and my brother come to see me!’ M. Thibault visited Crouy in his official capacity on the first Monday of each month, to preside over the administrative committee, and it was true that on that day, before leaving, he always had his son brought to see him for a few minutes in the parlour. As for Antoine, he had proposed going to visit his brother during the summer holidays, but M. Thibault had put his foot down. ‘It’s essential,’ he had said, ‘for the course of re-education your brother is undergoing, that he should be kept in absolute isolation.’

His elbows propped on his knees, Antoine twiddled the letter between his fingers. His peace of mind was badly shaken and of a sudden he felt so painfully at a loss, so lonely, that he was on the point of telling everything to the enlightened woman who, by some happy chance, had crossed his path. Looking up, he saw her with her hands resting on her lap, and with a thoughtful, somehow expectant look on her face. Her eyes seemed to read his thoughts.

‘Do you think we could help in any way?’ she smiled. The silken whiteness of her hair made the smile and the features seem those of a still younger woman.

But, just as he was about to make the plunge, he paused, noticing Daniel’s shrewd gaze intent on him. Antoine could not bear to seem irresolute, and even more disliked the idea that Madame de Fontanin might not regard him as the man of rapid measures that he was. But to himself he gave a more congenial reason for his silence—that he could not divulge a secret Jacques was at such pains to hide. Feeling unsure of himself, he cut the awkward situation short. He rose and, as he held out his hand, assumed the impressive look he deliberately cultivated, a look implying: ‘No questions, please! You see the man I am! We understand each other, that’s enough!’

In the street he strode ahead repeating to himself: ‘Keep calm, and act with firmness!’ Five or six years spent in studying science had given him the habit of casting his thoughts in ostensibly logical form. ‘Jacques does not complain: Therefore Jacques is happy.’ But, inwardly, he discredited his syllogism. The Press campaign against the Reformatory haunted his

thoughts; notably he recalled an article on 'Children's Jails' that had described in detail the physical and moral degradation of the ill-fed, ill-housed boys, the corporal punishments they were subjected to, the callous treatment often meted out to them by the warders. Unconsciously he made a menacing gesture. The rôle of rescuer appealed to him. Cost what it might, he would get the poor boy out of it! But how? Any idea of telling his father about it or having it out with him could be dismissed; for it was his father and the Institution founded and managed by him, that he was up against. This feeling of revolt against his father was so unprecedented that at first he felt a certain embarrassment, which soon changed to pride.

He remembered what had happened the year before, the day after Jacques' return. At the earliest stage of the proceedings M. Thibault had summoned him to his study. The Abbé Vécard had just come. M. Thibault was bellowing: 'The young ruffian! We've got to break his will!' He had stretched out his plump, hairy hand, had spread out the fingers, then slowly closed them, cracking the finger-joints. A self-satisfied smile had lit up his face. 'Yes, I think I've found the solution.' And, after a pause, raising at last his eyelids, he had uttered the one word, 'Crouy.'

'What! Do you mean to send Jacques to the reformatory?' Antoine had exclaimed. A heated argument had followed. 'We've got to break him in,' his father had repeated, cracking his knuckles again. The Abbé had demurred. Then M. Thibault had explained the special discipline Jacques would undergo—a *régime* which, to hear him, was amiably benevolent, paternal. He had concluded in an unctuous tone, with measured emphasis. 'In these conditions, out of reach of evil influences and purged by solitude of his baser instincts, inculcated with a taste for work, he will come to his sixteenth year, and I venture to hope it will then be possible for him safely to resume his place in our family life.' The priest had acquiesced. 'Yes, isolation does effect marvellous cures.' Impressed by his father's arguments and the priest's approval, Antoine had finished by thinking they were right. But now he could forgive neither his father nor himself.

He walked rapidly, without looking where he was going. In front of the Lion of Belfort, he turned on his heel, then went striding on again, lighting cigarette after cigarette, puffing the smoke into the lamp-lit darkness. Yes, he must make haste to Crouy, strike hard, do justice. . . .

A woman accosted him, murmuring cajoleries. He did not answer, but continued walking down the Boulevard Saint-Michel. 'I shall have justice done!' he repeated. 'I'll show up the double-dealing of the directors, I'll make a public scandal and bring the boy back.'

But somehow the edge of his enthusiasm had been blunted; all the time his thoughts had been sheering off their first preoccupation, and another impulse cutting across his grandiose campaign. He crossed the Seine, well knowing to what place his wayward steps were taking him. After all, why not? With his nerves strung up like this, there was no point in going home to bed. He inhaled deeply, puffed out his chest, and smiled. 'One's got to be a man,' he thought; 'to prove one's strength.' As he blithely entered the furtive, ill-lit street, another rush of generous emotion carried him away. In his mind's eye he saw his resolution beaconing him to triumph. Now that he was about to realize one of the two projects that had been vying for his attention during the last quarter of an hour, the other, by the same token, seemed to him all but realized. And, as with the assurance born of habit, he pushed open the glazed door, his plans were cut and dried. 'To-morrow's a Saturday—impossible to get away from the hospital. But on Sunday, Sunday morning, I'll visit the reformatory.'

2

As the morning express did not stop at Crouy, Antoine had to get out at Venette, the last station before Compiègne. He alighted from the train in the highest spirits. Next week he had to sit for an examination, but throughout the journey he had been unable to apply his mind to the medical manuals he had brought with him. The decisive moment was near. For the last two days he had been picturing so vividly the triumphant climax of his crusade that he almost fancied he had already effected Jacques' release, and the only problem troubling him was how to regain the boy's affection.

He had a mile and a half to walk along a level, sunlit road. For the first time that year after weeks of rain there was a promise of spring in the dewy fragrance of the March morning. He feasted his eyes on the tender verdure already mantling the ploughlands. Wisps of vapour were loitering on the bright horizon and the hills along the Oise glittered in the young sunlight. For a moment he was weak enough to hope he was mistaken; so pure, so calm was the countryside around him. Could this be the setting of a convict prison?

He had to cross the entire village of Crouy before reaching the reformatory. Then, suddenly, as he came round the last houses, he had a shock. Though he had never seen it and distant though it was, he could not be mistaken. There, in the midst of a chalk-white plain, ringed round on all sides, like a new graveyard, by bare, bleak walls, rose the huge building with its tiled roof, its clock-face gleaming in the sun and endless rows of small, barred windows. It would have been taken for an ordinary prison but for the gold lettering on the cornice over the first storey:

THE OSCAR THIBAUT FOUNDATION

He walked up the treeless drive leading to the penitentiary. The little windows seemed watching from afar the visitor's approach. Entering the portico, he pulled the bell-rope; a shrill clang jarred the Sabbath calm. The door opened. A brown watchdog, chained to its kennel, barked furiously. Antoine entered the courtyard, which consisted of a lawn surrounded by gravel paths and curved on the side facing the main ward. He had a feeling of being watched, but no living being was in sight except the dog that, tugging at its chain, was barking lustily as ever. To the left of the entrance was a little chapel topped by a stone cross; on the right he saw a low building with the notice: *Staff*, and turned towards it. The closed door opened the moment he set foot on the step. The dog went on barking. He stepped into a hall, with a tiled floor and yellow walls and furnished with new chairs; it reminded him of a convent parlour. The place was overheated. A life-size plaster bust of M. Thibault, giving an impression of enormous bulk under the low ceiling, adorned the right-hand wall. On the opposite wall a humble black crucifix, garnished with a sprig of box, seemed to be playing second fiddle to it. Antoine remained standing, on the defensive. No, he had not been wrong! The whole place reeked of the prison-house.

At last, in the wall furthest from him, a hatch was opened and a warder put out his head. Antoine threw down his own card and one of his father's, and curtly told the man he wished to see the Superintendent.

Nearly five minutes passed.

Annoyed by the delay, he was just about to start on a round of exploration, unaccompanied, when a light step sounded in the corridor and a bespectacled, plump, fair-haired young man ran up to him with little dancing steps. He was in brown flannel pyjamas and wearing Turkish slippers. All smiles, he held out both hands in welcome.

‘Good-morning, Doctor. What a happy surprise! Your brother will be so delighted, so delighted to see you. Of course I know you well; your father, the Founder, often speaks of his grown-up doctor son. And besides there’s a family resemblance. Oh yes,’ he laughed, ‘I assure you there’s a likeness. But do come to my office, please. And forgive me for not naming myself before; I’m Faisme, the Superintendent here.’

He shepherded Antoine towards his office, shuffling his feet and following close behind with his arms extended and fingers spread, as if he expected Antoine to slip or stumble, and wanted to be sure to catch him before he fell.

He forced Antoine into a seat and himself sat at his desk.

‘Is the Founder in good health?’ he asked in a high-pitched voice. ‘What an extraordinary man he is—he never seems to get older! Such a pity he couldn’t come to-day as well!’

Antoine cast a mistrustful glance round the room, then scanned without amenity the young man’s face, which for all its pink-and-white complexion had a Chinese cast; behind the gold-rimmed spectacles the two small slanted eyes seemed twinkling and beaming with perpetual joy. The voluble welcome had taken him off his guard and it upset his calculations to find that the stern warden of a ‘convict prison’ he had pictured was a smiling young man in pyjamas instead of the grim-faced martinet—or, at best, the donnish pedagogue—he had expected to confront. It was an effort for him to recover his composure.

‘By Jove!’ M. Faisme suddenly exclaimed. ‘It’s just struck me: you’ve arrived in the middle of mass. All our youngsters are in chapel, including your brother, of course. What’s to be done?’ He consulted his watch. ‘There’s another twenty minutes, half an hour, perhaps, if there are many communions—and that’s quite possible. The Founder must have told you; we are particularly fortunate in our Confessor, he’s quite a young priest with go-ahead ideas and any amount of tact, don’t you know? Since he’s been here the religious tone of the Institution has wonderfully improved. I’m so sorry to keep you waiting, but really I don’t see how it can be helped.’

Mindful of the investigation he proposed to carry out, Antoine made no show of friendliness.

‘As the buildings are empty for the moment,’ he said, standing up and fixing his eyes on the little man, ‘I presume there would be no objection to my having a look round the Institution. I’ve heard it so much discussed ever since I was a boy that I’d like to have a nearer view of it.’

‘Really?’ The Superintendent seemed surprised. ‘Nothing could be simpler, of course,’ he added with a smile, but made no sign of moving. For a moment he seemed lost in thoughts, the smile still lingering on his lips. ‘Really, you know, the buildings aren’t particularly interesting; more like a miniature barracks than anything else. And when I’ve said that, you know as much about them as I do.’

Antoine remained on his feet.

‘Still, it would interest me,’ he repeated. The Superintendent stared at him, his little slotted eyes twinkling with amused incredulity. ‘I mean what I say,’ Antoine added in a determined voice.

‘In that case, Doctor, I’ll be delighted. . . . Please give me time to put on a coat and shoes and I’ll be with you.’

He went out. Antoine heard an electric bell ring. Then a big bell in the courtyard clanged five times. ‘Aha!’ he thought. ‘That’s the alarm; the enemy is within the gates!’ Unable to bring himself to sit down, he walked to the window; the glass was frosted. ‘Steady now!’ he adjured himself. ‘And keep your eyes open. The first thing’s to make sure. Then to act. That’s the line to take.’

After a good while M. Faisme returned.

They went out together.

‘Here is our Main Quadrangle!’ he said, turning the pompous nomenclature with a laugh. The watchdog started barking again; he ran up to it and gave it a violent kick in the ribs that sent it slinking back into the kennel.

‘Are you anything of a gardener? But of course a doctor must know his way about in botany, what?’ He halted, beaming, in the middle of the little lawn. ‘Do give me your advice. How’m I to hide that bit of wall? What about ivy? Only it would take years, wouldn’t it?’

Ignoring the question, Antoine walked on to the main building. First they visited the ground floor. Antoine went in front; nothing escaped his observant eye, and he made a point of opening every door without exception. The upper half of the walls was whitewashed; up to the height of six feet they were tarred black. All the windows, like those in the office, had frosted glass, and here there were bars as well. Antoine tried to open a window, but a special key was necessary; the Superintendent produced one from his pocket and turned the latch. Antoine was struck by the dexterity of his short, fat, yellow fingers. He cast a shrewd exploring glance into the inner court which was quite empty—a large rectangle of dry, well-trodden

mud without a single tree and enclosed by high walls topped with broken glass.

M. Faisme described with gusto the uses of the different rooms: classrooms and workshops for carpentry, metal-work, electricity and so forth. The rooms were small, clean and tidy. In the refectory servants were just finishing clearing the deal tables; an acrid smell came from the sinks in the corners.

‘Each boy goes to the sink, after the meal, to wash his bowl, mug and spoon. They never have knives, of course, nor even forks.’ When Antoine gave him a puzzled look, he added with a grin: ‘Nothing with a point, you know.’

On the first floor there were more classrooms, more workshops and a shower-bath which did not seem much used, but of which the Superintendent was evidently particularly proud. He bustled from room to room, flapping his arms and prattling away. Now and then he would stop to push back a carpenter’s bench, pick up a nail from the floor, turn off a dripping tap, set perfect order in each room he entered.

On the second floor were the dormitories. They were of two sorts. The greater number contained ten small bedsteads, with grey blankets, placed side by side; each was fitted with a kit-rack as in French military barracks, which these resembled, except that in the centre of each room was a sort of iron cage enclosed in fine-meshed wire netting.

‘Do you shut them up in that?’ Antoine enquired.

M. Faisme flung up his arms in a gesture of comical dismay, then began laughing again.

‘Certainly not! That’s where the watchman sleeps. It’s quite simple; he puts his bed plumb in the middle, at an equal distance from each wall. In that way he can see and hear everything that goes on, in perfect safety. And he has an alarm-bell, too; the wires go under the floor.’

The other sort of dormitory consisted of rows of adjoining cells, built of solid stone and barred like the animal-cages in a menagerie. M. Faisme had stopped on the threshold. Now and then his smile had a pensive, disillusioned air which gave his doll-like features the melancholy that pervades the Buddha’s face in certain statues.

‘Alas, Doctor,’ he said, ‘it’s in these cells we have to lodge our “hard cases.” The boys, I mean, who come to us too late to be re-educated; I’m afraid there’s little to be said for them. Some lads have vice in the blood—don’t you agree? Well, there’s nothing for it but to shut them up by themselves at night.’

Antoine pressed his face to the bars and peered into the gloom of one of the cells. He could just make out an unmade pallet bed and walls covered with obscene drawings and inscriptions. Instinctively he drew back.

‘Don’t look, it’s too distressing,’ the Superintendent sighed, drawing him away. ‘Here you have the central corridor where the watchman on duty patrols all night. The light isn’t put out here, and he doesn’t go to bed. Though they’re securely locked up, the little rascals would be quite capable of giving us a lot of trouble, take my word for it!’ He shook his head mournfully, then suddenly started laughing; his slotted eyes grew narrower still and all trace of compunction had left his face. ‘Yes,’ he added with an air of naïvety, ‘it takes all sorts to make a world you know.’

Antoine was so much interested in what he saw that he had forgotten most of the questions he had prepared in advance. One, however, he remembered now.

‘How do you punish them? I’d like to see your punishment cells.’

M. Faisme stepped back a pace, his eyes wide open, flapping his hands in consternation.

‘Come, come, Doctor, what do you take us for? This isn’t a convict prison. Punishment cells, indeed! We haven’t any, thank God! For one thing the Founder would never tolerate such methods.’

Silenced and baffled, Antoine had to endure the irony that twinkled in the little narrow eyes, whose lashes flickered humorously behind the glasses. He was beginning to find the rôle he had assumed—of scrutiny and suspicion—rather irksome. Nothing he had seen encouraged him to maintain his attitude of hostility. Moreover, he had a feeling that the Superintendent might have guessed the invidious motive that had brought him to Crouy. Still it was hard to know, so genuine seemed the little man’s simplicity despite the occasional flashes of mockery that glinted in the corners of his eyes.

He had stopped laughing, came up to Antoine and put his hand on his arm.

‘You were joking, weren’t you? You know as well as I do what comes of overdoing discipline; it leads to rebellion or, what is still worse, hypocrisy. Our Founder made a fine speech on the subject at the Paris Congress, in the year of the Great Exhibition.’

He had lowered his voice and there was a look of special understanding on his face as he gazed at the young man; a look implying that he and Antoine belonged to an élite, capable of discussing such educational

problems without falling into the errors of the common herd. Antoine felt flattered, and his favourable impression grew stronger.

‘It’s true that in the courtyard, just as in a military barracks, there’s a small shed that the architect described on his plan as “Punishment Cells.”’

‘Yes?’

‘But we only use it for storing coal, and potatoes. What’s the use of punishment cells? You get so much more by persuasion.’

‘Really?’

With a subtle smile the Superintendent placed his hand on Antoine’s arm.

‘Let’s get it clear,’ he said. ‘What I call “persuasion,” I prefer to tell you right away, is the deprivation of certain items of the daily diet. Our young folk are always greedy. That’s only natural at their age, isn’t it? Dry bread, Doctor, has a persuasive power you’d never suspect; only you must know how to use it—it’s essential not to isolate the lad whom we’re trying to reform. That, by the way, shows you how little the solitary cell enters into our method. No, it’s in a corner of the dining-hall that the youngster eats his hunk of stale bread, at noon, when the best meal of the day is served, with the smell of a nice steaming dish of stew in his nostrils and with all the others tucking in under his eyes. That’s our method, and it never fails. At that age they thin down in no time; in a fortnight or three weeks I’ve broken in even the most stubborn cases. Persuasion—there’s nothing like it!’ His eyes were round with satisfaction. ‘And never have I had to take other measures; I’ve never lifted a finger against any of the young folk in my charge.’

His face was shining with pride and benevolence. He really seemed to love his youthful miscreants, even the toughest.

They went down the stairs again. M. Faisme took out his watch.

‘To finish up, let me show you a truly edifying spectacle. You’ll tell the Founder, I hope, and I’m sure he’ll be pleased to hear about it.’

They crossed the garden and entered the chapel. M. Faisme sprinkled holy water. Antoine saw the backs of some sixty lads in grey overalls, kneeling in strict alignment on the stone floor, motionless. Four of the staff, stalwart figures in blue uniforms with red braid, marched up and down the aisle, keeping their eyes fixed on the boys. Attended by two acolytes, the priest at the altar was just concluding the service.

‘Where’s Jacques?’ Antoine whispered.

The Superintendent pointed to the gallery beneath which they were standing and tiptoed back towards the porch.

‘That’s where your brother always sits,’ he said as soon as they were outside. ‘He’s alone there, that’s to say, only the young man who looks after him is with him. By the way, you might tell your father that a new servant, the man we spoke to him about, has been allotted to Jacques. He took up the post a week ago. Léon, the man whom Jacques had before, was getting too old for the job, and we’ve detailed him to supervise a work-room. The new man’s a young Lorrainer, a very, very decent fellow. He’s just ended his military service; used to be the Colonel’s orderly, and his references were excellent. It’ll be less boring for your brother on his walks, don’t you think so? Good heavens, here I am chattering away to you and the boys are coming out of church.’

The dog began to bark furiously. M. Faisme reduced it to silence, adjusted his glasses, and took his stand in the centre of the big quadrangle.

Both leaves of the chapel-door had been thrown open and, three by three, with the attendants beside them, the boys were filing out, keeping perfect step, like soldiers on parade. All were bareheaded and wearing rope-soled shoes, which gave them the noiseless step of gymnasts; their overalls were clean and held in at the waist by leather belts, the buckles of which flashed in the sun. The oldest were seventeen or eighteen, the youngest ten or eleven. Most had pale complexions, downcast eyes and a look of calm quite out of keeping with their age. But Antoine, though he scrutinized them with the utmost attention, could not detect a single questionable glance, not one unsavoury smile, nor even any trace of sullenness. Those boys did not look ‘hard cases,’ and, he could but own to himself, they did not look like oppressed victims either.

When the little procession had vanished into the building and the sound of muffled footsteps on the wooden stairs had died away, he turned to M. Faisme, who seemed to be waiting for his comment on the scene.

‘An excellent turn-out,’ he said.

The little man said nothing, but gently rubbed one plump palm against the other, as if he were soaping them, while his eyes, sparkling with pride behind the glasses, conveyed his silent gratitude.

At last, when the quadrangle was quite empty, Jacques appeared outside the sunlit porch.

At first Antoine wondered if it were really he. He had changed so greatly, grown so much taller, that Antoine all but failed to recognize him. He was not wearing uniform but a lounge suit, a felt hat and an overcoat

thrown over his shoulders. He was followed by a fair-haired, thick-set young man of about twenty, who was not wearing the official uniform. They came down the steps together. Neither seemed to have noticed Antoine and the Superintendent. Jacques was walking composedly, his eyes fixed on the ground, and it was not till he was within a few yards of M. Faisme that, raising his head, he stopped, displayed astonishment and briskly took off his hat. His demeanour was completely natural, yet Antoine had a suspicion that his surprise was simulated. Jacques' expression remained calm and, though he was smiling, did not seem to convey any real pleasure. Antoine held out his hand; his pleasure, too, was feigned.

'Well, this is a nice surprise, Jacques, isn't it?' the Superintendent exclaimed. 'But I'm going to scold you, my dear boy. You should put on your overcoat properly. It's parky up in the gallery and you might catch cold.'

Jacques had turned away from his brother as soon as he heard M. Faisme speak and was looking the Superintendent in the face with a respectful, remarkably attentive expression, as if he were trying to grasp some underlying meaning that the words might be intended to convey. Then promptly, without answering, he slipped the overcoat on.

'By Jove!' Antoine sounded almost startled. 'It's amazing how you've shot up.' He could not take his eyes off his brother, trying to analyse the complete change that had come over the boy's demeanour, face and general appearance, and his surprise hampered his spontaneity.

'Would you like to stay outside for a bit?' the Superintendent amiably suggested. 'It's such a nice day, isn't it? Jacques can take you to his room when you've done a few turns round the garden.'

Antoine hesitated. His eyes were asking his brother: What about it?

Jacques made no sign. Antoine took it to mean that he would rather not stay where he was, in full view of the reformatory windows.

'No,' he said, and turned to Jacques again. 'We'll be better in your room, won't we?'

'As you like,' the Superintendent smiled. 'But first of all I want to show you one more thing; you really must have a look at *all* our boarders, while you're about it. Come along, Jacques.'

Jacques followed M. Faisme who, his arms extended, laughing like a schoolboy playing a practical joke, was shepherding Antoine towards a shelter built against the wall of the porter's lodge. There were a dozen little rabbit-hutches. M. Faisme, it seemed, had a passion of small-stock raising.

‘This litter was born last Monday,’ he explained gleefully, ‘and look, they’re opening their eyes already, dear little things. In this hutch are my buck-rabbits. Have a good look at this one, Doctor; he’s a real “hard case.”’ He plunged his arm into a hutch and hauled out by the ears a big silver Champagne, kicking violently.

There was a ring of boyish merriment in his laugh; it seemed impossible to think ill of the little man. Then Antoine remembered the dormitory above and its hutches barred with iron.

The plaintive smile of a misunderstood man came to M. Faisme’s face. ‘Good heavens!’ he said. ‘Here I am chattering away, and I can see you’re only listening out of pure politeness, what? I’ll take you as far as Jacques’ door, and leave you. Come Jacques, show us the way.’

Jacques went in front. Antoine overtook him and put a hand on his shoulder. He was trying vainly to conjure up a picture of the small, nervous, weakly, short-legged urchin he had gone to retrieve at Marseilles only a year before.

‘Why, you’re as tall as I am!’

From the shoulder his hand moved up to the boy’s neck. It was as thin and frail as the neck of a bird. Indeed all the boy’s limbs seemed to have outgrown their strength, to be extraordinarily fragile. The elongated wrists protruded from the sleeves, the trousers left his ankles almost unclad, and there was a stiffness, an awkwardness in his way of walking, paradoxically combined with a certain adolescent suppleness, that was quite new to Antoine.

The rooms reserved for the special inmates were in an annexe to the administrative offices and could be approached only through them. Five identical rooms gave on to a corridor the walls of which were painted yellow. M. Faisme explained that as Jacques was the only ‘Special’ and the other rooms were unoccupied, the young man who looked after him slept in one, while the others were used as lumber-rooms.

‘And here’s our prisoner’s cell,’ he said, giving Jacques a playful tap with his plump finger; the boy smiled and drew back to let him enter.

Antoine inspected the room with eager curiosity. It might have been a bedroom in some small, unpretentious but pleasantly appointed hotel. The wall-paper had a floral pattern and there was a fair amount of light, though it came only from above through two fanlights of frosted glass criss-crossed by iron bars. They were immediately beneath the ceiling and, the room being lofty, nearly ten feet above the floor. Sunlight did not enter, but the room was warmed, not to say over-heated, by the heating-plant of the

establishment. The furniture consisted of a pitch-pine wardrobe, two cane chairs, and a black table covered with an array of books and dictionaries. The little bed was smooth and trim as a billiard-table, and had been freshly laid with clean sheets. The wash-basin stood on a clean cloth and there were several immaculate towels on the towel-rail.

A minute inspection of the room gave the final blow to Antoine's preconceived ideas about the Institution. Everything he had seen during the last hour had been the exact opposite of what he had expected. Jacques was effectively segregated from the other boys and treated with every consideration; the Superintendent was a good fellow, as unlike the warden of a prison as one could well imagine. In fact, all M. Thibault had said was true. Obstinate though he was, Antoine was being forced to retract his suspicions one by one.

He caught Mr. Faisme's gaze intent on him.

'Well, I must say you're pretty comfortable here,' he remarked, rather abruptly, turning to Jacques.

Jacques made no reply. He was taking off his hat and coat, which the servant took from him and hung up on the pegs.

'Your brother has just said that you seem comfortable here,' the Superintendent repeated.

Jacques swung round, with a polite, good-mannered air his brother had never seen him assume before. 'Yes, sir,' he said. 'Very comfortable indeed.'

'No, don't let us exaggerate,' M. Faisme smiled. 'It's all very primitive really, we only insist it shall be clean. In any case, it's Arthur we must compliment,' he added, turning to the servant. 'That bed does you credit, my lad!'

Arthur's face lit up. Antoine, who was watching him, found himself making a friendly gesture towards the young man. He had a bullet head, pale eyes, smooth features and there was something frank and forthright in his smile and gaze. He had stayed beside the door and was tugging at his moustache, which seemed almost colourless against his sun-tanned cheeks.

'So that's the grim warder I had pictured—creeping about with a dark-lantern and a bunch of keys!' Antoine was saying to himself, and could not help laughing at his mistake. Then he went up to the books and, still laughing, ran his eyes over them.

'Sallust, I see. Are you making good progress with your Latin?' he asked, a cheerful smile still lingering on his face.

It was M. Faisme who answered his question.

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t say it in front of him,’ he began with feigned reluctance and a flutter of his eyelashes in Jacques’ direction, ‘but I don’t see why I shouldn’t tell you his tutor is very pleased with his progress. We work our eight hours a day,’ he continued in a more serious tone. He went up to the blackboard and straightened it while he went on talking. ‘Still that doesn’t prevent us from going every day, whatever the weather—your worthy father attaches much importance to it—for a good long two hours’ tramp with Arthur. They’ve both good legs, and I leave them free to choose the walks they like. With old Léon it was another matter; I suspect they didn’t cover much ground; but they made up for it by gathering herbs along the hedgerows. I should tell you old Léon was a chemist’s assistant in his youth and knows all about plants, not to mention their Latin names. Jacques must have learned quite a lot from him. Still I must say I’d rather see them taking long walks in the country—much better for Jacques’ health, isn’t it?’

Antoine had turned to his brother several times while M. Faisme was speaking. Jacques seemed to be listening in a dream; now and then he had to make an effort to follow, and at these moments a look of vague distress crossed his face, his lips parted and his eyelids quivered.

‘There I am again, babbling away, and it’s ages since Jacques had a chance of seeing his big brother.’ M. Faisme backed towards the door with little friendly gestures. ‘Are you going back by the eleven o’clock train?’ he asked.

That had not been Antoine’s intention, but M. Faisme’s tone implied it was the obvious thing to do, and, moreover, he felt only too glad of the pretext for an early escape. He was conscious that the dreary atmosphere of the place and Jacques’ indifference were getting on his nerves. And, in any case, he had learned what he wanted to learn. What was the use of staying on?

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘Unfortunately I must get back to Paris early, for my afternoon visits.’

‘There’s nothing to regret; the next train doesn’t leave till late in the day. Well, so long, Doctor!’

The brothers were alone. For a moment both felt embarrassed.

‘Take the chair,’ Jacques said, and moved towards the bed as if to seat himself on it. Then he noticed the second chair, changed his mind and, offering it to Antoine, repeated ‘Take the chair’ in a natural tone, as if he were saying, ‘Do sit down!’

Nothing of this byplay had escaped Antoine; his suspicions were aroused.

‘So you have only one chair as a rule,’ he observed.

‘Yes. But Arthur’s lent us his to-day, as he does when my tutor comes.’

Antoine did not press the point.

‘Well, they seem to do you pretty well here.’ He cast another glance around the room. Pointing to the clean sheets and towels, he added: ‘Do they change the linen often?’

‘Every Sunday.’

Antoine had been speaking in the crisp, cheerful tone that was usual with him, but somehow in this echoing room, in the atmosphere created by Jacques’ apathy, it sounded incisive, almost aggressive.

‘Just think,’ he said, ‘I was worried about you, I hardly know why. I was afraid they might be treating you badly here.’

Jacques gazed at him with surprise, and smiled. Antoine kept his eyes fixed on his brother’s face.

‘Well now, honestly, between ourselves, you’ve nothing to complain of?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Now that I’m here, isn’t there anything I could fix up for you with the Superintendent?’

‘What sort of thing?’

‘How can I tell? Think, now.’

Jacques seemed to ponder, smiled again, then shook his head.

‘No. As you can see, everything’s quite all right.’

His voice had changed, like everything else about him; it was a man’s voice now, with an agreeable, if rather muffled, resonance, which came as a surprise from one so obviously a mere boy.

Antoine gazed at him again. ‘Yes, Jacques, how you’ve changed! No, “changed” isn’t really the word for it; you’re no longer the same, not a bit, not in any way.’

He still kept his eyes on Jacques, trying to recognize in the unfamiliar face the features he had known. There was still the same reddish hair, a little darker and browner now, but still coarse and growing low on the forehead; there was the same narrow, ill-formed nose, the same cracked lips, shaded now by a faint fringe of down; the same heavy jaw, but more massive than in the past; and the same protuberant ears that seemed tugging at the mouth, keeping it stretched. Yet nothing of it all was really like the youngster of the

day before yesterday. 'It looks as if his temperament has changed as well,' he mused. 'He used to be so changeable, always on edge—and now he looks half asleep, as if his face had been ironed out! Yes, he used to be a nervous type, and now he's gone lymphatic.'

'Stand up for a moment,' he said.

Jacques submitted to the examination with an amiable smile, but there was no warmth in it. The pupils of his eyes seemed misted over.

Antoine felt his arms and legs.

'Goodness, how you've shot up! Sure it isn't telling on your health?'

Jacques shook his head. Antoine was holding the boy in front of him, by the wrists. He was struck by the paleness of the freckled cheeks and the pouches under the eyes.

'None too healthy, your colour,' he went on, with a touch of seriousness. He frowned, was on the point of saying something more, but stopped.

Suddenly the sight of Jacques' submissive, expressionless face had revived all the suspicions he had vaguely felt when he first had seen Jacques in the quadrangle.

'I suppose they told you I was waiting for you after mass, didn't they?' he asked abruptly.

Jacques looked at him uncomprehendingly.

'When you came out of the chapel,' Antoine persisted, 'did you know that I was here?'

'Certainly not. How could I know?' Jacques' smile conveyed candid amazement.

Antoine decided to drop the subject. 'Well, I rather thought they had. . . . Can I smoke here?' he asked, to change the subject.

Jacques looked at him anxiously. Antoine held out his cigarette-case.

'Have one?'

'No, thanks.' A shadow seemed to settle on his face.

Antoine was at a loss what to say. As usually happens when someone wants to prolong a conversation with a taciturn companion, Antoine racked his brains to think of questions he might put.

'So really and truly,' he began, 'there's nothing you need. You've got all you want?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Is your bed comfortable? Have you enough blankets?'

'Oh yes, I'm too warm sometimes.'

‘What about your tutor? Is he decent to you?’

‘Very.’

‘But doesn’t it bore you rather, working like this, all by yourself?’

‘No.’

‘How do you spend the evenings?’

‘I go to bed after dinner, at eight o’clock.’

‘When do you get up?’

‘When the bell rings, at half-past six.’

‘Does the confessor come to see you sometimes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you like him?’

Jacques stared blankly at Antoine. He did not understand the question, and made no answer.

‘And does the Superintendent come as well?’

‘Yes, often.’

‘He looks a good sort. Do the boys like him?’

‘I don’t know. I expect so.’

‘You never meet the—the others?’

‘Never.’

At each question Jacques, whose eyes were constantly lowered, gave a slight shiver, as if it was a strain for him to jump like this from one subject to another.

‘How about your poems? Do you still write poetry?’ Antoine asked with a smile.

‘Oh no.’

‘Why not?’

Jacques shrugged his shoulders; a placid smile came to his lips and lingered there for some moments. It was the sort of smile Antoine would have expected had his question been: ‘Do you still play with a hoop?’

In despair Antoine switched the conversation round to Daniel. Jacques was not prepared for that; he flushed a little.

‘How do you expect me to know anything about him?’ he said. ‘We don’t get letters here.’

‘But,’ Antoine went on, ‘don’t you ever write to him?’ He kept his eyes fixed on his brother.

The boy smiled as he had done when Antoine had referred to his poems, and made a faint gesture as if to wave away the topic.

‘It’s ancient history, all that. Don’t let’s talk of it any more.’

What did he mean by that? If he had said, ‘No, I’ve never written to him,’ Antoine would have bluntly given him the lie, and felt a secret pleasure in doing so, for Jacques’ air of apathy was beginning to irritate him. But Jacques had eluded his question, and there had been a melancholy finality in his tone that had silenced Antoine. Just then he fancied he saw Jacques’ eyes grow suddenly intent on something behind himself, by the door; and, in his mood of latent irritation, he felt all his suspicions come crowding back. The door had a window in it, no doubt to make it possible to see from outside what was going on in the room, and over the door was a grating through which what was said could be overheard from outside.

‘There’s someone in the corridor, isn’t there?’ Antoine asked bluntly, but in a low voice.

Jacques stared at him as if he had gone mad.

‘Someone in the corridor? What do you mean? Sometimes people go by. Just now I saw old Léon passing.’

There was a knock at the door and Léon came in to be introduced to the big brother. Without more ado he sat down on the edge of the table.

‘I hope you find him fit, sir. Ain’t he shot up since the autumn?’

He was laughing. He looked a typical old-school French sergeant-major. He had a big, drooping moustache, and tanned cheeks which his jovial belly-laugh suffused with a glow of blood that ramified across them in a network of red veins, spreading into the whites of his eyes and blurring their expression, which normally, it seemed, was one of fatherly good humour with a spice of mischief in it.

‘They’ve packed me off to the workshops,’ he said to Antoine, with a resigned shrug of his shoulders. ‘And I’d got so used to this young gentleman! Eh well,’ he added, as he moved away, ‘it’s no use crying over spilt milk, as they say . . . Give my respects to Monsieur Thibault, if it ain’t too much trouble, sir. He knows me well, does your old dad.’

‘What a fine old chap!’ Antoine exclaimed when he had gone.

Then he tried to get their talk under way again.

‘I could take him a letter from you, if you want to send one,’ he said. When Jacques stared at him uncomprehendingly, he added: ‘Wouldn’t you like to write a word to Fontanin?’

Yet again he was trying to summon up to the boy's listless face some hint of real feeling, some memory of the past; and again he failed. Jacques merely shook his head, unsmiling.

'No, thanks. I've nothing to say to him. All that's ancient history.'

Antoine left it at that. Inwardly he was furious. Moreover, it must be getting late; he took out his watch.

'Half-past ten. In five minutes I must go.'

Jacques suddenly looked ill at ease, as if there was something he wanted to say to his brother. He went on to enquire about Antoine's health, the time the train went, his medical examinations. And, when Antoine rose, he was struck by the tone in which Jacques sighed.

'What? So soon? Do stay a little longer.'

He fancied then that the boy might have been put off by his coldness, that the visit might have given him more pleasure than he chose to evince.

'Are you glad I came?' he murmured awkwardly.

But Jacques' thoughts seemed far away. He gave a little start, as if surprised, and answered with a polite smile:

'Yes, of course. Very glad, thank you.'

'Right-oh, I'll try to come again. Good-bye till then.' He was feeling really annoyed. He looked at his young brother again, full in the face; all his perceptive powers were on the alert, and his emotions, too, were stirred.

'I often think of you, old chap, and I must say I'm feeling worried—that you mayn't be happy here.' They were near the door. Antoine grasped Jacques' hand. 'You'd tell me if you weren't, wouldn't you?'

Jacques looked embarrassed. He made an impulsive movement, as if at last he were about to confide in Antoine. Then he seemed to come to a quick decision.

'I say, I wish you'd give something to Arthur, the servant. He's so obliging, you know.' Antoine was so taken aback that he did not answer at once. Jacques went on in a pleading voice: 'You'll give him a tip, won't you?'

'But,' Antoine replied, 'mightn't it lead to . . . to complications?'

'No, of course not. When you're going, say good-bye to him nicely and give a small tip. Please, Antoine!' His attitude was almost imploring.

'Of course I will. But I want to know the truth about you, and I want a straight answer. Are you unhappy here?'

'No, certainly not!' There was a hint of vexation in Jacques' voice. Then he added in a lower tone: 'How much will you give him?'

‘Haven’t an idea. What do you think? How about ten francs? Or would you rather twenty?’

‘Oh, yes, twenty!’ Jacques seemed delighted, but embarrassed at the same time. ‘Thank you, Antoine.’ And he gripped affectionately the hand his brother gave him.

Arthur was going along the corridor as Antoine went out. He took the tip without demur, and his frank, slightly childish face flushed with pleasure. He escorted Antoine to the Superintendent’s office.

‘It’s a quarter to eleven,’ M. Faisme said. ‘You’ve got time enough, but you must start at once.’

They crossed the vestibule in which the Founder’s bust lorded it superbly. And now, when Antoine saw it again, his sense of irony was quelled. For he realized now the well-foundedness of his father’s pride in this institution, which he had built up unaided; and he felt a vicarious pride in being his father’s son.

M. Faisme accompanied him to the gate, begging him to present his respects to M. Thibault. As he spoke, he never ceased laughing, puckering his eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. The hands he pressed almost affectionately round Antoine’s hand were plump and yielding as a woman’s. At last Antoine managed to free himself. Looking back, he saw the little man standing in the road, bareheaded in the sunlight, still laughing and wagging his head with every sign of amity.

‘Really, I’m as silly as an hysterical school-girl, letting my imagination run away with me like that!’ Antoine was saying to himself as he walked to the station. ‘That show is excellently run, and Jacques isn’t a bit unhappy.

‘And the silliest thing,’ he suddenly thought, ‘is that I wasted my time cross-examining the boy instead of having a friendly chat with him.’

He was almost inclined to believe his brother had been positively glad to see the last of him. ‘But it’s a bit his own fault,’ he concluded with some exasperation, ‘he seemed so . . . so callous!’ Still he was sorry he had failed to make the first advances.

Antoine did not keep a mistress and was satisfied with casual adventure. But he was twenty-four, and he sometimes felt an almost painful yearning for the nearness of some weaker being on whom he could lavish his compassion, whom he could protect and shield. His affection for Jacques was growing stronger with every step he took away from him. And now—

when would he see him again? On the least pretext he would have turned back.

He walked with his eyes to the ground, to escape the glare of the morning sun. When, after a while, he raised them again, he saw he had missed his way. Some children showed him a short cut through the fields. He quickened his pace. 'Supposing I missed the train,' he thought, 'what should I do?' Playing with the idea, he pictured his return to the reformatory; he would spend the day with Jacques, would tell him of his fantastic fears, and this journey he had kept secret from their father. And this time he would play the part of a real confidant, a comrade, and remind the boy of the scene in the cab on their return from Marseilles, and how that night he had felt they might become real friends. His desire to miss the train became so urgent that he slackened his pace, though he had not yet come to an actual decision. Suddenly he heard the engine whistle, and a plume of smoke rose on his left, above a clump of trees. Unthinking, he began to run. The station was in sight. He had his ticket in his pocket, had only to jump into a carriage, running across the rails, if necessary. His head thrown back, his elbows pressed in to his sides like a professional sprinter, he took deep breaths of the keen air. Proud of his athletic fitness, he felt certain he would get there on time.

But he had reckoned without the embankment. To reach the station the road made a bend, passing under a little bridge. Vainly he made a spurt, getting the last ounce out of his muscles; when he came out on the far side of the bridge, the train was already moving out of the station. He had missed it by about a hundred yards.

Such was his pride that he would not admit he had been beaten in the race; he preferred to think he had missed the train on purpose. 'I could still jump into the guard's van if I chose,' he thought, 'but that would settle things peremptorily; then it would be impossible for me to see Jacques again.' He stopped, pleased with his decision.

Immediately all he had been picturing took concrete form; he would lunch at the inn, go back after lunch to the reformatory, and spend the whole day with his brother.

ANTOINE was back at the reformatory gate a little before one. M. Faisme was just going out, and was so taken aback that for a few seconds he seemed like a man of stone, but for the little eyes twinkling as usual behind his glasses. Antoine explained what had happened. Only then did the Superintendent burst out laughing and regain his wonted loquacity.

Antoine explained that he would like to take his brother out for the afternoon, for a walk.

The Superintendent looked dubious. 'That's a bit of a problem. The regulations, you know. . . .'

But Antoine pressed his point with such insistence that the man gave in.

'Only I must ask you to explain the particular circumstances to the Founder. . . . Well, I'll go and fetch Jacques.'

'I'll come with you,' Antoine said.

He regretted it; they arrived at an unfortunate moment. They had scarcely entered the corridor when Antoine came on his brother squatting, for all the world to see, in the retreat known to the Administration as the *Vater-closette*. The door was being held open by Arthur, who was leaning against it, smoking a pipe.

Antoine walked quickly past and entered Jacques' room. M. Faisme was rubbing his hands with an air of jubilation.

'You see!' he said. 'The lads we look after are looked after—even "there!"'

Jacques came to his room. Antoine had expected he would seem embarrassed, but nothing of the sort. Jacques was buttoning up his clothes quite unconcernedly as he entered and his face was expressionless; he did not even seem surprised at Antoine's return. M. Faisme explained that he would permit Jacques to be out with his brother until six. Jacques watched his face as if he wanted to be sure of understanding exactly what he meant, but made no comment.

'Now I really must fly, if you'll excuse me,' M. Faisme said in his brisk falsetto voice. 'There's a meeting of my Municipal Council. Would you believe it, I'm the Mayor here!' He was roaring with laughter, as if he had cracked a joke of the first order, as he vanished through the door. Even Antoine was infected by his merriment.

Jacques dressed composedly. Antoine was struck by Arthur's attentiveness to Jacques as he handed him his clothes. When he volunteered to give his boots an extra shine, Jacques made no objection.

The room had already lost the well-kept aspect that had so favourably impressed Antoine in the morning. He tried to discover why. The luncheon-tray was still on the table; there was an empty mug, a dirty plate, bread-crumbs. The clean linen had disappeared, a single soiled hand-towel hung on the rail, under the basin was a dirty, tattered square of oilcloth. The white bed-linen had been replaced by rough, unbleached, shabby-looking sheets. And suddenly all his suspicions were reawakened. But now he refrained from asking questions.

They set out on to the high road side by side.

‘Where shall we go?’ Antoine asked in a cheerful tone. ‘You don’t know Compiègne? It’s only about two miles’ walk, along the banks of the Oise. Like to have a look at it?’

Jacques agreed. He seemed decided to fall in with everything his brother proposed.

Antoine slipped his arm through his brother’s and fell into step with him.

‘What did you think of the towel trick?’ he asked. He looked at Jacques, and laughed.

‘The towel trick?’ his brother repeated blankly.

‘Don’t you remember? This morning, while I was being trotted round the place, they took advantage of it to lay your bed with clean sheets and hang nice clean towels by your washstand. Very clever! Unluckily I turned up again, like a bad penny! One in the eye for them!’

Jacques stopped abruptly, a faint, uneasy smile on his lips.

‘Really one would think you want to find fault with everything that goes on at the Institution,’ he blurted out, his deep voice quivering a little.

He fell silent for a while and continued walking at his brother’s side. A moment later he spoke again, obviously forcing himself to do so, as if it bored him desperately having to enlarge on so futile a topic.

‘You don’t realize, Antoine. It’s quite simple, really. The linen is changed on the first and third Sundays of each month. Arthur, who has been looking after me for the last ten days, had changed the sheets and towels last Sunday, so he thought it was his duty to change them again this morning, as it was a Sunday. The people at the linen-room told him he had made a mistake, so he had to take back the clean linen, which I’m not due to get till next week.’ Again he fell silent, gazing at the landscape.

A bad start! Antoine applied himself to turn their conversation into another channel, but he was still feeling annoyed at his clumsiness; somehow he could not strike the note of everyday good-fellowship he

wanted. Jacques answered briefly, Yes or No, to Antoine's questions, and did not show the slightest interest. At last he spoke, of his own accord.

'Please, Antoine, don't mention the business about the towels to the Superintendent; it would only get Arthur into trouble over nothing at all.'

'All right.'

'Nor to Papa, either,' Jacques added.

'I'll tell nobody, don't worry. As a matter of fact it had passed out of my mind. Now, look here, Jacques,' he went on, 'I'm going to tell you the truth. Just imagine, I'd got it into my head, I don't know why, that this was a rotten place, that you were having a bad time here.'

Jacques turned a little and examined his brother's face with a serious expression.

'I spent the morning nosing round,' Antoine went on. 'Finally, I saw I'd been mistaken. Then I pretended to miss my train. You see, I didn't want to go without having had time for a good talk with you.'

Jacques made no reply. Did he relish the prospect of a 'good talk'? Antoine felt uncertain and, fearing to make a false step, kept silent.

The road fell steeply towards the river, and they began to walk ahead more briskly. Presently they came to a bend of the river, which was converted at this point into a canal and spanned by a narrow iron bridge, crossing a lock. Three empty barges, their fat brown hulls almost entirely above the water-level, were floating on the all but stagnant stream.

'How'd you like the idea of a trip in a barge?' Antoine asked. 'It would be rather jolly dropping down through the morning mists, between the poplars on the banks, stopping at the locks now and then—wouldn't it? And, in the evening, at sunset, smoking a cigarette in the bows, thinking of nothing, dangling one's legs over the water. . . . By the way, do you still go in for drawing?'

Jacques gave a very definite start, and Antoine was certain he saw him blush.

'Why . . . ?' he asked in an uneasy voice.

'Oh, I hadn't any special reason for asking.' But Antoine's curiosity was aroused. 'I was only thinking one could make a rather pretty sketch here, with the barges, the lock and the little bridge.'

The towpath broadened, became a road. They were coming to a wide reach of the Oise, whose swollen waters rolled towards them.

'There's Compiègne,' Antoine said.

He had stopped and put his hand to his forehead to shelter his eyes from the sun. On the horizon, above the green mass of the woods, he saw a group of pinnacles around a belfry, the round tower of a church. He was about to tell the name of the churches to his brother—who, like himself, was holding his hand over his eyes and seemed to be gazing towards the horizon—when he noticed that Jacques' eyes were fixed on the ground beside his feet. He seemed to be waiting for Antoine to go on with the walk; without a word, Antoine started forward again.

All Compiègne was out-of-doors. The brothers joined the crowd streaming across the bridge. There had evidently been a medical examination of recruits that morning, for groups of young men in their Sunday best were buying tricolor ribbons from street-vendors and lurching down the pavements arm in arm, leaving no room for the ordinary townsfolk, and bawling soldiers' songs. On the Mall, amongst young women in summery attire and booted cavalymen, the local families were strolling, greeting each other affably.

The sight of all these people was making Jacques feel more and more ill at ease and he begged Antoine to come away.

They took a street that turned off from the main thoroughfare; dark and quiet, it gently rose towards the Palace Square. When they came out into the open again, the sunlight almost blinded them. Jacques blinked his eyes. Halting, they sat down under the trees, neatly laid out in alternating rows, shadeless as yet.

'Listen!' he said, putting his hand on Antoine's knee. The bells of Saint Jacques were ringing for vespers, and their long vibrations seemed to merge into the sunlight.

Antoine supposed that at last, unwittingly, the boy had responded to the bright enchantment of that first spring Sunday.

'A penny for your thoughts, old chap!' he smiled.

But, instead of answering, Jacques rose and began walking towards the park. The majesty of the scene did not seem to evoke the slightest response from him. What he wanted most of all apparently was to get away from places where there were people about. The calm that reigned around the château, on the great walled terraces, drew him towards it. Antoine followed, making conversation about whatever caught his eye: the clipped box borders skirting the green lawns, the ringdoves settling on the statues' shoulders. But the boy's replies were always evasive.

Suddenly Jacques asked: 'Have you spoken to him?'

'To whom?'

‘Fontanin.’

‘Yes, I met him the other day in the Latin Quarter. Do you know he’s a day-boy now at Louis-le-Grand Lycée?’

‘Really?’ was all Jacques said at first. Then he added, with a faint tremor in his voice that for the first time had something in it of the peremptory tone familiar with him in the past: ‘You didn’t tell him where I was, did you?’

‘He didn’t ask me. Why? You’d rather he didn’t know?’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘Because . . . !’ He did not go on.

‘An excellent reason!’ Antoine laughed. ‘But I suppose you’ve got another, eh?’

Jacques stared blankly at him; evidently he had not realized Antoine was joking. Aloof as ever, he started walking again. Then abruptly he asked another question.

‘And Gise? Does she know?’

‘Where you are? No, I don’t think so. But with children one can never be sure of anything.’ Now that Jacques himself had started a topic of conversation, Antoine made the most of it. ‘And Gise is such a quaint little thing. Some days you’d think she was quite grown up; she listens to everything that’s said with her eyes full of interest—and pretty eyes they are! And on other days she’s just like a baby. Would you believe it, yesterday Mademoiselle was looking for her everywhere, and there she was playing with her dolls under the hall table! And she’s rising eleven, you know.’

They were going down towards the wistaria arbour; Jacques halted at the bottom of the steps beside a sphinx in mottled pink marble, and began stroking pensively the sleek, cool forehead gleaming in the sunlight. Was he thinking of Gise and Mademoiselle? Had a sudden picture risen before him of the old hall table, with its fringed cloth and silver platter full of visiting-cards? So Antoine thought, and went on cheerfully:

‘Heaven only knows where she gets all her ideas from. Our home can’t be much fun for a kid, can it? Mademoiselle adores her, but you know what she’s like; she’s always in a flutter, she won’t let the poor child do anything, never leaves her in peace for a moment.’

Laughing, he tried to catch his brother’s eye, feeling that these little details of their family life were like a secret treasury to which they alone had

the key—something unique and irreplaceable, the memories of childhood spent in common. But Jacques vouchsafed only a fleeting, artificial smile.

Antoine, however, was not to be silenced now.

‘Meals aren’t much fun nowadays, I can tell you. Father doesn’t open his mouth, or else serves up to Mademoiselle a sort of rehash of his latest public speeches, or tells her how he spent the day, down to the latest detail. By the way, his election for the Institute is going very well, I hear.’

‘Yes?’ A hint of tenderness crept over Jacques’ face. After musing for a moment, he smiled. ‘So much the better!’

‘All his friends are putting their backs into it,’ Antoine went on. ‘The Abbé’s a pillar of strength; he has friends in every camp, you know. The election is in three weeks.’ He had stopped laughing, and added in a lower voice: ‘You may say what you like, but to be a member of the Institute means something. And father really deserves it, don’t you agree?’

‘Rather!’ the boy cried enthusiastically. ‘He’s awfully good, really—a really good man at heart.’ He stopped; then, obviously anxious to continue, could not bring himself to do so. He was blushing.

‘I’m waiting till father’s comfortably ensconced beneath that august dome before springing a great surprise on him.’ Antoine was obviously carried away by his subject. ‘I’m really awfully cramped in my room at the end of the hall; I’ve no room for my books, for one thing. Did you know Gise has been put in your old room? I’d like to persuade father to rent the little flat on the ground floor, where that old chap we called “the gay old bachelor” is now; he’s leaving on the fifteenth. There are three rooms and I could have a proper study where I could see patients, and perhaps a sort of laboratory—I could fix it up in the kitchen.’

Suddenly he realized how tactless he was being in thus depicting the freedom he enjoyed and his preoccupations with his personal comfort to this unhappy boy cut off from the world. And he realized, too, that he had just spoken of Jacques’ room as if he were never to come back to it. He stopped abruptly. Jacques had resumed his air of indifference.

‘Well, now,’ Antoine said, to clear the air, ‘how about something to eat? What do you say to it? I expect you’re feeling peckish.’

He had lost all hope of establishing easy fraternal relations between Jacques and himself.

They went back to the town. The streets were still crowded, and buzzing like a beehive. The tea-shops were overflowing with customers. Brought to a full stop by the crowd, Jacques stood unmoving in front of a confectioner’s

window resplendent with gaudy rows of cakes in sugar icing and exuding cream, the sight of which seemed to fascinate him.

‘Right-oh! Let’s go in!’ Antoine smiled.

Jacques’ hands were trembling as he took the plate Antoine handed him. They sat down at the far end of the shop, in front of a pyramid of mixed cakes. Rich wafts of vanilla and warm pastry came up through a service hatch. Unspeaking, slumped in his chair, his eyes swollen as if with unshed tears, Jacques wolfed his food down, stopping after each cake and waiting for Antoine to hand him another, which he began at once to eat voraciously. Antoine ordered two ports. Jacques fingers were still trembling as he took up his glass. The first sip of the wine seemed to burn him, and he coughed. Antoine drank his wine slowly, feigning not to notice his brother. Taking courage, Jacques gulped down a mouthful, felt it tingling in his gullet like liquid fire; after another gulp he drained his glass to the dregs. When Antoine began to pour him out a second glass, he pretended not to notice and only when the glass was nearly full, made a vague gesture of refusal. . . .

When they left the shop the sun was nearing the horizon and the temperature had dropped. But Jacques was unconscious of the change. His cheeks were burning and his whole body tingled with a feeling of well-being so unaccustomed that it was almost painful.

‘We’ve got those two miles to cover,’ Antoine said. ‘I suppose we’d better start back at once.’

Jacques was on the verge of tears. Clenching his fists in his pocket, he set his jaw and bent his head. Antoine, who was secretly watching him, was alarmed by the change that had come over the boy’s face.

‘Sure the walk hasn’t tired you?’ he asked.

It seemed to Jacques that there was a new note of affection in his brother’s voice. But he could not find a word to say, and the face he turned towards Antoine was grief-stricken, the eyes were full of tears.

Greatly amazed, Antoine followed him in silence. After they had crossed the bridge and left the town behind, and were once more on the towpath, he moved closer to Jacques, and took his arm.

‘Not too sorry to have missed your usual walk?’ he asked with a smile.

Jacques made no reply. Then suddenly it all came over him with a rush—the after-effect of this first heady taste of freedom, of the strong wine, and now the soft, sad dusk falling from the bright air. His emotions were too strong for him; he burst out sobbing. Antoine put his arm around him, steadying him, then sat down on the embankment and drew his brother to his side. He was no longer bent on prying into the intimacies of his young

brother's life. He was only conscious of a vast relief that at last the blank wall of apathy against which he had been coming all day long seemed to be giving way.

They were alone on the deserted river bank, alone with the dark recession of the water, under a misty sky dappled with the fires of sunset. In front of them a punt, chained to the bank, was swaying on the eddies, making the dry reeds rustle.

They had still a good way to go, Antoine was thinking, and they couldn't stay here for ever. Above all, he wanted to make the boy raise his head.

'What's come over you, Jacques? Why are you crying?'

Jacques pressed tighter against him.

'Was it thinking about your usual walk that made you cry?'

Jacques felt he must say something. 'Yes,' he answered.

'Why should it? Where do you usually go on Sundays?'

No answer.

'So you don't like going out with Arthur?'

'No.'

'Why don't you say so? If you'd rather have old Léon, it's easy to fix up, you know.'

'No! No!' The change in his voice from apathy to rage was startling. Jacques had straightened up, and Antoine was dumbfounded by the look of bitter hatred on his face.

It seemed as if Jacques could not bear staying still; he began hurrying along the path, dragging his brother after him.

'So you didn't like going out with Léon, either?'

Jacques went on walking, his eyes wide open, gritting his teeth and obstinately silent.

'Still he behaved quite nicely to you, didn't he?' Antoine went on.

Again no answer. He was afraid Jacques was going to shrink back into his shell once more, and tried to take his arm. The boy shook it off, and hurried on. Antoine followed, uncertain how to continue, anxiously wondering how to regain his confidence. Then, unexpectedly, Jacques slowed down, with a sudden sob. Tears were running down his cheeks, he did not look at his brother.

'Antoine, please promise not to tell, never to tell anyone. I didn't go walking with Léon, scarcely at all. . . .'

He stopped. Antoine was on the brink of asking a question, but instinct warned him not to utter a sound. And presently Jacques spoke again in a voice that sounded uncertain, a little hoarse.

‘On the first days, yes. As a matter of fact it was on our walks that he began to—to tell me things. And he lent me books; I didn’t believe such books existed! Afterwards he said he’d post letters for me, if I wanted. It was then I wrote to Daniel. But I hadn’t any money for stamps. Then something happened. Léon had noticed I could draw a bit. Then—but you can guess, can’t you? It was he who told me what was wanted. Then, in exchange, he paid for the stamp on my letter. In the evening he showed the drawings round to the warders, and they kept on asking for others, more and more elaborate ones. From that moment Léon did just as he liked, he stopped our walks altogether. Instead of going into the country, he used to take me round the back of the buildings, through the village. The children used to run after us. We always went by a side street to get into the public-house through the back yard. Then he’d go off to drink and play cards or whatever he wanted to do, and while he was at it I was kept hidden in a wash-house, with an old blanket over me.’

‘What? They kept you in hiding?’

‘Yes, I used to have to stay two hours locked up in the wash-house like that.’

‘But why?’

‘I don’t know. Well, of course the people who kept the place felt anxious. . . . One day there was some washing to be dried in there, so I was kept in a passage instead. The woman there said—she said . . .’ His voice was broken by sobs.

‘What did she say?’

‘She said: “One never knows with these beastly little . . .”’ He was sobbing so violently that he could not go on.

‘“These beastly little . . .?”’ Antoine prompted.

‘“. . . little jailbirds!”’ He brought out the word with an effort; then burst into a storm of weeping.

Antoine waited; just then his keen curiosity blunted the edge of his compassion.

‘And what else?’ he asked. ‘Tell me what else they did to you.’

‘Antoine, Antoine!’ he cried. ‘Swear to me you won’t tell anyone. Swear! If ever papa suspected anything, he’d . . .’

‘Papa is so good, you know; it would upset him terribly. It’s not his fault if he doesn’t see things as we do.’ His voice grew appealing. ‘Antoine, please, Antoine—don’t leave me now! Please!’

‘Of course not, old chap; I’m here and I’ll stand by you. I won’t breathe a word, I’ll do exactly what you want. Only—tell me the truth.’ Seeing Jacques could not bring himself to speak, he added: ‘Did he beat you?’

‘Who?’

‘Why, Léon.’

‘Of course not!’ Jacques was so surprised that he could not help smiling through his tears.

‘They don’t beat you there?’

‘Never.’

‘Really and truly, never?’

‘Never, Antoine.’

‘Well—what else?’

Jacques was silent.

‘This new man, Arthur? He’s not a nice chap, eh?’

Jacques shook his head.

‘What’s wrong with him? Does he go to the public-house too?’

‘No.’

‘Ah! So you do go out for real walks with him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, what have you got against him? Is he harsh with you?’

‘No.’

‘Then what is it? You don’t like him?’

‘No.’

‘Why? There must be some reason. . . .’

‘Because . . .’ Jacques turned his eyes away.

Antoine was silent for a moment; then he broke out.

‘But, damn it all, why don’t you complain? Why don’t you tell the Superintendent about it?’

Carried away by nervous excitement, Jacques pressed his body feverishly against his brother’s.

‘Oh, Antoine,’ he begged. ‘You mustn’t! You swore you wouldn’t tell anyone about it. You know you did.’

‘Yes, yes, that’s understood. But what I’m asking is: Why didn’t you complain of Léon to M. Faisme?’

Jacques merely shook his head, without a word.

‘Do you suspect that the Superintendent knows what’s going on, and connives at it?’ he suggested.

‘Oh no!’

‘What do you think of the Superintendent?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Do you think he gives the other boys a bad time?’

‘No. Why?’

‘Well, he looks decent enough, but now I feel all at sea. Old Léon, too, looked a good chap. Have you heard anything against the Superintendent?’

‘No.’

‘Are the staff afraid of him? Old Léon and Arthur, for instance?’

‘Yes, a bit.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Because he’s the Superintendent.’

‘How about you? When he’s with you have you noticed anything?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘So you don’t dare to speak freely to him?’

‘No.’

‘Supposing you’d told him that Léon went to the pub instead of taking you for walks, and that you were kept locked up in a wash-house, what do you think he’d have done?’

‘He’d have had Léon sent away.’ Jacques sounded terrified at the thought.

‘So something prevented you from telling him. What was it?’

‘That, of course!’

Antoine could make nothing of the answer, but he had a feeling that his brother was trapped in a network of complicities. Nevertheless, at all costs, he was determined to get at the truth.

‘Look here! Is it that you don’t want to tell me what it really was? Or don’t you know, yourself?’

‘There were some drawings that—they forced me to sign.’ Jacques lowered his eyes. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, he added: ‘But it’s not only that. One can’t say anything to Monsieur Faisme, you understand,

because—well, because he is the Superintendent. You see what I mean, don't you?’

His tone was weary, but sincere, and Antoine did not insist; he mistrusted himself, knowing how apt he was to jump to over-hasty conclusions.

‘Anyhow,’ he said, ‘are you working well?’

The sluice-gates were in sight; behind the little windows in the barges lamps were already being lit. Jacques walked ahead, his eyes fixed on the ground.

Antoine repeated his question.

‘So you're not going ahead with your work, either?’

Jacques shook his head, without looking up.

‘But the Superintendent told me your tutor was pleased with you.’

Jacques seemed to have difficulty in keeping up with his brother's cross-examination.

‘Well, you see,’ he said at last, in a toneless voice, ‘the tutor is quite old and he doesn't care much whether I work or not. He comes because he's been told to come, that's all. He knows nobody will check what he does. And he prefers having nothing to take home with him to correct. He stays for an hour, and we just chat; he's very friendly with me, he tells me about Compiègne and his other pupils and all sorts of things. He's not very happy, either. He's told me about his daughter who has stomach trouble, and quarrels with his wife, because he's married again; and about his son who was a company sergeant-major, but was cashiered because he ran into debt over a woman. We just pretend to be reading, doing lessons, but we don't do anything really.’

He stopped. Antoine found nothing to say. He felt almost intimidated by this youngster who already had such wide experience of life. Besides, he had nothing more to ask. The boy began speaking, of his own accord, in a low, monotonous voice; but, in the disconnected flow of phrases, it was impossible to make out the associations between his ideas, or even what, after his previous taciturnity, was impelling him to pour his heart out.

‘It's like what I do about the wine-and-water at the meals—I leave it to them, you see. Léon asked me to at the start, and it's all the same to me, you know; I'd just as soon drink plain water from the jug. What really annoys me is that they're always prowling about in the corridor; with their soft slippers one can't hear them. Sometimes, almost, they frighten me. No, I'm not really frightened; only the dreadful thing is that I can't make a movement without their seeing and hearing me. One's always alone, but

never really alone, you understand. Not on my walks, not anywhere at all. It's nothing so very terrible, but in the long run, you know—oh you've no idea of the effect it has, it makes one feel as if—as if everything was going round. There are days when I'd like to hide under my bed and cry. Not just to cry, you know, but to cry *without being seen*. It's like when you came this morning. They told me in the chapel. The Superintendent sent the chief clerk to see what I was wearing and they brought my overcoat and my hat, as I was bareheaded. Oh, don't think they did it to deceive you, Antoine. No, not at all, it's just the custom here. It's like that on Mondays, the first Monday in the month, when papa comes for the committee meeting, they always do things like that; just little trifles to make papa pleased. It's the same thing with the bed-linen; what you saw this morning is clean linen that's always kept in my cupboard, to put out in the room if anyone comes. It's not that they leave me with dirty linen, no, they change it quite often enough and, when I ask for an extra towel, they always give it. But it's the custom, you know, to make things look nice when a visitor comes. . . .

'It's wrong of me to tell you all this, Antoine; it'll make you fancy all sorts of things that aren't true. I assure you I've nothing really to complain of, that the discipline isn't at all irksome, they don't try to make things hard for me; not a bit of it. But it's just this—this softness, do you see? And then, having nothing to do all day, tied up like that with nothing, absolutely nothing to do. At first the hours seemed to me, so, so long, you've no idea. But one day I broke the mainspring of my watch, and since then it's been better, little by little I've got used to it. But I don't know how to express it, it's as if one had gone asleep deep down in oneself. One doesn't really suffer, because it's like being asleep, but it's disagreeable all the same, you understand.'

He was silent for a moment. When he spoke again it was in broken phrases and the words seemed to come with an immense effort.

'And then, Antoine, no, I can't tell you everything. But you must know. . . . Left alone like that, one gets to have a whole lot of ideas—ideas one shouldn't have. Especially as. . . . Well, there are Léon's stories, you know. And the drawings. Well, in a way it helps to pass the time, you know. I make them in the daytime and, at night, somehow my mind comes back to them. I know it's not right, I oughtn't to. Only. . . . When one's alone—you understand, don't you? Oh, I'm wrong to tell you all this, I feel I shall regret it. But I'm so tired this evening, I can't hold myself in.'

Suddenly he gave way to a flood of tears.

He had a strange feeling of frustration, as if, for all his efforts, he could not help lying, and the more he tried to tell the truth, the worse he succeeded

in doing so. Yet nothing of what he had said was actually untrue. But by his tone, by overcolouring his troubles, and by the choice of facts he had described, he was conscious of having given a false impression of his life—and yet he could not do otherwise.

They had been making slow progress and were only half way back. And it was half-past five. There was plenty of daylight left, but a mist was rising from the river, brimming over into the fields and swathing them in drifting vapour.

Antoine, as he helped the stumbling youngster on his way, was thinking hard. Not of what he must do; on that score his mind was made up: he must get the boy out of it. But he was wondering how to get his consent, and that looked like being difficult. At his first words Jacques clung to his arm, sobbing, reminding him of his promise to say nothing, do nothing.

‘But of course, my dear old chap; I’ve sworn it! I’ll do nothing you don’t want me to do. Only, listen. Do you want to go on like this, frittering your life away in idleness, with no one of your own kind to talk to, in these sordid surroundings? And to think that only this morning I imagined you were happy here!’

‘But I *am* happy!’ In a moment all he had complained of fled from his mind, and all he now was conscious of was the languid ease of his seclusion, the somnolent routine and absence of control; not to mention his isolation from the family.

‘Happy? If you were, I’d be ashamed of you! No, my dear Jacques, I can’t believe you really enjoy rotting away in that place. You’re degrading yourself, ruining your brains—and it’s been going on for far too long. I’ve promised you not to act without your consent, I’ll keep my word, don’t worry. But do think seriously about it; let’s look the facts squarely in the face, like two friends, you and I—for we’re friends now, aren’t we?’

‘Yes.’

‘You trust me, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, then? What are you afraid of?’

‘I don’t want to go back to Paris.’

‘Look here, my dear Jacques, after the picture you’ve given me of your life here, family life couldn’t be worse.’

‘Yes, it could!’

The bitterness in his voice stunned Antoine into silence, and he began to feel less sure of himself. ‘Damn it!’ he muttered, vainly racking his brain for

a solution. Time pressed, and he felt as if he were walking in pitch darkness. Then suddenly he saw light, he had hit on the solution! In a flash the whole plan was outlined in his head. He laughed.

‘Jacques!’ he cried. ‘Now listen to me and don’t interrupt. Or, rather, answer. Suppose we found ourselves, you and I, alone in the world, wouldn’t you like to come and live with me?’

At first the boy failed to understand what Antoine meant.

‘But, Antoine,’ he said at last, ‘what ever do you mean? There’s papa. . . .’

Menacing, between them and the future, loomed their father’s figure. The same idea crossed the minds of both: How easy things would be if he . . . ! Catching its reflection in his brother’s gaze, Antoine felt suddenly ashamed and averted his eyes.

‘Of course,’ Jacques was saying, ‘if I’d lived with you and only you, I’d have turned out quite different. I’d have worked well. . . . I would work well, I might become, perhaps, a great poet.’

Antoine stopped him with a gesture. ‘Well then, listen; if I gave you my word that no one except myself should have anything to do with you, would you agree to leave this place?’

‘Ye-es,’ Jacques murmured doubtfully. It was his craving for affection and his reluctance to offend his brother that led him to agree.

‘But would you promise to let me plan out your life and studies, and keep an eye on you generally, just as if you were my son?’

‘Yes.’

‘Right!’ For a while Antoine kept silent, thinking things out. His desires were always so imperative that he never questioned their feasibility, and indeed he had never failed so far in bringing off what he had set his heart on, definitely and doggedly. He turned to the youngster, smiling.

‘It’s not a daydream, Jacques.’ His tone was emphatic, though the smile did not leave his lips. ‘I know what I’m embarking on. Within a fortnight, do you hear, within a fortnight it shall happen—take my word for it. Now, you’ve got to go back to your precious Institution, looking as innocent as a lamb. Got it? And within two weeks, I swear it, you shall be free.’

Though he had hardly heard what his brother was saying, Jacques pressed against Antoine, seized by a sudden longing for affection; he would have liked to take him in his arms and hug him and to stay thus, unmoving, pressed to the comforting warmth of his big brother’s chest.

‘You can depend on me,’ Antoine repeated.

He, too, was feeling comforted and uplifted in his own esteem, rejoicing in a welcome sense of power. He compared his life with Jacques'. Poor devil, he thought, things are always happening to him that would never happen to anyone else! He meant: 'the sort of things that have never happened to me.' He pitied Jacques, but above all he felt a very keen joy at being the man he was, so level-headed and so well equipped for happiness, for becoming a personality, a great doctor. He felt inclined to quicken his step, to whistle a gay tune. But Jacques seemed tired, and could make only slow progress. Anyhow, they were coming into Crouy.

'Trust me,' he murmured once again, tightening his pressure on Jacques' arm.

M. Faisme was smoking a cigar in front of the entrance-gate. No sooner did he catch sight of them than he came tripping along the road towards them.

'Hullo, my friends! Had a good time, eh? I don't mind betting you've been to have a look at Compiègne.' Laughing out of sheer high spirits, he waved his arms in the direction of the town. 'You went along the towpath, didn't you? Such a nice walk that is! Really the country round here is charming, too charming for words!' He took out his watch. 'I don't want to hurry you, Doctor, but if you don't want to miss your train again . . .'

'I'm off,' Antoine said. There was emotion in his voice as he said quietly: '*Au revoir*, Jacques!'

Night was falling. Jacques had his back to the fading light, and Antoine dimly saw a young, submissive face and eyes gazing towards the dark horizon. Again he said:

'Au revoir!'

Arthur was waiting in the quadrangle. Jacques would have preferred to take leave of the Superintendent politely, but M. Faisme had turned his back on him. He was bolting the entrance-gate, as he did every evening. The dog was barking loudly and across the noise Jacques made out Arthur's voice.

'Now then! Are you coming?'

He followed Arthur obediently.

He came back to his cell with a feeling of relief. Antoine's chair was still there by the table, and his elder brother's affection seemed still lingering round it. He put on his old suit. His body was tired, but his brain active.

There seemed to be within him, beside the everyday Jacques, a second self, an immaterial being, new-born to-day, who watched the first self going about its tasks, and dominated it.

Somehow he found it impossible to sit still and he began pacing round and round the room. He was in the grip of a new and powerful emotion which kept him on his feet; a vital force that forced itself upon his consciousness. He went to the door and stood there, his forehead resting on the glass pane, his eyes fixed on the lamp in the deserted corridor. The stifling atmosphere from the hot pipes increased his fatigue. He was half asleep now. Suddenly on the far side of the glass a shadow loomed up. The double-locked door opened; Arthur was bringing his dinner.

‘Come along, get a move on, you little *schwein!*’

Before starting on the lentils, Jacques removed from the tray the slice of Gruyère and the mug of wine-and-water.

‘For me?’ the young man asked. Smiling, he took the piece of cheese and moved across to the wardrobe before starting to eat it, so as not to be visible from the door. It was the time when, before beginning his dinner, M. Faisme made a round of inspection along the corridors. He always wore slippers and oftener than not his visits only became known after his departure, by the reek of cigar smoke wafted through the grating.

Jacques ate what remained of his bread, dipping the pieces into the lentil juice. No sooner had he finished than Arthur called to him.

‘Now, young man, turn in!’

‘But it’s not eight yet.’

‘Don’t you know it’s Sunday and my pals are waiting for me down town? Get a move on!’

Without answering, Jacques began to undress. Arthur, his hands in his pockets, watched him. There was a touch of unexpected, almost feminine charm in the coarse face and stalwart, stocky figure of the fair-haired young man.

‘That brother of yours,’ he said with a knowing air, ‘he’s a bit of all right; a real gent he is!’ Smiling, he made as if to slip a coin into his pocket, then took the empty tray and went out.

When he returned Jacques was in bed.

‘Mighty quick you’ve been to-night.’ The young man kicked Jacques’ boots under the washstand. ‘Look here, can’t you tidy up your things a bit before turning in?’ He came up to the bed. ‘Hear what I say, you little *schwein?*’ He pressed his hands on Jacques’ shoulders and gave a little

laugh. The smile on the boy's face grew more and more strained. 'Quite sure you aren't hiding anything between the sheets? No books? No candles?'

He slipped his hand between the sheets. But with a movement that Arthur could neither foresee nor forestall, the boy broke free and flung himself away, his back to the wall. His eyes were dark with hatred.

'Aha!' Arthur chuckled. 'We're very high and mighty to-night, ain't we? . . . But I could tell some tales, too—and don't you forget it!' He spoke in a low tone, keeping an eye on the door. Then, without paying any more attention to Jacques, he lit the oil lamp that remained on all night, shut off the electric circuit with his master-key, and went out, whistling.

Jacques heard the key turn twice in the lock and then a sound of receding steps, rope-soled shoes padding away along the corridor. Then he rolled into the middle of the bed, stretched his limbs, and lay on his back. His teeth were chattering. He had lost heart, and when he recalled the events of the day and his confessions, he had an access of fury quickly followed by a mood of utter misery. Glimpses rose before him of Paris, of Antoine and his home, of quarrels and work and parental discipline. Yes, he had made an irremediable blunder, he had made himself over to his enemies! 'But what do they want of me? Why can't they leave me alone?' He began to cry. Despairingly he tried to console himself with the thought that Antoine's fantastic idea would come to nothing, that M. Thibault would put his foot down. And now he saw his father as a deliverer. Yes, of course nothing would come of it, they would end by leaving him in peace, by letting him stay here, in this haven of repose, of lethargy and loneliness.

Above his head, on the ceiling, the light from the night lamp flickered, flickered. . . .

Yes, here was peace, peace and happiness.

4

ON the ill-lit staircase Antoine met his father's secretary, M. Chasle, coming down, slinking rat-like close along the wall. Seeing Antoine, he pulled up abruptly with a startled look.

‘Ah, so it’s you?’ He had picked up from his employer the trick of opening a conversation with this remark. Then he announced in a confidential whisper: ‘There’s bad news! The university group are backing the Dean of the Faculty of Letters for the vacant seat at the Institute; that’s fifteen votes lost at least; with those of the law members that makes twenty-five votes gone. Shocking bad luck, as they say, isn’t it now? Your father will tell you all about it.’ He coughed. M. Chasle was always coughing, out of nervousness, but, believing himself to be a victim of chronic catarrh, sucked cough-lozenges all day. ‘I must fly now, or Mother will be getting anxious,’ he went on, seeing that Antoine made no comment. He took out his watch, listened to it before looking at the time, turned up his collar and went on down the stairs.

For seven years the little bespectacled man had been coming daily to work for M. Thibault, yet Antoine hardly knew him better now than on the first day. He spoke little, and always in a low voice, and his conversation was a tissue of commonplaces, a thesaurus of catchwords. He was a creature of trivial habits and a model of punctuality, and he seemed to have a touching devotion for his mother, with whom he lived. His boots always squeaked. His Christian name was Jules; but M. Thibault, mindful of his own dignity, always addressed his secretary as ‘Monsieur Chasle.’ Antoine and Jacques had two nicknames for him: ‘Old Acid-drop’ and ‘The Pest.’

Antoine went straight to his father’s study. He found him setting his papers in order before going to bed.

‘Ah, so it’s you? Bad news!’

‘I know,’ Antoine said. ‘M. Chasle told me about it.’

With an irritated jerk of his head M. Thibault freed his chin from his collar; it always vexed him to find that what he was proposing to announce was known already. But, just now, Antoine was not inclined to pay attention to his father’s mood; his mind was full of the object of this interview, and he was unpleasantly conscious that a sort of paralysis was creeping over him. He decided for a frontal attack, before it was too late.

‘I, too, have some bad news for you, I’m sorry to say. Jacques cannot stay at Crouy.’ He took a deep breath, then went on at once. ‘I’ve just come back from there. I’ve seen him. I got him to talk frankly, and I’ve learnt some abominable things. I want to talk to you about it. It’s up to you to get him out of the place as soon as possible.’

For some seconds M. Thibault did not move; his stupefaction was perceptible only in his voice.

‘What’s that? You’ve been to Crouy? When? Why did you go there? You must be off your head. I insist on your explaining this conduct.’

Relieved though he was to have taken the obstacle in his first stride, Antoine was extremely ill at ease and incapable of speaking. There followed an oppressive silence. M. Thibault had opened his eyes; now they closed again slowly, reluctantly, it seemed. Then he sat down and set his fists on the desk.

‘Explain yourself, my dear boy,’ he said. He spoke each syllable with careful emphasis. ‘You say you have been to Crouy. When did you go?’

‘To-day.’

‘With whom?’

‘Alone.’

‘Did they—let you in?’

‘Naturally.’

‘Did they let you see your brother?’

‘I have spent the day with him. Alone with him.’

Antoine had a belligerent way of rapping out the last word of every phrase he spoke; it made M. Thibault angrier than ever, but also warned him to go warily with his son.

‘You are a child no longer.’ The way he said this gave the impression he had just inferred Antoine’s age from the sound of his voice. ‘You must understand the unsuitability of acting thus, behind my back. Had you any particular reason for going to Crouy without telling me? Did your brother write to you to come?’

‘No. I had suddenly become anxious about him, that’s all.’

‘Anxious? In what way?’

‘About everything, about the whole system, about the effects of the life Jacques has been subjected to for eight months.’

‘Really, my dear fellow, you—you surprise me.’ He hesitated. The measured terms he was deliberately employing were belied by the large tightly clenched hands and the furious way he jerked his head forward at each pause. ‘This mistrust of your father is . . .’

‘Anybody can make mistakes,’ Antoine broke in. ‘And I can prove what I say.’

‘Prove it?’

‘Listen, father, it’s no use losing your temper. I suppose we both desire the same thing—Jacques’ welfare. When you know the state of moral decay

I found him in, I'm sure you will be the first to decide that he must leave the reformatory at the earliest possible moment.'

'That I will not!'

Antoine tried not to hear the sneering laugh which accompanied the remark.

'You will, father.'

'I tell you I will not!'

'Father, when you've heard. . . .'

'Do you, by any chance, take me for a fool? Do you suppose I've had to wait for you to go and look round Crouy to learn how things are done there? I'd have you know that for over ten years I've been making a thorough inspection of the place every month and followed it up by a written report. No new step is taken there without being first discussed by the committee whose President I am. Now are you satisfied?'

'Father, what I saw there . . .'

'That's enough. Your brother may have poisoned your mind with all the lies he pleases; you're easy game. But you'll find I'm not so easy to hoodwink.'

'Jacques didn't breathe a word of complaint.'

M. Thibault seemed thunderstruck.

'Then, why on earth . . . ?' he asked, raising his voice a little.

'Quite the contrary,' Antoine continued, 'and that's the alarming thing. He told me he didn't worry; indeed he said he was happy, that he likes being there.' Provoked by his father's chuckle of self-satisfaction, Antoine added in a cutting tone. 'The poor boy has such memories of family life that even prison life strikes him as more agreeable.'

The insult missed its mark.

'Very well,' M. Thibault retorted, 'then everything's as it should be; we're at one on that. What more do you want?'

As he was feeling less sure now of Jacques' release, Antoine judged it wiser not to repeat to M. Thibault all the boy had told him. He resolved to keep to generalities and withhold his detailed complaints.

'I'm going to tell you the whole truth, father,' he began, gazing intently at his father. 'I admit that I'd suspected ill-treatment, privation, solitary confinement and so forth. Now I know. Happily there is nothing of that sort at Crouy. Jacques is not suffering physically, I grant, but in his mind, his morals—and that's far worse. You're being deceived when they tell you that isolation is doing him good. The remedy is far more dangerous than the

disease. His days are passed in the most degrading sloth. As for his tutor, the less said the better; the truth is that Jacques does no work, and it's already obvious that his brain is growing incapable of the least effort. To prolong the treatment, believe me, will be to compromise his future irreparably. He is sinking into such a state of indifference to everything, and his mental flabbiness is such, that in another month or two he'll be too far gone, it will be too late to bring him back to mental health.'

Antoine's eyes had never left his father's face as he was speaking. He seemed to be concentrating the utmost impact of his gaze on the stolid face, trying to force from it some gleam of acquiescence. M. Thibault, withdrawn into himself, preserved a massive immobility; he brought to mind one of those pachyderms whose strength remains hidden so long as they are at rest, and he had the elephant's large, flat ears and, now and then, his cunning eye. Antoine's harangue had reassured him. There had been some incipient scandals at the reformatory, certain attendants had had to be dismissed without the reasons for their departure being bruited abroad, and M. Thibault had for a moment feared that Antoine's revelations were of this order. Now he breathed freely again.

'Do you think that's news to me, my dear boy?' he asked with an air of jocular good humour. 'All you've been saying does credit to your kindness of heart; but permit me to say that these questions of reformatory treatment are extremely complex, and in this field one does not become an expert overnight. Trust my experience, and the opinions of those who are versed in these subjects. You talk of your brother's—what do you call it?—"mental flabbiness." But that's all to the good. You know what Jacques was like. Don't you realize that is the only way to crush out such evil propensities as his—by breaking down his will? For by gradually weakening the will-power of a depraved boy, you sap his evil instincts and, in the end, eradicate them. Now, consider the facts. Isn't your brother completely changed? His fits of rage have ceased; he's disciplined, polite to all who come in contact with him. You yourself admit that he has come to like the order and routine of his new life. Well, really, shouldn't we be proud of getting such good results within less than a year?'

He was teasing out the tip of his beard between his puffy fingers as he spoke; when he had finished, he cast a side-glance at his son. That booming voice and majestic delivery lent an appearance of force to his least words, and Antoine was so accustomed to letting himself be impressed by his father that in his heart he weakened. But now his pride led M. Thibault to commit a blunder.

‘Now that I come to think of it,’ he said, ‘I wonder why I’m taking so much trouble to defend the propriety of a step which is not being, and will not be, reconsidered. I’m doing what I consider I ought to do, after taking careful thought, and I have not to render an account to anyone. Get that into your head, my boy!’

Antoine made a gesture of indignation.

‘That’s not the way to silence me, father! I tell you once more, Jacques must not remain at Crouy.’

M. Thibault again emitted a harsh, sarcastic laugh. Antoine made an effort to keep his self-control.

‘No, father, it would be a crime to leave Jacques there. There are sterling qualities in him which must not be allowed to run to seed. And, let me tell you, father; you’ve often been mistaken about his character; he irritates you and you don’t see his. . . .’

‘What don’t I see? It’s only since he’s gone that we’ve had any peace at home. Isn’t that true? Very well, when he’s reformed, we shall see about having him back. Not before!’ His fist rose as if he were about to bring it down upon the table with a crash; but he merely opened his hand and laid his palm flat on his desk. His wrath was still smouldering. Antoine made no effort to restrain his own.

‘I tell you, father,’ he shouted. ‘Jacques shall not stay at Crouy; I’ll see to that!’

‘Really now!’ M. Thibault sounded frankly amused. ‘Really! Aren’t you, perhaps, a little inclined to forget that you’re not the master here?’

‘No, I’m not forgetting it. That’s why I ask you—what you intend to do.’

‘To do?’ M. Thibault repeated the words slowly, with a frosty smile. For a moment his eyebrows lifted. ‘There’s no doubt about what I mean to do: to give M. Faisme a good dressing-down for admitting you without my authorization, and to forbid you ever again to set foot in Crouy.’

Antoine folded his arms.

‘So that’s all they mean,’ he said; ‘your pamphlets, your speeches, all your noble sentiments. They come in handy for public meetings, but when a boy’s mind is being wrecked, your own son’s mind, it’s all the same to you. All you want is a quiet life at home, with no worries—and to hell with all the rest!’

‘You young ruffian!’ M. Thibault shouted, rising to his feet. ‘Yes. I’d seen it coming. I’ve known for quite a while what to expect of you. Yes, I’ve noticed them—the remarks you sometimes let fall at table and the books you

read, your favourite newspapers. I've seen your slackness in performing your religious duties. One thing leads to another; when religious principles go, moral anarchy sets in and, finally, rebellion against all proper authority.'

Antoine made a contemptuous gesture.

'Don't let's confuse the issues. We're talking about the boy, and it's urgent. Father, promise me that Jacques . . .'

'I forbid you to speak to me again about him. Not another word. Now have I made myself clear enough?'

Their eyes met challenging.

'So that's your last word, is it?'

'Get out!'

'Ah, father, you don't know me!' There was defiance in Antoine's laugh. 'I swear to you I'll get Jacques out of that damned jail. And that I'll stick at nothing!'

A bulky, menacing form, M. Thibault advanced towards his son, his under-jaw protruding.

'Get out!'

Antoine had opened the door. Turning on the threshold, he faced his father and said in a low, resolute tone:

'At nothing, do you hear? Even if I have to start a campaign, a new one, in "my favourite papers!"'

5

EARLY next morning, after a sleepless night, Antoine was waiting in a vestry of the Archbishop's Palace for the Abbé Vécard to finish his mass. It was essential that the priest should know the whole story, and somehow intervene; that was now Jacques' only chance.

The interview lasted for a long time. The Abbé had had the young man sit beside him, as if for a confession, and listened meditatively to him, in his favourite position, leaning well back in his chair, with his head slightly drooping to the left. He let Antoine have his say without interrupting him.

The long-nosed, sallow face was almost expressionless, but now and again he cast a gentle, searching look on his companion, a look that conveyed his wish to read the thoughts behind the spoken words. Though he had seen less of Antoine than of the other members of the Thibault family, he had always treated him with particular esteem; what just now gave a certain piquancy to this attitude was that it was largely due to M. Thibault himself, whose vanity was always agreeably tickled by Antoine's successes, and who was fond of singing his son's praises.

Antoine did not try to win over the Abbé by dint of argument, but gave him an unvarnished account of the day he had spent at Crouy, ending by the scene with his father. For that the Abbé reproved him, not by words but by a deprecating flutter of his hands, which he had a way of holding level with his chest. They were the typical priest's hands, tapering smoothly away from round, plump wrists and capable of manifesting sudden animation without moving from where they were; it was as though Nature had accorded them the faculty of expression which she had denied the Abbé's face.

'Jacques' fate is now in your hands, Monsieur l'Abbé,' Antoine concluded. 'You alone can make father listen to reason.'

The priest did not answer, and the gaze he now gave Antoine was so aloof and sombre that the young man could draw no conclusion from it. It brought home to him his own powerlessness and the appalling difficulties of the task he had undertaken.

'And afterwards?' the Abbé softly questioned.

'What do you mean, sir?'

'Supposing your father brings Jacques back to Paris, what will he do with him, afterwards?'

Antoine felt embarrassed. He knew exactly what he wanted to do, but wondered how to put it, for he had the gravest doubts as to whether he could get the Abbé to approve of his plan, involving as it did Jacques' quitting his father's flat and coming to live with his brother on the ground floor of the same building. And dare he tell the priest that he meant to remove the boy almost entirely from parental authority, to take on himself alone the supervision of Jacques' education, indeed the entire control of his brother's life? When he explained this to the priest, the latter smiled, but the smile was perfectly good-humoured.

'You'd be taking on a heavy task, my friend.'

'No matter!' Antoine replied impetuously. 'You know I'm absolutely convinced that what the boy needs is plenty of freedom. That he'll never

develop in an atmosphere of repression. You may laugh at me, sir, but I'm positive that if I took entire responsibility for him . . .'

But he could get nothing more out of the Abbé than another shrug of the shoulders, followed by one of his shrewd, searching glances, that seemed to come from very far away and sink so deep. He felt profoundly disheartened when he left the Abbé. After the furious rebuff from his father, the priest's unenthusiastic reception of his scheme had left him scarcely any hope. He would have been much surprised to learn that the Abbé had resolved to go to see M. Thibault that very day.

He did not need to take that trouble. When he returned, as he did every day after mass, to drink his cup of cold milk in the flat, a few steps from the Archbishop's Palace, where he lived with his sister, he found M. Thibault waiting for him in the dining-room. The big, thick-set man, sunk in a chair with his large hands resting on his legs, was still nursing his resentment. At the Abbé's entrance he rose heavily from the chair.

'So here you are?' he murmured. 'I suppose my visit is a surprise to you?'

'Not so much as you suppose,' the Abbé answered. Now and again the ghost of a smile and a gleam of mischievous humour lit up the impassive face. 'I have an excellent detective service and there's little I'm not informed of. But will you excuse me?' he added, going towards the mug of milk awaiting him on the table.

'What's that? Do you mean you've seen . . . ?'

The Abbé drank his milk in little sips.

'I learnt how Astier was, yesterday morning, from the Duchess. But it was only last night that I heard of the withdrawal of your competitor.'

'Astier? Do you mean . . . ? I don't follow. I've not been told anything. . . .'

'Well now, that's amazing!' the Abbé smiled. 'Is the pleasure of breaking the good news to you to be my privilege?' He took his time. 'Well then, old Astier's had a fourth stroke; this time the poor man's doomed and so the Dean, who's no fool, is withdrawing, leaving you as the only candidate for election to the vacant seat at the Institute of Moral Science.'

'What!' M. Thibault exclaimed. 'The Dean's withdrawing! But why? I don't follow.'

'Because, on second thoughts, he realizes that the post of Registrar would be more suitable for a Dean of the Faculty of Letters, and also

because he'd rather wait a few weeks for a seat that isn't contested than risk his chance against you.'

'Are you quite sure of it?'

'It's official. I met the permanent secretary at the gathering of the Catholic Association yesterday evening. The Dean had just called in, and he had his letter of withdrawal with him. A candidature that lasted less than twenty-four hours—that's rather unusual, isn't it?'

'But in that case——!' M. Thibault panted. His surprise and delight had taken his breath away. He moved a few steps forward, without looking where he was going, his hands behind his back; then, turning to the priest, he all but embraced him. Actually he only clasped his hands.

'Ah, my dear Abbé, I shall never forget. Thank you. Thank you.'

Again delight submerged him, leaving no room for any other feelings, sweeping away his anger. So much so that he had to exercise his memory when the Abbé—having without his noticing it led him to the study—asked in a perfectly natural tone:

'And what can have brought you here so early, my dear friend?'

Then he remembered Antoine, and at once his anger mastered him again. He had come, so he explained, to ask the Abbé's advice as to the attitude he should adopt towards his elder son, who had much changed lately, changed for the worse, towards a mood of unbelief and insubordination. Was he, for instance, conforming with his religious obligations? Did he go to mass? He was growing more and more erratic in his attendance at the family table—giving his patients as an excuse—and, when he did put in an appearance, behaved in a new and disagreeable manner. He contradicted his father and indulged in unthinkable liberties of speech. At the time of the recent municipal elections, the discussion had several times taken so bitter a turn that it had been necessary to tell him to hold his tongue, as if he were a small boy. In short, if Antoine was to be kept in the way he should go, some new line would have to be taken with him; in this respect M. Thibault felt that the assistance and perhaps the active intervention of his good friend the Abbé were indispensable. As an illustration, M. Thibault described the undutiful conduct of which Antoine had been guilty in going to Crouy, the foolish notions he had brought back with him, and the shocking scene that had followed. Yet all the time, the esteem in which he held Antoine and which, without his knowing it, was actually enhanced by the very acts of insubordination with which he was now reproaching him, was always evident; and the Abbé duly noted it.

Sitting listless at his desk, the priest from time to time signified his approval with little fluttering movements of his fingers on each side of the clerical bands that fell across his chest. Only when Jacques' name was mentioned did he raise his head and show signs of extreme interest. By a series of skilful, seemingly disconnected questions, he obtained confirmation from the father of all he had been told by the son.

'But really!' he exclaimed vaguely. He seemed to be talking to himself. He meditated for some moments. M. Thibault waited, in some surprise. When the Abbé spoke again his voice was firm.

'What you tell me about Antoine's behaviour doesn't worry me as much as it does you, my friend. It was to be expected. The first effect of scientific studies on an enquiring and active mind is always to puff up a young man in his own conceit and cause his faith to waver. A little knowledge leads a man away from God; a great deal brings him back again. Don't be alarmed. Antoine's at the age when a man rushes from one extreme to another. You did well to tell me about it. I'll make a point of seeing him and talking to him oftener. None of that is very serious. Only have patience, and he'll come back to the fold.

'But what you tell me about Jacques' present life makes me feel far more anxious. I had no idea that his seclusion was of so extreme a nature. Why, the life he's leading is that of a convict, and I cannot but believe it has its perils. In fact, my dear friend, I confess I'm very worried about it. Have you given the matter your earnest consideration?'

M. Thibault smiled. 'In all honesty, my dear Abbé, I can say to you as I said yesterday to Antoine: Don't you realize that we are far better equipped than the common run for dealing with such problems?'

'I don't deny it,' the priest agreed good-humouredly, 'But the boys you usually have to deal with don't need the special handling that your younger son's peculiar temperament calls for. In any case, I gather, they are treated on a different system, they live together, have recreation hours in common and are employed on manual work. I was, as you will remember, in favour of inflicting on Jacques a severe punishment, and I believed that a taste of somewhat prison-like surroundings might lead him to reflect and mend his ways. But, good heavens, I never dreamt of its being a real imprisonment; least of all that it would be inflicted on him for so long a period. Just think of it! A boy of scarcely fifteen has been kept alone in a cell for eight months under the supervision of an uneducated warder, as to whose probity of character you have only the assurances of the local officials. He has a few lessons—but what do you really know about this tutor from Compiègne who, in any case, devotes a mere three or four hours a week to teaching the

boy? I repeat, what do you really know about him? Then again, one of the points you made was your experience. There let me remind you that I've lived amongst schoolboys for twelve years, that I'm far from ignorant of what a boy of fifteen is like. The state of physical and, worse, of moral decay into which this poor child may have fallen, without its being apparent to you—it makes one shudder!

'Well, well!' M. Thibault exclaimed. 'I'm surprised at that from *you*. I wouldn't have thought you so sentimentally minded,' he added with a brief, ironic laugh. 'But we aren't concerned with Jacques at present.'

'Excuse me,' the Abbé broke in, without raising his voice, Jacques is our first concern just now. After what I've just learned, I consider that the physical and moral health of this child is being exposed to terrible risks.' After pondering, it seemed, he added with slow emphasis: 'And he should not remain one day longer where he is.'

'What!'

For a while neither spoke. It was the second time within twelve hours that M. Thibault had been touched on the raw. He felt his temper rising but kept it in check.

'We'll talk it over some other day,' he said, beginning to rise. His tone implied that he was making a great concession.

'No, I'm sorry, but that won't do,' the priest broke in, with unwonted vivacity. 'The least one can say is that you have acted with an imprudence that is almost inexcusable.' He had a way, soft but emphatic, of letting his voice linger on certain words, though his face showed no emotion, and at the same time raising his forefinger to his lips, as if to say: Mark well what I am saying. He made this gesture as he repeated: 'Almost inexcusable!' After a momentary pause he said: 'And now the great thing is to remedy the evil that's been done.'

'What? What do you want me to do?' M. Thibault had given up trying to restrain his anger, and faced up to the priest aggressively. 'Am I going to cut short, without any reason, a treatment that has already produced such excellent results, and take back that young scoundrel into my house? Just to be once more at the mercy of his disgusting fads and fancies? No, thank you!' He clenched his fists so fiercely that the knuckles cracked, and his set teeth gave a guttural harshness to his voice. 'With all due consideration, I say—emphatically—No!'

The Abbé's hand made a brief conciliatory gesture, implying: Have it your own way!

M. Thibault had pulled himself up heavily from his chair. Once more Jacques' fate hung in the balance.

'My dear Abbé,' he went on, 'I see there's no prospect of a serious talk with you this morning, so I'm off. But let me tell you, you're allowing your imagination to run away with you, exactly as Antoine did. Come now! Do I look like an unnatural father? Haven't I done everything to bring back this child to the right path, by affection and kindness, by good example and the influences of family life? Haven't I endured for years the utmost a father can endure from a son? And can you deny that all my well-meaning efforts have been wasted? Fortunately I realized in time that my duty lay on different lines and, painful as it was, I did not hesitate to take stern measures. You agreed with me then. Moreover, God in His mercy had given me some experience; I've often thought that in inspiring me with the idea of establishing that special department at Crouy, Providence enabled me to prepare in advance the remedy for a personal affliction. Have I not borne this trial with a certain courage? Would many fathers have done as I have done? Have I anything to reproach myself with? God be thanked, I have a quiet conscience.' But, as he made the proud assertion, there came into his tone a note of uncertainty, as if some still small voice within were protesting against it. 'My wish for every father is that his conscience may be as clear as mine!'

He opened the door, a complacent smile hovering on his face. For his parting shot, his voice had an accent of pawky humour, not without a savour that smacked of his native Norman soil.

'Luckily, my friend, I've a harder head than yours!'

He crossed the hall, followed by the Abbé, who made no reply.

On the landing he turned. 'Well, well, good-bye for the present.'

As he was proffering his hand, suddenly the priest began speaking in a low voice, almost to himself.

'"Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner."'

M. Thibault's eyelids lifted and he saw his confessor standing in the shadowy hall, with a finger on his lip.

'"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that

humbleth himself shall be exalted.”’

Without flinching the burly ‘Pharisee’ heard him out; his eyes were closed now and he made no movement. Presently, as the silence continued, he ventured to look up again. Without a sound the priest had closed the door on him. Left to himself, he stared for a moment at the closed door; then, shrugging his shoulders, he turned on his heel and started down the stairs. Halfway down he halted, his hand clutching the balustrade; his breath was coming in short gasps and he was jerking his jaw forward, like a horse chafing at the bit.

‘No,’ he murmured to himself. ‘No.’

Without more hesitation he went on his way downstairs.

All that day he did his best to forget the interview. But in the course of the afternoon, when M. Chasle was slow in handing him a file he wanted, he had an access of rage that he had difficulty in repressing. Antoine was on duty at the hospital. Dinner that night was a silent meal. Without waiting for Gisèle to finish her dessert, M. Thibault folded his napkin and returned to his study.

Eight o’clock struck. ‘I might go back to him,’ he thought as he sat down. ‘It’s not too late yet.’ But he was quite determined to do nothing of the kind. ‘He’ll start talking to me again about Jacques. I have said No, and No it is.’

‘But what did he mean with the parable of the Pharisee and the publican?’ he asked himself for the hundredth time. Suddenly his underlip began quivering. He had always been afraid of death. He stood up and, over the bronzes crowding up the mantelpiece, scanned his face in the mirror. His features had lost the look of self-complacency that had stamped itself, indelibly as it had seemed, upon them: the look that never left them even when he was alone, even in prayer. A shudder ran through his body. His shoulders sagged and he dropped back into his chair. He was picturing himself on his death-bed, and a dread came over him that he might have to face his last hour empty-handed. He tried to reassure himself by recalling the high esteem in which the world held him.

‘Still, am I not an upright man?’ he kept on asking himself, but always with a rankling doubt. Words were not enough to quell his anxiety, for he was in one of those rare moods when a man delves down into himself, letting light into the dark places of his heart. With his hands clenched on the arms of his chair, he looked back on his life and found in it not one act that was wholly pure. In the twilight of his mind harrowing memories flickered

into consciousness. One of them, crueller than all the rest, stung him so bitterly that he bowed his head and hid it with his hands. For the first time in his life perhaps, M. Thibault was ashamed. He knew at last that supreme self-disgust, so intolerable that no sacrifice seems too great, if only it sets a man right with his own conscience, buying the divine forgiveness and restoring to the stricken heart a feeling of peace and hope of eternal salvation. Ah, to find God again! But first of all he must regain the good opinion of the priest, God's mandatory. Yes, he could not live an hour longer with this sense of damnable estrangement, under such obloquy.

Once he was in the open air, he felt calmer. To save time he took a cab. The Abbé opened the door; his face, under the lamp held high to see his visitor, betrayed no emotion of any kind.

'It's I,' M. Thibault said mechanically, holding out his hand; then in silence he walked to the priest's study. 'No, I've not come to talk to you about Jacques,' he declared, the moment he was seated. The priest's hands made a vague, conciliatory movement. 'There's nothing more to be said on that subject, I assure you; you're on a false scent. But, of course, if you feel you'd like to do so, why not go to Crouy and see for yourself?' With a rather naïve abruptness he continued: 'Forgive me for my bad temper this morning. You know how easily roused I am. But really, well, at bottom I'm . . . Look here, you were too hard on me, you know. Much too hard on the "Pharisee" you take me for! I'm perfectly justified in protesting—perfectly! Why, for thirty years haven't I been giving all my time, all my energies to good works; not to mention the greater part of my income? And all the thanks I get is to be told by a priest, who is my personal friend, that I'm . . . Come now, own up, it's not fair!'

The Abbé looked at his penitent, and the look implied: 'Pride is showing through again, for all you try to mask it, in every word you say.'

There was a long silence, broken at last by M. Thibault.

'My dear Abbé,' he said in an uneasy tone, 'I admit I'm not altogether . . . Well, yes, I admit it; only too often I . . . But that's the way I'm built, if you see what I mean. You know that well enough, don't you?' He seemed to be pleading for the priest's indulgence. 'Ah, it's a strait and narrow path indeed—and you're the only one who can guide me, keep me from stumbling. . . .'

Suddenly he murmured in a broken voice: 'I'm getting old, I'm afraid. . . .'

The Abbé was touched by the change in his tone. Feeling he had been silent overlong, he drew his chair nearer to M. Thibault's and began to

speak.

‘It’s I who now feel unsure of myself, and, indeed, my dear friend, what should I add, now that the holy words have sunk so deep into your heart?’ He mused for a while before continuing. ‘I know well that God has placed you in a difficult position; the work you do for Him gives you authority over other men, and honours—and that is as it should be. Yet it may possibly incline you sometimes to confound His glory with your own. And might not this lead you, little by little, even to prefer yours to His?’

M. Thibault’s eyes were for once wide open, and showed no sign of closing; there was consternation in their pale intensity, and a gleam of almost childish awe.

‘And yet remember!’ the Abbé went on. ‘*Ad majorem Dei gloriam*. That alone counts, and nothing else should weigh with us. You, my friend, are one of the strong ones of the earth, and the strong are usually proud. Oh, I know how hard it is to control the driving force of pride, to direct it into its proper channel. How hard it is not to live for oneself, not to forget God, even when all one’s life is taken up with acts of piety! Not to be amongst those of whom Our Lord once spoke so sadly. “This people honours Me with its lips, but its heart is far from Me.”’

‘Ah yes,’ M. Thibault cried excitedly, without lowering his eyes, ‘indeed it’s hard! No one on earth knows as well as I do how terribly hard it is.’

In self-humiliation he was finding a delightful anodyne, and he was vaguely conscious, too, that by this attitude he might regain the priest’s esteem, without having to make concessions in the matter of Jacques’ detention. And a secret force within him urged him to go still further, to prove the depth of his faith by an astounding declaration and the display of an unlooked-for nobility. No price would be too high if he could force his friend, the priest’s respect.

‘Listen, Abbé!’ he exclaimed; for a moment his face had the same resolute expression that was often Antoine’s. ‘Listen! If until now my pride has made of me a miserable sinner, has not God offered me this very day an opportunity to make—to make atonement?’ He hesitated, as though engaged in an inner struggle. And indeed at that moment he was struggling against himself. The Abbé saw him trace the sign of the cross rapidly with his thumb across his waistcoat, above his heart. ‘I am thinking about this election, you understand. That would be a genuine sacrifice, a sacrifice of my pride, since you told me this morning that my election was assured. Well then I——! But wait! There’s vanity even in this. Shouldn’t I keep silent and do it without telling anyone, even you? But—let it be! Very well then, Abbé,

I make a vow to withdraw to-morrow, and for ever, my candidature for the Institute.'

The Abbé made a gesture that M. Thibault did not see; he had turned his eyes towards the crucifix hanging on the wall.

'O Lord,' he prayed, 'have mercy on me, a sinner!'

He put into the prayer a residue of self-satisfaction that he himself did not suspect; for pride is so deep-rooted that, at the very moment of his most fervent repentance, he was savouring his humility with a passionate thrill of pride. The priest gazed at him intently; he could not help wondering how far the man before him was sincere. And yet at that moment there shone on M. Thibault's face the illumination of a mystic who has made the great renunciation; it seemed to obliterate the puffiness and wrinkles, giving the time-worn features the innocence of a child's face. The priest could hardly believe his eyes. He was ashamed of the rather despicable satisfaction he had felt that morning at confounding this gross Pharisee. Their rôles were being reversed. He turned his mind's eye on his own life. Was it really for the sole glory of God that he had been so ready to abandon his pupils and canvass his present exalted post, with its pomp and prestige? And was there not something sinful in the pleasure he felt, day after day, in the exercise of that diplomatic adroitness which was his speciality—even if it were exercised in the service of his Church?

'Tell me honestly, do you believe that God will pardon me?'

The tremor of anxiety in M. Thibault's voice recalled the Abbé to his function of spiritual director. Claspng his hands beneath his chin, he bent his head, and forced a smile on to his lips.

'I have not tried to stop you,' he said, 'and I have let you drain the cup of bitterness to its dregs. And I am very sure that the divine compassion will take into account this moment of your life. But—' he raised his forefinger—'the intention is enough, and your true duty is not to carry out the sacrifice to the end. Do not protest. It is I, your confessor, who free you from your vow. Indeed God's glory will be better served by your election than by this gesture of renunciation. Your family and your wealth impose obligations which you must not ignore. That title "Member of the Institute" will confer on you, amongst the great republicans of the conservative group, who are the backbone of our country, an added authority, and one which we consider necessary for the advancement of the highest interests of our faith. You have at all times submitted your life to our guidance. That being so, let the Church, speaking through my lips, show you once more the course to take.

God declines your sacrifice, my dear friend; hard as it may be, you must bow to His will. *Gloria in excelsis!*'

As he spoke, the priest had been watching M. Thibault's face and had noticed how its traits had gradually changed, readjusting themselves and settling back to their normal composure. At the last words he had lowered his eyelids, and it was impossible to guess what was passing in his mind. The priest, in giving him back his seat in the Institute, an ambition of twenty years' standing, had given him back life. But the effects of the tremendous struggle he had gone through had not yet worn off; he was still in an emotional mood, thrilled with a sense of infinite gratitude. At the same moment both men had the same impulse. Bowing his head, the priest began to offer humble thanks to God, and when he looked up again he saw M. Thibault already on his knees, gazing heavenwards with unseeing eyes, his face lit up with joy. His moist lips were quivering, his hairy hands—so bloated that they looked as if the fingers had been stung by wasps—were locked in an ecstasy of fervour. Why did this edifying spectacle suddenly strike the priest as unbearable to see—so much so that he could not help stretching out his arm till it all but touched the penitent?

He checked the gesture at once, and laid his hand affectionately on M. Thibault's shoulder. The latter rose with an effort from his knees.

'Everything has not been settled yet,' the priest reminded him, with the inflexible gentleness that was his characteristic. 'You must come to a decision about Jacques.'

M. Thibault seemed to stiffen up, suddenly, violently.

The Abbé sat down.

'Do not follow the example of those who think they have done all they need do, because they have faced some arduous duty, while neglecting the one that is immediate, close at hand. Even if the ordeal you have made this child undergo has not been so injurious as I fear, do not prolong it. Think of the servant who buried the talent his master entrusted to him. Come now, my friend, do not leave this room till you have dealt faithfully by all your responsibilities.'

M. Thibault remained standing, shaking his head, but much of the obstinacy had gone out of his expression. The Abbé rose.

'The difficult problem,' he murmured, 'is how to avoid producing an impression of having given way to Antoine.' He saw that he had hit the mark, took a few steps and suddenly began to speak in a cool, business-like tone. 'Do you know what I'd do, my friend, if I were in your place? I'd say to him: "So you want your brother to leave the reformatory, do you? Yes?

And you're still of the same opinion? Very well then, I take you at your word, go and fetch him—and keep him with you; you want him back, and it's for you to take charge of him.”’

M. Thibault made no response. The priest went on speaking.

‘I'd go even further. This is what I'd tell him. “I don't want Jacques at home at all, arrange things as you please. You always look as if you thought we didn't know how to deal with him. Very well, have a try yourself!” And I'd saddle him with the full responsibility for Jacques. I'd give them a place where they could live together—near you, of course, so that they could have their meals at home. But I'd give Antoine entire charge of his brother. Don't say no, my dear friend,’ he added, though M. Thibault had made no movement of any kind. ‘Wait, let me finish; my idea is not so fantastic as it may seem.’

He returned to his desk and sat down, resting his elbows on the table.

‘Firstly: It's quite likely that Jacques will put up with his elder brother's authority more easily than with yours, and I'm inclined to believe that if he enjoys greater freedom, he may lose that spirit of revolt and insubordination which has been so distressing in the past.

‘Secondly: As regards Antoine, his level-headedness entitles him to our entire trust. If you take him at his word, I'm convinced he won't reject this chance of freeing his brother. And, as to those regrettable tendencies we were talking of this morning, a small cause can have great results. In my opinion the fact of being responsible for the spiritual welfare of another will tend to counteract them, and we shall find him coming back to a less—a less anarchical conception of society, and morals, and religion.

‘Thirdly: Your parental authority, once it is spared the friction of everyday contacts which wear it down and disperse its efficacy, will keep its prestige intact; you'll be able to use it for that general supervision of your sons which is its prerogative and—how shall I put it?—its main function.

‘Finally’—his tone grew confidential—‘I must confess that, at the moment of your election, it strikes me as desirable that Jacques shall have left Crouy, and that the whole unhappy episode should be put out of mind. Celebrity attracts all sorts of interviews and enquiries, and you would be a target for the indiscretions of the Press. That's an entirely secondary consideration, I know; yet all the same . . .’

M. Thibault could not restrain a glance betraying his uneasiness. Though he would not admit it to himself, he knew that it would salve his conscience if the ‘prisoner’ were released; indeed the plan suggested by the priest had

everything in its favour. It would save his face *vis-à-vis* to Antoine and bring Jacques back to normal life without his having to trouble about the boy.

‘If I could be sure,’ he said at last, ‘that the young rascal after being released wouldn’t bring new scandals upon us. . . .’

The Abbé knew that he had gained his point.

He undertook to exercise a discreet supervision over the two lads, anyhow during the first few months. Then he accepted an invitation to dine on the following day, and to take part in an interview M. Thibault would arrange for with his son.

M. Thibault rose to go. A weight had been lifted off his heart and he felt a new man. Still, just as he was shaking hands with his confessor, he felt a final qualm of conscience.

‘May God in His compassion forgive me for being the man I am.’ There was a note of sadness in his voice.

The priest beamed on him, and recited in a low voice, like a benediction:

‘“What man of you having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?”’ A sudden smile lit up his face, he raised a finger to emphasize the words. ‘“I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth.”’

6

ONE morning, it was barely nine, the concierge of the building where Madame de Fontanin lived asked to have a word with her. A ‘young person,’ it seemed, wanted to see her but would neither go up to the flat nor give a name.

‘A “young person”? Do you mean a woman?’

‘A little girl.’

Madame de Fontanin’s first impulse was to refuse to see her; the visit had probably to do with one of Jerome’s love-affairs; or was it blackmail?

‘She’s quite a child,’ the concierge remarked.

‘I’ll see her.’

It was indeed a child whom she found hiding in the darkness of the concierge’s ‘lodge’; a child who met her eyes reluctantly.

‘Why, it’s Nicole!’ Madame de Fontanin cried when she recognized Noémie Petit-Dutreuil’s daughter. Nicole was on the point of throwing herself into her aunt’s arms, but she checked the impulse. All the colour had gone out of her face and she was looking haggard, but she was not crying, and though her eyes seemed unnaturally large and her nerves were obviously on edge, she had complete control of herself.

‘I’d like to speak to you, Auntie.’

‘Come along upstairs.’

‘No, not in your flat.’

‘Why?’

‘I’d rather not, please.’

‘But why? I’m all by myself in the flat this morning.’ She realized Nicole was uncertain what to do. ‘Daniel’s at school and Jenny’s gone to her piano lesson. I shall be alone till lunch. Now come along upstairs.’

Nicole followed her without a word. Madame de Fontanin led her to her bedroom.

‘What’s the matter?’ She could not conceal her mistrust. ‘Who told you to come here? Where have you come from?’

Nicole looked at her without lowering her eyes, but her eyelids were fluttering.

‘I’ve run away.’

‘Run away!’ Madame de Fontanin looked distressed. Yet, at the same time she felt relieved. ‘And what made you come to us?’

Nicole made a movement with her shoulders that implied: ‘Where could I go? There’s nobody else.’

‘Sit down, darling. Now let’s see. . . . You’re looking dreadfully tired. By the bye, are you feeling hungry?’

‘Well, a bit,’ she confessed with a timid smile.

‘Why ever didn’t you say so at once?’ Madame de Fontanin smiled and led Nicole into the dining-room. When she saw with what appetite the little girl fell on the bread and butter, she went and fetched what remained of some cold meat from the sideboard. Nicole ate without saying a word, ashamed of showing such voracity, but unable to conceal her hunger. The colour was coming back to her cheeks. She drank two cups of tea in quick succession.

‘How long is it since your last meal?’ Madame de Fontanin asked. She was looking even more upset than the little girl. ‘Are you feeling cold, dear?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘But you must be. You’re shivering.’

Nicole made a petulant gesture; she was always angry with herself for not being able to conceal her moments of weakness.

‘I travelled all night. I expect that’s why I’m feeling a bit cold.’

‘You travelled all night! Where on earth have you come from?’

‘From Brussels.’

‘Good heavens! All by yourself?’

‘Yes,’ Nicole answered in a level voice, ‘all by myself.’ The firmness of her tone showed that she had acted not on caprice but of a set purpose. Madame de Fontanin took her hand.

‘You’re freezing, child! Come along to my bedroom. Wouldn’t you like to lie down and sleep a bit? You can tell me all about it later.’

‘No, I’d rather tell you now, while we’re alone. Besides, I’m not sleepy. Really, I’m quite all right now.’

It was one of the first days in April. Madame de Fontanin wrapped a shawl round the little runaway, lit the fire, and tried to get her to sit in front of it. At first the child resisted, but at last she gave way. She seemed in a highly nervous state, her eyes were shining with a hard, unnatural fixity, and she was staring at the clock on the mantelpiece. Obviously she was eager to speak, but, now she was seated beside her aunt, had suddenly become tongue-tied. Not to increase her embarrassment, Madame de Fontanin refrained from looking at her.

Minutes passed, and still Nicole did not say anything. Madame de Fontanin decided to speak first.

‘Whatever you’ve done, dear, no one here will ask you anything about it. Keep your secret, if you’d rather do so. I’m grateful to you for having thought of coming to us. You’re like a daughter here, you know.’

Nicole stiffened up, startled by the thought that she was being suspected of having done something wrong, something she disliked confessing. She made a sudden movement that let slip the shawl from her shoulders, revealing the curves of a healthy young body, strangely incongruous with her haggard cheeks and the immaturity of her features.

‘It’s not that at all!’ Her eyes were flashing. ‘And now I’m going to tell you everything.’ Her voice had an almost aggressive harshness as she began

her story.

‘You remember, auntie, the day you came to see us at our flat in the Rue de Monceau . . . ?’

‘Yes, indeed!’ Madame de Fontanin sighed, and again a look of anguish crossed her face.

‘Well, I heard everything, every word!’ The words came with a rush; her eyelids were quivering.

There was a pause.

‘I knew it, my dear.’

The child stifled a sob and hid her face with her hands as if the tears were flowing from her eyes. But almost at once she took her hands away; her eyes were dry, and her lips tightly set—which changed not only the expression of her face but the quality of her voice.

‘Don’t think hardly of her, please, Aunt Thérèse. She’s so dreadfully unhappy, you know. You do believe me, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’ A question was hovering on Madame de Fontanin’s lips, and she looked at the girl with a calm that carried no conviction. ‘Tell me, is—is your Uncle Jerome at Brussels, too?’

‘Yes.’ For a moment she was silent, then her eyebrows lifted and she added: ‘Why, it was he who gave me the idea of running away, of coming here.’

‘What! He told you to run away?’

‘Well, no, not exactly that. You see he’d been coming every morning all last week. He gave me some money to buy myself food, as I’d been left all alone. Then the day before yesterday he said, “If some kind soul would find room for you, it would be much better for you than staying here.” “Some kind soul,” he said, and of course I thought of you at once, Aunt Thérèse. And I’m sure he had the same idea. Don’t you think so?’

‘Very likely,’ Madame de Fontanin murmured. And suddenly a feeling of such happiness swept over her that she all but smiled.

Eagerly she asked: ‘How did you come to be alone? Where ever were you?’

‘At home.’

‘In Brussels?’

‘Yes.’

‘I didn’t know your mother had gone to live in Brussels.’

‘We had to, at the end of November. Everything was sold up at our place in Paris. Mummy never has any luck, she’s always in trouble, with bailiffs coming round for money. But now the debts have been paid off, she’ll be able to return.’

Madame de Fontanin looked up quickly, on the brink of asking: ‘*Who* is paying them?’ And so obvious was the question in her gaze that she could read its unspoken answer on the little girl’s lips. She could not restrain herself from asking:

‘And *he*—he left in November, with her, I suppose?’

There was such anguish in her voice that Nicole did not answer for a while. At last she forced herself to speak.

‘Auntie, you mustn’t be cross with me; I don’t want to hide anything from you, but it’s so difficult to explain everything, all at once. Do you know Monsieur Arvelde?’

‘No. Who is he?’

He’s a wonderful violinist who used to give me lessons here. He’s a really great artist, you know; he plays in concerts.’

‘Well?’

‘He lived in Paris, but he’s a Belgian really. That’s why, when we had to run away, he took us to Belgium. He has a house of his own in Brussels, and we stayed there.’

‘With him?’

‘Yes.’ She had understood the question and did not shirk it; indeed she seemed to find a certain perverse pleasure in vanquishing her reticence. But for the moment she did not dare to say more.

After a rather long pause Madame de Fontanin spoke again.

‘But where were you living during these last few days, when you were by yourself and Uncle Jerome came to see you?’

‘There.’

‘At that Belgian gentleman’s house, you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘And did your uncle visit you there?’

‘Why, of course.’

‘But how did you come to be alone?’ Madame de Fontanin’s voice had lost none of its gentleness.

‘Because Monsieur Raoul is on tour just now, in Lucerne and Geneva.’

‘Monsieur Raoul? Who is that?’

‘Monsieur Arvelde.’

‘So your mother left you alone in Brussels to go to Switzerland with him?’ The little girl’s gesture was so desperate, so pitiful, that Madame de Fontanin blushed. ‘You must forgive me, darling,’ she added weakly. ‘Don’t let’s talk any more about all this. You’ve come here and that’s quite all right, and I hope you’ll stay with us.’

Nicole shook her head energetically.

‘No, no, there’s not much more to tell.’ She took a deep breath, then broke into a voluble explanation. ‘This is what’s happened, Auntie. Monsieur Arvelde has gone to Switzerland. But Mamma didn’t go with him. He had got her an engagement at a theatre in Brussels; she’s playing in a light opera—because of her voice, you know; he made her work hard at her singing, and she’s been awfully successful really. They talk about her in the papers; I’ve got the cuttings in my bag—would you like to see them?’ She stopped suddenly, uncertain of her ground. A curious look came into her eyes as she went on. ‘So you see it was just because Monsieur Raoul went to Switzerland that Uncle Jerome came, but it was too late. When he arrived Mamma had left the house. One evening she came and kissed me. No, that’s not true.’ Her eyebrows knitted, and she continued in a low, forlorn voice. ‘She didn’t kiss me, she almost beat me, because she didn’t know what on earth to do with me.’ Raising her eyes, she forced a smile to her lips. ‘Oh no, she wasn’t really angry with me, it wasn’t that at all.’ A sob broke from the smiling lips. ‘She was so awfully unhappy, Aunt Thérèse; you simply can’t imagine. She had to go, as someone was waiting for her downstairs, and she knew Uncle Jerome would be coming soon, because he’d been to see us several times; he even played music with Monsieur Raoul. But, the last time, he said he wouldn’t come again while Monsieur Arvelde was there. So, just before she went out, Mamma told me to tell Uncle Jerome that she’d gone away for a long time, that she was leaving me behind and he was to look after me. I’m sure he would have done so, only I didn’t dare to say it when I saw the way he looked when he came and found her gone. He was so terribly angry, I was afraid he might go after them, so I had to tell him a lie. I said Mamma was coming back next day; and every day I told him I was expecting her. He kept on hunting for her high and low, he thought she was still in Brussels. But everything was so awful, I felt I simply couldn’t stay there any longer; because of Monsieur Raoul’s valet especially. He’s such a nasty man; I hate him!’ She shivered. ‘Oh Aunt Thérèse, he has such horrible eyes—I can’t bear him! So, the day Uncle Jerome spoke to me about some kind soul, all of a sudden I made up my mind. Yesterday morning, when he gave me a little money, I went out at once so that the

servant shouldn't take it from me. I hid in churches until the evening, and I caught the slow night train.'

She had told her story hastily, with lowered eyes. When she raised her head and saw the look of profound disgust and indignation on Madame de Fontanin's face, she clasped her hands imploringly.

'Oh, Aunt Thérèse, please don't think unkindly of Mamma, it really wasn't her fault at all. I'm not always nice and I'm really a dreadful nuisance to her; you understand, don't you? But I'm grown up now, and I don't want to go on with that life any more. I couldn't bear it!' Her mouth set in a look of firm resolve. 'I want to work, to earn my living, and not be a drag on anyone. That's why I've come, Aunt Thérèse. There's no one else but you. Please tell me how to set about it; please, Auntie. You won't mind looking after me, will you? Just for a few days.'

Madame de Fontanin was too deeply moved to reply at once. Could she ever have believed this child would one day become so dear to her? There was a world of tenderness in her eyes as she gazed at Nicole, an affection that warmed her own heart, too, and allayed her distress. The little girl was not so pretty as she used to be; those feverish days had left their mark, and an ugly rash blemished the young lips—but her deep blue eyes were lovelier than ever. Just now they seemed dilated, unnaturally large, yet what courage, what steadfastness shone in their limpid depths! . . . At last, smiling, she leant towards the little girl.

'Darling, I quite understand. I respect your decision and I promise to help you. But for the present you're going to live here, with us; it's rest you need.' She said 'rest,' but her eyes implied 'affection.' Nicole read their meaning, but she still refused to soften.

'I want to work, I don't want to be a charge on anyone any longer.'

'What if your mother comes back to fetch you?'

Her clear gaze grew misted; then suddenly an unbelievable hardness came over it.

'I'll never go back to her. Never!' Her voice was harsh with bitter resolution.

Madame de Fontanin made as if she had not heard, and merely said:

'I—I'd very much like to keep you with us—for always!'

The girl rose unsteadily, then suddenly sank on to the floor and laid her head on her aunt's knees. As Madame de Fontanin stroked the child's cheek, her mind was busy with a delicate problem which she felt it her duty to settle once for all.

‘My dear, you’ve seen a great many things that a girl of your age oughtn’t to have seen,’ she began.

Nicole tried to rise, but Madame de Fontanin prevented her. She did not want the child to see her blushing. As she held the girl’s forehead to her knee, unthinkingly, she was winding a strand of golden hair round her finger, groping in her mind for the right words to say. ‘And you must have guessed a number of things, things which, I think, had better remain a secret. You understand me, don’t you?’ Nicole had moved her head and was looking up at her. A sudden light came into the child’s eyes.

‘Oh, Aunt Thérèse, you can be sure of that. I won’t breathe a word to anyone. They wouldn’t understand; they’d say Mamma was to blame.’

She was as bent on concealing her mother’s weakness as Madame de Fontanin was on concealing Jerome’s. The strange complicity that was springing up between the little girl and Madame de Fontanin was sealed by Nicole’s next remark. She was standing, her face lit up with eagerness.

‘Listen, Aunt Thérèse. This is what you must tell them: that Mamma has been obliged to earn her living and has found a situation abroad—in England, let’s say. A situation that has prevented her from taking me with her. As French mistress in a school, we might tell them.’ A childish smile hovered on her lips as she added: ‘And, as Mamma’s gone away, there’ll be nothing surprising if I seem rather sad, will there?’

7

THE ‘gay old spark’ on the ground floor moved out on the fifteenth of April.

On the next morning Mademoiselle de Waize, preceded by two maids, by Madame Frühling, the concierge, and a handyman, went to take possession of the little bachelor flat. The reputation of its previous occupant had been anything but savoury and Mademoiselle, drawing her black merino mantle round her shoulders, waited until all the windows had been opened before crossing the threshold. Then only did she risk entering the little hall of the flat and making a thorough inspection of the rooms. Though

somewhat reassured by the immaculate bareness of the walls, she directed the rite of cleansing in the spirit of an exorcist.

Much to Antoine's surprise the worthy spinster had agreed almost without protest to the idea of the two brothers being installed outside the parental walls, though such a project must have run counter to all her notions of home life as it should be lived, and played havoc with her views of the Family and Education. Antoine accounted for Mademoiselle's attitude by the pleasure she felt at Jacques' return, and the respect in which she held the decisions of M. Thibault, above all when they had the commendation of the Abbé Vécard.

As a matter of fact there was another reason for Mademoiselle's almost enthusiastic acquiescence: the relief she felt at seeing Antoine leave the flat. Ever since she had taken Gise under her wing the poor old lady had lived in constant terror of infectious diseases. One spring she had actually kept Gise imprisoned in her room for six weeks, not daring to let her take the air elsewhere than on the balcony and delaying the departure of the whole family to their summer residence, because little Lisbeth Fürhling, the concierge's niece, had whooping-cough and, to leave the house, it would have been necessary to pass in front of the concierge's premises on the ground floor. It goes without saying that Antoine, what with his clothes redolent of the hospital, his medical books and instruments, seemed to her a source of daily peril in their midst. She had begged him never to take Gise on his knee. If, on coming home, by some unlucky chance he dropped his overcoat across a chair in the hall instead of taking it to his room, or if he arrived late and came to table without washing his hands—though she knew he did not wear an overcoat when seeing patients, and never left the hospital without first visiting the lavatory—she was too terrified, too obsessed by fears of 'germs,' to eat and, the moment dessert came on the table, would sweep Gise away with her to her room and inflict on her a fiercely antiseptic douche in throat and nostrils. To install Antoine on the ground floor meant creating a protective zone of two stories between Gisèle and him, and diminishing to that extent the peril of infection. Thus she displayed particular zest in preparing for the bearer of contagions this remote quarantine. In three days the rooms were scraped clean, washed, carpeted and equipped with curtains and furniture.

All was ready now for Jacques' return.

Every time she thought of him, her activity redoubled; or else she would indulge in a sentimental breathing-space, conjuring up before her melting eyes the well-loved face. Her affection for Gise had by no means ousted Jacques from his priority in her regard. She had doted on him since he was

born, indeed she had loved him even longer than that, for she had loved and brought up, before him, the mother whom he had never known, whose place she had taken from the cradle. It was between her outstretched arms that one evening, tottering along the carpet in the hall, Jacques had taken, towards her, his first step; and for fourteen successive years she had trembled for him as now she trembled for Gisèle. And with boundless love went total incomprehension. The boy, from whom she scarcely ever took her eyes, remained a mystery to her. There were days when she gave up hope—so ‘inhuman’ did she find the child—and then she would weep, recalling Madame Thibault’s childhood, for Jacques’ mother had been as meek and mild as an angel out of heaven. She never tried to puzzle out from whom Jacques had inherited his propensity for violence, and could only blame the Devil. And yet there were days when one of those sudden, impulsive gestures in which the child’s heart suddenly flowered forth would quicken her emotion, making her weep again, but now with joy.

She had never been able to get used to Jacques’ absence nor had she ever been able to understand the reasons for his exile. And now she wanted his return to be a festive occasion and his new room to contain everything he loved. Antoine had to put his foot down or she would have crammed the cupboards full of his old toys. She had brought down from her own room his favourite arm-chair, the chair in which he had always used to sit when a black mood was on him; and, on Antoine’s advice, she had replaced Jacques’ old bed by a brand-new sofa-bed, that, folded up in the day, gave the room the dignity of a study.

Meanwhile Gisèle had been left to her own devices for two days, but with plenty of work to keep her out of mischief. Try as she might, she could not fix her attention on her lesson-books. She was dying of curiosity to see what was happening down below. She knew her Jacquot was going to return, that all this commotion was on his account, and, to calm her nerves, kept pacing up and down the room that seemed to her a prison-cell.

On the third morning she could bear it no longer, and the temptation was so strong that at noon, noticing that her aunt had not come up again, she ran out of her room without more ado and raced down the stairs, four steps at a time. Antoine was just coming in. She burst out laughing. Antoine had a special way of looking at her—a stolid, concentrated glare he had invented for their mutual amusement—that never failed to send her off into peals of uncontrollable laughter, which lasted as long as Antoine could retain his gravity. Mademoiselle used to scold them both for it. But just now they were alone, and the occasion was too good to miss.

‘What are you laughing at?’ he said at last, catching hold of her wrists. She struggled, laughing all the more. Suddenly she stopped.

‘I really must get out of this habit of laughing. If I don’t, you know, nobody will ever want to marry me.’

‘So you want to get married, do you?’

‘Yes,’ she said, gazing up at him. There was a mildness in her gaze that brought to mind the eyes of a large, sentimental dog. Looking down at her plump little body, with its wild-flower grace, he reflected for the first time that this imp of eleven would one day become a woman, would marry. He let go her wrists.

‘Where were you rushing off to like that, by yourself, without even a hat or a shawl on? Don’t you know it’s lunch-time?’

‘I’m looking for auntie. She’s given me a sum I can’t make out,’ she added with a little giggle. Then, blushing, she pointed to the mystery-laden door from which a single ray of light was streaming. Her eyes were shining in the dimness of the vestibule.

‘You’d like to have a look at it, eh?’

She made a ‘Yes’ with a flutter of her red lips, soundlessly.

‘You’re in for a scolding, I warn you,’ Antoine smiled.

She hesitated, eyed him boldly to see if he were joking. Then she made up her mind.

‘No, why should I be scolded? It’s not a sin.’

Antoine laughed; he had recognized Mademoiselle’s phraseology for Right and Wrong. He fell to wondering what effect the old maid’s influence was having on the child. A glance at Gisèle reassured him; she was a healthy plant, which would flourish in any soil, and defy the gardener’s restraint.

Her eyes were still fixed on the half-opened door.

‘Well, why don’t you go in and have a look round?’ Antoine said.

As she slipped in like a scared mouse, she stifled a cry of joy.

Mademoiselle was alone. She had climbed on to the sofa-bed and, standing tiptoe, was straightening the crucifix she had just hung on the wall; it was the crucifix she had given Jacques for his first communion, and it was still to watch over her dear one’s sleep. She seemed gay, happy, young, and was singing as she worked. She had recognized Antoine’s step in the entrance-hall, and thought she must have forgotten the time. Meanwhile Gisèle had made an inspection of the other rooms and, unable to restrain her glee, had begun dancing and clapping her hands.

‘Good heavens!’ Mademoiselle exclaimed, jumping down from the bed. In a mirror she saw her niece, her hair streaming in the breeze from an open window, capering like a young fawn, and screaming at the top of her voice.

‘Hurrah, for lovely draughts! Hurrah!’

She did not understand, did not try to understand. The idea that an act of wilful disobedience might account for the little girl’s presence here never crossed her mind; for sixty-six years she had been in the habit of bowing to the exigencies of fate. She made a dash at the child and, unhooking her cape, wrapped her hastily in its folds, and without a word of reproach hurried her out. And, after making Gisèle run up the stairs even quicker than she had run down them, did not draw breath till she had put the child in bed under a warm blanket and made her drink a bowl of boiling hot herb-tea.

It must be admitted her fears were not entirely groundless. Gisèle’s mother, a Madagascan whom Major de Waize had married in Tamatave, where he was garrisoned, had died of tuberculosis less than a year after the birth of the child; two years later the Major himself had succumbed to a slow, never fully diagnosed disease that was thought to have been transmitted to him by his wife. Ever since Mademoiselle, the orphan’s only relative, had had her sent home from Madagascar and taken charge of her, the dangers of hereditary disease had constantly obsessed her, though actually the child had never had a serious cold in her life, and the various doctors and specialists who examined her each year had never found the least flaw in her healthy constitution.

The election for the Institute was taking place in a fortnight, and M. Thibault seemed in a hurry to have Jacques back. It was arranged that M. Faisme should personally escort him to Paris on the following Sunday.

On the previous Saturday evening, Antoine left the hospital at seven o’clock, dined at a neighbouring restaurant so as to escape the family dinner, and, round about eight, alone and in high spirits, took possession of his new domain, where he was to sleep that night for the first time. He found a pleasure in the feel of his private key turning in the lock, in slamming his own door behind him, and, after switching on all the lights, began to walk slowly from room to room, with the zest of a conqueror exploring a new-won kingdom. He had reserved for himself the side looking out on the street: two big rooms and a dressing-room. The first large room had little furniture in it; only a few chairs of various shapes and sizes grouped round a small circular table. This was to serve as the waiting-room, when patients came to consult him. Into the second room, which was the larger of the two, he had

moved the furniture belonging to him in his father's flat, his big desk, his bookshelves, his two leather arm-chairs, and all the various accessories of his industrious hours. His bed was in the dressing-room, which also contained a washhandstand and wardrobe.

His books were stacked on the hall floor alongside his unopened trunks. The heating apparatus was emitting a gentle warmth, and brand-new electric lamps shed an uncompromising brilliance on everything in the flat. Antoine had the rest of the evening before him to set his house in order; he made up his mind to have everything unpacked and in its appointed place—a congenial setting for the new life that was beginning—within the next few hours. He pictured the dinner in the flat above drawing to its dreary close, Gisèle drowsing over her dessert, M. Thibault as usual perorating. And Antoine relished the peace around him, and the inestimable boon of solitude.

The glass over the mantelpiece reflected him half length. He drew near it, not without a certain self-satisfaction. He had a way of his own with mirrors, and always viewed himself full face, squared his shoulders and clenched his jaws, while his eyes seemed boring almost angrily into their reflected selves. He preferred not to see his lanky torso, short legs and somewhat puny arms, for the disproportion between his rather undersized body and the bulkiness of his head, the size of which was increased by the thick beard, was distasteful to him. But he approved of himself, he regarded himself as a fine figure of a man, built on exemplary lines. What particularly pleased him was the look of grim determination on his face, for, by dint of creasing his forehead as if he felt obliged to concentrate his full attention on each incident of daily life, a bulge had formed at the level of his brows, which, overshadowing his eyes, imparted to them a curious piercingness that pleased him as the outward sign of an indomitable will.

He decided to begin with his books, and, taking off his coat, started by giving a vigorous tug to the closed doors of the empty bookcase. Let's see now, he mused. Lecture note-books at the bottom, dictionaries within easy reach; medical manual—yes, that's the place for it. Tra-la-la! he hummed light-heartedly. Well, well, here I am; I got my way. The ground floor flat; Jacques. It all panned out—who'd have believed that possible three weeks ago? He began to speak aloud, in a high-pitched voice, impersonating an admirer. 'That chap Thibault has an in-dom-itable will. Never knows when he's beaten. Indomitable!' Casting a humorous glance at the mirror, he cut a caper, which all but dislodged the pile of books and pamphlets he was propping under his chin. Steady now! he adjured himself. That's better. My shelves are coming to life again. Now for the manuscripts. Oh, for this evening, let's put the files back into the file case, as they were before. But

one of these days we'll have to sort them out, all those notes and comments. Quite a lot I've got together. The great thing is to have a simple, efficient system for classifying them; with an index, of course, that I keep absolutely up to date. Like Philip's. Yes, a card-index. Of course, all the great doctors . . .

Gaily, with an almost dancing step, he moved to and fro between the hall and the bookcase. Suddenly he emitted a boyish laugh, that came as a surprise. 'Doctor Antoine Thibault!' he announced, halting for a moment and straightening his shoulders. 'It's Doctor Thibault! Of course you've heard of him; the child-specialist!' He side-stepped nimbly, made a rapid bow, then, sobering down, resumed his journeys to and fro between the hall and study. The wicker basket, next. In two years' time I'll annex the Gold Medal. House Physician at a Clinic. Hospital diploma. So I'm setting up here for three or four years at most. Again he mimicked a high falsetto voice. 'Thibault is one of our youngest hospital staff doctors; Philip's right-hand man.' I got on the right scent when I specialized at once on children's diseases. When I think of Louiset, Tournon and the rest of them—the damned fools!

Damned fools! he repeated absent-mindedly. His arms were full of all sorts of objects and he was looking round perplexedly for the best place for each. Pity Jacques doesn't want to be a doctor. I could help him, I'd see him through. Two Thibaults as doctors! Why not, after all? It's a career worthy of a Thibault. Hard, I grant you, but how rewarding, when one has a taste for fighting against odds, and a bit of personal pride! Think of all the attention, memory, will-power it demands! And one never gets to the end of it. And consider what it means when one's made good! A great doctor, that's somebody! A Philip, for instance. One has to learn, of course, how to adopt that gentle, assured manner. Very courteous, but distant. Yes, it's pleasant to be someone, to be called in for consultation by the colleagues who're most envious of one!

Personally I've chosen the most difficult branch: children. Yes, they're the trickiest cases; never know how to tell you what's wrong and when they do, lead you all astray. That's it; with children one can count only on oneself; got to face up to the disease and hit the diagnosis. X-rays luckily. . . . A competent doctor to-day has got to be a radiologist, and know how to use the apparatus himself. Soon as I've taken my M.D., I'll do a course of X-rays. And later on, next door to my consulting-room, there'll be an X-ray room. With a nurse. No, a male assistant's better; in a white coat. On consulting-days, for every case that's in the least complicated—zip!—a photo.

‘What gives me confidence in Dr. Thibault is that he always begins with an X-ray examination.’

He smiled at the sound of his own voice, and winked towards the mirror. Why yes, I don’t deny it, that’s Pride, with a capital P! He laughed ironically. The Thibault pride, as Abbé Vécard calls it. My father, too, of course. But I—oh well, let it go at that! It’s pride. Why not? Pride comes in very useful as a driving force. I make good use of it, too. Why shouldn’t I? Isn’t it up to a man to make the most of his talents? What are my talents, now? He smiled. Easy to answer that. For one thing, I’m quick in the uptake, and I’m retentive; what I know sticks. Next, I can work. ‘That chap Thibault works like a horse!’ So much the better; let ’em say it if they want to, they’d all like to be able to do as much. And then, what more? Energy. Definitely that. An ex-tra-ord-in-ary energy! He said it out loud, syllable by syllable, turning again to the mirror. It’s like a battery; well, a charged accumulator, always on tap for any effort I require of it. But what would all those talents come to, if there wasn’t driving force to actuate them? Tell me that, Monsieur l’Abbé! He was holding in his hand a flat, nickel-plated instrument-case that gleamed under the ceiling-light, and was wondering where to put it. Finally he reached up and placed it on the top of the bookcase. ‘Eh lad, it’s nowt to be ashamed of!’ he shouted in the jovial, bucolic Norman voice his father sometimes affected. ‘And there’s a lot in pride, saving your respects, Monsieur l’Abbé.’

The wicker basket was nearly empty. From its depths Antoine took two little portraits in plush frames and gazed at them musingly. They were photographs of his maternal grandfather and his mother. The former portrait showed a handsome old man standing beside a table piled with books, on which his hand was resting; the other, a young woman with fine features and indefinite rather gentle eyes. She was wearing an open square-cut bodice and two silky tresses fell upon a shoulder. He was so familiar with this likeness of his mother that it was thus he always pictured her, though the portrait dated from the time of Madame Thibault’s engagement, and he had never known her with her hair like that. He had been nine years old at Jacques’ birth, when she had died. He could remember better his grandfather. Couturier the economist and friend of MacMahon, who had just missed being made Prefect of the Seine Department on the fall of M. Thiers and had been for some years Dean of the Institute. Antoine had never forgotten his pleasant face, his white muslin cravats, and his razors with mother-of-pearl handles, one for every day of the week, in their sharkskin case.

He stood the two portraits on the mantelpiece, amongst his specimens of stones and fossils.

The room was rapidly undergoing a complete transformation. The miscellaneous objects and papers littering his desk had still to be arranged. He set about it with a will and, when everything was in place, surveyed his handiwork with satisfaction. As for my old clothes and linen, he decided lazily, that's old Mother Frühling's affair. To make his escape from Mademoiselle's leading-strings still more complete, he had arranged for the concierge to do all the work in the ground-floor flat, without help or interference from above. Lighting a cigarette, he settled luxuriously into one of the leather arm-chairs. It was seldom he had a whole evening to himself like this, without anything definite to do, and he was feeling rather lost. It was too early to go to bed and he wondered what to do with himself. Should he stay where he was, smoking cigarettes, thinking of anything, or nothing? Of course he had letters to write but—no, he didn't feel like letter-writing.

I know, he suddenly thought, rising from the chair and going to the bookcase. I meant to look up what Hémon says about infantile diabetes. Setting the fat, paper-bound volume on his knee, he began glancing through its pages. Yes, I ought to have known that; it's obvious. A frown had settled on his face. Yes, I was completely mistaken; if it hadn't been for Philip that poor child would be done for, and it would be my fault. Well, not exactly my fault. Still . . . He closed the book and slammed it on to the table. Curious how stiff, almost cutting, the Chief can be on such occasions. Of course he's awfully vain, likes to throw his weight about. 'My poor good Thibault,' that's what he said: 'My poor good Thibault, the diet you prescribed was bound to make the child get worse.' Yes, he said that in front of the nurses and students; a nasty slap in the eye!

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he took a few steps in the room. I really ought to have answered him back. I should have said: For one thing, if you did your own duty . . .' Just that. He'd have said: 'Monsieur Thibault, on that score I do not see how anyone . . .' Then I'd have driven home my point.

'Excuse me, Chief. If you came to hospital punctually in the morning, and if you stayed until the end of the consultation hour, instead of dashing off at half-past eleven to visit your paying patients, I wouldn't have to do your work for you, and I wouldn't run the risk of making blunders.' Yes! In front of them all! What a sensation! Of course he'd have been sick to death with me for a couple of weeks or so—but what the devil would that matter? Who cares?

A vindictive expression had suddenly come over his face. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he began absent-mindedly winding up the clock. He shivered, put on his coat again, and went back to his chair. His cheerfulness of a short while back had evaporated and he felt a sudden chill at his heart. The damned fool! His lips twisted in a rancorous grin. Crossing his legs impatiently, he lit another cigarette. But even as he murmured 'Damned fool!' he had been thinking of the sureness of eye, the experience, the amazing intuition of Dr. Philip, and at that moment the genius of his Chief seemed to him something almost superhuman.

What about me? he thought, and a vague distress seemed to grip his throat. Shall I ever get to understand things in a flash, as he does? Shall I ever have that almost infallible perspicacity which is what really makes the great physician? Shall I? Of course I've a good memory, I'm hard-working, persevering. But those are virtues of the underling. Have I anything more in me? It's not the first time I've boggled over an easy diagnosis—yes, there's no getting over that, it was simplicity itself, a 'classical' case, with all the obvious symptoms. Suddenly he flung his arms up, and raised his voice. Yes, it's going to be a hard struggle. I've got to work, pile up knowledge day by day. But then his face grew pale. He had remembered Jacques was coming next day. To-morrow evening, he thought, Jacques will be in the room over there, and I . . .

He had jumped up. And now the project he had formed of living with his brother appeared to him in its true light, as the most irreparable of follies! He was no longer thinking of the responsibility he had undertaken, he was thinking only of the handicap that was bound from now on, whatever he might do, to retard his progress. What a fool he had been! It was he himself who had hung this millstone round his own neck. And now there was no escape.

He crossed the hall unthinkingly, opened the door of the room that had been prepared for Jacques, and stood on the threshold, unmoving, peering into the darkness. He felt profoundly discouraged. 'Damn it!' he said aloud. 'Is there no way of escape, no place where one can have some peace? Where one could work, and have only oneself to think about? Here one has to give in all the time—to the family, to friends, and now to Jacques! They all conspire to prevent me from working, to make a mess of my life!' The blood had gone to his head, his throat was parched. He ran to the kitchen, drank two glasses of cold water, and returned to his study.

In a mood of black depression he began to undress. All in this room, in which he had not yet got used to his surroundings, in which familiar objects

seemed different from their former selves—everything in the room suddenly seemed hostile.

He took an hour to go to bed, and longer still to sleep. He was not accustomed to have noises of the street so near; each passing footfall made him start. His mind was obsessed with trifles; he remembered the trouble he had had coming home the other night, from an evening at Philip's place, in finding a cab. And, from time to time, the thought of Jacques' return came back with harrowing intensity, and he started tossing this side and that in nervous exasperation.

Furiously he adjured himself: I've my own way to make, blast it! Let them look after themselves! I shall let him live here, now that it's all fixed up, and I'll see he does the work he has to do. But there it ends. I've promised to look after him, and that's all. It must not stand in the way of my career. My career! That's the great thing!

Of his affection for the boy not a trace remained that night. Antoine recalled his visit to Crouy. He pictured his brother as he then had seen him: emaciated, with the pale cast of loneliness. Quite possibly, it struck him now, the boy was consumptive. In that case he would persuade his father to pack off Jacques to a good sanatorium; to Auvergne, to the Pyrenees or, better still, to Switzerland; then he, Antoine, would be alone, his own master, free to work just as he pleased. He even caught himself thinking: I'd take his room and use it as my bedroom.

8

ANTOINE woke up in an entirely different mood. In the course of the morning, at the hospital, he frequently consulted his watch with cheerful impatience, all eagerness to go and take over his brother from the hands of M. Faisme. He was at the station long before the train was due and, while he walked up and down the platform, busied himself memorizing what he intended to say to M. Faisme about the Foundation. But when the train came in and he saw Jacques' form and the Superintendent's glasses amidst the press of passengers, he completely forgot the home-truths he had intended to rub in.

M. Faisme was all smiles, very spick and span, and accosted Antoine as if he were a bosom friend. He wore light-coloured gloves and his yellow face, close-shaved to an immaculate smoothness, gave the impression of having been liberally powdered. He seemed little disposed to part company with the brothers and urged them to a café terrace for a drink. Only by promptly hailing a taxi did Antoine manage to escape. M. Faisme himself lifted Jacques' hold-all on to the seat, and when the cab moved off, at the risk of having the toes of his patent-leather shoes run over, thrust his head in through the window and clasped effusively the brothers' hands, bidding Antoine meanwhile convey his profound respects to the Eminent Founder.

Jacques was crying.

He had not yet said a word or made the least response to his brother's cordial welcome. But the state of prostration the boy was evidently in increased Antoine's pity and the new gentleness stirring in his heart. Had anyone ventured to remind him of his rageful feelings of the previous night, he would have disclaimed them indignantly and affirmed in perfect good faith that he had never ceased to feel that the boy's return would give at least a point and purpose to his life, so lamentably empty and futile hitherto.

When he had led his brother into their flat and closed the door behind them, he was as pleasantly elated as a young lover doing the honours of the home he has prepared for her to his first mistress. Indeed that very idea flashed through his mind and made him laugh; perhaps he was being ridiculous, but he was feeling far too cheerful to mind that. And though in vain he tried to catch some gleam of satisfaction on his brother's face, he never doubted for a moment that he was going to make a success of the task he had undertaken.

Jacques' room had been visited at the last moment by Mademoiselle; she had lit the fire to give it a cosier air and placed well to the fore a plateful of the almond cakes dusted with vanilla sugar for which Jacques had had a special fondness in the past. On the bedside table, in a glass, was a little bunch of violets with a streamer cut out of paper attached to it, on which Gisèle had written in chalk of various colours: *For Jacques*.

But Jacques paid no heed to any of these preparations. Almost the moment he entered, while Antoine was taking off his coat, he had sat down near the door, holding his hat.

'Come along, Jacques, and have a look round our estate!' Antoine called out.

The boy went up to him lethargically, cast a listless glance into the other room, and went back to his seat. He seemed to be waiting for, and afraid of,

something.

‘What do you say to going up and seeing “them” now?’ Antoine suggested. And he guessed from Jacques’ shiver that, with all his dread of the impending encounter, he would rather get it over as soon as possible.

‘Yes? Well, let’s go at once. We’ll only stay a minute or two,’ Antoine added, to give him courage.

M. Thibault was waiting for them in his study. He was in a good humour. The sky was cloudless and spring was in the air. Moreover, that morning when he had gone to mass at the parish church, sitting in his special pew, he had had the pleasure of reminding himself that on the next Sunday there would doubtless be, sitting in that same seat, a new and eminent member of the Institute. He went up to his sons, and kissed the younger. Jacques was sobbing. M. Thibault saw in his tears proof of his remorse and good resolutions; he was more moved than he cared to show. He had the boy sit in one of the high-backed chairs on each side of the fireplace, and stalking up and down the room, his hands behind his back, puffing and blowing as was his wont, he pronounced a brief homily, affectionate yet firm, recalling the terms on which Jacques had been given the privilege of coming home again to his father’s house, and bidding him show Antoine as much deference and obedience as if Antoine were his father.

An unexpected caller cut short the peroration; it was a future colleague, and M. Thibault, anxious not to keep him cooling his heels in the drawing-room, dismissed his sons. Nevertheless he escorted them up to his study door and, as with one hand he drew back the curtain, placed the other on the head of the repentant boy. Jacques felt his father’s hand stroking his hair and patting his neck with an indulgence so unwonted that he could not restrain his emotion and, turning, seized the thick, flabby hand to raise it to his lips. Taken by surprise, M. Thibault opened a displeased eye, and withdrew his hand with a feeling of embarrassment.

‘Tch! Tch!’ he muttered gruffly, jerking his neck clear of the collar several times. Jacques’ sentimentality seemed to him to augur no good.

They found Mademoiselle dressing Gisèle for Vespers. When Mademoiselle, instead of the little imp of mischief she was expecting, saw a tall, pale youth with haggard eyes enter the room, she wrung her hands alarmingly and the ribbon she was tying in the little girl’s hair slipped from her fingers. Such was her consternation that it was some little time before she could bring herself to kiss him.

‘Bless and save us, Jacques! Is it really you?’ was all she managed to say; then flung her arms around him. After hugging him to her bosom, she

stepped back to have another look at him, but, though her shining eyes lingered on every feature, they could find no semblance of her dear youngster's face.

Gise was still more startled by the change and feeling so shy that she kept her eyes fixed on the carpet, and had to bite her lip to keep herself from bursting into laughter. And Jacques' first smile of the day was for her.

'So you don't recognize me, Gise!' He went up to her and, now that the ice was broken, she threw herself into his arms and then began skipping round him like a young lamb, still clinging to his hand. But she dared not talk to him as yet; not even ask if he had seen her flowers.

They all went down together. Gisèle had not let go Jacques' hand and was nestling against him with the innocent sensuality of a young animal. At the foot of the staircase they parted hands, but in the portico as she was going out she blew him, through the glass door, a big kiss with both hands; he did not see it.

Now they were alone in their new home, Antoine's first glance at Jacques told him a weight had been lifted from the boy's mind by this meeting with the members of the family, and that he was already feeling better.

'You know, I think we'll do very well here, you and I. Nice little flat, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Well, sit down, old chap, and make yourself at home. Try that chair over there, it's very comfy, and tell me what you think of it. Now I'll make some tea. I expect you're hungry? Go and choose us some cakes at the pastrycook's.'

'Thanks, I'm not hungry.'

'But *I* am!' Nothing could repress Antoine's geniality. After a laborious, solitary youth, Antoine was now experiencing for the first time the pleasure of loving and protecting someone, sharing his life with another. And for the sheer joy of it he was laughing, carried away by an exhilaration that was making him expansive as he had never been before.

'Have a cigarette then. No? You keep on looking at me. . . . Don't you smoke? You keep on looking at me, I was going to say, as if I was laying a trap for you. Look here, old chap, let yourself go a bit. Have a little confidence, damn it! You're not in the reformatory now. Can't you trust me even now?'

'Of course I trust you.'

‘Well then, what is it? Are you afraid I’ve let you down, that I’ve got you back on false pretences and you’re not as free as you expected?’

‘N-no.’

‘Then what’s worrying you? Are you missing anything?’

‘No.’

‘Then what is it? What’s going on behind that stubborn-looking forehead of yours? Out with it!’ He went up to the boy, on the point of bending over him, giving him a brotherly kiss, but he refrained. Jacques looked up at his brother with forlorn, hopeless eyes; he realized an answer was expected of him.

‘Why do you ask me all those questions?’ He shuddered slightly, then added in a very low voice: ‘What difference can it make?’

There was a short silence. Antoine was gazing at his brother, and there was such affectionate compassion in his eyes that once more Jacques felt inclined to cry.

‘Yes, old chap, just now you’re like a sick man.’ All the gaiety had left Antoine’s voice. ‘But, never fear, you’ll get over it. Only let yourself be looked after—and loved!’ he added shyly, without looking at the boy. ‘We don’t yet know one another well. Just think, nine years between us—it was a regular abyss as long as you were a child. You were eleven when I was twenty; we couldn’t have anything in common. But now it’s very different. . . . No, I couldn’t say if I had any affection for you in those days. I didn’t ever think about it. You see I’m being quite frank with you. But now—well, all that, too, is changed. I’m delighted—yes, damn it!—I’m thrilled to have you here with me. Life will be more pleasant, better in many ways, now that there are two of us. Don’t you think so? For instance, when I’m coming back from the hospital, I’m sure to hurry now, so as to get home quickly. And I’ll find you here, sitting at your desk, after a strenuous day’s work. Shan’t I? And in the evening we’ll come down from dinner early, and each will settle down in his own study, under a lamp; but we’ll leave the doors open so as to see each other and feel we are together. Or else, some nights, we’ll have a good talk, like two old friends, and it’ll be an effort to drag ourselves to bed. What’s up? Why are you crying?’

He went up to Jacques, sat on the arm of his chair, and after a brief hesitation took his hand. Jacques turned away his tearful face, but returned the pressure of Antoine’s hand, and for some moments clung to it feverishly with all his might.

‘Oh, Antoine!’ The cry seemed choking in his throat. ‘If you only knew all that’s happened inside me, in the last year!’

He was sobbing so violently that Antoine did not dream of putting any further questions. Placing his arm round Jacques' shoulders, he pressed the boy tenderly to him. Once before, on that evening when in the darkness of the cab the barriers between them had fallen, he had experienced that thrill of vast compassion, that sensation of a sudden access of strength and will-power—the feeling that he alone must supply the vital force for both of them. And very often since an idea had hovered in the background of his mind, an idea which now was taking clear and definite form. Rising, he began to pace the room.

'Listen!' he began. His voice had an unusual intensity of feeling. 'I don't know why I'm speaking to you of this so soon, on our first day. Anyhow, we've plenty of time to return to it. Well, this is what I've been thinking—you and I are brothers. That doesn't sound much of a discovery, does it? And yet the idea is a new one, for me, and one that deeply moves me. We're brothers! Not merely of the same blood, but springing from the same origins since the beginning of time, from the same germ-cells, the same vital impulse. We're not just any two young men, named Antoine and Jacques; we're two Thibaults, we *are* the Thibaults. Do you see what I mean? And what's so alarming in a way is that we both have in us that same vital impulse, that special Thibault temperament. Do you see? For we Thibaults are somehow different from the rest of mankind. I rather suspect we have something in us that others haven't got; just because we *are* Thibaults. Personally, wherever I've been, in college, Faculty, or hospital, I've felt myself a man apart, I hardly like to say "superior to the others"—though, after all, why shouldn't I? Yes, we are superior, we're equipped with an energy others don't possess. What's your opinion? Don't you agree? I know that you passed for a bit of a duffer at school, but didn't you feel it there, too, that "urge" as they call it, which somehow gave you more—more driving force than the other boys?'

'Yes!' Jacques had stopped crying and was staring at his brother with passionate interest. His face had suddenly an expression of intelligence and maturity that made him seem ten years older.

'It's a long while now since I first noticed it,' Antoine went on. 'There must be some particular combination in our make-up, of pride and violence and obstinacy—I don't know how to put it. Take father, for instance. But, of course, you don't know him very well. And it takes a different form with him. Now listen!' He drew up his chair in front of Jacques and leant forward, his hands resting on his knees: one of M. Thibault's favourite attitudes. 'What I wanted to say to you to-day was that this secret force is always making itself felt in my life; I don't know how to describe it, it's like

a wave—one of those sudden swelling waves that buoy you up when you're swimming, and carry you in one tremendous rush a great way forward. But you must know how to turn it to good account. Nothing's impossible, nothing's even difficult, when one has that vital force; and we have it, you and I. Do you understand? In my own case, for example—but I'm not telling you all this just to talk about myself. I want to talk about you. It's up to you now to take stock of this driving force you have in you, to analyse it and apply it rightly. If you make up your mind, you can catch up on all the time you've wasted, in one stride. It's a matter of will-power. Some people simply haven't any—as I've discovered only quite recently. I've got it, and you can have it, too. All the Thibaults can have it. And that's why they can make good at anything they turn their hand to. Think of what it means, to forge ahead of others, to make one's value recognized. I tell you, it's our duty to bring this vital energy, which is our heritage, to full fruition. It's in us—in you and in me—that the Thibault stock must come to flower—the full flower of a lineage. Do you see what I mean?' Jacques' eyes had been riveted on Antoine with all but painful fixity. Antoine repeated: 'Do you understand all this?'

'Yes, yes, I understand!' he all but shouted. His plea eyes were sparkling, there was an almost vicious edge to his voice, and his lips were curiously twisted. It looked as if he were furious with his brother for shattering his peace of mind by this so unexpected outburst of enthusiasm. A tremor passed through his body, then his features relaxed and a look of profound weariness settled on his face.

'Oh let me be!' he suddenly exclaimed, letting his forehead sink between his hands.

Antoine said nothing; he was observing his brother. How much thinner and paler he had grown, in a fortnight! The close-cropped reddish hair made still more apparent the abnormal size of his skull, the scragginess of his neck, and his protruding ears.

'By the way,' he suddenly asked, point blank, 'have you turned over a new leaf?'

'In what way?' Jacques murmured, and a mist crept over the brightness of his eyes. He flushed, and, though he managed to keep up an expression of surprise, it was obviously feigned.

Antoine made no reply.

It was getting late. He looked at his watch and rose; he had his second round to make, at five. He pondered if he should tell his brother he was

going to leave him alone till dinner; but, much to his surprise, Jacques seemed almost glad to see him go.

And indeed, when he was alone, he felt as if a weight had been lifted from him. He had the idea of making an inspection of the flat; but in the hall in front of the closed doors a vague anxiety came over him and he went back to his own room, and shut himself in. At last he noticed the bunch of violets and the paper streamer. All the events of the day merged together in his memory; his father's welcome, Antoine's conversation. He lay down on the sofa and began crying again, but not with despair; he was weeping above all from exhaustion, but also because of the room, and the violets, and the hand his father had laid on his head, and Antoine's solicitude, and the new life which was beginning for him. He wept because on all sides they seemed to want to love him, because henceforth people were going to take notice of him, and speak to him, and smile towards him and he would have to respond; because his days of tranquillity were over.

9

TO soften the transition, Antoine had postponed Jacques' return to the Lycée till October. With the help of some of his old school-friends, who were about to enter the University, he had worked out a sort of 'refresher course,' the object of which was the progressive re-education of the boy's intelligence. Three different tutors shared the task. They were all young, and personal friends. Under those favourable conditions, the youngster worked as and when he pleased, according to the amount of concentration he could bring to his task. And soon Antoine had the pleasure of seeing that his seclusion in the reformatory had not done so much harm to his brother's mental faculties as might have been feared; in certain respects, indeed, his mind seemed to have ripened most remarkably in solitude—so much so that after a rather slow start, his progress soon became more rapid than Antoine had dared to hope. Jacques profited, without excess, by the independence he was allowed. Moreover, Antoine, though he did not say so to his father, but with the tacit approval of the Abbé Vécard, felt that no harm could be done by allowing Jacques the utmost freedom. He realized the potentialities of

Jacques' mind and believed that there was everything to be gained by letting him develop in his own way, on his own lines.

During the first few days the boy felt a strong distaste for going out of the house. The bustle of the street made him feel dizzy, and Antoine had to exercise his ingenuity in devising errands which took him out into the open air. So gradually Jacques renewed acquaintance with the neighbourhood and after a while came actually to like his walks abroad. The weather kept fine and he found pleasure in walking to Notre Dame along the river bank, and strolling in the Tuileries Gardens. One day he even ventured to enter the Louvre Museum, but he found the air stifling and dusty, and the long lines of pictures so monotonous that he soon went out, and did not return.

At meal-times he was silent; he listened to his father. In any case M. Thibault was so dictatorial and overbearing that all who were constrained to live in his vicinity took refuge in silence and composed their faces into masks of decorous attention. Mademoiselle herself, despite her beatific admiration, always hid her real face from him. M. Thibault enjoyed this deferential silence, which gave free rein to his craving to lay down the law on every topic, and was naïve enough to take it for approval. His attitude to Jacques was studiously reserved, and, faithful to his promise, he never questioned him as to how he spent his time.

There was one point, however, on which M. Thibault had shown himself intractable; he had formally forbidden all intercourse with the Fontanins, and, to make assurance doubly sure, had decided that Jacques should not join the rest of the family that summer at Maisons-Laffitte, where he went every year with Mademoiselle, and where the Fontanins, too, had a little country residence on the outskirts of the forest. It was settled that Jacques should spend the summer in Paris with Antoine.

The paternal edict against seeing the Fontanins was the subject of a momentous conversation between Antoine and his brother. Jacques' first reaction was a cry of revolt; he felt that the old injustice would never be wiped out, so long as this attitude of suspicion as regards his friend was allowed to persist. The violence of his reaction was far from displeasing Antoine. For it proved to him that Jacques, the real Jacques, was being reborn. But when the first blaze of anger had passed, he set himself to reason with the boy. And he had little trouble in extracting a promise that he would not try to see Daniel. As a matter of fact, Jacques was not so set on their meeting as he seemed to be. He was still too shy and too unsociable to desire new contacts; the intimacy with his brother was enough—all the more so as Antoine took pains to live with him on a footing of simple friendship,

without anything to indicate the difference in their ages, and still less the authority with which he had been invested.

One afternoon in early June, when he came home, Jacques saw a crowd gathered round the street-door. Old Madame Frühling, the concierge, had had an attack and was lying unconscious on the threshold of her room. She came to in the evening, but her right arm and leg were partially paralysed.

Some days later, when Antoine was about to leave his flat after breakfast, there was a ring at the bell. A young German-looking girl, wearing a pink blouse and black apron, was standing in the doorway. She was blushing, but there was boldness in her smile.

‘I’ve come to do your rooms, sir. Don’t you recognize me, Monsieur Antoine? I’m Lisbeth Frühling.’

She spoke with an Alsatian accent, the sing-song quality of which was still more emphasized by her childish intonation. Antoine had not forgotten the little girl who was known to all the residents in the block of flats as ‘Old Madame Frühling’s orphan brat,’ and whom, as he walked past the concierge’s ‘lodge,’ he often used to see playing hopscotch in the courtyard. Lisbeth explained that she had come from Strasburg to look after her aunt and do her work for her. And forthwith the girl took up her domestic duties in the young men’s flat.

She continued to come each morning, bringing their early breakfast on a tray and waiting on them as they ate it. Antoine would tease her over her way of blushing in and out of season, and ask her questions about German life. She was nineteen; during the six years since she had left Madame Frühling, she had been living with her uncle who kept an *Hotel Restauration* in the vicinity of the station at Strasburg. So long as Antoine was present, Jacques put in a word now and then. But whenever he was alone with Lisbeth in the flat he kept studiously out of her way.

All the same, on the mornings when Antoine was on duty early at the hospital, she served the breakfast in Jacques’ bedroom. On these occasions he always asked her for news of her aunt, and Lisbeth did not spare him a single detail. The old lady was slowly getting better—she must be, as her appetite was steadily improving. Lisbeth had a great respect for food. She was small and plump, and the suppleness of her body bore witness to her passion for dancing and open-air games. When she laughed, she would look at Jacques without the least constraint. She had a knowing, pretty little face, with a rather short nose, young, pouting lips, china-blue eyes and clusters of flaxen curls rippling over her forehead.

Each day Lisbeth made the talk last a little longer and gradually Jacques got over his early shyness. He listened to all she said seriously, attentively. He had a way of listening that had at all times won him confidences: the secrets of servants, of schoolfellows, sometimes even of his masters. Lisbeth talked to him more freely than to Antoine, though it was with the elder brother she behaved more childishly.

One morning, noticing that Jacques was looking up a word in his German dictionary, she dropped what little reserve she had so far kept up and asked him to show her what he was translating. It happened to be a *Lied* of Goethe's that she knew by heart and used to sing at home.

Fliesse, fliesse, lieber Fluss!
Nimmer werd' ich froh. . . .

German poetry, it seemed, had a way of going to her head. In a soft voice she sang to him several German love-songs, explaining the meanings of the first lines before she began. The songs she liked best were always sad ones, with a note of childish sentiment.

Were I a little swallow in the nest
I would take wing to thee!

But Schiller was her adoration. After thinking hard for a while she recited without a break one of her favourite passages, the lines in *Mary Stuart* in which the young imprisoned queen is given leave to take a few steps in the garden of the keep where she is confined, and runs across the lawns, her eyes half blinded by the sudden light, her heart aflame with youth. Jacques could not understand all the words, so she translated as she went along and, to convey the young queen's delight in that brief spell of freedom, she put such emotion into her voice that Jacques, remembering Crouy, felt profoundly thrilled. Little by little vanquishing his reserve, he began describing his own misfortunes. He was still living so much alone, and spoke so seldom, that the sound of his own voice rapidly went to his head. In his excitement he embroidered on reality and inserted in his narrative all sorts of literary reminiscences; for, during the past two months, a large share of his time and industry had gone to the perusal of the novels on Antoine's shelves. He was keenly aware, moreover, that these romantic travesties were stirring Lisbeth's emotions far more effectively than would have done the plain, unvarnished truth. And when he saw the pretty girl drying her tears, in the graceful attitude of Mignon weeping for her motherland, he felt, almost for the first time, the boundless joy of the creative artist, and such an immense gratitude to Lisbeth for the pleasure she

was giving him that, with a thrill of hope, he wondered if this were not love. . . .

Next morning he awaited her impatiently. She guessed his feelings very likely and had brought with her an album full of picture-postcards, autographs and dried flowers; a visual record of her young life, of all she had been and done since the age of three. Jacques plied her with questions; he liked being taken by surprise, and was surprised by everything he did not know. Lisbeth's stories of her young days were sprinkled with picturesque details that carried conviction—in fact it was impossible to question her good faith. And yet, when a blush mantled her cheeks and the singing tone of her voice grew more pronounced, somehow she gave the impression of making things up, of lying, that we get from people trying to describe their dreams.

In a flutter of pleasurable excitement she spoke to him of the winter evenings at the Tanzschule where the young men and girls of her quarter of the city met. Carrying a tiny violin the dancing-master would follow the couples round, marking the beat, while Madame ground out the latest Viennese waltzes on the player piano. At midnight they all settled down to a meal. Then in merry groups they flocked out into the darkness, and saw each other home from house to house, but never could bring themselves to separate, so soft was the snow underfoot, so clear the wintry sky, so keen the night wind on their cheeks.

Sometimes non-commissioned officers from the garrison put in an appearance at their dances. One of them she named as 'Fredri' and another 'Will.' Lisbeth took her time before pointing out on a group-photograph of men in German uniforms the big doll-like soldier whose Christian name was Will. '*Ach!*' she said, dusting the photograph with her loose sleeve, 'he's such a nice boy, Will, so good-hearted and sentimental!' Evidently she had been to his room, for she told Jacques a long story in which a zither, raspberries and a bowl of junket figured. In the midst of the tale she caught herself up with a sudden little laugh; and left it unfinished. Sometimes she spoke of Will as her fiancé, and sometimes as if he had passed out of her life. Jacques gathered finally that he had been transferred to a garrison in Prussia after a mysterious, rather comical incident, the memory of which set her shivering at one moment and giggling at another. It seemed that there had been an hotel bedroom at the end of a corridor where the floor squeaked—but at that point the story became quite incomprehensible. One thing seemed clear; the room in question must have been one of those in Frühling's own hotel; otherwise how could her old uncle have been able, in the middle of the night, to rise in anger from his bed, pursue the soldier into

the courtyard, and throw him out into the street, in his shirt and socks? By way of explanation Lisbeth added that her uncle thought of marrying her himself, for her to keep house for him. She also informed Jacques that her uncle had a hare-lip and smoked black cigars that smelt of soot from morn till night. And, at that, suddenly the smile left her lips and she began to cry.

Jacques was sitting at his table, with the album open before him. Lisbeth was perched on the arm of his chair and when she bent down he was conscious of the warm fragrance of her breath and felt her curls lightly brushing his ear. But his senses were not stirred. Perversion he had known, but now another world was opening up before him, a world he fancied he was discovering within himself, but actually was exhuming from an English novel he had recently perused. It was a world of chaste love, happy, sentimental satisfactions, and of purity.

All through the day his imagination was busy planning out, down to the least detail, the interview of the next morning. He pictured them alone in the flat; they would, of course, have the whole morning to themselves without fear of interruption. He had made Lisbeth sit on the sofa, on his right; she bent her head forward and, standing, he gazed down, across the ringlets tumbling round her neck, on the smooth curves of her neck and back under the loose bodice. She did not dare to raise her eyes and he leant over her, whispering: 'I don't want you to go away again, ever again!' And then at last she raised her head, with a questioning look, and he gave her his answer, a kiss on her forehead, sealing their betrothal. 'In five years I'll be twenty. Then I shall tell Papa: "I'm a child no longer." If they say, "She's the concierge's niece," I . . .' He made a threatening gesture. 'So now we're engaged, you and I. You're my fiancée!' The four walls of his room seemed too narrow to contain so much happiness. He went out and walked in the warm summer sunshine, dazed with ecstasy. 'She's mine! Mine! My sweetheart!'

Next morning he was sleeping so soundly that he did not even hear her knock and leapt from his bed only when he heard her laugh in Antoine's room. When he went there Antoine had just finished breakfast and was about to leave. He had his hands pressed on Lisbeth's shoulders and was admonishing her in a gruff tone.

'Make no mistake about it! If you let your aunt have any more coffee, you'll have to deal with me!'

Lisbeth was laughing with that characteristic laugh of hers; she refused to believe that coffee served in the good old German manner, with plenty of

milk and sugar, and gulped down piping hot, could possibly do any harm to the old woman.

Now, at last, they were alone. On the tray were some pastry twists sprinkled with aniseed; she had made them specially for him. Deferentially she watched him eat his breakfast. Jacques was vexed with himself for being so hungry. Nothing was working out according to plan, and he was at a loss to find a means of linking up reality with the scene he had planned out in fancy, down to its last detail. And, as a crowning misfortune, the bell rang.

It was a surprise visit. Old Madame Frühling tottered in; she was far from being fully restored to health, but she was feeling better, heaps better, and had come to say good-morning to Master Jacques. After that Lisbeth had to help her aunt back to the lodge, and settle her down in her arm-chair. Time passed, and Lisbeth did not come back. Never had Jacques been able to endure the tyranny of circumstance. He stormed up and down his room, in the throes of a baffled fury that resembled the fits of rage that used to come over him in the past. Setting his jaw, he thrust his fists into his pocket. And presently he began to feel a grievance against Lisbeth.

When at last she came back, his mouth was parched and his gaze aggressive; he was so strung up by waiting that his hands were trembling. He pretended to be busy with his books. She hurried through the housework and said *au revoir*. He was still bending over his books. Sick at heart, he let her go without a word. But, the moment he was alone, he flung himself back in his chair and his lips set in a smile of such undiluted bitterness that he went to the mirror to enjoy it objectively. For the twentieth time he pictured the scene he had composed in fancy: Lisbeth seated, he standing, her flaxen curls . . . In a rush of bitterness he placed his hand before his eyes and flung himself on the sofa. But no tears came; all he felt was the throbbing of his nerves, a sense of baffled fury. . . .

When she came next day she had a downcast air and, thinking he was to blame for it, Jacques felt immediately contrite. As a matter of fact, the cause of her dejection was a disagreeable letter she had just received from Strasburg. The hotel was full, and her uncle wanted her back. Frühling agreed to wait one more week, but no longer. She had thought of showing the letter to Jacques, but the look of timid affection on his face so touched her that she could not bring herself to say anything that would distress him. She sat down, without thinking, on the sofa, and, as chance would have it, at the exact place where, in his daydream, Jacques had intended her to sit. And now he, too, was standing beside her, just where he had meant to stand. She bent forwards and he saw across a mist of flaxen ringlets the smooth curve of her back flowing away under the loosely fitting blouse. Almost

mechanically he began to bend towards her, when suddenly she straightened up—a shade too soon. She looked at him with surprise, then, smiling, drew him beside her on the sofa and without the least hesitation pressed her face to Jacques', her temple resting on his temple, her soft, warm cheek upon his cheek.

'*Chéri . . . Liebling!*'

He felt like swooning with the delight of it, and closed his eyes. Lisbeth's fingers, roughened at the tips by needlework, were fondling his other cheek, and now, very gently, they began to slip down underneath his collar. He felt the button come loose and a delicious tingling ran through his body. Her little hand seemed charged with electricity, as it slipped between the shirt and his skin; at last it settled upon his breast. Taking courage, Jacques moved his own hand towards her blouse, but found the way barred by a brooch. She unfastened the blouse to help him. He held his breath as he felt under his fingers the unfamiliar contact of another's flesh. She made a sudden nervous movement as if he were tickling her, and all at once he realized that the soft warmth of a little breast was nestling in his hand. Blushing, he gave her a clumsy kiss; she returned it, passionately, full on his mouth. He was disconcerted, even a little disgusted, by the clammy moisture lingering on his lips after the warm pressure of the kiss. Once more she rested her cheek on his, unmoving; the silken flutter of her eyelashes lightly brushed his temple. . . .

Henceforth this was their daily ritual. She would start taking off her brooch in the hall and, as she entered, pin it to the door-curtain. Then they would sit on the sofa, cheek to cheek, nestling in their bodies' warmth. Usually they were silent, but sometimes she would begin singing in a low voice a sentimental German ballad, which brought tears to their eyes; and for a while, pressing closely against each other, they would sway from side to side in rhythm with the song, mingling their breath and asking no better joys than that. When Jacques' fingers moved a little under her blouse, or if he changed the position of his head to brush Lisbeth's cheek delicately with his lips, she would gaze at him with eyes that always seemed to hold a mute appeal for gentleness, sighing, 'Be loving, *chéri!*'

Once their hands had found the usual resting-place, they did not stray in quest of new delight; by an unspoken pact both young people avoided unrehearsed gestures. They had all the physical nearness they wanted in the long, insistent pressure of cheek on cheek and the fluttering of their breasts, like the ghost of a caress, under each other's hands. For Lisbeth, who often seemed in a half dream, it was the easiest thing to keep her senses under control; at Jacques' side she was lost in a haze of poetic fancies, of ecstatic

purity. As for Jacques, the need for keeping in check any more definite impulse did not make itself felt in any way. Those chaste caresses were an end in themselves, and the idea that they might be a prelude to more ardent gestures never so much as crossed his mind. If at moments the proximity of the young, warm body had a physical effect upon his senses, he was hardly conscious of it, and the thought that Lisbeth might have noticed it would have made him mortally ashamed, disgusted with himself. No gross desire ever came over him while he was with her; the gulf between his spiritual and his fleshly self was unbridgeable. The former belonged to his beloved; the latter had its sordid, solitary being in another world, the world of night, which Lisbeth never entered. If some nights, unable to go to sleep, he flung himself out of bed, pulled off his nightshirt and, standing before the glass, fell to kissing his arms, hugging himself with a sort of desperate frenzy, never on these occasions did he conjure up Lisbeth's form to join the phantom rout of his imaginings.

Meanwhile Lisbeth was only too well aware that these idyllic days were numbered; she was due to leave Paris on the following Sunday, and she had not had the courage to tell Jacques.

That Sunday, at dinner-time, Antoine, knowing his brother was upstairs with the family, went to his room, where Lisbeth was awaiting him.

‘Well, what about it?’ he asked, with an enigmatic smile.

She shook her head.

‘And you’re off this evening, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

He made a gesture of annoyance.

‘But it’s his fault, too,’ she protested. ‘He doesn’t seem to think of it.’

‘You promised to “think of it” for him.’

She gazed at Antoine, despising him a little in her heart of hearts, for not understanding that, for her, Jacques was ‘different.’ Still, Antoine was good-looking, she liked his imposing manner, and could forgive him for being like the rest of men.

She had pinned her brooch to the curtain and began to undress in an absent-minded way; her thoughts were busy with the journey before her. When Antoine took her in his arms she gave a short, nervous laugh, which seemed to die away deep down in her throat. ‘*Liebling,*’ she whispered, ‘be extra nice this time—it’s our last evening.’

Antoine was out all the rest of the evening. Towards eleven Jacques heard him enter and walk at once to his room as quietly as he could. He was just going to bed, and did not call his brother.

As Jacques got into bed, his knee hit against something hard, a package of some sort—evidently a ‘surprise’ intended for him. It contained some aniseed twists, covered with a sticky coating of burnt sugar and wrapped up in tinfoil, and, inside a silk handkerchief with Jacques initials on it, a mauve envelope, inscribed: *To my beloved*.

She had never written to him before. That night it was as if she had come into the room and was bending over his bed. He was laughing for joy as he opened the envelope.

DEAR MASTER JACQUES,

When you read this letter I shall be far away from you. . . .

The lines grew blurred under his eyes; a cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

. . . I shall be far away from you. I am leaving to-night for Strasburg by the 10.12 train, from the Gare de l’Est.

‘Antoine!’

The cry was so heart-rending that Antoine rushed across to his brother’s room, thinking he had had an accident.

Jacques was sitting on his bed, his arms outspread, his lips parted, a look of wild entreaty in his eyes; it seemed as if he were dying and Antoine alone could save him. The letter lay on the counterpane. Antoine glanced through it without surprise; he had just seen Lisbeth off. He bent over his brother, but Jacques pushed him away.

‘Don’t say a word, Antoine, please. You can’t understand, you can’t imagine. . . .’

He was using the same words as Lisbeth. A look of obstinacy had settled on his face and his eyes had a dark, brooding intensity that brought to mind the boy he used to be. Suddenly his chest began to heave, his lips trembled and, as if he were trying to take shelter from an enemy, he rolled over and burst into sobs, crushing his face against the bolster. One of his arms was hanging behind him; Antoine gripped the quivering fingers which instantly closed round his. At a loss for words, Antoine squeezed his brother’s hand affectionately, gazing at his bent back racked by sobs. Once more he was struck by the secret fires brooding beneath the crust of seeming apathy and

always ready to blaze up in angry flames; and he took stock of the vanity of his educational pretensions.

Half an hour went by; Jacques' hand unclenched, he was no longer sobbing, but his breath still came in gasps. Little by little it became more regular, he was going to sleep. Antoine did not move; he could not bring himself to go. He was thinking with dismay of the boy's future. He waited another half-hour; then went out on tiptoe, leaving the door ajar.

Next morning Jacques was still asleep, or pretending to be, when Antoine left the flat.

They met, for the first time that day, upstairs, at the family table. Jacques' face was tired and drawn, there was a scornful twist to the corners of his mouth; he had the expression of children who take pride in thinking themselves misunderstood. Throughout the meal he was careful not to meet Antoine's eye; he did not even want to be pitied. Antoine understood; and moreover, he, too, did not particularly want to talk about Lisbeth.

Their life slipped back into its normal rut, as if nothing had happened.

10

ONE evening, just before dinner, Antoine was surprised to find amongst his mail an envelope addressed to him and enclosing a sealed letter for his brother. The writing was unfamiliar, but as Jacques was in the room with him, he did not want to seem to hesitate.

'Here's something for you,' he said at once.

Jacques darted towards him, his cheeks flushing an angry red. Antoine, seemingly absorbed in a bookseller's catalogue, handed him the envelope without looking at him. On raising his eyes he saw that Jacques had thrust the letter into his pocket, unread. Their eyes met. Jacques' were aggressive.

'Why are you staring at me like that?' he demanded. 'Haven't I the right to get a letter?'

Antoine returned his brother's look without a word, turned his back on him and left the room.

Throughout dinner he conversed with M. Thibault, studiously ignoring Jacques. As usual after dinner they went down together, but did not exchange a single word. Antoine went straight to his room. He had hardly sat down when Jacques entered without knocking, approached him with a combative air and flung down the open letter on the table.

‘Now that you’ve taken it on you to censor my correspondence, you’d better have a look at it!’

Antoine refolded the letter without a glance at its contents, and held it out to his brother. As Jacques did not take it, he opened his fingers and let the letter drop on to the carpet. Jacques picked it up and thrust it into his pocket.

‘Got the sulks, have you?’ he jeered. ‘Well, they’re wasted on me!’

Antoine shrugged his shoulders.

‘And, what’s more, let me tell you I’m sick and tired of it all.’ Jacques’ voice was shrill with anger. ‘I’m no longer a child, and I insist—you can’t deny I have the right . . .’ He left the phrase unfinished. Antoine’s air of calm attention maddened him. ‘I tell you I’ve had enough of it!’ he shouted.

‘Enough of what?’

‘Of everything.’ All the finer shades of feeling had left his face; his eyes were smouldering with rage, his ears seemed to be sticking out more than ever, and his mouth gaped. At that moment he looked a boor. His cheeks were growing scarlet. ‘Anyhow, this letter came here by mistake. My instructions were that I was to be written to *Poste Restante*. That way at least I can get my letters without interference, without having to render an account to anyone.’

Antoine gazed at him steadily without answering. Silence was his trump card, he knew; moreover it served to mask his embarrassment. Never had the boy spoken to him in that tone before.

‘And, to begin with, I mean to start seeing Fontanin again, do you understand? No one shall stop me.’

It came back to Antoine in a flash; that was the writing in the grey exercise-book. So Jacques had broken his promise and was writing to Fontanin. Antoine wondered if Madame de Fontanin was in the secret. Had she authorized the clandestine correspondence?

For the first time in his life Antoine was thinking ‘Well, I suppose it’s up to me to play the “heavy father”!’ He remembered that not so very long ago he might have found himself adopting towards M. Thibault the very attitude Jacques was adopting with him now. Yes, the tables had been properly turned!

‘So you’ve been writing to Daniel?’ he asked with a frown.

Jacques nodded decisively, without the least sign of contrition.

‘Without telling me!’

‘Well, what about it?’ Jacques retorted.

Antoine’s first impulse was to give the impertinent youngster a slap on the face. He clenched his fists. The way the argument was going threatened to ruin the very thing on which he set most store.

‘Go away,’ he said in a tone of feigned discouragement. ‘To-night you simply don’t realize what you are saying.’

‘I’m saying . . . I’m saying that I’ve had enough of it!’ Jacques stamped his foot. ‘I’m no longer a child. I insist on being allowed to see whoever I choose. I’ve had enough of living like this. I want to go and see Fontanin because Fontanin is my friend. That’s why I wrote to him. I know what I’m doing. I’ve asked him to meet me, and you can tell that to—to anyone you like. I’m sick of this life, sick to death of it.’ He was raging about the room, his mind a chaos of rancour and revolt.

What he did not say, and what Antoine could scarcely be expected to guess, was that ever since Lisbeth had gone away, the unhappy youngster had been feeling such desolation and such heaviness of heart that he had given way to his yearning to confide this first great secret of his young existence to someone of his own age; to share with Daniel the burden that seemed crushing out his life. He had rehearsed the whole scene to himself, carried away by romantic emotion: the climax of their friendship, when he would entreat his friend to love one half of Lisbeth, and Lisbeth to let Daniel take on himself one half of their love.

‘I’ve asked you to go,’ Antoine repeated. He feigned complete detachment and rather enjoyed the feeling of superiority it gave him. ‘We’ll talk it over later, when you’ve come to your senses.’

Maddened by Antoine’s imperturbability, Jacques began shouting in his face. ‘You’re a coward! You’re just another wretched usher!’ He slammed the door behind him as he went out.

Antoine rose, turned the key in the lock and dropped into a chair. His face was white with indignation.

‘The damned little fool—calling me an usher! He shall pay for that. If he thinks he can say what he likes to me, he’s mistaken. He’s spoilt my evening, I shan’t be able to do a stroke of work now. Yes, he shall pay for this! And to think I used to have a quiet life. What a mess I’ve made of things! And all for this wretched little ass. An “usher” indeed! The more one does for them—Yes, it’s I who’ve played the fool. For his sake, here I am

wasting my time, ruining my work. But now I'm through with him. I've my own life to live, exams to get through. And that little idiot shan't interfere, damn him!' Unable to keep still, he began pacing up and down the room.

Suddenly he visualized himself in Madame de Fontanin's presence, and a look of stoical disillusionment settled upon his features. 'Yes, Madame, I've done everything I possibly could. I've tried kindness and affection, and allowed him the greatest possible freedom. And look at the result! Believe me, Madame, there are some temperaments with which there's nothing to be done. Society can protect itself from them only in one way, and that's by preventing them from doing harm. It may sound pretentious calling a reformatory a "Means of Social Preservation," but there's good sense behind it.'

A rustling, mouse-like noise made him turn his head. A note had been pushed under the locked door.

'Please forgive me,' it ran, 'for calling you an usher. I've got over my temper. Let me come back.'

Antoine could not help smiling. Impulsively, in a sudden access of affection, he went to the door and opened it. Jacques was there, his arms dangling by his side. His nerves were still so much on edge that he kept his head bent and had to bite his lip to keep himself from laughing. Assuming a look of vexation and aloofness, Antoine went back to his chair.

'I've work to do.' His tone was curt. 'You've already made me waste time enough for one evening. What do you want now?'

Jacques raised his eyes, in which the laughter lingered, and looked his brother in the face.

'I want to see Daniel again.'

There was a short silence.

'You know that father's set against it,' Antoine began. 'What's more, I've taken the trouble to explain to you his reasons. Do you remember? On that day it was settled that you agreed to the arrangement and wouldn't make any attempt to get in touch with the Fontanins. I trusted you. And now, see what's happened! You've let me down; at the first pretext, you've broken our pledge. Well, all that's over now; I'll never be able to trust you again.'

Jacques was sobbing.

'Please don't say that, Antoine. It isn't fair. You can't understand. I know I oughtn't to have written without telling you. But that was because there was something else I'd have been obliged to tell you—and I simply couldn't!' In a low voice he added: 'Lisbeth. . . .'

Antoine cut him short. 'That has nothing to do with it.' At all costs he wanted to stave off a confession on that topic. It would have been even more embarrassing to him than to Jacques. To divert the conversation into a new channel, he went on at once. 'Well, I'll agree to give you one more chance. You're going to promise me. . . .'

'No, Antoine, I can't promise you not to see Daniel again. It's you who are going to promise me to let me see him. Listen to me, Antoine, I swear to you before God that never again will I hide anything from you. But I must see Daniel again—only I don't want to do so without your knowing. Neither does he. I'd written to him asking him to reply *Poste Restante*, but he wouldn't. This is what he writes. "Why *Poste Restante*? We have nothing to conceal. Your brother has always been on our side. So I'm addressing this letter to him, and he can give it to you." At the end he refuses to come and meet me behind the Panthéon as I'd asked him to. Listen! "I have told mother about it. The simplest way will be for you to come as soon as you can and spend a Sunday at our place. My mother likes you and your brother very much, and she's told me to invite both of you." You see what a decent chap he is. Papa has no idea of it and condemns him without knowing a thing about him. I don't feel bitter with father; but with you, Antoine, it's not the same thing. You've met Daniel, you know what he's like and you've seen his mother; there's no reason for you to behave like Papa. You should be pleased I have a friend like Daniel. Haven't I had my share of loneliness? Please forgive me, I don't mean that for you, you know I don't. But you must see; it isn't the same thing, Daniel and you. I'm sure you have friends of your own age, haven't you? You must know what it is to have a real friend.'

Seeing the look of happiness and affection that lit up Jacques' face as he said the final word, Antoine ruefully admitted to himself that he had no real friend. And suddenly he felt an impulse to go up to his brother and put his arm round him. But there was an obduracy, a challenge in Jacques' eyes that galled his pride and gave him a desire to match his will against it, fight it down. Still, he could not help being shaken by the boy's determination.

Stretching out his legs, he began to turn the problem over in his mind. 'Obviously,' he mused, 'I'm broadminded enough to admit that father's veto is absurd. That Fontanin boy can have nothing but a good influence on Jacques. Nothing could be better than the atmosphere of his home life. What's more, it might be of help to me in handling Jacques. Yes, I'm sure she would help me; indeed she'd have a better notion of what to do than I, and she'd soon get a great influence over the boy. What a fine woman she is! The devil of it is—supposing father heard of it! Well, well, I'm not a child.

After all, it's I who've taken full responsibility for Jacques—so I've the right to decide things, in the last resort. I consider that, on the face of it, father's veto is absurd and unjust; well then, I'll ignore it. For one thing it will make Jacques more attached to me. He'll think, "Antoine isn't like Papa." And then there's Daniel's mother. . . .' He saw himself standing again before Madame de Fontanin, saw her smile as he explained: 'Madame, I've made a point of bringing my brother to you, myself.'

He rose, took a few steps in the room, then halted in front of Jacques who stood, unmoving, summoning up all his will-power and resolved to fight down Antoine's opposition to the bitter end.

'Well, Jacques,' he said, 'now that you've forced my hand, I'll have to tell you what my plan has always been about it. I've always intended to override father's opposition and let you see the Fontanins again. I'd even meant to take you there, myself. What do you think of that? Only I preferred to postpone it till you were quite yourself again, anyhow till the beginning of the school term. Your letter to Daniel has precipitated matters. Very well, I'll take the responsibility on myself. Father shall know nothing about it, nor the Abbé either. We'll go there next Sunday, if you like.'

He paused a moment, then continued in a tone of affectionate reproach: 'I hope you realize now how greatly mistaken you have been, and how wrong not to give me credit for better feelings towards you. Surely I've told you dozens of times, old chap, that there must be perfect frankness between us, perfect confidence—or it's the end of all we've hoped.'

'Next Sunday!' Jacques stammered. This unexpected victory without a struggle had made chaos of this thoughts. He had a vague feeling that he was the dupe of some stratagem too subtle for his comprehension. Then he was ashamed of his suspicion. Antoine was really and truly his best friend. What a pity he was so dreadfully old! But—next Sunday? Why so soon? And he began to wonder if he were really so anxious to see his friend again.

ON that Sunday afternoon Daniel was seated beside his mother, sketching, when the little dog started barking. The bell had rung. Madame de Fontanin

put down her book.

‘I’ll go, mother,’ Daniel said, when he saw her beginning to move towards the door. Lack of money had constrained her to dismiss first the maid, then, a month ago, the cook; Nicole and Jenny were helping with the housework.

Madame de Fontanin had been listening to hear who the caller was; she recognized Pastor Gregory’s voice and, smiling, went out into the hall to greet him. She found him holding Daniel by the shoulders and, as he peered into the boy’s face, emitting his raucous laugh.

‘What do you mean by it, lad, staying indoors on a fine day like this? You should be out taking some exercise. Oh, these Frenchmen, they don’t know what sport is—cricket, boating and the rest of it.’ The brilliance of his small black eyes, which seemed to have no whites, the pupils filling the entire space between the eyelids, was so overpowering at close quarters that Daniel turned away with an uneasy smile.

‘Don’t scold him,’ Madame de Fontanin said; ‘he’s expecting a friend to call. It’s the Thibaults, you know.’

Screwing up his face, the Pastor groped amongst his memories; then suddenly began rubbing his dry hands together with such demoniac vigour that they seemed to crackle with electric sparks, while his lips parted in an eerie, soundless laugh.

‘I’ve got it!’ he said at last. ‘It’s that bearded doctor man. A nice, decent young chap. Do you remember how flabbergasted he looked when he came and found our dear little girl risen from the dead? He wanted to test the resurrection with his thermometer. Poor fellow! By the way, where is she? Is she, too, shut up in her room on this lovely day?’

‘No, you needn’t trouble about her; Jenny’s out with her cousin. They hurried through lunch and went out at once. They’re trying a new camera which Jenny was given for her birthday.’

Daniel, who had brought a chair for the pastor, raised his head and looked at his mother, whose voice had shaken a little as she spoke.

‘What about this Nicole girl?’ Gregory asked, as he sat down. ‘Any news?’

Madame de Fontanin shook her head. She did not want to discuss it in front of her son who, at the mention of Nicole, had cast a furtive glance at the pastor.

‘Now, my boy, tell me,’ the latter asked abruptly, turning to Daniel, ‘what about your bearded doctor friend? What time exactly is he going to come and inflict himself on us?’

‘I’m not sure. About three, I expect.’

Gregory sat up, so as to extract from his clerical waistcoat a silver watch as big as a saucer. ‘Very well. You’ve exactly an hour, lazybones. Off with your coat and start out at once for a good quick sprint round the Luxembourg Gardens—in record time, mind you! Off you go!’

Daniel exchanged a glance with his mother before rising.

‘All right, I’ll leave you to yourselves,’ he said mischievously.

‘Cunning little rascal!’ Gregory shook his fist playfully at him.

But once he was left alone with Madame de Fontanin, a glow of kindness lit up the dry, fallow face, and his eyes grew tender.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘the time has come when I want to speak to your heart, my dear, and to your heart alone.’ For a few moments he seemed abstracted from his surroundings, as if in prayer. Then with a nervous gesture he ran his fingers through his straggly black hair, pulled a chair towards him and sat astride it. ‘I’ve seen him.’ He watched the colour ebbing from Madame de Fontanin’s face. ‘He asked me to come and see you. He is repentant and I can’t tell you how unhappy.’ Gregory kept his eyes fixed on hers as if he hoped the joy that glowed in them persistently might alleviate the distress he was imposing on her.

‘So he’s in Paris?’ she murmured, without thinking of what she was saying, for she knew Jerome had come in person, on Jenny’s birthday, two days before, to leave the camera with the concierge. Wherever he might be, never had he forgotten the birthday of any member of the family. ‘So you’ve seen him.’ She spoke in a far-away voice and her face betrayed as yet no definite emotion. For months she had been thinking about him incessantly, but in so vague a manner that, now he was being spoken about, a curious lethargy had crept over her mind.

‘Yes, he’s so unhappy,’ the pastor repeated with insistence, ‘and overwhelmed with remorse. That wretched creature of his is still singing at the theatre, and he is thoroughly disgusted with it all; he never wants to see her again. He says life is impossible for him apart from his wife and children—and I believe he means it. He begs your forgiveness and will make any undertaking you desire if only he can remain your husband. He implores you to abandon your intention of divorcing him. And I discerned on his face the look of the just man, of one who is fighting the good fight.’

She said nothing, but gazed pensively into the middle distance. There was a gentleness about her face, the soft, sensitive lips, full cheeks and rather heavy chin that seemed instinct with compassion; and Gregory thought she was in a forgiving mood.

‘He tells me you are going to appear, both of you, before the judges,’ he continued, ‘for the preliminary attempt at reconciliation and that, only if that fails, the actual divorce proceedings will begin. So he now craves your forgiveness, for he has undergone a change of heart; I’m convinced of it. He says he is not the man he seems to be, that he’s better at heart than we imagine. And that, too, I believe. And he’s quite decided to work now, if he can find work. So, if only you’ll consent, he will live here with you, he’ll choose the better path and atone for his misdeeds.’

He saw her lips trembling, a nervous tremor convulsing her chin. Then, with a quick, decisive jerk of her shoulders, she turned to him.

‘No!’

Her voice was clear, emphatic and in her gaze there was a sombre dignity, giving the impression that her mind was made up irrevocably. Gregory leant back and closed his eyes; for a long while he did not speak.

When at last he spoke his voice was remote; all the warmth had gone out of it. ‘Look here!’ he began. ‘I’m going to tell you a story, if you’ll let me, a story that is new to you. It’s about a man who was in love. I ask you: listen well. This man, while he was still quite young, was engaged to a poor girl who was so good and beautiful, so truly beloved of God, that he too loved her.’ His eyes grew dark, intense. ‘Yes, he loved her with his whole soul. . . .’ For a moment he seemed to have lost the thread; with an effort he continued, speaking more quickly. ‘And then, after their marriage, this is how things went. One day the man discovered that his wife did not love him only; she loved another man, their friend, who was welcome at their house and like a brother to them both. The unhappy husband took his wife away on a long journey, to help her to forget; and then he came to understand that now she would always love that other man, their friend; and himself no more. Thus life became a hell for both of them. He saw his wife suffering adultery in her body, then in her heart, and at last even in her soul, for she was becoming unjust and wicked. Yes,’ he continued in a slow, sad voice, ‘they came to a terrible pass those two poor people; she growing evil because of thwarted love, and he too growing evil because the Negative was rooted in their lives. Well, what did he do then, that man? He prayed. And he thought: “I love this woman, and I must shield her soul from evil.” And then, with joy in his heart, he summoned his wife and his friend into his study and, setting before them the New Testament, he said: “In the sight of God I solemnly declare that you twain are joined in holy wedlock.” All three were weeping. But then he said: “Have no fears; I am leaving you and never shall I return to spoil your happiness.”’

Screening his eyes with his hand, Gregory added in a low voice:

‘Ah my dear, what a noble reward God made that man, in the memory of that great sacrifice, his love-offering!’ He raised his head. ‘And the man did as he had said; he gave away all his money to them, for he had great riches and she was the poorest of the poor. He made a long journey, to the other side of the world, and I know that now, seventeen years later, he is still quite alone and all but penniless, earning his daily bread as I do, as a humble worker for the Church of Christian Science.’

Madame de Fontanin gazed at him, deeply moved.

‘But wait!’ His voice grew suddenly shrill, excited. ‘Let me tell you now the end of the story.’ His features were working with emotion, his arms were resting on the back of the chair on which he sat astride, with the emaciated fingers feverishly interlocked. ‘That poor man thought he was bequeathing happiness to those two people, and taking away with him all the evil that had marred their lives. But God moves in a mysterious way and it was of them that Evil took possession. They mocked at him. They betrayed the Spirit. They accepted his sacrifice with crocodile tears, but in their hearts they scoffed. They told lies about him to their mutual friends. They showed his letters round. They even used against him his act of generosity, calling it “connivance,” and went so far as to say he had left his wife without a penny, deserted her to run away to another woman’s arms, in Europe. Yes, they said all that. And they bought a judgement of divorce against him.’

He dropped his eyes for a moment, and an odd noise that sounded almost like a chuckle came from his throat. Then he rose and very carefully put back his chair in the place from which he had taken it. All signs of grief had left his face.

‘Well,’ he said, bending over the motionless form of Madame de Fontanin, ‘such is love, and so incumbent on us is forgiveness that if at this very instant that dear, faithless woman appeared beside me, saying, “James, I have come back, to live again under your roof. You shall be once more my abject slave, and when I feel inclined, I’ll make a mock of you again”—well, even if she said all that, I’d reply, “Come, take all the little I possess. I thank God for your return. And I shall strive so ardently to be truly good in your eyes, that you, too, will become good; for Evil does not exist,” Yes, it’s the truth, dear, if ever my Dolly comes back to me, asking me to give her shelter, that’s how I shall deal by her. But I shan’t say, “Dolly, I forgive you,” but only “Christ watch over you!” And so my words will not come back empty, because Good is the power, the only power, capable of holding in check the Negative.’ Folding his arms, he fell silent, nursing his pointed chin in the hollow of his hand. At last he spoke again, in the sing-song intonation of the professional preacher. ‘And you, Madame de Fontanin,

should go and do likewise. For you love this man with your heart's love, and Love is Righteousness. Christ has said: "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."'

She shook her head sadly.

'You don't know him, James,' she said in a low voice. 'The very air's unbearably beside him. Everywhere he brings evil. He would only destroy all our happiness again—and contaminate the children.'

'When Christ touched the leper's sore with His hand, the hand of Christ was not infected, but the leper was cleansed.'

'You say I love him—no, that isn't true! I know him too well now. I know what his promises are worth. I've forgiven him far too often.'

'When Peter asked Our Lord how often he should forgive his brother, saying, "Till seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say not unto thee until seven times: but until seventy times seven."'

'I tell you, James, you don't know him.'

'Who has the right to think, "I know my brother"? Christ said, "I judge no man." And I, Gregory, I say to you: If a man leads a life of sin without being vexed and sore at heart, that is because there still is blindness in his soul. But one who weeps because he has lapsed into a sinful life, verily his eyes are open to the light of truth. I tell you he is stricken with remorse and his face was the face of a Just Man.'

'You don't know everything, James. Ask him what he did when that woman had to run away to Belgium because her creditors were after her. It was another man that she ran away with, but he left all to follow them, he threw away every vestige of self-respect. For two months he worked as a check-taker in the theatre where she was singing. The way he behaved was simply revolting. Yes, revolting! She went on living with her violinist; Jerome put up with everything, he used to dine with them, to play duets with his mistress's lover! "The face of a Just Man!" No, you've no idea what he's really like. To-day he's in Paris, he's repentant, and tells you he has left that woman, and doesn't want to see her again. Tell me, why should he be paying off her debts—if it isn't that he wants to get her to come back to him? Yes, he's settling with Noémie's creditors one by one, and that's the reason why he is in Paris now. And the money he's using for it is—mine and the children's. Listen! Do you know what he did three weeks ago? He mortgaged our place at Maisons-Laffitte, just to raise twenty-five thousand francs for one of Noémie's creditors who was pressing her for payment.'

She looked down; there was more to tell, but she left it unsaid. She was recalling that meeting at the notary's to which she had been summoned and to which she had gone, suspecting nothing, to find Jerome waiting for her at the door. He needed her power of attorney for the mortgage, as the property was hers, by inheritance. He had thrown himself on her mercy, professing to be penniless and on the brink of suicide; there, in the public street, he had dramatically turned out his empty pockets. She had given way, almost without a struggle, and had followed him to the lawyer's office, to put an end to the scene he was making in the street—and also because she, too, was short of money and he had promised to give her a few thousand francs out of the proceeds of the mortgage. She had to have the money to tide over the next six months, pending the settlement that would take place after the divorce.

'I tell you again, James, you don't know him. He assures you that everything is changed, and he wants to come back to live with us. Supposing I tell you that the day before yesterday, when he came here to leave his birthday present for Jenny downstairs, with the concierge, he had his cab stop only a few yards from our door, and that there was someone with him in the cab!' She shuddered; a picture had risen before her of the little workgirl in black she had seen crying on a bench beside the Seine. She stood up. 'That's the sort of man he is!' she cried. 'He's so dead to every sense of decency that he brings with him some woman or other, his latest mistress, when he calls to leave a birthday present for his daughter. And you say I still love him—that's untrue, absolutely untrue!' She was pale with resentment; at that moment she seemed genuinely to hate him.

Gregory gazed at her severely.

'The truth is not in you,' he said. 'Even in thought, should we return evil for evil? Spirit is everything. The material world is subject to the spiritual. Has not Christ said—?' The barking of the dog cut him short. 'That must be your damned bearded doctor man!' he muttered, scowling.

He hurried back to his chair and sat down.

The door opened and Antoine entered, followed by Jacques.

He came in with a firm, decided step, now that he had accepted all the consequences this visit might entail. The light from the open windows fell full on his face; his hair and beard formed zones of shadow and all the sunlight seemed concentrated on the pale rectangle of his forehead, lending him an air of high intellectuality. And, though he was of medium height, at that moment he seemed tall. As Madame de Fontanin watched him coming towards her, her instinctive liking for the young man took a new lease of

life. While he was bowing and she was holding out both hands towards him in affectionate welcome, he was annoyed to notice Pastor Gregory in the background. The pastor, without moving, gave him a curt nod.

Jacques, who was standing at some distance from the others, was examining with interest Madame de Fontanin's eccentric-looking visitor, while Gregory, astride his chair, his chin propped on his folded arms, his nose as red as ever, and lips set in an uncouth, incomprehensible grin, watched the young folks good-humouredly. When Madame de Fontanin went up to Jacques, there was such affection in her look that he suddenly recalled that evening when she had held him weeping in her arms. She, too, was remembering it, as she exclaimed:

'Why, he's such a big boy now that I hardly dare to—!' and, promptly kissed him, with a laugh that had in it a touch of coquetry. 'But of course I'm a mamma, and you're the next thing to a brother to my Daniel.' She turned to Gregory, who had just risen and was about to take his leave. 'You're not going yet, James, I hope?'

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but I've got to go now.' He shook hands energetically with the two brothers, then went up to her.

'Just one word,' Madame de Fontanin said, as they were leaving the room together. 'Answer me quite frankly, please. After what I've told you, do you still think that Jerome should be allowed to return to live amongst us?' Her eyes were full of anxious questioning. 'Weigh well your answer, James. If you say to me "Forgive!" I will forgive.'

He was silent. His face was lit up with that look of all-enveloping compassion which is a trait of those who look on themselves as chosen vessels of the Truth. He fancied he detected something like a gleam of hope in Madame de Fontanin's eyes. It was not that sort of forgiveness Christ desired of her. He turned away his eyes, with a disapproving snort.

Taking him by the arm, she tried to impart a note of affection to their leave-taking.

'Thank you, James, thank you. Please tell him my answer is "No."'

He was not listening; he was praying for her.

'May Christ reign in your heart,' he murmured, as he went out, without a backward glance.

When she came back, Antoine was gazing round the drawing-room, his mind full of the last occasion when he had seen it. She had to make an effort to steady her ruffled nerves.

'How nice of you to have come with your brother!' Her voice sounded a little artificial, exaggerating the pleasure she genuinely felt at seeing him

again. 'Do sit down.' She motioned Antoine to the chair beside hers. 'To-day we'll do better not to count on the young people's company.'

While she was speaking, Daniel had slipped his arm through Jacques' and was taking him off to his own room. They were of the same height now. Daniel had not expected to find his friend so changed. His affection was all the stronger, and his desire to confide in him more urgent. No sooner were they alone than his face grew animated and took on an air of mystery.

'Look here, you'd better know at once—you'll be seeing her presently. She's a cousin of mine, who's living with us. She's absolutely ravishing!' He stopped abruptly, whether it was he noticed a hint of embarrassment in Jacques' attitude, or a belated scruple checked his revelations. 'But let's hear about you, old chap,' he went on with a friendly smile. Even with his most intimate friend Daniel maintained a slightly ceremonious courtesy. 'Why, it's ages, a whole year, since we saw each other.' Jacques made no remark, so he went on: 'Oh, there's nothing as yet,' and added, bending confidentially towards his friend: 'But I've high hopes!'

The insistence of his gaze and the tone in which he spoke were making Jacques feel ill at ease. And then it dawned on him that Daniel was not quite the same as before, though he could not have said exactly where the difference lay. Perhaps the oval face had lengthened out a little, but the features looked much the same; the upper lip formed still the same Cupid's bow, but now its curves were emphasized by the dark line of a moustache, and he had still the trick of smiling with one side only of his face—which marred its symmetry, showing on the left side of his mouth the white flash of his upper teeth. Something perhaps of their former purity had gone out of his eyes, and the tendency of the eyebrows to lift towards the temples was more pronounced, giving an almost feline charm to his gaze. In his voice, too, and manner were traces of a nonchalance which formerly he would not have ventured to display.

Jacques was so busy observing Daniel that he did not think of answering. Then—was it due to that casual manner of his friend's, which at once irritated and attracted him?—he suddenly felt a rush of the passionate affection of his schooldays coming over him, and tears rose to his eyes.

'Think of it!' Daniel was exclaiming. 'A whole year! Lots of things must have happened to you. Tell me all about them.' He had been moving restlessly about the room; now he sat down, so as to fix his attention on his friend.

Daniel's attitude conveyed the sincerest affection, but Jacques thought he discerned in it a conscious effort, and became tongue-tied. Still, feeling

he must speak, he began telling about the time he had spent in the reformatory. Once again, without actually intending to do so, he dropped into the same literary clichés that he had tried on Lisbeth; a sort of bashfulness prevented him from giving a bald, unvarnished account of the life he had led there.

‘But why did you write to me so seldom?’

Jacques shirked the real reason, his reluctance to expose his father to hostile criticism—which, incidentally, did not prevent him, in his heart of hearts, from totally disapproving of M. Thibault.

‘Being all alone like that changes one, you know,’ he explained after a pause. The mere fact of recalling it had made his face go apathetic, blank. ‘You come to feel that nothing really matters. And there’s a sort of formless fear that never leaves you. You do things, but without thinking. After a while you hardly know who you are, you hardly know, even, if you exist. In the long run that life would kill one, or else drive one mad.’ He was staring into vacancy, a bemused look on his face. He shuddered slightly; then, changing his tone, fell to describing Antoine’s visit to Crouy.

Daniel listened without interrupting. But once he saw that Jacques’ narrative was coming to an end, his face lit up again.

‘Why, I’ve not even told you her name!’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s Nicole. Like it?’

‘Very much,’ Jacques said. For the first time he began to think of the charms of such a name as Lisbeth.

‘Nicole! It suits her to a T. That’s my idea anyhow. Well, you’ll be seeing for yourself. She’s not pretty, pretty, so to speak. But more than pretty; vivid, full of life, and such eyes!’ He paused. ‘Appetizing, if you see what I mean.’

Jacques would not meet his gaze. He, too, would have liked to open his heart to Daniel, tell him of his love; that indeed was why he had come here. But, from Daniel’s first remark on, he had been feeling ill at ease, and now he listened with downcast eyes, with a sense of constraint, almost of shame.

‘This morning,’ Daniel went on—he could hardly keep his exultation within bounds—‘Mother and Jenny went out early, so we had our tea by ourselves, Nicole and I. We were alone in the flat. She hadn’t dressed yet. It was simply wonderful! I followed her into Jenny’s room, that’s where she sleeps. A young girl’s bedroom, there’s something about it—! Well, I caught her in my arms, just for a second. She struggled, but she was laughing. You’ve no idea how supple she is. Then she ran out and shut herself in mother’s room, and wouldn’t open the door. I can’t think why I’m telling

you all this—it's too silly for words, really.' He tried to smile, but his lips stayed tense.

'Do you want to marry her?' Jacques asked.

'To marry her?'

Jacques felt suddenly hurt, as if he had been insulted. Every minute his friend was growing more and more of a stranger to him. And he felt his heart turn to ice when he saw the expression on Daniel's face—a look of faintly mocking curiosity.

'But what about you?' Daniel asked, coming closer. 'In your letter you told me that you, too . . . ?' He left the phrase unfinished.

But, without looking up, Jacques shook his head, as if to say: 'No, that's all over; you shan't hear a word from me.' In any case, without waiting for an answer, Daniel had just got up. A sound of young voices came to their ears.

'You must tell me about it later on. They've just come. Hurry up!' He glanced at a mirror, threw up his head and hurried out into the corridor.

'Well, children,' Madame de Fontanin was calling, 'aren't you coming for tea?'

The tea was laid in the dining-room.

As he crossed the threshold Jacques' heart beat faster; two girls were standing by the table. They had their hats and gloves still on, and their cheeks were glowing after their walk. Jenny ran up to Daniel and clung to his arm. Seeming to ignore her, he steered Jacques in the direction of Nicole, and introduced him with a breezy unself-consciousness that impressed the boy. He was conscious of Nicole's eyes giving him a curious, fleeting glance, of Jenny's lingering on him with more attention. He looked back towards Madame de Fontanin who was standing beside Antoine at the drawing-room door, evidently concluding a remark.

' . . . to get children to understand,' she was saying with a melancholy smile, 'that there is nothing more precious than life, and that it is so terribly short.'

It was long since Jacques had found himself amongst people he did not know, but he was so keenly interested in observing them that he lost all shyness. Nicole's natural elegance and sparkle were such that, beside her, Jenny struck him as insignificant and almost plain. Just then Nicole was talking to Daniel; she was laughing. Jacques could not hear what they were talking about, but he could see her eyebrows lifting in merriment or wonder. Her grey-blue eyes, if rather shallow, set too far apart and perhaps a shade too round, made up for these defects by their gaiety and brilliance, which

gave the pale, fair features a vitality that seemed unquenchable. And her face, moulded on generous lines, was crowned by a thick, heavy plait of hair tightly coiled above her head. She had a way of holding herself, slightly bending forward, that gave her an air of always making haste to greet a friend, and lavishing on all who crossed her path the thoughtless vivacity of her smile. As he watched her, Jacques found himself reluctantly applying to her that word ‘appetizing,’ which had so profoundly shocked him on Daniel’s lips. Just then she realized she was being looked at, exaggerated her spontaneity, and promptly lost it.

It never crossed Jacques’ head to make an effort to conceal the interest other people inspired in him; on such occasions he had the ingenuousness of the child who stares open-mouthed—his face grew rigid, his gaze inert. Formerly, before his return from Crouy, he had not been thus, but used to treat those with whom he came in contact with such indifference that he never recognized anyone. Now, wherever he was, in crowded shop or street, his eyes observed the passers-by. He did not consciously analyse what he discovered in them; his mind worked on them unknowingly. It was enough for him to catch a glimpse of some peculiarity in a face or in the demeanour of another, for his imagination to attribute to these strangers whom chance had brought his way a host of special traits of character.

Madame de Fontanin cut short his musings; she had placed her hand on his arm.

‘Come and have your tea beside me,’ she said. ‘I want you to pay me a little visit now.’ She handed him a cup and plate. ‘I’m so glad you’ve come to see us. . . . Jenny, my pet, please bring the cake. . . . Your brother’s been telling me about the life you lead in your little flat. I’m so happy about it. It’s so pleasant when two brothers understand each other like bosom friends, isn’t it? Daniel and Jenny, too, get on very well together, and it’s one of my greatest joys. Ah, that makes you smile, my big boy!’ She had turned to Daniel who was coming up with Antoine. ‘He’s always poking fun at his old Mamma! Now, as a punishment, you shall kiss me, in front of everybody.’

Daniel laughed, with perhaps a shade of embarrassment, but bent down and touched his mother’s forehead lightly with his lips. There was an easy elegance in his least movement.

From the other side of the table Jenny was watching the scene with a smile the charm of which delighted Antoine. Carried away once more by her feelings, she went up to Daniel and linked her arm in his. ‘There’s another,’ Antoine thought, ‘who gives more than she gets.’ When he had seen her for the first time, his interest had been quickened by the way the childish face looked wise beyond its years. He noticed now the graceful way her

shoulders moved, as the young bosom gently rose and fell under the light blouse. She was not in the least like her mother, or Daniel either, but that was not surprising, for she seemed destined for a life quite other than the normal.

Madame de Fontanin was sipping her tea, holding the cup very near her laughing face; through a fragrant mist she was making little amiable gestures towards Jacques. The brightness and the goodness of heart that shone in her eyes seemed to diffuse a gentle glow around her, and the white hair crowned like an incongruous diadem the noticeably youthful forehead. Jacques' eyes strayed from mother to son. At that moment he loved both with such fervour that he wished with all his heart they might perceive it; for, more than most, he felt a craving not to be misunderstood. His interest in the minds of others was so keen that nothing would satisfy him but an intimate communion with their secret thoughts; almost he wished to merge his life into theirs.

Beside the window Nicole and Jenny had embarked on a discussion. Daniel went up to them and joined in. All three bent over the camera to discover whether or not another photograph could be taken on the spool.

'Do! Just to please me!' Daniel suddenly exclaimed in the warm, emotional tone which was something new with him; the gaze he cast at Nicole was at once imperious and caressing. 'Yes! Just as you are now, with your hat on, and my friend Thibault beside you.'

'Jacques!' he called, then added in a lower tone: 'Please do—I'm awfully keen on taking you two together.'

Jacques joined their group. Daniel dragged them all into the drawing-room where the light, so he said, was better.

Antoine stayed on with Madame de Fontanin in the drawing-room. He was bringing to an end the explanation he had thought it best to give her, with the brusqueness which, to his thinking, lent an accent of forthrightness to his manner. 'And I'd have you know exactly the circumstances of this visit,' he was saying. 'If father knew Jacques was here, he'd take my brother from my keeping, and all the trouble would begin again.'

'Poor man,' Madame de Fontanin murmured, in a tone that made Antoine smile.

'Do you really mean you're sorry for him?' he asked.

'Yes, for having failed to win the trust of a son like you.'

'It's not his fault, and it's not mine either. My father is what is usually described as an eminent and worthy man. I respect him. But there's no help for it; never, on any question, do we think—I won't say "alike," but even on

the same lines. Never, whatever the subject we are talking about, can we manage to see it from the same angle.'

'There are some who've not yet been touched by the great light.'

'If it's religion you're thinking of,' Antoine put in at once, 'I may as well tell you father's fanatically religious.'

Madame de Fontanin shook her head. 'That's nothing new,' she smiled. 'Doesn't the apostle Paul tell us that it isn't those who only hearken to the Law who find favour in God's eyes, but, rather, those who practice it in word and deed?'

For M. Thibault, whom she thought she pitied from the bottom of her heart, she really felt an instinctive, unreasoning aversion. The taboo he had imposed on her son, her household and herself, seemed odious, unjust, and based on the least worthy motives. Not only did the grossness of M. Thibault's appearance revolt her, but she could not forgive him for mistrusting the very things she valued most: her moral standard, her Protestantism. And she felt all the more warmly towards Antoine for having overridden his father's injunction.

'What about you?' she asked with sudden apprehension. 'Are you still a practising Catholic?'

When Antoine shook his head, her face lit up with a glow of pleasure.

'As a matter of fact, I kept it up for quite a long time,' he began. He found that Madame de Fontanin's company gave a fillip to his thoughts—and, still more certainly, to his tongue. She had a knack of listening with extreme attention that implied a high esteem of the person speaking to her, and always encouraged him to rise to the occasion, above his normal conversational level. 'I kept up my religious observances, but I had no real piety. God was for me a sort of omniscient headmaster, whom it was best to humour by means of certain gestures and a certain line of conduct. I obeyed, but, for the most part, with a sense of boredom. I was a good pupil, you see, in everything; in religion like the rest. It's hard for me to say now exactly how I came to lose my faith. When I found I'd lost it—that was only four or five years ago—I'd in any case already reached a stage of scientific knowledge that left little room for religious belief. I'm a positivist, you know,' he added, with a feeling of self-satisfaction; as a matter of fact he was expressing theories he made up as he went along, for so far he had had scant leisure or occasion to indulge in self-analysis.

'I don't claim,' he continued, 'that science explains everything, but it tells me what things are, and that's enough for me. I find the *how* of things sufficiently interesting for me to dispense with the vain quest of the *why*.

Besides,' he added hastily, in a lower voice, 'isn't it possible that between these two types of explanation there's only a difference of degree?' He smiled, as if in self-excuse. 'As for questions of morality, well, I hardly give them a thought. I hope I'm not shocking you! But you see, I love my work, I love life, I'm energetic, I like getting things done, and my experience has led me to believe that "Get on with your job!" is a quite adequate rule of life. So far, in any case, I've never felt the slightest hesitation about what it was up to me to do.'

Madame de Fontanin made no reply. She was not in the least vexed with Antoine for being so different from herself. But in her heart of hearts she gave thanks all the more fervently to God for His constant presence in her life. To this awareness of divine protection she owed the joyful, never-failing confidence that radiated from her so unmistakably and with such efficacy that, though her life had been a sequence of disaster and her lot was far worse than that of most of those she met, she yet had that peculiar gift of being a source of courage, peace of mind and contentment for all around her. Antoine at that moment was experiencing it; never in his father's circle had he met anyone who inspired him with such veneration; round whom the atmosphere was so exalting, by reason of its purity. And he wanted to come nearer her, even at the expense of strict veracity.

'I've always felt drawn to Protestantism,' he averred, though actually he had never given it a thought till he met the Fontanins. 'Your Reformation was a Revolution on the religious plane, for it opened the door to ideas of spiritual freedom.'

She listened to him with growing appreciation. Young, ardent, chivalrous he seemed to her just now, and she was impressed by the vital energy of his expression, the furrow on his forehead that told of concentrated thought. And when he raised his head she had a childish delight in noting a peculiarity that increased the pensiveness of his expression; the upper eyelids were so narrow that they almost vanished under the heavy brows when he opened his eyes wide; at that moment his eyelashes and his eyebrows were all but indistinguishable.

A man with a forehead like that, she was thinking, could never stoop to an ignoble act. And suddenly it struck her that Antoine was the perfect prototype of a man worthy to be loved. She was still quivering with resentment against her husband. How different would have been a life united with someone of Antoine's calibre! It was the first time she had compared another man with Jerome, the first time a definite regret had crossed her mind and she had been aware of feeling that another might have brought her happiness. It was only a fleeting impulse, strong but secret, that stirred her to

the depths of her being; almost immediately she felt ashamed, and she got the better of it quickly enough. But the after-taste of bitterness that contrition and perhaps regret had left behind them was slower to dissipate.

Just then Jenny and Jacques came in, and their appearance laid effectively the phantoms of her troubled mind. She made a welcoming gesture and called them up to her at once, lest they should think their presence was unwanted. At the first glance she felt that something had happened between them. . . . It had.

Immediately after taking the photograph of Nicole and Jacques, Daniel proposed to find out forthwith whether it had been a success. That morning he had promised Jenny and his cousin to teach them how to develop, and they had made all the necessary preparations in an empty cupboard at the end of a passage, that Daniel had formerly used as a dark-room. The space in it was so cramped that it was practically impossible for more than two to be in it at the same time. Daniel had adroitly managed to get Nicole to go in first; then, running up to Jenny, had laid a hand trembling with excitement on her shoulder and whispered:

‘You stay with Jacques!’

She had cast him a shrewd, disapproving glance. Yet she had obeyed, such was her brother’s influence over her, so irresistible his manner of demanding, not only in so many words but by the sheer effrontery of his gaze and the vehemence of his demeanour, that his wishes should be complied with then and there.

While the brief scene between brother and sister was in progress, Jacques had stayed in the background, examining the contents of a glass cabinet in the drawing-room. Jenny persuaded herself, as she went to join him, that he could not have noticed Daniel’s manœuvre. With a little pout she asked him:

‘How about you? Do you go in for photography?’

‘No.’

The almost imperceptible embarrassment with which he replied made her realize that she should not have asked the question. It came back to her that he had only just been released from some sort of institution in which he had been to all intents and purposes a prisoner. Following an association of ideas, and by way of making conversation, she put another question.

‘You haven’t seen Daniel for quite a long time, have you?’

Jacques lowered his eyes.

‘No. Not for a very long time. Not since . . . ! Why, it’s over a year.’

A shadow flitted across her face. Her second attempt had been hardly more successful than her first. He would think she was trying to remind him of the Marseilles episode. So much the worse for him! She had never approved of that adventure, and in her eyes he alone was responsible for it from the start, unconsciously, she had been disliking Jacques. When she saw him that afternoon, at tea-time, she had been unable to help recalling the injury he had done her family, and from the moment she set eyes on him had felt an unqualified repugnance. For one thing, she found him ugly, vulgar even; his big head and uncouth features, his jaw, chapped lips, protuberant ears and red hair bunched up over his forehead—all displeased her. Indeed she could hardly forgive Daniel his attachment to such a friend; though her jealousy prompted her to be more glad than otherwise to discover that the only being who dared to contest with her the first place in her brother's heart was so unattractive.

She had taken the little dog on her lap and was stroking it absent-mindedly. Jacques was still staring at the floor; he, too, was thinking of the escapade to Marseilles, of the memorable night when he first had crossed this threshold.

‘Do you find him much changed?’ she asked, to break the silence.

‘Not at all,’ he said; then hastily corrected himself. ‘No, that’s wrong; he has changed quite a lot.’

His keen regard for truth impressed her, and for a moment she found him less distasteful. Perhaps Jacques was conscious of this fleeting change of mood, for he stopped thinking about Daniel. Looking at Jenny, he began to wonder what she was like. And suddenly he had a brief glimpse into her character, a revelation that he found he could not put into words, though he had guessed the nervous instability, the cross-currents of intense emotion, behind those features seemingly expressive, yet so reticent, and the eyes which, for all their animation, kept their secret. It struck him that he would like to know her better, gain access to that fast-shut heart—even, perhaps, become the friend of this young girl. And for a while his fancy toyed delightfully with the thought that he might come to love her. All his troubled past was out of mind, and now it seemed to him that never again could he be unhappy.

He let his eyes rove round the room, and linger now and then on Jenny; in his gaze there was both curiosity and a shyness which prevented him from noticing how reserved her attitude was, how much she was on the defensive. Suddenly, by an inevitable flash-back of emotion, the picture of Lisbeth rose before him—but a Lisbeth who had dwindled now into a little, insignificant, domestic creature, of no account. For the first time he realized the

childishness of his romantic scheme of marrying Lisbeth. But—what then? He was appalled at the void that of a sudden loomed up in his life, a void that at all costs he must fill. In Jenny, obviously, he might find the friend he needed, but . . .

Her voice took him from his reverie, with a start.

‘. . . at a school?’

He only caught the tail-end of the phrase.

‘Sorry! I didn’t catch. . . . What were you saying?’

‘I asked if you were going to school just now.’

‘Not yet.’ His voice betrayed his discomfiture. ‘I’m very behindhand with my studies, you know. I’m working with private coaches, friends of my brother.’ Then, in all innocence, he added: ‘And you?’

She was offended by his putting a direct question to her and the too familiar glance that accompanied it.

‘I don’t go to school,’ she answered curtly. ‘I have a governess.’

With his next observation he made another blunder.

‘Of course, for a girl, it doesn’t matter really.’

She bridled.

‘That’s what you think. But it’s not mother’s view, or Daniel’s.’

Now there was no mistaking her hostility. He realized too late his clumsiness and tried to retrieve the situation by a remark that he imagined amiable.

‘What I mean is: a girl always knows enough to get along with.’

He saw that he was sinking in deeper; he could not control his thoughts or words. That damned reformatory! It had made an idiot of him! He reddened, and the sudden rush of blood to his head seemed to complete his befuddlement. The only issue he could see now was to give vent to his anger. For a moment he groped vainly for some stinging retort; then, throwing discretion to the winds, he blurted out in the vulgar, bantering tone his father often used:

‘The principal thing isn’t taught in schools; it’s character.’

She had herself well under control, and did not flinch. But just then the dog gaped noisily and she exclaimed:

‘Oh, you nasty little creature! What disgusting manners!’ Her voice was trembling with rage. ‘What disgusting manners!’ she repeated, with a shrill, rancorous insistence. Then she put the dog down, rose, and walked out on to the balcony.

Five slow minutes passed, five minutes of intolerable silence. Jacques had not moved from his chair; he felt as if he were suffocating. From the dining-room came the sound of alternating voices: Madame de Fontanin's and Antoine's. Jenny was leaning on the balcony rail, with her back to him, humming one of her piano exercises, and beating time with her foot as if to emphasize her truculent contempt. She had made up her mind to tell her brother all about it, and get him to drop this vulgar, ill-bred friend of his. At that moment she hated Jacques. Glancing furtively into the room, she saw him sitting there, flushed but on his dignity. She felt even surer of herself and set her mind to finding some new remark to hurt him.

'Come along, Puce! I'm off!'

Leaving the balcony, she walked past him as if he were not there and calmly proceeded to the dining-room.

Jacques was terrified at the thought that if he stayed behind he would never find a way of getting up and going. So he rose, and followed her at a distance. Madame de Fontanin's affectionate welcome changed his resentment into melancholy.

'So your brother's deserted you?' she said to her daughter.

'Oh, I asked Daniel to develop my films straight away,' she explained, but without meeting her mother's eye. 'He won't be long now.'

She had a shrewd suspicion that Jacques had not been taken in, and this complicity that circumstances had forced on them intensified their mutual dislike. Inexorably Jacques wrote her down a liar, and disapproved of her readiness to shield her brother. She guessed his feelings and her pride was wounded; she carefully refrained from looking in his direction.

Smiling, Madame de Fontanin motioned them towards the sofa.

'I see my little patient has grown famously,' Antoine remarked.

Jacques said nothing, and kept his eyes bent upon the floor. He was foundering in an abyss of hopelessness; never would he recover his former self! Conscious at once of his weakness and his brutality, he felt profoundly sick at heart; every impulse had him at its mercy, he was a puppet in the hands of implacable fatality.

He heard Madame de Fontanin asking him a question. 'Are you fond of music?'

He pretended not to understand, tears were filling his eyes, and he bent quickly down, as if to tie a shoelace. He heard Antoine answering on his behalf. His ears were buzzing and he felt like death. Was Jenny looking? he wondered.

Daniel and Nicole had been together in the dark-room for over a quarter of an hour. Daniel had shot the bolt the moment he entered, then taken the films out of the camera and unrolled them.

‘Don’t meddle with the door,’ he said. ‘The least speck of light will fog the whole spool.’

Nicole’s first impression was one of total obscurity, but after a while she began to see what looked like incandescent shadows moving in the red glow of the lantern close beside her. Gradually they took form, and she saw two long, delicate hands, cut off at the wrists, tilting a long dish. Those two disembodied hands were all she could make out of Daniel, but there was so little space in the dark-room that she was as conscious of his every movement as if he were actually in contact with her. They held their breath, each haunted by a vivid memory of the kiss exchanged that morning in the bedroom.

‘I say! Can you see anything?’ she whispered.

But he would not answer her at once; the silence had an exquisite suspense that thrilled his senses and, now that darkness was doing away with the restraints of normal life, he had turned towards her and was inhaling eagerly the perfume floating round her.

At last he brought himself to speak. ‘No, there’s nothing yet.’

Again there was silence. Then suddenly the dish on which Nicole’s eyes were fixed ceased moving. The two spectral hands had left the zone of the lamplight. The moment seemed never-ending. All at once Nicole felt his arms encircling her, closely, passionately. She experienced no surprise, rather a vague sense of relief that the suspense was over. But she drew her shoulders back as far as she could, twisting and turning, to elude the lips whose impact she both dreaded and desired. At last their faces touched. Daniel’s burning forehead came in contact with something cold, slippery and pliant; it was Nicole’s hair, the long, glossy plait she wore coiled round her head. He could not help giving a start, and drawing back a little. For a moment her lips were free, and she had just time to utter a strangled cry: ‘Jenny!’

Roughly his hand closed her lips; then, leaning against her with the full weight of his body, he crushed her against the door. His voice came in quick gasps through his clenched teeth; there was a note almost of madness in it.

‘Keep quiet! Stop! Nicole darling, dear little girl, I want—I want to tell you. . . .’

She had almost ceased struggling and he thought she was giving way to him. She had slipped her arm behind her and was feeling for the latch. The

door fell open abruptly letting in a flood of light. He released her, and shut the door again at once. But in the sudden light she had seen his face, and it was unrecognizable, like a livid Chinese mask, with great blotches of red round the eyes that seemed to slew them up towards the temples. The pupils, shrunk to pin-points, were expressionless, and the thin, tight lips of a few minutes past were puffy now, clumsily agape. A thought of Jerome flashed through her mind. There was hardly any likeness between Daniel and his father, yet in that harsh, revealing beam of light, it was Jerome's face she had seen!

'My congratulations!' His voice was shrill with vexation. 'The whole spool's ruined.'

'I'm quite ready to stay,' she said composedly. 'In fact I want to talk to you. Only, please unlatch the door.'

'No; Jenny will come in.'

After a momentary hesitation she said: 'Then promise me on your honour that you won't touch me again.'

He felt like flinging himself on her, gagging her with his hand, ripping up her blouse; but, in the same breath, knew that he was beaten.

'All right. I promise.'

'Good! Now listen to me, Daniel. I was very silly this morning; I let you go too far, much too far. But this time I say definitely, No! I didn't run away from home just to get involved in this sort of thing.' She spoke the last words hurriedly; to herself. Then she addressed Daniel again. 'Yes, I'll trust you with my secret. I ran away from mother's place. Oh, there's nothing really to be said against her—only that she's very unhappy . . . and very weak. That's all I can tell you.' She paused. That face she loathed above all, Jerome's face, still hovered before her eyes; his son might bring her to the state to which Jerome had brought her mother. Alarmed by Daniel's silence, she went on hastily: 'You don't understand me a bit. Of course that's my fault, really; I've not been my real self with you. With Jenny, yes. With you I've gone on in a silly way, and you've imagined all sorts of things. But, underneath, I'm not like that, not in the least. I don't want the sort of life that—that begins that way. What would have been the point of coming to live with someone like Aunt Thérèse? No! I want—you'll laugh at me, but I don't care—I want to be able later on to deserve the respect of a man who'll love me truly, for always; a man who—who takes it seriously.'

'But I *do* take it seriously!' From the tone she guessed the smile of naïve self-pity hovering on his lips, and knew at once that she had no more to fear from him.

‘No, you don’t!’ She sounded almost cheerful. ‘And you mustn’t be angry, Daniel, if I tell you straight out—you don’t love me.’

‘Not love you? Oh, Nicole . . . !’

‘No, it’s not me you love, it’s . . . something else. And I don’t love you either. Now listen, I’m going to be quite frank; I don’t think I could ever love a man like you.’

‘Like me?’

‘I mean, a man like all the rest. It isn’t that I don’t want to love someone, one day. I do. But it’s got to be someone, well, someone who’s pure, and who’ll have approached me in a very different way, and for . . . for other reasons. Oh, I don’t know how to express it! Anyhow, a man quite different from you.’

‘Thanks very much!’

His desire for her was dead, and all he wanted now was to escape seeming ridiculous.

‘Now then,’ she said, ‘let’s make peace, and forget all about it.’ She began to open the door; this time he did not try to stop her. ‘Is it “friends”?’ she asked, holding out her hand. He made no answer. He was looking at her eyes, her cheeks, the young face that seemed proffered like a ripe fruit. He forced a smile on to his lips; his eyelashes were fluttering. She took his hand and grasped it tightly.

‘Don’t spoil my life as well!’ she murmured in a coaxing voice, and suddenly her eyebrows took a humorous inflexion. ‘Isn’t a spool of films quite enough damage for one day?’

Good-naturedly he laughed. She had not expected that much of him, and felt a little chagrined. Still, all in all, she was well satisfied with her victory and with the opinion he would have of her henceforward.

‘Well?’ Jenny asked when they appeared together in the dining-room.

‘No go,’ Daniel said gruffly.

Jacques felt a thrill of spiteful satisfaction. Nicole’s eyes twinkled as she repeated slowly, emphatically:

‘Ab-so-lutely no go!’

Then she noticed that Jenny’s cheeks were quivering, her eyes blurred with sudden tears, and running up to her, she kissed her.

From the moment his friend had come into the room, Jacques had stopped thinking about himself; he could not keep his eyes off Daniel. A change had come over Daniel’s features, a change that was painful to observe. It was as if the upper and lower halves of his face no longer

matched; the enigmatic, troubled, almost sinister expression of his eyes was out of keeping with the smile that lifted one side of his mouth and screwed the lower portion of his face round to the left.

Their eyes met. Daniel frowned slightly and moved uneasily away.

This indication of mistrust grieved Jacques more than all the rest. All the time, from the very start, Daniel had been obscurely disappointing him; now at last he was consciously aware of it. There had not been a moment of real intimacy between them; why he had not even been able to tell Lisbeth's name to his friend!

For a while he fancied that the cause of his distress was his disillusionment regarding Daniel. But the real reason, though he had only a vague inkling of it, was that now, for the first time, he was viewing his love from a critical angle and, by the same token, eliminating it from his system. Like all young people, he lived only for the present; the past lapsed so swiftly into oblivion, and thoughts of the future merely whetted his impatience. And to-day the present, every moment of it, seemed to have a bitter savour; as the afternoon drew to a close, he felt more and more hopelessly depressed. When Antoine signed to him to get ready to go, he felt actually relieved.

Daniel had noticed Antoine's gesture. He went up to Jacques at once.

'You're not going yet?'

'Yes, we must.'

'So soon?' Then he added in a lower tone. 'But we've seen hardly anything of each other.'

He, too, had got nothing but disappointment from the day. And now, to make things worse, he began to feel remorseful for the way he had treated Jacques and—what grieved him even more—their friendship.

'Please forgive me,' he said suddenly, leading Jacques towards the window-recess. And there was such humility, such genuine solicitude in his manner that Jacques, forgetting all his disappointments, felt carried away by an access of the old affection. 'It's been a rotten day,' Daniel continued. 'Everything went wrong. When shall I see you again?' His tone grew pressing. 'Look here, I've got to see you alone and have a good long talk. We've got out of touch with each other somehow. Of course, there's nothing odd in that—why, we haven't seen each other for a whole year! But we can't let that go on.'

He suddenly wondered what future lay before their friendship, which so long had had nothing to thrive on except an almost mystical sentiment of loyalty, the fragility of which had just been shown to them. No, they must

not let it wither. True, Jacques struck him now as rather childish; but his affection remained intact and, for all he knew, the keener for his feeling so much older than his friend.

‘We’re always at home on Sunday,’ Madame de Fontanin was saying just then to Antoine. ‘We shan’t leave Paris till after the School Prize-day.’ Her eyes lit up. ‘Daniel has won several prizes,’ she said in a low voice, but with evident pride. ‘Wait!’ she added hastily, after making sure her son had his back to her and was not listening. ‘Before you go, I’d like to show you my treasures.’ She hastened light-heartedly to her room, Antoine following, and led him to a writing-desk. In one of the drawers, in a neat row, lay twenty laurel crowns in painted cardboard. She shut the drawer almost immediately and began laughing, a little flustered at having yielded to a sentimental impulse.

‘Don’t tell him,’ she said. ‘He hasn’t the least idea I keep them all.’

They returned in silence to the hall.

‘Hullo, Jacques!’ Antoine called.

‘To-day doesn’t count,’ Madame de Fontanin said, holding out both hands to Jacques and giving him a keen glance, as if she had guessed everything. ‘You’re amongst friends here, Jacques dear, and any time you feel like coming you’ll always be welcome. And your big brother, too, I needn’t say,’ she added with a graceful gesture for Antoine.

Jacques turned round to see if Jenny was there; but she had gone off with her cousin. Bending over the little dog, he kissed its sleek, smooth forehead. . . .

Madame de Fontanin went back to the dining-room to clear the table. Daniel followed her pensively, then leant against the doorway and, without speaking, lit a cigarette. He was turning over in his mind what Nicole had told him. Why had they concealed from him the fact that his cousin had run away from home and come to them for refuge? Refuge against what?

Madame de Fontanin was moving to and fro with the supple movements that gave her still the easy grace of a much younger woman. She was thinking of what Antoine had said, of all he had told her about himself, his studies, and his plans for the future, and about his father. ‘What a noble character!’ she was saying to herself. ‘And I do like that forehead of his. It’s so—’ she groped for an epithet—‘yes, so earnest,’ she added with a little thrill of pleasure.

Then she recalled the idle fancy that had crossed her mind; for an instant had not she, too, sinned in thought? Gregory’s words came back to her. And all at once, for no definite reason, she felt her heart full of such abounding

joy that she put down the plate she was holding so as to pass her fingers over her face and feel, under her hand, the imprint of that sudden ecstasy. She went up to her son and startled him from his reverie, gaily clapping her hands on his shoulders. Then she gazed into his eyes, kissed him and, without a word, went quickly out of the room.

She went straight to her desk and began writing in her large, childish, rather wavering hand.

MY DEAR JAMES,

I have behaved too arrogantly towards you. Who of us has the right to judge another? I thank God for having enlightened me once again. Tell Jerome I will not press for a divorce. Tell him . . .

Across her tears the words seemed dancing on the paper.

12

A FEW days later Antoine was awakened by a sound of hammering on the shutters. The dustman had failed to get the street-door opened for him, though the bell was in order—he could hear it ringing in the concierge’s room—and suspected that ‘something was wrong.’

Something was wrong, indeed; old Madame Frühling was dead. She had had another seizure, a fatal one, in the course of the night, and had dropped dead on the floor.

Jacques came in just as the body was being laid out on the mattress. The old woman’s mouth was gaping, showing some yellow teeth. What was it, something horrible, it reminded him of? Yes, that dead grey horse lying on the Toulon road. Then suddenly it struck him very likely Lisbeth would be coming for the funeral.

Two days passed and she did not appear; it seemed she was not coming at all. Jacques caught himself thinking: So much the better! He could not make out his real feelings just now. Even after his visit to the Fontanins, he had gone on tinkering with a poem in which he glorified his heart’s beloved

and lamented her absence. But somehow he had no real wish to see her again.

None the less he walked past the concierge's room ten times a day, and each time glanced eagerly inside, only to turn away each time, reassured, yet dissatisfied.

On the day before the funeral, as he was coming in after dining alone in the little restaurant where he and Antoine had been having their meals since M. Thibault's departure to Maisons-Laffitte, the first thing to meet his eye was a valise in the entrance-hall, just outside the concierge's door. He felt himself trembling, his forehead damp with sweat. In the light from the candles round the bier he saw a girlish form, swathed in heavy mourning veils, kneeling beside it. He entered the room at once. The two nuns glanced round at him without interest; but Lisbeth did not turn. The night was sultry and a warm, sickly-sweet odour filled the room; the flowers on the coffin were wilting. Jacques remained standing, feeling sorry he had ventured in; the death-bed and everything connected with it had given him a sensation of discomfort that he was unable to vanquish. Lisbeth had passed out of his mind and all he wanted now was a pretext to get away. When a nun rose to snuff a candle, he slipped out of the room.

It seemed as if Lisbeth had intuitively felt his presence, or perhaps she had recognized his step, for she caught him up before he had reached the door of the flat. Hearing her step behind him, Jacques turned. For a few seconds they stood gazing at each other in a dark corner of the entrance-hall. Under the black veil her eyes were clouded with tears, and she did not see the hand he was holding out to her. He would have liked to weep in sympathy, but he was conscious of no emotion, only a vague boredom and a certain shyness.

A door banged on one of the upper landings. Fearing they might be caught outside his door, Jacques took out his keys. But what with his confusion and the darkness, he was unable to find the keyhole.

'Sure it's the right key?' she murmured. He was profoundly moved by the slow cadence of her voice. When at last the door was open, she hesitated. Footsteps could be heard coming down the stairs from one of the upper flats.

'Antoine's on duty at the hospital,' Jacques whispered, to persuade her. Then, without the least sign of embarrassment, she crossed the threshold.

As he shut the door and switched on the lights, he saw her walking straight to his room. When she sat down on the sofa, each of her movements reminded him exactly of the past. Through the crêpe veil he saw her eyes swollen with weeping; grief had perhaps taken away some of the prettiness

of her features, but it had added pathos. He noticed that she had a bandaged finger. He did not dare to sit down; he could not take his mind off the bereavement that had led to her return.

‘How close it is to-night!’ she said. ‘I’m sure there’s going to be a storm.’

She moved a little on the sofa; and the movement seemed an invitation to him to take the place beside her, his usual place. Jacques sat down and at once, without a word, without even taking off her veil, but simply drawing it aside, she pressed her cheek against his, exactly as before. The crêpe veil had an odour of dye and starch, and he found the contact of her moist skin disagreeable. He felt at a loss what to do or say. When he took her hand in his she gave a little cry.

‘Have you hurt yourself?’

‘*Ach*, it’s only a—a whitlow,’ she sighed.

The sigh seemed to be for all her troubles at once: her sore finger, her bereavement and the baffled tenderness fretting her heart. Without thinking, she began unwinding the bandage. When the finger was laid bare—livid and misshapen, with the nail displaced by the abscess—Jacques felt his breath stop short and for a moment his senses reeled as if she had suddenly exposed some secret place of her body.

Meanwhile he was beginning to feel, across his clothes, the warmth of the young body touching his. She turned her china-blue eyes towards him, plaintive eyes that always seemed entreating him not to be unkind. And then he had an impulse, stronger than his repugnance, to press his lips on the disfigured finger and make it well again.

She rose and, with a dejected air started winding the lint again round her finger.

‘I’ll have to be going back now.’

She looked so worn out that he made a suggestion.

‘I say, let me make you a cup of tea. Shall I?’

She gave him a curious look, and only afterwards smiled.

‘Thank you, I’d like a nice cup of tea. I’ll run across and say a little prayer; then I’ll come back.’

In a few minutes he had the water boiled, the tea made, and was bringing it back to his room. Lisbeth was not yet there. He sat down. Now he was all eagerness for her return. He felt his nerves on edge, but did not try to ascertain the reason. Why was she delaying like this? He could not bring himself to call to her; it would be like an affront to the dead woman. But

what could be keeping her all this time? As the minutes passed he kept on going up to the tea-pot, feeling its declining warmth. At last it was stone-cold and, having no pretext for getting up, he stayed unmoving in his chair. His eyes were smarting with staring at the lamp and, with his exasperation, he felt the fever rising in his blood.

A sudden glare of lightning, between the slats of the closed shutters, jarred his nerves to breaking-point. Was she *never* coming back? He felt half asleep, so weary of everything he would have liked to die.

There was a low rumble, a black crash. That was the tea-pot bursting. Let it burst! The tea was pouring down in rain, lashing the shutters. Lisbeth was soaked through, water was streaming down her cheeks, down the black crêpe, washing the colour out of it till it was snow-white, white and translucent, a bridal veil.

Jacques gave a violent start. She had just sat down beside him again, pressing her cheek to his.

‘Were you asleep, Jacques dear?’

Never before had she called him by his Christian name. She had taken off her veil and, in a half-dream, he seemed to see once more the well-beloved face of the Lisbeth he had known, though now there were dark rings round her eyes and the corners of her lips were drooping. She made a gesture of weary resignation.

‘Now,’ she said, ‘my uncle will marry me.’

Her head was bowed, and Jacques could not see if she was crying. There had been sadness in her voice, but acquiescence too; perhaps her regret was touched with curiosity about the new life opening before her. But Jacques was not disposed to press such speculations too far. He wanted to believe her unhappy, to revel in the thrill of pitying her. Putting his arms round her, he pressed her body against his with all his might, as if he were trying to merge them into one. Her lips found his, and passionately he gave his mouth to her mouth’s kiss. Never in his life had he felt such an ecstasy of emotion. Evidently she had unfastened her blouse before coming in, for suddenly, almost without a movement on his part, the warmth of her young breast was nestling in his hand.

She shifted her position a little so that Jacques’ hand could move untrammelled, under the dress.

‘Let’s pray together for Mother Frühling,’ she murmured.

He felt no inclination to smile; almost he believed he was really praying, such was the fervour of his caresses.

Suddenly she gave a little moan, and shuffled free from his embrace. He supposed that he had hurt her finger, or else that she was about to leave him. But she only moved towards the lamp-switch; after turning off the light she came back to the sofa. Close beside his ear he heard her whisper '*Liebling!*' and then again he felt her soft lips crushed on his, her feverish fingers on his clothes. . . .

Another clap of thunder woke him; rain was hissing on the cobbles in the courtyard. Lisbeth? Where was Lisbeth? All was darkness in the room. He had half a mind to get up, to go and look for her, and even made a tentative effort to rise, propping himself on his elbow; but then a flood of sleep swept over him, and he sank back amongst the cushions.

It was broad daylight when at last he opened his eyes.

First, he saw the tea-pot on the table, then his coat inexplicably sprawling on the floor. Now everything came back to him and he got up at once. A sudden, urgent craving had come over him to take off what clothes he still had on and wash his limbs in good clean water. The cold bath seemed like a purifying rite, a baptism. Still dripping, he began to walk about the room, throwing out his chest, testing his muscles and patting the cool, firm skin; the odious associations of this cult of his own nakedness had been completely blotted from his memory. Reflected in a glass he saw his slim young body and for the first time since a very long while he found that he could gaze at every part of it coolly, with unruffled equanimity. Remembering certain lapses of the past, he merely shrugged his shoulders with indulgent contempt. 'All that was childish silliness!' That chapter of his life, he felt, was definitely closed; it seemed to him that certain energies, after a long spell of incomprehension and deviation from their natural course, had at last found their proper function. Though what had happened during the last twelve hours was only vaguely present in his consciousness, and though he did not even give a thought to Lisbeth, he felt light-hearted, clean and sane in mind and body. He had not the least impression of having hit on something new; rather, it seemed to him he had recovered a long-lost equilibrium, like a convalescent who, though delighted by his return to health, finds nothing new in it.

Still naked, he moved into the hall, and held the door ajar. He fancied he could make out Lisbeth in the darkened room where the dead body lay, on her knees and swathed in the black veils she had worn the previous night. Men on ladders were festooning the street entrance with black draperies. He remembered the funeral was fixed for nine, and dressed in eager haste, as if for a holiday. That morning every act was a delight.

He had just finished tidying his room when M. Thibault, who had made a point of returning from Maisons-Laffitte for the funeral, came to fetch him.

He walked beside his father in the cortège. He had a vague sense of almost patronizing superiority as at the church he filed in with the others, amongst all those people who did not know; and, without much emotion, he clasped Lisbeth's hand.

All that day the concierge's room was empty. Jacques counted the minutes, waiting for Lisbeth's return; but he would not own to himself the reason for his impatience, the desire smouldering in the background of his mood.

At four o'clock the bell rang, but when he ran to open the door, it was his Latin tutor. He had quite forgotten he had a lesson that afternoon.

He was listening to his tutor's explanations of a passage of Horace with an inattentive ear, when the bell rang again. This time it was she. From the threshold she could see the open door of Jacques' room, and the tutor's back bent over the table. For a few moments their eyes met, questioning. Jacques had no idea that she had come to say good-bye, that she was leaving by the six o'clock train. She did not dare to speak, but a slight tremor ran through her body and her eyelids quivered. Raising her bandaged finger to her mouth, she came quite close to him and, as if she were already in the train that was to carry her away from him for ever, threw him a hasty kiss, and fled.

The tutor went on with the interrupted lesson.

'*Purpurarum usus* means the same thing as *purpura qua utuntur*. But there's a shade of difference. Do you feel it?'

Jacques smiled as if he felt it. He was telling himself Lisbeth would be back quite soon and a picture was hovering before his eyes of Lisbeth's face in the dusk of the hall, and the raised veil, and the kiss she had seemed to snatch with her bandaged finger from her lips, to throw to him.

'Go on translating,' the tutor said.

[As regards *Parts I* and *II* of THE THIBAULTS the present Translator wishes to acknowledge the assistance he has derived from the previous version by Mr. Stephen Haden Guest.]

PART III

THE two brothers walked along by the Luxembourg railings. The Senate-house clock had just gone half-past five.

‘Your nerves are on edge,’ Antoine observed. Jacques had been forcing the pace for quite a while, and his brother was ‘rowing tired of it. ‘Sweltering, isn’t it? Looks like a storm brewing.’

Jacques slowed down and took off his hat, which was pinching his temples.

‘Nerves on edge? Not a bit of it. Quite the contrary. You don’t believe me? Well, I’m amazed at my own calmness. Each of the last two nights I’ve slept like a log; so much so that, on awaking, I felt stiff all over. Cool as a cucumber, I assure you. But you shouldn’t have bothered to come with me, you’ve such heaps of things to do. All the more so as Daniel’s going to turn up. Amazing, isn’t it? He came all the way from Cabourg this morning just for me. He telephoned a moment ago to know when the results would be posted. Damned thoughtful he is about things like that. Bataincourt promised to come, too. So, you see, I shan’t be alone.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Well, in half an hour. . . .’

Yes, his nerves are strung up all right, thought Antoine. Mine too, a bit. Still, as Favery swears he’s in the list—Antoine brushed aside, as in his own case he had always done, all thought of failure. Casting a paternal glance on the youngster beside him, he hummed through closed lips: *In my heart, in my heart* . . . What that girl Olga was singing this morning; can’t get it out of my head. By Duparc, I fancy. I only hope she doesn’t forget to remind Belin about tapping Number Seven. *In my heart tra-la-la* . . .

And if I’ve passed, Jacques mused, shall I be really, really pleased? Not so much as they, anyhow, he added to himself, thinking of Antoine and his father.

A memory flashed across his mind.

‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘the last time I dined at Maisons-Laffitte—I’d just got through the *viva voce* and my nerves were in rags—when we were at the dinner-table, father suddenly addressed me, with that special look of his, you know: “And what shall *we* make of you, if you’re ploughed?”’

The picture faded and another memory crossed his mind. What a state I’m in this afternoon! he thought and, smiling, took his brother’s arm.

‘No, Antoine, there was nothing unusual about that, of course. It was next day, the following morning. Look here, I simply must tell you about it. As I’d nothing to do, father told me to attend M. Crespin’s funeral in his place. Remember? And it was then that something happened—something quite inexplicable. I got there too soon and, as it was raining, I went into the church. I was thoroughly sick, you know, at having my morning spoiled like that; all the same, as you’ll see, that doesn’t really explain it. Well, I entered the church and sat down in an empty row, when—what do you think?—a priest came up and took the chair beside me. Mind you, there were any number of empty chairs; yet this priest deliberately planted himself next to me. He was quite young, still at the seminary, no doubt, smooth shaven and smelling clean, of good mouth-wash—but he had disgusting black gloves and, worst of all, a huge umbrella with a black handle that reeked like a drenched dog. Don’t laugh, Antoine; wait and see! I simply couldn’t get that priest out of my mind. He had his nose buried in a prayer-book and I could just see his lips moving as he followed the service. So far, so good. But, at the elevation, instead of using the kneeling-desk in front of him—that, of course, I’d have understood—he knelt on the ground, prostrated himself on the bare stone slabs. I, meanwhile, remained standing. When he rose he saw me like that and caught my eye; perhaps my attitude may have struck him as provocative. Anyhow I caught a look of pious disapproval on his face and he rolled his eyes upwards—it maddened me, his air of smug superiority. To such a pitch that—I can’t think what possessed me to do it, it’s a mystery to me yet—I drew a visiting-card from my pocket, scrawled a phrase on it and handed it to him.’ (As a matter of fact, all this was make-believe; Jacques had merely fancied at the moment that he might act thus. What prompted him to lie?) ‘He raised his nose from his book, and hesitated; yes, I had positively to force the card into his hand. He glanced at it, stared at me in consternation and then, slipping his hat under his arm, quietly picked up his broly and—rushed out! You’d have thought he had a lunatic at large beside him. Well, for that matter, I *was* pretty mad at the moment, it was all I could do to keep a hold on myself. I went away without waiting for the service to end.’

‘But, I say, whatever had you written on the card?’

‘Oh yes, the card. It was so perfectly idiotic I hardly like to tell you. What I wrote was this: *I do NOT believe!* With a note of exclamation. Underlined. On a visiting-card. A monkey-trick, eh? *I do NOT believe!*’ His eyes widened, staring ahead. ‘In the first place, can one ever affirm such a thing—positively?’ He stopped speaking for a moment, to watch a smartly dressed young man in mourning, who was crossing at the Medicis corner.

When he spoke again his voice sounded brittle, as though he were forcing himself to an odious confession. ‘It’s absurd. Do you know what I’ve been thinking of for the last minute? I was thinking, Antoine, that if you died I’d like to have a close-fitting black suit like the one that fellow there has on. I even, for an instant, longed for your death—impatiently. Now, don’t you think I’ll end my days in a padded cell?’

Antoine merely shrugged his shoulders.

‘It mightn’t be such a bad thing, perhaps,’ Jacques continued. ‘I might try to analyse myself right up to the final stage of madness. I say, that’s an idea! I might write the story of a highly intelligent man who goes mad. Everything he did would be insane, yet he would act only after the most scrupulous deliberation and behave, on his own estimate, with perfect logic. Do you see? I’d install myself in the very centre of his mind, and I’d . . .’

Antoine kept silence. That was another pose he had essayed and it had become a second nature with him. But there was such awareness in his silences that his companions’ thoughts, far from being paralysed, were stimulated by them.

‘Oh, if only I had the time to work, to try out my ideas!’ Jacques sighed. ‘One exam, after another! And I’m twenty already; it’s simply ghastly!’

He lifted his hand to his neck, where the collar-edge chafed the tip of a pimple. Another boil in the making, he mused dolefully; the iodine hasn’t stopped it.

He turned to his brother again.

‘I say, Antoine! When you were twenty, you weren’t childish, were you? I remember you quite well. But I’m different, I never change. Really I feel exactly the same as I was ten years ago. Don’t you agree?’

‘No.’

All the same, Antoine reflected, he’s right about that. Consciousness of continuity; or, better, the continuity of consciousness. Like the old fellow who says, ‘Personally, I was mad keen on leapfrog.’ Same feet, same hands, same old buffer. I, too, that night I had such a fright at Cotterets, that colic attack. Didn’t dare leave my room. Dr. Thibault it was, yes, the doctor himself and no other—our House-physician, a first-rate man, he added complacently, as though he overheard one of his subordinates describing him.

‘Am I boring you?’ asked Jacques, lifting his hat to mop his forehead.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘That’s what it looks like. You hardly answer a word, and listen to me as if I were a fever case.’

‘Oh no, I don’t.’

If, Antoine mused, the ear-douche doesn’t bring the temperature down . . . He was thinking of the boy they had brought to the hospital that morning, the look of agony on his face. *In my heart. . . . In my heart tra-la-la.*

‘You think I’m feeling nervous,’ Jacques went on. ‘I tell you again, you’re mistaken. I may as well make a clean breast of it; there are moments when I’d almost rather hear I’d failed the entrance!’

‘Why on earth——?’

‘To escape.’

‘To escape? Escape what?’

‘Everything. The whole show. You, them, the whole bunch!’

Instead of uttering the comment that rose to his lips—‘You’re talking nonsense’—Antoine turned to his brother and examined him thoughtfully.

‘To burn my boats,’ Jacques continued, ‘and go away. Oh, if only I could go right away, all by myself, anywhere on earth! Somewhere far away, where I’d have some peace and settle down to work.’ Well knowing that he would never go, he yielded to his daydream with all the greater zest. He paused for a moment, then, with a wry smile, turned to his brother again.

‘And there, there perhaps, but nowhere else, I might bring myself to forgive them.’

Antoine stopped short.

‘Still harping on that, eh?’

‘On what?’

‘Forgive them, you say. Forgive whom, for what? The reformatory?’

Jacques cast a hostile glance at him, shrugged his shoulders and walked on. A lot his stay at Crouy had to do with it! But what was the good of explanations? Antoine would never understand.

And, anyhow, what did this idea of ‘forgiveness’ amount to? Jacques himself could not explain it satisfactorily, though he was always finding himself at grips with a dilemma: to forgive or, alternatively, to cultivate his rancour. To take things as they came, get his degree, become a cogwheel in the machine; or—the other way out—to give full rein to the destructive forces that surged within him and launch himself with the full impetus of his resentment against—against what, he could hardly say; against morality, the cut-and-dried life, the family, society. An ancient grievance, that, and

harking back to childhood; a vague awareness that none had known him for what he was, a boy who needed to be properly taken, but, time and again, everyone had failed him. Yes, he was sure of it; had escape been feasible, he would have found that peace of mind which he accused 'the others' of frustrating.

'Once I'd got there, Antoine, I'd work.'

'"Got there." *Where*, exactly?'

'There you are—asking me "Where?"! No, Antoine, you can't understand. You've always felt in harmony with other people. You were always satisfied with the path of life you'd chosen.'

Jacques fell to summing up his grown-up brother in terms which usually he held taboo. He saw him as a diligent, contented man. He had energy all right, but what about his brains? The brains of a zoologist. An intellect so positive and so realistic that it had found its natural field in scientific research. An intellect that based its theory of life on the one concept of activity, and with that was satisfied. And—this struck even deeper—an intellect which stripped things of their secret virtue, of all, in a word, that gave significance and beauty to the universe.

'I'm not a bit like you,' he burst out passionately and, swerving a little from his brother's side, walked silently aloof along the kerb.

I'm stifled here, he mused; everything they make me do is loathsome, sickening. The tutors, my fellow-students—all alike! And the things they rave about, their favourite books! Their 'great modern authors'! Oh, if only someone in the world could guess what I am, my real self—and what I'm out to do. No, no one has a notion of it, not even Daniel. His raging mood had passed. He did not listen to Antoine's reply. To forget all that has been written up to now! he adjured himself. To get out of the rut and, looking inside oneself, say *everything*! No one's ever had the nerve to say everything, as yet. But someone might; *I* might. . . .

It was hard going up the Rue Soufflot incline in such a temperature, and they slackened speed. Antoine talked on; Jacques was silent. Noticing the contrast, Jacques smiled to himself. After all, he thought, I can never argue with Antoine; either I stand up to him and lose my temper, or else I dig myself in before the arguments he methodically marches up, and hold my tongue. Now, for instance. It's a sort of low cunning, really; I know that Antoine takes my silence for assent. But it's not so. Far otherwise. I stick to my guns, my ideas. I don't care if other people find them muddled; I'm sure, myself, of their soundness and I've only got to develop the knack of proving this to others—a matter of getting down to it one day, that's all. Arguments

—they’re easily found. But Antoine rattles on and on, never stops to wonder if there’s any sense in my ideas. All the same, how I do feel lonely! . . . And once again the desire to go away flamed up in him. Wonderful it would be to give up everything, all at once. *Rooms left behind! Wonders of setting forth!* He smiled again and, throwing a teasing glance at his brother, began to declaim.

Families, I hate you! Closed circles round your hearth!

Fast shut doors. . . .^[1]

^[1] For this and for the other passages from M. Gide’s *Les Nourritures Terrestres* cited in this chapter, I have used the authorized translation by Mrs. Dorothy Bussy—*Translator*.

‘Who’s that by?’

Nathanael, look at everything as you pass by and stop nowhere. . . .

‘By whom?’

‘Oh,’ Jacques exclaimed—the smile had left his lips and he was walking faster—‘that comes from a book that’s to blame for everything, a book in which Daniel has found every sort of excuse—far worse, a panegyric!—for his—his callousness. He’s got it off by heart, while I . . . No’—his voice trembled—‘no, I can’t say I loathe it, but—don’t you see, Antoine?—it’s a book that burns your fingers while you read, and somehow I can never feel at ease with it, so dangerous do I think it.’ With grudging appreciation he repeated: ‘*Rooms left behind! Wonders of setting forth!*’ When, after a moment’s silence, he spoke again, his voice was changed, had suddenly grown harsh, *staccato*. ‘I may talk about it—going away. But it’s too late. I shall never be able to get *really* away.’

‘You talk about “going away,”’ Antoine replied, ‘as if it meant leaving home for good. And that, obviously, is easier said than done. But why not travel a bit? If you’ve passed the entrance exam, father will be quite agreeable to your going away during the summer.’

Jacques shook his head.

‘Too late.’

What did he mean by that?

‘Surely you don’t propose to spend the two months’ holidays at Maisons-Laffitte, with only father and Mademoiselle?’

‘I do.’

He made an evasive gesture and, now they had crossed the Place du Panthéon and entered the Rue de l’Ulm, he pointed to the groups collecting outside the Ecole Normale. His face darkened.

What a queer character he has! Antoine reflected. He had often made the same observation—indulgently and with unconscious pride. Much as he hated the unforeseen, and despite Jacques’ habit of constantly springing surprises on him, he was for ever trying to make his brother out. Round and about the incoherent phrases Jacques let fall, Antoine’s nimble wits were busy with an intellectual gymnastics, which not only amused him but enabled him (so he imagined) to read the riddle of the boy’s personality. Unfortunately, no sooner did Antoine see himself adding the crowning touch to his diagnosis of the boy’s mind than Jacques would utter some new remark that upset all his inferences. A fresh start had to be made, leading him more often than not towards entirely different conclusions. The result was that, for Antoine, every conversation with his brother involved a sequence of improvised and incompatible deductions, the last of which he always took to be decisive.

The grim façade of the Ecole Normale was looming above them, and Antoine, turning to Jacques, cast a long, meditative look at him. Reading between the lines, he reassured himself, you can see the youngster appreciates family life far better than he imagines.

The gate was open now, and the quadrangle crowded. At the vestibule entrance Daniel de Fontanin was talking to a blond young man.

‘If it’s Daniel who spots us first,’ Jacques murmured to himself, ‘that means I’ve passed.’ But Fontanin and Battaincourt turned simultaneously when Antoine hailed them.

‘Not too nervy?’ Daniel enquired.

‘Not in the least.’

(If, thought Jacques, he mentions Jenny’s name, it means I’ve passed.)

‘This quarter of an hour’s suspense before the results are posted,’ Antoine observed, ‘is simply damnable.’

‘I wonder now!’ Daniel demurred. He took a childish delight in contradicting Antoine, whom he addressed as ‘Doctor’ and whose precocious gravity amused him. ‘There’s always a spice of pleasure in suspense.’

Antoine shrugged his shoulders and turned towards his brother.

‘Hear what he says? . . . Personally,’ he continued, ‘I’ve been through this sort of suspense fourteen or fifteen times, but I’ve never managed to get used to it. What’s more, I’ve noticed that the fellows who put on an air of stoicism on such occasions are nearly always the second-raters, weaklings.’

‘The joys of hope deferred are not for everyone,’ Daniel oracled. When he addressed the doctor there was a glint of mockery in his eyes that softened to tenderness as they turned to Jacques.

Antoine insisted.

‘I’m speaking in earnest. A strong man finds uncertainty intolerable. True courage isn’t just a matter of facing events with coolness; it’s going out to meet them half way, so as to take their bearings at the earliest moment, and act accordingly. Isn’t that so, Jacques?’

‘No, I’m more inclined to agree with Daniel,’ Jacques replied, though he had not been listening. And, as Daniel went on talking to Antoine, he slipped in a leading question, aware that he was cheating destiny.

‘Are your mother and sister still at Maisons-Laffitte?’

Daniel did not hear, and, in the act of dinning the thought ‘I’m ploughed’ into his head, Jacques realized how solid was his faith in his success. Father’ll be delighted, he thought and, smiling at the prospect, bestowed the smile on Battaincourt.

‘Very decent of you to come to-day, Simon.’

Battaincourt glanced towards him affectionately; he made no secret of his fervent cult of Daniel’s friend, an adoration which sometimes irritated Jacques, since he could not respond to it with a friendship of equal warmth. . . .

The hubbub in the quadrangle ceased abruptly. A roll of white paper had flashed into view at one of the windows. Jacques had a vague impression of being swept off his feet, borne by a wave towards the fateful scroll.

A buzzing in his ears; then Antoine’s voice.

‘Passed! Third on the list!’

Warm, vibrant with life, the voice rang for a moment in his ears, but he did not grasp the meaning of the words till, looking timidly round, he saw the jubilation on his brother’s face. Then, lifting a clammy hand, he fumbled with his hat; sweat was pouring down his forehead. Daniel and Battaincourt were edging round the crowd towards him. Daniel’s eyes were on him and, scanning his friend as he approached, Jacques noticed how his raised upper lip bared his teeth, though no other feature showed the least trace of a smile.

A murmur grew, filling the place with sound; and life went on its way again. Jacques drew a deep breath, and the blood once more flowed freely through his limbs. He had a sudden vision of dangers ahead, a pitfall. 'Trapped!' he murmured. Then other thoughts welled up. He seemed to live again some seconds of his Greek *viva voce*, the crucial moment when he made that slip; the tablecloth rose green before his eyes, with the examiner's thumb splayed flat on the Choëphori, his bulging nail flaked like a shred of horn.

'Who is first?'

He did not hear the name that Bataincourt announced. I'd have been first, he thought, if I'd tumbled to *asylum, shrine. Wardens of the domestic shrine*. Then, again and again, he struggled to reconstruct the train of thoughts which had misled him to that appalling blunder.

'Wake up, doctor! Try to look pleased!'

Daniel clapped Antoine on the shoulder and Antoine deigned to smile. For that was Antoine's way; pleasure for him almost always involved a feeling of constraint, for the gravity of his demeanour precluded any show of gaiety. It was otherwise with Daniel; his gaiety was untrammelled. He seemed to find an almost sensual pleasure in poring on the faces of his friends, his neighbours, and, above all, the women present, mothers or sisters, whose artless affection frankly betrayed itself in every accent, every gesture.

Glancing at his watch, Antoine turned to his brother.

'Well? Anything more to do here?'

Jacques gave a start.

'What? No, rather not!' He looked dejected; he had just realized that inadvertently—at the moment when the results were posted, most likely—he had made the pimple on his lip, which for a week past had spoilt his appearance, start bleeding again.

'Then let's be off,' Antoine proposed. 'I've a patient to see before dinner.'

As they left the quadrangle, they saw Favery hurrying up to greet them. He was jubilant.

'There you are! I told you I'd heard your French Composition was a fine piece of work.'

Favery had left the Ecole Normale a year previously and, eschewing provincial posts, had got himself nominated to a temporary vacancy at the Lycée Saint-Louis. He did coaching in his off-hours by day so that by night

he might enjoy the life of Paris. Teaching did not appeal to him, his preferences went to journalism, with a secret hankering after politics.

It came to Jacques' mind that Favery was fairly intimate with the examiner in Greek, and again a picture of the green tablecloth and the examiner's finger flashed across his mind; he felt his cheeks reddening with shame. That, nevertheless, he'd passed had not yet dawned on him; he experienced no sense of relief, rather a mood of listlessness, with occasional bursts of rage whenever he recalled his blunder or the pimple on his lip.

Daniel and Battaincourt linked their arms in his and swung him along, to a dancing lilt, towards the Panthéon. Antoine and Favery followed behind.

'My alarm goes off at six-thirty,' Favery explained, 'standing in a saucer poised precariously upon a tumbler.' His voice was loud, his laugh complacent. 'I curse a bit, open an eye, switch on the light; then I move on the hand to seven o'clock and go to sleep again, clasping the infernal machine against my chest. Presently the house, the whole neighbourhood, is rocked by an earthquake; I damn-its-eyes, but disobey. I give myself till five past, then ten, then a quarter-past, and, when it's two minutes over the quarter, I allow myself till twenty past—to make it a round figure. At long last I scramble out of bed. All my things are spread out ready—like a fireman's kit—on three chairs. At seven twenty-eight I'm in the street; naturally I've had no time for breakfast or a wash. Just four minutes remain to catch my metro. At eight o'clock I'm standing at my desk and the cramming process begins. You know when I get away. I have to find time for a tub, for dressing and looking up friends. How the devil am I to do any work?'

Antoine listened with half an ear, while his eyes roved in quest of a taxi. He turned to his brother.

'Dining with me, Jacques?'

'Jacques is having dinner with us,' Daniel protested.

'No, no,' Jacques exclaimed. 'I'm dining with Antoine to-night.' And to himself he added with impatience: 'Won't they ever leave me in peace, confound it? For one thing, I've got to put some more iodine on my boil.'

Favery put in a suggestion.

'Let's all have dinner together.'

'Where?'

'Any old place. How about Packmell's?'

Jacques demurred.

'No. Not to-night. I'm tired.'

‘Tiresome old thing!’ murmured Daniel, slipping his arm in Jacques’. ‘Doctor, you’ll join us at Packmell’s, won’t you?’

Antoine had secured a taxi. He turned towards them, obviously in two minds.

‘What sort of a place is Packmell’s?’

Favery drew a bow at a venture.

‘Not by any means what *you* think . . .’

Antoine looked at Daniel questioningly.

Packmell’s?’ Daniel said. ‘Hard to classify, isn’t it, Batt, old boy? Quite out of the ordinary run of cabarets. More like a well-conducted boarding-house. Certainly the bar functions from five to eight, but at eight-thirty the bar-flies flit with one accord, leaving the field to the “regulars.” The tables are run together and we all dine off a vast and highly decorous tablecloth, with Mother Packmell in the seat of honour. A good band; pretty girls. What more can you want? So that’s that. You will meet us at Packmell’s?’

Antoine rarely went out at night; he led laborious days and reserved his evenings for examination work. To-day, however, he did not feel in the mood for haematology. To-morrow would be Sunday; Monday, the daily round began again. Occasionally he took a Saturday evening off and plotted out a night’s amusement. Packmell’s appealed to him. Pretty girls. . . .

‘Have it your own way!’ His voice was studiously indifferent. ‘Where is it by the way?’

‘Rue Monsigny. We’ll look out for you up to half-past eight.’

‘I’ll be there long before that,’ said Antoine, slamming the taxi door.

Jacques made no protest; his brother’s assent had changed his outlook and, moreover, he always took a secret pleasure in giving in to Daniel’s caprices.

‘Shall we walk there?’ Bataincourt asked.

‘Personally, I’m taking the metro,’ said Favery, stroking his chin. ‘I’ll change in a jiffy and meet you there.’

Paris was stifling in a sultry heat, presaging storm, the heat-wave which so often ends July, when at each nightfall the air grows drab and dense—with dust and vapours, indistinguishably.

They had a good half-hour’s walk before them. Bataincourt came up to Jacques’ side.

‘So now you’ve started on the path of glory!’ There was no irony in his voice.

Jacques made a petulant gesture; Daniel smiled. Though Battaincourt was five years older than himself, Daniel regarded him as a mere child, and the very quality which so irritated Jacques—his incorrigible naïvety—endeared him to Daniel. He recalled the days when they used to ask Battaincourt to recite, and the latter, planted on the hearthrug, would declaim:

O sleek-haired Corsican, how fair thy France
Under the sun of Messidor . . . !

The would-be Napoleonic gesture that accompanied this exordium always set them loudly laughing, but their hilarity never shook Battaincourt's simple faith.

In those days Simon de Battaincourt, a new-comer to Paris from the city in Northern France where his father, a Colonel, lived, used to wear a black, close-fitting coat, which he had had specially built to order, as being most seemly for a student at the Paris School of Divinity. The budding clergyman was at that period a frequent visitor at Mme. de Fontanin's house; she made a point of encouraging his visits as Colonel de Battaincourt's wife had been one of her childhood's friends.

'I can't stick this Latin Quarter of yours!' exclaimed the ex-divinity student, who now lived near the Etoile, wore light suits and had quarrelled with his people over the fantastic marriage on which his heart was set. He was now employed, at a salary of four hundred francs a month, cataloguing engravings in Ludwigson's Art Gallery, where Daniel had found him a post.

Raising his eyes, Jacques looked around him. His gaze fell on an ancient flower-vendor, squatting behind her basket of roses; he had passed her earlier in the day, when he was with Antoine, but then he had observed her with brooding eyes, aloof from all distractions of things seen. Recalling their walk together up the Rue Soufflot, he suddenly felt that he missed something, as if some familiar thing was lacking, like a ring that he had always worn. The feeling of unrest which had haunted him for the past three weeks, and, less than an hour since, weighed on his every step, had vanished, leaving behind a void that was almost pain. For the first time since the results were out, he took the measure of his success; but it left him dazed and broken, as though he had fallen from a height.

'Anyhow, you had some sea-bathing, I suppose,' Battaincourt was saying to Daniel.

Jacques turned to his friend.

'Yes, by Jove!' he exclaimed, and his eyes grew tender. 'To think you came back all on my account! Had a good time down there?'

‘Far better than I’d any reason to expect,’ Daniel replied.

Jacques smiled ruefully.

‘As usual!’

The look that passed between them was the aftermath of a long-standing controversy.

Jacques’ affection for Daniel had an astringent quality, far different from the easy-going friendship Daniel accorded him. ‘You’re far more exacting where I’m concerned,’ Daniel once remarked, ‘than for yourself. You’ve never fallen in with the life I lead.’ ‘No,’ Jacques had answered, ‘I’ve nothing against your way of living; what I cannot bear is the attitude you have adopted towards life.’ And therein lay the source of many a quarrel in the past.

After Daniel had taken his degree, he had refused to follow any beaten track. His father was away and did not trouble about him. His mother left him free to choose his path; she respected strength of will in any form and was fortified by her mystical faith that all was for the best where her children—and, in general, the family—were concerned. Above all she wished her son to feel free and under no obligation of earning money to better the fortunes of his family. Nevertheless, Daniel could not ignore his duty. His inability to help his mother had preyed upon his mind for two consecutive years and he had anxiously cast about for ways and means of reconciling duty to his kin with other and more urgent needs that shaped his conduct. Scruples whose complexity even Jacques was far from appreciating. The truth was that—judging by the haphazard way in which Daniel had set about learning his art, unaided, taking instinct (mere caprice, it often seemed) as his only guide, painting so little, drawing little more, sometimes shutting himself up all day with a model, only to cover half the pages of an album with outline sketches, and then not touching a pencil again for weeks on end—the truth was that few indeed would have suspected the sublime faith he felt in his talent, and in his future. A tacit self-esteem untainted by conceit; he waited for the day when, in the long process of unalterable law, all that was best in him would find a medium of expression; for he was certain of his destiny—that of a first-rate painter. When and by what path would he win to that high estate? He had no notion and, judging by his conduct, did not greatly care; ‘We must let life take charge,’ he proclaimed, and followed his precept to the letter. Not without twinges of remorse, however; but his timorous reversions to his mother’s moral code had been short-lived and never restrained him effectively from following his bent. ‘Even when in the past two years my conscience pricked me most acutely,’ he once wrote to Jacques (he was eighteen at the time), ‘I

can swear I never reached the point of being genuinely ashamed of myself. What is more, when in those hours of doubt I blamed myself for yielding to temptation, I actually felt far less angry with myself than later on, when life had taken charge again, and I recalled my puerile gestures of self-restraint and abnegation.’

Soon after this letter was written, Daniel happened to share a compartment in a suburban train with another passenger (known to them thereafter as ‘the Man in the Train’), who can assuredly have had no inkling of the repercussions that brief encounter was to have upon the early life of two young people.

Daniel was returning from the Versailles Park where he had lounged away a fine October afternoon under the shadows of the trees. He jumped into a carriage just as the train was leaving. As chance would have it, the face of the elderly man sitting opposite him was not entirely unfamiliar; their paths had crossed that afternoon in the Trianon shrubberies and Daniel had observed him with some interest. He welcomed the chance of examining the man at his leisure. A near view of the traveller gave the impression of a much younger man; though his hair was white, he could be little more than fifty. A short white beard set off effectively the oval of a face whose symmetry enhanced its gentle charm. His complexion, hands and bearing, the cut of the summery suit he wore, the exotic shade of his tie and, above all, the clear blue gaze, vibrant with life and light, that he cast on all about him—all gave the impression of a quite young man. The book whose leaves he was turning with a practised hand was bound in flimsy leather like a guide-book, and the cover bore no title. Between Suresnes and Saint-Cloud he rose and, going into the corridor, leaned forth to contemplate the panorama of Paris, flecked with gold under the fires of sunset. Then, drawing back, he leaned against the inner window, behind which Daniel sat. The hands that held the cryptic book were level now with Daniel’s eyes, only the pane of glass intervened; plastic hands, emotional yet listless—a thinker’s hands. The fingers moved, half-opening the book, and on a page flattened against the glass Daniel could read a few phrases.

Nathanael, I will teach you fervour . . .

A throbbing, lawless life. . . .

A harrowing existence, Nathanael, rather than tranquillity.

The book slipped aside, but not before Daniel had caught a glimpse of the title heading the page: *Les Nourritures Terrestres*.

What could this be: ‘*Fruits of the Earth*’? He visited a series of booksellers that evening, only to find that they knew nothing of the book.

Would 'the man in the train' keep his secret to himself? 'A harrowing existence,' Daniel repeated to himself, 'rather than tranquillity.' Next morning he hastened to examine all the catalogues available in the arcades of the Odéon and, a few hours later, shut himself up in his room with his new acquisition.

The whole afternoon went to its perusal and he read it at one sitting. He left the house at nightfall. Never had his mind been in such ferment, uplifted by such splendid visions. He walked on and on, taking long strides—a conqueror's progress. Night came on. He had been following the bank of the Seine and was very far from home. He dined off a roll and returned; the book lay on his table, awaiting him. Should he, or should he not . . . ? Daniel dared not open it again. Finally he went to bed, but not to sleep. At last he capitulated and, wrapping a dressing-gown around him, slowly read the book once more, from beginning to end. He well knew that this was a momentous hour for him, that at the deepest levels of his consciousness a slow, mysterious process of gestation was at work. When with the dawn he turned, for the second time, the final page, he found that now he looked on life with new eyes.

I have boldly laid my hands everywhere, and believed I had a right to every object of my desire . . .

Desires are profitable, and profitable the surfeiting of desires—for so they are increased.

He realized how in a flash the burden that his upbringing had laid on him—the obsession of moral standards—had been lifted; the word 'sin' had changed its meaning.

We must act without considering whether the action is right or wrong: love, without troubling whether what we love is good or evil.

Feelings to which hitherto he had yielded grudgingly, if at all, suddenly broke free and beckoned him on; in the brief period of a night the scale of moral values which from his earliest days had seemed immutable went up in flames. Next day he felt a man baptized anew. As, stage by stage, he repudiated everything he had hitherto held true beyond all question, a miracle of peace allayed the forces that, until now, had grappled with his soul.

Daniel spoke of his great discovery to none but Jacques, and to Jacques only after a long while. It was one of the bosom secrets of the friends; they

thought of it as all but a religious mystery and alluded to it only in veiled terms. Nevertheless, for all Daniel's zealotry, Jacques obstinately refused to be inoculated with his friend's cult. And, in refusing to quench his thirst at this too heady spring, he saw himself making a stand against his instincts and gaining thus in strength and personal integrity. But he well knew the book gave Daniel the *régime*, the 'fruits of the earth,' that suited him, and Jacques' resistance was accompanied by feelings of envy and despair.

'So you look on Ludwigson as one of nature's freaks, eh?' Bataincourt was saying.

'Ludwigson, my dear Batt.—' Daniel began explaining.

Jacques shrugged his shoulders and fell back behind his friends. The Ludwigson of whom they spoke—Daniel had just come back from a short stay at his place—had earned the reputation in the various centres where he had established himself of being one of the 'warmest' art-dealers in Europe, and had been for some time past a bone of contention between Jacques and his friend. Jacques could never stomach the notion that Daniel should, directly or indirectly—even to earn his living—take part in the schemes promoted by this dealer. But no one, not even Jacques, could ever boast of having dissuaded Daniel from any venture on which his heart was set. In the case of Ludwigson, the man's intelligence and tireless activity—carried to a pitch that made insomnia a habit with him—the contempt for luxury and, up to a point, of money too, evinced by this merchant-prince who found his life's interest in adventuring and winning, the efficiency of this big-business-man whose career evoked the picture of a fiery brand, shaken by the wind, smoky yet dazzling, too—everything about the man seemed wildly interesting to Daniel. In fact it was curiosity more than necessity that led him to agree to work for this modern buccaneer.

Jacques remembered the day when Daniel first confronted Ludwigson; two races, two cultures, met face to face. He had chanced to drop in at the studio which Daniel was sharing with some friends as impecunious as himself. Ludwigson entered without knocking, and countered Daniel's indignant outburst with a smile; then brusquely, without making himself known or taking a chair, he drew a pocket-book from his pocket, with the gesture of a high-comedy actor tossing his purse to an underling, and offered 'the gentleman present whose name is Fontanin' a salary of six hundred francs a month as from that day, for the next three years, provided that he, Ludwigson, Proprietor of the Ludwigson Art Galleries and Manager of Messrs. Ludwigson & Co., Art-Dealers, should have sole rights in all the works of art produced by M. Fontanin during this period, the said works to be signed in the artist's hand, and dated. Daniel, least industrious of artists,

who had never exhibited or sold a single sketch, had never understood how Ludwigson had come to form so flattering an opinion of his talents as to justify the offer. In any case he was resolved to be sole arbiter of his output and well aware that, had he closed with the offer, he would have taken Ludwigson's money only on furnishing month by month a sufficiency of pictures, ample to cover the salary proposed. But it was one of his pet theories that work should be performed joyfully, without constraint. So, to the stupefaction of his fellow-artists, he had shown Ludwigson the door with icy politeness, and, giving him no time to collect his wits, had made the dealer beat a retreat on to the landing as quickly as he had come.

But that was not the end of it. Ludwigson returned to the attack, but with more tactful strategy, and some months later a business connexion had been established between the dealer and Daniel—somewhat to the latter's amusement. Ludwigson was the editor of a sumptuous art magazine appearing in three languages; he asked Daniel to select the French articles for publication. The young man's character had pleased him from the start and he was impressed by the excellence of Daniel's taste. The work was far from boring and Daniel devoted his spare time to it. Very soon he had complete charge of the French section of the magazine. Ludwigson, always lavish in his personal expenditure, made a point of engaging few but carefully selected associates, giving them a free hand, and paying their work on a generous scale. Daniel, though he had laid no claim to it, was soon being paid the same salary as the English and German collaborators. As he had to earn his living, he preferred an avocation wholly independent of his artistic career. Moreover, some of his drawings (Ludwigson arranged a private show for him) had already made good with certain connoisseurs. The advantages he derived from his association with the picture-dealer enabled him not only to contribute to the welfare of his mother and sister, but to lead the easy life he liked, without being tied down to any rigid task or encroaching on the hours of freedom essential to his true calling.

Jacques caught up his friends at the Boulevard Saint-Germain crossing.

'... the priceless experience,' Daniel was saying, 'of being introduced to the dowager Madame Ludwigson.'

'Why, I never dreamt that Ludwigson of yours had ever had a mother!' Jacques observed, by way of joining in the conversation.

'Nor did I,' Daniel concurred. 'And what a mother! Try and imagine—no, only a sketch would do her justice. I've done several, but not from life, worse luck! Imagine a mummy tricked out by some clown to do a circus turn. An old Egyptian Jew, at least a hundred years old, bloated with gout and natural fat, reeking of fried onions, who wears mittens, has pet names

for her footmen, calls her son *bambino*, lives on bread soused in red wine and passes the unwary visitor a tobacco-jar——’

‘So the old lady fancies a pipe?’ Bataincourt broke in.

‘No, it contains—snuff! The old creature’s always dribbling black powder on the mass of diamonds with which Ludwigson’s thought fit—why, God alone knows—to plaster her dewlaps.’ A quaint analogy struck him and he paused to find words for it. ‘Like the lanterns they post round a house that’s being pulled down.’

Jacques grinned; he was always taken by Daniel’s flow of spirits.

‘And what did he want to get out of you when he revealed the skeleton in his cupboard?’

‘You’ve guessed it! He has a new scheme up his sleeve. Wonderful chap he is!’

‘Wonderful, yes; because he’s so damned rich. If he were poor he’d be no better than a——’

Daniel cut him short.

‘Leave it at that, if you don’t mind. I like him. And he’s hit on a sound idea; a series of monographs, *Great Masters in their Paintings*. That’s his long suit: lavishly illustrated hand-books at astounding prices.’

Jacques listened no longer; he felt peevish, out of spirits. Over-tired, perhaps, after the day’s emotions. Or was it vexation at having been let in for this evening’s jaunt, when he so longed for solitude? Or just the chafing of his collar on his neck?

Bataincourt slipped between the two friends. He was waiting for a chance of asking them to act as witnesses at his wedding. For months past, by night and by day, that event had loomed large in his thoughts and under the fever of his desire his bloodless features were visibly wasting away. Now, at last, he had not long to wait. The period set by law to the parental veto had just run out, and, that very morning, the date of his wedding had been fixed. In two weeks’ time. . . The thought of it brought the blood to his cheeks; he turned away to hide his blush, took off his hat and mopped his forehead.

‘Don’t move!’ cried Daniel. ‘It’s fantastic how, in profile, you’re the living image of a deer—*d double e r*, of course!’ And, indeed, Bataincourt had a long nose which almost joined his lip, arched nostrils, round eyes and, just then, a wisp of towy hair matted with sweat, that curled up into a little tapering horn above his forehead.

Battaincourt replaced his hat mournfully and let his eyes roam across the Place du Carrousel and Trajan's Arch towards the Tuileries Garden, where the dust glowed red.

Poor little belling deer, Daniel mused. Who'd have believed him capable of such a passion? There he goes, a traitor to all his principles, quarrelling with his people, and all for that woman! A widow, fourteen years his senior, a shop-soiled widow—attractive, I grant, but shop-soiled. He smiled inwardly, remembering the afternoon last autumn when Simon had badgered him into meeting the fascinating widow—and the sequel of their meeting a week later. . . . Well, anyhow he could honestly say he had done his utmost to restrain Battaincourt from that act of folly. But he was at grips with blind instinct and, since he deferred to passion wherever he encountered it, he had confined himself to steering clear of the lady in question and watching the developments of his friend's matrimonial venture from a safe distance.

'For a conquering hero you look pretty glum,' observed Battaincourt, who, aggrieved by Daniel's mockery, hoped for amends from Jacques.

'Don't you realize that he wanted to be ploughed?' Daniel suggested. He was surprised by the pensive look in Jacques' eyes and, approaching him, laid his hand on his shoulder, murmuring with a smile: "for each thing has a special and a different value." '

The words sufficed to bring back the whole passage—Daniel used often to repeat it—to Jacques' mind.

Woe betide you if you say your happiness is dead because you had not dreamt it would take that shape! . . . Your dream of to-morrow is a delight—but to-morrow has a delight of its own—and nothing, fortunately, is like the dream we have dreamt of it, for each thing has a special and a different value.

Jacques smiled.

'Give me a cigarette.'

He tried to shake off his lethargy, for Daniel's sake. 'Your dream of to-morrow is a delight. . . .' And indeed he seemed to feel delight, as yet evasive, hovering round him. To-morrow? Ah, to wake and see, across his open window, the sun rise level with the tree-tops! To-morrow; Maisons-Laffitte, and the cool shadows of the woods!

NOTHING in the sleepy street near the Paris Opera, nothing except a file of cars drawn up along the kerb called the attention of passers-by to an anonymous cabaret with close-drawn blinds. A page swung round the revolving doors to let them through and Daniel made way for Jacques and Battaincourt to pass, as though he were receiving them at his own house.

Some discreet exclamations greeted Daniel's arrival. Few of the patrons of the place knew his real name; to everyone he was the 'Prophet.' Just now the cabaret was rather empty. Behind the bar, in the alcove whence a slender spiral staircase, painted white and edged with gold to match the panelling of the room, led up to Mme. Packmell's quarters on the next floor, a piano, violin and 'cello were playing the hits of the season. The tables had been pushed back against the grey plush settles that flanked the walls and a few couples were dancing a boston on the purple carpet under the last gleams of the sunset filtering through the lace curtains. Close under the ceiling fan-blades droned monotonously, fluttering the pendants of the chandeliers, green foliage of palms, and lifting trailing clouds of muslin about the dancing couples.

Jacques, always swept off his feet by a first glimpse of new surroundings, meekly followed Daniel to a table from which the two rooms could be observed in vista. A group of girls in the further room had pounced on Battaincourt and he had already begun to dance.

'You always need screwing up to the point,' Daniel said. 'Now that you are here, I'm sure you'll like it. Now, own up, isn't it a homely, cheery little dive?'

'Order a cocktail for me,' Jacques broke in on his encomium. 'You know the sort—with milk, red-currant juice and lemon-peel in it.'

Young women in white dresses served the customers; they were known as the 'Nurse-girls.'

'Shall I give you a little "Who's Who" of some of these people?' Daniel asked, changing his seat and coming to sit by Jacques. 'That fair woman over there, in blue, to begin with—she's the boss. "Mother Packmell" we call her, though, as you see, she's still quite a fetching wench! She's here, there and everywhere all night long, with the same old smile on her face, amongst her bright young things—rather like a fashionable dressmaker showing off her mannequins. See that dark chap over there who's saying

“How do you do?” to her? Now he’s talking to a pale little kid, the girl who was dancing with Battaincourt just now—no, nearer us; that’s Paule, the fair young girl who looks like an angel—a slightly, ever so slightly tarnished angel. Look, what’s that queer-looking dope she’s swilling now, might be green curaçoa? The chap who’s standing, talking to her, is Nivolsky, the painter, quite a fine fellow in his way; a knave and a liar, but for all that chivalrous as a knight of old! Whenever he turns up late for an appointment he says he’s just been fighting a duel, and, for the moment, genuinely believes it. He borrows money right and left and is always broke, but he has talent; he pays his bills with pictures. This is his system, in a nutshell. He spends the summer in the country and paints a strip of road on a canvas fifty yards long—complete with trees, farm-carts, cyclists, a sunset and so on; then, in the winter he retails his road in driblets proportioned to the money owed and his creditor’s standing. He says he’s Russian and owner of heaven knows how many “souls.” So, you see, during the Russo-Japanese war, everyone was pulling his leg for staying in Montmartre and indulging in tap-room patriotism. Know what he did? He cleared out, vanished for a year, and returned only after the fall of Port Arthur, bringing with him a sheaf of war-photos; his pockets bulged with them.

‘“Just observe, old chap,” he’d say, “this battery in action. Do you see that big rock at the back? And just behind the rock the business end of a rifle? Well, old chap, I was behind that rifle.” The trouble was that he brought back several crates of sketches, too, and during the next two years he always paid his debts with landscapes of Sicily. Hullo! He’s twigged that I’m talking about him; he’s flattered. Watch, and you’ll see him go through his paces!’

Jacques, resting his elbow on the table, kept silence. In such moods his face seemed emptied of intelligence; with his dull eyes and slightly parted lips he had the look of an animal, brooding and lethargic. Listening to his friend’s chatter, he watched Nivolsky and the girl, Paule. She had a vanity-box in her hand and, pouting her lips, dabbed them with a lipstick, to which her fingers gave a brisk little twirl, as though she meant to bore a hole with it. As the painter watched her, he kept swinging her bag round and round his finger. It was obvious that theirs was merely a cabaret acquaintanceship; nevertheless, she touched his hands and knee, and set his tie straight. Once, when he leaned towards her confidentially, she pressed her little white hand against his face and teasingly pushed him away. Jacques’ senses tingled.

Not far from her a dark woman was sitting by herself, huddled up at the far end of the settee, her black satin cloak drawn tightly round her as though

she feared the cold; her ardent gaze was riveted on Paule, who showed no sign of being aware of it.

Jacques' brooding eyes rested on all these folk; was he studying them, or building fancies round them? He had only to watch any one of them for a while, to surmise in him or her a maelstrom of emotions. Moreover, he did not seek to analyse the feelings he read into each and could not have put his intuitions into words; he was far too taken by the spectacle before his eyes to double his personality and register his impressions. But, anyhow, this sense of communion, real or illusive, with other beings gave him unbounded pleasure.

'Who is that tall woman talking to the barman?' he asked.

'In peacock blue, with a necklace down to her knees?'

'Yes. What a cruel face!'

'That's Marie-Josèphe; a name that would become an empress. Fine-looking woman, eh? There's a funny history to those pearls of hers. Are you listening?' With a smile Daniel turned to his friend. 'She was kept by Reyvil, the perfume-king's son. Now Reyvil had a lawful, if unfaithful, spouse at home, who was Josse, the banker's mistress. . . . Look here, are you listening?'

'Yes, yes—with all my ears.'

'Well, you look half asleep. Josse is immensely rich and one day he was moved to make a present of some pearls to his mistress, Mme. Reyvil. The problem was how to do so without putting her husband's back up. But Josse is as cute as you make 'em. He faked up a lottery in aid of the White Slaves' Rescue League, persuaded M. Reyvil, the husband, to take ten tickets at a franc each, and saw to it that Reyvil won the necklace intended for Mme. Reyvil. But then the trouble began. Reyvil wrote to Josse to thank him, but added a postscript asking him not to breathe a word about the lottery to Mme. Reyvil as he had just given the pearls to his mistress, Marie-Josèphe. But there's more to come—the end of the story goes one better. Josse saw red; his one idea was to have the necklace back or, failing that, to have the lady who was wearing it. And, three months later, he'd dropped Mme. Reyvil and cut out his dear friend Reyvil with Marie-Josèphe—exchanged the pearlless wife for the pearl-decked mistress. So now the worthy Reyvil, who has completely forgotten that the necklace only cost him ten paltry francs, declaims in season and out of season against the unspeakableness of the demi-rep! Hullo, Werfff!' He paused to shake hands with a handsome youth who had just come in, greeted from the far end of the room with cries of 'Apricot! Hi, Apricot!'

‘You know each other, don’t you?’ Daniel asked Jacques, who held out his hand somewhat ungraciously to the new-comer. ‘Good morrow, fair lady!’ Daniel continued, as Paule, the Russian painter’s anaemic companion, walked past; and stooped to kiss her hand. ‘May I introduce my friend Thibault?’ he added. Jacques rose. The girl’s neurotic eyes just glanced at Jacques, lingered more intently on Daniel’s face; she seemed about to address him, then changed her mind and walked away.

‘Do you come here often?’ Jacques enquired.

‘No. Well . . . yes; several times a week. A habit. And yet, as a rule, I get tired of seeing the same people, the same place, pretty quickly. I like to feel that life is moving on . . .’

Suddenly Jacques remembered, ‘I’ve passed!’—and drew a deep breath. An idea flashed through his mind.

‘Do you know when the Maisons-Laffitte telegraph-office shuts down?’

‘It’s closed by now. But, if you send a wire at once, your father will get it first thing in the morning.’

Jacques beckoned to a page.

‘Telegraph form, please.’

He scribbled the telegram in such feverish haste, and this belated eagerness to announce his success was so like Jacques, that Daniel smiled and leant over his friend’s shoulder; but only to draw back hastily, surprised and even annoyed by his unwitting tactlessness. He had read, not M. Thibault’s address, but: *Mme. de Fontanin, Chemin de la Forêt, Maisons-Laffitte.*

A buzz of curiosity had greeted the appearance of an elderly dame, a familiar figure at the cabaret, who had just come in accompanied by a pretty, dark girl whose observant air, though in no wise timid, gave the impression that this was her first visit to the place.

‘Hullo, something new!’ Daniel murmured under his breath.

Werff, who happened to be passing, smiled.

‘Don’t you know? Ma Juju’s launching a “deb.”’

‘Damned pretty little thing, anyhow,’ commented Daniel after taking a good look at her.

Jacques turned. Yes, she was really charming, with her bright eyes, natural complexion and general air of not ‘belonging’ here. Her gauzy dress was of the palest pink; she wore no ornaments, no jewels. Beside her even the youngest women present looked tawdry.

Daniel had returned to his seat beside Jacques.

‘You should secure a close-up view of Ma Juju,’ he suggested. ‘I know her well; she’s quite a character. Nowadays she enjoys a social standing of sorts; she has quite a nice flat and an at-home day, indulges in evening parties and gives young girls their start in life. Her peculiarity was that she would never let a man keep her; she was just a nice little prostitute and never tried to better herself. For thirty years she figured on the Police Register and plied her trade between the Madeleine and Rue Drouot. But her life fell into two compartments; from 9 a.m. till 5 p.m. she went as Madame Barbin and led a quiet middle-class existence in a ground-floor flat in Rue Richer, with a hanging lamp, a housemaid and all the household cares of that walk of life—accounts to keep, the stock-markets to be watched with an eye to her investments, servant troubles, family ties, nephews and nieces, birthdays, and, to crown all, a children’s party round the Christmas-tree. It’s gospel truth. Then at five each evening, wet or fine, she doffed her flannel camisole for a smart tailor-made coat and skirt and sallied forth, without the least compunction, on her beat; Madame Barbin had changed to Juju, pretty lady, a keen worker, ever cheerful, never glum, and a familiar, well-liked client of all the accommodating hotels along the boulevards.’

Jacques could not take his eyes off ‘Ma Juju.’ With her laughing, energetic, rather cunning face, she had the genial aspect of a country parish priest; her bobbed hair showed snow-white beneath a wideawake hat.

‘Without the least compunction . . .’ Jacques repeated pensively.

‘Of course,’ said Daniel. There was a touch of raillery, almost of aggressiveness in his manner as, glancing towards Jacques, he murmured Whitman’s lines.

You prostitutes flaunting over the trottoirs or obscene in your rooms,
Who am I that I should call you more obscene than myself?

Daniel knew he was administering a shock to Jacques’ modesty and he did it deliberately, for it irritated him to see how easily Jacques, for months on end—was it by way of a reaction against his friend’s loose living?—endured a life of all but perfect chastity. Daniel was simple-minded enough, indeed, to be greatly upset about it and he knew that Jacques, too, was sometimes rather uneasy about the insidious lethargy gaining on a temperament which in early youth showed promise of more ardent ways. Once in the course of the past winter they had broached that delicate topic; it was on their way home from the theatre, as they threaded their way along the boulevards dense with a seething crowd of lovers. Daniel had expressed amazement at his companion’s apathy. ‘Still,’ Jacques answered, ‘I’m fit as a fiddle. At my army medical I noticed that they put me in the top class

physically.’ But Daniel had remarked a quaver of anxiety in his friend’s voice.

His musings were cut short by the arrival of Favery who had appeared in the offing and was looking in their direction; with studied nonchalance he committed hat, stick and gloves to the cloak-room attendant. He hailed Jacques with a grin.

‘Hasn’t your brother come yet?’

In the evening Favery always wore collars that were a trifle too high, new suits that looked as if they were someone else’s, and he stuck out his smooth-shaven chin with a jaunty air that prompted Werff to sneer: ‘See the conquering usher comes!’

‘I’ve passed!’ thought Jacques, with half a mind to take French leave and catch an evening train to Maisons-Laffitte. Only the thought that Antoine had promised to meet him here and might turn up at any moment held him back. If not to-night, he consoled himself, then to-morrow morning very early. And at the thought the cabaret faded out and, drenched in coolness, he was watching the new-risen sun drinking up the dew along the avenues.

A blinding flash as all the lights went on together startled him out of his daydream. I—have—passed! The thought seemed to restore at once his contact with reality. He looked round for his friend and espied Daniel talking confidentially to Ma Juju in a corner of the room. Daniel was perched sideways on a swivel-chair and his vivacious gestures as he rattled on brought out the graceful poise of his head, the bright awareness of his eyes and smile, the shapeliness of his hands poised in mid-air—hands, look and smile spoke no less than his lips. Jacques could not take his eyes off him. How handsome he looks! was his unformulated thought. How fine that one so young, so splendidly alive, should sink himself so utterly in the Now, the Here! And do it all so naturally! He doesn’t know I’m watching him, or give it a thought; he has no notion of being under scrutiny. Curious, to catch a fellow unawares like that, to pry into his inmost secrets! How can anyone manage to be so oblivious of his surroundings, when in public? When he talks, he is whole-heartedly in what he says. I’m different; I can’t be ‘natural.’ I could never give myself away like that—except in a closed room, safe from prying eyes. And even then . . . ! He gave his musings pause. Daniel’s not so very observant, he resumed, that’s why he’s not absorbed, as I am, by environment; he can remain himself. Jacques pondered again; then, as he rose from his seat, he summed the matter up: But I am always an easy prey to the world around me. . . .

‘No, my charming Prophet,’ Ma Juju was admonishing Daniel at that moment, ‘it’s no use begging; that little girl is not for you.’ The suppressed fury in Daniel’s eyes made her burst into laughter. ‘Well, upon my word! Have a nice sit-down, dearie, and you’ll get over it!’

This Parthian shot was one of a batch of pointless gags—others were: ‘That’s nobody’s business’—‘Be my mascot, Baby!’—‘That ain’t nothing so long as you keep fit’—one of the reach-me-down phrases, restocked from time to time, wherewith the Packmell ‘crowd’ were wont to interlard their conversation in and out of season, smiling the while masonically.

‘But how did you get to know her?’ Daniel insisted; his eyes were obdurate.

‘No, my dear. Nothing doing in that quarter. She’s one in a thousand, that kid, a nice little thing and no nonsense about her. A top-notch!’

‘Tell me how you got to know her.’

‘Will you leave her alone?’

‘Yes, I promise.’

‘Well, it was when I had the pleurisy—remember? She heard about it and turned up one day, all out of her own head. And, don’t forget, I hardly knew the girl—I’d helped her a bit once or twice, but only in a small way. You see the kid had had a deal of trouble, a rotten time of it. She’d fallen in love with a society man, as far as I can make out, and there was a child (wouldn’t think it, now would you?) who died almost at once, with the result that one can’t mention the word “baby” without her starting to howl! Anyhow, when I had my attack, she came and settled in at my place, like a trained nurse, and, day and night for six weeks and more, she looked after me better than if she’d been my own daughter. Why, there were days she put as many as a hundred cupping-glasses on my chest. Yes, my dear, she saved my life, and that’s gospel truth. And didn’t spend a sou. One in a thousand! So I swore I’d see her fixed up all right. These young folk, they’re always running after whims and fancies. But my job’s to see her launched, properly launched, you know. . . . By the way, you might lend me a hand there—I’ll explain presently. . . . She hasn’t been out of my sight for three months now. First I’d got to find a name for her. Her real name is Victorine—Victorine Le Gad. “Le Gad,” a double-barrelled name, might pass. But “Victorine”—I ask you! So I changed it to “Rinette.” Not bad, eh? And the rest to match. Colin’s given her elocution lessons; she had a Breton accent you could cut with a knife; well, she’s kept just the right dash of it, a bit of a foreign twang—might be English—delicious anyhow. She learnt the boston in a fortnight, she’s light as a feather. What’s more, she’s no fool. She sings in tune; a real

rich voice she has, with a tang of the gutter in it; that's how I like 'em! So there she is, shipshape, ready to be launched. The one thing now is to give her a good send-off. No, don't laugh; that's where *you* come in. I've talked to Ludwigson about her; since Bertha gave him the bird, he's all at a loose end. He's promised to come to-night to meet the child. Put in a word saying you like her and he'll be as keen as mustard. Ludwigson, you see, is exactly the man to suit her. She has only one idea: to collect a little nest-egg and go back to Brittany, where her home is. Damned silly, but there you are! All Bretonnes are like that. A cottage near the village pump, the usual white streamers and plenty of processions—just Brittany, in a word! She's not asking for the moon; if she keeps straight and listens to reason, she'll get what she wants in no time. I hope she'll have twenty thousand francs put away by the New Year and I know just how I'm going to invest them for her. . . . Look here, do you know anything about the Rand market?'

Hungry voices vociferated: 'Dinner! Take your seats!'

Daniel returned to Jacques.

'Hasn't your brother come yet? Anyhow let's pick our seats.'

The long table was laid for twenty people; there was some hesitation as they chose their places. Daniel so manoeuvred that Jacques was placed beside Rinette, on her left; Ma Juju, who clung to her like a leech, sat on her right, as close as she could squeeze beside her. But, just when everyone had picked his place and Jacques was about to take his own, Daniel forestalled him.

'Change with me!'

Without more ado he pulled Jacques to one side, gripping his arm so roughly that Jacques felt his fingers nipping his wrist and all but gave a squeal of pain.

Daniel was too preoccupied to think of excusing himself. He turned to Ma Juju.

'Isn't it up to you, Ma Juju, to introduce me to my neighbour?'

'Ah, there you are!' muttered the old lady, who had just noticed Daniel's ruse. Then she apostrophized the company at large.

'May I introduce Mademoiselle Rinette to you all?' And added in menacing tones: 'She's under my wing.'

'Introduce us!' voices clamoured on all sides. 'Introduce us to her!'

'Save us, what a to-do they're making!' sighed Ma Juju, and with a bad grace she removed her hat and tossed it to one of the 'Nurse-girls' waiting at table. She pointed to Daniel first of all.

‘This is the Prophet,’ she announced, ‘and a real bad hat!’

‘How do you do?’ said the girl amiably. Daniel took her hand and kissed it.

‘Next please!’

‘His friend—I don’t know his name.’ Ma Juju’s finger indicated Jacques.

‘How do you do?’ said Rinette.

‘Next: Paule, Sylvia, Madame Dolores—also a child unknown; the Wonder-Child, no doubt. Then Werff, *alias* “Apricot,” and Gaby. The Chump.’

‘Thanks,’ a sarcastic voice broke in, ‘I prefer the name of my forefathers. Favery, Mademoiselle, and one of your most ardent admirers.’

‘Be my mascot, baby!’ someone chirped ironically.

‘Lily and Harmonica, or the Inseparables,’ Ma Juju went on, steeled against interrupters. ‘The Colonel. Maud, Queen of the Garden. A gentleman I don’t know and with him two ladies whom I know very well, though I can’t recall their names. An empty chair. Ditto another. Then Bataincourt, otherwise “Little Batt.” Marie-Josèphe, *plus* the pearls. Madame Packmell.’ Then, with a bow, she added: ‘And Ma Juju, your humble servant.’

‘How do you do? How do you do?’ Rinette echoed herself in silvery cadences, smiling without a shadow of constraint.

‘Rinette’s no sort of name for her,’ Favery observed. ‘What about Miss Howd’youdo?’

‘Why not?’ the girl replied.

‘Three cheers for Miss Howd’youdo!’

Smiling still, she seemed delighted by their noisy acclamations.

‘And now, the soup!’ The suggestion came from Madame Packmell.

Jacques nudged Daniel with his elbow and showed him the bruise on his wrist.

‘Whatever came over you just now?’

His friend threw him a quizzing glance, without the least sign of contrition, a glance that was ardent to the point of fierceness.

‘“I am he that aches with amorous love,”’ he quoted in English, lowering his voice.

Jacques leant forward to examine Rinette who happened to be looking towards him; he met her cool eyes, green-glistening like Marennes oysters.

Daniel continued in the same low voice.

‘“Does the earth gravitate? Does not all matter aching attract all matter?”

‘“So the body of me to all I meet and know.”’

Jacques frowned slightly. This was not the first time he had chanced to witness one of these paroxysms of passion which carried Daniel off his feet in quest of pleasure, beyond all possibility of restraint. And each of them made a rift in Jacques’ affection despite his efforts to keep it whole. A comic detail shifted the trend of his thoughts; he had suddenly noticed that the inner surface of Daniel’s nose was lined with jet-black down, making his nostrils like the vent-holes of a mask. Then his eyes fell on the ‘Prophet’s’ hands, fine, tapering hands, shaded too with dusky down. *Vir pilosus*, he thought, repressing a smile.

Daniel leaned towards him again and continued in the same low tone, as though finishing the quotation from Whitman.

‘Fill up your neighbour’s glass, my dear.’

‘Madame Packmell, the menu ith quite illegible thith evening,’ lisped a voice from the far end of the table.

‘Two black marks against Madame Packmell!’ declared Favery severely.

‘That ain’t nothing, so long as you keep fit,’ the comely blonde riposted philosophically.

Jacques was sitting next to Paule, the slightly tarnished angel with the snow-white skin. Beyond her sat a big-breasted girl who never spoke and applied her napkin to her lips after each spoonful. Further on, almost facing Jacques, beside a dark woman whose forehead rippled with tiny curls—Dolores, as Ma Juju called her—sat a little boy, seven or eight years old, dressed in rather shabby black; his eyes followed every movement of the others and, now and again, a smile lit up his face.

Jacques addressed the girl beside him.

‘I say, they’ve forgotten your soup.’

‘Thanks, I’m not taking any.’

She kept her eyes lowered and only raised them to look in Daniel’s direction. She had tried her best to get a seat beside him but at the last minute had seen him exchanging chairs with his friend; Jacques was to blame for this, she thought. Where had this fellow with the spotty face and a boil on his neck sprung from? There was something in this dark boy’s looks which put him in the category of red-haired folk—her pet aversion. Only to see his hairy forehead, his jowl and loose-set ears, you knew him for a bit of a brute!

Madame Dolores' shrill voice broke in.

'Well, what's come over you? Why don't you put your serviette on?' She jerked the youngster to and fro, tucking the starched napkin, which half submerged him in its folds, into his collar.

'When a woman owns to a certain age,' Favery was laying down the law to Marie-Josèphe, 'it means she's past it. She got into the Conservatoire, I tell you, at the extreme age-limit, exactly forty-five years ago, by producing her younger sister's birth-certificate—which made her two years under her true age. So it comes to this . . .'

'That's nobody's business,' Ma Juju declared in a loud stage-whisper.

'Favery is one of those excellent folk who can never engage in a conversation without premising that the rate of velocity for falling bodies is 32 feet 2 inches per second at Paris,' observed Werff, who once had crammed for the Polytechnic. He owed the nickname of 'Apricot' to the hue of his skin; it had been burnt to a dull gold, spangled with freckles, by his practice of open-air sports. He cut a handsome figure, with his supple shoulders, strongly moulded face and full, red lips; by night his sunburnt cheeks and blue eyes radiated hale well-being, a muscular gusto regaled by the day's athletics.

'Nobody knows what he died of,' someone remarked, eliciting a jesting repartee. 'The real mystery was what he lived on!'

'Hurry up now!' Madame Dolores admonished the boy. 'They serve dessert here, you know—but you shan't have any?'

'Why?' the lad pleaded, turning his shining eyes towards her.

'Because you shan't if I say No! Now do as you're told, hurry up!' She saw that Jacques was watching and sped him a confidential smile. 'He's a fussy kid, you see. He shies off anything he's not used to. Salmis of pigeon—you won't see that every day, my pet! Gammon and greens came his way oftener than pigeon I should say. He's been spoilt. Fussed over, petted, like all only children. Especially as his mother was an invalid for so long. That's what he is—she stroked the child's round, close-cropped head—a spoilt child. A naughty, spoilt child. But, now his aunt's in charge of him, there'll be a change. Our young gentleman wanted to keep his lovelocks, like a little girl, eh? We'll hear no more about those fads of his; no more pampering for him. Eat your dinner now. The gentleman's looking. Be quick!' Delighted to have an audience, she cast another smile in the direction of Jacques and Paule. 'He's a little orphan,' she announced complacently. 'He lost his mother only this week; she was married to my brother. She died in her village down in Lorraine—of consumption. Poor little kid,' she added, 'it's

lucky for him that I am willing to look after him. He has no one in the world now except me. But I shall have my work cut out!’

The little boy had ceased eating and was staring at his aunt. Did he understand? There was a curious intonation in his voice as he questioned her.

‘Was it my mummy who died?’

‘Don’t bother with questions. Eat your dinner!’

‘Don’t want to now.’

‘There you are! That’s how he is,’ Madame Dolores lamented. ‘Well, if you must know, it *was* your mummy who died. Now do as you’re told and go on eating, or you won’t have any ice-cream.’

Paule averted her eyes just then and, as their looks crossed, Jacques saw the image of his own distress. Her neck was slim and lithe and very pale, still paler than her cheeks; its slender grace invited thoughts of dalliance. As his gaze rested on her fine-grained skin, shaded with a slight down, a faint savour of sweetness rose to his lips. He groped for something to say, found nothing, and smiled. Watching him from the corner of an eye, she found him less uncouth. But a sudden twinge at her heart brought a deathly pallor to her face; resting her hands on the table edge, she let her head sink back a little, biting her tongue to save herself from fainting.

Seeing her thus, Jacques pictured a bird alighted on the tablecloth, there to die.

‘What is it?’ he whispered.

Her eyes were swimming and a line of white showed between her half-shut eyelids. Without moving she forced out two words.

‘Say nothing!’

A lump had risen to his throat and, even had he wished, he could not have called out. In any case the others paid no heed to them. He looked at Paule’s hands; her rigid fingers, diaphanous like tiny tapers, had grown so livid that the nails showed up as patches of dark violet.

‘My alarm goes off at six-thirty,’ Favery was explaining to the girl beside him, with chuckles of self-satisfaction, ‘standing in a saucer poised precariously on a tumbler . . .’

Meanwhile Paule’s colour had returned a little and she opened her eyes again; turning, she weakly smiled her thanks to Jacques for his silence.

‘It’s over,’ she murmured breathlessly. ‘I’m liable to these attacks—my heart, you know.’ Then she added ruefully, with lips that quivered still, ‘Have a nice sit-down, dearie, and you’ll get over it!’

He had an impulse to catch her in his arms and carry her far, far away from all this sordidness; in a daydream he devoted all his life to her and made her well. So potent was the love he felt within him for any weaker being who might claim, or merely accept, the refuge of his strength! He had half a mind to tell Daniel of his fantastic scheme, but Daniel's thoughts were otherwise occupied.

Daniel was chatting with Ma Juju, across Rinette; a pretext for watching the girl beside him and feeling her warm nearness. Though all through the meal he had diplomatically refrained from addressing her in any but the briefest phrases, while paying court to her with delicate attentions, she obviously filled his thoughts. On several occasions she had noticed his eyes fixed on her and on each occasion, though she could not analyse the cause, his look, far from attracting her, evoked a feeling of estrangement; she was not blind to the virile charm of Daniel's face, but it annoyed her.

Meanwhile a heated discussion was in progress at the far end of the table.

'Conceited ass!' 'Apricot' apostrophized Favery, who pleaded guilty.

'That's what I often say to myself!'

'But not loudly enough, I fear.'

Amidst the general laughter Werff kept the upper hand.

'My dear Favery,' he declared, deliberately raising his voice, 'allow me to tell you something: what you've just said *about* women proves that you don't know what to say *to* them.'

Daniel glanced at Favery. The young pedagogue was laughing and Daniel fancied he saw him glance towards Rinette, as though she had been the theme of the discussion. There was a certain effrontery, a lewdness, in Favery's look which gave a fillip to Daniel's antipathy for him. He knew stories about Favery which did him little credit, and felt a brutal impulse to retail them in Rinette's hearing. And he never could resist impulses of that order. Lowering his voice so as to be heard by the two women only, he bent towards Ma Juju in such a way as to include Rinette in the conversation, and asked in a casual voice:

'Do you know that one about Favery and the Woman taken in Adultery?'

The old woman snapped at the bait.

'No, let's hear it! And chuck us a cigarette! This dinner seems likely to last all night.'

'One fine day—she'd been his mistress for a good spell then—the lady rolled up at his place with a valise in her hand. "I've had enough of it. I want

to live with you,” and the usual stuff. “But how about your husband?” “Him? I’ve just written him this letter: ‘Dear Eugène, I have come to a turning-point in my life,’ and so on . . . ‘I want, as I have the right, to bestow my affection on a heart that understands,’ and so on and so forth. . . . ‘That heart—I have found it, and so I leave you.’”

‘And what a heart—I ask you!’

‘That was her look-out. But guess what happened next! Old Favery was in the devil of a stew. A woman on his hands and, what was worse, a woman who’d soon be divorced and free to insist on his marrying her. Then he brought off what he claims to be a stroke of genius. He sent this letter to the lady’s husband: “Dear Sir, I hereby inform you that your wife has left her home with the intention of coming to live with me. Faithfully yours . . .”’

‘Very decent of him,’ Rinette remarked.

‘So you think!’ A malicious smile flitted across Daniel’s face. ‘But wait a bit! Favery’s astute; he was simply taking his precautions for the future. Her husband, he knew, would produce the letter in court. And the marriage of an unfaithful wife with her lover is forbidden by law. So Favery winds up his story with the maxim: Heaven helps those who know the Civil Code.’

Rinette pondered a while; then it dawned on her.

‘A dirty trick!’

Daniel, as he bent towards her, felt her breath hover on his face and lips, and he took a deep breath, almost closing his eyes.

‘So he let her drop, eh?’ the old woman inquired.

Daniel did not reply. Rinette looked towards him. He kept his eyelids lowered now, for he felt powerless to hide their frenzy of desire. Close to her eyes she saw the smoothness of his skin, the savage line of his mouth, his quivering lashes, and, as though she long had known and tested their dark treacheries, something within her, urgent as an instinct, turned her suddenly against him.

‘But what became of the woman?’ Ma Juju asked again.

‘They say she killed herself. His version is that she was consumptive.’ With a forced smile he passed his fingers across his forehead.

Rinette drew herself up, shrinking against the back of her chair, so as to keep as far apart as possible from Daniel. What was the cause of this revulsion that had come over her so suddenly? His face, his smile, his expression—all about this handsome youth repelled her; his way of leaning forward, the grace of his gestures and, most of all, his long, sensitive hands.

Never had she dreamt there slumbered in her heart, biding their time but so far held in leash, such potencies of loathing for a total stranger.

‘So, in other words, I’m a flirt!’ exclaimed Marie-Josèphe, calling the company to witness.

Battaincourt smiled ingenuously.

‘Am I to blame if our language has no other word to describe that most charming of traits: the desire to fascinate?’

‘Oh, how disgusting!’ Mme. Dolores’ shrill voice broke in.

All eyes turned in her direction, only to find that the little boy had spilt a spoonful of cream on his black coat and was being hauled away by his aunt towards the lavatory.

Jacques profited by her eclipse to question Paule, glad of this chance of breaking the ice.

‘You know her?’

‘Slightly.’

Panic’s impulse was to stop there; she was naturally reserved, and felt depressed. But, as Jacques had been so nice to her just now, she continued. ‘She’s not a bad sort, you know. And she’s well off. She was once, for quite a long while, the mistress of a fellow who writes plays. Then she married a chemist. He’s dead now and his patent medicines bring her in a tidy income still—the “Dolores Corn-cure,” you must have heard of it. No? Better tell her so, she always carried samples in her bag. A striking woman, you’ll see; quite a character. She keeps a dozen cats picked up here, there and everywhere, and a large aquarium of fishes in her bedroom. She loves animals.’

‘But not children.’

Paule shook her head.

‘That’s the sort she is,’ she concluded.

Jacques noticed that after speaking she breathed with difficulty. All the same he wanted to prolong their talk. The reminder that she had heart-disease brought to his lips, somewhat inaptly, a familiar phrase: ‘The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.’

She reflected a moment, then, strumming on the table with her fingers, corrected him.

‘It should be: “The heart its reasons has . . .” The first way it didn’t sound like poetry.’

His longing for her persisted, but he now felt less disposed to devote his life to her. No sooner, he thought, am I allowed the smallest glimpse into

another's soul than I am half in love already! He recalled the first occasion when he noticed this habit of his. One day during the previous summer he had gone for a walk with some of Antoine's friends in the Viroflay woods. A Swedish girl, studying medicine at Paris, had leaned on his arm and chattered to him of her childhood. . . .

Suddenly he realized that it was half-past nine and Antoine had not yet come. A panic fear came over him and, forgetting everything else, he clutched Daniel's arm and shook it.

'I'm positive something's happened to him!'

'What . . . ?'

'To Antoine.'

Dinner had just ended and people were leaving their seats. Jacques rose to his feet. Daniel was standing too and, while manœuvring to keep in touch with Rinette, tried to reassure his friend.

'Don't be an ass, old chap! He's a doctor. An urgent call. . . .'

But Jacques was already out of earshot. Unable to collect his wits or master his forebodings, he had hurried off to the cloak-room. Without saying good-bye to anyone or giving a thought to Paule, he ran outside. 'It's my fault,' horror-stricken, he admonished himself. 'I've brought Antoine bad luck. My fault! My fault! And all to have a black suit, like that fellow at the Medicis crossing!'

The orchestra of three had just struck up a waltz and a few couples had started dancing near the bar. Daniel saw Favery's chin uptilted, as if he sniffed the air, his twinkling eyes fixed on Rinette, and by a quick move forestalled him.

'Shall we . . . ?'

She had noticed his approach and met it with a hostile look. She gave him time enough to bend a little towards her before replying.

'No.'

He masked his surprise with a smile.

'"No." Why "no"?' he said, mimicking her intonation. So sure was he of getting his way that he took a step towards her. 'Come along!' The touch of over-confidence in his gesture clinched her distaste.

'No, not with you,' she said pointedly.

'No?' he repeated; but there was a challenging gleam in his dark eyes that seemed to say, 'My time will come!'

She turned away and, noticing Favery's hesitant approach, went up to him as if he had already asked her for the dance. They danced together in

silence.

Ludwigson had just arrived. Wearing a dinner-jacket and an incongruous straw hat, he stood beside the bar, chatting with Mother Packmell and Marie-Josèphe, whose necklace he was fingering complacently. But stealthily his slow eyes, slotted between reptilian lids, would alight, like a blow from a loaded cane, on something or someone present, summing up the company.

Ma Juju steered a course between the dancers in quest of Rinette. When she had found the girl, she nudged her with her elbow.

‘Hurry up! And remember what I said!’

Paule had buttonholed Daniel in a corner of the room and he was listening to her with a far-away smile. He watched Ma Juju proceeding with the most natural air in the world to join Marie-Josèphe’s group, while Rinette, ceasing to dance, went and sat down alone at a distant table in the far room. A moment later Ludwigson and Ma Juju crossed both rooms and joined her there. Ludwigson always—and especially when he knew he was being looked at—stiffened his back, like an old-time cabby, as he walked. He knew only too well that nature had cursed him with a houri’s hind parts and that whenever he moved fast his hips were apt to sway from side to side; so he stepped delicately. He pressed his thick lips on Rinette’s proffered hand. As he made the gesture Daniel noted his somewhat receding skull, plastered with black and skilfully deinked hair. ‘The fellow’s got a distinction of his own all the same,’ he said to himself. ‘There’s a touch of the coolie in our Levantine mountebank—but something of the Grand Turk, too.’

As Ludwigson slowly drew off his gloves his expert, appraising gaze was sizing Rinette up. He sat down facing her, Ma Juju beside him. Drinks were served at once though Ludwigson had given no order; they knew his ways. He never drank champagne, but always Asti—a still variety—not iced or even cool, but slightly warmed. ‘Tepid,’ he explained, ‘like the juice of frucht in sunshine.’

Daniel left Paule and, lighting a cigarette, strolled round the bar, greeting his friends; then he returned and settled down in the further room. Ludwigson and Ma Juju had their backs to him, but he was directly opposite Rinette, though the full width of the room lay between them. A breezy conversation had sprung up all at once around the glasses of Asti. Rinette was smiling at Ludwigson’s sallies; leaning towards her, he made no secret of his admiration and spared no pains to please her. When she saw Daniel watching she put on an even gayer air.

The two rooms led into each other and dancing couples came and went through the opening between them. A little rosy-cheeked ‘professional,’ who might have stepped out of a Lawrence canvas, had perched herself on the first step of the tiny white staircase behind the bar, and, with both hands on the banisters and standing on one leg, she swung the other to and fro in time with the music, and yelled, her face uptilted, a meaningless refrain that everyone that summer knew by heart.

‘Timmyloo, lammyloo, pan, pan, timmylah!’

Daniel, a cigarette between his lips, rested his head on his hands; his eyes were riveted on Rinette. He had ceased smiling; his features had grown rigid, his lips pinched. ‘Where have I seen him before?’ the girl asked herself. She laughed over-noisily, studiously evading Daniel’s gaze. But evasion grew more and more difficult; oftener and oftener, like a lark lured towards a mirror, she found her attention caught and held by his unswerving eyes. Shadowed yet clear, they seemed precisely focussed on a point in space far beyond Rinette; keen, burning eyes and never faltering; twin magnets from whose pull she managed to break free each time, but each time found it harder.

Suddenly Daniel felt something: moving almost at his side. Such was the tension of his nerves that he could not help starting. It was the little orphan who had gone to sleep on the settle, curled up in Dolores’ silky mantle, one finger near his mouth, and eyelashes still moist with half-dried tears.

The band had ceased playing while the violinist went his round in quest of tips. When he came to Daniel the latter slipped a currency-note under the napkin.

‘The next boston—make it last a quarter of an hour, non-stop,’ he whispered. The musician’s dusky eyelashes fluttered in assent.

Daniel felt that Rinette was watching him and, raising his eyes, he took possession of her gaze. And now he knew that it was in his thrall; once or twice—to amuse himself—he played at cat-and-mouse, pouncing on it and letting it go, to test his power. And then . . . he let it go no more.

Ludwigson, greatly smitten, waxed more and more insistent in his wooing, while the attention Rinette paid him grew more and more perfunctory and vacillating. When the violin struck up another waltz, from the first touch of the bow upon the strings, she knew by the thrill his tense features gave her that things were coming to a head. Yes, there was Daniel getting up! Coolly, with eyes fixed on his prey, he crossed the room, came straight up to her. It flashed across him that he was risking his post with Ludwigson and the thought was like a rowel to his passion. Rinette watched

him come, and in her glassy stare there was something so abnormal that Ludwigson and Ma Juju both swung round at once. Ludwigson, imagining that Daniel meant to greet him, made a tentative gesture in his direction. But Daniel did not seem even to know him. As he leaned forward his look bored into the girl's seagreen eyes, bright with mingled terror and consent. Subdued, she rose. Without a word he slipped his arm around her, drew her close and disappeared with her into the further room where the band was playing.

For a second or two Ludwigson and Ma Juju sat in stony silence, blankly staring at their retreating backs. Then their eyes met.

'Well, of all the damned cheek . . . !' Ma Juju could hardly speak and her double chin quivered with fury.

Ludwigson's eyebrows lifted, but he did not answer. He was naturally so pale that he could not grow paler. The nails of his huge fingers glowed darkly like cornelians as he reached for his glass and raised the Asti to his lips.

Ma Juju was panting like a winded sprinter. 'Anyhow,' she ventured, with the dry chuckle of a woman getting her revenge, 'that means the sack for the young scallawag, I guess, as far as you're concerned.'

Ludwigson looked surprised.

'Monsieur de Fontanin? But why should you think that?'

His smile implied that a man of breeding does not stoop to such acts of petty spite. Cool and collected, he drew on his gloves. Perhaps, indeed, he was genuinely tickled at the situation. Taking a note from his pocket-book, he tossed it on to the table and rose with a courteous gesture of farewell to Ma Juju. Then he went to the room where dancing was in progress and halted on the threshold till the couple came round to where he stood. Daniel caught his drowsy gaze, in which a spice of malice mingled with jealousy and admiration; then he saw him sidling past the settles towards the exit and vanish through the swivel-door, which seemed to swish him round in its wake, into the outer darkness.

Daniel waltzed slowly; his body did not seem to move, and he held his head erect. There was a certain coolness in his deportment, partly ease and partly stiffness; he danced on the tips of his toes and his feet never left the ground. Rinette, lost to her surroundings—whether spell-bound or outraged, she could not decide—followed so perfectly Daniel's least movements that it was as if they had always danced together. After ten minutes they were the last couple left in; the others, whose energy had failed them long before, formed a circle round them. Five more minutes passed and left them dancing

still. Then, after a last repeat, the band cried quarter. They danced on till the final chord—the girl half-swooning on his shoulder; Daniel self-possessed, veiling with closed eyelids the burning gaze which now and again he proved on her, thrilling her by turns with loathing and desire.

To the accompaniment of clapping hands Daniel led Rinette back to Ludwigson's table, took quite composedly the vacant chair, asked for another glass and, filling it with Asti, gaily lifted it to Ma Juju and drained it at a draught.

‘Faugh!’ he exclaimed. ‘What syrup!’

Rinette broke into a nervous laugh and her eyes filled with tears.

Ma Juju stared at Daniel, big-eyed with wonder; her anger had evaporated. She rose and, shrugging her shoulders, sighed comically.

‘Well, that ain't nothing so long as you keep fit!’

Half an hour later Daniel and Rinette left Packmell's together.

Rain had fallen.

‘A taxi?’ the page enquired.

‘Let's walk a bit first,’ Rinette proposed. There was a soft fall in her voice that Daniel found charming.

Despite the rain, the air was still sultry. The ill-lit streets were empty. They walked slowly on along the rain-bright pavement.

An infantryman passed by; he held two women by the waist and was laughingly teaching them how to change step. ‘Left, right! Not like that. Hop on your left foot! Left, right!’ Laughter rang receding, long echoing along the silent house-fronts.

When they left the cabaret she thought he would slip his arm through hers at once. But Daniel so keenly relished joys deferred that he would postpone them almost to the breaking-point. She made the first move, startled by a distant flash of lightning.

‘The storm's not over yet. It'll rain again.’

‘And that will be delightful.’ His voice was like a caress, charged with hidden meanings, rather too subtle for the girl, whom his aloofness disconcerted.

‘You know I can't get it out of my head that I've seen you somewhere before.’

He smiled in the shadow, thankful that she kept to commonplace remarks. He was far from suspecting that she really thought she had met him before, and all but answered ‘So do I,’ by way of joining in the game; then,

of course, they would fall to guessing when it had happened. But it amused him more to go on mystifying her by keeping silence.

‘Why do they call you “Prophet”?’ she asked, after a pause.

‘Because my name is Daniel.’

‘Daniel what. . . ?’

He hesitated, reluctant to drop the defensive, even on a minor point. Still Rinette’s curiosity was so patently ingenuous that he felt it unfair to dupe her with a false name.

‘Daniel de Fontanin.’

She did not reply, but gave a start of astonishment. She’s stumbled, he thought, and made as if to come to her aid; but she eluded him. That was enough to make him eager to coerce her and, going up to her, he tried to take her arm. Swerving nimbly aside, she kept beyond his reach; then suddenly she turned aside, making for a side-street. Playing a game with me, he thought; well, I’ll join in! But it looked as if she were trying to escape him in earnest; she quickened her step till he could hardly keep his distance without breaking into a run. Their point-to-point along the deserted streets amused him. But, when she dived into a darker street that would have brought them back, by a roundabout way, to their starting-point, feeling rather tired, he made a third attempt to grasp her arm. She eluded him again.

‘Don’t be so silly!’ he cried angrily. ‘Stop now!’

But she fled all the faster, darting into patches of shadow and constantly swerving from one pavement to the other, as if she really meant to shake off his pursuit. All at once she broke into a run. With a few strides he drew level and brought her to bay before a door-porch. Then on her face he caught a look of terror that could not have been feigned.

‘What’s the matter?’

She crouched in the dripping doorway, panting, staring up at him with haggard eyes. He thought for a moment. It was clear to him, though he could make nothing of it, that she had had some serious shock. He tried to draw her towards him; she recoiled in such panic haste that a flounce of her dress was torn.

‘What on earth is the matter?’ he asked again, moving back a pace. ‘Are you afraid of me? Or do you feel ill?’

A nervous shudder passed through her body; she could not utter a sound and never took her eyes off him.

It was all as much a mystery as ever, but now he took pity on her.

‘Would you rather I left you?’

She nodded. Feeling slightly ridiculous, he repeated his question.

‘You mean it? You’d rather I went away?’ He might have been soothing a lost child, such was the gentleness he put into his voice.

‘Yes.’ Her tone was almost brutal.

Obviously, he decided, this was no acting. He realized that any more insistence on his part would be unmannerly and, suddenly resigned to losing her, determined to take it like a sportsman.

‘Have it your own way,’ he said. ‘Only I can’t leave you stranded here in the middle of the night, in this doorway. We’ll forage round for a taxi first, and then I’ll leave you. . . . Right?’

The lights of the Avenue de l’Opéra were visible in the distance and they walked silently towards them. Quite soon an empty taxi came their way and, at a sign from Daniel, drew up beside the kerb. Rinette kept her eyes fixed on the ground. Daniel opened the door. Only when her foot was on the step did she turn towards him and look him in the face; it was as if something compelled her to survey him once again. With a forced smile he stood before her, bareheaded, doing his best to keep up the appearance of a friend who is bidding a casual good-bye. Once she was sure he would not try to accompany her, her features relaxed. She told the driver where to go. Then, turning, to Daniel, she whispered an apology.

‘I’m sorry, but to-night, Monsieur Daniel, you must leave me. I’ll explain to-morrow.’

‘To-morrow, then,’ he said, with a bow. ‘But—where?’

‘Oh, yes. . . . Where?’ she repeated innocently. ‘At Madame Juju’s, if you like. Yes, at her place. Three o’clock.’

‘Right!’

He took her extended hand in his, and his lips lightly brushed the tips of her gloved fingers.

The taxi started.

Then suddenly a gust of anger swept over Daniel. He was just mastering it when he observed the girl’s white shoulders leaning from the window and saw her bid the driver stop.

In a few strides he had caught up the taxi, the door of which Rinette had opened. He saw her huddled together at the far end of the seat, her eyes staring into the darkness. He read their meaning and sprang in beside her; when he took her in his arms, she crushed her lips to his and now he knew it was no fear or weakness that moved her to surrender, but that she freely

gave herself. She was sobbing, sobbing desperately, and murmured broken phrases.

‘I want . . . I want . . .’

Daniel was dumbfounded by the words that followed.

‘I want . . . to have . . . a child by you!’

. . . ‘Same address, sir?’ the taxi-driver enquired.

3

AFTER leaving Jacques and his friends Antoine had the taxi take him to Passy where he had ‘a pneumonia case’ to visit; thence to his father’s residence in the Rue de l’Université where for the past five years he and his brother had shared the ground floor flat between them. Lolling in the car that took him homewards, a cigarette between his lips, he decided that his little patient was certainly on the mend, that his day’s work was over, and that he was feeling in excellent spirits.

Yesterday, he mused, I wasn’t too pleased with myself. As a rule, when expectoration ceases so abruptly . . . *Pulsus bonus, urina bona, sed aeger moritur*. The essential now is to prevent endocarditis. His mother’s still a pretty woman. Paris is looking pretty, too, this evening.

As the car sped by, his eyes searched the green shadows of the Trocadéro and he swung round to follow with his gaze a couple turning up a lonely pathway. The Eiffel Tower, the statues on the bridges and the Seine were flushed with rosy light. *In my heart tra-la-la*. . . . The engine purred a ground-bass to his voice. *In my heart . . . sleeps*, he suddenly added. Got it! *In my heart sleeps la-la-la*. Provoking not to be able to remember the words. Now what the devil sleeps in anybody’s heart? The beast in all of us, he thought, smiling to himself. And again his wandering thoughts veered to the prospect of a festive evening at Packmell’s. Some girl, perhaps . . . ? He felt glad to be alive, borne on an undercurrent of desire. Throwing away the cigarette, he crossed his legs and drew a deep breath of air, to which the rapid motion of the taxi lent an illusive coolness. Let’s hope Belin didn’t forget the cupping-glasses for that child. We’ll save the poor kid—what’s

more, without an operation. I'd love to see the look on Loïselle's face. Those surgeons! They're all the rage but—what are they? Mere acrobats. As old father Black used to declare: 'If I'd three sons, I'd say to the least gifted one: "Go in for midwifery!" To the most sporting: "The lancet for you, my boy!" But, to the cleverest, I'd say: "Be a G.P., treat lots of patients and try to better your knowledge every day."' A joyous mood swept over him again, he felt each sinew tense with deep-set joy. 'I've played my cards well,' he murmured under his breath.

When he reached home, the open door of Jacques' room reminded him that his brother had passed his examination; a success that crowned his five years' vigilance and careful handling of the boy. How well I remember, he mused, the evening when I met Favery in the Rue des Ecoles and the idea of urging Jacques to join the Ecole Normale first came to me! The Square Monge was white with snow. A bit cooler than this! he sighed. Zestfully he foresaw his body under the cool, clear water, and tossed his garments hither and thither with childish impatience.

He felt a new man when he turned off the shower and, thinking of Packmell's, whistled merrily. He accorded but a minor rôle in his life to 'the girls,' as he called them; and none to sentimental love. Light come, light go, was his method, and he prided himself on its matter-of-factness. Moreover, certain nights excepted, he held aloof from 'that sort of thing'—not for discipline's sake or through physical indifference, but because 'that sort of thing' belonged to a scheme of life in which the line he had decided once for all to take had no part. He had a feeling that such preoccupations were fit for weaklings; whereas he was a 'strong man.'

There was a ring at the bell. He glanced at the clock; if it came to that, he would have time to visit a patient before joining the others at Packmell's.

'Who's there?' he railed through the door.

'It's I, Monsieur Antoine.'

He recognized M. Chasle's voice and opened the door. During M. Thibault's absence at Maisons-Laffitte his secretary continued to work in the Rue de l'Université.

'Ah, there you are!' murmured M. Chasle vaguely. Abashed by the vision of Antoine in his pants, he looked aside, muttering 'What?' with an interrogative grimace. 'I see you're dressing,' he added almost immediately, one finger uplifted, as though he had just solved an enigma. 'I hope I'm not intruding.'

'I have to be off in twenty-five minutes,' Antoine made haste to inform him.

‘That’s more than enough. Look here, doctor.’ He put down his hat and, taking off his glasses, opened his eyes wide. ‘Don’t you see anything?’

‘Where?’

‘In my eye!’

‘Which eye?’

‘This one.’

‘Keep still. No, I can’t see anything at all. You got it in a draught, perhaps?’

‘Yes, it must be that. Thank you. I’d opened both windows.’ He coughed shortly and replaced his spectacles. ‘Thanks. You’ve set my mind at rest. That was all; a draught. An airy nothing. Hee! Hee!’ He tittered to himself before continuing. ‘You see, I haven’t taken up much of your time.’ But, instead of reaching for his hat, he perched himself on the arm of a chair and mopped his forehead.

‘It’s hot,’ Antoine observed.

‘Terribly.’ M. Chasle knitted his brows with a knowing air. ‘Thunder about, that’s sure. It’s hard on people who’re bound to keep moving, people who have got steps to take. . . .’

Antoine, who was lacing up his shoes, glanced at him enquiringly.

‘Steps to take?’

‘Well, in heat like this! In offices, in police-stations, why it’s stifling! So one just puts it off to another day.’ He wagged his head with an air of kindly commiseration.

Antoine could make nothing of the rigmarole.

‘By the way,’ said M. Chasle, ‘I have often wanted to ask you about it; do you know the Superannuates’ Home?’

‘Superannuates . . . ?’

‘Yes. For old people; not incurables. A rest-home at Point-du-Jour; the best air in France. By the bye, while we’re on that topic, there’s something else I’d like your opinion about, Monsieur Antoine. You’ve never chanced to find a five-franc piece which had been forgotten?’

‘“Forgotten?” How? In a pocket?’

‘No. In a garden. In the street, so to say.’

Antoine stood up, trousers in hand, and stared at M. Chasle. One can’t be a moment with the old blighter, he said to himself, without beginning to feel like a mental case. With an effort he pulled his wits together.

‘I don’t quite follow your question.’ He spoke with careful gravity.

‘It’s like this. Suppose somebody happens to lose something. Well, someone else may happen to find it, the thing that was lost, I mean, eh?’

‘Quite.’

‘Now supposing it happened to be you who found the thing, what would you do with it?’

‘I’d try to discover the owner.’

‘Yes, of course. But supposing the party wasn’t there any more?’

‘Where?’

‘In the garden, in the street, for instance.’

‘Well, I’d take the—the thing to the police-station.’

M. Chasle smiled knowingly.

‘But, if it was money? What then? A five-franc piece? We all know what would become of it at the police-station.’

‘Do you imagine the police would keep the money?’

‘To be sure!’

‘Not a bit of it, M. Chasle. To begin with, there are the formalities, papers to sign. Look here! Once when I was with a friend in a cab I found a baby’s rattle, quite a pretty little thing, really, ivory and silver-gilt. Well, at the police-station they took our names—my friend’s name, the cabby’s, our addresses and the cab number; we had to sign a form and they gave us a formal receipt. That’s news to you, eh? What’s more, my friend was notified a year later that, as no one had appeared to claim the rattle, he could come and get it.’

‘Why?’

‘That’s the law; if lost property is not claimed, the finder is entitled to keep it, after a year and a day.’

‘A year and a day? The finder?’

‘That’s so.’

M. Chasle shrugged his shoulders.

‘A rattle, may be. But supposing it were a note—a fifty-franc note, for instance?’

‘Exactly the same thing.’

‘I don’t believe it, M. Antoine.’

‘But I’m positive, M. Chasle.’

The grey-haired dwarf perched on the chair stared at the young man over his spectacles. Then, averting his eyes, he coughed behind his hand.

‘I asked you that—it’s about my mother.’

‘Has your mother found some money?’

‘What?’ ejaculated M. Chasle, wriggling on the chair-arm. His cheeks were crimson and, for a moment, his face betrayed an agony of doubt. But, almost immediately, a subtle smile crept over his lips. ‘Of course not. I was speaking of the Home.’ Then, as Antoine began to slip on his coat, he leapt down from the chair to help him pass his arms through the sleeves. ‘A passage of arms,’ he tittered. Then, taking advantage of his position at Antoine’s back, he continued quickly, speaking into his ear. ‘The dreadful thing, you see, is that they want 9,000 francs. With the extras, 10,000 francs all told. And *payable in advance*, what’s more; it’s written down. And then, if anyone wants to leave, eh?’

‘To leave?’ Antoine faced round, uncomfortably aware that he was losing the thread yet again.

‘Good heavens, she won’t stay there three weeks! Is it really worth it, do you think? She is rising 77, you see, and it’s odds on she won’t have time to spend all that at home, ten thousand francs. What do you think?’

‘Seventy-seven,’ Antoine echoed, involuntarily working out the dismal reckoning.

He had lost track of the time. The moment you deflect your attention to other people, he had observed, you find a ‘case.’ Despite his professional training, his attention always centred so instinctively on himself that, whenever he directed it to others, he had a feeling of its being deflected. This fool is certainly a case, he said to himself: ‘the Chasle case.’ He remembered the time when he first met M. Chasle; on a recommendation from the priests at the boys’ school, M. Thibault had engaged him for the holidays as the children’s tutor. After their return to Paris, enchanted by the tutor’s punctuality, he had given him the post of secretary. For eighteen years, Antoine mused, I’ve seen the little man day after day and yet I know nothing about him!

‘My mother is a splendid woman,’ M. Chasle continued, avoiding his eyes. ‘You must not think, M. Antoine, that as a family we’re nobodies. I may be one—but mother, not she! She was born to be a great lady, not to the humble life we lead. Still, as the gentlemen at Saint-Roch so often say, and they’ve been true friends to us, not forgetting the Curé, who knows Monsieur Thibault by name quite well—“Every life has its cross,” they say, and it’s quite true. It isn’t as if I didn’t want to do it. I do. If only one could be sure. . . . Ten thousand francs! . . . And then I’d have a quiet little life, as I like it! But, there, she wouldn’t stay! And they wouldn’t give me back the

money. They see to that all right. When you go there they make you sign a long rigmarole, with an official stamp on it, a sort of affidavit. Like at your police-station. But they're cannier than your policemen, they don't write to you after a year, they give nothing back. Not a sou, not a brass farthing,' he repeated with a harsh guffaw. Then, in the same tone, he continued: 'And your friend—what did he do? Did he go and get it?'

'The ivory rattle? No, he didn't.'

M. Chasle seemed to ponder deeply.

'A child's rattle, well, yes. . . . But money, that's another story. People who lose money in the street are off like a flash to claim it at every police-station in Paris. Shouldn't wonder if some people put in for more than they lost. But what about proving it, eh?'

Antoine did not reply. M. Chasle fixed him with an inquisitorial eye and chuckled. 'How about proving it, I'm asking?'

'Proving it?' Antoine sounded annoyed. 'What about all the particulars they have to specify—how the money was lost, if it was in notes or coin, if _____,

'No, not that,' M. Chasle broke in excitedly. 'They surely wouldn't ask if it was in notes or coin. Particulars, I grant you. But, anyhow, not that one!' He murmured bemusedly: 'No, not that one, most certainly not!'

Antoine glanced at the clock.

'Look here, I don't want to hurry you away but I really must be going.'

M. Chasle seemed to waken from a trance and slipped off the chair-arm.

'Many thanks, doctor, for the consultation. I'll go home and put a bandage on . . . and a wad of cotton-wool in my ear. It'll pass off, I'm sure.'

Antoine could not help smiling as he watched the little man hopping warily across the polished hall floor. M. Chasle's shoes always creaked, and this was one of the 'crosses' of his life. He had consulted a host of bootmakers, tried every shape of clicks and uppers, every kind of sole—leather, felt and rubber; he had visited pedicures and even (on the advice of a floor-polisher who, on occasion, acted as a table-waiter) taken his chance with the inventor of an elastic boot, known as the 'Sleuth,' specially built for waiters and domestics. But all in vain. Thus he had acquired a habit of walking on tiptoe and, with his beady eyes set in a tiny head, and coat-tails flapping on his hips, looked like a wing-clipped magpie.

'There now, I was forgetting,' he exclaimed as he reached the door. 'All the shops are shut. Have you any change?'

'For . . . ?'

‘For a thousand francs.’

‘Might have,’ said Antoine, opening a drawer.

‘I don’t care to carry such big notes on me,’ M. Chasle explained. ‘And, as you happened to speak of people losing money . . . Could you give me ten hundred-franc notes? Or twenty fifties? The fatter the wad is, the safer, so to speak.’

‘No, I’ve only two five-hundreds,’ Antoine said, making as if to close the drawer.

‘Better than nothing,’ said M. Chasle, approaching him. ‘Quite different, anyhow.’ He handed Antoine the note which he had just extracted from the lining of his coat, and was about to slip the other two into the same recess when the door-bell rang so stridently that both men jumped and M. Chasle, who had not yet inserted the money in his cache, stammered: ‘Wait! Wait a bit!’

His features twitched convulsively when he knew the voice for that of his concierge; the man was hammering on the door and shouting:

‘Is M. Chasle there?’

Antoine hastily opened to him.

‘Is he there?’ the man panted. ‘It’s urgent. An accident. The little girl’s been run over.’

M. Chasle, who had heard the man’s words, staggered, and Antoine returned to the room just in time to catch him as he fell. Laying him on the floor, he fanned his face with a wet towel. The old man opened his eyes and tried to stand up.

‘Do come quickly, Monsieur Jules,’ said the man at the door. ‘I’ve a taxi waiting.’

‘Is she dead?’ Antoine asked, without pausing to wonder who the little girl might be.

‘As near as may be,’ the man replied under his breath.

Antoine took from a shelf the first-aid kit which he had handy for such emergencies and, suddenly remembering that he had lent Jacques his bottle of iodine, ran to his brother’s room, shouting to the concierge.

‘Get him into the taxi! Wait for me! I’ll come with you.’

When the taxi pulled up near the Tuileries in front of the house in the Rue d’Alger where the Chasles lived, Antoine had pieced together from the concierge’s flustered explanations an outline of the accident. The victim was

a little girl who used to meet 'M. Jules' each evening on his way back. Had she tried to cross the Rue de Rivoli on this occasion, as M. Jules was late in coming home? A delivery tri-car had knocked her down and passed over her body. A crowd had gathered and a newspaper-vendor who was present had recognized the child by her plaited hair, and furnished her address. She had been carried unconscious to the flat.

M. Chasle, crouching in a corner of the taxi, shed no tears, but each new detail drew from him a racking sob, half muffled by the hand he pressed against his mouth.

A crowd still lingered round the doorway. They made way for M. Chasle, who had to be helped up the stairs as far as the top landing by his two companions. A door stood open at the end of a corridor, down which M. Chasle made his way on stumbling feet. The concierge stood back to let Antoine pass, and touched him on the arm.

'My wife, who's got a head on her shoulders, ran off to fetch the little doctor who dines at the restaurant next door. I hope she found him there.'

Antoine nodded approval and followed M. Chasle. They crossed a sort of anteroom, redolent of musty cupboards, then two low rooms with tiled floors; the light was dim and the atmosphere stifling despite the open windows giving on a courtyard. In the further room Antoine had to edge round a circular table where a meal for four was laid on a dingy strip of oilcloth. M. Chasle opened a door and, entering a brightly lit room, stumbled forward with a piteous cry.

'Dédette! Dédette!'

'Now, Jules!' a raucous voice protested.

The first thing Antoine noticed was the lamp which a woman in a pink dressing-gown was lifting with both hands; her ruddy hair, her throat and forehead were flooded with the lamplight. Then he observed the bed on which the light fell, and shadowy forms bending above it. Dregs of the sunset, filtering through the window, merged in the halo of the lamp, and the room was bathed in a half-light where all things took the semblance of a dream. Antoine helped M. Chasle to a chair and approached the bed. A young man wearing pince-nez, with his hat still on, was bending forward and slitting up with a pair of scissors the blood-stained garments of the little girl. Her face, ringed with matted hair, lay buried in the bolster. An old woman on her knees was helping the doctor.

'Is she alive?' Antoine asked.

The doctor turned, looked at him and hesitated; then mopped his forehead.

‘Yes.’ His tone lacked assurance.

‘I was with M. Chasle when he was sent for,’ Antoine explained, ‘and I’ve brought my first-aid kit. I’m Dr. Thibault,’ he added in a whisper, ‘House-physician at the Children’s Hospital.’

The young doctor rose and was about to make way for Antoine.

‘Carry on! Carry on!’ Antoine drew back a step. ‘Pulse?’

‘Almost imperceptible,’ the doctor replied, intent once more on his task.

Antoine raised his eyes towards the red-haired young woman, saw the anxiety in her face and made a suggestion.

‘Wouldn’t it be best to telephone for an ambulance and have your child taken at once to my hospital?’

‘No!’ an imperious voice answered him.

Then Antoine descried an old woman standing at the head of the bed—was it the child’s grandmother?—and scanning him intently with eyes limpid as water, a peasant’s eyes. Her pointed nose and resolute features were half submerged in a vast sea of fat, that heaved in billowy folds upon her neck.

‘I know we look like paupers,’ she continued in a resigned tone, ‘but, believe me, even folk like us would rather die at home in our own beds. Dédette shan’t go to hospital.’

‘But why not, Madame?’ Antoine protested.

She straightened up her back, thrust out her chin and sadly but sternly rebuked him.

‘We prefer not,’ was all she said.

Antoine tried to catch the eye of the younger woman, but she was busy brushing off the flies that obstinately settled on her glowing cheeks, and seemed of no opinion. He decided to appeal to M. Chasle. The old fellow had fallen on his knees in front of the chair to which Antoine had led him; his head was buried on his folded arms as though to shut out all sights from his eyes, and, from his ears, all sounds. The old lady, who was keenly watching Antoine’s movements, guessed his intention and forestalled him.

‘Isn’t that so, Jules?’

M. Chasle started.

‘Yes, mother.’

She looked at him approvingly and her voice grew mothering.

‘Don’t stay there, Jules. You’d be much better in your room.’

A pallid forehead rose into view, eyes tremulous behind their spectacles; then, without a protest, the poor old fellow stood up and tiptoed from the room.

Antoine bit his lips. Meanwhile, pending an occasion further to insist, he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves above his elbow. Then he knelt at the bedside. He seldom took thought without at the same time beginning to take action—such was his incapacity for long deliberation on any issue raised, and such his keenness to be up and doing. The avoidance of mistakes counted less with him than bold decision and prompt activity. Thought, as he used it, was merely the lever that set an act in motion—premature though it might be.

Aided by the doctor and the old woman's trembling hands, he had soon stripped off the child's clothing; pale, almost grey, her body lay beneath their eyes in its frail nakedness. The impact of the car must have been very violent, for she was covered with bruises, and a black streak crossed her thigh transversely from hip to knee.

'It's the right leg,' Antoine's colleague observed. Her right foot was twisted, bent inwards, and the whole leg was spattered with blood and deformed, shorter than the other one.

'Fracture of the femur?' suggested the doctor.

Antoine did not answer. He was thinking. 'That's not all,' he said to himself, 'the shock is too great for that. But what can it be?' He tapped her knee-cap, then ran his fingers slowly up her thigh; suddenly there spurted through an almost imperceptible lesion on the medial side of the thigh, some inches above the knee, a jet of blood.

'That's it,' he said.

'The femoral artery!' the other exclaimed.

Antoine rose quickly to his feet. The need to make, unaided, a decision gave him a new access of energy and, as ever when others were present, his sense of power intensified. 'A surgeon?' he speculated. 'No, we'd never get her alive to the hospital. Then, who? I? Why not? And, anyhow, there's no alternative.'

'Will you try a ligature?' asked the doctor, piqued by Antoine's silence.

But Antoine did not heed his question. It must be done, he was thinking, and without a moment's delay; it may be too late already, who knows? He threw a quick glance round him. A ligature. What can be used? Let's see. The red-headed girl hasn't a belt; no loops on the curtains. Something elastic. Ah, I have it! In a twinkling he had thrown off his waistcoat and

unfastened his braces. Snapping them with a jerk, he knelt down again, made with them a tourniquet and clamped it tightly round the child's groin.

'Good! Two minutes' breathing-time,' he said as he rose. Sweat was pouring down his cheeks. He knew that every eye was fixed on him. 'Only an immediate operation,' he said decisively, 'can save her life. Let's try!'

The others moved away at once from the bed—even the woman with the lamp, even the young doctor, whose face had paled.

Antoine clenched his teeth, his eyes narrowed and grew hard, he seemed to peer into himself. Must keep calm, he mused. A table? That round table I saw, coming in.

'Bring the lamp!' he cried to the young woman; then turned to the doctor. 'You there—come with me!' He strode quickly into the next room. Good, he said to himself; here's our operating theatre. With a quick gesture he cleared the table, stacked the plates in a pile. 'That's for my lamp.' Like a general in charge of a campaign, he allotted each thing its place. 'Now for our little patient.' He went back to the bedroom. The doctor and the young woman hung on his every gesture and followed close behind him. Addressing the doctor, he pointed to the child.

'I'll carry her. She's light as a feather. Hold up her leg, you.'

As he slipped his arms under the child's back and carried her to the table, she moaned faintly. He took the lamp from the red-haired woman and, removing the shade, stood it on the pile of plates. As he surveyed the scene, a thought came suddenly and went: 'I'm a wonderful fellow!' The lamp gleamed like a brazier, reddening the ambient shadow, where only the young woman's glowing cheeks and the doctor's pince-nez showed up as highlights; its rays fell harshly on the little body, that twitched spasmodically. The swarming flies seemed worked up to frenzy by the on-coming storm. Heat and anxiety brought beads of sweat to Antoine's brow. Would she live through it? he wondered, but some dark force he did not analyse buoyed up his faith; never had he felt so sure of himself.

He seized his bag, and taking out a bottle of chloroform and some gauze, handed the former to the doctor.

'Open it somewhere. On the sideboard. Take off the sewing-machine. Get everything out.'

As he turned, holding the bottle, he noticed two dim figures in the dark doorway, the two old women like statues posted there. One, M. Chasle's mother, had great, staring eyes, an owl's eyes; the other was pressing her breast with her clasped hands.

‘Go away!’ he commanded. They retreated some steps into the shadows of the bedroom, but he pointed to the other end of the flat. ‘No. Out of the room. That way.’ They obeyed, crossed the room, vanished without a word.

‘Not you!’ he cried angrily to the red-haired woman who was about to follow them.

She turned on her heel, and for a moment he took stock of her. She had a handsome, rather fleshy face, touched with a certain dignity, it seemed, by grief; an air of calm maturity that pleased him. Poor woman! he could not help thinking. . . . But I need her!

‘You’re the child’s mother?’ he asked.

‘No.’ She shook her head.

‘All the better.’

As he spoke he had been soaking the gauze and now he swiftly stretched it over the child’s nose. ‘Stand there, and keep this.’ He handed her the bottle. ‘When I give the signal, you’ll pour some more of it on.’

The air grew heavy with the reek of chloroform. The little girl groaned, drew a deep breath or two, grew still.

A last look round. The field was clear; the rest lay with the surgeon’s skill. Now that the crucial moment had come, Antoine’s anxieties vanished as if by magic. He went to the sideboard where the doctor, holding the bag, was laying on a napkin the last of its contents. ‘Let’s see,’ he murmured, as though to gain a few seconds’ respite. ‘There’s the instrument-box; good. The scalpel, the artery-forceps. A packet of gauze, cotton-wool, that’ll do. Alcohol. Caffeine. Tincture of iodine. And so forth. . . . All’s ready. Let’s begin.’ And yet again there came to him that sense of buoyancy, of boundless confidence, of vital energies tautened to breaking-point; and, crowning all, a proud awareness of being lifted high above his workaday self.

Raising his head, he looked his junior for a moment in the eyes. ‘Have you the nerve?’ his eyes seemed to enquire. ‘It’s going to be a tough job. Now for it!’

The young man did not flinch. And now he hung on Antoine’s gestures with servile assiduity. Well he knew that in this operation lay their only hope, but never would he have dared to take the risk, alone. With Antoine, however, nothing seemed impossible.

He’s not so bad, this young chap, thought Antoine. Lucky for me! Let’s see. A basin? No matter—this will do as well. Grasping the bottle of iodine he sluiced his arms up to the elbow with the liquid.

‘Your turn!’ He passed the bottle to the doctor, who was feverishly polishing the lenses of his pince-nez.

A vivid lightning-flash, closely followed by a deafening clap of thunder, lit up the window.

‘A bit previous, the applause,’ Antoine said to himself. ‘I hadn’t even taken up my lancet. The young woman didn’t turn a hair. It’ll cool things down; good for our nerves. Must be pretty nearly a hundred degrees in this room.’

He had laid out a series of compresses round the injured limb, delimiting the operative field. Now he turned towards the young woman.

‘A whiff of chloroform. That’ll do. Right!’

She obeys orders, he mused, like a soldier under fire. Women! Then, fixing his eyes on the swollen little thigh, he swallowed his saliva and raised the scalpel.

‘Here goes!’

With one neat stroke he cut the skin.

‘Swab!’ he commanded the doctor bending beside him. ‘What a thin child!’ he said to himself. ‘Well, we’ll be there all the sooner. Hullo, there’s little Dédette starting snoring! Good! Better be quick about it. Now for the retractors.’

‘Now, you,’ he said aloud, and the other let fall the blood-stained swabs of cotton-wool and, grasping the retractors, held the wound open.

Antoine paused a moment. ‘Good!’ he murmured. ‘My director? Here it is. In Hunter’s canal. The classical ligation; all’s well. Zip! Another flash! Must have landed pretty near. On the Louvre. Perhaps on the “gentlemen at Saint-Roch.”’ He felt quite calm—no more anxiety for the child, none for death’s imminence—and cheerfully repeated under his breath: ‘the ligature of the femoral artery in Hunter’s canal.’

Zip! There goes another! Hardly any rain, too. It’s stifling. Artery injured at the site of the fracture; the end of the bone tore it open. Simple as anything. Still she hadn’t much blood to spare. He glanced at the little girl’s face. Hullo! Better hurry up. Simple as anything—but could be fatal, too. A forceps; right! Another; that will do. Zip! These flashes are getting a bore; cheap effect! I’ve only plaited silk; must make the best of it. Breaking a tube, he pulled out the skein and made a ligature beside each forceps. Splendid! Almost finished now. The collateral circulation will be quite enough, especially at that age. I’m really wonderful! Can I have missed my vocation? I’ve all the makings of a surgeon, sure enough; a great surgeon. In the silent interval between two thunder-claps dying into the distance, the

sharp metallic click of scissors snipping the loose ends of the silk was audible. Yes; quickness of eye, coolness, energy, dexterity. Suddenly he pricked up his ears and his cheeks paled.

‘The devil!’ he muttered under his breath.

The child had ceased to breathe.

Brushing aside the woman, he tore away the gauze from the unconscious child’s face and pressed his ear above her heart. Doctor and young woman waited in suspense, their eyes fixed on Antoine.

‘No!’ he murmured. ‘She’s breathing still.’

He took the child’s wrist, but her pulse was so rapid that he did not attempt to count it. ‘Ouf!’ He drew a deep breath, the lines of anxiety deepened on his forehead. The two others felt his gaze pass across their faces, but he did not see them.

He rapped out a brief command.

‘You, doctor, remove the forceps, put on a dressing and then undo the tourniquet. Quickly. You, Madame, get me some note-paper—no, you needn’t; I’ve my note-book.’ He wiped his hands feverishly with a wad of cotton-wool. ‘What’s the time? Not nine yet. The chemist’s open. You’ll have to hurry.’

She stood before him, waiting; her tentative gesture—to wrap the dressing-gown more closely round her body—told him of her reluctance at going thus, half dressed, into the streets, and for the fraction of a second a picture of the opulent form under the garment held his imagination. He scribbled a prescription, signed it. ‘A two-pint ampoule. As quickly as you can.’

‘And if——?’ she stammered.

‘If the chemist’s shut, ring, and keep on hammering on the door till they open. Be quick!’

She was gone. He followed her with his eyes to make sure she was running, then addressed the doctor.

‘We’ll try the saline. Not subcutaneously; that’s hopeless now. Intravenously. Our last hope.’ He took two small phials from the sideboard. ‘You’ve removed the tourniquet? Right. Give her an injection of camphor to begin with, then the caffeine—only half of it for her, poor kid! Only, for God’s sake, be quick about it!’

He went back to the child and took her thin wrist between his fingers; now he could feel nothing more than a vague, restless fluttering. ‘It’s got

past counting,' he said to himself. And suddenly a feeling of impotence, of sheer despair, swept over him.

'God damn it!' he broke out. 'To think it went off perfectly—and it was all no use!'

The child's face became more livid with every second. She was dying. Antoine observed, beside the parted lips, two slender strands of curling hair, lighter than gossamer, that rose and fell; anyhow, she was breathing still.

He watched the doctor giving the injections. Neat with his fingers, he thought, considering his short sight. But we can't save her. Vexation rather than grief possessed him. He had the callousness common to doctors, for whom the sufferings of others count only as so much new experience, or profit, or professional advantage; men to whose fortunes death and pain are frequent ministers.

But then he thought he heard a banging door and ran towards the sound. It was the young woman coming back with quick, lithe steps, trying to conceal her breathlessness. He snatched the parcel from her hands.

'Bring some hot water.' He did not even pause to thank her.

'Boiled?'

'No. To warm the solution. Be quick!'

He had hardly opened the parcel when she returned, bringing a steaming saucepan.

'Good! Excellent!' he murmured, but did not look towards her.

No time to lose. In a few seconds he had nipped off the tips of the ampoule and slipped on the rubber tubing. A Swiss barometer in carved wood hung on the wall. With one hand he unhooked it, while with the other he hung the ampoule on the nail. Then he took the saucepan of hot water, hesitated for the fraction of a second and looped the rubber tubing round the bottom of it. That'll heat the saline as it flows through, he said to himself. Smart idea, that! He glanced towards the other doctor to see if he had noticed what he had done. At last he came back to the child, lifted her inert arm and sponged it with iodine. Then, with a stroke of his scalpel, he laid bare the vein, slipped his director beneath it and inserted the needle.

'It's flowing in all right,' he cried. 'Take her pulse. I'll stay where I am.'

The ten minutes that followed seemed an eternity. No one moved or spoke.

Streaming with sweat, breathing rapidly, with knitted brows, Antoine waited, his gaze riveted on the needle. After a while he glanced up at the ampoule.

‘How much gone?’

‘Nearly a pint.’

‘The pulse?’

The doctor silently shook his head.

Five more minutes passed, five minutes more of sickening suspense. Antoine looked up again.

‘How much left?’

‘Just over half a pint.’

‘And the pulse?’

The doctor hesitated.

‘I’m not sure. I almost think . . . it’s beginning to come back a little.’

‘Can you count it?’

A pause.

‘No.’

If only the pulse came back! sighed Antoine. He would have given ten years of his own life to restore life to this little corpse. Wonder what age she is. Seven? And, if I save her, she’ll fall a victim to consumption within the next ten years, living in this hovel. But shall I save her? It’s touch and go; her life hangs on a thread. Still—damn it!—I’ve done all I could. The saline’s flowing well. But it’s too late. There’s nothing more to be done, nothing else to try. We can only wait. . . . That red-haired girl did her bit. A good-looker. She’s not the child’s mother; who can she be then? Chasle never breathed a word about all these people. Not his daughter, I imagine. Can’t make head or tail of it! And that old woman, putting on airs. . . . Anyhow, they made themselves scarce, good riddance! Curious how one suddenly gets them in hand. They all knew the sort of man they had to deal with. The strong hand of a masterful man. But it was up to me to bring it off. Shall I now? No, she lost too much blood on the way here. No signs of improvement so far, worse luck! Oh, damn it all!

His gaze fell on the child’s pale lips and the two strands of golden hair, rising and falling still. The breathing struck him as a little better. Was he mistaken? Half a minute passed. Her chest seemed to flutter with a faint sigh which slowly died into the air, as though a fragment of her life were passing with it. For a moment Antoine stared at her in perplexity. No, she was breathing still. Nothing to be done but to wait, and keep on waiting.

A minute later she sighed again, more plainly now.

‘How much left?’

‘The ampoule’s almost empty.’

‘And the pulse? Coming back?’

‘Yes.’

Antoine drew a deep breath.

‘Can you count it?’

The doctor took out his watch, settled his pince-nez and, after a minute’s silence, announced:

‘A hundred and forty. A hundred and fifty, perhaps.’

‘Better than nothing!’ The exclamation was involuntary, for Antoine was straining every nerve to withstand the flood of huge relief that surged across his mind. Yet it was not imagination; the improvement was not to be gainsaid. Her breathing was steadier. It was all he could do to stay where he was; he had a childish longing to sing or whistle. *Better than nothing tra-la-la*—he tried to fit the words to the tune that had been haunting him all day. *In my heart tra-la-la. In my heart sleeps . . .* Sleeps—sleeps *what?* Got it. *The pale moonlight.*

In my heart sleeps the pale moonlight
Of a lovely summer night . . .

The cloud of doubt lifted, gave place to radiant joy.

‘The child’s saved,’ he murmured. ‘She’s *got to be* saved!’

. . . a lovely summer night!

‘The ampoule’s empty,’ the doctor announced.

‘Capital!’

Just then the child, whom his eyes had never left, gave a slight shudder. Antoine turned almost gaily to the young woman who, leaning against the sideboard, had been watching the scene with steady eyes for the last quarter of an hour.

‘Well, Madame!’ he cried with affected gruffness. ‘Gone to sleep, have we? And how about the hot-water bottle?’ He almost smiled at her amazement. ‘But, my dear lady, nothing could be more obvious. A bottle, piping hot, to warm her little toes!’

A flash of joy lit up her eyes as she hastened from the room.

Then Antoine, with redoubled care and gentleness, bent down and drew out the needle, and with the tips of his fingers applied a compress to the tiny wound. He ran his fingers along the arm from which the hand still hung limp.

‘Another injection of camphor, old chap, just to make sure; and then we’ll have played our last card. Shouldn’t wonder,’ he added under his breath, ‘if we’ve pulled it off.’ Once more that sense of power that was half joy elated him.

The woman came back carrying a jar in her arms. She hesitated, then, as he said nothing, came and stood by the child’s feet.

‘Not like that!’ said Antoine, with the same brusque cheerfulness. ‘You’ll burn her. Give it here. Just imagine my having to show you how to wrap up a hot-water bottle!’

Smiling now, he snatched up a rolled napkin that caught his eye and, flinging the ring on to the sideboard, wrapped the jar in it and pressed it to the child’s feet. The red-haired woman watched him, taken aback by the boyish smile that made his face seem so much younger.

‘Then she’s—saved?’ she ventured to ask.

He dared not affirm it as yet.

‘I’ll tell you in an hour’s time.’ His voice was gruff, but she took his meaning and cast on him a bold, admiring look.

For the third time Antoine asked himself what this handsome girl could be doing in the Chasle household. Then he pointed to the door.

‘What about the others?’

A smile hovered on her lips.

‘They’re waiting.’

‘Hearten them up a bit. Tell them to go to bed. You, too, Madame, you’d better take some rest.’

‘Oh, as far as I’m concerned . . .’ she murmured, turning to go.

‘Let’s get the child back to bed,’ Antoine suggested to his colleague. ‘The same way as before. Hold up her leg. Take the bolster away; we’d better keep her head down. The next thing is to rig up some sort of gadget. . . . That napkin, please, and the string from the parcel. Some sort of extension, you see. Slip the string between the rails; handy things these iron bedsteads. Now for a weight. Anything will do. How about this saucepan? No, the flat-iron there will be better. We’ve all we need here. Yes, hand it over. To-morrow we’ll improve on it. Meanwhile it will do if we stretch the leg a bit, do you agree?’

The young doctor did not reply. He gazed at Antoine with spell-bound awe—the look that Martha may have given the Saviour when Lazarus rose from the tomb. His lips worked and he stammered timidly:

‘May I . . . shall I arrange your instruments?’ The faltered words breathed such a zeal for service and for self-devotion that Antoine thrilled with the exultation of an acknowledged chief. They were alone. Antoine went up to the younger man and looked him in the eyes.

‘You’ve been splendid, my dear fellow.’

The young man gasped. Antoine, who felt even more embarrassed than his colleague, gave him no time to put in a word.

‘Now you’d better be off home; it’s late. There’s no need for two of us here.’ He hesitated. ‘We may take it that she’s saved, I think. That’s my opinion. However, for safety’s sake, I’ll stay here for the night, if you’ll permit me.’ The doctor made a vague gesture. ‘If you permit me, I repeat. For I don’t forget that she’s your patient. Obviously. I only gave a hand as there was nothing else for it. That’s so, eh? But from to-morrow on I leave her in your hands. They’re competent hands and I have no anxiety.’ As he spoke he led the doctor towards the door. ‘Will you look in again towards noon? I’ll come back when I’m done at the hospital and we will decide on the treatment to follow.’

‘Sir, it’s . . . it’s been a privilege for me to . . . to . . .’

Never before had Antoine been ‘sirred’ by a colleague, never before been treated with such deference. It went to his head, like generous wine, and unthinkingly he held out both hands towards the young man. But in the nick of time he regained his self-control.

‘You’ve got a wrong impression,’ he said in a subdued tone. ‘I’m only a learner, a novice—like you. Like so many others. Like everyone. Groping our way. We do our best—and that’s all there is to it!’

Antoine had looked forward to the young man’s exit with something like impatience. To be alone, perhaps. Yet, when he heard approaching footsteps, the young woman’s, his face lit up.

‘Look here, don’t you intend to go to bed?’

‘No, doctor.’

He did not press her further.

The little girl moaned, was shaken by a hiccough, expectorated.

‘Good girl, Dédette,’ he said. ‘That’s a good girl.’ He took her pulse. ‘A hundred and twenty. Steady improvement.’ He looked at the woman, unsmiling. ‘I think I can say now that we’re out of the wood.’

She did not reply, but he felt she had faith in him. He wanted to talk to her and cast about for an opening.

‘You were very plucky,’ he said. Then—as was his wont when he felt shy—he went directly to the point. ‘What are you here, exactly?’

‘I? Nothing. I’m not even a friend of theirs. It’s only that I live on the fifth floor, just below.’

‘But who is the child’s mother then? I can’t make head or tail of it.’

‘Her mother is dead, I think. She was Aline’s sister.’

‘Aline?’

‘The servant.’

‘The old thing with the shaky hands?’

‘Yes.’

‘So the child’s not in any way related to the Chasles?’

‘No. Aline’s bringing up her little niece here—Monsieur Jules pays, of course.’

They spoke in undertones, bending a little towards each other, and Antoine had a nearer view of her lips and cheeks, and the pale beauty of her skin, touched with a curious glamour by fatigue. He felt over-tired and restless, at the mercy of every impulse.

The child stirred in her sleep. As they approached the bed together her eyelids fluttered, then closed again.

‘Perhaps the light worries her,’ the young woman suggested, taking the lamp and placing it further from the bed. Then, returning to the bedside, she wiped the beads of perspiration from the child’s forehead. Antoine followed her movements with his eyes and, as she stooped, he felt a sudden thrill; outlined as in a shadow-play under the flimsy dressing-gown, the young woman’s body was silhouetted, frankly provocative as if she stood naked before him. He held his breath; a dark fire seemed to sear his eyes, watching through misty shadows the languid rise and fall of her bosom, rhythmised to her breath. Antoine’s hands grew suddenly cold as ice, contracted in a spasm. Never before with such an urgency of passion had he desired another human being.

‘Mademoiselle Rachel,’ a voice whispered.

She drew herself up.

It’s Aline; she wants to come and see the child.’

Smiling, she seemed to plead the servant’s cause and, though vexed by the intrusion, he dared not deny her.

‘So your name’s Rachel,’ he stammered. ‘Yes, let her come.’

He hardly noticed the old woman kneeling beside the bed. He went to an open window; his temples were throbbing. No cooling breeze came from within; far above the housetops the distant glimmer of a star or two spangled the darkness. Now at length he realized his weariness; he had been on his feet for three or four hours on end. He looked round for a seat. Between the windows two small mattresses resting on the tiled floor formed a sort of couch. Here, no doubt, Dédette usually slept; the room was evidently Aline’s bedroom. He sank on to the pallet, propping his back against the wall, and again an uncontrollable desire swept over him—to see once again, half veiled beneath the tenuous fabric, Rachel’s firm breasts, their rhythmic rise and fall. But she was no longer standing in the light.

‘Didn’t the child move her leg?’ he enquired without rising. As she walked towards the bed, her body lithely swayed beneath the wrap.

‘No.’

Antoine’s lips were parched and he still felt a burning at the sockets of his eyes. How could he lure Rachel out into the lamplight?

‘Is she still as pale as she was?’

‘A little less.’

‘Move her head straight, will you? Quite flat and straight.’

Now she stepped into the zone of light, but only for a moment, as she passed between the lamp and Antoine. The moment sufficed, however, to quicken his desire anew. He had to shut his eyes, jam his back against the wall and thus remain, clenching his teeth, struggling to keep his eyelids closed upon their secret vision. The stench of cities in the summer, a mingled reek of horse-dung, smoke and dusty asphalt, stifled the air. Flies pattered on the lampshade, hovered on Antoine’s damp cheeks. Now and again thunder rumbled still, above the remoter suburbs.

Little by little, fever, heat and the very urgency of his emotion sapped his powers of resistance. He was unconscious of the slow tide of lethargy advancing; his muscles relaxed, his shoulders settled down against the wall, he fell asleep. . . .

It was as if a summons, gently insistent, were calling him from sleep and, still on the verge of dreams, he was vaguely aware of a pleasurable feeling. For a long while he hovered in an ecstatic limbo, unable to discover by what channel and at what point on the surface of his body the warm tide of well-being was seeping in. Presently he traced it to his leg and, at the same moment, grew conscious that someone was seated at his side; that the warmth along his thigh emanated from a living body; that this warmth and

the body were Rachel's and the sensation was really one of sensual pleasure, enhanced now that he knew its origin. Her body must have slipped towards him as she slept. He had self-control enough to sit quite still. . . . Now he was wide awake. All the feelings of his body were centred in a little space, no wider than a hand's breadth, where, across the thin covering of their garments, thigh touched thigh. He stayed thus, motionless, breathing rapidly yet fully lucid, finding in the mingling of his body's warmth with hers a thrill more potent than the subtlest of caresses.

Suddenly Rachel awoke and stretched her arms; drawing away from him, but without haste, she sat up. He made as if he, too, were just awakening, roused by her movement.

'I dozed off,' she confessed with a smile.

'So did I.'

'It's almost daylight,' she murmured as she raised her arms to settle her hair.

Antoine glanced at his watch; it was just on four.

The child lay all but motionless. Aline's hands were clasped, as if in prayer. Antoine went to the bed and drew aside the blankets.

'Not a drop of blood—that's good.'

While his eyes followed Rachel's movements, he took the child's pulse; a hundred and ten.

How warm her leg was! he was thinking.

Rachel was examining her reflection in a strip of looking-glass, tacked with three nails to the wall, and smiling. With her shock of red hair, open collar, strong bare arms, and her bold, free-and-easy, slightly scornful air, she might have stood for an heroine of the Revolution; a 'Marseillaise' on the barricades.

'I'm a fine sight!' She pouted at her reflected self, though well aware that the young bloom of her cheeks lost, even in the acid test of waking, nothing of its charm. This was plain to read on Antoine's face as, moving to her side, he peered into the mirror. She noticed that the young man's gaze fastened not on her eyes, but on her lips.

But then Antoine took stock of his own appearance—sleeves rolled up, arms burnt with iodine, his shirt crumpled and stained with blood.

'And to think I was due to dine at Packmell's!' he exclaimed.

A curious smile flickered on Rachel's face.

'Hullo! So you go to Packmell's sometimes?'

Their eyes were smiling, and Antoine's heart leapt with joy. He knew little of women other than those of easy virtue. Now suddenly Rachel seemed to become less inaccessible to his desire.

'I'll go downstairs to my flat,' she said and turned to Aline who was watching them. 'If I can be of any help, don't hesitate to call me.'

Then, without bidding Antoine good-bye, she drew the flaps of her dressing-gown together and discreetly made her exit.

No sooner had she gone than he, too, felt a wish to leave. 'A breath of fresh air,' he murmured, glancing over the housetops towards the morning sky. 'Must go home, too, and explain to Jacques. I can return when I've done with the hospital. Washed, presentable. Might have them send for her to help with the dressing. Or shall I look in on my way up? But I don't even know if she's living by herself.'

He explained to Aline what to do, should the child wake before his return. Then, just as he was leaving, a scruple held him back; how about M. Chasle?

'His room opens into the hall alongside the stove,' the servant explained.

Antoine discovered a cupboard door beside the stove, answering to her description. Opening it, he saw a triangular recess, lit from the far end by a makeshift window let into the party wall of the staircase. This was the so-called bedroom. M. Chasle lay fully dressed on an iron bedstead, his mouth wide open, placidly snoring.

'Sure enough, the old loonie's plugged his ears with cotton-wool!' Antoine exclaimed.

He decided to wait a minute or two, hoping the old fellow would decide to open his eyes. Pious pictures on coloured cardboard mounts lined the walls. Books—devotional, too—filled a whatnot, on whose topmost shelf stood a terrestrial globe, flanked by two rows of empty scent-bottles.

'The Chasle case!' I've a mania for seeing 'cases' everywhere, Antoine reflected. Nothing complex about him, really; a reach-me-down face and a mug's life! Whenever I try to see into people, I distort, exaggerate. Bad habit! That servant-girl at Toulouse, for instance. Now why should I think of her? Because her bedroom window opened on to a staircase, too? No; must be the stale smell of toilet-soap. Funny things, associations of ideas! . . . He was conscious of a vivid sense of pleasure in recalling that juvenile experience; the chamber-maid with whom, when travelling with his father to attend a congress, he had passed a night in an attic room at an hotel. And, at

this very minute, he would have given much to possess the buxom maid as he had known her then between the rough sheets of her bed.

M. Chasle went on snoring. Antoine decided not to wait, and returned to the hall.

No sooner had he begun to descend the stairs than he remembered that Rachel occupied the floor below. Coming round the bend of the stairs, he glanced down towards her door; it was open! No other door was visible, so it must be hers. Why was it open?

No time to hesitate; it would seem odd if he halted on the way down. Soon he was on her landing.

Rachel was in the hall of her flat and, hearing footsteps outside, glanced round. Her hair was tidy, she looked neat and cool. The pink dressing-gown had given place to a white kimono. Above its silken whiteness her red hair glowed like the flame upon an altar candle.

He addressed her first.

'Au revoir!'

She came to the door. 'Won't you come in, doctor, and have something before going out? I've just made some chocolate.'

'No, really, thanks—I'm too filthy to come in. *Au revoir!*'

He held out his hand. A smile hovered on her lips, but she did not imitate his gesture.

'Au revoir!' he repeated. Smiling still, she still refrained from taking his proffered hand, to his surprise. 'You won't shake hands with me then?'

He saw the smile freeze on her lips, her eyes grow set. Then she held out her hand. But, before Antoine could touch it, she had grasped him firmly and, with a brusque movement, drawn him over the threshold. She slammed the door behind them. They stood in the hall facing each other. She had ceased to smile, but her lips were parted still; he saw the white gleam of her teeth. The perfume of her hair drifted towards him and he remembered a naked breast, the warm contact of her limbs. Deliberately, he brought his face near to Rachel's, his eyes bored into hers, grown large in nearness. She did not flinch; he felt, or seemed to feel, her wavering in his embrace and it was she who raised her lips to his mouth's kiss. Then with an effort she drew back from Antoine and stood with lowered head, smiling again.

'A night like that works you up . . . !' she murmured.

Through an open door at the far end of the passage he had a glimpse of a bed and, all about it, the glimmer of pink silk; under the waxing light the

alcove, distant and so near, seemed the great calyx of a flower aglow there in the dawn.

4

ON the same morning, at about half-past eleven, Rachel knocked at the Chasles' door.

'Come in!' a shrill voice answered.

Mme. Chasle was at her wonted place beside the open window of the dining-room. She sat stiffly erect, her feet resting on a hassock, her hands, as usual, unemployed. 'I'm ashamed of doing nothing,' she sometimes explained, 'but there comes a time of life when one can't go on slaving oneself to death for others.'

'How is the little girl?' Rachel enquired.

'She woke up, had something to drink and went to sleep again.'

'Is Monsieur Jules in?'

'No, he's out,' Mme. Chasle replied with a shrug of resignation.

Rachel felt chagrined.

'All the morning,' the old woman lamented, 'he's been going on like—like a mosquito! Sunday's such a dreadful day with a man about the place. I hoped this accident would teach him to treat us better. No such luck! The first thing this morning I could see he had something else on his mind, the Lord knows what! Nosing around, and don't I know that way of his? These fifty years now I've had to put up with it anyhow. He left for High Mass more than an hour too early. Now that's a queer thing, and no mistake. And he's not back yet. Look there!' Her lips set tight. 'There he comes! Talk of the devil . . . Really, please, Jules,' she continued, craning her neck towards her son who had just tiptoed in, 'don't bang the doors like that! Not only because of my heart trouble; there's Dédette as well to think of now—you'll be the death of her.'

But M. Chasle showed no contrition; he looked worried and absent-minded.

‘Let’s go and see how she is,’ Rachel suggested. No sooner were they at the bedside of the sleeping child than she put a question to him. ‘Have you known him long—Dr. Thibault, I mean?’

‘What?’ M. Chasle explained with a look of consternation. Then he began to smile knowingly and ‘What?’ he murmured again, like an echo. After a pause he brusquely turned towards her as though he had a secret to impart.

‘Look here, Mademoiselle Rachel, you’ve been so kind about Dédette that I’m going to ask a small favour of you. I was so put out by that business that I seem to have lost my head this morning; honestly I must go back there. At once. But it’s—it’s awkward going back a second time to that office of theirs all by myself. Don’t say “No”!’ he implored. ‘I give you my word of honour that it won’t last more than ten minutes.’

Smiling, she assented, though she had no notion what he might mean. She foresaw amusement in humouring the old man’s foibles and meant to seize the opportunity of putting further questions concerning Antoine. But all the way he was deaf to her enquiries and did not open his mouth once.

It was well after noon when they reached the police-station. The Inspector had just left. M. Chasle seemed so upset by his absence that the police clerk was nettled.

‘I can do it for you just as well, you know. What exactly do you want?’

M. Chasle cast a furtive glance towards him and, lacking the courage to draw back, embarked on explanations.

‘It’s because I’ve been thinking things over. I want to add something to my statement.’

‘What statement?’

‘I came here this morning—I reported at the other end of the counter, over there.’

‘What name? I’ll turn up the file.’

Her curiosity aroused, Rachel came and stood beside M. Chasle. The clerk returned in a moment with some papers; he gave the old man a shrewd look.

‘Chasle? Jules-Auguste? That your name? Well, what do you want?’

‘It’s like this. I fear the Inspector didn’t quite gather where I found the money.’

‘In the Rue de Rivoli,’ the clerk replied, after perusing the record.

M. Chasle smiled as though he had just won a wager.

‘You see! No, that’s not quite right. I revisited the spot and some details came back which might be helpful, you know; one’s got to be quite honest, eh?’ He coughed into his hand. ‘It’s this. I can’t be quite sure that it was in the street; more likely in the Tuileries. Yes. I was in the garden, you see. I was sitting on a stone bench—the second from the newspaper-stall on the way from the Concorde to the Louvre. I was sitting there with my stick in my hand. You’ll see why I lay stress on this point. I saw a gentleman and lady passing in front of me, with a child following. They were talking. I remember saying to myself, “Well, there’s a couple that have managed to set up a family . . . a child and so forth.” You see, I’m telling you everything. Then, just when he was passing my bench, the child fell down and started crying. I’m not used to handling these delicate situations, so I didn’t budge. The child’s mother ran up. And then, when they were just in front, almost at my feet—not my fault, was it?—she knelt down to wipe the child’s face and took a handkerchief or something of the kind from the little bag she was carrying. I remained seated. Well’—he raised his index finger—‘it was after they had gone that, poking about in the sand with my stick, with the ferrule, you know, I happened to see the money. It all came back to me afterwards. I’ve always kept straight, as people say. This young lady will tell you so. Fifty-two years old and nothing on my conscience; and that’s what *tells*, eh? So there’s no need to beat about the bush. I’ve come to think that perhaps the lady with the little bag may have some connection or other with this business of the money; and I tell you honestly what I think.’

‘Couldn’t you have run after them?’ Rachel asked.

‘They had gone too far.’

The police clerk looked up from his papers.

‘Well, can you describe their appearance?’

‘I’m not sure about the gentleman. The lady, I know, wore dark clothes; looked thirty or thereabouts. The baby had a steam-engine. Yes, I’m sure about that detail—a little locomotive. Well, when I say “little” I mean about *that* size. He was dragging it behind him. You’re taking it all down?’

‘That’s all right. Anything more?’

‘No.’

‘Thank you.’

Rachel was already near the door. But M. Chasle did not follow her. Leaning on the counter, he stared at the clerk.

‘There’s another little detail.’ A deep blush came over his face. ‘I rather think I made a slight mistake when I handed in the money this morning. Yes.’ He paused and wiped his brow. ‘I rather think I made over two notes,

didn't I? Yes, yes. I'm sure of it now. That was a little mistake—an oversight, I should say. Because . . . well, you know . . . the money I found wasn't exactly that. It was a single note, a thousand-franc note, do you see?' His face was pouring with sweat and once again he passed his handkerchief over his brow. 'Make a note of that, now that I remember it—though, in a way, it comes to the same thing, really.'

'It doesn't come to the same thing by any means,' the clerk replied. 'On the contrary, it's an important point. The gentleman who lost a thousand-franc note might have come to us a dozen times but we shouldn't have given him back the two five-hundreds.' He stared at M. Chasle disapprovingly. 'Look here, have you your identity papers with you?'

M. Chasle fumbled in his pockets.

'No.'

'This won't do at all. I regret it, but under the circumstances I cannot let the matter drop. An officer will go with you to your residence and your concierge will have to certify that the name and address you gave are not fictitious.'

A mood of resignation seemed to have come over M. Chasle for, though he continued to mop his face, his expression was serene, almost cheerful.

'Just as you please,' he said politely.

Rachel burst out laughing. M. Chasle cast a mournful glance at her; then, after a moment's hesitation, he nerved himself to approach her and address her haltingly.

'Sometimes, Mademoiselle, there lies beneath the plain coat of a mere nobody a nobler heart—and when I say "nobler" I mean "more honest," too—than under the silk lapels of one of the great ones of the earth, for all his name and titles.' His underlip quivered; no sooner had he spoken than he regretted the outburst. 'I don't mean that for you, Mademoiselle, nor for you, officer,' he added, turning without the least timidity towards the policeman who had just entered.

Rachel left M. Chasle and the policeman to their explanations in the concierge's room and went up to her flat.

Antoine was waiting for her on the landing.

She was far from expecting to meet him there and, when she saw him, a sudden thrill of pleasure made her half-close her eyes, but hardly showed at all upon her face.

'I rang and rang. I'd almost given up hope,' he confessed.

Gaily their glances met and their lips smiled a mutual avowal.

‘What are your plans for this morning?’ he asked. He was delighted to find her so smart in her summery tailor-made and flower-trimmed hat.

‘This morning! But it’s after one. And I haven’t had lunch yet.’

‘Nor have I.’ He came to a sudden decision. ‘I say, will you have lunch with me? Do say Yes!’ She smiled, charmed by his eagerness, as of a greedy child who has not learnt self-control.

‘Say Yes!’

‘All right then . . . Yes!’

‘Good!’ he exclaimed. He took a deep breath. She opened the door of her flat.

‘Just a moment, I must let my charwoman know, and pack her off home.’

As he waited alone outside her door, his emotion of that morning when she had moved towards him came back in all its intensity. ‘Ah, how she gave me her lips!’ he murmured, and was so carried away that he steadied himself with his head against the wall.

Rachel returned.

‘Come along! I’m ravenous!’ she cried, with a smile of almost animal eagerness.

‘Would you rather go down by yourself?’ he ventured awkwardly, ‘I can join you in the street.’

She burst out laughing.

‘By myself? Why? I’m quite free and make no secret of anything I do.’

They entered the Rue de Rivoli. Once again Antoine observed the easy rhythm of her steps; she seemed to dance along, rather than walk.

‘Where would you like to go?’ he enquired.

‘Why not try that place over there—it’s getting late, you know?’ She indicated with her parasol a small restaurant at the street corner.

The room on the mezzanine was empty; small tables were aligned in a semicircle beside the windows that opened on to a covered-in arcade and, extending downwards to the pavement level, lighted the room from an unusual angle. Here the air was cool, the twilight never varied. They sat down facing each other with the air of two children starting to play a game.

‘Why, I don’t even know your name!’ Antoine suddenly exclaimed.

‘Rachel Goepfert. Age: twenty-six. Chin: oval. Nose: medium. . . .’

‘And all her teeth?’

‘See for yourself!’ she laughed, falling upon the sliced sausage in the hors d’œuvre dish.

‘Better be careful. I suspect garlic in it.’

‘What about it?’ she laughed again. ‘I’m all for anything that’s low!’

Goepfert. . . . A Jewess, very likely; and, with the thought, a dusty residue of his upbringing stirred in Antoine’s mind, adding a spice of the exotic, a piquant independence to the adventure.

‘My father was a Jew,’ she announced as if she had read the young man’s thought.

A white-cuffed waitress brought the menu.

‘A mixed grill?’ Antoine suggested.

A most unexpected smile, which obviously she was unable to control, lit up Rachel’s face.

‘What are you smiling at? It’s jolly good. A lot of tasty things from the grill—kidneys, bacon, sausages, cutlets. . . .’

‘With water-cress and puffed potatoes,’ the waitress put in as a garnish.

‘I know. That’ll do for me.’ The merriment which she had momentarily repressed seemed once again to sparkle in her enigmatic eyes.

‘What will you drink?’

‘Beer, please.’

‘So will I. Off the ice.’

He watched her nibble the leaves of a tiny raw artichoke.

‘I love things with a taste of vinegar,’ she confessed.

‘So do I.’

He wanted to resemble her and could hardly refrain from breaking in with a ‘So do I!’ after each remark she made. In all she said and did she was the woman of his dreams. She dressed exactly as he had always wished a woman to dress. A necklace of old amber was round her neck, and the heavy beads hung in long translucent ovals like pulpy fruit, huge Malaga grapes or golden plums aglow with sunlight. Behind the amber her skin took on a milk-white sheen that stirred his senses. Gazing at her, Antoine felt like a starved jungle creature whose raging hunger nothing, nothing could ever quell. As he recalled their kiss, the pressure of her lips on his, his pulses raced. And here she was, under his eyes—the selfsame Rachel!

Two mugs of foaming beer were set before them. He and she were equally impatient to taste it. Antoine amused himself by timing his gestures with hers, never taking his eyes off her; at the same moment as he felt the

soapy, pungent brew lapping his tongue and thawing on it, an icy draught flowed cool on Rachel's tongue—and it was as if their mouths were mingled once again. The emotion left him dazed with pleasure and a minute passed before he caught what she was saying.

‘. . . and those women treat him like a menial.’

He pulled himself together.

‘What women?’

‘His mother and the servant.’ He realized that Rachel was speaking of the Chasles. ‘The old woman always addresses him as “Woolly-head”!’

‘Well, you must admit that she's not far out.’

‘No sooner is he back than she starts badgering him about. Each morning he has to clean their boots—even the child's shoes—on the landing.’

‘What, the old boy?’ Antoine smiled as he recalled another picture; the worthy Chasle writing to M. Thibault's dictation or solemnly receiving in his employer's stead some colleague from the Institute.

‘And they join forces to bleed him dry; why, they even filch the money from his pockets, pretending they're brushing his coat before he leaves. Last year the old woman signed IOU's for three or four thousand francs, forging her son's signature. The old chap nearly fell ill with the shock of it.’

‘What did he do?’

‘Why, he stumped up of course. In six months, by instalments. He dared not give his mother away.’

‘And to think we see him every day, yet nothing of that sort ever entered our heads!’

‘You've never been to his place before?’

‘Never.’

‘Nowadays their home looks poverty-stricken. But you should have seen how the little flat looked even two years ago; with the tiled floor, the panelling and cupboards, you'd think you were back in the time of Voltaire. Inlaid furniture, family portraits, even some fine old silver plate.’

‘What's become of it?’

‘The two women disposed of it behind his back. One evening when the old man came home the Louis XVI davenport had decamped; another day it was the tapestry, the easy-chairs, the miniatures. They even sold the portrait of his grandfather—a fine figure of a man in uniform, with a cocked hat on his head and an open map in front of him.’

‘A distinguished soldier, perhaps?’

‘Yes, he’d made a name for himself. He saw service under Lafayette in America.’

He noticed that she was voluble, but had the knack of expressing herself well. The details she gave had local colour. Obviously she had brains, but, above all, a mental outlook, a gift for noting and remembering facts, that pleased him.

‘He never breathes a word of complaint,’ Antoine remarked, ‘when he’s with us at home.’

‘No doubt—yet I’ve come across him time and time again when he’d crept out on to the stairs to hide his tears.’

‘Well, I’d never have believed it!’ he exclaimed, and there was such vivacity in his look and smile that her thoughts veered from her narrative towards the young man himself.

‘Are they really so terribly hard up?’ he asked.

‘Not a bit of it! The two old women are hoarding all the money, they’ve hidden it away somewhere. And, I assure you, they’re lavish enough where they themselves are concerned; but they read him a curtain-lecture if he dares to buy a few acid-drops. The stories I could tell you of what goes on in that flat! Aline wanted—guess what!—to get the old fellow to marry her. Don’t laugh! She nearly brought it off, too. The old woman was backing her up. But, luckily enough, one day they fell out.’

‘And Chasle, did he agree?’

‘Oh, he’d have ended by giving in, because of Dédette. That child is all the world to him. When they want to squeeze something out of him they threaten to send her away to Aline’s home in Savoie; then he starts crying, and gives way all along the line.’

He hardly heard what Rachel was saying; he watched the movements of the mouth that he had kissed—a well-shaped mouth, fleshy at its centre and clean-cut as an incision at the edges. When in repose, the corners of her lips lifted a little, poised in a smile that was not mocking, but serene and gay.

So far were his thoughts from the sorrows of M. Chasle that he murmured under his breath: ‘I’m a lucky chap, you know!’ and blushed.

She burst out laughing. Last night beside the operating table, she had gauged this man’s true worth, and now she was enchanted to discover that he was half a child; it brought him nearer to her.

‘Since when?’ she asked him.

He equivocated.

‘Since this morning.’

Yet it was true enough. He recalled his feelings when he left Rachel's place and plunged into the sunlight of the streets; never had he felt in such fine fettle. In front of the Pont-Royal, he remembered, the traffic had been dense but he had launched himself athwart it with amazing coolness, murmuring to himself as he threaded his way through the moving maze of vehicles: 'How sure of myself I am, how well I have my energies in hand! And some people tell you there's no free will!'

'Let me help you to a fried mushroom,' he suggested.

She answered him in English.

'With pleasure.'

'So you speak English?'

'Rather! *Si son vedute cose più straordinarie.*'

'Italian, too. How about German?'

'*Aber nicht sehr gut.*'

He reflected for a moment. 'So you've travelled?'

She repressed a smile. 'A bit.' There was an enigmatic quality in her voice that made him scan her face intently.

'What was I saying . . . ?' he murmured vaguely.

But their words little mattered—there was a strange telepathy at work, in every look and smile, in their least gestures and their voices.

After a long look at him she exclaimed:

'How different you are to-day from the man I watched last night!'

'I assure you it's one and the same man.' He raised his hands still stained with iodine. 'But just now I can show off my surgical abilities on nothing better than a cutlet.'

'I had a good look at you last night, you know.'

'And what was your impression?'

She was silent.

'Was it the first time you'd witnessed a performance of that kind?'

She stared at him, hesitated, then began to laugh.

'The first time?' she echoed, and her voice implied: I've seen a good many things in my time! But she turned the question adroitly.

'And do *you* have operations like that every day?'

'Never. I don't go in for surgery. I'm a doctor, a child-specialist.'

'But why aren't you a surgeon? With your ability. . . .'

'I suppose it wasn't my vocation.'

They were silent for a moment; her words had conjured up a vague regret.

‘Pshaw! A doctor or a surgeon!’ he exclaimed. ‘People have a lot of false ideas about “vocations.” Men always imagine they have chosen their vocation. But it’s circumstances . . .’ She saw his face masked for a moment by the resolute look which had so deeply moved her at the child’s bedside. ‘What’s the good,’ he continued, ‘of raking up the ashes? The path we have always chosen is always the best one, provided it enables us to go ahead.’ Then suddenly his thoughts returned to the handsome girl seated in front of him and the place that in a few brief hours she had made for herself in his life. A shade of apprehension crossed his face. That’s all very fine, he thought, but first of all I must make sure this business won’t handicap my work, my future. . . .

She saw the shadow on his brow.

‘You’re terribly headstrong, I should say.’

He smiled.

‘Look here, don’t laugh at what I’m going to tell you. For many years my motto was a Latin word, *Stabo*: I will stand firm. I had it stamped on my note-paper and the first pages of my books.’ He drew forth his watch-chain. ‘I even had it engraved on this old seal which I still wear.’

She examined the pendant he showed her.

‘It’s very pretty.’

‘Really? You like it?’

She took his meaning and handed it back to him.

‘No.’

But he had already undone the clasp.

‘Do please. . . .’

‘But what’s come over you?’

‘Rachel. To remind you . . .’

‘Of what?’

‘Of everything.’

‘Everything?’ she repeated, her eyes still fixed on his, and laughing heartily.

Adorable she looks just now, he thought. It’s charming too, that unrestrained smile of hers, that almost boyish smile. She was as different from the ‘professionals’ he had known as from the girls or married women who had crossed his path in society functions or at holiday resorts, and

whom he always found intimidating, seldom attractive. Rachel did not intimidate him; he met her upon an equal footing. She had the pagan charm and even a little of the frankness one finds in harlots who like their calling; but in Rachel that charm had nothing furtive or vulgar about it. How delightful she is! he thought, and saw in her more than an ideal playmate; for the first time in his life he had encountered a woman who might be a friend, a comrade, to him.

The idea had been simmering in his mind all the morning and he had built a castle in the air, a new design of life, in which Rachel had her place. One thing only was lacking: the consent of the other party to the contract. And now he was burning with childish impatience to take her hands and say: 'You are the woman I have waited for. I want to have done with casual adventures. But, as I loathe uncertainty, I'd like our mutual relations settled once for all. You shall be my mistress. Let's fix things up accordingly.' Now and again he had conveyed a hint of such designs and let fall a word or two touching their future, but always she had seemed to miss his meaning. Knowing her non-committal attitude was deliberate, he hesitated to let her into his plans.

'This is a nice place, isn't it?' she observed, nibbling at a cluster of crystallized red-currants which stained her lips with carmine.

'Yes, it's worth making a note of. In Paris you can find everything, even the atmosphere of a country town.' He pointed to the empty tables. 'And no risk of meeting anyone.'

'Don't you want to be seen with me?'

'Oh come now! I was thinking about you, of course.'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'About me?' That he should find her so mysterious delighted her and she was in no hurry to make things clearer. But his unspoken anxiety was writ so large upon his face that she could not but confess: 'As I told you, I'm absolutely on my own. I have enough to live on in a simple way and want nothing more. I am quite free.'

His anxious, drawn expression relaxed with frank relief. She guessed the meaning he read into her words: I am yours for the asking. It would have revolted her in any other man, but she had a genuine liking for Antoine. The pleasure of feeling that he desired her outweighed whatever irritation she might feel at his complete misjudgment of her.

Coffee was served. She was silent, lost in thoughts. For she, too, had not failed to weigh the chances of an understanding between them; indeed she had caught herself thinking only a moment earlier—'I'll get him to shave off

that beard!’ All the same, he was a stranger to her and, after all, if she felt drawn towards him now, so she had felt to others in the past. He must, she thought, make no mistake about it, must not go on looking at her as he now did with as much complacency as hunger in his eyes.

‘A cigarette?’

‘No, thanks. I have my own—they’re milder.’

He held a match to her cigarette. She puffed a cloud of smoke towards him.

‘Thanks.’

Yes, she mused, the great thing was to avoid all misunderstanding, from the start. She could speak all the more freely because she knew she ran no risk. She moved her cup forward a little, rested her elbows on the tablecloth, her chin on her locked fingers. Her eyelids, puckered with the smoke, almost completely veiled her eyes.

‘I say that I am free.’ She weighed her words. ‘But that doesn’t mean I’m—in the market! You see the point?’

Antoine was wearing his tragic air.

‘I must tell you that I’ve been through the mill, I haven’t always had my independence; two years ago I hadn’t it. But now I’ve got it—and I mean to keep it.’ (She believed she spoke sincerely.) ‘I set so much store by my freedom that for nothing in the world would I abandon it. Do you follow me?’

‘Yes.’

Now they were silent. He watched her intently. Her eyes were averted; there was the ghost of a smile on her lips as she stirred her coffee.

‘What’s more—to speak quite frankly—it’s not in me to be a real friend to a man, or even his trusted mistress. I like to indulge all my whims—every one of them. And for that you have to be free. . . . You see what I mean?’ With an air of unconcern she raised her cup and drank the coffee in little scalding sips.

For a moment Antoine felt quite desperate. The bitter end! . . . But no, there she was still in front of him; the battle was not lost, far from it! To give up anything on which his heart was set was quite beyond him; he had no precedents for failure. Anyhow there was no mistaking how things lay, and that was better than mirage. When one has all the facts, action can be taken. Never for an instant did it cross his mind that she might possibly slip through his fingers or meet his projects for their future with a blank refusal. That was Antoine’s way; he never doubted he would gain his end.

The great thing was to get to know her better; to rend the veils that still enveloped her.

‘So two years ago you were not free?’ His tone was frankly inquisitive. ‘And are you really free now; now and for the future?’

Rachel looked him all over as if he were a child, while a shade of irony hovered on her face, as though she said: ‘If I answer, it’s only because I choose to do so.’

‘The man with whom I used to live,’ she explained, ‘has settled in the Sudan. He will never return to France.’ She ended her explanation with a faint, soundless laugh and averted her eyes. Then, as though to close the subject once for all, she rose from her seat.

‘Let’s go!’

When they were outside she took a street leading to the Rue d’Alger. Antoine walked beside her saying nothing, wondering what to do. He could not bring himself to leave her so soon.

When they had reached the street-door, Rachel came to the rescue.

‘Will you have a look at Dédette?’ she asked. Then, taking herself up, she added: ‘But what am I thinking of? Very likely you’ve somewhere else to go.’

As a matter of fact Antoine had promised to return to Passy in the afternoon and visit the sick child. Moreover, he had to go over the proofs of a report that his Chief had sent him that morning, asking him to check the references. More important still, he was due to dine that evening at Maisons-Laffitte and meant to keep the appointment; he had firmly resolved to arrive there early so as to have a chat with Jacques before dinner. But all those good resolves went up in smoke, the moment he saw a possibility of staying in Rachel’s company.

‘I’m free all day,’ he boldly lied, making way for her to enter.

Qualms for the duties left undone, the upset to his scheme of life, glanced lightly off his conscience. So much the worse for them! . . . So much the better for me! he all but thought.

They climbed the stairs in silence.

At the door of her flat, as she put her key in the lock, she turned towards him. His features were aglow with candid, undisguised desire; desire untrammelled, jubilant, and not to be frustrated.

JACQUES had rushed home from Packmell's at headlong speed. When his concierge informed him that M. Antoine had been called away for an accident, his superstitious fear vanished into air, leaving him vexed with his credulity—that he had thought a passing fancy for a mourning suit could have brought about his brother's death. The absence of the bottle of iodine which he needed for his boil was the last straw; he undressed in the mood of vague but fierce resentment which he knew only too well and always bitterly regretted, as unworthy of him. For a long time he could not sleep; he got no joy of his success.

Next morning Antoine met Jacques at the street-door, when the latter was just setting out for Maisons-Laffitte, having decided not to await his brother's return. Antoine gave him a rapid account of the past night's happenings, but did not breathe a word about Rachel. His eyes were bright and there was a combative expression on his face which his brother put down to the strain of the operation.

The church-bells were ringing full peal when Jacques left the Maisons-Laffitte station. There was no need to hurry; M. Thibault never missed High Mass, nor did Gisèle and Mlle. de Waize. He had ample time for a stroll before going to the house. The warm shadows in the park were an invitation to saunter. The avenues were empty. He sat down on a bench. No sounds broke the stillness but the hum of insects in the grass, and the sudden whirr of sparrows as, one by one, they left the branches above his head. He sat unmoving, a smile on his lips, thinking of nothing in particular, glad simply to be there.

The ancient domain of Maisons, bordering the forest of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, was bought under the Restoration by Laffitte, who sold off the fifteen hundred acres of the park in parcels, reserving only the château for his use. But the financier saw to it that the dispersion of the estate did not impair the grandiose vistas that radiated from the château, and that damage to the standing timber should be reduced to a minimum. Thanks to his foresight, Maisons remained a vast seigniorial domain; its avenues of lime-trees hundreds of years old offered magnificent approaches to a whole colony of small estates, unwallled and nestling in the woods.

M. Thibault's summer residence lay north-east of the château in a grassy clearing, ringed with white palings and the shade of immemorial trees; in the

middle of the greensward a round pond gleamed, set off by shrubberies of box.

Jacques made his way slowly towards this green retreat. As the house came into view in the far distance, he discerned a white dress pressed against the garden gate; Gisèle was looking out for him. Her eyes were fixed on the station road and she did not see him coming. Thrilled with sudden joy, he began to run. Then she saw him and, making a speaking-trumpet of her hands, called to him.

‘Passed?’

Though she had turned sixteen, she did not dare to go outside the garden without leave from Mademoiselle.

To tease her, he did not answer. But she read the good news in his eyes and began capering like a child. Then she flung herself into his arms.

‘Don’t be a silly kid,’ he growled, more out of habit than anything else. She drew away laughing, but a moment later threw herself once again into his arms, quivering with excitement. He saw her gleeful smile, tears flashing in her eyes; touched and grateful, he held her for a moment closely to his heart.

Laughing still, she lowered her voice.

‘I had to make up such a yarn to get auntie to go with me to Low Mass; I thought you’d be here at ten, you see. Father isn’t back yet. Come along!’ She led him towards the house.

Mademoiselle’s diminutive figure came into view at the far end of the hall; her back was hunched a little with the years. She hurried forward, her head shaking slightly with excitement. She halted at the edge of the terrace and, as soon as Jacques was near, stretched out her doll-like arms, nearly losing her balance as she kissed him.

‘You’ve passed? Yes?’ she mumbled as if she had something in her mouth.

‘Woa!’ he gaily implored. ‘Do mind my boil. It’s terribly painful.’

‘Turn round! Bless and save us!’ Jacques’ small infirmity evidently lay more within her province than examinations at the Ecole Normale, for she asked no more about his success, but led him off to have his neck bathed with boiled water and a soothing compress applied.

The minor operation was just ending in Mademoiselle’s room when the gate-bell tinkled. M. Thibault had returned.

‘Jacquot’s passed,’ Gisèle shouted from the window, while Jacques went down to meet his father.

‘Ah, there you are! What place?’ M. Thibault asked, a quick flush of satisfaction colouring his pasty cheeks.

‘Third.’

M. Thibault’s approval grew even more pronounced. His eyelids did not rise, but the muscles of his nose began to quiver, his glasses dropped to the end of their tether and he held out his hand.

‘Well, well! Not too bad!’ he muttered, pressing Jacques’ hand between his flabby fingers. He paused a moment, frowning. Then ‘How hot it is!’ he murmured. He drew his son to him and kissed him. Jacques’ heart beat faster. He raised his eyes towards his father, but M. Thibault had already turned away and was hurriedly ascending the terrace steps. He went to his study, dropped his prayer-book on the table and, taking out his handkerchief, mopped his face.

Lunch was on the table. Gisèle had placed a bunch of marshmallows at Jacques’ place and the family table wore a festive air. So blithe was her heart that she could not restrain her laughter. The life she led with the two old people was hard upon her youth, but, such was her vitality, it never weighed on her; with hopes of happiness to come why not be happy now?

M. Thibault came in, rubbing his hands.

‘Well, Jacques,’ he said, unfolding his napkin and planting his fists on either side of his plate, ‘now you mustn’t rest on your laurels. We’re no fools in the family and, as you’ve entered third, what’s to stop you, if you work hard enough, from coming out first in the Finals?’ Half closing an eye, he perked up his beard, with a knowing air. ‘For may we not assume that in every competitive examination *someone* must be first?’

Jacques greeted his father’s sally with an evasive smile. He was so used to play-acting at the family table that it cost him little effort to carry through his part; occasionally, however, he blamed himself for the habit, as lacking dignity.

‘To take a first place,’ M. Thibault continued, ‘in the Finals of such an *Alma Mater* as the Ecole Normale—your brother will bear me out—stamps a man for life; he is sure of being looked up to in whatever career he chooses. How is your brother?’

‘He said he was coming after lunch.’

The idea of telling his father that there had been an accident in M. Chasle’s household never for an instant crossed Jacques’ mind. All who came in contact with M. Thibault were involved in a conspiracy of silence;

they had learnt how rash it was to give him any kind of information, for there was no knowing what conclusions that burly busybody would draw from even the smallest piece of news, or what steps he might not take, whether by interviews or correspondence, in the exercise of what he deemed his right of meddling in—and muddling—other people’s business.

‘Have you seen that the morning papers confirm the failure of our Villebeau Co-operative Society?’ he enquired of Mademoiselle, though he knew she never opened a newspaper. She answered, nevertheless, with an emphatic nod. M. Thibault emitted a short, brittle laugh; thereafter, till the meal ended, he said no more and seemed indifferent to the others’ conversation. Daily he grew more hard of hearing, more isolated from his family. Sometimes throughout a meal he stayed thus—devouring in silence the huge helpings that an appetite worthy of a boxer demanded, and lost in thoughts. At such moments he was pondering on some complicated scheme, and his inertia was that of a sedulous spider; he was waiting till the tireless workings of his mind had unravelled out some social or administrative problem. Thus, indeed, he had always worked—with eyes half shut, only his brain active, calm as a man of stone. Never had this great worker taken a note, or mapped out the sequence of a speech; everything took form, and was indelibly recorded down to the least detail behind that brooding forehead.

Mademoiselle sat in front of him, keeping a sharp eye on the servants. Her hands lay folded on the tablecloth, diminutive and comely hands which she kept in condition (a secret, as she thought) with a lotion made of milk of cucumber. She had almost given up eating. For dessert she took a mug of milk and a biscuit only; out of coquetry she never dipped the biscuit in the milk but nibbled it dry with her well-preserved, mouse-like teeth. She was convinced that everyone ate too much, and kept close watch on her niece’s plate. To-day, however, in honour of Jacques, she waived her principles so far as to suggest, when the meal ended:

‘Jacquot, will you try the jam I’ve been making?’

‘“Delicious flavour, perfectly digestible,”’ Jacques murmured, winking at Gisèle, and this standing joke of theirs, calling up a certain packet of bullseyes and their screams of laughter as children, set them off laughing as in the past, till the tears came to their eyes.

M. Thibault had not heard the remark, but smiled benevolently.

‘You’re a bold young scamp!’ Mademoiselle protested. ‘But just look how well they’ve set.’ On the dumb-waiter a squad of fifty jam-pots, filled

with ruby jelly and protected by a strip of muslin against the flies' offensive, glowed in anticipation of their caps of rum-soaked parchment.

The french windows opened from the dining-room on to a verandah bright with flower-boxes; and sunbeams, slipping past the blinds, streaked the floor with dazzling light. A wasp buzzed round the jar of greengages and, droning under the caress of noonday, set the whole house ahum. Jacques was destined to recall this meal as the only moment when his success in the examination gave him a fleeting thrill of pleasure.

Gisèle was wildly happy and, though habit kept her silent, exchanged clandestine glances with him, as if to share some unspoken secret. At everything Jacques said she broke into a merry peal of laughter.

'Oh, Gise, that mouth of yours!' Mademoiselle twittered; never could she get over the enormity of Gisèle's mouth and her thick lips. No better could she abide the dusky warmth that glowed in the girl's fair skin, her flattish nose and black, slightly fuzzy hair—all that reminded her only too well of Gisèle's mother, the half-caste, whom Major de Waize had married during his stay in Madagascar. She never missed a pretext for alluding to her niece's forebears on her father's side. 'When I was younger,' she used to say, 'my grandmother—the one with the Scotch shawl, you know—used to make me repeat "prunes and prisms, prunes and prisms" a hundred times a day, to make my mouth smaller.' While she talked she was flicking her napkin at the wasp, trying to catch it, and laughing every time she missed it. There was nothing of the kill-joy about the worthy old creature; her life had been a hard one, but her contagious laugh rang blithe as ever. 'Grandmother,' she continued, 'danced at Toulon with Count de Villèle, the cabinet minister. She'd be dreadfully unhappy if she had to live in these present times, for she couldn't bear the sight of big mouths or big feet.' Mademoiselle was very vain of her feet, shaped like a new-born babe's, and always wore blunt-ended cloth shoes to keep her toes from losing their shape.

At three, the hour of Vespers, the house became empty. Jacques, left to himself, went up to his bedroom. It was an attic on the top floor, but a large, cool room, gay with a floral wall-paper; the view was restricted, but agreeably so, by the high branches of two chestnut-trees whose feathery leaves formed an attractive foreground.

Dictionaries, a text-book of philology and the like still littered the table; he bundled them all away into the bottom of a cupboard, and came back to his desk.

Am I still a child or am I a man? he suddenly wondered. Daniel . . . but that's another matter altogether. But I—what am I really? He felt a world in himself, a world of warring impulses; a chaos, but a chaos of abundance. Pleased with his private universe, he set his gaze roaming over the expanse of smooth mahogany. Why had he cleared the table? Well, anyhow, he was not short of plans. For how many months had he not been repressing an impulse to set about doing something? 'Wait till you've passed,' he had admonished himself. And now that liberty deferred was here at last, he could see nothing worthy of his undertaking—not the *Story of Two Young Men*, not *Fires*, nor yet *The Startled Secret*.

He rose from the desk, took a few steps and glanced towards the shelf where he had been hoarding books (some of them acquired the year before) against the day that set him free. Which of them should be his first choice? he wondered; then, in a fit of petulance, flung himself on the bed, empty-handed.

'Damn all these books and arguments and phrases!' he exclaimed. 'Words! Words! Words!'" He stretched his arms out towards some phantom of his mind, intangible; and all but wept. May I now begin to—live? he asked himself perplexedly. And again: Am I a child still, or a man?

His breath came and went in painful gasps; he felt crushed and broken. He could not have said what it was he asked of fate.

'To live!' he repeated. 'To *act*!'

Then 'To love' he added, and closed his eyes. . . .

He rose an hour later. Had he been in a daydream or asleep? His head was heavy and his neck smarted. Deep exhaustion, due at once to a vague boredom and excess of energy, put any mode of action out of reach and dulled his thoughts. He cast a glance round the room. Must he vegetate for two months in this house? Yet he felt some enigmatic destiny chained him here for the summer, and that elsewhere his plight would be still worse.

Going to the window, he rested his elbows on the sill. And suddenly his anguish lifted. Gisèle's dress gleamed white across the lower branches of the chestnuts and now he knew her nearness would give him back the zest of youth and life.

He had meant to take her unawares, but her ears were on the alert, or else her book had little interest for her, for she swung round at once, hearing Jacques' footstep behind her.

'No luck that time!'

'What's this you're reading?'

She refused to answer and hugged the book to her breast in her folded arms. Their eyes challenged each other with a sudden thrust of pleasure.

‘One, two, three. . . .’

He rocked the chair to and fro till she slipped off on to the grass. But she would not let go of her book and he had to grapple with her lithe, warm body for a strenuous minute before he could secure his booty.

‘*Le Petit Savoyard*, Vol. I. My word! Are there many more of this?’

‘Three volumes.’

‘Congrats. Is it exciting anyhow?’

She laughed.

‘Why, I can’t even get through the first volume!’

‘Why do you read tosh like that?’

‘I’ve no choice, you see.’

(After several experiences of the kind Mademoiselle had given her verdict: ‘Gisèle doesn’t care for reading.’)

‘I’ll lend you some books instead,’ Jacques proposed, pioneer as usual of disobedience and revolt.

But Gisèle did not seem to hear him.

‘Don’t hurry away,’ she begged, stretching herself on the grass. ‘Take my chair. Or lie down here if you like.’

He lay down beside her. The sun beat remorselessly on the villa some sixty yards away and on the sanded terrace round it, set with orange-trees in tubs; but here, under cover of the chestnut-trees, the grass was cool.

‘So, Jacquot, now you’re free.’ Then in a voice that vainly tried to sound detached, she added: ‘And what are you going to do next?’ She bent in his direction, with eager, parted lips.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, where will you go now that you have two months to do as you like?’

‘Nowhere.’

‘What? You’re going to stay here with us for a bit?’ She looked up at him; her eyes were round and glowing with dog-like devotion.

‘Yes. I’m going to Touraine on the tenth, for a friend’s wedding.’

‘And then?’

‘I’m not sure.’ He averted his eyes. ‘I’m thinking of staying all the holidays at Maisons.’

‘Really and truly?’ She leant forward to study Jacques’ expression.

He smiled, rejoicing in her joy, and now he viewed with few or no misgivings the prospect of spending two months in the company of this simple, affectionate child whom he loved like a sister—far more than a sister. His presence here had always seemed unwanted and he had never dreamed his coming could bring such radiant happiness to her life; the revelation made him feel so grateful to her that he took the hand lying listless on the grass, and stroked it.

‘What a nice skin you have, Gisèle! Do you use cucumber lotion, too?’

She laughed and Jacques was impressed by her suppleness as lithely she snuggled up to him. She had the natural, playful sensuality of a young animal and in her full-throated laugh, when it had not a ring of childish glee, sounded an amorous, dove-like cooing. But there was peace between the virgin soul and the ripe young body, thrilled though it might be by countless vague desires whose meaning she could not guess.

‘Auntie still won’t let me join the tennis-club this season.’ She made a grimace. ‘You’ll be going there, I suppose?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Will you go for bicycle rides?’

‘Perhaps I will.’

‘How lovely!’ she exclaimed, and her look implied: wonders will never cease. ‘You know, auntie’s promised to let me go for rides with you. Would you like that?’

For a moment he peered into the dark pools of her eyes.

‘You’ve pretty eyes, Gisèle.’

It seemed to him that they grew darker yet, ruffled by a strange unrest. Smiling still, she turned away. That blithe and laughing charm of hers, the first thing people usually noticed, showed not only in the sparkle of her eyes and the little dimples that played incessantly about the corners of her lips, but also in her ripely moulded cheeks, the blunt tip of her nose, the roguish roundness of her chin—it lit up all her small, plump face, vivid with health and cheerfulness.

She grew uneasy at his evasion of the question she had asked.

‘I say, you will—won’t you?’

‘Will what . . . ?’

‘Why, take me for bike rides in the woods, or to Marly, like last summer.’

She was so delighted to see him smile a vague assent that she wriggled still closer and kissed him. They lay on their backs, side by side, their eyes exploring the green depths above.

Sounds reached their ears, the tinkle of a fountain, a chuckling chorus of frogs around the pond and, now and again, voices of passers-by beyond the garden fence. The scent of petunias whose gummy whorls had toasted daylong in the sun slowly drifted from the flower-boxes on the verandah, lingering on the warm air.

‘You *are* funny, Jacques. Always thinking! What ever do you think about?’

Propping himself on his elbow, he looked at Gisèle and saw the wonder on her parted, glistening lips.

I was thinking what pretty teeth you have.’

She did not blush, but gave a little shrug.

‘No, Jacques, I’m being serious.’

Her tone of childish gravity set Jacques laughing.

A bumble-bee, drenched in amber light, hovered round them, blundering like a tiny woolly ball against Jacques’ cheek; then, veering earthwards, it dived into a hole in the turf, humming like a threshing-machine.

‘I was thinking, Gise, as well, that you remind me of that bee there.’

‘I do?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ He stretched himself out again on his back. ‘It’s round and black like you and, what’s more, its buzz is rather like the noise you make when you laugh.’

He made the announcement in such a serious tone that the words seem to set Gisèle deeply pondering. Both were silent now. The slanting shadows lengthened on the sun-scorched lawn and a level ray caught Gisèle’s face. Spangles of gold played on her cheeks, fretting her eyes across the lids; the tickling on her face started her laughing again. . . .

A chime of the gate-bell announced Antoine’s arrival and when Jacques saw his brother at the end of the drive he rose promptly, as though it were all thought out beforehand, and hurried to meet him.

‘You’re going back this evening?’

‘Yes, by the ten-twenty.’

Jacques was impressed once again, not by the weariness so evident on Antoine's features, but by their brightness, that gave him an unwonted, almost defiant, air.

He lowered his voice.

'I say, won't you come with me after dinner to Madame de Fontanin's?' He knew his brother would demur and, averting his eyes, he added hastily: 'I simply must call on them and I'd hate to have to go there alone tomorrow.'

'Will Daniel be there?'

Jacques knew for a fact that he would not.

'Of course,' he said.

M. Thibault appeared at a window of the drawing-room, holding an open newspaper, and they ceased speaking.

'Ah, there you are!' he called to Antoine. 'I am glad you were able to come.' He always spoke to Antoine with studied courtesy. 'Stay where you are, I'll join you.'

'That's fixed up then?' Jacques whispered. 'We can say we're going for a stroll after dinner.'

M. Thibault had never withdrawn the veto he had pronounced long ago against any revival of Jacques' relations with the Fontanins. For safety's sake the hated name was never mentioned in his hearing. Was he unaware that for some time past his injunction had been disregarded? Impossible to be sure. So blind was his paternal pride, it well might be that the notion his orders were being persistently disobeyed never crossed his mind.

'Well, he's passed,' said M. Thibault, descending with heavy tread the terrace steps, 'so now we need feel no more anxiety about his future.' Then, as an afterthought: 'Shall we take a stroll round the lawn before dinner?' The unusual proposal called for explanation. 'I wanted to have a talk with you both. But, first of all'—he turned towards Antoine—'have you seen the evening papers? What do they say of the Villebeau bankruptcy? Have you seen anything about it?'

'Your Workmen's Co-operative Society?'

'Yes, my dear boy. An absolute disaster—with a scandal behind it, too! Quick work, eh?' He emitted a short laugh that sounded like a cough.

Ah, how she gave me her lips! Antoine was thinking, and a picture of the restaurant rose before his eyes: Rachel sitting opposite him, the light welling up from below—as on a stage—from windows that extended to the

pavement. . . . I wonder why she laughed like that when I suggested a mixed grill!

He tried his best to be interested in his father's conversation. Moreover, it puzzled him that M. Thibault should take this 'disaster' so calmly, for the philanthropist was a member of the group that had supplied the Villebeau button-makers with funds when, after the last strike, they had founded a co-operative workers' union to demonstrate that they could do without their employers.

M. Thibault had reached his peroration.

'In my opinion the money was not spent in vain. We have no reason to regret our conduct; we took the workers' utopian projects seriously and volunteered to assist them with our capital. With this result: the enterprise went bankrupt in under eighteen months. As it happens, the middleman between the workmen's delegates and ourselves did his work well. He's an old acquaintance of yours, by the bye.' He halted and turned to Jacques. 'It's Faisme, who was at Crouy in your time.'

Jacques made no comment.

'He has a hold on all the men's leaders, thanks to the letters those noble souls addressed us, asking for funds—letters penned during the worst phase of the strike. So none of them can think of climbing down.' He emitted another little cough of self-satisfaction. 'But that is not what I wish to consult you about,' he added, moving forward again.

He walked with heavy steps and flagging breath, trailing his feet in the sand, with his body bent forward and hands behind his back; his unbuttoned coat flapped loosely round him. His two sons walked beside him. Jacques recalled a sentence he had read, though he could not place it: 'Whenever I meet two men walking side by side and finding nothing to say to each other, I know them for father and son.'

'It's this,' said M. Thibault. 'I want your opinion on a plan I have in mind—on your behalf.' They heard a note of sadness and a ring of sincerity in his voice, quite other than his usual tone. 'You will find out, my sons, when you attain my age, that a man cannot but look back and ask himself: What will remain of my life's work? I know very well—Abbé Vécard has often told me so—that all our efforts spent on doing good work together to the same end, are cumulative. Still—is it not cruel to think that all the strivings of a life may be utterly obliterated in the nameless jetsam each generation leaves behind? May not a father legitimately desire that his own children will keep some personal memory of him? . . . If only by way of an example to others.' He sighed. 'I can honestly say that I have your interests

at heart, rather than mine. It has struck me that in future years you, as my sons, will prefer not to be confounded with all the other Thibaults in France. We have two centuries behind us—as commoners, if you like; but we can prove who we are. That, anyhow, is something. And I believe that, to the best of my ability, I have added to this worthy heritage, and have the right—this will be my reward—to hope there may be no misunderstanding as to your parentage, and to desire that you may bear my name in its entirety and transmit it intact to those who will be born of my blood. It lies with the Heralds' College to deal with such requests. So, some months ago, I took the requisite steps to have a formal alteration of your names recorded; I expect very shortly to receive the deed-polls, which I shall ask you to sign. And, by the end of the holidays, I trust—in any case, not later than Christmas—each of you will have the legal right to call himself no longer just plain “Thibault,” but “Oscar-Thibault” with a hyphen; “Dr. Antoine Oscar-Thibault,” for example.’ Bringing his hands in front of him, he rubbed them together. ‘That is what I wanted to tell you. No thanks, if you please; we will not mention it again. And now to dinner; I see Mademoiselle beckoning.’ He laid a patriarchal arm around the shoulder of each of his sons. ‘If it so happens that this distinction helps you on in life, so much the better, my sons. Surely, in all conscience, it is only justice that a man whose heart was never set on worldly gain should endow his heirs with such prestige as he has himself acquired.’

There was a tremor on his voice and, to hide his emotion, he swerved from the path along which they were walking and hurried on by himself, stumbling over the hummocks, towards the house. Never before had Antoine and Jacques seen their father so profoundly moved.

‘Well, that beats everything!’ Antoine chuckled.

‘Oh don’t, Antoine!’ It seemed to Jacques that dirty hands, his brother’s, were pawing at his heart. Jacques rarely spoke of his father without a certain deference; he declined to judge him, and deplored his own clear-sightedness when (oftener than he would have wished) his father was its target. And tonight the agony of doubt that lay behind his father’s longing for survival had touched him deeply, for even Jacques, though only twenty, could never think of death without a sinking of the heart.

Why ever did I get Antoine to come? Jacques asked himself as, an hour later, he accompanied his brother down the green avenue, flanked by centenarian lime-trees, that led from the château to the forest. His neck was smarting; Mademoiselle had insisted on having the boil inspected by

Antoine, who had thought fit to lance it, despite his victim's protest—for the idea of paying a visit with a bandage on his neck did not at all appeal to him.

Antoine was tired but talkative; his thoughts were all for Rachel. Yesterday at this hour he did not know her yet, and now she filled every moment of his life.

His exuberance contrasted with his brother's mood; Jacques had passed a restful day and now, as he walked on, his thoughts were busy with a visit whose prospect stirred in him a fugitive emotion, sometimes akin to hope. He felt dissatisfied and mistrustful as he walked at Antoine's side. Some cautionary instinct warned him against his brother, setting a wall of silence between them, though their conversation was cordial as ever. But, in reality, each was building up a screen of words and smiles, like hostile forces tossing up clods of earth to make a barrier against attack. Neither was hoodwinked by the other's strategy. The tie of blood linked them so intimately that nothing of importance could remain a secret between them. The very tone of Antoine's voice as he praised the fragrance of a late-flowering lime—it had called up a secret memory of Rachel's scented hair—if it did not tell Jacques everything, was all but tantamount to a confession. So he was little surprised when Antoine, yielding to his obsession, caught his arm and, setting a faster pace, launched forth into an account of his eventful night, and of its aftermath. Antoine's tone, his grown-up air, taken with certain broad details little in keeping with his normal, elder-brotherly reserve, made Jacques feel strangely ill at ease. He put a good face on it, smiled and nodded his approval—but he was distressed. He was angry with his brother for causing this distress, and even for the sentiment of disapproval which accompanied it. The more his brother hinted at the state of rapture in which he had been living for the last twelve hours, the more Jacques shrank back into his shell of cold disdain and felt the thirst for chastity grow strong within him. When Antoine, describing his afternoon, ventured to use the words 'a day of love,' Jacques was profoundly shocked, and showed it.

'No, Antoine,' he protested, 'no, and no again! "Love"—that's something quite different.'

A rather self-complacent smile hovered on Antoine's lips; but he was taken aback for all that, and said no more.

The Fontanins were living in an old house, left them by Mme. de Fontanin's mother, at the far end of the park, on the outskirts of the forest. The house abutted on the old park wall. A road, lined with acacias and so seldom used that patches of rank grass were growing on it, led from the main avenue to a postern-gate let into the garden wall.

Night was falling when they arrived, and lights shone in some of the windows. A bell tinkled and, at the bottom of the garden beside the house, Puce, Jenny's dog, began to bark. Antoine and Jacques knew where to find them. After meals the Fontanins resorted to the far side of the house where, shaded by two plane-trees, a natural terrace overhung the ancient fosse. A car had pulled up in the drive and they had to grope their way around it.

'Visitors!' Jacques murmured, and suddenly regretted he had come.

But Mme. de Fontanin was already on her way to meet them.

'I knew it was you!' she exclaimed as soon as she saw their faces. She hastened towards them with brisk, glad steps, holding out her hands and smiling her greetings. 'We were ever so pleased this morning when Daniel's wire came.' Jacques did not flinch. 'But I *knew* you would pass,' she continued, looking earnestly at Jacques. 'Something told me so that Sunday in June when you came here with Daniel. Dear Daniel, how delighted, how proud he must feel! Jenny was delighted, too.'

'So Daniel isn't here to-night?' Antoine remarked.

As they neared the circle of chairs, they heard a sound of gay voices. Jacques singled out at once a certain voice with a distinctive quality of its own, vibrant yet subdued; Jenny's voice. She was seated beside another girl, her cousin Nicole, and a man some forty years of age towards whom Antoine advanced with an air of surprise; a young surgeon who had been his colleague at the Necker hospital. The two men shook hands cordially.

Mme. de Fontanin beamed. 'So you know each other. Antoine and Jacques Thibault are great friends of Daniel's,' she explained to Dr. Héquet. 'So you won't mind letting them into the secret, will you?' She turned to Antoine. 'I'm sure my little Nicole will let me tell you about her engagement—won't you, darling? It's not really quite official yet, but, as you see, Nicole's already brought her *fiancé* here to meet her aunt, and you need only look at them to guess their secret.'

Jenny had not gone to meet the brothers and did not rise till they were actually standing before her; she shook hands with them coldly.

'Nico dear, come and see my pigeons,' she said to Nicole before they had time to sit down again. 'I've eight baby pigeons who are . . .'

'Still on the bottle,' Jacques broke in; his voice, which he meant to sound insolent, was merely ill-mannered and out of place. This he realized at once, and clenched his teeth.

Jenny did not seem to hear.

' . . . who are just learning to fly,' she continued smoothly.

‘But they’re all in bed by now,’ Mme. de Fontanin protested, to keep her from going.

‘So much the better. You can’t get near them in the daytime. Will you come too, Félix?’

Dr. Héquet, who was talking to Antoine, hastened to follow the two girls.

As soon as the engaged couple was out of earshot Mme. de Fontanin bent towards Antoine and Jacques.

‘It’s a most fascinating little match, you know. Our little Nicole has no means of her own and she was quite set against being on anyone’s hands. So for three years she’s been earning her living as a nurse. And now, just see how she has been rewarded! Dr. Héquet met her at the bedside of a patient and was so impressed by her devotion and intelligence, and the plucky way she was facing life, that he fell in love with her. There’s the whole story. Now don’t you think it’s perfectly charming?’

The romantic glamour of her tale, where virtue triumphed and every sentiment was lofty, enchanted her simple soul, and the light of faith shone in her eyes. Most of her remarks were addressed to Antoine and she spoke to him in a cordial manner that seemed to imply they saw eye to eye in everything. She liked his forehead and keen gaze, never reflecting that he was sixteen years her junior; that she might, or almost might, have been his mother. She was overjoyed when he assured her Félix Héquet was a first-rate surgeon with a great future before him.

Jacques took no part in the conversation. ‘On the bottle!’ He was furious with himself. Everything, even Mme. de Fontanin’s effusive amiability, had been ruffling his nerves ever since he came. He had not been able to hear her congratulations out, but turned away, feeling ashamed on her account—that she should seem to attach any importance to his success, the news of which, however, he had been at pains to telegraph to her. ‘Jenny at least spared me her compliments,’ he murmured to himself. ‘Did she realize that I am capable of better things, I wonder? No. Just indifference. Better things! “Still on the bottle!” I wonder if she even knows what the Ecole Normale means. Anyhow, what does she care about my future? She hardly said “Good evening” to me. But how about me? Why did I make that idiotic remark?’ He blushed, gritting his teeth again. ‘And while she said “Good evening” she went on listening to her cousin. Her eyes—inscrutable, they are. The rest of her face is almost childish, but her eyes . . . !’ At every moment painful twinges were reminding him of his boil, but he resented still

more the bandage that all of them—not only Mademoiselle but Gisèle, too—had foisted on him. A hideous sight he must be looking!

Antoine was talking cheerfully, paying no heed to Jacques.

‘. . . and from the moral point of view . . .’ he was saying. When Antoine talks, Jacques thought, there’s no room for anybody else. Then suddenly his brother’s easy manners in society and that ‘moral point of view,’ following as it did avowals of a very different order, disgusted him as a piece of unforgivable hypocrisy. How different from him his brother was! Rushing to extremes, Jacques decided that he had not a single thing in common with Antoine. Sooner or later their ways would part, inevitably; their different bents were incompatible and had no point of contact. A mood of utter hopelessness came over him; even their five years of close communion, he realized, had failed to make them proof against this coming estrangement, could not prevent them from growing indifferent to each other, strangers, or even enemies! He all but rose, snatching at any pretext for escape. Ah, could he but wander away into the darkness, out into the forest, anywhere! One human being alone had smiled her way into his heart; little Gisèle. Yesterday’s success—how gladly would he forgo it, could he but be with her again at this very moment, lying on the grass, watching her face and eyes—so unmysterious, hers!—and hear her cry, ‘You will, won’t you?’ with that cooing laugh of hers! Now that he thought of it, never had he seen Jenny laugh; even her smile seemed disillusioned. Whatever has come over me? he wondered and tried to pull himself together. But the dark mood was stronger than his will, a bitter nausea filling him with loathing for everything and everybody; for Mme. de Fontanin’s remarks, Antoine’s degradation, people in general, his own wasted youth, the world at large—yes, and for Jenny too, who seemed so much at home in a world of futility.

‘What are your plans for the holidays?’ Mme. de Fontanin enquired. ‘Couldn’t you induce Daniel to spend a few weeks away from Paris? It would be so nice for you both and would benefit you in other ways.’ She was discovering with some dismay that the brilliant career on which she had hoped to see her son embark was slow to shape itself and, for all her reluctance to linger on such thoughts, she was sometimes worried by the life he led; it was too free, too easy-going and—though she shirked the thought—too dissipated.

When Jacques told her that he intended to stay at Maisons, she was delighted.

‘That’s splendid! I hope you’ll persuade Daniel to go out a bit; he never will take a holiday and I’m so afraid he will make himself ill. Jenny!’ She had noticed the girl returning with her friends. ‘Good news! Jacques will be

here all the summer. That will mean some good tennis, won't it? Jenny's simply mad on tennis this summer; she spends all her mornings at the club. Our local tennis-club is quite famous in its way,' she explained to Dr. Héquet who had taken the chair beside her. 'Such nice young people! They all turn up there every morning. The courts are excellent and they're always arranging matches, tournaments, and that sort of thing. I don't know much about it,' she added with a smile, 'but it's terribly exciting they tell me. And they're always grumbling about the shortage of men. Are you still a member, Jacques?'

'Yes.'

'That's good. Nicole, you must bring Dr. Héquet and stay a week or ten days with us this summer. That will be nice, won't it, Jenny? I'm sure Dr. Héquet is a good player, too.'

Jacques turned towards Héquet. The drawing-room lamp shone through the open window, showing up the young surgeon's lean, austere face, his close-cropped brown beard and temples prematurely streaked with silver. He looked quite ten years older than Nicole. The lamplight, glinting on his glasses, masked the expression of his eyes, but his thoughtful air was decidedly engaging. Yes, thought Jacques, *there* is a man—and I am only a child! A man who can inspire love. Whereas I . . .

Antoine had risen from his chair. He felt tired and did not want to miss his train. Jacques cast him an angry look. Though a few minutes before he himself had been in half a mind to snatch at any pretext for departure, now he could not bring himself to end the evening thus. Still, he would have to leave at the same time as his brother.

He moved towards Jenny.

'Whom are you playing tennis with at the club this summer?'

She looked at him, and the slender line of her eyebrows knitted a little.

'With anyone who happens to be there,' she replied.

'Meaning the two Casins, and Fauquet, and the Périgault crowd?'

'Naturally.'

'They're just the same, I suppose, and as witty as ever?'

'What about it? We can't all be shining lights at the Ecole Normale!'

'Yes, I dare say one has to be a bit of a fool to play tennis properly.'

'Very likely.' She threw him an aggressive look. 'Anyhow *you* should know about that; you used to be pretty good at tennis once.' Then, ostentatiously breaking off their conversation, she turned to her cousin. 'You're not going yet, Nicole darling, I hope.'

‘Ask Félix.’

‘What’s this you’re to ask Félix?’ said Dr. Héquet, who had approached the two girls.

Antoine’s eyes were fixed on Nicole; yes, he mused, the girl certainly has a dazzling complexion. But, beside Rachel’s . . . ! And suddenly his heart beat faster.

‘So, Jacques, we’ll be seeing you again quite soon,’ said Mme. de Fontanin. ‘Are you going to play to-morrow, Jenny?’

‘I don’t know, mamma—I hardly think so.’

‘Well, if it isn’t to-morrow, you’re bound to meet there one morning,’ Mme. de Fontanin continued in a conciliatory tone. And, despite Antoine’s protest, she insisted on escorting the two young men to the gate.

‘I must say, darling, you weren’t very nice to your friends,’ Nicole exclaimed as soon as the Thibaults were out of earshot.

‘To begin with, they’re not my friends,’ Jenny replied.

‘I’ve worked with Thibault,’ Héquet observed. ‘He’s a first-rate man and has already made his mark. I’ve no ideas about his brother but’—behind the glasses his grey eyes twinkled quizzingly—‘I’d be surprised if a duffer got through the Normale exam, at his first shot, and took a high place, too.’

A deep blush mantled Jenny’s cheeks, and Nicole came to her rescue. She had lived with the Fontanins long enough to learn the kinks in Jenny’s character, one of which was her shyness always at issue with her pride, and sometimes lapsing into a morbid readiness to take offence.

‘The poor boy had a boil on his neck,’ she put in good-naturedly, ‘and that doesn’t help a man to be his social best.’

Jenny made no comment, and Héquet did not insist. He turned to Nicole.

‘We must be getting ready now, dear.’ His tone was that of a man who always runs his life by clockwork.

Mme. de Fontanin’s return was the signal for a general move. Jenny went with her cousin to the bedroom where she had left her coat. Some minutes passed before she spoke.

‘So there’s my summer spoilt, absolutely ruined!’

Seated before the mirror, Nicole was tidying her hair for the sole benefit of her *fiancé*. She felt that she was looking her best, wondered what he was saying to her aunt downstairs, and pictured the long drive home in her lover’s car across the silent night. So she paid little heed to Jenny’s ill-humour. Noticing the sullen look on her friend’s face, she merely smiled.

‘What an infant you are!’

She did not see the look that Jenny flung her.

A motor-horn sounded and Nicole swung round gaily and darted towards her cousin to embrace her, with the mixture of affection, innocence and coquetry that made her so attractive. But Jenny, uttering an involuntary cry, swerved out of her reach. She shrank from being touched by anybody and had always refused to learn to dance, so physically repugnant to her was the contact of another's arm. Once, in early childhood, she had sprained her ankle in the Luxembourg and had to be taken home in a carriage; she had preferred to climb the stairs trailing an injured limb, to letting the concierge carry her in his arms up to their landing.

‘What a touch-me-not you are!’ laughed Nicole. Then, with a cheerful glance at her cousin, she changed the subject, returning to their conversation before dinner in the rose-alley. ‘I’m ever so glad to have had my talk with you, darling. Some days I’m positively oppressed by my happiness. With you of course I’m always perfectly sincere—just myself, my real self, exactly as I am. Oh, how I hope, darling, it won’t be long before you, too . . .’

Under the headlights the garden had the glamour of a stage set for a gala night. Héquet had raised the bonnet of his car and was tightening a plug with the measured gestures of a skilled surgeon. Nicole suggested keeping her coat folded on her knees, but he insisted on her wearing it. He treated her like a little girl for whom he was responsible. Did he treat all women thus—like children? But Nicole gave in with a good grace that startled Jenny and roused in her a vague resentment towards the engaged couple. ‘No,’ she said to herself, with a shake of her head: ‘That sort of happiness. . . . Not for me, thanks!’

For a long while her eyes followed the flail of light that swept the trees before the receding car. Leaning against the garden wall, with Puce clasped in her arms, she felt such hopeless hope, such bitterness against she knew not what, that, lifting her eyes towards the star-strewn spaces, she wished for an instant or two that she might die thus, before attempting life’s adventure.

GISÈLE was wondering why for some days past the daylight hours had seemed so short, summer so glorious, and why each morning as she dressed before her open window she could not help singing, smiling at everything—her mirror, the cloudless sky, the garden, the sweet-peas she watered on her window-sill, the orange-trees on the terrace which seemed to be curling themselves into balls, like hedgehogs, the better to screen themselves from the far-darting sun.

M. Thibault rarely spent more than two or three days at Maisons-Laffitte without making a business trip to Paris, where he stayed overnight. When he was away a brisker air seemed to pervade the house, meals came and went like games, and Jacques and Gisèle once more gave free vent to their bursts of childish glee. Mademoiselle, in gayer mood, pattered from pantry to linen-store, from kitchen to drying-room, lilting antiquated hymns that sounded like bygone music-hall refrains. On such occasions Jacques felt unconstrained, his brain alert and full of warring projects, and gave himself whole-heartedly to his vocation. He spent the afternoons in a corner of the garden, getting up, sitting down again, scribbling in his note-book. Gisèle, too, infected by a desire to turn her leisure to good account, posted herself on a landing whence she could watch Jacques coming and going beneath the trees and, immersed in Dickens' *Great Expectations*—Mademoiselle, on Jacques' suggestion, had sanctioned its perusal as being 'good for Gisèle's English'—wept ecstatically for having guessed from the outset that Pip would give poor Biddy up for the exotic charms of cruel Miss Estelle.

Jacques' brief absence in the second week of August to attend Bataincourt's wedding in Touraine—he had not dared to stand out against his friend's request—sufficed to break the spell.

The day after his return to Maisons he awoke too early after a restless night; shaving warily, he noticed that his cheeks were innocent of rash and the boil had given place to an invisible scar, and now the prospect of resuming this too uniform existence seemed so exasperating that he suddenly stopped dressing and threw himself upon his bed. The weeks are passing, passing, he thought. Could this be the vacation to which he had looked forward so? He sprang up from the bed. 'Exercise is what I need,' he murmured in a cool voice that assorted ill with his fevered gestures. He took a tennis-shirt from the wardrobe, saw that his white shoes and racquet were in order, and a few minutes later jumped on his bicycle and was off post-haste to the tennis-club.

Two courts were in play; Jenny was one of the players. She did not seem to notice Jacques' arrival and he made no haste to greet her. A new toss-up

brought them into the same four; first against each other, then as partners. As players, there was little to choose between them.

No sooner were they together than they dropped back into their old-time unmannerliness. True, Jacques paid ample attention to Jenny, but always in an irritating, not to say offensive way; he jeered at her bad shots and obviously enjoyed contradicting her. Jenny gave him tit for tat, in a shrill voice that was quite unlike her. She could easily have replaced him by a less churlish partner, but apparently did not want to do so; on the contrary she seemed set on having the last word. When it was lunch-time and the players began to disperse she challenged Jacques in a voice that had lost nothing of its hostility.

‘Play four up with me!’

The energy she put into her play was so intense, so combative, that she beat Jacques four-love.

The victory made her generous.

‘There’s nothing in it, you know; you’re out of training. One of these days you’ll have your revenge.’

Her voice had once again the soft, brooding tone that was natural to her. We’re just two kids, Jacques thought. It pleased him that they shared a failing and he seemed to see a gleam of hope. A wave of shame traversed his mind when he recalled his attitude to Jenny, but when he asked himself what other to adopt he found no answer. There was no one with whom he longed so keenly to be natural; yet in her company he found it utterly impossible.

Noon was striking when they left the club together, wheeling their bicycles.

‘*Au revoir,*’ she said. ‘Don’t wait for me. I’m so hot that I might catch a chill if I started riding now.’

Without replying, he continued walking at her side.

Jenny disliked the clinging type of person; to be unable to dislodge a companion at the moment of her choice always annoyed her. Jacques had no idea of this; he meant to return for another game next day and cast about for a pretext to justify this sudden assiduity.

‘Now that I’m back from Touraine,’ he began awkwardly. The tone of mockery had left his voice. Last year she had noticed the same thing; when they were alone, he dropped his teasing ways.

‘So you were in Touraine,’ she repeated, for want of anything better to say.

‘Yes. A friend’s wedding. But of course you know him, I met him at your place—Battaincourt.’

‘Simon de Battaincourt?’ Her tone implied that she was piecing her memories of him together. She summed them up bluntly. ‘Ah yes—I didn’t like him.’

‘Why ever not?’

She resented being cross-examined in this fashion.

‘You’re too hard on him,’ Jacques continued, seeing she would not answer. ‘He’s a good sort.’ Then he thought better of it. ‘No, you’re right, really; there’s nothing much in him.’ She vouchsafed an approving nod which delighted him.

‘I didn’t know you were so attached to him,’ she observed.

‘Hardly that,’ Jacques smiled. ‘He attached himself to me. It happened on our way back from some show or other. It was very late and Daniel had deserted us. Without a word of warning, Battaincourt launched out into a plenary confession. The way he unloaded his life-story on me made me think of a fellow handing his money over to a banker: “Look after my capital; I put myself in your hands!”’

Jacques’ description interested her up to a point and, for the moment, she ceased wishing to shake him off.

‘Do many people confide in you?’

‘No. Why should they? . . . Well, perhaps they do.’ He smiled. ‘Yes, as a matter of fact, quite often. Does that surprise you?’ There was a note of defiance in his voice.

He was touched to hear her answer quickly:

‘No, not at all.’

Gusts of warm wind wafted towards them the fragrance of the gardens beside the road, a fume of freshly watered mould, and the thick pungency of marigolds and heliotropes. Jacques found nothing more to say and it was she who broke the silence first.

‘And by dint of all those confessions, you brought off the marriage?’

‘Certainly not, quite the opposite. I tried my best to prevent him from doing anything so silly. Think of it! A widow, fourteen years older than he, with a child, what’s more! And now his people have dropped him completely. But there was no holding him.’ He remembered that he had often used the word ‘possessed’—in its theological sense—when speaking of his friend and it struck him as felicitous. ‘Battaincourt is positively possessed by that woman.’

‘Is she pretty?’ Jenny asked, disregarding the strong term he had used. He pondered so deeply that she pursed her lips.

‘I’d no notion I was setting you such a poser!’

But he remained, unsmiling, in a brown study.

‘Pretty? Well, hardly that. She’s sinister. I can’t find any other word for it.’ He paused again. ‘Oh, it’s a queer world!’ he exclaimed. He caught the look of surprise on Jenny’s face. ‘Yes, I mean it. Everyone’s so queer. Even quite uninteresting people. Have you ever noticed, whenever you speak of a person you know to others who know him too, how many small points that are really suggestive and revealing seem to have escaped them? That’s why people misunderstand each other so often.’

He looked at her again and felt that she had been listening attentively and was repeating to herself what he had just said. And suddenly the cloud of mistrust which hung over his relations with Jenny seemed to lift, giving place to radiant understanding. To make the most of her attention, so rarely given him, and rouse her interest further, he fell to describing certain incidents at the wedding which were still fresh in his mind.

‘Where was I?’ he murmured hazily. ‘Oh, I’d love to write that woman’s life one day—from the little I learnt of her! She was once a shopgirl in one of the big stores, they say. That woman’s a ruthless climber’ (he quoted a tag he had jotted down in his note-book), ‘a Julien Sorel in petticoats! Do you like *Le Rouge et le Noir*?’

‘No, not a bit.’

‘Really? Yes. I see what you mean.’ After a pensive moment he smiled and spoke again. ‘But, if I switch off on to side-issues, I’ll never get to the end of it. Sure I’m not taking up too much of your time?’

She answered without thinking, reluctant to betray her desire to hear more.

‘Oh no; we won’t lunch till half-past twelve to-day, on Daniel’s account.’

‘So Daniel’s at home?’

She had to fall back on a downright lie.

‘He said he might come,’ she replied with a blush. ‘But how about you?’

‘I needn’t hurry, as father’s in Paris. Shall we take the shady side? What I really want to tell you about is the wedding breakfast. Nothing much happened, yet, I assure you, it was a very poignant experience. Let’s see! The setting, to begin with: an old-world chateau of sorts with a dungeon restored by Goupillot. Goupillot was her first husband, a remarkable fellow

too; he started as a haberdasher in a small way, but he had big business in the blood, and died a multi-millionaire after providing every French provincial town with its "Goupillot's Stores." You must have come across them. The widow, by the way, is enormously wealthy. I'd never met her before. How shall I describe her? A thin, lithe, ultra-smart woman, with rather shrewish features and a haughty profile; pale eyes that show up against a rather muddy complexion—eyes of a moleskin grey, with a sort of gloss upon them, like stagnant ooze. Does that give you an idea of her? She has the manners of a spoiled child—far too youthful for her looks. She has a shrill voice and laughs a lot. Now and again—how shall I describe it?—you catch a flicker of grey fire between her eyelids, along the lashes, and, all of a sudden, the childish small-talk she reels off seems to have something macabre behind it and you can't help recalling what people said soon after Goupillot's death, that she had poisoned him by inches.'

'She gives me the shivers!' Jenny exclaimed, no longer trying to repress the interest Jacques' narrative roused in her. He felt the change and was pleasantly elated by it.

'Yes, you're right; she's rather terrifying. That was just what I felt when we took our seats and I saw her standing with that mask of steel upon her face behind the white flowers on the table.'

'Was she in white?'

'Almost. It wasn't absolutely a wedding-dress; more of a garden-party costume, rather theatrical, a rich, creamy white. Breakfast was served at separate tables. She went on asking people right and left to sit at her table, quite regardless of the number of places at it. Battaincourt, who was near her, looked worried. "I say, you're muddling everything up, my dear," he protested. You should have seen the look that passed between them—a curious look! It struck me that all that was young and vital had died out of their relations; they were living on the past.'

Perhaps, thought Jenny, perhaps he is not so spoiled as I imagined, not so callous and . . . In a flash it dawned on her that she had always known Jacques to be sensitive and gentle. The discovery thrilled her and now, as she listened to his narrative, she found herself snatching at each phrase that might confirm her new and kindlier judgment of him.

'Simon had made me sit on his left. I was the only one of his friends to turn up. Daniel had promised, but backed out of it. Not a single member of Simon's family was present, not even the cousin with whom he had been brought up, and whom he had been counting on till the last train had gone. One felt sorry for the poor devil! He's a sensitive, rather nice-minded fellow

really; I know a lot of decent things about him. He looked at the people round him—strangers all! He thought of his family. “I never dreamt,” he told me, “that they’d be so terribly unrelenting. They *must* have it in for me!” He came back to it during the meal. “Not a word from them, not even a wire! It looks as if they’d blotted me out of their lives. What do you think?” I didn’t know what to reply. “But,” he made haste to add, “I don’t mention this so much on my account—I don’t care a damn! It’s Anne I’m thinking of.” As luck would have it, the sinister Anne was opening a telegram that had just been delivered when he spoke. Battaincourt went quite pale. But the telegram was really for her, from a friend. That was the last straw; regardless of all the people watching, even of Anne with her impassive face and steely eyes intent on him, he burst into tears. She was furious, and he realized it soon enough. He was sitting next to her, of course. Putting his hand on her arm, he stammered out excuses like a naughty child: “Do forgive me!” It was dreadful to hear him. She never turned a hair. And then—it was even more painful to witness than his fit of weeping—he began talking cheerfully, cracking jokes, and sometimes, while he was saying something or other in a tone of forced gaiety, you could see the tears come to his eyes and, still talking away, he brushed them off with the back of his hand.’

Jacques’ emotion made it all so vivid that Jenny, too, was carried away.

‘How horrible!’

Now, for the first time in his life, perhaps, he knew the thrills of authorship. An ecstasy. But he masked it disingenuously and made as if he had not heard her cry.

‘Sure I’m not boring you?’ He paused, then hurried on with his story. ‘That’s not all. When dessert was served, they started shouting at the other tables: “The Bride and Bridegroom!” Battaincourt and his wife had to stand up, smile, and go the round of the room, lifting their glasses of champagne. Just then I observed a little incident that was touching in its way. On their tour round the tables they overlooked her daughter by husband number one—a little girl eight or nine years old. The kid ran after them. They’d got back to their seats by then. Anne embraced the little girl rather roughly, rumpling the child’s collar. Then she pushed her daughter towards Battaincourt. But, after that melancholy, unfriended tour of the room, his eyes were swimming with tears; he noticed nothing. Finally they had to put the little girl on his knee; then, with a ghastly, forced smile, he bent towards the other man’s child. The kid held her cheek towards him; sad eyes she had, I shall never forget them. At last he kissed her and, as she stayed where she was, he started tickling her chin in a silly sort of way, like this, with one

finger—do you see what I mean? It was painful to watch, I assure you; but it makes a good story, doesn't it?"

She turned towards Jacques, struck by the tone in which he had said: 'a good story.' And now she noticed that the brooding, almost bestial look that so displeased her had left his face; the pupils of his eyes showed crystal-clear, sparkling with emotion and vivacity. Oh, why isn't he always like that? she thought.

Jacques began to smile. Painful as the experience had been, its poignancy weighed little beside the interest he took in other people's lives, in any display of human thoughts and feelings. Jenny shared his taste and, perhaps in her case just as in his, the pleasure was now enhanced by the knowledge that she was not alone.

They had reached the end of the avenue and the outskirts of the forest were in sight. Under the sun the grass shone like a burnished mirror. Jacques halted.

'I've been boring you with all this talk.'

She made no protest.

But, instead of bidding her good-bye, he ventured a suggestion.

'As I've come so far, I'd like to have a word with your brother.'

The reminder of the lie she had told was decidedly ill-timed, and she was the more annoyed that he had so readily believed it. She did not answer him, and Jacques took her silence to mean that she had had enough of his company.

He felt chagrined, but could not bring himself to leave her thus, with an unfavourable impression of him—now, least of all, when it seemed to him that something new had come into their relations, something after which, for months, perhaps for years, he had been yearning unawares.

They walked in silence between the acacias lining the road that led to the garden gate. Jacques, who was a little behind Jenny, could see the pensive, graceful outline of her cheek.

The further he advanced, the less excuse he had for leaving her; minute linked minute in a chain. Now they were at the gate. Jenny opened it; he followed her across the garden. The terrace was deserted, the drawing-room empty.

'Mother!' Jenny called.

No one answered. She went to the kitchen window and, bound by her lie, enquired:

'Has my brother come?'

‘No, miss. But a telegram has just been brought.’

‘Don’t disturb your mother,’ Jacques said at last. ‘I’m off.’

Jenny remained stiffly erect, an obdurate look on her face.

‘*Au revoir*,’ Jacques murmured. ‘See you to-morrow, perhaps?’

‘*Au revoir*,’ she said, making no move to see him to the gate.

The moment Jacques had turned to go she entered the hall, slammed her racquet into the press and flung it upon a wooden chest, venting her ill-humour in a display of needless violence.

‘No, not to-morrow,’ she exclaimed. ‘Certainly not to-morrow!’

Mme. de Fontanin, who was in her bedroom, had not failed to hear her daughter calling, and had recognized Jacques’ voice, but she was too upset to feign an air of calmness. The telegram she had just opened came from her husband. Jerome announced that he was at Amsterdam, penniless and friendless, with Noémie, who had fallen ill. Mme. de Fontanin had come to a speedy decision: she would go to Paris that very day, draw out all the money in her account, and send it to the address given by Jerome.

When her daughter entered the room, she was dressing. Jenny was shocked by the anguish on her mother’s face and the sight of the telegram lying on the table.

‘Whatever is the matter?’ she exclaimed, while the thought flashed through her mind: Something’s happened and I wasn’t there. It’s all Jacques’ fault!

‘Nothing serious, darling,’ Mme. de Fontanin replied. ‘Your father . . . your father’s short of money, that’s all.’ Then, ashamed of her own weakness and, most of all, thus to disclose a father’s failings to his child, she blushed and hid her face between her hands.

7

BEHIND the misted windows dawn was rising. Huddled in a corner of the railway-carriage, Mme. de Fontanin watched with unseeing eyes the green plains of Holland slipping past.

She had gone to Paris on the previous day and found another telegram from Jerome awaiting her at home:

Doctor given Noémie up. Cannot stay here alone. Implore you to come. Bring money if possible.

She had not been able to get in touch with Daniel before the night train left, and had scribbled a note telling him she was leaving and he must look after Jenny.

The train stopped. Voices were crying, 'Haarlem!'

It was the last stop before Amsterdam. The lights were switched off. The sun, invisible as yet, sheeted the sky with a pearly lustre, mottled with rainbow gleams. Her fellow-travellers awoke, stretched their limbs and bundled up their traps. Mme. de Fontanin remained unmoving, trying to prolong the apathy which spared her still, to some extent, from realizing what she had undertaken. So Noémie was dying. She tried to peer into her mind. Was she jealous? No. For jealousy—that meant the fiery gusts of feeling that had seared her heart during their early years of married life, when she still kept open house to doubt and blinded herself to reality, fighting back a hateful horde of visual obsessions. For many years past not jealousy had rankled, but a sense of the injustice done her. And had it really rankled, truth to tell? Her trials had been of a quite different order. Had she really been at any stage a jealous woman? Her real grief had always been to discover—ever too late—that she had been duped; her feeling towards Jerome's mistresses was oftener than not a rather distant pity, sometimes touched with fellow-feeling, as towards sisters in distress.

Her fingers were trembling when it was time to fasten up her luggage. She was the last to leave the compartment. The rapid, startled glance she cast about her did not meet the look whose impact she expected. Surely he had got her wire. It might be that his eyes were fixed on her, and at the thought she pulled herself together and followed the outgoing stream of passengers.

Someone touched her arm. Jerome stood before her, looking diffident but delighted. As, with bared head, he bowed towards her, despite his care-worn features and the slight stoop he had developed, he had still the exotic charm of some Eastern potentate. They were caught in the rush of travellers before he could shape a phrase of welcome for Thérèse, but he took her bag from her hands with tender solicitude. So *she* is not dead, Mme. de Fontanin reflected, and shuddered at the thought that she might have to watch her die.

They entered the station yard in silence and M. de Fontanin hailed an empty cab. Suddenly, as she was stepping into it, a wave of emotion that was almost joy flooded her senses; she heard Jerome's voice. While he was talking to the cabman in Dutch, telling him where to go, she paused a moment on the step in vibrant immobility, then, opening her eyes again, she sank on to the seat.

No sooner was he seated in the open carriage than he turned in her direction; once again she looked into the darkly glowing eyes she knew so well and felt their ardency envelop her like a caress. He seemed about to take her hand, to touch her arm; the gesture was so ill-assorted with the courteous reticence of his demeanour that she felt almost shocked, as if he had offered her an insult, yet thrilled by the intimation of a living love, all hope of which had died.

She was the first to break the silence. 'How is . . . ?' Stumbling at the name, she hastily went on: 'Is she in pain?'

'No, no. That's all over now.'

Though she would not meet his eyes, the way he spoke convinced her that Noémie was much better; it seemed to her that he was feeling some embarrassment at having summoned his wife to the bedside of a sick mistress. A pang of regret shot through her heart. Now she could not imagine what evil genius had prompted her to take this ill-considered step. What business had she here—now that Noémie would recover, and life go on its way again, unchanged? She decided to leave at once.

'Thank you, Thérèse,' Jerome murmured. 'Thank you.'

There was a note of affection in his voice, of diffidence and respect. She noticed that Jerome's hand, resting on his knee, was thinner, and trembling a little; the massive signet-ring hung slack upon his finger. She would not raise her eyes, but fixed them on his gloveless hand, and now she could not bring herself to regret the impulse that had brought her here. Why go away? She had acted spontaneously, prayer had inspired the impulse, surely no harm could come of it! Now that she could fall back on her faith, as bidding her reject all thoughts of drawing back, her confidence revived. Never had her heavenly guide left her for long the prey of doubts.

They were entering a vast and spacious city, laid out in endless vistas. At this early hour the shutters were still drawn across the shop-fronts, but the pavements were loud with workmen hastening to their tasks. The cab turned into a narrower street where short stretches of causeway alternated with hump-backed bridges, spanning a sequence of parallel canals. Tall, slender houses lined the water-front and the red façades, bare of ornaments but

studded with white windows, were mirrored in the almost stagnant water between the branches of elms that drooped beside the quays. Mme. de Fontanin realized that France was very far away.

‘How are the children?’ Jerome enquired.

She had noticed his hesitation in putting the question; he was moved, and for once made no attempt to hide his emotion.

‘Quite well.’

‘What’s Daniel doing?’

‘He’s at Paris, working. He comes to Maisons whenever he is free.’

‘So you’re at Maisons?’

‘Yes.’

He was silent; the park, the house beside the forest that he knew so well, rose up before his eyes.

‘And . . . Jenny?’

‘She is quite well.’ An unspoken question hovered in his eyes. ‘Jenny’s grown much taller,’ she went on; ‘very much changed, in fact.’

Jerome’s eyelids quivered and his voice was shaken by emotion when he answered her.

‘Yes, I suppose that’s so. She must have changed a lot.’ Looking away, he relapsed into silence. Then, passing his hand over his forehead, he exclaimed in a sombre voice: ‘How ghastly it all is!’ And, almost in the same breath, added: ‘I have practically no money left, Thérèse.’

‘I’ve brought some,’ she answered impulsively.

She had heard such agony in Jerome’s cry that, with the knowledge she could set his fears at rest, her immediate feeling was one of thankfulness. But close upon it came another thought, that stung her: the report of Noémie’s illness had, quite likely, been exaggerated—it was for the money, only for that, they had lured her here! And she felt sick with disgust when, after a slight hesitation, in a voice thickened by shame, Jerome blurted out the question:

‘How much?’

She fought back a brief temptation to understate the sum.

‘All I could scrape together,’ she replied. ‘A little over three thousand francs.’

‘Thank you, thank you,’ he stammered. ‘Ah, Thérèse, if you only knew . . . ! The great thing is to settle the doctor’s bill: five hundred florins.’

The cab had crossed a stone bridge crossing what looked like a wide river, crowded with shipping; now, after traversing some narrow suburban streets, it entered a small square and pulled up in front of a flight of steps abutting on a chapel. Jerome alighted, paid the cabman and lifted out his wife's bag. Then, without more ado, he helped Thérèse down from the vehicle, walked up the steps and held the door ajar. It seemed to be neither a Catholic nor a Protestant church; a synagogue, perhaps.

'I must ask you to excuse me,' he whispered, 'but I don't want to drive up to the house. They keep a sharp look-out on strangers—I'll explain later.' Then with a quick change of tone he became the man about town, making an affable suggestion. 'Isn't the air delicious this morning? I'm sure you won't mind a short walk. I'll lead the way, shall I?'

She followed him without comment. The cab was out of sight. Jerome took her along a vaulted passage, leading down a flight of stone steps to the solitary quay of a canal; on the other side the houses came down straight to the edge of the water which lapped the basements. Sunlight played on brick walls and flashing window-panes; the sills were gay with nasturtiums and geraniums. The quay was crowded with people, trestle-tables and baskets; an open-air market was being set up and, amidst the oddments and old junk, small craft were unloading boatloads of flowers whose perfumes mingled with the musty reek of stagnant water.

Jerome turned towards his wife.

'Not too tired, sweetheart?'

He gave a singing lilt to the word—'sweet-heart'—just as in old days. She dropped her eyes and did not answer him.

Without an inkling of the emotions he had conjured up he pointed to a house with low eaves, to which a footbridge gave access.

'There it is,' he said. 'Yes, it's not much of a place. You must forgive me for this poor welcome.'

As he said, the house had a humble appearance, but the fresh coat of brown stucco and the white woodwork reminded her of a well-kept yacht. The flame-coloured blinds of the second floor were down, and on them she could read in unassuming letters:

PENSION ROOSJE-MATHILDA

So Jerome was living in some sort of hotel, a nondescript abode where the sensation that they were her hosts would not weigh too heavily; that, anyhow, was a relief.

They stepped on to the footbridge. There was a movement at one of the blinds. Was Noémie on the watch? Mme. de Fontanin drew herself erect. It was only then she noticed, between two ground-floor windows, a crudely painted metal sign depicting a stork beside its nest, whence a naked baby was emerging.

They went along a corridor, then up a staircase redolent of beeswax. Jerome halted on the landing and knocked twice. She could hear whispers behind the door, a peep-hole was drawn aside and presently the door was opened cautiously, just enough to let Jerome in.

‘Will you allow me . . . ?’ he murmured. ‘I’ll just let them know.’

Mme. de Fontanin heard a brief colloquy in Dutch, and almost immediately Jerome opened the door wide. The others had gone. She followed him along an interminable, winding passage with a beeswaxed floor. Mme. de Fontanin felt ill at ease; the thought that she might encounter Noémie at any moment unnerved her and she had to summon up all her courage to preserve her calm demeanour. But there was no one in the room they entered; it was clean and cheerful, and gave on to the canal.

‘Here, sweetheart,’ said Jerome, ‘you are—at home!’

An unuttered question rose to her lips. ‘And what about Noémie?’

He read her thought.

‘I must leave you for a moment,’ he said. ‘I’ll just go and see if I’m needed.’

But, before leaving, he went towards his wife and took her hand.

‘Oh, Thérèse, I must, I must tell you. . . . If you only knew what a terrible time I’ve been having! But, now you are here . . .’ His lips and cheek caressed Mme. de Fontanin’s hand. She shrank from his touch; he made no effort to coerce her. ‘I’ll come back for you in a moment. . . . You’re sure you don’t mind—seeing her again?’ He began to move away.

Yes, she would see Noémie once again; she had come to this place of her own accord, and she would see it through. But after that, without wasting a moment, she would go away, whatever came of it. She made a gesture of assent, and, oblivious to Jerome’s stammered thanks, bent over her valise, pretending to hunt for something in it, till he had left the room.

Alone now with her thoughts, she felt less sure of herself. Taking off her hat, she glanced into the mirror and noticed her tired face. She passed her hand over her forehead. What could have induced her to come here? She felt ashamed.

A knock at the door cut short her mood of weakness. She had no time to say 'Come in' before it opened. The woman in a red dressing-gown who entered was obviously past her prime, despite her jet-black hair and made-up complexion. She put some questions in a tongue that Mme. de Fontanin did not understand, made an impatient gesture, and called in another woman who evidently had been waiting in the corridor. The new-comer was younger and she, too, wore a dressing-gown; hers was sky-blue. She greeted Mme. de Fontanin in a guttural voice.

'*Dag, Madame. Good-morning.*'

The Dutchwomen held a brief colloquy, the elder explaining what the other was to say. The younger woman paused a moment, then, turning amiably towards Mme. de Fontanin, addressed her, halting between each sentence.

'The lady says you shall take off the sick lady. You must pay the bill and move to one other house. *Verstaat U?* Understand you what I say?'

Mme. de Fontanin made an evasive gesture—all this was no concern of hers. The older woman broke in again; she seemed worried and determined to have her way.

'The lady says,' the young woman interpreted, 'even if you pay not the bill at once, you must move, go away, take the sick lady to a room in an hotel somewhere else. *Verstaat U?* That is better for the *Politie.*'

The door was flung open and Jerome appeared. Going up to the woman in red, he began scolding her in Dutch, propelling her meanwhile over the threshold. The woman in blue said nothing; her bold eyes wandered from Jerome's face to Mme. de Fontanin's, and back again. The older woman was obviously in a blazing temper; raising an arm that jangled a full peal of bracelets like a gipsy's, she spluttered incoherent phrases in which certain words recurred like a refrain.

'*Morgen. . . . Morgen. . . . Politie. . . .*'

At last Jerome managed to get rid of them, and turned the key.

'Really I'm dreadfully sorry.' His face showed his vexation as he turned towards his wife.

Thérèse realized now that, instead of going to Noémie, he had adjourned to his room, to complete his toilet; he had just shaved, there was a touch of powder on his cheek, and he looked younger. And I, she thought, what a sight I must be, after travelling all night!

'I should have told you to lock yourself in,' he explained. 'The old dame who runs the place is a decent soul in her way, but she talks too much and has no manners.'

‘What did she want of me?’ Thérèse enquired absent-mindedly. The odour of citron that always floated round Jerome when he had just finished dressing had evoked the past, leaving her pensive for some moments, with parted lips and brooding eyes.

‘I haven’t a notion what she was jabbering about,’ he replied. ‘She probably mistook you for someone else who’s staying here.’

‘The woman in blue told me several times to pay the bill and go elsewhere.’

Jerome laughed. She seemed to hear an echo from the past—that rather artificial, self-satisfied way he had of laughing, with his head flung back.

‘Ha! Ha! Ha! Too absurd for words!’ he guffawed. ‘Perhaps the old hag thought I wouldn’t pay her.’ He seemed to consider it unthinkable that he should ever be at a loss to pay his debts. Then suddenly his face fell. ‘Am I to blame? I tried my best, but no hotel would hear of taking us in.’

‘But I gathered from her it had to do with the police.’

He seemed astounded.

‘What? She mentioned the police?’

‘Yes, I think so.’ Once more she caught on Jerome’s face that look of dubious innocence which she associated with the darkest moments of her life; it gave her a sudden nausea, as though the air in the room were plague-infected.

‘An old wives’ tale, all that! Why should there be a police enquiry? Just because there happens to be a consulting-room on the ground-floor? No. The only thing that matters is to be able to pay that doctor fellow his five hundred florins.’

Mme. de Fontanin was as mystified as ever and this distressed her, for she always liked things made clear. But what grieved her most was to find that once again Jerome had let himself become entangled in a network of intrigues of which she hardly liked to think.

‘How long have you been staying here?’ she asked, hoping to get something definite out of him.

‘A fortnight. No, not so long; ten or twelve days, more likely. I’ve lost track of things. . . .’

‘And . . . her illness?’ The tone was so insistent that he dared not turn her question.

‘That’s just what the trouble’s about.’ The reply came pat enough. ‘With these foreign doctors it’s so hard to make out what is really the matter. It’s a local disease of sorts, one of those—er—Dutch fevers, you know—

something to do with the miasma from the canals.' He pondered for a moment. 'This city reeks with malaria, you know; the air is full of infections the doctors don't know much about.'

She listened to him perfunctorily, but could not help noticing that, whenever Noémie was in question, Jerome's attitude—the way he shrugged his shoulders, his casual air when speaking of her illness—was hardly that of a devoted lover. But she forbade herself to see in this an avowal of estrangement.

He did not observe the searching glance she cast on him; he had gone to the window, and, though he had not moved the blind, his eyes were fixed intently on the quay. When he came back to her, his face had assumed the earnest and sincere, yet disillusioned air she knew so well and so much dreaded.

'Thank you, dear, you're very good to me,' he suddenly exclaimed. 'I've wounded you again and again—and yet you have come to me. Thérèse. . . . Sweetheart. . . .'

Shrinking away, she would not meet his eyes. But, such was her insight into others' feelings—into Jerome's most of all—she could not question the sincerity of his emotion and his gratitude at this moment. Yet she could not bring herself to answer or prolong the conversation.

'Please take me . . . there,' she said.

After a brief hesitation, he gave way.

'Come.'

The moment she dreaded was at hand. 'I must be brave,' she murmured as she followed him down the long dark corridor. 'Is she still in bed . . . convalescent? What shall I say to her?' It struck her suddenly how worn-out she must look after her journey, and she wished she had at least put on her hat again.

Jerome halted at a closed door. With a trembling hand Mme. de Fontanin settled her white hair. 'She'll find me looking terribly old,' she all but said aloud, and all her self-confidence oozed away.

Jerome opened the door noiselessly. So she's in bed, Mme. de Fontanin decided.

Chintz curtains, patterned with blue flowers, were drawn across the window and a subdued light filled the room. Two women, whom she had not seen before, rose as she came in. One of them, who wore an apron and was busy knitting, was presumably a servant or an attendant; the other, a buxom matron some fifty years old, had a violet bandanna round her head and looked like an Italian peasant. As Mme. de Fontanin entered, the older

woman began to beat a retreat, whispering something in Jerome's ear as she went out.

Thérèse did not notice the woman's departure, nor the disorder of the room, the basin and the dirty towels littering the sheets. Her gaze was riveted on the sick woman, stretched flat upon the pillowless bed. Would Noémie turn in her direction? She was snoring, seemingly asleep. A craven impulse urged Mme. de Fontanin to leave her to her rest, and go; but then Jerome signed to her to come to the foot of the bed and she dared not refuse. Then she saw that Noémie's eyes were open and the stertorous breathing came in gasps from her wide-open mouth. As she grew used to the half-light she saw a bloodless face and ice-blue eyes, their pupils set in the glassy stare of butchered animals. In a flash it came to her that she was standing by a death-bed and in her consternation she turned quickly with a cry for help upon her lips. But Jerome was at her side, gazing at the dying woman; his grief was plain to read upon his face and she saw at once that he had nothing to learn from her.

'Since her last hæmorrhage—it was the fourth attack,' he whispered—'she has never regained consciousness. She has been like that all night.' Tears gathered slowly at the edges of his eyelids, hung for a moment on the lashes, rolled down his sallow cheeks.

Mme. de Fontanin vainly tried to pull herself together; she could hardly bring herself to admit the evidence of her eyes.

Yes, Noémie was dying and would pass out of their lives; Noémie whom, only a moment ago, she had pictured as triumphing over her! She dared not take her eyes off the dying woman's face where even now all movement was arrested—the rigid nostrils, dulled eyes and bloodless lips through which the rattling breath, coming, it seemed, from very far away, rose and ebbed, and feebly rose again. She lingered on each feature, turn by turn, with curiosity, that was half terror, still unsated. Could that be Noémie—that shape of ashen, bloodless flesh, with a brown wisp of hair plastered across a dry, white-gleaming forehead? Drained of colour and expression, the face seemed wholly unfamiliar. How long was it since she last saw Noémie? Then it came back to her, the day five or six years ago when she had rushed to Noémie's house to cry in vain: 'Give me back my husband!' Her cousin's shrill laugh seemed echoing in her ears, and she remembered with a shudder the handsome woman lolling on the sofa, and her glimpse of a plump shoulder stirring beneath the lace. That was the day when Nicole had run up to her in the hall and . . .

'What about Nicole?' she asked abruptly.

‘Nicole?’

‘Have you let her know?’

‘No.’

How was it she did not think of this herself, when leaving Paris? She drew Jerome aside.

‘You *must*, Jerome. She’s Nicole’s mother.’

The look of entreaty on his face gave her the measure of his weakness, and her resolution faltered, too. To think of Nicole coming to this hateful house, entering such a room, confronting Jerome by this bedside! But she insisted, though her tone was less assured.

‘You *must!*’

The curious earth-brown hue which darkened Jerome’s dusky skin still more whenever he was thwarted, came to his cheeks; his narrow lips set in a harsh grimace, baring his teeth.

‘Jerome, Nicole must be sent for,’ she repeated gently.

His slender eyebrows drew together, drooped, and for a while he still held out. At last, raising his hard eyes to hers, he yielded.

‘What is her address?’

When he had left to send the telegram she returned to the bed; somehow she could not tear herself away from it. She stood beside it with drooping arms, her fingers locked. What had possessed her to imagine Noémie out of danger? And why did Jerome not seem more distressed? What were his plans? Would he come back to live with her? Certainly no such suggestion would cross her lips; yet she would not deny him shelter, if he asked it.

A grateful mood of peace, almost of happiness, crept over her; the feeling shamed her and she sought to banish it. To pray. To pray for this departing soul which was returning to the Universal Soul. Poor soul, she thought, that takes so little with her on her way! Yet, in the ineluctable ascent of all towards a higher plane, through the vast sequence of our earthly incarnations, does not each upward effort, however feeble, tell in favour of the one who makes it? Does not each trial mean a step forward on the pathway of perfection? That Noémie had suffered Thérèse could not doubt. Despite the specious glamour of her life, surely there had rankled in the poor woman’s heart a deep unrest, the dull ache of a conscience that, for all its unconcern, trembled in secret at its degradation. And now that suffering would be accounted to the poor soul’s credit in another, better life; and her love, too, despite its guilt and the evil it had done. This, in her present mood, Thérèse could readily forgive. Still, she reflected, such forgiveness did her

little honour. For, there was no denying it, she could not persuade herself that Noémie's death would be a great misfortune. For anyone. Her feelings were evolving with remorseless speed; she, like Jerome, was growing used to the notion that Noémie was to pass out of their lives. Less than an hour had gone since first she *knew*—and, already, almost her only feeling was one of resignation. . . .

When, two days later, Nicole stepped down from the Paris express, her mother had been dead for thirty-six hours; the funeral was to take place on the following morning.

Everyone concerned seemed eager to have done with it—the proprietress of the pension, Jerome, and, most of all, the young doctor, recipient of the five hundred florins, who had signed the death-certificate without even coming upstairs to view the body, after a brief parley in one of the ground-floor rooms.

Harrowing though the task would have been, Thérèse expressed a desire to help in laying-out the body; she wished to be able to tell Nicole that she had carried out this pious duty in her stead. But, at the last moment and on trivial grounds, they had refused her access to the room; the midwife had insisted on attending to the laying-out—'After all, she's used to it,' Jerome had observed—in the presence of the nurse alone.

Nicole's arrival brought a welcome change. Hour by hour Mme. de Fontanin had been finding her encounters in the corridor with pension-keeper, doctor and the nurse, more and more unbearable; indeed, from the moment she had come, the atmosphere she was breathing in this house seemed to suffocate her. Nicole's open face, her youth and health brought a breath of fresh, cleansing air into the place. The violence of her grief, however—Jerome was so unnerved by it that he took refuge in another room—struck Mme. de Fontanin as disproportioned to the girl's true feelings towards a mother she had cast out of her life. The childish extravagance of her outburst bore out the elder woman's view of her niece's mentality; a warm-hearted girl, she thought, but lacking real depth of character.

Nicole wanted to bring her mother's body back to France; as she declined to have anything to do with Jerome, whom she still held responsible for her mother's lapse, her aunt volunteered to sound him on the matter. Jerome met the proposal with an emphatic veto. He expatiated on the exorbitant railway charges in such cases, the endless formalities involved and, finally, the inquest on which, needless though it was, the local police

would certainly insist; they delighted, Jerome averred, in putting foreigners to inconvenience. So Nicole's plan had to be dropped.

Exhausted though she was by her emotions and the journey, Nicole insisted on keeping vigil beside the coffin. The three of them passed the night, in silence and alone, in Noémie's room. The coffin, spread with flowers, rested on two chairs. So heady was the perfume of jessamine and roses that they had to keep the window wide open. The night was hot, and bright as day with dazzling moonlight. Now and again they heard low sounds of water lapping round the piles which supported the house. Near at hand the passing hours chimed from a clock-tower. A moonbeam, gliding across the floor, crept every minute nearer to an over-blown white rose fallen beside the coffin's foot, making it seem translucent, almost blue. Nicole's indignant eyes took in the squalor of the room; here her mother had lived, perhaps; assuredly had suffered. She was counting up, perhaps, the printed flowers on yonder curtain when first she heard death's summons and, in a tragic pageant, the follies of her wasted life had passed before her dying eyes. Had she given her daughter then a last, belated thought?

The funeral took place very early next day. Neither midwife nor pension-keeper put in an appearance. Thérèse walked between Jerome and Nicole, and the only other mourner was an old clergyman whom Mme. de Fontanin had sent for to attend the funeral and read the Burial Service.

To spare Nicole another visit to the odious house beside the canal, Mme. de Fontanin decided to take the girl directly to the station on leaving the graveyard. Jerome would follow up with the luggage. Moreover, Nicole refused to take over any object whatsoever associated with her mother's life abroad; the decision to leave Noémie's trunks behind made the final settlement with the proprietress a much simpler matter.

When all the bills had been paid and Jerome was on his way to the station, he found he had a good deal of time on his hands before the train was due to leave; yielding to a sudden impulse, he directed the cabman to take another road, and revisited the graveyard for the last time.

He lost his way several times before finding the grave again. When he sighted in the distance a mound of newly-turned earth, he took off his hat and walked towards it with measured steps. Here lay all that remained of their six years of life in common, of quarrels, jealousy and reconcilements; six years of memories and secrets shared—all to end in the final, most tragic secret whose upshot lay before his eyes.

'After all, things might have turned out worse; I do not seem to feel it much,' he consoled himself, though his care-worn forehead and blinding

tears seemed to belie the thought. Was he to blame if rejoicing over his wife's return outweighed his grief? Surely there had been one love only in his life—Thérèse! But would she ever understand that? Would she ever forgo her cold austerity and realize that, appearances notwithstanding, she alone fulfilled the life of this too wayward lover, who yet had loved with all his soul one woman only? Would it ever come to her that, beside the whole-hearted devotion he bestowed on her, no other love of his was more than a passing fancy? Surely this very moment bore him out—Noémie's death had left him neither lost nor lonely. So long as Thérèse lived, though she were even more aloof from him, though she might fancy every bond between them severed, he was not alone. For an instant he tried to picture Thérèse lying there under the flower-strewn turf; but found the thought unbearable. He hardly blamed himself at all for any of the sufferings he had brought on his wife, so firm was his conviction at this solemn moment that he had deprived her of nothing which really mattered, but had devoted to her all that was best and most enduring in his heart—so sure was he that he had never for a moment been unfaithful to her. What are her plans for me? he asked himself, but with no anxiety. Surely she would want him to come back to her and to the children. His head was bowed, his cheeks were wet with tears—but in his heart hope glowed insidiously.

If it weren't for Nicole, all would be for the best! he thought. He recalled the girl's hostile silence and her steely eyes. He saw her again bending above the grave, and heard again the dry, racking sob she had not been able to keep back.

Yes, the thought of Nicole was a torment to him. Was it not on his account that, angered beyond bearing, she had fled her mother's house? A passage from the Gospels echoed in his memory: 'Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!' How shall I make amends? he wondered. He could not endure the thought that anyone disapproved of him. . . . Suddenly he had an inspiration. Why not adopt her as his daughter?

Yes, that settled everything! In his mind's eye he pictured it—the little flat that he would share with Nicole; she would, of course, arrange it to her liking, keep house for him, help him to entertain. How everybody would admire his gesture of contrition! Thérèse, too, would approve.

He put on his hat again and, turning his back on the grave, walked briskly to the cab.

The train had been in for some time when he reached the station. The two women had already taken their seats. Mme. de Fontanin was perturbed by her husband's delay in coming. Had some complication arisen at the *pension*? Almost anything seemed possible. Would Jerome be prevented

from leaving? Was her dream of bringing him back to Maisons, of smoothing the way for his return to her and, it well might be, for his repentance—was her fond dream so soon to vanish like mirage? Her apprehension grew to panic when she saw him approaching with rapid strides and an anxious air.

‘Where is Nicole?’

‘Why, over there, in the corridor,’ Mme. de Fontanin replied with some surprise.

The window was half down and Nicole stood beside it, idly gazing at the gleaming network of rails. She felt sad, but weary most of all; sad, yet happy too, for to-day’s sorrow could not even for an instant quell her secret joy. Her mother was dead—but was not the man she loved awaiting her? And once again she tried to ban the thought, as something impious, from her mind, that her mother’s death could not but prove, for her lover anyhow, a relief—a lifting of the one and only shadow that hitherto had dimmed their future.

She did not hear Jerome’s step behind her.

‘Nicole, I implore you—for your mother’s sake—forgive me!’

She started and turned round. He stood before her, hat in hand, his eyes aglow with humble entreaty. And now his face, ravaged by sorrow and remorse, no longer disgusted her; she was touched by pity. She could almost fancy that this opportunity for kindness was of her seeking; yes, she would forgive him.

Without answering, impulsively, she held out her little black-gloved hand, and he pressed it with unfeigned emotion.

‘Thank you,’ he murmured. Then he moved away.

Some minutes passed. Nicole did not move. Things were better so, she thought, if only for her aunt’s sake; and then, of course, there would be Félix to tell about this touching little incident. People were bustling along the corridor, jostling her with their luggage. At last the train began to pull out. The sudden stresses helped to dispel her lethargy, and she returned to the compartment. Latecomers occupied the seats which only a moment earlier were empty. At the far end, ensconced in a corner-seat facing Mme. de Fontanin, one arm lolling in the leather window-strap and eyes fixed on the landscape, her uncle Jerome, she observed, was munching a ham-sandwich.

JACQUES spent the evening trying to reconstruct, word for word, his talk with Jenny. He made no attempt to analyse what exactly it was that drew his thoughts so urgently towards that conversation, yet it obsessed his mind. He woke up several times in the course of the night and harked back each time to the same theme with unabated eagerness. So, naturally enough, he was bitterly disappointed when he went to the tennis-club next morning only to find that Jenny had not turned up.

He was asked to join in a set and thought it better to comply, but he played badly, for his eyes strayed all the time towards the entrance-gate. The morning passed and soon it was too late to hope that Jenny would come. He made his escape the moment he could decently do so. His hope had failed him, but he was not hopeless yet.

Then he saw Daniel coming towards him.

‘Where’s Jenny?’ he asked at once. Daniel’s presence at this hour was unexpected, but he made no comment on it.

‘She’s not playing this morning. Are you leaving now? Then I’ll come along with you. I’ve been at Maisons since yesterday evening.’ As soon as they had left the club grounds he explained. ‘Mother’s been called away, you see; she asked me to sleep at home so that Jenny wouldn’t be alone at night—our house is such miles from anywhere. It’s another of my father’s little games and mother, poor thing, can never say “no” to him.’ A shadow flitted across his face, but soon was vanquished by a resolute smile, for Daniel had a short way with disagreeable thoughts. ‘And how are you getting on?’ His eyes conveyed affectionate concern. ‘I’ve been thinking quite a lot about your *Startled Secret*; I like it as much as ever, you know. And the more I think about it the better I like it. Psychologically it’s in a class by itself—a trifle brutal, perhaps, and a bit obscure in places. But you’ve hit on a fine idea and your two heroes are very life-like and, what’s more, original.’

‘No, Daniel,’ Jacques broke in, unable to master his annoyance. ‘You mustn’t judge me by that. To begin with, the style’s abominable. Flatulent, lumpy, long-winded!’ And to himself he added, raging inwardly: ‘Hereditry, no doubt!’

‘The theme, too,’ Jacques continued, ‘is still far too conventional, too made-to-order. A man’s mental underworld. . . . Oh, I see quite well what’s

wanted, only——’ He broke off abruptly.

‘What are you working at now? Have you started on something else?’

‘Yes.’ Jacques felt a blush rising to his cheeks, though he knew no reason for it. ‘But I’m mostly resting; I was more run down than I suspected, after a year’s cramming. And then I’ve only just come back from attending poor old Battaincourt’s wedding—that’s one for you, you slacker!’

‘Yes, Jenny told me about it.’

Jacques blushed again. At first he felt a brief annoyance—that yesterday’s talk had ceased to be a secret shared by Jenny and himself alone; but then he was agreeably thrilled to learn that she set store by what he said and it had so impressed her that she had spoken of it that very evening to her brother.

‘Shall we take a stroll as far as the bank of the Seine?’ he suggested, linking his arm in Daniel’s. ‘We can talk on the way.’

‘Can’t be done, old chap. I’m off to Paris by the 1.20. I’m prepared to play the watchdog at night, you see; but in the daytime——’ His smile conveyed the nature of the appointment that called him back to Paris; Jacques was displeased by it, and withdrew his arm.

‘Look here,’ Daniel hastily suggested, anxious to ease the tension, ‘you’d better lunch with us. Jenny’ll be delighted.’

Jacques lowered his eyes to hide a new emotion and feigned some indecision. As his father was not back, there would be no bother about his missing a meal. He was dumbfounded by the rapture that swept over him, but mastered it enough to answer his friend.

‘Thanks very much. I’ll just drop in to warn them at home. You go ahead. I’ll meet you in the Castle Square.’

Some minutes later he rejoined his friend, who was waiting for him, lying on the grass in front of the château.

‘Isn’t it topping here!’ Daniel exclaimed, stretching his legs out in the sunshine. ‘The park’s at its best this morning. You’re a lucky chap to live in such surroundings.’

‘And so could you,’ Jacques observed, ‘if you chose to.’

Daniel stood up.

‘Yes, no doubt I could,’ he admitted musingly but with a twinkle in his eye. ‘But I—well, it’s not my pigeon! Look here, old fellow!’ He moved towards Jacques and a change came over his voice. ‘I rather think I’m in for a perfectly marvellous adventure.’

‘The green-eyed girl?’

‘Green-eyed? I don’t . . .’

‘At Packmell’s, you know.’

Daniel stopped short and stared for a few seconds at the grass. Then a curious smile crossed his face.

‘Ah, Rinette, you mean. No, someone new—streets ahead of her.’ He paused a while, lost in thought, before he spoke again. ‘Rinette! Yes, that was a queer girl, if you like! Just fancy, it was she who dropped me after a day or two!’ He laughed—the laugh of one whose way such an experience had never come before. ‘As a novelist, you’d have thought her thrilling, very likely. Personally, I found her boring. I’ve never known a woman one could make so little of. Why, even now I’ve no idea whether she was ever keen on me for ten consecutive minutes; but, when the loving mood was on her, well . . . ! A bit queer, I should say. She must have had a pretty shady past and couldn’t shake it off. I shouldn’t be in the least surprised to learn that she belonged to some secret society or other.’

‘So you’ve quite lost touch with her?’

‘Absolutely. I don’t even know what’s become of her, she never showed up at Packmell’s again. Sometimes I rather miss her,’ he added after a pause. ‘Anyhow it would have had to end pretty soon; I couldn’t have stuck her very long. You’ve no idea how tactless she could be. Always asking questions about my private life, yes—damn it!—about my family, my mother and sister . . . my father, even!’

He walked on in silence.

‘Still, when all’s said and done, I’m indebted to her for a priceless experience—that evening at Packmell’s when I wiped Ludwigson’s eye.’

‘And, with the same shot, brought down your prospects, I suppose?’

‘Meaning, I got the sack?’ Daniel’s eyes twinkled and a wide grin displayed his teeth. ‘I’d never had such an opportunity of taking friend Ludwigson’s measure; well, he pretended not to remember a thing about it. You may think what you like about him, old chap; what I say is, he’s a great lad in his own way.’

Jenny had stayed at home all the morning. When Daniel proposed escorting her to the tennis-club she had emphatically declined, professing to be busy. But she felt listless, at a loose end, and the time hung heavy on her hands.

When, from her window, she saw the two young men crossing the garden, her first feeling was one of vexation. She had looked forward to

having her brother to herself, and here was Jacques spoiling everything! Still her ill-humour was not proof against Daniel's exuberance, as he cried to her through the half-open window:

'Guess whom I've brought back to lunch!'

I've time to change my dress, she thought.

Jacques was strolling to and fro in the garden; never as to-day had he appreciated the quiet beauty of Jenny's home. After the park, studded with villas, it had all the charm of an old-world farmhouse secluded on the margin of the forest. The central portion with its tall windows had evidently been a hunting-lodge, many times restored; more or less incongruous annexes had been built on to it at different periods. A flight of wooden steps, like the open ladders clamped to barns, led under a penthouse to the more lofty of the two wings. Jenny's pigeons scudded to and fro along the shelving tiles and the walls were rough-coated with a bright pink distemper which drank up the sunlight like an Italian stucco. A tangled conclave of tall fir-trees cast dry, cool shadows on the house and sunburnt grass, and the air beneath them had a brisk tang of resin.

Daniel was in great form at lunch and his gaiety was contagious; he had had an exhilarating morning and the afternoon promised well. He congratulated Jenny on her blue frock and pinned a white rose in her blouse, calling her 'sister mine.' He was amused by everyone and everything, even his own high spirits.

He insisted on being escorted to the station and seen into his train by Jacques and Jenny.

'Will you be back for dinner?' she enquired. Sometimes, Jacques noticed with a vague distress, a jarring undertone—which certainly was not intentional—crept into Jenny's voice, contrasting with her gentle, unassuming ways.

'It's quite on the cards,' Daniel replied. 'Anyhow I'll do my level best to catch the seven o'clock train. In any case I shall be back before dark, as I promised mamma in my letter.' The small-boyish voice in which Daniel spoke the last words and his mature appearance were so charmingly incongruous that Jacques could not help laughing and even Jenny, as she stooped to clip the leash on her little dog's collar, looked up with a smile of amusement.

When the train came in Daniel noticed that the front carriages were empty and ran towards them; from where they stood they saw him leaning out of the window and waving with his handkerchief a frivolous farewell.

Now they were alone, and the situation found them unprepared to deal with it; Daniel's high spirits had carried them off their feet. They managed, however, to keep up a tone of easy intimacy, as if Daniel still were serving as a link between them; and this new truce was such a relief to both that they were careful not to break its amity.

Rather depressed to see her brother leave, Jenny recalled his all too frequent absences from home.

'Couldn't you get Daniel to stop spending his holidays running backwards and forwards like this? He doesn't realize how sad it makes mother, seeing so little of him this summer. But, of course, you'll stick up for him,' she added, though without the least aggressiveness.

'No, I've not the least wish to do so,' he replied. 'Do you imagine I approve of the life he's leading?'

'Well, do you let him know that, anyhow?'

'Of course I do.'

'And he won't listen to you?'

'He listens all right. But it goes deeper than that. I rather think he doesn't understand me.'

'You mean, that he has *ceased* to understand you?'

'Very likely. . . . Yes.'

From the outset their conversation had taken a serious turn. With Daniel as their theme there was a mutual understanding between them that since yesterday was no new thing; but it had never before been given such free play. And, when they were about to turn into the park, it was from her that the suggestion came:

'How about going by the high road? Then you could see me home through the forest. It's quite early, and such a lovely day!'

He made no effort to conceal the happiness that flooded his heart, but dared not let it master him. Fearing to snap the golden thread of sympathy between them, he hastily reverted to their common interest.

'Daniel has such a zest for living.'

'Yes,' she said, 'I know it only too well. For living without control. But a life that's uncontrolled is very—very dangerous.' Averting her eyes, she added: 'And . . . impure.'

'Impure,' he repeated gravely. 'Yes, I agree with you, Jenny.'

Impurity! A word he little cared to use, yet one which very often rose to his lips, and now on hers he heard it with a sudden thrill. Yes, all Daniel's 'affairs' were sullied by 'impurity,' and so was Antoine's passion. All carnal

lusts were tainted in the same way. One thing, one only, in the world was pure—the nameless feeling which had been growing up within him for months and months and since yesterday unfolding, in gradual beauty, like a flower.

Steadying his voice, he continued.

‘Sometimes I’m furious with him for the attitude he has taken up towards life, a sort of——’

‘Perverseness,’ she added ingenuously; it was a word that often crossed her thoughts, her name for all that seemed obnoxious to her innocence.

‘Personally, I’d rather call it cynicism,’ he amended, using in his turn an incorrect expression which he had twisted to his uses. But no sooner had he spoken than he felt he was not being wholly loyal to himself. ‘Don’t imagine,’ he exclaimed hastily, ‘that I approve of a nature that is always fighting against itself. I prefer——’ He paused, and Jenny hung on his words, eager to take his meaning—as though what he had just said were of exceptional importance in her eyes. ‘I prefer people who make a point of living according to their natures. All the same, they shouldn’t——’ He broke off. Several instances he did not think fit for Jenny’s ears had crossed his mind.

‘Yes,’ she agreed. ‘And I’m so afraid that Daniel may end by losing—what should I call it?—the sense of sin. Do you see what I mean?’

He nodded approval and now he, too, could not refrain from gazing at her intently, for the earnestness of her look added significance to her words. How she betrayed herself unwittingly, he mused, in that last remark!

She had her features well under control, but her set lips and laboured breathing vouched for the effort she was making to fight down one of those gusts of wild emotion which so often swept across her, emotion which she always did her utmost to conceal.

What can it be, Jacques wondered, that makes her face so apt to wear that hard, aloof expression? Is it because the line of her eyebrows is rather narrow, too precise? No, I fancy it must be the two dark cavities her pupils form in the grey-blue of the iris, when they retract. And, from this moment on he forgot about Daniel; his thoughts were all for Jenny.

For some minutes they walked on without speaking, and to them the silent interval, though it lasted quite a while, seemed very short. But, when they wanted to pick up the fallen strand of conversation, they found their thoughts had wandered far afield, almost, it seemed, in opposite directions. Neither could find a word to break the silence.

It so happened that they were passing a garage; the road was lined with cars under repair and the noise of running engines gave little scope for conversation.

A decrepit, mangy old dog shambled across the grease-stains on the road towards Puce, and began to show an interest in her; Jenny picked up her little dog in her arms. No sooner had they passed the workshop entrance than they heard cries behind them. A skeleton chassis, driven by a youngster of fifteen, had clattered out of the repair-shop and swung round so sharply that, despite the lad's belated cry of warning, the old dog had no time to get out of the way. Jacques and Jenny, who had turned round at the cry, saw the chassis catch the unfortunate animal in the side and two wheels pass over his body in quick succession.

Jenny gave a scream of horror.

'Oh, he's killed! He's killed!'

'No. He's got up again.'

The dog had struggled up and fled in a blind panic, yelping and covered with blood. His shattered hindquarters trailed on the ground, making him move in zig-zags, collapsing every few yards.

Jenny's face was twitching and she went on crying monotonously:

'He's killed! Oh, he's killed!'

The dog turned into a courtyard, its cries grew less frequent, then ceased altogether. The garage hands, glad of an excuse for knocking off work, followed up the trail of blood. One of them went as far as the house with the courtyard and shouted:

'He's dead! Not a kick left!'

With a gesture of relief, Jenny let her dog slip from her arms, and they set off again towards the forest. The emotion they had shared brought them still nearer to each other.

'I shall never forget,' said Jacques, 'your face and your voice when you called out just now.'

'One loses one's head—it's silly. What did I say?'

'"He's killed!" That's an interesting point, isn't it? You'd seen the dog run over by the car, pounded into a shapeless, bleeding mass—that was the really sickening part of it. And yet the real tragedy began only at the moment, the dreadful moment, when the poor beast who'd been alive a second earlier had to lie down and die. Don't you agree? The most moving thing of all is the unknowable transition, the headlong fall from life into nothingness. It haunts us all, the terror of that moment; it's a sort of—of

mystical awe, always waiting on the threshold of our thoughts. Do you often think of death?’

‘Yes. Well, I mean . . . not so very often. Do you?’

‘Personally, I’m almost always thinking about it. Most of my thoughts bring me back to the idea of death. But’—he sounded discouraged—‘however often one comes back to it, it’s only a notion of the mind. . . .’ And there he left it. For the moment he looked almost handsome, his face aglow with fervour, a zest for life mingled with dread of death.

They walked a little way before she broke the silence.

‘I can’t think what’s brought it into my head—really it has nothing to do with what you were saying,’ she began in a hesitating voice. ‘But I’ve just remembered something . . . the first time I saw the sea. But perhaps Daniel’s told you already?’

‘No. Tell me about it.’

‘It’s ancient history, you know—when I was fourteen or fifteen. It was near the end of the holidays and mamma and I were going to join Daniel at Tréport. He’d asked us to get out at some station or other on the way, and met us there with a farm-cart. As he didn’t want to spoil my first impression of the sea by casual glimpses at the bends of the road, he blindfolded me—a silly idea, wasn’t it? After a while he told me to get down and led me by the hand. I followed him, stumbling at every step. A terrific gale lashed my face and there was a perfectly fiendish din, roaring and shrieking in my ears. I was scared to death and begged him not to take me any further. At last we came to the summit of the cliff, and Daniel slipped behind me and untied the handkerchief. Before my eyes lay the open sea and far beneath, where the cliff fell sheer, the waves were breaking on the rocks. On every side was sea, sea everywhere as far as eye could reach. I stopped breathing and collapsed into Daniel’s arms. It took me some minutes to come to, and then I started sobbing, sobbing. They had to take me home and put me to bed; I had a temperature. Mamma was terribly upset. But now—do you know?—I don’t regret it one bit; I feel I really know the sea.’

Jacques had never seen her thus; no trace of melancholy on her face, her look unclouded, almost ecstatic. Then, suddenly, the fervour died from her face.

Little by little Jacques was discovering an unknown Jenny. Her abrupt changes of mood, from reticence to sudden outbursts, brought to his mind a choked but copious spring, which only flowed in sudden gushes. Here lay, he guessed, the secret of that innate sadness which gave her face its contemplative air and lent such charm to her rare, transient smiles. And

suddenly the thought appalled him, that such a walk as this must have an end.

‘No need to hurry, is there?’ he tentatively suggested, now they had passed beneath the arch of the old forest gate. ‘Let’s take the long way round. I don’t mind betting you’ve never tried that lane.’

A sandy track, soft underfoot, led down into the darkness of a glen. Flanked at first by wide strips of grass, it narrowed as it went on. Here the trees thrived ill, their meagre leafage let the sunlight through on every side.

They walked on, not in the least troubled by their silence.

What’s come over me? Jenny was wondering. He’s so different from what I thought. Yes, he’s . . . he’s . . . But she could not find the word she wanted. How alike we are! she thought, with a strange thrill of certitude and joy. But then she grew anxious. What thoughts were in his mind?

But Jacques’ mind was empty, lulled by a bliss devoid of thoughts. He walked beside her and asked nothing more of life.

‘I’m afraid I’m taking you into one of the ugliest parts of the forest,’ he murmured at last.

She started at the sound of his voice and the same thought flashed across the minds of both: that their brief silence had been of crucial import for the vague dream that haunted both alike.

‘Yes, I agree with you,’ she replied.

‘Why, it isn’t even real grass!’ Jacques prodded the ground with his toecap. ‘It’s a sort of dog-grass.’

‘Well, Puce certainly seems to take to it—just look!’

They spoke at random; common words seemed to have completely changed their sense and value for them.

That’s a charming blue, thought Jacques, looking at her dress. How is it that a soft, greyish blue is so exactly *her* colour? Then his thoughts flew off at a tangent.

‘I want to tell you something!’ he exclaimed. ‘What makes me so dense is that I never can switch my attention off what’s going on in my mind.’

‘I’m just the same.’ Jenny fancied she was capping his remark. ‘I’m nearly always day-dreaming. I like it awfully; so do you, don’t you? The things I dream are quite my own and I like to feel I needn’t share them with anyone. Do you see what I mean?’

‘Yes, absolutely!’

A sweet-brier grew beside the lane; some branches were in flower and on one the tiny hips were forming. Jacques was in half a mind to proffer

them to her and quote: 'I bring thee flowers and fruit and leafy boughs. And with them all . . . my heart!' Then he would pause, observing her. But his courage failed him. When they had passed the bush, he said to himself: 'What a *littérateur* I am!'

'Do you like Verlaine?' he asked.

'Yes. *Sagesse*, that Daniel used to like so much, is my favourite.'

He murmured:

Beauté des femmes, leur faiblesse, et ces mains pâles
Qui font souvent le bien et peuvent tout le mal . . .

'And how about Mallarmé?' he continued, after a pause. 'I've quite a decent anthology of modern poets. Would you like me to bring it?'

'Yes.'

'Do you care for Baudelaire?'

'Not so much. He's rather like Whitman. Anyhow I don't know much of Baudelaire.'

'Have you read Whitman?'

'Daniel read me some of his poems last winter. I can quite understand Whitman's appeal for him. But, as for me——' Again the word 'impurity' which they had used a little while ago rose to their minds. How like me she is! Jacques thought.

'As for you,' he went on, 'that's just the reason why you don't like Whitman so much as he does, isn't it?'

She nodded, grateful to him for uttering her unspoken thought.

The pathway, wider now, debouched into a clearing where a bench was set between two oak-trees stripped of their foliage by caterpillars. Jenny threw her wide-brimmed hat of supple straw on to the grass, and sat down.

'There are times,' she exclaimed impulsively, as though she were thinking aloud, 'when I almost wonder how it is you're such a bosom friend of Daniel's.'

'Why?' He smiled. 'Do I strike you as being so very different from him?'

'Very different indeed—to-day.'

He lay down on a grassy bank a little way from her.

'My bosom friend . . .' he repeated musingly. 'Does he ever talk to you about me?'

'No. I mean, yes. Now and then.'

She blushed; but he was not looking her way.

‘Yes,’ he continued, nibbling a blade of grass, ‘nowadays there’s a solid bond of affection between us; it’s calm and tolerant. But we weren’t always like that.’ Pausing, he pointed to a snail, translucent as an agate, that, clinging to a grass-halm, timidly probed the sunlight with its viscid horns. ‘When I was working for the exam., you know,’ he added inconsequently, ‘I often used to think for weeks on end that I was going off my head; my brain was seething with such a ferment of ideas. And then—I was so lonely!’

‘But you were living with your brother, weren’t you?’

‘Yes, luckily enough. And I was quite free—that, too, was a stroke of luck. Otherwise I think I’d have gone mad, really mad. Or else run away.’

For the first time in her life she recalled the Marseilles escapade with something like indulgence.

‘I felt misunderstood.’ His voice grew sombre. ‘Misunderstood by everyone, even by my brother; often enough, even by Daniel, too.’

Just as I did! was her unspoken comment.

‘When I was in those moods I couldn’t summon up the faintest interest in my studies. I doped myself with reading—everything in Antoine’s library, all the books Daniel could supply. I must have sampled nearly every modern novelist, French, English and Russian. You simply can’t imagine the thrills I got from books! And, afterwards, everything else seemed so deadly dull—my tutors, all their pedantic fumbling with texts, their precious cult of respectability. No, most decidedly that wasn’t in my line at all!’ He talked about himself without a trace of self-conceit; like all young people he was full of himself and could imagine no keener pleasure than to dissect his personality under attentive eyes; and his pleasure was infectious. ‘Those were the days,’ he continued, ‘when I used to write Daniel thirty-page letters that I’d spent all night concocting. Letters where I poured out all my day’s enthusiasms and, most of all, disgusts. I suppose I ought to laugh at all that, now. But, no, I can’t.’ He pressed his hand against his forehead. ‘The life I led in those days made me suffer far too intensely for me to make my peace with it, as yet. I had Daniel give me back my letters and I read them over again! They read like the confessions of a madman in his lucid intervals. Sometimes there were several days between them, sometimes only a few hours. Each was a sort of volcanic outburst, the eruption of a mental crisis, and, often as not, in flat contradiction with the one that went before it. A religious crisis, really, for I’d just been soaking myself in the Gospels, or the Old Testament—or else in Comte and positivism. What a letter I wrote just after reading Emerson! I’d been through all the usual maladies of youth: a

galloping “Baudelairitis,” a sharp attack of Vinci. But none of them was chronic; they came and went! One day I rose a classicist and went to bed romantic, and made a secret holocaust of my Boileau and Malherbe in Antoine’s laboratory. I performed the rite in solitude, laughing like a fiend. Next day everything that had to do with literature seemed to me utterly stale and unprofitable. I started delving into geometry, from the primers on; I’d set my heart on unearthing new laws that would turn all previous theories inside out. Then I had a spell of poetizing. I wrote odes for Daniel, Horatian epistles of two hundred lines, dashed off with hardly one erasure. The oddest thing of all’—his voice had suddenly grown calm—‘was a pamphlet I composed in English, yes, entirely in English, and entitled “The Emancipation of the Individual in Relation to Society.” I gave it a preface, a short one, I grant, in—would you believe it?—modern Greek!’ (The last detail was untrue; he merely remembered his intention to compose such a preface.) He burst out laughing. ‘No, I’m not really so mad as I seem,’ he exclaimed after a pause. Then he fell silent again and, half laughingly, but without the least trace of vanity, declared: ‘Anyhow, I was quite different from the rest of them.’

Jenny was in a brown study, stroking her little dog. How often in the past had she pictured Jacques as a disturbing, almost a dangerous personality! Now, however, she could not but admit her views had changed; he had ceased to be alarming.

Jacques was stretched out on the grass, staring in front of him, glad to have unburdened his heart so freely.

‘Isn’t it pleasant here under the trees?’ he murmured lazily.

‘Yes. What’s the time?’

Neither of them had a watch. Anyhow they were at the confines of the park and need not hurry. From the bench Jenny could see the tops of two familiar chestnut-trees and, further on, the cedar beside the forester’s lodge, a tracery of palm-like foliage etched in black against the blue.

She bent towards the dog which was crouching against her skirt and took care not to look in Jacques’ direction when next she spoke.

‘Daniel has read me some of your poems.’

His silence was so portentous that now she could not help stealing a glance at him. A blush had mounted from cheeks to brow, to the peak-point of his hair, and he was glaring angrily about him. She, too, began to blush.

‘Oh, I shouldn’t have told you that!’ she exclaimed.

But already Jacques regretted his annoyance and was trying to overcome it; yet he could not bear to think that someone—and that someone, Jenny—

should choose to judge him by his fumbling first attempts; he was all the more touchy on this count because he knew only too well that he had never done himself justice—a thought that never ceased to rankle in his mind.

‘My poetry, why, it’s—rubbish!’ he exclaimed brutally. She did not protest or stir a finger; he was grateful for her reticence. ‘You must have a very poor opinion of me, if you . . . if anyone . . .’ He broke off, then passionately exclaimed: ‘Oh, if anyone could guess the things I mean to do!’ The all-absorbing topic, the woodland peace, Jenny’s proximity, stirred him to such emotion that his voice faltered and his eyes began to smart as if he were on the brink of tears. ‘Take, for instance,’ he went on after a pause, ‘take the people who congratulate me on getting into the Ecole Normale. You can’t imagine how I feel about all that! I’m ashamed of it. Yes, positively ashamed. Not merely ashamed of having got in at all, but of having bowed to . . . to the opinions of all those. . . . If you knew what they really are, those people! All shaped in the same mould, by the same books. Books and books and books! And to think I had to cringe to them! I! That I gave in to their . . . Just imagine it!’ Words failed him yet again. He fully realized that he had given no plausible motive for his aversion; the true and valid arguments for it had sunk their roots too deeply into his being to be dragged forth to order and paraded on the surface. ‘Yes, I despise the whole crowd of them!’ he exclaimed. ‘And myself still more for having had any truck with them. No, I shall never, never—yes, it’s unforgivable, all that!’

She kept her self-control the better for seeing him so uncontrolled. Though she had no clear insight into Jacques’ mind, she had noticed that he often gave vent to a vague rancour of this sort, and his reluctance to forgive. How he must have suffered! Yet—and this was the difference between them—his faith in the future and happiness in store was unmistakable. A ceaseless undertone of hope and confidence pervaded his invectives; boundless as his ambition might seem, it was untouched by doubt. Hitherto Jenny had never speculated on Jacques’ future, yet she was not surprised to learn that he aimed high, very high indeed; even in the days when she had thought of Jacques as a brutal, oafish schoolboy, she never failed to recognize that his was a force to be reckoned with. To-day his feverish outburst and her glimpse of the dark fires that preyed upon his heart made her feel dizzy; it was as if she, too, were being drawn against her will into a maelstrom of emotions. So vivid was the sense of insecurity it gave her that she stood up to go.

‘I’m awfully sorry,’ Jacques stammered nervously, ‘only, you see, I take these things so dreadfully to heart.’

Taking a path that closely followed, like a sentinel's beat, each zig-zag of the old-time fosse, they came to the further gate between the forest and the park; its iron grille bristled with spikes and the lock creaked like a dungeon bolt.

The sun was high, and it was only four o'clock; there was no necessity to end their walk so soon. What prompted them to choose a path that brought them home at once?

There were people strolling in the park and, though Jacques and Jenny had walked along the selfsame avenue on the previous day without the least self-consciousness, they both felt bashful now at the thought of being seen walking together by themselves.

'I say,' Jacques ventured when they came to a cross-roads, 'hadn't I better leave you now? What do you think?'

Her answer came promptly. 'Oh, yes. I'm practically home now.'

He stood before her, feeling, though he ignored the reason for it, rather ill at ease, forgetting even to raise his hat. Embarrassment brought back to his face the sullen, uncouth look that he so often wore but, during their walk, she had not once observed. He did not hold out his hand to her, but tried to smile and, just as he was turning away, ventured a timid glance in her direction.

'Oh why,' he murmured in a voice shaken by emotion, 'why can't I always be . . . like this . . . with you?'

Jenny did not seem to hear, but walked straight on, without one look behind, across the grass. That last remark of his—was it not almost word for word what, since yesterday, she had been saying to herself time and time again? But suddenly a surmise that she hardly dared put into words flashed into thought; supposing Jacques had meant: 'Why shouldn't I spend all my life with you beside me, as you've been to-day?' and the thought seared her mind like wildfire. She quickened her pace and fled for refuge to her bedroom; her limbs were trembling, her cheeks aflame, and she forbade herself to think.

The rest of her afternoon was spent in feverish bursts of energy; she reorganized her bedroom, changing the position of the furniture, tidied out the linen-cupboard on the landing, and replenished the flower-vases throughout the house. Now and again she picked up her little dog, hugged it to her breast and lavished caresses on it. When for the last time she glanced at the clock and it was certain Daniel would not be back for dinner, a mood of despair came over her. Unable to face the empty dining-room, she dined off a plate of strawberries on the terrace and, to escape the tedious agony of

the dying day, took refuge in the drawing-room, where she lit all the lamps. She picked up a Beethoven Album but, changing her mind, set it back on the shelf and ran to the piano with Chopin's *Etudes* under her arm. . . .

That evening daylight seemed exceptionally long in dying, for the moon had risen unseen behind the trees and, little by little, moonlight had effaced the last gleams of the sunset.

Without any definite plan in mind, Jacques slipped into his pocket the book of modern poems he had mentioned to Jenny. On such a night as this the tedium of the domestic scene was past endurance and he went out for a stroll into the park. He could not keep his wandering wits on any subject. In less than half an hour he found himself hurrying along the path between the acacias, with only one thought in his mind: Let's hope the gate hasn't been locked for the night!

It was not locked. When the bell tinkled he started like a trespasser caught red-handed. A warm, resinous fragrance, mingled with the acrid fume of anthills, drifted towards him from the shadow of the firs. Only the muted throb of a piano ruffled the stillness of the garden with faint sounds of life. Jenny and Daniel, he supposed, were having a musical evening together. The drawing-room lay on the far side of the house; all the windows facing Jacques were closed and the house seemed asleep. But, to his surprise, the roof was flooded with a ghostly light. Looking round, he saw the moon had risen above the tree-tops, spreading the tiles with a pale sheen and striking white fire from the dormer-windows. His heart beat faster as he neared the house; the thought of coming on them unawares abashed him, and he was relieved when Puce rushed up to him, barking. But there was no pause in the music; the sound of the piano must have drowned Puce's noisy greeting. Stooping, he took the little dog in his arms and lightly touched her silken forehead with his lips. Walking round a wing of the house, he reached the terrace on to which the tall french windows of the drawing-room opened. He moved towards the light, trying to recognize the piece that Jenny was playing. The melody seemed to hesitate, poised in mid-air between smiles and tears, to soar at last into an empyrean where joy and pain alike were meaningless.

When he reached the threshold it seemed as though the room were empty. At first he could see only the Persian shawl that draped the piano, and the knick-knacks standing on it. Then, in the gap between two vases, he made out a face, wraithlike in the misty candle-light—Jenny's face convulsed by the stresses of her inward vision. Her expression was so unstudied, so bare of all disguise, that he recoiled instinctively; it was as if he had surprised her naked.

Pressing the little dog to his shoulder and trembling like a thief, he waited outside the house under cover of the shadows till she had finished playing. Then he called loudly to Puce to make it seem that he had only just entered the garden.

Jenny started when she recognized his voice and stood up hurriedly. Her face still bore traces of the emotion felt in solitude, and her startled eyes parried Jacques' gaze, as though to keep inviolate their secret.

'I hope I didn't startle you,' he said.

She frowned, but could not utter a word.

'Isn't Daniel back yet?' he asked, adding, after a pause: 'Here's the anthology I spoke about this afternoon.'

He fumbled in his pocket and produced the book. Taking it, she fluttered the pages mechanically, without sitting down or asking him to do so. Jacques realized that he had better go, and retreated to the terrace. Jenny followed.

'Please don't bother to see me to the gate,' he stammered nervously.

But she persisted in accompanying him, for she fancied this the quickest way to have done with it, and somehow did not dare hold out her hand and break off then and there. Once they were clear of the trees the moonlight was so bright that, when he turned to Jenny, he could see her eyelashes fluttering. The blue dress seemed unreal, spectral pale.

They crossed the garden in silence. Jacques opened the postern-gate and stepped outside. Jenny followed him unthinkingly and stood in the middle of the narrow road, haloed with moonlight. Then, on the whitely gleaming wall, he saw a graceful shadow, Jenny's profile, neck and chin, her plaited hair, even the set of her lips—like a silhouette cut in black velvet, exact in every detail. He pointed to it. Suddenly a fantastic notion stirred in his mind and, without giving himself time to reflect, ardent with the temerity that only visits timid natures, he bent towards the wall and kissed the shadow of the beloved face.

Jenny stepped back hastily, as though to wrest her shadow from his lips, and vanished through the doorway. The moonlit vista of the garden faded as the gate swung to. Jacques listened to her flying steps along the gravelled path and then he, too, launched himself into the darkness.

He was laughing.

Jenny ran and ran as though all the phantoms, black and white, haunting the eerie silence of the garden, were at her heels. She fled into the house, ran upstairs to her room, flung herself on the bed. She was shivering, in a cold sweat, there was a pain at her heart and she pressed her trembling hands

against her bosom, crushing her forehead against the pillow. Her whole will was bent on one aim only: to forget. A sense of shame oppressed her, checking her rising tears. A feeling till then unknown had mastered her: fear of herself.

Downstairs Puce was barking; Daniel had come home.

Jenny heard him climb the stairs, humming a tune, and pause a moment at her door. No light showed through the chinks; thinking his sister was asleep, he dared not knock. But then—why were the drawing-room lamps alight? Jenny did not move; she wanted to be left alone, in the darkness. But, when she heard her brother's steps recede, an anguish gripped her heart and she jumped down from the bed.

‘Daniel!’

The light of the lamp he was holding revealed her haggard face and staring eyes. It struck him that his late return must have alarmed his sister and he fumbled for excuses. She cut him short.

‘No. I’m all nerves to-night.’ Her voice was shrill. ‘That friend of yours! I couldn’t get rid of him, he kept following me, he stuck to me like a leech.’ White with rage, she rapped out every syllable. Then a sudden flush spread on her cheeks and she began to sob. Worn out by her emotion, she sank on to the edge of the bed. ‘Daniel, I beg you, tell him . . . ! Send him away! I can’t, no, I simply can’t. . . . !’

He stared at her perplexedly, struggling to guess what might have passed between them.

‘But—what is it?’ he murmured. A suspicion flitted across his mind, but he hardly dared give words to it. He screwed his lips into a forced smile. ‘Poor old Jacques!’ he suggested tentatively. ‘Why, I shouldn’t wonder if he’s . . .’

He had no need to end the sentence; the tone conveyed his meaning well enough. To his surprise, Jenny betrayed no emotion; her eyes were lowered and she seemed indifferent. She was pulling herself together. When her silence had lasted so long that he had ceased to expect an answer, she spoke.

‘Possibly.’ Her voice had regained its usual intonation.

So she’s in love with him! Daniel thought, and so amazing was the discovery that it left him speechless, dumbfounded. But at that moment Jenny’s eyes met his and read his thought. It spurred her to revolt; an angry light flashed into her eyes, her look grew challenging. She did not raise her voice, but her eyes bored into Daniel’s and she shook her head peremptorily.

‘Never! Never! Never!’

Daniel seemed unconvinced, and his face wore a look of affection and elder-brotherly concern that stung her like an insult; she went up to him, settled a vagrant lock of hair upon his forehead and patted his cheek.

‘Anyhow tell me, you ridiculous old thing, have you had dinner yet?’

9

STANDING in front of the fireplace, in pyjamas, Antoine was chopping up a slab of plum-cake with a Malayan kris.

Rachel yawned.

‘A thick one for me, Toine dear,’ she murmured lazily. She was lying on the bed, naked, her hands behind her head.

The window stood wide open but, mellowed by the drawn blind, the light inside the room was golden, like the warm twilight of a tent under the sun. Paris was sweltering in the blaze of an August Sunday. No sound came from the streets below and the house, too, was silent, empty perhaps but for the flat above; there, no doubt, Aline was reading the newspaper aloud for the benefit of Mme. Chasle and the little invalid who, though convalescent, had to lie flat for some weeks yet.

‘I’m starving!’ Rachel murmured, exhibiting an open mouth, pink as a cat’s.

‘The water can’t have boiled yet.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Give me one!’

He tipped a thick slice of cake on to the plate and placed it on the edge of the bed. Slowly, without rising, she slewed her head and shoulders round and, leaning on her elbow, with her head thrown back, began to eat, rolling pellets of cake between her fingers and letting them drop into her open mouth.

‘How about you, dear?’

‘Oh, I’ll wait till the tea’s ready,’ he replied, sinking among the cushions on the easy-chair.

‘Tired?’

He answered her with a smile.

The bed was low and open on all sides, and the alcove hung with curtains of pink silk, setting off Rachel's nakedness in all its splendour; she might have been some fabled daughter of the sea, ensconced within a glimmering shell.

'If I were a painter . . .' Antoine murmured.

'That settles it; you *must* be tired.' A smile came and went on Rachel's face. 'When you start being artistic, it always means you're tired.'

She flung her head back, and her face, framed in the fiery halo of her hair, was lost in shadows. A pearly lustre emanated from her body. Her right leg lay in an easy, flowing curve upon the mattress, sinking a little into it; the other, flexed and drawn up in the opposite direction, displayed the graceful outline of her thigh, lifting an ivory knee towards the sunlight.

'I'm hungry,' she whimpered. But, when he went to the bed to fetch her empty plate, she flung her strong arms round his neck and drew his face towards her.

'Oh, that beard of yours!' she exclaimed, but did not let him go. 'When shall we abate the nuisance?'

He stood up, cast an anxious look at the glass, and brought her another slice of cake.

'Yes, it's just that I like so much in you,' he declared, watching her teeth close on an ample mouthful.

'My appetite?'

'No, your fitness. Your body with its splendid circulation. You're bracing, like a tonic. . . . I'm pretty well-built, too,' he added, and, turning to the mirror, viewed his reflected self. Squaring his shoulders, he straightened up his chest and puffed it out, but failed to realize how undersized his limbs appeared in proportion to his head; he always persuaded himself that his physique as a whole had the same look of vigour as the facial expression he had cultivated. During the past two weeks his sense of power and plenitude had been stimulated beyond all measure by the emotions love engendered. 'Do you know,' he concluded, 'you and I are built to see a century through?'

'Together?' she whispered, with half-shut, tender eyes. And then a passing shadow dimmed her happiness: the dread that one day his appeal for her, the source of so much present joy, might lose its power.

Opening her eyes, she lightly stroked her legs, running her palms over the lissom skin.

‘Personally,’ she declared, ‘if no one murders me, I’m certain to die old. Father was seventy-two when I lost him and he was hale as a man of fifty. He died quite by accident, really—the after-effects of a sunstroke. As a matter of fact it runs in our family, death by misadventure, I mean. My brother was drowned. I shan’t die in my bed, either; a revolver-shot will be the end of me, I feel it in my bones.’

‘How about your mother?’

‘Mother? She’s very much alive. Every time I see her she looks younger. No wonder, of course, considering the life she leads.’ Her voice had a curious inflexion as she added: ‘She’s shut up—at Saint Anne’s.’

‘The asylum?’

‘Hadn’t I told you?’ Her smile seemed almost apologetic and she made haste to satisfy his curiosity. ‘She’s been there for seventeen years. I can hardly remember what she was like—before. When one’s only nine, you know . . . Anyhow she’s cheerful, doesn’t seem to worry in the least, always singing. Yes, as a family, we’re a tough lot! I say, the water’s boiling!’

He hurried to the gas-ring and, while the tea was brewing, surveyed himself in the dressing-table glass, covering his beard with his hand to see how he would look clean-shaven. No. It suited him, that dark mass at the bottom of his face; it emphasized so well the pale rectangle of his forehead, the curve of his eyebrows, and his eyes. Moreover, some instinct made him chary of unmasking his mouth—almost as if it were a secret better kept concealed.

Rachel sat up to drink her tea, then lit a cigarette and stretched herself again on the bed.

‘Come near me. What are you up to, mooning about over there?’

Gaily he slipped beside her and bent above her face. In the warm alcove the perfume of her loosened hair enveloped him, honey-sweet yet piquant, clinging and almost cloying; sometimes he ached for it and sometimes turned away, for, if he inhaled it too long, it left his throat and lungs filmed with a bitter-sweet aroma.

‘What are you after now?’ she asked.

‘I’m looking at you.’

‘Toine darling!’

When their lips parted he bent over her again, gazing down at her with insatiable eyes.

‘What on earth are you staring at like that?’

‘I’m trying to make out your pupils.’

‘Are they so hard to find?’

‘Yes; it’s because of your eyelashes. They form a sort of golden haze in front of your eyes. That’s what makes you look so . . .’

‘So what?’

‘So sphinx-like.’

She gave a little shrug.

‘My pupils are blue, if you want to know.’

‘So you say.’

‘Silvery blue.’

‘Not a bit of it!’ He set his lips to Rachel’s, then teasingly withdrew them. ‘Sometimes they look grey, and sometimes mauve. A muzzy sort of colour . . . blurred.’

‘Thanks very much!’ Laughing, she rolled her eyes from side to side.

He gazed at her musingly. ‘Only a fortnight,’ he said to himself, ‘but it seems like months. Yet I couldn’t have described the colour of her eyes. And her life—what do I know of it? Twenty-six years she’s lived without me, in a world so different from mine. Years crowded with a host of things, adventurous years. Mysteries, too, that I’m beginning to discover, bit by bit.’ He would not admit the pleasure each discovery afforded him; still less give her an inkling of his pleasure: He never asked her anything, but she was always ready to talk about herself. He listened, ruminated, set facts and dates together, trying to understand, but above all amazed, taken aback at every turn. He was at pains to hide his wonder, but it was not chicanery that prompted him to do so. For years now his pose had been that of the man who understands everything; the only people he had learned to question were his patients. Surprise and curiosity were feelings that his pride had taught him to conceal, as best he might, under a mask of quiet interest and knowingness.

‘One would think you’d never seen me before, the way you’re staring at me to-day,’ she said. ‘That’s enough, drop it now for goodness’ sake!’

Under his scrutiny she was growing restive and, to escape it, shut her eyes. He began prising her lids apart with his fingers.

‘Look here! That’s quite enough of it! I won’t have your eyes prying into mine like that.’ She crooked her arm over her eyes.

‘So you want to keep me in the dark, little sphinx?’ He sprinkled kisses on the shining, shapely arm, from shoulder to wrist.

Secretive, is she? he asked himself. No, a trifle reserved, but not secretive. Quite the contrary; she likes chattering about herself. In fact she

gets more talkative every day. And that's because she loves me, he thought delightedly. Because she loves me. . . .

Putting her arm round his neck, she drew his face beside hers once more. When she spoke again, there was a graver note in her voice.

'That's a fact, you know; one has no idea how one can give oneself away in a mere look.' She paused. He heard, deep down in her throat, the silent little laugh which so often preceded her evocations of the past. 'That reminds me. . . . It was by his look, just the look on his face, that I hit upon the secret of a man with whom I'd been living for months. At a table, in a Bordeaux restaurant. We were facing each other, talking. Our eyes were going to and fro, from the plates to each other's faces, or glancing round the room. Suddenly—I'll never forget it—for the fraction of a second I caught his eyes fixed on a point behind me, with an expression . . . I was so startled that I couldn't help turning in my chair to see.'

'Well?'

'Well, that just shows,' she continued in a changed voice, that one should mind the look in one's eyes.'

'And what did you find out?' The question was on the tip of Antoine's tongue, but he dared not utter it. He had a morbid dread of making himself ridiculous by putting futile questions. Once or twice already he had ventured to ask for explanations at such moments and Rachel had looked at him with surprise, followed by amusement, laughing with an air of gentle mockery that deeply galled him.

So he held his tongue and it was she who broke the silence.

'All those old memories give me the blues. Kiss me. Again. Better than that.' But evidently the subject had not left her thoughts, for she added: 'As a matter of fact, I shouldn't have said "his secret," but "one of his secrets." You could never get to the bottom of that man's mind.'

Then, to break away from the past and, perhaps, to elude Antoine's unspoken query, she rolled right over on the bed, with a slow, lithe, snake-like wriggle of all her body.

'How supple you are!' He stroked her body appreciatively, like a fancier stroking a thoroughbred.

'Yes? Did you know I'd had ten years' training at the Opera School of Dancing?'

'What? At Paris?'

'Yes, my lad! What's more, when I left I was a leading *ballerina*!'

'Was that long ago?'

‘Six years.’

‘Why did you give it up?’

‘My legs.’ Her face darkened for a moment. ‘After that, I almost joined a circus—as a trick-rider,’ she continued quickly. ‘Are you surprised?’

‘Not a bit,’ he replied coolly. ‘What circus was it?’

‘Oh, not a French one. A big international show that Hirsch was touring all over the world at the time. Hirsch, you know—that’s the fellow I told you about, who’s settled in the Sudan. He wanted to exploit my talent, but I wasn’t taking any!’ While she spoke, she amused herself crooking and straightening out each leg in turn with the effortless agility of a trained gymnast. ‘What gave him the idea was that he’d persuaded me to try my hand at trick-riding some time before that, at Neuilly. I loved it. We had a fine stable then, and we made the most of it, you may be sure!’

‘Were you living at Neuilly?’

‘No; but he was. He owned the Neuilly riding-school in those days; he was always mad keen on horses. So was I. Are you?’

‘I ride a bit,’ he replied, straightening his back. ‘But I haven’t had many opportunities for getting on a horse—or the time for it.’

‘Well, I had opportunities all right. And to spare. Why, we were once on horseback for twenty-two days on end!’

‘Where was that?’

‘At the back of beyond. In Morocco.’

‘So you’ve been to Morocco?’

‘Twice. Hirsch was selling obsolete “Gras” rifles to the tribes in the South, and an exciting job it was! Once there was a regular pitched battle round our camp. We were under fire for twenty-four hours; no, all night and the following morning. They don’t often make night-attacks. It was a terrifying business; we couldn’t see a thing. They killed seventeen of our bearers and wounded over thirty of them. I threw myself between the crates of rifles at each volley. But they got me all right!’

‘What? You were wounded?’

‘Yes.’ She laughed. ‘Only a scratch it was.’ She pointed to a silky scar on the line of her waist, just under the ribs.

‘Why did you tell me you’d had a carriage-accident?’ Antoine enquired unsmilingly.

‘Oh!’ she exclaimed with a little shrug, ‘that was our first day together. You’d have thought I was trying to show off.’

They were silent. So she’s capable of lying to me, Antoine thought.

Rachel's eyes grew darkly pensive, then suddenly brightened again—but with a glint of hatred that quickly came and went.

'He'd got it into his head that I'd follow him anywhere and always. Well, he was wrong.'

Antoine felt an uneasy satisfaction every time she cast such rancorous glances at her former life. 'Stay with me—always!' he felt inclined to say. Pressing his cheek against the little scar, he waited. His ear, true to its professional training, followed the languid vascular flux and reflux murmuring deep down in her chest, and heard, remote yet clear, the full-toned throbbing of her heart. His nostrils quivered. On the warm bed all Rachel's body breathed the perfume of her hair, but subtler, more subdued; a faint, yet maddening odour with a tang of spices in it, a humid fragrance redolent of a curious range of scents—hazel-leaves, fresh butter, pitch-pine and vanilla candy; less of a perfume, truth to tell, than a fine vapour, almost a flavour, leaving an after-taste of spices on the lips.

'Let's drop the subject,' she said. 'Give me a cigarette. No, the ones on the little table. They're made by a girl I know; she puts a dash of green tea in with the Virginia leaf. They smell of burning leaves, camp-fires and—yes, that's it—shooting-parties in September; the smell of gunpowder, you know, when you shoot the coverts and the smoke hangs in the mist.'

He stretched himself out beside her under the smoke-rings, and his hands caressed the almost phosphorescent whiteness, hardly pink at all, of Rachel's belly, ample as a vase turned on the potter's wheel. She had acquired, probably in the course of her travels, the habit of Eastern unguents and, in its maturity, her skin still kept the fresh and flawless smoothness of a young child's body.

'*Umbilicus sicut crater eburneus*,' he murmured, recalling as best he could the sonorous Latin of the Vulgate which had so thrilled him in his sixteenth year. '*Venter tuus sicut*—like a what?—*sicut cupa*.'

'What on earth does it mean?' She sat up on the bed. 'Wait a bit! I'll try and guess. *Culpa*; I know that word. *Mea culpa*, that's it; a fault, a sin. "Thy belly is a sin," eh?'

He burst out laughing. Since she had come into his life, he no longer kept a hold on his high spirits.

'No, *cupa*. "Thy belly is like a goblet,"' he amended, leaning his head on Rachel's hip, and proceeded with his slightly garbled versions of the Song of Solomon. '*Quam pulchrae sunt mammae tuae soror mea!* "How beautiful are thy two breasts, my sister!" *Sicut duo* (what's the Latin for

them?) *gemelli qui pascuntur in liliis*. “Like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies.”’

Delicately she held them up, first one and then the other, with a tender little smile for each, as if they were two friendly little animals.

‘They’re awfully rare, you know, pink tips like that—really pink, like the buds on apple-trees,’ she declared with almost judicial gravity. ‘As a doctor, you must have noticed that.’

‘Yes, I believe you’re right. A skin without pigmental granulation. White on white, with pink shadows.’ Shutting his eyes, he crushed himself against her. ‘Soft, soft shoulders . . .’ he murmured sleepily. ‘I can’t bear flappers with their skimpy little shoulders.’

‘Sure?’

‘I love your delicious plumpness, every curve’s so smooth and firm; its texture’s like . . . like soap! Don’t move; I’m comfy.’

Suddenly a galling memory crossed his mind. ‘Like soap!’ . . . A few days after Dédette’s accident he had travelled with Daniel from Maisons to Paris. They were alone in the compartment. Antoine’s mind was full of Rachel and the thought that now at last he could regale this expert amorist with an adventure of his own had proved too tempting; he could not contain himself, but launched into an account that lasted out the journey, of his dramatic night, the operation *in extremis*, the anxious vigil at the child’s bedside and his sudden passion for the handsome red-haired girl dozing beside him on the couch. Then he had used those very words, ‘delicious plumpness,’ ‘texture like soap.’ But he had not dared to tell Daniel of what followed; describing how, as he went down the stairs, he noticed Rachel’s open door, he had added—less from motives of discretion than an absurd anxiety to prove his strength of will—: ‘Did she expect me? Should I take the opportunity? Anyhow, I sized things up, pretended not to see, and passed the door. What would you have done in my place?’ Then Daniel, who so far had heard him out in silence, looked him up and down, and rapped out: ‘Why, I’d have acted just as you did—you humbug!’

Daniel’s exclamation echoed in his ears, sceptical, ironic, almost cutting, but with just the touch of geniality it needed not to be offensive. Whenever he recalled it, it stung him to the quick. A humbug! Well, of course he was apt to lie upon occasion; or, more accurately, to catch himself out lying. . . .

Meanwhile, that ‘delicious plumpness’ had given Rachel, too, to think.

‘I’ll grow into a fat old dame, quite likely,’ she said. ‘Jews, you know. . . . Still my mother wasn’t fat and I’m only half a sheeny. But you

should have seen me sixteen years ago when I joined the beginners' class. A regular little pink mouse I looked!

She slipped off the bed before he had a chance of stopping her.

'What's up?'

'I've got an idea . . .'

'Anyhow you might give a fellow some warning.'

'Least said, soonest mended.' Laughing, she eluded his outstretched arm.

'Lulu dear . . . Come back and sleep a bit,' he murmured lazily.

'No more bye-bye to-day! Closing time!' She slipped into her wrap.

She ran to her desk, unlocked it and pulled out a drawer full of photographs. Then she came back and sat on the edge of the bed, resting the drawer on her knees.

'I love looking over old photos. Some nights I take the whole collection to bed with me and spend hour after hour turning them over, thinking. Don't move! Have a look at them too, if it won't bore you.'

Antoine, who had been lying curled up on the bed behind her, sat up at once; his interest was aroused and, resting his arms on the mattress, he settled into a comfortable position. As Rachel pored over her photographs he saw her in profile; her face had grown earnest and her drooping lashes showed like a faint filigree in pale gamboge along her slotted eyes. She had hastily put up her hair; against the light it shone like a chain-helmet woven of fine-spun silk, and almost orange-red; at every movement sparks seemed to flicker round her neck and at the corners of her temples.

'Here's the one I was hunting for. See that little ballet-girl? It's me! I got a rare telling-off that day, as a matter of fact, for spoiling the flounces of my ballet-skirt, crushing them against the wall like that. Aren't I weird with my elbows like pin-points, my hair all over my shoulders and that flat, high-cut bodice? I don't look over-cheerful, do I? Look here, that's me in my third year; my calves were filling out a bit. Here's the dancing-class, the bunch of us lined up along the practice-bar. Can you spot me amongst them? Yes, that's me. That's Louise over there—the name doesn't mean anything to you, eh? Well, you're looking at the famous Phytie Bella; we went through the school together and in those days she was just plain Louise to us. Louie, for short. We ran neck to neck for the first place. Yes, I might have been their star dancer to-day, only for my phlebitis. . . . Like to have a look at Hirsch? Ah, now you're interested, I can see. Here he is. What do you think of him? I'm sure you didn't guess he was so old. But, for all that he's fifty, there's lots of kick in the old dog yet, you may take my word for it.

Loathsome creature! Look at that neck, that bull's neck of his wedged between his shoulders; when he turns his head all the rest goes round with it. At first sight you might take him for almost anything—a horse-coper, or a trainer, perhaps—don't you think so? His daughter was always saying to him: "Your Royal Highness reminds me of a slave-dealer!" That used to start him laughing every time, with that fat stomach-laugh of his. But they're worth looking at—his skull and that hook nose like a hawk's, the curve of his lips. Ugly, I grant you, but he's got *style* all right. Just look at his eyes; he'd seem even more of a brute if it wasn't for that—well, the kind of eyes he has; I don't know how to describe them. And doesn't he look self-confident, a real tough customer, hot-tempered, too? What? Hot-tempered and sensual as they're made. How that man loves life! For all my loathing of him I can't help saying what one says of some kinds of bull-dog; "He's so ugly that he's a beauty!" Don't you agree? Hullo, that's papa! Papa with his work-girls round him. That's how he always was; in his shirt-sleeves, with his little white beard and scissors dangling. He'd build you a fancy-dress with a couple of dish-clouts and half a dozen pins. That was taken in the work-room. Do you see the draped lay-figure at the end of the room, and the designs on the walls? He'd been appointed costumier at the Opera and given up working for private customers. Just go and ask the Opera people what they thought of old Father Goepfert in those days! When my mother had to be put away and he and I were left alone, he wanted to take me on as his partner, poor old chap; he meant to leave the business to me. A good paying business it was; it's thanks to it that I can carry on now without working. But you know how it would affect a kid—seeing actresses about the place all day. I'd only one ambition: to be a dancer. He let me have my way; what's more he got old Madame Staub to take me under her wing, and it was a real joy to him to see me getting on so well at it. He was always harping on my career. Well, it's a good thing the poor old boy can't see how I've gone downhill since those days. I cried, you know, when I had to give up dancing. Women as a rule haven't much ambition; they take things as they come. But, on the stage, we're at it all the time—struggling to make good; and one soon gets to enjoy the struggle as much as one's actual successes. So it seems the end of the world when one has to say good-bye to all that and live a humdrum life with nothing to look forward to. Look, here are my travel photos! All in a jumble, of course! There we're having lunch; I'm not sure where—in the Carpathians, I think. Hirsch was on a shooting trip. He sported a long, drooping moustache in those days; rather like a Sultan, isn't he? The Prince always addressed him as "Mahomed." Do you see that sunburnt fellow standing behind me? It's Prince Peter, who became King of Servia. He gave me the two white whippets lying down in front; see the way

they're curled up—just like you! That man there, who's laughing, don't you think he's very like me? Look hard! No? Well, it's my brother all the same. He was dark like papa, while I take after mother—fair; well it's auburn, if you like. Don't be so absurd! Oh well, have it your own way; carrotty! But I've inherited my father's character, and my brother took after mother. Look, he comes out better in this one. . . . I've no photo of mother, not one; papa destroyed the lot. He never spoke of her to me, or took me to Saint Anne's. But all the same he used to go and see her there, himself, twice a week; year in, year out, he never missed a visit. The attendants told me about it, later. He used to sit there in front of her for an hour—sometimes longer. Quite futile it was, as she didn't recognize him or anyone else. But he simply adored her. He was much older than she. He never got over the worry she gave him. One evening, I remember it so well, papa was sent for, at the work-room, as mother'd been arrested. She had been caught stealing from a counter at the Louvre Stores. What a to-do! Madame Goepfert, the costume-maker at the Opera—just think! They found a child's jersey and a pair of socks in her muff. She was released at once; a fit of kleptomania, they said. You know all about that of course. That was the beginning of her breakdown. Well, my brother took after her in many ways. He got into dreadful trouble with a bank. Hirsch helped him out. But he'd have gone mother's way sooner or later, if there hadn't been that accident. No, leave that one alone! Drop it, there's a good man! I tell you, it's not a photo of me; it's . . . it's a little godchild, who died. Look at this one instead. It's . . . it was taken . . . just outside Tangiers. No, don't take any notice, Toine dear, it's over now; I've stopped crying, can't you see I've stopped? The Bubana plain, our camp by the Si Guebbas caravanserai. That's me; beside the Marabout of Sidi-Bel-Abbès. Do you see Marrakesh in the background? What do you think of this one? It was taken near Missum-Missum, or it might be Dongo; I can't remember. Those are two Dzem chiefs, and a rare job I had taking 'em! They're cannibals; oh yes, they still exist all right! Now that's a ghastly one! Look, don't you see? Just there, that little heap of stones. Got it? Well, there's a woman beneath that heap. Stoned to death. Horrible, isn't it? Try to imagine it—a decentish sort of woman whom her husband had deserted for no earthly reason three years before. He'd vanished and, as she thought he was dead, she'd married again. Two years later he came back. Bigamy in those tribes is reckoned the crime of crimes. So they stoned her. Hirsch made me come to Meched just to see it, but I took to my heels and stayed half a mile away. I'd seen the woman dragged through the village the morning before the execution, and that was sickening enough, I assure you. But he saw it out; yes, he pushed his way to the front. Listen! It seems they dug a hole, a very deep hole, and led the woman to it.

She lay down in it of her own accord, without saying a word. Would you believe it? She didn't utter a sound, but the crowd were yelling for her death so loudly that I could hear them, even at that distance away. Their high-priest gave the lead. First of all he read out the sentence. Then he picked up a huge boulder and hurled it with all his force into the hole. Hirsch told me she didn't utter a cry. That started the crowd off. They'd big piles of stones stacked up ready, and each of them took what he wanted there and flung his quota into the hole. Hirsch swore to me that, for his part, he didn't throw any. When the hole was full—brimming over, as you can see—they stamped it down, yelling all the time, and then they all decamped. Hirsch insisted on my coming back to take a snapshot, as it was I who had the camera. I had to give in. Why, even now the mere thought of it sets my heart palpitating—don't you feel it? There she lay, under those stones. Dead, most likely. . . . No, not that one! Hands off!

Antoine, craning his neck over Rachel's shoulder, had just time to catch a glimpse of tangled, naked limbs before Rachel deftly clapped her hands over his eyes. The warmth of her palms upon his eyelids brought back to him, with less of feverish insistence but in all else the same, her gesture at the climax of her ecstasy, to veil from her lover's eyes the passion on her face. He made a playful effort to free himself. Suddenly she sprang down from the bed, pressing to her dressing-gown a sheaf of photographs tied up together. Laughing, she ran to the desk, slipped the package into a drawer and turned the key.

'For one thing,' she explained, 'they aren't mine. I've no rights over them at all.'

'Whose are they?'

'They belong to Hirsch.'

She returned and sat at Antoine's side.

'Now will you promise to be sensible? I'll carry on, then. Sure you're not bored? Look here; that's another travel picture of sorts. A donkey-ride in the Saint-Cloud woods. As you can see, those kimono sleeves were just coming in. That was a fetching little dress I'd on, wasn't it now?'

ALWAYS, MME. de Fontanin mused, I am lying to myself; were I to face the facts, I'd give up hope.

Standing at a window of the drawing-room, she observed across the silk-net curtain the trio in the garden, Jerome, Daniel and Jenny, pacing to and fro.

'How easily even the most honest of us can make themselves at home in a world of lies!' she murmured. But, just as she so often failed to hold in check a rising smile, so now she could not stem the tide of happiness that, wave on wave, came surging through her heart.

Leaving the window she went out to the terrace. It was the hour when eyes grow tired of trying to discern the forms of things, and on an iridescent sky some pale and early stars were glimmering. Mme. de Fontanin sat down, letting her eyes linger for a moment on the familiar scene. Then she sighed. Only too well she knew Jerome would not continue living at her side as for the past fortnight he had done; that this renewal of their home life would prove short-lived, as ever. For did she not discern, with mingled joy and apprehension, in his whole attitude towards her, yes, even in his sedulous affection, the selfsame Jerome that she had always known? Did it not prove that he had never changed and soon would leave her once again? Already the crestfallen, ageing Jerome whom she had brought back home with her from Holland, the husband who had clung to her for succour like a drowning man, was changed out of recognition. Even now, though in her presence he might affect the manner of a contrite child, and despite the seemly sighs of resignation that escaped him when he remembered his bereavement—even now he had unpacked a summer suit, and (though he was unaware of it) was looking vastly younger. 'Why not call for Jenny at the club this morning? That will give you a nice walk,' she had suggested. True, he had feigned indifference; yet he had risen without demur, and presently she had seen him walking briskly away, in white flannel trousers and a light coat, holding himself erect. Yes, she had even caught him picking a sprig of jessamine for his buttonhole!

Just then Daniel, who had noticed that his mother was alone, came up to her. Since Jerome's return Mme. de Fontanin had felt rather ill at ease in her relations with her son. Daniel had noticed this and, as a result, was coming oftener to Maisons and doing his utmost to show himself more attentive than ever to his mother. He wished to make it clear to her that he quite grasped the situation, and blamed her not at all.

Stretching himself full length in a low deck-chair, his favourite seat, he lit a cigarette and smiled towards his mother. . . . How like his father's are his hands and gestures! she thought.

‘Will you be leaving us again to-night, dear boy?’

‘Yes, mother, I must. I’ve an appointment early to-morrow morning.’

He fell to talking of his work—a thing he rarely did; he was preparing for the autumn season a special number of *Progressive Art*, devoted to the newest schools of European painting, and found the choice of the abundant illustrations that would accompany the text a thrilling task. But the theme was soon talked out.

The silence was murmurous with the vague sounds of evening, and the shrill chorus of the crickets in the forest fosse below the terrace dominated all the rest. Now and again a vagrant breeze wafted towards them from the firs a tang of toasted spices, rustled the fibrous plane-leaves and shreds of bark across the sand. Swiftly, on flaccid wings, a bat swooped down and lightly brushed Mme. de Fontanin’s hair; she could not repress a cry of alarm.

‘Will you be here on Sunday?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I’ll come back to-morrow and stay two days.’

‘You should ask your friend to lunch. I met him, by the bye, in the village, yesterday.’ And, partly because she really thought it, partly because she credited Jacques with all the qualities she thought to see in Antoine, and—last, but not least—wishing to please her son, she added; ‘What a sincere, noble-minded fellow he is! We had quite a long walk together.’ Daniel’s face fell, for he remembered Jenny’s outburst the evening after her walk with Jacques across the forest.

What an ill-developed, ill-starred, ill-balanced mind Jenny has! he mused regretfully; old beyond her years with thought and solitude and reading! Yet she knows nothing, nothing at all of life. But what can I do? She doesn’t trust me now, as she used to. If only she had a solid constitution! But she’s all nerves, like a little girl. And full of romantic ideas! She refuses to explain herself, prefers to fancy she’s ‘misunderstood.’ A sort of uncommunicative pride it is, that’s poisoning her life; or is it only a hang-over from the awkward age?

He rose from his chair and moved to his mother’s side, feeling it his duty to let her know.

‘Tell me, mother, have you noticed anything special in Jacques’ attitude towards you . . . and towards Jenny?’

‘Towards Jenny?’ Mme. de Fontanin echoed Daniel’s words and, as they sank into her consciousness, they seemed to crystallize around a dim, unformulated fear. Less than a fear, perhaps—one of the transient impressions whose purport her keenly sensitive mind had noted, but without

putting it into words. A spasm of anguish gripped her heart; and at once her faith took wing towards the Spirit. 'Forsake us not!' she prayed.

The others came up to them.

'Hadn't you better cover yourself up a bit more, sweetheart?' Jerome exclaimed. 'You must be careful; it's turned much cooler than usual this evening.'

He went to the hall and fetched a scarf, which he wrapped round his wife's shoulders. It happened that the long wicker chair in which, on the doctor's orders, Jenny rested after meals had been left under the plane-trees. No sooner did Jerome catch sight of her, dragging it across the sand, than he hurried to her aid and helped her to settle down in it.

But he had found it a none too easy task to tame her wild bird's nature. The bond uniting Jenny with her mother had been so close throughout her early years that, even as a mere child, she had always judged her father without lenience. Jerome, however, delighted with his new-found daughter just ripening into womanhood, had been all attention, cajoled her with his subtlest methods of approach, and with so good a grace, such tact, that Jenny had been touched. To-day, indeed, father and daughter had talked without reserve, like bosom friends, and Jerome was still tingling with the emotion he had felt.

'The air is fragrant with your roses this evening, sweetheart,' he said, as he dropped languidly into a rocking-chair and set it swaying. 'The Gloire de Dijon round the dovecot's a blaze of flowers.'

Daniel stood up.

'Time to be off,' he said and, going up to his mother kissed her forehead.

She took the young man's face between her hands and for a moment scanned it closely, murmuring:

'My own big boy!'

'D'you know, I think I'll go with you as far as the station,' Jerome suggested. The morning's escapade had whetted his appetite for brief evasions from the garden where, for a fortnight now, he had been leading a cloistered life. 'Won't you come, too, Jenny?'

'I'll stay with mamma.'

'Got a cigarette?' asked Jerome, taking Daniel's arm. Since his return he had eschewed tobacco rather than go out and buy it.

Mme. de Fontanin watched the two men's receding figures; Jerome's voice came wafted back to her.

‘Do you think I can get Turkish tobacco at the station?’ Then they disappeared behind the fir-trees.

Jerome pressed to his side the arm of this good-looking youth, his son. Any young creature had an intense appeal for him; intense, yet barbed with keen regret. Each day he spent at Maisons quickened his distress; time and again the sight of Jenny evoked—how cruelly!—his own lost youth. And, at the tennis-club, with what self-pity had he watched them—young men and girls, bright-eyed, their hair in disorder, their collars open, their clothes ‘all anyhow’; yet flaunting, for all that, the glorious panoply of youth! Lithe bodies, steeped in sunlight, whose very sweat was wholesome, redolent of health. In ten brief minutes he had realized in all its bitterness the handicap of his declining years. He was shamed and sickened by the thought that henceforth, day in day out, he must wage war against himself, against decrepitude and dirt, the noisomeness of age; against the premonitions of that ultimate decay which had already set its mark upon his body. The contrast between his heavy gait, shortness of breath and struggles to keep brisk, and his son’s limber strides appalled him; releasing Daniel’s arm, he gave vent to an envious cry.

‘What wouldn’t I give to be your age, my boy!’

Mme. de Fontanin had made no protest when Jenny volunteered to keep her company.

‘You’re looking fagged out, darling,’ she said when they were alone. ‘Perhaps you’d rather go up to bed at once?’

‘Rather not!’ Jenny replied. ‘The nights are quite long enough as it is.’

‘Aren’t you sleeping well just now?’

‘Not too well.’

‘But why not, darling?’

The tone of Mme. de Fontanin’s voice conveyed more than a casual question. Jenny looked at her mother in surprise, and it dawned on her that something lay behind the words, an explanation was being asked of her. Instinctively she decided to elude it; though not secretive, she shrank from any effort to draw her out.

Mme. de Fontanin had not the art of subterfuge and the look she now cast on her daughter in the dying light was plain to read. If only the affection in her eyes might break the barrier of reticence that Jenny had set up between them!

‘As for once in a way we’re alone,’ she began—there was a hint of emphasis in her tone, as though she begged the girl’s forgiveness for the inroads Jerome’s return had made upon their intimacy—‘there’s something

I'd like to speak to you about, darling. I'm thinking of the Thibault boy, whom I met yesterday. . . .' She paused; after this frontal attack on her subject, she was puzzled how to proceed. But her anxious air as she bent towards the girl spoke for the unspoken words, pointed a tacit question.

Jenny said nothing and Mme. de Fontanin slowly drew herself up, fixing her eyes upon the darkening garden.

Five minutes passed. The breeze freshened and Mme. de Fontanin fancied she saw Jenny shiver.

'You're catching cold. Let's go in.'

Her voice had regained its normal intonation. A new idea had come to her: what was the use of insisting? Glad she had spoken out and sure she had been understood, she faced the future confidently.

Mother and daughter rose and crossed the hall without a word; then climbed the stairs in almost total darkness. Mme. de Fontanin, who was in front, waited on the landing at Jenny's door to kiss her good-night as usual. Though she could not see the girl's face, she felt her body, as she kissed her, stiffening with revolt, and for a moment held the young cheek pressed to hers, in a movement of compassion which made Jenny recoil instinctively. Mme. de Fontanin gently released her, then moved away towards her own bedroom. But then she noticed that, instead of opening the door and entering her room, Jenny was following; just as she was about to turn she heard the girl's excited voice behind her, exclaiming passionately, in one breath:

'You've only got to treat him a bit more stiffly, mamma, if you think he comes here too often.'

'Treat whom?' Mme. de Fontanin stared at her daughter. 'Jacques? If he comes too often? But he hasn't shown up for a fortnight or more?'

(Jacques' non-appearance was deliberate; learning from Daniel of M. de Fontanin's return and the disturbing factor it had proved in their home life, he had thought it more tactful to keep away altogether for the present. Jenny, too, went far less often to the club and, when she did so, avoided Jacques as much as possible, waiting till he was playing in a set to slip away before he had a chance of saying more than a casual word to her. The result was that the two young people had seen very little of each other during the past fortnight.)

Jenny deliberately entered her mother's bedroom; shutting the door, she stood there, unspeaking, in an attitude of resolute courage. Mme. de Fontanin's heart thrilled with pity; her one thought was to make it easy for Jenny to speak out.

'I assure you, darling, I really can't see what you mean.'

‘Why did Daniel ever bring those Thibaults to our place?’ Jenny broke out passionately. ‘Nothing would have happened if Daniel hadn’t, for some fantastic reason, taken such a liking for those people.’

‘But what *has* happened, darling?’ Mme. de Fontanin’s heart beat quicker.

Jenny flared up.

‘Nothing! Nothing has happened! That’s not what I meant. But, if Daniel and you, too, mamma, hadn’t always been pressing those Thibaults to come here, I, I wouldn’t . . .’ Her voice gave way.

Mme. de Fontanin summoned up all her courage.

‘Please, Jenny dear, tell me about it. Do you think you’ve noticed that . . . that . . . well, that he feels in a special way towards . . .?’ She did not need to end her question, for Jenny had lowered her head in a gesture of mute assent. Once again the moonlit garden, the little door, her profile on the wall and Jacques’ outrageous gesture rose before Jenny’s eyes; but she was firmly resolved to breathe no word about the dreadful incident whose memory still haunted her nights and days. It was as though, by keeping the secret locked in her breast, she reserved to herself the choice of treating it as a source of horror, or simply of emotion.

Mme. de Fontanin knew that the crucial moment had come; she must not let Jenny build up once again a wall of silence between them. Resting a trembling hand on the table behind her to steady herself, the poor woman bent towards Jenny, whose face she could only just discern in the faint glimmer coming from the open window.

‘Darling,’ she said, ‘there’s no need to take it to heart unless you, too . . . unless you are . . .’

An emphatic gesture of denial, repeated several times, was her answer. Now that the agony of doubt was past, Mme. de Fontanin heaved a sigh of relief.

‘I’ve always loathed the Thibaults!’ Jenny suddenly exclaimed in a tone her mother had never heard from her before. ‘The elder one’s no better than a conceited lout, and the other . . .’

‘That’s not true,’ Mme. de Fontanin cut in, and in the darkness her cheeks glowed fiery red.

‘And the other one has always been Daniel’s evil genius,’ Jenny added, harking back to an early grievance which even she had long ago discarded as unjust. ‘No, mamma, please don’t stick up for them. You *can’t* like them—they’re so utterly different from you. They are—I don’t know what! Even when they seem to think like us, we shouldn’t let ourselves be taken in; they

always think differently, and from different motives. As a family, they're . . .' She groped for an epithet. Then 'They're loathsome!' she exclaimed. 'Loathsome!' Her mind was in a turmoil which now she made no effort to control. 'No, mamma,' she continued in the same breath, 'I don't want to hide anything from you. Nothing! Well, when I was quite little, I think I had a nasty sort of feeling towards Jacques, a sort of jealousy. It upset me to see Daniel making such a fuss of him. "He's not good enough for my brother," I used to think. "He's vain and selfish. A sulky, jeering, ill-bred schoolboy! Only to look at him—that mouth of his, the shape of his jaws!" I tried to keep him out of my thoughts. But I couldn't; he'd always let fly some cutting remark that made me furious, that rankled! Then he was always coming to our place—it looked as if he made a point of hanging round me. But that's all ancient history. I can't think why I'm always coming back to it. Since those days I've observed him more closely. This year, especially—this last month. I've come to see him in another way. I try to be fair. I'm not blind to his good points, such as they are. There's something I must tell you, mamma; sometimes I've fancied, yes it's struck me sometimes that I, too—without realizing it—I felt somehow . . . drawn towards him. No, that's impossible! It isn't true a bit! I loathe everything about him . . . almost everything.'

'About Jacques,' Mme. de Fontanin admitted, 'I can't be sure. You've had more opportunities than I of judging what he is. But, as far as Antoine's concerned, I can assure you——'

'No,' the girl broke in impulsively. 'I never said that Jacques was . . . I mean, I've never denied that he's got very fine qualities too.' Little by little her voice had changed and she now spoke calmly. 'To begin with, you can tell that he's extremely clever by everything he says. I admit that. I'll go even further; his nature isn't warped, he can be not merely sincere, but generous, noble-minded. So you see, mamma, I'm not at all biassed against him. What's more, I firmly believe'—she spoke with such deep conviction that Mme. de Fontanin was taken aback and gazed at her intently—'I believe that a great future awaits him, perhaps a very great one indeed. So now you can't say that I'm unjust to him. Why, I'm almost convinced that the driving force behind him is nothing less than what is known as "genius"; yes, just that, genius!' The word, as she repeated it, rang like a challenge, though her mother had shown no sign of contradicting her.

Then suddenly she cried out in a paroxysm of despair:

'But all that doesn't change anything! He has a Thibault character—he is a Thibault! And I hate them all!'

Mme. de Fontanin was stupefied, bereft of speech.

‘But . . . Jenny . . . !’ at last she murmured.

Jenny perceived behind her mother’s exclamation the selfsame meaning as that which she had read so clearly on Daniel’s face. With childish impetuosity she darted forward and put her hand over her mother’s mouth.

‘No! No! Is isn’t that. I tell you it isn’t that!’

Then as her mother clasped her to her breast, safe in the shelter of her mother’s arms, Jenny felt suddenly the stranglehold of sorrow loosening at her throat; now at last she could sob her heart out, repeating over and over again, in the small voice of her childhood when something had upset her:

‘Mummy dear . . . oh, mummy!’

And Mme. de Fontanin soothed her like a child upon her breast, murmuring vague consolations.

‘Darling . . . Don’t be frightened. . . . Don’t cry. . . . There’s nothing to worry about. No one’s going to force you to . . . Everything’s quite all right, so long as you don’t . . .’ For a memory had flashed through her mind of the occasion when she had met M. Thibault, the morning after the two boys had run away from home; she seemed to see him again, big and burly, with the two priests on either side of him. And now she pictured him refusing to countenance Jacques’ love and desecrating Jenny’s with cruel scorn. ‘Oh, I’m so glad there’s nothing in it. And you mustn’t blame yourself the least little bit. I’ll talk to him myself; I’ll see the boy and make him understand. Don’t cry, darling. You’ll forget all about it. There, there, it’s all over. . . . Don’t cry any more.’

But Jenny sobbed more and more violently; each of her mother’s words dealt a new stab at her heart. For a long while they stayed thus in the darkness, closely enfolded; the girl nursing her sorrow in her mother’s arms, the mother murmuring cruel consolations, with staring, panic-stricken eyes. For, with her wonted prescience, she foresaw the path of destiny that Jenny must follow ineluctably; no fears of hers, not love, not even prayer could avert its menace from her child. For, as the whole creation moves on its slow upward progress to the spiritual plane—the thought appalled her!—each of us must make his way alone, from trial to trial—often enough from error to error—along the path which has been appointed him from all eternity.

At last the sound of the front-door closing and Jerome’s steps in the tiled hall startled them into movement. Jenny hurriedly let fall her arms and fled to her room, stumbling as though a load of grief were laid on her frail shoulders, a burden no one in the world could ever lighten.

A GIGANTIC poster, flaunted on the boulevard, brought passers-by to a full stop before the picture-house.

THE THIBAUTS

IN DARKEST AFRICA

TRAVELS AMONGST THE SAVAGE TRIBES OF THE INTERIOR

‘It doesn’t begin till half-past eight,’ Rachel sighed.

‘I told you so.’

Not without regret had Antoine forgone the privacy of the pink bedroom, and now, to console himself with an illusive isolation, he booked one of the shut-in boxes at the back of the amphitheatre.

While he was doing so, Rachel came back to him.

‘I say, I’ve just spotted a real beauty!’ she cried, and led him to the lobby where stills from the film were being exhibited. ‘Look there!’

Antoine read the caption first: ‘A Mundang girl winnowing millet on the banks of the Mayo Kabbi.’ Then his eyes rose to a bronzed body, stark naked but for a ribbon of plaited straw knotted round her loins. Intent upon her task, the girl, resting her weight on her right leg, her bust strained upwards, her right arm rising in a sweeping curve above her head, had the poised beauty of a statuette. In her right hand she held a tilted calabash filled with grain that she was pouring in a thin trickle, from as high as she could reach, into a wooden bowl below, clasped in her left hand at the level of her knee. Nothing was studied in her attitude; the poise of her head, flung back a little, the balanced harmony of her curving arms, the upward surge of the torso, tip-tilting the firm young breasts, the flexure of her waist and tension of her hip, the forward swing of the unweighted limb that lightly spurned the soil at its extremity—all breathed harmonious beauty, adjusted to the rhythms of toil, an artless counterpoint of movements.

‘I say, what do you think of that?’ She pointed to a file of ten young negroes bearing on their shoulders a tapering piragua. ‘Isn’t that little chap lovely? He’s an Ouoloff, you know. That’s a *grigri* he has round his neck, and he’s wearing a blue *boubou* and a tarboosh.’ Her voice was vibrant with unwonted excitement that evening and, when she smiled, her lips all but

refused to part, as though the muscles of her face had stiffened unawares. Her eyes moved restlessly between the narrowed lids, fever-bright and lit with silvery gleams; never had Antoine seen them thus before.

‘Let’s go in,’ she suggested.

‘But there’s a good quarter of an hour before it starts.’

‘That doesn’t matter!’ she insisted, like an impatient child. ‘Let’s go in now.’

The house was empty. In the well of the orchestra some musicians were tuning up. As Antoine began to raise the lattice-window in front of the box Rachel pressed herself to his side.

‘Do loosen your tie!’ she pleaded laughingly. ‘You always look as if you’d just been trying to throttle yourself and dashed off with the rope round your neck.’ Letting the window fall, Antoine made a vague gesture of petulance. ‘Yes,’ she murmured in the same breath, ‘I’m ever so glad you’re with me to see this show.’ Prisoning Antoine’s face between her hands, she drew it to her lips. ‘You’ve no idea how much I love you now that beard of yours is gone!’

She took off her hat, gloves and cloak, and they sat down. Across the lattice which screened them from the public, they saw the theatre coming to life under their eyes; from a mute, dingy cavern, bathed in dim red light, whence here and there emerged a speck of human flotsam, it became a seething mass of life, a busy aviary whose twitterings were sometimes drowned by a chromatic scale from some wind instrument. The summer had been exceptionally hot, but the latter half of September had brought many Parisians home again perforce, and even now the Paris of high summer, that Rachel delighted in exploring like a new-found city, year by year, had ceased to be.

‘Listen!’ she said. The orchestra had begun to play the spring-song from the *Valkyrie*. Antoine was sitting very close beside her, and her head drooped on his shoulder; from Rachel’s lips, through her closed lips, there came to him an echo as it were of the melody the violins were playing.

‘Have you ever heard Zucco, the tenor?’ she enquired casually.

‘Yes. Why?’

Lost in a daydream, she did not reply at once; at last she whispered under her breath, as if a belated scruple forbade her keeping him in the dark:

‘He was my lover once.’

Though in no way jealous, Antoine was keenly curious about Rachel’s past. He realized exactly what she meant by her remark: ‘My body has no

memory.’ All the same—that fellow Zucco! What a figure of fun he’d looked in his white satin doublet, perched on a sort of wooden crate, in the third act of the *Meistersinger*; a fat and stocky oaf who, for all his yellow wig, looked like a gipsy and, in the love-duets, splayed his fat fingers against his heart. Antoine was rather vexed that Rachel should have stooped so low as that!

‘Have you heard him sing it?’ she asked, while her fingers traced in air the sinuous curves of melody. ‘I never told you about Zucco, did I?’

‘No.’

He was pressing Rachel’s hand against his breast and need only look down to observe her face. She had not the lively air habitual with her, when she evoked the past; her eyebrows were a little knitted, her eyelids all but closed, and the corners of her mouth were drooping. ‘How well the cast of grief would fit her face!’ he said to himself. Then, struck by her silence, and anxious once again to prove he took no umbrage at her past, he put a leading question.

‘Well, what about your Signer Zucco?’

She started.

‘Zucco?’ she repeated with a faint smile. ‘Well, you know, there’s little enough to tell, really. He was number one, that’s all.’

‘And where do I come on the list?’ The question cost him a slight effort.

‘Why, number three, of course,’ she replied coolly.

A threesome, Antoine mused: Zucco, Hirsch and I. *Only* a threesome?

She seemed to wake up suddenly.

‘You want to hear more? But there’s nothing in it, really. It was just after papa’s death; my brother had a job at Hamburg. I was busy at the Opera all day and every day, but the nights I wasn’t dancing I felt rather lonely—you know how one is at eighteen. Zucco had been after me for ages. I didn’t think much of him; he was inclined to put on airs.’ She hesitated. ‘A bit of an ass, really. Yes, I rather think that even then I found him rather maudlin. But I never guessed he was a brute as well!’ she suddenly burst out.

The lights had just gone down; she glanced round the theatre.

‘What comes first?’

‘News-reels.’

‘Then?’

‘A Wild West film—rotten, I expect.’

‘And Africa?’

‘Last of all.’

‘Oh well,’ she murmured, resting again her fragrant hair on Antoine’s shoulder, ‘you can tell me if there’s anything worth watching. . . . Sure I don’t tire you, Toine dear, like that? I’m ever so comfy.’

He saw her glistening, parted lips, and pressed his mouth to her mouth’s kiss.

But, when he mentioned Zucco’s name again, to his surprise the smile died from her face.

‘Now I look back on it,’ she said, ‘I can’t imagine how I ever stood the way he treated me—worse than a brutal drover treats his cattle! He’d been a muleteer, as it happens, in Oran. All the other girls were sorry for me; no one could make out why I put up with him; indeed I can’t understand it myself. Of course, so they say, some women like being knocked about. . . .’ She was silent for a while, then added: ‘No; it must have been because I so dreaded being alone again.’

Never before within his memory had Antoine heard such sadness in Rachel’s voice. He drew his arms more closely round her, as if to shelter her from the rough world. But then his embrace grew weaker; he was thinking of his over-readiness to pity—a facet, doubtless, of his pride, and, perhaps, the secret of his devotion to his young brother. Indeed he had sometimes wondered—before Rachel crossed his path—if he were capable of any other form of love.

‘And then?’

‘Then it was he who dropped me. . . . Needless to say,’ she added, without a trace of bitterness.

After an interval she continued in a lower voice, as though she wanted the avowal to pass in silence.

‘I was going to have a baby.’

Antoine was dumbfounded. Rachel had been a mother! Impossible! Was it credible that he, a doctor, should have failed to note the signs. . . ? Preposterous!

His eyes strayed, fretful and bemused, towards the captions reeling out before him.

THE ARMY MANŒUVRES

M. FALLIÈRES CONVERSES WITH THE GERMAN MILITARY
ATTACHÉ.

THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICE OF THE FUTURE

LATHAM LANDS IN HIS MONOPLANE WITH IMPORTANT DESPACHES FOR THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF. THE INTREPID AIRMAN IS GREETED BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC.

‘Oh, that wasn’t his only reason for dropping me,’ Rachel explained. ‘If I’d gone on paying his bills . . .’

Antoine suddenly remembered the photograph of a baby which he had seen at her place, and her words as she snatched it away from him: ‘It’s a little godchild—who’s dead.’

He was less astonished by Rachel’s revelation than aggrieved at it, piqued in his professional self-esteem.

‘Is that really so? he murmured. ‘You had a child?’ Then quickly added with a knowledgeable smile: ‘Of course I’d guessed as much, some time ago.’

‘Still, it doesn’t show a lot, does it? I took no end of trouble about myself—because of my job at the theatre.’

‘But a doctor’s eyes, you know!’ He gave a slight shrug.

She smiled. Antoine’s perspicacity made her still prouder of him. For some moments she was silent and when she spoke again her voice had the same languorous tone.

‘When I think of those days, you know, Toine dear, I feel that the best of my life lies behind me. How proud I was about it! And when I was getting a bit ungainly and had to ask them at the Opera for a holiday, guess where I went! To Normandy. A little village at the back of beyond, where an old woman who’d been our nurse, my brother’s and mine, was living. What a fuss they made of me down there! I wouldn’t have minded settling there for good and all; and that’s what I should have done. Only the stage, you know, when once one’s got it in the blood . . . I acted for the best, as I thought, and left the kid there with the wet-nurse; I felt quite safe. Then, eight months later . . . Meanwhile I’d fallen ill, too,’ she sighed after a moment’s pause. ‘The confinement had wrecked my health. I had to leave the Opera, say good-bye to everything. And there I was again—alone in the world!’

He scanned her face. She was not weeping; her eyes were wide open, staring up at the ceiling. But slowly, very slowly, tears were welling up beneath her eyelids. Abashed by her emotion, he dared not kiss her. He was thinking out what she had told him. Each day he fancied he had found a stable vantage-point whence to survey her life in its entirety and judge it whole; but the very next day some reminiscence or avowal, even a casual

hint, sufficed to open unsuspected vistas which once again he could not get in focus.

Suddenly she drew herself up, raising an arm to set her hair straight; but, as abruptly, stayed the gesture.

‘Look! Oh, look!’ she cried, pointing to the screen.

Involuntarily, across a mist of tears, she gazed wide-eyed at a girl on horseback flying from pursuit with a furious pack of Redskins at her heels. The fearless maiden and her steed whisked up a rocky slope, posed for a second statue-like upon the summit, then scudded down a dizzy gradient. Intrepidly she plunged into a torrent, and thirty horsemen splashed in after her, vanishing in clouds of spray. Now she was on the further bank, spurring her horse, galloping ahead. Vain hope! The kidnappers rode hell-for-leather on her track, closed in around their quarry. Lassoos whipped the air above her, snaked round her head. An iron bridge hove into sight, beneath it an express in full career. In a flash she slipped from the saddle, vaulted the parapet, leapt into the void.

The audience gasped.

Brief panic. Now they saw her standing on the roof of a carriage, borne along at headlong speed, her hair awry, with flying skirt and arms akimbo, while, from the bridge, the Redskins discharged thirty guns at her in vain.

‘Were you watching?’ Her voice thrilled with delight. ‘I love it!’

He drew her towards him again, this time on to his knees, and rocked her like a child. He wanted to console her, make her forget everything, everything but their love. But he said nothing of it and began toying with her necklace. Inset between the honey-golden beads were little balls of leaden-hued ambergris which, as he fingered them, grew warm and fragrant; so clinging was the perfume that sometimes, two days later, he would catch a sudden tang of it in the hollow of his hands. Unfastening her blouse, he pressed his cheek upon her breast; she did not try to stop him. Then:

‘Come in!’ she cried.

A young attendant appeared; she had opened the door of their box by mistake, and quickly closed it, but not before casting an interested glance at the half-undressed girl in Antoine’s arms. Antoine released Rachel in haste, but not in time—much to her amusement.

‘How silly you are! Perhaps she wanted to . . . Anyway she looks nice. . . .’

The words and the way she said them were so astonishing that he tried to catch the look on her face, but she had buried her forehead on his shoulder

and all he noticed was her laugh—an almost soundless, enigmatic chuckle that always made him ill at ease.

The element of mystery in Rachel that still was apt to baffle him always gave Antoine the impression of a yawning gulf between them. It roused in him a feeling of unrest, tintured with curiosity, subtly obnoxious to his self-esteem. For hitherto it had been he who, as a man of science, by veiled allusions, sceptic smiles, set others in a quandary. Rachel had turned the tables on him; beside her Antoine felt atrociously small-boyish and (loth though he was to own to it) rather at sea where certain subjects were concerned. Once, to redress the balance, he had ventured to garnish his professional reminiscences with echoes from the students' mess and even invented for her benefit a far-fetched amorous adventure in which, so he alleged, he had played a leading part. But she had shut him up with a burst of affectionate laughter.

'Drop it, my dear! Whom do you take me for? Don't I love you just as you are?'

He had reddened with annoyance; and he had learnt his lesson.

Neither had felt inclined to speak during the interval which was just ending. The film of Africa was announced and the lights went down. The band struck up a negro melody. Rachel moved to a seat in front of the box.

'Let's hope they've made a good job of it.'

Landscapes began to flicker across the screen. A stagnant river under enormous trees tethered to the soil by a network of lianas. A hippo's back, like the corpse of a drowned bull, bulged on the surface of the water. Little black monkeys, white-bearded like ancient mariners, frolicked on the sand. Then came a village; an empty space of beaten soil, fissured by the heat, and, in the background, rows of stockaded huts. Next, a compound where some young Peuhl girls, naked to the waist, the muscles of their hips working beneath the loincloths, were busily pounding grain in high wooden mortars, surrounded by piccaninnies sprawling in the sun. Then more women, carrying large baskets; then a group of spinners, squatting cross-legged on the ground; each grasped a distaff in her right hand, while the left twirled inside a wooden trough the bobbin, shaped like a peg-top, which took the yarn.

Leaning well forward, Rachel gazed intently at the screen, her elbow resting on her crossed knees, her chin cupped in her hand. Antoine could hear the rapid intake of her breath. Sometimes, without turning, she spoke to him in a hushed whisper.

'Toine dear! Look! Just look!'

The film ended with a barbaric dance to the sound of tomtoms in a clearing ringed with palm-trees. Night was falling and a crowd composed exclusively of negroes, their faces tense, their bodies squirming with delight, had formed a circle round a couple of their fellow-tribesmen. The dancers, two jet-black but extremely handsome males, were almost naked; their bodies shone with sweat. They flew at each other, collided, bounded back and crashed together again, gnashing their teeth, or, now and again, circled in the love-chase, rubbing their bodies together, varying the rhythms of their frenzy as they portrayed the rage of battle or the spasms of sensual desire. Panting, capering with excitement, the dark crowd closed in round the frenzied couple; faster and faster they clapped their hands and faster drummed upon the tomtoms, goading the dancers on and on towards a climax of delirium. The picture-house band had stopped playing; a clapping of hands in the wings kept time with the gestures of the negroes, restoring a fantastic semblance of life to the dark figures and infecting the audience with something of the fierce pleasure, strung to the pitch of pain, that convulsed the savage faces on the screen. . . .

The show was over, the audience filing out. Attendants were beginning to sheet the empty stalls.

Silent and exhausted, Rachel could hardly bring herself to move. When Antoine, who was already on his feet, held up her evening cloak she rose and pressed her lips to his. They were the last to go; neither of them spoke. As they left the cinema they found themselves caught in a crowd of people flocking out together from all the places of amusement on the boulevards. The warm, soft darkness shimmered with twinkling lights and already some autumn leaves were slowly spinning down. Antoine took her arm, whispering in her ear: 'I say, let's go back to your place now.'

'Oh, not yet, please,' she protested. 'Let's go somewhere first. I'm thirsty.' Then the posters outside the theatre caught her eye and she swerved aside to examine once more the photograph of the young negro. 'It's extraordinary,' she remarked, 'how he's like a boy who once came down the Casamanca with us. An Ouoloff boy: Mamadou Dieng.'

'Where shall we go?' he asked, concealing his disappointment.

'Oh, any old where! The *Britannie*? No, what about Packmell's? Let's walk there. That's it: an iced Chartreuse at Packmell's and then we'll go home.' She nestled up to him with a sudden tenderness, that seemed like an earnest of better things to come.

‘It’s upset me a bit, you know, thinking of poor little Mamadou this evening, just after seeing that film. You remember the photo I showed you, with Hirsch sitting in the stern of the jolly-boat? You said he looked like a Buddha in a sola topee. Well, the boy on whom he’s leaning, a real blackamoor in a little white shift—do you remember?—that’s Mamadou.’

‘And how do you know it wasn’t he in the film?’ he asked, to humour her.

After a moment’s silence she shuddered slightly.

‘Poor kid, I saw him eaten alive under my eyes, some days later. He was bathing in a stream. No, it was really Hirsch who . . . You see, Hirsch bet Mamadou he wouldn’t swim a tributary of the river to get an egret that I’d just brought down—and how often I’ve wished I’d missed it! The boy said he’d have a try, and dived in. We watched him swimming across, when suddenly——! Oh, it was like a nightmare! It all happened in a flash, you know. We saw him suddenly standing up out of the water; he’d been nipped below the waist, you see. I shall never forget his scream. Hirsch always rose to the occasion at such moments. He knew at once that the boy was a goner, and would endure agonies. He brought his gun to his shoulder and—bang!—the child’s head had crumpled up like a calabash. The best way out, wasn’t it? But I felt like being sick.’

She paused and pressed herself to Antoine’s shoulder.

‘Next day I went to take a snapshot of the place. The water was calm, so calm, you’d never have dreamt . . .’

Her voice shook. There was a longer pause before she spoke again.

‘With Hirsch, you see, one life more or less simply doesn’t count. Still, he liked that boy of his. Well, he didn’t turn a hair. That’s how he was. Even after the accident, he stuck to his idea; he promised an alarm-clock to anyone who’d retrieve my egret. I tried to stop him, but he shut me up. He always insisted on being obeyed. Well, in the end I got it. One of the porters fetched it; he had better luck than the boy.’ She was smiling now. ‘I’ve got it still. I wore it last winter on a little brown velvet toque; a dinky little hat it was, too!’

Antoine made no comment.

‘Oh, you old stay-at-home!’ she burst out, and petulantly drew away from him. ‘A trip to Africa’d have been the making of you!’

Then, in swift contrition, she came back and took his arm again.

‘Don’t take any notice of me, Toine dear; a show like to-night’s works me up till I’m positively ill. I’m sure I’ve got a touch of fever—haven’t I? One stifles here in France. It’s only over there one can really live. You can’t

imagine what it means—the white man’s freedom amongst all those blacks. Not a soul on this side has the faintest notion how far it goes. No laws, nothing to tie you down! You needn’t even bother what other people think of you. See what I mean? Can you even imagine what it’s like? You have the right to be yourself everywhere and all the time. You’re just as free amongst those black folk as you are at home with only your dog to watch you. And, what’s more, they’re really charming people to live amongst. You’d never believe how tactful, how quick in the uptake, they can be. Just fancy having only cheerful, smiling faces round you, and keen young eyes that can read your least desire. Why, I remember . . . Sure I’m not boring you, dear? I remember one day when we pitched camp out in the desert and Hirsch was chatting with a headman near the spring where the women used to draw water; it was getting dark that’s the time they always come—and we saw two darling little girls come up, carrying a huge oxhide waterskin between them. “They my girls,” the Cadi explained to us. That was all. But the old fellow had guessed . . . That night when I was with Hirsch in the *dar*, the mat slid up without a sound, and lo and behold our two little girls, smiling all over their faces!’ She walked a few paces in silence before continuing. ‘As I said . . . your least desire. And . . . yes, I remember, another time—it’s such a relief to have someone to tell about it! At Lomé, it was. At the pictures, too, as it happens, everybody there goes to the pictures in the evening. It’s just a café terrace, very brightly lit, with evergreens in tubs all round it. Suddenly the lights go out and the show begins. You sip iced drinks while you watch it—see the idea? The Europeans, dressed up in their white ducks, sit in front, with the light reflected from the screen falling on their faces; behind them it’s pitch dark, no, blue-black—you’d never believe how blue—and I’ve never seen the stars so bright anywhere else. That’s where the natives sit and watch, youngsters and girls. You can hardly see their faces for shadows, but their eyes glow like the eyes of cats—such lovely eyes! Well, you needn’t even make a sign. Your eyes just linger on one of the smooth, dark faces, meet his eyes for a second—and that’s all. But it’s enough. A few minutes later you get up and go, without a glance behind, to your hotel; all the doors are left open on purpose. I had a room on the second floor. I’d hardly had time to undress when I heard someone scratching at the shutter. I put out the light and opened the window. There he was! He’d slithered up the wall like a lizard. Without a word he let his one and only garment slide off his little body. I shall never forget it. His mouth was moist and cool . . . so cool!’

‘Good God!’ Antoine could not help exclaiming to himself. ‘A nigger—and not even vetted beforehand to make sure!’

‘They’ve such wonderful skins,’ Rachel went on. ‘Fine-grained like the rind of a fruit. None of you over here have an idea of what it’s really like. It’s smooth as satin, their skin; dry and sleek as if it had just been dusted with talc-powder, without a single blemish or trace of unevenness or moisture, but hot as fire under the surface; hot like a feverish arm across a muslin sleeve—see what I mean?—or a bird’s body underneath the feathers. And, when you look at it under the glaring African sun and the light’s splashing all over their shoulders, that gold-brown skin of theirs looks like shot silk, speckled with blue flashes—oh, I simply can’t describe it!—like little specks of powdered steel, or a shower of broken moonbeams. Such eyes they have, too! Surely you’ve noticed how their glance hovers over you like a caress; it’s the white of their eyes, you know, a trifle browned, with the pupils swimming about in it, never quite at rest. Then—I can hardly explain it—love-making in those parts isn’t a bit like yours, over here. It’s all done without words—like a sacrament, but the most natural thing in the world. There’s not an atom of thought goes into it. Over here people are bound to keep it more or less dark when they’re out for pleasures of that kind, but there—why, it’s as normal as life itself, and just as sacred as life and love. Do you see what I mean, Toine dear? “In Europe,” Hirsch always said, “you have what you deserve. Happily there are other countries for people like ourselves, free-minded people.” He simply adores the black man.’ She started laughing. ‘Do you know how I first discovered that about him? Surely I’ve told you? No? It was at a restaurant, in Bordeaux. He was sitting opposite me and we were talking. Suddenly I noticed him staring hard at something behind me; it only lasted a second, but there was a curious glitter in his eyes. . . . It was so striking that I swung round at once. I saw a little negro, a lad of about fifteen, near a side-table, carrying a bowl of oranges.’ In a soft, brooding voice, she added: ‘It was that day most likely, I, too, began to hanker after going over there.’

They took some steps in silence.

‘My ambition,’ she suddenly exclaimed, ‘my dream for when I’m old is to—to run a brothel. Don’t look so shocked! There are brothels and brothels, and naturally I’d keep a high-class one. I’d loathe growing old amongst old people. I’d like to be sure of having young folk round me, fine young bodies; free, sensual bodies. Can’t you understand that, dear?’

They were almost at Packmell’s, and Antoine had not answered her. What, indeed, could he have found to say? Rachel’s was an uncharted land for him, where he encountered nothing but surprises. He felt so alien from her, rooted to the soil of France by his middle-class upbringing, by his work and his ambitions, by the career he had so carefully mapped out. He saw the

bonds that held him and had not the faintest wish to break them; but for all that Rachel liked, that alien world of hers, he had the antipathy of a domesticated animal for the prowling denizens of the wild that are a menace to the home.

Nothing in the placid frontage of the cabaret except the streaks of garish light that filtered past the edges of the crimson curtains gave any inkling of the cheerful scene behind them. The swivel-door swung round with a groan, launching a gust of purer air into the atmosphere within, fetid with dust and heat and the stale fumes of alcohol.

The place was crowded and dancing was in progress.

Rachel headed for a vacant table near the cloak-room and did not wait to let her cloak drop from her shoulders before ordering a green Chartreuse with crushed ice. When the drink appeared she propped her elbows on the table and sat before it motionless, with the twin straws between her lips.

‘In the dumps?’ Antoine enquired.

Her eyelids flickered and, drinking still, she threw him as gay a smile as she could muster up.

Near them a dark woman was flaunting shamelessly upon the tablecloth a biceps worthy of a boxer, which a Japanese, his childish face belied by an array of small but rusted teeth, squeezed with polite disdain.

‘I’d like another drink, please; the same as before.’ Rachel pointed to her empty glass.

Antoine felt a light tap on his shoulder.

‘I wondered for a moment if it was you,’ a cordial voice addressed him. ‘So you’ve shed your beard!’

Daniel stood before them. The lamplight fell harshly on the faultless oval of his face as he stood there, slim and willowy, twiddling an advertisement-fan between his ungloved hands; bending it into a circle, then letting it spring back, with a provocative smile upon his lips, he called to mind the stripling David, testing his sling.

While Antoine was introducing him to Rachel, Daniel’s taunt came back to him. ‘I’d have acted just as you did—you humbug!’ But now it seemed to him the taunt had lost its sting, and it was with a thrill of pleasure he observed the look the young man, after stooping to kiss Rachel’s hand, cast on her face, lifted towards him, and on her arms and neck, gleaming snow-white against the blush-pink bodice.

Daniel took another look at Antoine, then smiled towards the girl, as though congratulating her on her handiwork.

‘Yes, by Jove!’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s a vast improvement.’

‘Yes, I dare say it is, as long as one’s alive!’ Antoine affected the tone of a facetious medical. ‘But, if you’d seen as many “stiffs” as I have . . . ! After two days——!’

Rachel rapped on the table to make him stop. She often forgot that Antoine was a doctor. Turning to him, she scanned him for a moment, then murmured tenderly:

‘My medicine-man!’

Could it be possible this face she knew so well was the same face as that which she had watched during the operation under the garish lamplight—a hero’s face and terrible in beauty, superbly inaccessible? How well she knew it—better than ever, now she saw it unconcealed, with all its contours, its smallest details visible! The razor had exposed a slight hollow in the cheeks—a certain slackness of the tissues—giving them a milder air that somewhat redeemed the sternness of the jaw. She had learnt by touch, as blind men learn their world, under the nightly pressure of her palms, the squareness of his jawbones, the squat curve of his chin, so oddly flattened on its under surface that she had exclaimed: ‘Why, your under-jaw’s almost exactly like a snake’s!’ But, now his beard had gone, what she found most perplexing in his face was the long sinuous line of his mouth—so rigid was it, yet so plastic; its corners hardly ever lifted and seldom drooped—cut short abruptly on either side by a straight line, a trait of more than human will-power, such as is sometimes found on the faces of ancient statues. ‘Is his will *really* so strong as that?’ she asked herself. Bending forward, she scrutinized him rather mischievously from the corner of an eye, and a brief glint of gold flickered along her eyelashes.

Antoine suffered her scrutiny with the pleased smile of a man who knows himself beloved. Since shaving off his beard, he had come to take a rather different view of himself; he set less store by his hypnotic gaze, for he detected in himself new possibilities, new and eminently agreeable ones. Moreover, for some weeks past, he had felt a thoroughgoing change coming over him; so drastic was it that the events in his life which preceded his meeting with Rachel were falling away into obscurity—they had taken place *before*. Before what? Before his transformation. A vicious circle; but he let it go at that. Yes, his temperament had changed, had grown more supple; more mature and, at the same time, younger. He liked to tell himself that he had also gained in strength of mind, and he was not far wrong. True, less reflexion lay behind his forcefulness; but its very spontaneity made it more telling, more authentic in its exercise. The change that had come over him had affected even his life’s work; at first his love-affair had tended to divert

it from its course, but, of a sudden, it had gathered strength, till his life brimmed over with it, like a river in spate.

‘Don’t take so much interest in my appearance,’ Antoine protested, waving Daniel into a chair. ‘We’ve just come from the movies. “In Darkest Africa”; do you know it?’

‘Have you ever been outside Europe?’ Rachel suddenly enquired.

The resonance of her voice took Daniel by surprise.

‘No, never.’

‘Well,’ she said, drawing towards her the glass that had just arrived, and greedily plunging two fresh straws into the cold, green depths, ‘it’s a film you should see. That view, for instance, of a string of porters on the trek at sunset. Don’t you think so, Antoine? And the kids playing in the sand while the women are unloading the canoes.’

‘Certainly I’ll go and see it,’ Daniel replied, his eyes intent on her. Then, after a short pause, he added: ‘Do you know Anita?’

She shook her head.

‘She’s a coloured girl from America, who is usually to be seen at the bar. Yes, there she is, you can see her now, just behind Marie-Josèphe—the tall woman, you know, with all the pearls.’

Drawing herself up, Rachel discerned, across the throng of dancers, a fawn-coloured face half hidden in the shadow of a massive hat.

‘That’s not a negress!’ Rachel made no attempt to hide her disappointment. ‘She’s only a Creole.’

Daniel smiled faintly.

‘So sorry!’ he murmured, then turned to Antoine. ‘Do you come here often?’

Antoine was about to answer ‘Yes,’ but Rachel’s presence checked the impulse.

‘Hardly ever.’

Rachel’s eyes were following Anita who now was dancing with Marie-Josèphe. The supple body of the American girl showed to advantage in a close-fitting white satin dress, lustrous as a bird’s plumage and glittering at every movement of her long, lithe limbs, with gleams of pearly light.

‘Shall you go to Maisons to-morrow?’ Antoine asked.

‘I’ve only just come from there,’ Daniel replied. He was about to speak of Jacques when his eyes fell on a Spanish-looking girl, with a saffron shawl draped round her, who seemed to be hunting for someone. ‘Excuse me,’ he murmured hastily and made off. Slipping a practiced arm beneath the shawl,

he danced the girl away, to the strains of a boston, towards the corner where the band was playing.

Anita had stopped dancing and Rachel watched her breasting the flood of dancers with a swan's easy grace, steering a course, as chance would have it, towards the table where she and Antoine sat. The Creole brushed against the young man's chair and, coming to the settle where Rachel was seated, took out of her bag an object which she kept hidden in the hollow of her hand, then, thinking herself unobserved—indifferent, perhaps, to being seen—placed her foot on the settle and, whisking up her skirt, punctured her thigh. Rachel caught a fleeting glimpse of chocolate skin showing between two waves of silken whiteness, and her eyelids twitched involuntarily. Letting her skirt drop back, Anita drew herself erect with a slow, languid movement that set the crystal dangling from a pearl set in her lobe, sparkling with sudden fires. Then she went back to her friend.

Rachel rested her elbows on the table, her eyes half closed, and slowly drew into her mouth the iced liqueur. The violins' caress, the passionate insistence of their throbbing strings, worked on her mood of sensuous languor till it was almost unendurable.

Antoine looked at her.

'Lulu . . . !' he murmured.

Raising her eyes to his, she drew away the last faint tinge of green from the crushed ice in her glass. The look she gave him came as a surprise; a laughing, almost saucy look.

'You, I suppose, you've never . . . seen a black woman?'

'No,' Antoine unblushingly confessed.

She made no comment. A cryptic smile flickered on her lips.

'Come along then!' she suddenly commanded.

Rising at once, she wrapped her coat of shining black about her as if it were a domino for some nocturnal masquerade. As she went out by the revolving-door with Antoine at her heels he heard once more, behind her close-set lips, the husky little laugh that always so dismayed him.

IN the days when Jerome was still living in Paris, his concierge in the Avenue de l'Observatoire had standing orders to keep his mail for him, and he called periodically to collect his letters. Then his visits had abruptly ceased. He had left no address and for two consecutive years a mass of correspondence had been accumulating. Now that the concierge had heard of M. de Fontanin's return to Maisons-Laffitte, he requested Daniel to deliver it in person to its rightful owner.

Buried in a pile of circulars, two letters came as a surprise to Jerome.

One of them, eight months old, announced that an ill-starred enterprise from which he had long ceased to expect returns had been wound up, and his share of the assets—six thousand francs and some odd hundreds—was lying to his credit. His face brightened. The remittance was a god-send; now at last he could shake off the vague discomfort which had been oppressing him ever since he had settled down at Maisons—a feeling due not only to his presence in a home where he now felt out of place, but also to a lack of ready money which piqued his pride.

(Five years previously his share of the family fortunes had passed out of his hands. Without applying for a divorce Mme. de Fontanin had sequestered the modest inheritance left her by her father, the clergyman. This sum, though by no means intact at the time of their separation, had enabled her to live so far in some degree of comfort, and to keep on her flat without stinting her outlay on the children's education. Jerome, too, had not yet squandered all the money left him by his parents and still kept up his business activities; even when, dancing attendance on Noémie, he had settled down in Holland or in Belgium, he had dabbled in the stock-markets, speculated, and promoted new inventions. For all his lack of ballast, he was quick to see an opening, and this ability, coupled with his fondness for taking risks, enabled him, now and again, to back a winning venture. Fat years and lean, he had lived them through, oftener than not upon a lavish scale; sometimes indeed, for conscience' sake, he had even contrived to remit a thousand francs or so to his wife's account, by way of contribution to the children's maintenance. But, during the last few months of his sojourn abroad, things had taken a turn for the worse and, for the moment, he had no means of drawing on his capital. He could see no way of refunding the money Thérèse had brought to Amsterdam and, worse still, he was now obliged to live at his wife's expense. This was bitter enough; but bitterer still was the thought that she might misinterpret his motives, might imagine it was lack of money that had brought the wanderer home.)

Thanks to this windfall then, Jerome felt his dignity slightly restored. He would be able now to discharge his obligations.

So eager was he to impart the news to his wife that he began to move towards the door, opening as he went the other envelope, inscribed in an illiterate hand, which conveyed nothing to him. Suddenly he stopped, aghast.

DEAR SIR,

I take up my pen to tell you something has happened to me which I am not put out about at all not in the least in fact I am quite happy about it as I have been so awfully lonely, but I have been dismissed from my place because of it and I don't know what to do, but I am sure you will not go on leaving me without any money at such a time because this is it I can't get another place people can see it to much, and I have only 30 francs fifty and nothing more to keep the baby after and I do so want to feed it myself as everybody ought to.

I don't blame you one bit only I hope that when you get this you will do the right thing by me, you must bring me the needful tomorrow or the day after or thursday at the latest as I don't know what will become of me if you don't.

With all my true love

V. LE GAD.

At first he could make nothing of it. 'Le Gad—who's that?' Then suddenly he remembered. 'Victorine! Why, it's Cricri!'

Retracing his steps, he sat down, rolling the sheet of note-paper between his fingers. 'To-morrow or the day after.' He could just decipher the date on the postmark; the letter had been waiting him for two whole years! Poor Cricri! What had become of her? What meaning had she read into his silence? And—the child? No genuine emotion touched him as he asked himself these questions; the commiserating air that unawares he had put on was a tribute to convention. Yet, all the while, a young, shy, tremulous body, two ingenuous eyes, a girlish mouth, were taking shape in his memory and stirring his senses more and more definitely.

Cricri? Where had he come across her? Ah yes, at Noémie's place; Noémie had brought the girl back with her from Brittany. And after that? His memories of the suburban hotel where he had kept her hidden for a fortnight were rather blurred. Why had he left her then? Much clearer was the picture of another meeting two years after, during one of Noémie's escapades. Every detail of the servant's attic bedroom which he used to toil up to at nightfall came back to him clearly, and then the furnished rooms

somewhere in the Rue de Richepanse where he had set her up later, during that second lease of passion which had lasted two or three months—or was it longer?

He read the letter again, noted the date. A familiar warmth flooded his brain and clouded his eyes. Rising, he drank a glass of water, slipped Cricri's note into his pocket and, with the letter of advice in his hand, went out to find his wife.

An hour later he was stepping into the Paris train.

It was striking ten o'clock when, in a delightful state of excitement, he left the Saint Lazare Station under a genial September sun. He drove to his bank and, simmering with impatience, waited at the counter; only when he had signed the receipt, had slipped the notes into his pocket-book and flung himself triumphantly into the waiting taxi—only then he felt that the shadow which had darkened his life for all these recent weeks had lifted; he had risen from the dead!

The arduous quest on which he now embarked took him all over Paris, from one concierge to another; indeed it promised to be fruitless till at about two in the afternoon—he had forgone luncheon—it led him to the home of a certain Mme. Barbin, *alias* Mme. Juju. The mistress of the house was out, but the maid, who was youthful and loquacious, informed him that she knew the young lady, Mlle. Le Gad—'Rinette they all call her'—quite well.

'Only,' she went on, 'she never goes to her room at the hotel except Wednesdays; that's her day off.'

Jerome blushed; but with a smile of understanding.

'Yes, of course.' His smile conveyed that he was in the know. 'But, you see, it's her other address I'm after.'

By this time they were on the best of terms. 'A nice little thing,' Jerome suddenly said to himself. But he was quite decided to keep his mind exclusively on Cricri.

'It's in the Rue de Stockholm,' the maid at last informed him with a smile.

Jerome had the taxi take him there, alighted, and was not long in finding the house described by the maid. An insidious melancholy which he would not avow—though for some time he had been trying to shake off—was ousting his high spirits of the early hours.

The swift transition from the sunlit streets to the meretricious twilight of the establishment he now entered made him feel uneasier than ever. He was shown into the 'Japanese' room, where the sole touch of local colour was a cheap Japanese fan pinned to the wall above the bed. He waited, hat in hand,

affecting an unembarrassed air; but, wherever he turned his eyes, a mocking mirror presented him with his reflected self, till he could endure it no longer and seated himself at the extreme end of the sofa.

At last the door was flung open; a young prostitute, draped in a mauve tunic, bustled in and as abruptly halted, facing him.

‘Oh!’ she gasped; he supposed she had entered the room by mistake. But then, as she recoiled towards the door which she had closed instinctively on entering, she stammered out one word:

‘You!’

Even now he was far from sure that it was she.

‘Is it you, Cricri?’

Keeping her eyes fixed on Jerome, almost as if she half expected him to whip out a revolver from his pocket, Rinette reached towards the bed, pulled off the bedspread and wrapped herself up in it.

‘What’s happened?’ she asked. ‘Did someone send you?’

Vainly he tried to discover the childish Cricri he had known, behind the painted features of this showy harlot, with her bobbed hair and rather puffy cheeks. Even her country accent her clear young voice had left her.

‘What do you want of me?’ she asked.

‘I’ve come to see you, Cricri.’

For a moment she misconstrued the gentleness in his voice; he puzzled her. Then, averting her eyes, she decided, or so it seemed, to let things take their course.

‘Please yourself,’ she said.

She went to the sofa and sat down, keeping the bedspread wrapped round her body, but letting it fall a little from her neck and arms.

‘Who told you to come here?’ she repeated with lowered eyes.

The question nonplussed him. Standing awkwardly before her, he began explaining that he had come back to France after a long stay abroad and had only just received her letter.

‘What letter?’ she asked, raising her eyes.

Once again he saw the grey-green lustre of her pupils; they, anyhow, looked innocent as ever. He handed her the envelope; she stared at it bemusedly.

‘Well, upon my word!’ she exclaimed, casting a venomous look at him. Holding the letter she nodded emphatically several times. ‘Of all the low-down tricks! To think you didn’t even bother to answer it!’

‘But, I tell you, Cricri, I only opened it this morning.’

‘That’s neither here nor there; you might at least have answered me,’ she persisted with an obstinate toss of her head.

‘I did better than that; I came here myself right away,’ he patiently explained. Then, unable to control himself, he asked: ‘And—the child?’

Her lips tightened, she gulped down her saliva and tried to speak, but the words would not come. Her eyes filled with tears.

At last she managed to speak.

‘Dead. It was born too soon.’

Jerome sighed—but it sounded like a sigh of relief. Under Rinette’s vindictive stare, he felt cowed, humiliated, bereft of speech.

‘To think it’s all your fault!’ she continued in a voice that was less hostile than her eyes. ‘I wasn’t one of them fast ones, and very well you knew it. Twice I believed what you had promised me, twice over I gave up everything to live with you. Oh, how I cried when you left me again, for the second time!’ She held him with a downward look, her shoulders hunched and mouth a little twisted; her eyes were shining greener than ever through her tears. He felt at once aggrieved and sick at heart; uncertain what line to take, he forced his lips into a smile. . . . How like Daniel he was with that crooked smile of his!

She dried her eyes and, unexpectedly, addressed him in a steady voice.

‘And how is the mistress?’

Jerome realized at once that she meant Noémie. On his way he had decided not to allude to Mme. Petit-Dutreuil’s death, lest the news should prey on Cricri’s feelings, calling up sentiments or scruples which might thwart the plans he had in mind. So, without further thought, he kept to the story he had decided on.

‘She’s on the stage, abroad.’ It cost him an effort to go on. ‘She’s quite well, I believe.’

‘On the stage!’ Rinette echoed the words respectfully.

Now they were silent. She turned towards him with an expectant air. Smiling, she let the drapery fall a little lower on her neck and shoulders.

‘But all that—it isn’t only for that you’ve come to see me,’ she said.

At the least sign from him, Jerome was well aware, Cricri would be in his arms. But nothing, alas, survived of all that wild desire which had sped him all the day, like a hound in cry, hotfoot on her trail, tracking his quarry to her lair from end to end of Paris.

‘That,’ he replied, ‘is the only reason why I’ve come.’

Rinette looked surprised, almost offended.

‘Well, let me tell you, here we’re not supposed to see . . . ordinary visitors.’

Jerome made haste to change the subject.

‘Why have you cut your hair?’

‘They prefer it short.’

He concealed his discomfiture with a smile, and could think of nothing else to say. And yet he could not make up his mind to leave. A secret discontent gnawed at his heart, compelling him to stay. It was as if something important remained to do. But what? . . . Poor Cricri! Well, the damage had been done; there was no way of mending it. . . . No way at all?

Somewhat abashed by his silence, she stole a furtive glance at Jerome, a look more curious than hostile. Why had he come back? Could he be still just a little in love with her? The fancy stirred her with faint longings and suddenly a wild idea flashed through her mind: couldn’t she have another child by him? All her frustrated hopes flamed up again. Jerome’s son, Daniel’s little brother, a child of her own, and for her only! She all but cast herself at Jerome’s feet and clasped his knees, murmuring with a look of fond entreaty: ‘I want to have a child by you!’ No! That would shatter, for a mere caprice, all the future which, inch by hard-won inch, she was now rebuilding. A brief emotion thrilled her body, and for a moment her eyes brooded on an elusive dream; but then she murmured through tight-set lips: ‘No, it can’t be done.’

‘How’s Daniel?’ she suddenly enquired.

‘Who? My son?’ Then in a constrained voice he added, ‘Do you know him?’

Rinette, though why she hardly knew, had hoped that Daniel had something to do with Jerome’s return. Now she was sorry that his name had crossed her lips, and decided to say nothing more about him; neither father nor son must ever guess her secret, the strange dilemma of her love.

She turned the question.

‘Do I know him? Why, everyone at Paris knows him! Yes, I’ve met him.’

Jerome’s anxiety deepened, but he dared not put the question: ‘Was it here?’

‘Where did you meet him?’ he asked.

‘Oh, all over the place. In cabarets.’

‘Yes,’ he observed, ‘I thought as much. I’ve told him more than once what I think of the life he’s leading.’

‘Oh, that was ages ago,’ she made haste to add. ‘I don’t know if he still goes to such places. Perhaps he’s turned over a new leaf—like me!’

He gazed at her in silence, sincerely grieving over the depravity of the younger generation, the collapse of moral codes—and, most of all, over this brothel, and this fellow-creature abandoned to the powers of evil.

Such is life, he mused, but why must it be so? And suddenly he felt crestfallen, conscience-stricken.

Rinette, lost once again in roseate visions of the future, the goal towards which henceforth all her efforts would be directed, gave utterance to her daydream, clicking her garter against her thigh.

‘Yes, I’ve straightened things out at last—that’s why I’ve not got my knife into you any more. If I stick to my job and don’t play the fool, in another three years it’s good-bye to Paris for me! That god-forsaken old Paris of yours!’

‘Why in three years?’

‘Why, it’s simple as shelling peas. I’ve been here just under a month now and I’m making fifty or sixty francs clear, day in, day out. Four hundred a week. That means, in three years—sooner, with any luck—I’ll have scraped together thirty thousand francs. When that day comes you’ll hear no more of Cricri, Rinette and the bunch of ’em; Miss Victorine will hop into the Lannion train with all her bags and baggage, and a wad of bank-notes in her pocket. Good-bye to the whole lot of you!’

She chuckled.

No, Jerome reassured himself with desperate insistence, surely I’m not so depraved as my acts would make me. No, the problem’s not so simple as all that; I’m better than the life I lead. Yet, only for me, this girl . . . Only for me! And from the depths of memory the words came back to him once more: ‘Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!’

‘Are your parents alive?’ he asked.

A notion, imprecise as yet, though even now he was at pains to keep it under, was slowly taking form within his mind.

‘My old dad, he died last year, on Saint Yves’ day.’ She paused, doubtful if she should cross herself or not; she decided against it. ‘I’ve only auntie left. She has a little house on the market-square, just behind the church. You don’t know Perros-Guirec, do you? As it so happens, I’m the old dame’s only heir. ’Tisn’t that she’s so mighty well-to-do, but the house is hers, that’s

something. She lives on a pension, a thousand francs a year. She was in service with titled folk for years and years. She lets out the chairs in church, too, and that brings in a bit. Well'—she paused a moment, then her face brightened—'with thirty thousand francs capital Madame Juju swears that I can have the same income, or as near as may be. I'll find something to do to make up the difference, sure enough. And then we'll keep house together. We always hit it off, her and I. . . . And down there,' she added, watching her toes twisting and turning in the tiny satin slippers, 'down there nobody knows a mortal thing about me; it'll all be done with, for good and all.'

Jerome had risen. His plan was taking definite shape, obsessing his mind. For a moment or two he paced to and fro. An act of generosity . . . to make amends!

He halted in front of Rinette.

'You're really fond of your home—of Brittany, aren't you, Victorine?'

So taken aback was she by his punctilious 'Victorine' that she could not reply at once.

Then 'I should say so!' she rejoined.

'Well you're going back there. Yes, you are. Now listen!'

Again he fell to his restless pacing to and fro, eager to have his way, like a spoilt child. 'It's now or never,' he reflected. 'Otherwise I won't be answerable for the consequences.'

'Listen!' He jerked out the words. 'You're going back there.' Then, looking her boldly in the eyes, he added peremptorily: 'This very night.'

She laughed.

'Am I?'

'Yes.'

'To-night?'

'Yes.'

'To Perros?'

'To Perros.'

Now she had ceased to laugh; with malevolent eyes and lowered brows she looked him up and down. What business had he to play the fool with her? Was it a subject to make jokes about?

'If you had a thousand francs a year like your aunt . . . ' he began.

His smile convinced her that he meant her well. But what could he be after with his 'thousand francs a year'? She worked it out composedly: twelve into a thousand.

The smile had left his lips.

‘Is there a notary in your village? What’s his name?’

‘A notary? Who do you mean? Monsieur Benic?’

Jerome puffed his chest out.

‘Well, Cricri, I give you my word of honour that every year, on the first of September, Monsieur Benic will hand you a thousand francs on my behalf. Here’s the money for this year.’ He pulled out his pocket-book. ‘And here’s another thousand to pay your expenses settling in.’ He held out the money.

She opened her eyes wide and bit her lip without replying. There the money lay, within her reach; she had only to stretch out her hand. So simple-minded was she still, in spite of all, that the proposal left her wonder-struck, but not incredulous. Patiently Jerome held out the notes and at last she took them; after folding and refolding them as small as possible she slipped them inside her stocking and stared at Jerome, tongue-tied. It never entered her head that she might kiss him; she had forgotten not only what she now was but what they had been to each other. He was once more Monsieur Jerome, Madame Petit-Dutreuil’s friend, and she was as shy of him now as the first time she had set eyes on him.

‘But,’ he added, ‘it’s on one condition—that you leave this place at once.’

She was not prepared for that.

‘What? At once? This afternoon? No, I can’t manage that, sir; really it’s impossible.’

But, rather than retard the issue of his good intentions even for a day, he would have preferred to drop them altogether.

‘This afternoon without fail, my dear, and, what’s more, I’ll see you off.’

Now there was no mistaking his determination, she flew into a temper. At once? What nonsense! For one thing, this was just the time she started work. Then, what about her things at the hotel? And the girl friend who shared the room with her? And Madame Juju? And all her washing at the laundry? And anyhow the people here wouldn’t hear of her going off like that. She fussed and fluttered like a netted bird.

‘I’ll go and fetch Madame Rose,’ she exclaimed at last, with tears in her eyes, when all her protests proved of no avail. ‘Then you’ll see it simply can’t be done. And, what’s more, I don’t want to do it!’

‘Fetch her at once!’

Jerome foresaw a heated argument and was prepared to take a firm line with the lady. Mme. Rose's amiable smile came as a surprise.

'Of course she can. Why ever not?' she replied, for she had scented a police trap from the start. 'All our young ladies are quite free; they can leave when they like.' Turning to Rinette, she addressed her in a peremptory tone, rubbing her plump hands together. 'Run along, my dear, and get dressed. Can't you see the gentleman's waiting?'

Rinette, clasping her hands, stared at her 'Madame' and at Jerome, turn by turn, in blank bewilderment. Big tears were sluicing down her make-up. Her mind was in a ferment of conflicting emotions, of mingled helplessness and rage and consternation. At that moment she hated Jerome. Moreover, she was reluctant to leave the room before conveying to him that he must not breathe a word about the money hidden in her stocking. Mme. Rose ended by flying into a towering passion and, grasping Rinette's arm, she ejected her forcibly. 'Will you do as you're told, you!' she shouted at the girl, then hissed under her breath: 'And never show your dirty, spying face here again!'

Half an hour later a taxi set Jerome and Rinette down at the hotel where the latter had a room. Rinette had ceased crying and, as she had no personal initiative to take, was coming to accept, though still reluctantly, the over-hastiness of the proceedings. But now and then a protest rose to her lips, like a refrain.

'In three years, I don't say No. But not now, please, not at once!'

Jerome made no answer, but patted her hand. 'To-day,' he was repeating under his breath. 'This very evening, without fail!' Just now he felt that he had strength enough to break down all resistance, but already he could see, only too clearly, the limit of his power; no time must be lost.

He had the hotel bill brought him, with a time-table. The train left at 7.15 p.m.

Rinette asked him to help her drag from underneath a wardrobe a battered wooden trunk containing a bundle of garments.

'My uniform when I was in service,' she explained.

A memory of Noémie's dresses, which Nicole had handed over to the pension-keeper at Amsterdam, flashed across Jerome's mind. He sat down, drew Rinette on to his knee and calmly, yet with real fervour throbbing in the cadence of each phrase, exhorted her to leave her finery behind, cast off the harlot's stock-in-trade, and begged her to go back, for good and all, to the simple ways, the purity of her former life.

She listened to him earnestly. His words were like an echo of some long-forgotten voice within herself. ‘And then,’ she could not help reflecting, ‘fancy me wearing those things at home! At High Mass, for instance! Whatever would they think of me?’ She could never have brought herself to throw away, even to give away, the lace-trimmed underlinen and showy dresses on which so much of her savings had been spent. But she owed the girl with whom she shared the room two hundred francs and, now she was leaving Paris, the debt loomed large in her mind. Why not settle it by leaving the clothes to her friend, and keep intact the round sum Jerome had provided? An excellent way out!

At the idea of putting on once more her shabby black serge dress she clapped her hands with glee, as if she were preparing for a fancy ball. She slipped off Jerome’s knee with a burst of hysterical laughter that racked her body like a fit of sobbing.

Jerome had averted his eyes so as not to embarrass her while she dressed. He walked to the window and stared, in a brown study, at the courtyard wall in front. Surely, he mused, I’m worth more than people think! To his mind, this act of merit redeemed the error of the past, responsibility for which, however, he had never frankly taken on himself.

One thing more was needed to set his mind at rest. Without turning his head, he addressed the girl impulsively.

‘Tell me that you’re not angry with me any more.’

‘Not a bit!’

‘No, but say the words. Say: “I forgive you.”’ Her courage failed her and, still gazing out of the window, he implored:

‘Be generous. Say just those three words!’

She obeyed him.

‘Of course . . . of course, I forgive you, sir.’

‘Thank you.’

Tears came to his eyes. He was an exile returning to his place in the scheme of things, regaining, after two years of deprivation, a tranquil heart! At a window of the lower storey a canary was in full song. ‘There is a soul of goodness in me,’ Jerome reflected. ‘People judge me over-harshly; they don’t understand. As a man I’m better than the way I live.’ His heart overflowed with compassion, indiscriminate benevolence.

‘Poor Cricri!’ he murmured.

When he turned he saw Rinette fastening the last buttons of her black woollen bodice. She had drawn her hair back and, after a wash, her cheeks

had regained their bloom; once more she looked the timid, rather mulish little servant-girl whom Noémie had brought back with her six years earlier from Brittany.

Unable to contain his feelings, Jerome went up to her and slipped his arm round her waist. 'I'm good at heart,' he kept on repeating to himself like a refrain. 'Far better than anyone supposes.' Instinctively his fingers unhooked her skirt while his lips rested on the girl's forehead in a paternal kiss.

Rinette shrank away—almost she seemed the shy, reluctant little girl of former days. He pressed her closely to him.

'Ah,' she sighed, 'so you still use the same scent—you know what I mean, the one that smells like lemonade.' Smiling now, she lifted a responsive mouth to his, closing her eyes.

Was it not, indeed, the only token of gratitude that she could offer? And for Jerome, too, was it not the one gesture adequate in his present mood of mystic fervour to express in its entirety the devout compassion abounding in his heart?

When they reached the Montparnasse station her train was in. Now, for the first time, when she saw the carriage labelled 'Lannion,' Rinette woke to a sense of realities. No, there was no catch in it; the dream that she had cherished for so many years was coming true at last. Why then, she wondered, should she feel so sad?

Jerome found a seat for her and they paced up and down the platform in front of her carriage, in silence. Rinette was thinking of something, of someone. . . . But she found no words to break the silence. Something, it seemed, was preying on Jerome's mind as well, for several times he turned to her, as if about to speak, then looked away. At last, shunning her eyes, he blurted it out:

'I didn't tell you the truth, Cricri. Madame Petit-Dutreuil is dead.'

She asked for no details, but began to cry, and in her silent grief Jerome took heart of grace, thinking with nattering unction: 'What kindness there is in all of us!'

No more words passed between them till the train was due to leave. Had she dared to do so, Rinette would have snatched at any pretext to hand back the money and return to Mme. Rose, begging to be taken back. The delay was getting on Jerome's nerves as well; the thought that he had achieved the rescue of this girl had lost its zest.

Only when the train was pulling out did Rinette pluck up her courage.

'Will you be so kind, sir, as to give my respects to Monsieur Daniel?'

But the noise of the train drowned her voice. She saw he had not heard her; her lips began to quiver, her fingers tightened upon her breast. Jerome, all smiles, delighted to see her go, waved her good-bye with a courteous sweep of his hat.

A new thought had waylaid him and set him tingling with impatience; he would take the first train back to Maisons-Laffitte and, throwing himself at his wife's feet, confess everything—well, nearly everything.

'And then,' he murmured to himself as he lit a cigarette and moved away from the station with brisk steps, 'about the yearly allowance—I'd better explain matters to Thérèse; she's got a head on her shoulders and will see it's properly attended to.'

13

ANTOINE had formed the habit of calling several times a week at Rachel's place to take her out to dinner.

One evening as Rachel was on her way towards the mirror, preparatory to going out, and taking her powder-box out of her bag, she let a scrap of folded paper drop to the floor. Antoine picked it up and held it out to her.

'Eh? Oh, thanks!'

He thought he had detected an uneasy tremor in Rachel's voice; she read his thought at once.

'Well?' she said, trying to pass it off with a joke. 'What's all the fuss about? It's only a time-table.'

He said nothing and she replaced the paper in her bag. A moment later he blurted out the question:

'Are you going away?'

And now the flutter of her lashes, her twisted smile, were not to be mistaken.

'Well, Rachel . . . ?'

Her smile had gone; a spasm of anguish gripped him. No, he thought; no, I mustn't let her. . . . I couldn't do without her, even for a day or two!

He went up to her and touched her arm; sobbing, she sank on to his breast.

‘But what . . . what ever . . . ?’ he stammered.

She replied at once in brief, *staccato* sentences.

‘No, it’s nothing, nothing at all. Just my nerves. I’ll tell you; then you’ll see it’s nothing much really. It’s on account of baby’s grave; at Gué-la-Rozière, you know. I haven’t been to visit it for ages and ages; I really shall have to go there soon. You understand, don’t you? Fancy my frightening you like that! I’m sorry. So you’d be dreadfully cut up—would you?—if . . . if one day——’

‘Don’t go on!’ he begged in a low voice. Now for the first time he realized the place that Rachel had come to occupy in his life, and it appalled him. ‘How long will you be away?’ he faltered.

Loosening her embrace, she ran off, with a forced laugh, to the washhandstand, to sponge her eyes.

‘Isn’t it silly, starting crying like that!’ she exclaimed. ‘Do you know, the news came one evening—exactly like to-night—when I was just going out to dinner. I was at my place with some friends—people you don’t know. There was a ring at the bell; a wire. *Baby dangerously ill. Come.* I knew what it meant. I rushed off to the station just as I was, in a light tulle hat and evening shoes, and caught the first train out. What a journey that was! I was all alone and almost off my head. It’s a wonder I wasn’t quite daft by the time I got there.’ She turned towards Antoine. ‘Wait just a bit longer! I’m letting them dry off; that’s the best way.’ Her face lit up suddenly. ‘I say, do you want to do something very, very nice? Then you’ll come along there with me. It would only take two days, you know—Saturday and Sunday. We could stay the night at Rouen or Caudebec and go on next day to the Gué-la-Rozière graveyard. Wouldn’t it be great—to go off like that together, all on our own! Don’t you think so?’

They left on the last Saturday in September. The afternoon was fine, the train almost empty, and they had the carriage to themselves. Antoine was delighted with his two days’ holiday in Rachel’s company; a weight seemed lifted from his shoulders and he looked younger. Like a schoolboy, he seemed unable to keep still, he laughed at everything and twitted Rachel about her luggage deployed along the rack. The better to feast his eyes upon her face, he refused to sit beside her.

‘That’ll do!’ she protested when he got up again, this time to lower the blind. ‘I’m not going to melt.’

‘Perhaps not. But, when the sun’s on your face, I’m positively blinded.’ And, indeed, when the light fell full on her cheeks and set her hair ablaze, his eyes grew dazzled if he looked long at her. ‘This is the first time we’ve travelled together,’ he presently remarked. ‘Has that struck you?’

She could not bring herself to smile. Her mouth was a little drawn, tense with resolve and contained emotion. He bent towards her.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s nothing. Only the journey.’

He was silent, aware that selfishly he had forgotten the object of their pilgrimage. But then she explained what she meant.

‘Travelling always sets my nerves on edge. The landscape flying past. And always at a journey’s end . . . the unknown!’ Her eyes dwelt for a moment on the transient horizon. ‘And I’ve travelled in so many of them, trains and boats.’ Her look grew sombre.

Antoine slipped across to her side and, stretching himself full length on the seat, laid his head on her lap.

‘“Thy navel is like a round goblet . . . set about with lilies,”’ he murmured. Then, after a moment’s silence, realizing that Rachel’s thoughts were far away, he asked her: ‘What are you thinking about?’

‘Nothing.’ She tried to speak lightly. ‘About your head-masterish tie, perhaps!’ She slipped a finger under the silk. To think that even when you travel you can’t manage to knot it a trifle looser, let it out a bit!’ She stretched herself and smiled. ‘A stroke of luck— isn’t it?—having the carriage to ourselves. Now it’s up to you to talk. Tell me about things that have happened to you.’

He laughed.

‘That’s your pigeon—things that happen! I’ve only my “cases,” examinations and so forth. How on earth could I have anything to yarn about? I’ve always lived like a mole, underground; it’s you who’ve pulled me up to the surface and taught me to look at the world.’

Never before had he confessed as much to her. Bending above the head she loved so well, pillowed on her knees, she took it between her hands, gazing into his eyes.

‘You mean that? You really mean it?’

‘Next year, you know,’ he went on, without changing his position, ‘we won’t stay in Paris all the summer.’

‘No?’

‘I haven’t taken any leave this year; I’ll fix things up to get a fortnight off at least.’

‘Yes.’

‘Three weeks, perhaps.’

‘Yes.’

‘We’ll go abroad together, somewhere or other. Like the idea?’

‘Yes.’

‘To the mountains, if you like. The Vosges, or Switzerland. Or we might go further afield.’

There was a far-away look on Rachel’s face.

‘What are you thinking about now?’ he asked.

‘About what you’re saying. Switzerland—rather!’

‘Or the Italian lakes, perhaps.’

‘No.’

Lying on his back, lulled by the rhythms of the swaying train, he drowsily agreed.

‘All right then, we’ll go somewhere else.’ After a moment’s silence he added lazily: ‘What have you got against the Italian lakes?’

With the tips of her fingers she stroked Antoine’s forehead, his eyelids and his temples, slightly sunken like his cheeks, and did not answer. His eyes were closed, but the question he had put still simmered in his brain.

‘Why won’t you tell me what you have against the Italian lakes?’

She made a slight movement of impatience.

‘Because, if you must know, that’s where my brother died. My brother Aaron. At Pallanza.’

He regretted his insistence, but did not drop the subject.

‘Had he settled in Italy, then?’

‘Oh no, he was travelling. On his honeymoon.’ Her eyebrows frowned; then, after a moment, as if she had read Antoine’s thought, she murmured: ‘No, there’s no denying it, I’ve had my share of queer experiences in my time!’

‘You don’t hit it off with your sister-in-law, I suppose?’ he suggested. ‘Anyhow you never speak of her.’

The train was stopping; getting up, she looked out of the window. But she had heard Antoine’s question, for she turned round towards him.

‘Eh? What sister-in-law? Clara?’

‘The one who married your brother; he died, you said, on his honeymoon.’

‘She died at the same time. Didn’t I tell you about it? No?’ She was still looking out of the window. ‘They were drowned in the lake. Nobody ever knew how it happened.’ She hesitated. ‘Nobody, except, perhaps . . . Hirsch.’

‘Hirsch!’ he exclaimed, propping himself on his elbow. ‘Hirsch was with them, was he? Then—weren’t you there, too?’

‘Please don’t let’s talk about it to-day,’ she begged, returning to her seat. ‘Hand me my bag, please. Feeling hungry?’ She unwrapped a stick of chocolate and, holding one end between her teeth, proffered the other end to Antoine, who gaily joined in the game.

‘It tastes better that way,’ she observed with a greedy flicker of her eyelashes. Then a sudden, almost startling change came over her voice. ‘Clara was Hirsch’s daughter. Got it straight, now? I came to know Hirsch through his daughter. Haven’t I told you about it?’

He shook his head, but refrained from putting further questions; he was trying to make these latest details tally with what he had already gleaned from her. Anyhow it was not long before Rachel launched forth again—as she never failed to do when he ceased questioning her.

‘You’ve never seen Clara’s photo, have you? I’ll hunt it up for you. She was a great pal of mine; I got to know her in the beginners’ class. But she only stayed a year at the Opera; hadn’t the stamina for it. And I dare say Hirsch preferred keeping her at home; that’s more than likely, in fact. She and I were thick as thieves, and I used to go to see her every Sunday at the Neuilly riding-school. That’s how I started learning riding, along with her. We got into the way of going out for rides together, the three of us, and kept it up afterwards.’

‘Whom do you mean by “the three of us”?’

‘Why, Clara, Hirsch and I, of course. From Easter on I used to join them at six o’clock sharp, three mornings a week. I had to be back at eight sharp at the Opera. We had the Bois de Boulogne to ourselves at that hour—and heavenly it was!’ She paused a moment, and he gazed up at her, propping his elbows on the seat, and stayed thus without moving. Rachel harked back to her memories of the past. ‘A queer girl and no mistake! Full of grit and good-hearted as you make ’em. Lots of charm—with a spice of the gutter in it, and now and then you’d catch that terrifying expression of her father’s on her face. Yes, Clara was the best friend I had in those days. Aaron had been

keen on her for years; that was all he worked for, really—to marry her some day. But she wouldn't consent; no more would Hirsch, needless to say. Then one day she made up her mind all of a sudden; at the time I couldn't think why she did it. Why, even when the engagement was announced, I'd no idea what was at the back of her mind. When I knew—it was too late to say anything.' She paused again. 'Then, three weeks after their marriage, Hirsch wired to me to come to Pallanza. I didn't know that he had gone off to join them, and the moment I heard he was there I knew something dreadful had happened. . . . Anyhow there's no secret about it; everyone could see the bruises round Clara's neck. He must have strangled her.'

'“He?” Whom do you mean?'

'Aaron. Her husband. He'd engaged a boat that evening for a trip on the lake—all by himself. Hirsch didn't try to stop him, it suited his book too well. He knew what he was about, I expect, and guessed that Aaron meant to kill himself. Only Clara had an inkling of it, too; she picked a moment when Hirsch wasn't watching her and sprang into the boat, just as Aaron was starting to row away. Anyhow that's how I've pieced it together, bit by bit, for Hirsch . . .' She shuddered, then continued: 'You never know what Hirsch has in his head.'

Antoine broke the silence that ensued.

'But why should he have killed himself?'

'Aaron was always talking about suicide. He had it on the brain, even as a child. That's just why I didn't dare say anything to him, and let the marriage take place. Oh!' she exclaimed in a tone of deep distress, 'how I've reproached myself for it, since! Perhaps if I'd spoken out in time——' She gazed at Antoine, as though it lay with him to justify her to her conscience. 'I'd found out their secret, you see. But was that a reason for letting Aaron know about it? What could I do? He had told me several times that he'd kill himself if Clara didn't marry him. And it's sure he'd have done it, if I'd told him what I had discovered—quite by accident, too. Don't you think so?'

Antoine could not answer; he repeated her words.

'By accident?'

'Yes, quite by accident. I'd gone to join Clara and Hirsch for a morning ride. I went straight upstairs to Clara's room; when I was near it I heard a scuffle going on and started to run. The door was ajar. Clara had no blouse on, her arms were bare and her riding skirt hampered her movements; then, just as I flung the door wide open, I saw her snatch up her riding-whip from a chair and slash him across the face with it as hard as she could. Hirsch felt it all right!'

‘What? Her own father . . . ?’

‘Yes, my dear. That was a scene if you like—I often think of it!’ She chuckled with vindictive glee. ‘The sight he was that morning, I shan’t forget it in a hurry! His face went yellow, while the weal grew darker and darker. He was pretty free with his fists, himself, and, when he was at it, he hit hard. But that time it was his turn to get a cut across the face, for a change!’

‘But . . . I don’t follow.’

‘Well, I never knew exactly what had happened that morning. It struck me at once that, now she was engaged, Clara must have told him to . . . well, to leave her alone. Various details I’d already noticed, things that had puzzled me at the time, came back to me. In a flash I *understood*. . . Hirsch marched out of the room with a high and mighty air, without saying a word to me. He seemed quite confident that I’d hold my tongue, and, as you know, he wasn’t far wrong there. I ferreted the whole story out of Clara. But she swore to me—I’m sure she meant it, too—all that was over and done with, and she was marrying just to get away from it. To get away from Hirsch? Or did she mean from her own infatuation? That’s what I should have asked myself that morning. I ought to have guessed it wasn’t done with, not by any means, if only from the way she talked of Hirsch.’ After a pause, she went on in a brooding voice: ‘When you hear a woman say she hates a man as much as that, you may be sure she’s hankering after him all the time.’

Again she seemed lost in her musings and stayed a minute thus, with lowered forehead, eyes downcast. At last she spoke again.

‘Yes, and it only shows how true that is, what I’ve just said; it was Clara herself, right in the middle of their honeymoon—would you ever believe it?—who asked Hirsch to come to Italy. I don’t know exactly what happened after that. Anyhow, Aaron must have caught them together; otherwise he wouldn’t have wanted to drown himself. The one thing I’ve never quite made out is just what Clara was after. Why did she jump into the boat alongside her husband? To stop him from killing himself? Or did she intend to die with him? Either theory would fit. Think of that last talk of theirs together, out on the lake in the middle of the night! What passed between them there? Over and over again I’ve put myself the question. Did she blurt out the whole truth in that cynical way she had? She was quite capable of doing so. Did Aaron decide to do away with her, just to make sure *that* could never happen again after he was dead? Their boat was recovered next day, empty; the bodies were found together several days later. But the queerest thing of all to my mind is that Hirsch should have sent for me to come quite

early that evening, before the telegraph office closed and before even the search party had gone out to look for them. . . . Anyhow,' she continued after some pensive moments, 'you must have seen all about it in the papers—only you didn't pay much attention, I expect. The Italian police held an enquiry, and the French police took a hand in it, too. They had searches made at my place and Aaron's, but they never solved the mystery; I know more about it than they do.'

'And they never got on the tracks of your friend Hirsch?'

She drew herself up abruptly.

'No,' she coolly replied, 'they did *not* get on the tracks of my friend Hirsch.'

There was a hint of truculence in her voice and in the glance she flung at Antoine; but he took no notice, for often, when she talked of her experiences, she affected a rather provocative tone; it seemed as if she took a delight in startling the man who, on the evening when first they met, had impressed her so profoundly.

'No, they didn't get on his track,' she repeated with a chuckle, 'but he thought it wiser not to come back to France that year.'

'Are you really quite sure it was she, his daughter, in the middle of her honeymoon, who . . . ?'

'Pretty sure,' she replied, then, flinging her arms about him with the passion she always manifested when their conversation turned on Hirsch, she sealed his lips with an imperious kiss. 'Ah,' she sighed, nestling to his breast, 'you're so different from everyone else. You're generous and kind. You're straight. Oh, how I love you, Toine dear!' When Antoine, his mind still haunted by her story, showed signs of questioning her further, she was firm in her refusal. 'No, that's enough on the subject. It works me up too much; I'd rather forget, forget everything—for as long as I can. Hold me tight, darling, and be nice to me . . . yes, hug me, like that . . . closer, still closer—and help me to forget!'

He clasped her in his arms; but then, from the depths of his unconscious self, a craving for adventure, like a new instinct, flared into sudden life. Ah, could he only swerve from the rut of a too orderly existence, make a new start, live dangerously and divert to free, spontaneous acts the energies which it had been his pride to lavish on laborious ends!

'Supposing we went right away, just you and I? I say, why shouldn't we start life together, far away from Paris? You've no idea what a success I'd make of it!'

'What? You!' she laughed, lifting her lips to his.

He sobered down at once and smiled, to make believe he had not been in earnest.

‘How I love you!’ she murmured, poring on his face with a look of anguish he was destined to recall in after days.

Antoine knew Rouen well; his father’s family came of Norman stock, and some more or less near relatives of M. Thibault were still living there. Moreover, some eight years earlier, Antoine had been posted to Rouen for his military service.

He insisted on Rachel coming with him before dinner across the bridges to an outlying suburb, swarming with troops, and led her along beside a never-ending barrack wall.

‘There’s the sick-ward!’ Antoine announced delightedly, pointing to some lighted windows. ‘Do you see the second window there? That’s the M.O.’s office. What days and days I’ve wasted in that room with damn-all to do—why, I couldn’t even read a book!—except keep an eye on a brace of lead-swingers and a few youngsters with a dose!’ He laughed without a trace of rancour, then joyfully exclaimed: ‘What a change! Why, I’m the happiest man in the world to-day!’

She made no reply and slipped hastily in front of him; he did not notice she was on the brink of tears.

A picture-house announced ‘In Darkest Africa.’ Antoine drew Rachel’s attention to the poster, but she shook her head and hurried him back to their hotel.

While they dined, all his efforts to make her laugh were unavailing and, remembering why they had come here, he felt a little ashamed of his high spirits.

But, the moment they were in the bedroom, she flung her arms round his neck.

‘Don’t be angry with me,’ she pleaded.

‘Angry? What ever for?’

‘For spoiling our trip like this.’

He was going to protest when she embraced him again.

‘Oh, how I love you!’ she repeated, almost as if she were talking to herself.

Early next morning they arrived at Caudebec. The heat was more oppressive than ever; a veil of scintillating mist hung over the wide river. A small hotel announced conveyances for hire and Antoine carried their luggage to it. The carriage they had ordered drew up, well before the appointed time, in front of the window near which they were breakfasting. Rachel hurried through the dessert and, refusing Antoine's aid, piled all her parcels into the hood, then, after explaining to the driver the route she wanted him to take, sprang gaily into the ancient victoria.

The nearer came the melancholy climax of their expedition, the more her spirits seemed to rise. She grew ecstatic over the countryside, each hill and each declivity, the crosses by the roadside, each village market-place. Everything came as a surprise to her; she might have never roamed beyond the suburbs of some great city.

'I say, just look! Those hens! And that palsied old crone over there, toasting in the sun! And that level-crossing barrier with a great chunk of stone to weigh it down. Aren't they back numbers, the folk in these parts! Well, I warned you you were coming to the back of beyond, didn't I? And I wasn't far wrong?'

When she caught sight of the roofs down in the valley, clustering round the spire of the little church of Gué-la-Rozière, she stood up in the carriage and her face lit up as if she were a wanderer returning to her native land.

'The graveyard's over on the left, a long way from the town. Behind those poplars. You'll see it in a minute. . . . Keep your horse at a trot through the village, please,' she told the driver, as they came to the first houses of Gué.

Half hidden at the far end of grassy orchards, white house-fronts, striped with black and trimly capped with thatch, flashed back the sunlight through the apple-trees; the windows all were shuttered. They passed a slate-tiled building flanked by two sentinel yews.

'That's the town-hall,' Rachel cried delightedly. 'Not a single thing has changed. That's where they fixed up the certificates and so forth. See that house over there? That's where baby's nurse used to live. Nice folk they were. They've gone away, or else I'd look them up and give the old girl a kiss. Hullo, that's where I stayed once. When I came, I put up where there happened to be a spare bed. I took my meals there; how I used to laugh at the funny way they talked! And they gaped at me as if I'd escaped from a menagerie. The old girls used to come and inspect me in bed—my pyjamas, you know. You'd never believe what back numbers they are in these parts. Nice people, for all that. They were terribly kind to me when baby died.'

After that I sent them heaps and heaps of things: candied fruit, ribbons for their bonnets, liqueurs for the curé.’ She stood up again. ‘The graveyard’s there, just beyond that ridge. If you look well you’ll see the graves, down in the hollow. I say, put your hand here—do you know why my heart’s fluttering like that? I’m always in terror I shan’t be able to find her again, poor little thing. We didn’t care to take out a permanent lease, you see; everyone assured us that wasn’t the custom hereabouts. And, every time I come, I can’t help thinking to myself: “Suppose they’ve bundled her out of it!” They’d be in their rights, you know, if they did so. . . . Pull up in front of the pathway, my man; we’ll walk to the gate. . . . Come along, be quick!’

Jumping down, she ran to the iron gate, opened it and vanished round a wall. Almost immediately she came into sight again and called to Antoine.

‘It’s still there.’

Sunlight fell full upon her face, where only joy was manifest. She vanished again and this time Antoine followed her up. He found her standing, arms akimbo, gazing at a patch of weeds wedged in the angle between two walls; some vestiges of masonry showed through the nettles.

‘It’s there all right, but what a state it’s in! Yes, poor kid, your grave could do with a brush-up—and, just fancy, I pay them twenty francs a year to look after it!’

She turned to Antoine, and now her voice sounded almost diffident, as though she craved his indulgence for a caprice.

‘Toine dear, would you mind very much taking off your hat?’

Blushing, Antoine removed his hat.

‘Poor little darling!’ she suddenly exclaimed, and rested her hand on Antoine’s shoulder, while her eyes filled with tears. ‘To think I wasn’t even with her when she died! I came too late. She was such a sweet little thing, just like a little angel, and so pale. . . .’ Then, in a sudden change of mood, she wiped her eyes and smiled. ‘Well, it’s a queer sort of expedition I’ve brought you on, isn’t it? Of course it’s ancient history in a way, but one can’t help feeling it all the same. It’s just as well we’ve a job of work before us—it takes one’s mind off things. Come along!’

She insisted on going back to the carriage and, refusing the driver’s help, carried her packages to the graveyard. There, waving Antoine aside, she unfastened them herself, kneeling on the ground. On an adjoining tombstone she aligned methodically a bill-hook, a shovel and a mallet; last of all a big cardboard box containing a wreath woven of strings of white beads.

‘Now I know why it was so heavy,’ said Antoine smiling.

She drew herself up gaily.

‘Look here, stop ragging and lend us a hand for a change. Off with your coat! Here, take this bill-hook! We’ve got to root up, or hack away somehow, all those damned weeds which have overgrown everything. See those bricks there, underneath? That’s the grave. She had such a mite of a coffin, and it didn’t weigh much either, poor darling! Pass me that, please. It’s all that’s left of a wreath; a pretty old one, that. *In memory of our darling daughter*. Zucco brought it. I’d had nothing to do with him for a year, but I thought I ought to let him know about it all the same—you understand, don’t you? Anyhow he did the right thing; he put in an appearance, in mourning, too. What’s more I was really glad he’d come, I didn’t feel so lonely at the funeral. Silly of me, but there you are! Hullo, that’s the cross. Set it up straight please; we can bank it up with earth presently.’

As he drew aside a wisp of grass, Antoine had a shock; a first glimpse had not revealed the entire inscription: *Roxane Rachel Goepfert*. The *Roxane* had been hidden, and he had only seen *her* name. For some seconds he stood there, lost in thought.

‘Now then,’ Rachel admonished him. ‘Let’s get down to it! We’ll begin here.’

Antoine ‘got down to it’ with a will; he was no believer in half-measures. In his shirt-sleeves, brandishing bill-hook and shovel, he very soon was sweating like a navvy.

‘Now for the wreaths,’ she said. ‘Pass them to me and I’ll clean them one by one. Hullo, there’s one missing! Can’t you find it? It’s Hirsch’s, the best of the lot. In china flowers, it was. Well, I must say, that’s a bit thick!’

Antoine watched her with amusement; hatless, the red tangle of her hair burning in the sunlight, lips curling with scorn and indignation, her skirts tucked up and sleeves rolled to her elbows, she raged about the churchyard, from first to final grave, muttering imprecations.

‘Someone’s gone and lifted it, the dirty thief—damn him!’

When she came back she seemed disheartened.

‘And I was so fond of it! They’ve chopped it up into trinkets I expect. Yes, they’re a primitive lot, all right! Still’—her anger evaporated as if by magic—‘I’ve spotted some yellow sand over there which will brighten things up no end.’

With the passing minutes the little grave was taking on a new aspect; the cross, trued up again and hammered into the ground, rose high above a brick rectangle, meticulously cleared of weeds; a narrow border of sand, laid all around it, added the finishing touch to a neat, well-kept grave.

They had not noticed the horizon clouding up and some premonitory raindrops took them by surprise. A storm was gathering above the valley. Under the leaden sky the tombstones seemed to grow whiter yet, the grass more green.

‘Hurry up!’ Rachel cried. She cast a mothering glance towards the tiny grave. ‘Yes, we’ve made a good job of it. Why, it might be a little cottage garden!’

Antoine had espied in a corner of the graveyard two saffron-hearted roses on a drooping branch, tossing in the breeze. He thought of laying them in token of farewell on little Roxane’s grave, but could not bring himself to make the romantic gesture, which would come so much better from the child’s mother. He picked the roses and handed them to Rachel.

Taking them from his hand, she thrust the stems hastily into her blouse.

‘Thanks,’ she said, ‘but we must hurry or my hat will be ruined.’

Without looking back, she ran to the carriage, holding up her skirts under the downpour.

The driver had taken out his horse, and man and beast were sheltering in a hollow of the hedge. Antoine and Rachel took cover under the hood, spreading on their knees the heavy apron reeking of musty leather. She was laughing, amused at the trick the elements had played on them, and rejoicing, too, in a sense of duty done.

It was only a summer shower. Soon the rain abated, the clouds sheered off towards the east. Across the clear, pellucid air the setting sun shone out again in blinding splendour. The driver began to harness his horse and some children came along the road, driving before them a flock of rain-drenched geese. A little boy of nine or ten climbed on to the step and hailed them in a shrill, childish voice.

‘It’s nice to be in love, ain’t it, mister?’

He jumped off again; they heard his clogs clattering down the road.

Rachel burst out laughing.

‘Back numbers?’ Antoine chuckled. ‘The rising generation strikes me as being very much up-to-date.’

At last the vehicle was ready to take the road. It was too late to catch the train at Caudebec and they had to drive directly to the nearest main-line station. As Antoine had not arranged for a substitute at the hospital on Monday morning, he was bound to return to Paris that night.

The driver persuaded them to halt at Saint Ouen-la-Noue for supper. The inn was thronged with the usual Sunday-night crowd of toppers. The new-

comers were allotted in one of the back rooms.

They ate in silence. Rachel's joviality had spent itself and she was musing on the past—that evening when at this very hour, after the funeral, she had driven to this inn in a similar, perhaps the same conveyance; but then the famous tenor had been her companion. Most vivid memory of all was the dispute that had flared up between them almost at once. Zucco had grown violent and dealt her a blow—just there it had happened, in front of that corn-bin. But that very night she had given herself to him again in one of the bedrooms overhead, and for the next four months she had once more put up with his brutal ways, his boorishness. Still, she bore him little malice; there was even a certain sensual thrill in her memories of the man and of the blow he had inflicted. But she took good care not to tell Antoine the story; she had never confessed to him in so many words that the singer used to beat her. . . . Then another and more poignant memory loomed through the darkness of her thoughts, and now she realized that she had dallied all this time with other fancies only to shake off its obsession.

She rose.

'Shall we walk to the station?' she suggested. 'The train's not due till eleven. The driver can bring along the luggage.'

'What? A five-mile tramp along these muddy roads, in the middle of the night?'

'Why not?'

'I never heard of such an idea!'

'Oh,' she sighed, 'then I'd have got there fagged out and that would have done me no end of good!' But, without further protest, she followed him to the waiting carriage.

The night was pitch dark, the air refreshed by rain. No sooner was she seated than she prodded the driver's back with her parasol.

'Drive slowly, please; as slowly as you like. We've heaps of time.' Then she snuggled up to Antoine, murmuring: 'It's such a lovely night; I'm so comfy, like this.'

But when, a moment later, he lightly stroked the cheek that nestled against his shoulder, he felt it wet with tears.

'My nerves are all upset,' she explained, and moved her face away. Then suddenly she flung herself into his arms. 'Oh, my darling, keep me, hold me close, close in your arms!'

They were silent now, locked in each other's arms. Trees and houses, briefly lit up by the carriage-lamps, flickered into phantom life and died into

the darkness. A host of stars spangled the zenith. Rachel's drooping head swayed to and fro on Antoine's shoulder with each lurch of the ramshackle conveyance; now and again she drew herself up and her arm tightened round his shoulders.

'Oh, how I love you!'

They were the only passengers awaiting the Paris train on the platform of the little junction. They took shelter under a penthouse. Rachel, still in silent mood, held Antoine's arm.

Porters were bustling hither and thither in the darkness, swinging their lanterns over the rain-drenched platform and lighting it with evanescent gleams.

'Stand back for the express!'

With a rattle and a roar the express hurtled past, a black, fire-eyed mastodon, whirling aloft whatever might take wing, draining away the very air behind it. The tumult passed; silence closed in again. Suddenly above their heads the thin, exasperating buzzing of an electric bell announced the coming of their train.

There was only half a minute's halt and they had barely time to scramble into a compartment, no time to choose one. Three other passengers were in their carriage, sound asleep; vizored in blue, the roof-lamp glimmered wanly. Rachel took off her hat and sank into the only remaining corner-seat. Antoine sat down at her side, but, instead of leaning towards him, she pressed her forehead against the window.

In the half-light her hair which glowed in sunshine orange-yellow, almost pink, had lost its normal hue; changed to a white-hot, molten fluorescence, like spun glass or a metallic floss. Her cheeks were bathed in a phosphorescent sheen which made the skin seem unsubstantial, wraithlike. Antoine clasped Rachel's hand, which lay drooping on the cushions. Thinking he had seen her shiver, he questioned her in a low voice; her only response was a febrile pressure of his hand, she did not turn in his direction. He had no inkling of what might be passing in her mind. He remembered her demeanour in the graveyard, her nervous breakdown at the inn; could the errand which had brought them there account for it? Yet she had seen it through cheerfully enough. He could make nothing of her present mood.

When they reached Paris, and their fellow-travellers, struggling to their feet, unmasked the lamp, he noticed that her eyes were fixed on the ground.

He followed her in silence through the crowd and only when they were in the taxi did he venture a question.

‘Whatever is the matter?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Tell me what it is, Rachel.’

‘Leave me in peace! Can’t you see it’s over now?’

‘No, I won’t leave you in peace. I’ve the right . . . Now do tell me what it is.’

Raising her tear-stained face, she gazed at him with a look of utter despair.

‘No, I can’t tell you what it is.’ But then her self-control broke down and she flung herself into his arms. ‘I’ll never have strength enough, my darling; never, never, never . . . !’

In a flash he knew his happiness was drawing to an end; Rachel would leave him, pass from his life—and there was nothing, nothing at all, that he could do against it. He realized the bitter truth without a word from her and long before he guessed what lay behind it, even before the sorrow of it touched his life; it was as if he had always, from the first, been prepared for this to happen.

In silence they climbed the stairs and entered Rachel’s flat. She left him to himself for a few moments in the pink room. He stood there, bereft of thought, gazing vacantly at the bed, the dressing-table, the alcove—at all that had become a second home to him. She had taken off her cloak when she came back to the room. He watched her enter, shut the door, come near him, her eyes veiled by the golden lashes, her lips close-set and enigmatic.

His courage gave way, and he stumbled towards her, stammering:

‘But you can’t mean it, surely you can’t? You’re not really going to leave me?’

Then she sat down and in a weary, broken voice asked him to face it calmly; she had a long journey before her, a business trip to the Belgian Congo. She launched into explanations. Her father’s estate, every sou he had, had been invested by Hirsch in an oil-mill which hitherto had done very well indeed and paid good dividends. But recently one of the managers had died, and now she had learnt that the other manager, who was running the factory at present, was hand in glove with some wealthy business-men from Brussels who had just established at Kinchassa—in close proximity, that was—a rival factory, and the Belgians were doing their utmost to ruin the concern in which she, Rachel, was interested. (As she went on, her voice

grew rather more assured.) The situation was complicated, moreover, by political intrigues. The Müller group was backed by the Belgian government. There was no one she could trust on the spot. Her entire fortune was in jeopardy, her material welfare and her future. She had thought things over, tried to find some other way out. Hirsch was living in Egypt and quite out of touch with the Congo, at present. The only solution was to go there herself and set the business on its feet again, or dispose of it to the Müller group at a suitable price.

Vanquished by her coolness, Antoine heard her out, pale-faced, with tight-set lips.

‘But’—he ventured at last to intervene—‘surely it won’t take you so very long?’

‘That depends.’

‘How long? A month? More than that . . . two months?’ There was a tremor in his voice. ‘Or three months?’

‘Yes.’

‘Less, perhaps.’

‘Hardly less. Why, it takes a month to get there!’

‘Supposing we could find someone to send instead? Someone you could depend on?’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘How could I rely on anyone during the month or so he’d be out of my control? With my rivals over there only too ready to grease his palm!’

There was no arguing against the logic of it. As a matter of fact, a word had been hovering on his lips ever since she began her explanation—the query: When? All other questions could bide their time. He made a timid move towards her, and murmured in a humble voice which curiously belied the masterful set of his features:

‘Lulu dear, you’re not thinking of leaving me at once, are you? Do please tell me.’

‘No, not at once. But quite soon.’

He mustered up all his courage.

‘When?’

‘When I’ve got everything ready. I can’t say exactly.’

Their fixity of purpose wavered in the ensuing silence. Antoine could read on Rachel’s haggard face that she was near her breaking-point, and he, too, felt his will-power ebbing. He went up to her, pleaded with her again.

‘You don’t really mean it, do you? You’re not going to . . . go away?’

She strained him to her breast and drew him stumblingly towards the bed; they fell across it, locked in each other’s arms.

‘Don’t speak,’ she whispered. ‘Don’t ask me anything. Say nothing more about it . . . nothing at all—or I shall go away at once, without a word of warning!’

Desolate and defeated, he kept silence, and now, in his turn, fell to weeping, crushing his face upon her loosened hair.

14

RACHEL kept her word, and for a whole month turned a deaf ear to any further questions. Whenever she detected a certain flicker of anxiety in Antoine’s eyes, she looked away. It was a terrible month; life went on its usual way, and yet no act, no thought, but had its repercussion on their suffering.

On the day after she broke the news to him, Antoine had summoned up all his strength of mind to see him through, but it had failed him; he was appalled to find his grief so poignant, ashamed of having it so little under control. A disturbing suspicion had crossed his mind: ‘Can it be that I’m . . . ?’ and, close on its heels, another thought: ‘Anyhow, I mustn’t let others see it.’ It was as well for him the duties of his calling gave him no respite, and daily, as he crossed the precincts of the hospital, professional instinct got the upper hand again and saw him through the day; at each bedside his thoughts were only for the patient. But in his spells of leisure—between two visits, or at the family table (for M. Thibault was back in Paris and, since the beginning of October, their domestic life followed the old routine)—the mood of irremediable gloom, for ever brooding in the background of his mind, bore down on him, and he grew inattentive, quick to take offence; it seemed that all the energy on which he used to pride himself could find its only outlet now in fits of temper.

He spent his evenings and every night with Rachel; joyless evenings, joyless nights. All that they said, even their silences, were poisoned by

unuttered thoughts, and their embraces quickly wore them out, yet never slaked their almost hostile craving each for each.

One evening at the beginning of November when he was about to enter Rachel's flat, Antoine found the door wide open. Bare walls. A carpetless floor. The whole aspect of the hall had changed. He rushed into the flat. His footsteps echoed emptiness, and in the pink bedroom the alcove gaped, a meaningless recess.

He heard sounds in the kitchen and ran there, panic-stricken. He saw the concierge on her knees, fumbling with a pile of discarded garments. Antoine snatched from her hand the letter she held up to him. His heart began to beat again once he had read the first few lines; no, Rachel had not left Paris yet, she was waiting for him in a neighbouring hotel and would not be leaving for Le Havre till the following night. At once he fell to planning a campaign of lies that would enable him to take the night and morning off, and see Rachel on board her boat.

He spent most of the following day in unsuccessful attempts to arrange this, and it was not till six o'clock that everything had been settled, a substitute provided, and he was free to go.

He joined Rachel at the station where she was busy registering a pile of brand-new trunks. She looked pale, much older, and wore a tailor-made costume that he had not seen before.

It was not till the following morning, at the Havre hotel, when he was trying to steady down his throbbing nerves in a boiling hot bath, that something he had vaguely noticed yesterday flashed through his mind, vivid as lightning and as startling: Rachel's luggage was marked 'R.H.'

He sprang out of the water, flung open the bathroom door.

'You . . . you're going back to Hirsch!'

To his utter bewilderment Rachel's face lit up with a tender smile.

'Yes,' she whispered, but so faintly that he only caught a far-off sibilance; then he saw her eyelids flutter an avowal, and she nodded twice.

He sank into a chair. Some minutes passed. No word of reproach rose to his lips, and it was not grief or jealousy that bowed his shoulders now, only a sense of his own powerlessness, the crushing load of life; they were puppets in the hands of fate.

A shivering fit reminded him that he was wet and naked.

'You'll catch cold,' she said. So far no word had passed between them.

Hardly aware what he was doing, Antoine dried himself and began to dress. She remained standing there, as she had been when he burst in, leaning against the radiator, a nail-file in her hand. For all their sorrow, both of them, he hardly less than she, were conscious of a vague relief. How often during the past month had Antoine felt that something was being kept back from him! Now, at least, the truth in all its stark reality lay bare before his eyes. And Rachel, shaking off the irksome trammels of her lie, could feel her sense of dignity return, and be herself again.

At last she broke the silence.

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t have told a lie!’ Love shone on her face, and pity, unshadowed by the least remorse. ‘What a lot of silly notions one has about jealousy—false, conventional ideas! Anyhow, I assure you, it was only for your sake—to spare you—that I lied; personally, it only made me more miserable than ever. But now I’m glad I haven’t got to go away with a lie between us.’

He made no comment, but stopped dressing and sat down.

‘Yes,’ she went on, ‘Hirsch has asked me to return, and I am going back to him.’

She paused again and, now she understood his silence was deliberate, all the thoughts she had kept back so long clamoured for utterance.

‘It’s sweet of you, Toine dear, not to say anything—thank you! For, oh my darling, don’t I know all that might be said? I’ve been arguing it out with myself for weeks and weeks. It’s pure madness, what I’m doing—but nothing could stop me from doing it. I suppose you think it’s Africa that tempts me, the call of the wild, as they say. Well, there’s something in that of course; sometimes that call’s so urgent that I’m positively sick with longing. But that, by itself, wouldn’t have been enough. Or perhaps you think I’m acting from mercenary motives. There’s some truth in that, too. Hirsch is going to marry me; he’s immensely rich and at my age—you may say what you like—marriage has its importance; it’s pretty hard spending all one’s days on the outside edge of things. But there’s more in it than that. I really think that I’m a bit above such considerations, so far as anyone who’s a Jew, or half a Jew, can be above them. Here’s a proof of it; you’re a rich man, or will be one; well, you might ask me to marry you to-morrow, but I wouldn’t give up my plan of going away.

‘I know I’m hurting you, Toine darling, but do be brave and hear me out; it does me good to tell you everything. For your sake, too—it’s better for you to know all. . . . I thought of killing myself. Morphia gives you a quick death, with no fuss, no pain. I’d even bought the bottle; I threw it away

yesterday before leaving Paris. I want to live, you see; I never really, really wished to die. You never seemed jealous when I spoke of him—and you were right. It's he, as you very well know, who should be jealous of you. I love you, dear, I love you as I've never loved anyone before; and—I hate *him!* Why shouldn't I own to it? I hate him. He's not a man, he's a . . . I don't know what. I hate him and he terrifies me. Time after time he's beaten me. And he'll beat me again—kill me, who knows? He, anyhow, is jealousy itself. Once on the Ivory Coast he bribed one of our coolies to strangle me. Do you know why? Because he imagined his boy had come to my hut one night, to see me. No, he'd stick at nothing!

'At nothing!' she repeated in a brooding voice. 'But one can't stand up against him. Listen to this—I've never dared to tell you about it before. You remember when I went to Pallanza after the tragedy—when he sent for me? Well, that's when it all began. Yet I'd guessed the truth and I was scared to death of him. One day I didn't dare to drink a cup of tea he'd made for me, because of the queer smile on his face when he brought it. And yet, in spite of that, in spite of all . . . Do you understand? No, you simply can't conceive the curious fascination of that man!'

Antoine shivered again. Rachel wrapped a dressing-gown round his shoulders and went on in a cool, unemotional voice.

'Don't imagine he had to use threats, or force. He had only to bide his time; that was all and he knew it, he knew his power. Why, it was I who went and knocked at his door! And it was only on the second night that he opened it to me. Then I gave up everything to go away with him; I didn't return to France. I followed him everywhere, like his dog, like his shadow. For two, nearly three, years I put up with everything—blows, exhaustion, ill-treatment, prison . . . everything! For three years I couldn't look a day ahead without being terrified of what might happen. Sometimes we had to stay in hiding for weeks on end, without daring to go out-of-doors. At Salonica there was a terrible scandal, we had all the Turkish police hunting us down; we had to change our names five times before we could make the frontier. Always the same story, trouble over his . . . propensities. In one of the London suburbs he managed to buy up a whole family—a prostitute from the slums, her two sisters and her little brother; his "mixed grill," he called it. One day the police surrounded the house and nabbed us. We had three months in the lock-up over that. But he managed to get us off in the end. Oh, if I started telling you everything . . . ! The things I've seen, the things I've been through!

'I can see you saying to yourself: "Now I know why she left him." Well, you're wrong; it wasn't I who left him. I told you a lie. I could never have

done it. It was he who told me to go. He roared with laughter. "Clear out!" he said. "When I want you, you'll come back right enough!" I spat in his face. Now, do you want to hear the truth? Since I came back, I've never been able to stop thinking of him. I've been waiting, waiting. And now at last he has told me to return. Now do you understand why I'm going?"

She went to Antoine and knelt before him, resting her head on his knee, sobbing. He gazed down at her shoulders, shaken with sobs. He, too, was trembling.

How I love you, my darling!' she murmured, closing her eyes.

All day, as though they had made a pact of silence, they spoke no more of all these things. What good would it have been? At lunch they had to sit face to face, and now and again his eyes and hers, haunted by a like obsession, drew together, then resolutely turned aside. What good would it have been?

She had some small purchases to make and lingered over them as long as possible, feigning to be interested. Rain-squalls, sweeping inland from the sea, sluiced down the streets and hissed along the house-fronts. Antoine followed her meekly from shop to shop till it was dinner-time. She did not even need to book a berth in the mail-steamer, as she was travelling by the *Romania*, a cargo-boat which carried some passengers, and put in at Havre on her way from Ostend at about 5 a.m., sailing an hour later. Hirsch was to meet her at Casablanca. There had not been a word of truth in her story about the Congo oil-mill.

They spun the dinner out as long as possible; the prospect of retiring to their bedroom and being alone together for this final night made cowards of them both. The café into which they had drifted consisted of one huge, crowded room, noisy and brightly lit; drinking-hall, billiard-room and dance-floor were combined in one and, in a blue haze of tobacco smoke, the click of billiard-balls fretted the languid throb of waltzes. When it was nearly ten a troupe of strolling Italians made a sudden entry; there were a dozen of them, red-shirted, white-trousered fellows, flaunting Neapolitan fishing-caps whose tassels dangled on their shoulders. They jigged and capered with demoniac glee, yelling at the top of their voices, and playing, as they danced, on violins and castanets, guitars and tambourines. Antoine and Rachel watched them gratefully, glad of this foolish respite from the bane of thought; but, when the merrymakers had sung their last and passed the hat round, their grief flared up with new intensity. They rose and, shivering in the downpour, walked back to the hotel.

It was midnight. Rachel was to be called at 3 a.m. Flurries of wild November rain beat on the iron balcony, and, huddled side by side like two forlorn, lost children, they spent their last, brief night together, without a word . . . without desire.

Once only Antoine spoke.

‘Are you cold?’

She was trembling violently.

‘No,’ she replied, and nestled up against him, as though even now he still might rescue her, might save her from herself. ‘No, I’m frightened.’

He let it pass, for he was almost tired of trying, always in vain, to understand her.

There was a knock at the door and, springing from the bed, she cut short their last embrace. He was grateful to her, for each depended on the other’s fortitude to see it through.

They dressed in silence, with studied calmness, giving each other now and then a helping hand, keeping up to the bitter end the habits of their life in common. He helped her to close a recalcitrant suit-case, kneeling on it with all his weight while, squatting on the floor, she turned the key. When at last everything was ready and the time past for commonplace remarks, when she had strapped her rugs together, put on her hat, pinned her veil, slipped on her gloves and buttoned up the cover of her dressing-case—there were still some minutes to go before the cab arrived. She sank into a low chair near the door. A shivering fit came on her and, setting her jaws to stop her teeth from chattering, she crouched there, her hands clasped round her knees. Equally at a loss for anything to say or do, Antoine perched himself on a pile of trunks, with dangling arms, not daring to approach her. The moments dragged by in an agonizing silence, dark with forebodings, each moment charged with suffering so keen that, under its strain, they must have broken down, had they not known that in a few more seconds the end would come. A memory flashed through Rachel’s mind—the custom of certain Slav tribes who, when someone they love is setting forth on a long journey, form a circle and sit around the pilgrim for a while, in silent meditation. She all but spoke her thought aloud, but feared her voice might fail her.

When she heard, outside the door, the footsteps of the men coming to fetch her luggage, she suddenly raised her head and swung her body round towards him. Such love shone in her eyes, such sheer despair and terror, that he flung out his arms towards her.

‘My dearest!’

The door opened and the men streamed into the room. Rachel rose. She had waited for others to be present before she said good-bye. She moved towards Antoine, stood beside him. He dared not put his arms around her lest he should never let her go. For the last time, the last, he felt under his lips the warm, soft pressure of her trembling mouth. He heard, or seemed to hear, a whisper.

‘Good-bye, good-bye . . . my darling.’

With a swift movement she drew away, vanished without a look behind into the passage. He stared towards the open door, twisting his hands together, and his only feeling was a dull amazement.

She had made him promise not to escort her to the steamer, but it was understood between them that he would go to the far end of the northern jetty and, standing at the foot of the lighthouse, watch the *Romania* putting out to sea. The moment he heard the cab drive away, he rang and gave instructions for his luggage to be carried to the cloak-room; he did not wish to have to see this room again. Then he flung out into the darkness.

Shrouded in dripping mist, the town looked like a city of the dead. Overhead an angry wrack of storm still lowered, while another cloud-bank rose on the horizon, and, as the masses drew together, the zone of limpid sky between them seemed to melt away.

After walking blindly ahead for a while, Antoine halted under a street-lamp and, struggling against the serried impact of wind and rain, unfolded a map of the city. Fog blinded his eyes, but the sound of breakers and a distant wail of sirens gave him his direction. At last, groping his way across an expanse of slippery mud, in the teeth of a sea-wind that slapped his overcoat against his legs, he reached a rough-hewn quay and struggled on along it.

The breakwater narrowed as it advanced into the waves. On his right the open sea thundered in massive cadences; leftwards he heard the waters of the harbour lapping in restless undertones. Louder and louder in his ears, though he could not locate the sound, a fog-horn bellowed through the darkness. Hoo! Hoo! Hoo.!

After he had tramped ahead for ten minutes without meeting a soul on the way, Antoine suddenly perceived almost above his head the beam of the lighthouse, which till now the fog had veiled. He had come to the end of the breakwater.

He halted at the foot of the steps leading up to the platform and tried to take his bearings, cut off from the world in a wild turmoil of wind and waves. Just before his eyes a streak of livid light proclaimed the east, where over other lands a wintry dawn was rising. At his feet a flight of steps, hewn

in the granite, descended to the water's edge, but, though he peered into the dark abyss, he could not see the waves fretting against the sea-wall; he could only hear their measured breathing, almost at his feet; a long-drawn sigh ending in a muted sob.

The minutes passed, but he was unaware of their passing. Little by little the canopy of vapour that screened him from the world of living men grew less opaque. Now he could perceive an intermittent glow upon the southern jetty, and dared not lift his eyes from the pale void between him and the further lighthouse, for there it was, along that silvery expanse between the harbour-lights, that she would pass.

Suddenly, to the left of where his eyes were fixed, a dark mass hove in sight, framed in aureole of golden haze heralding the dawn. Tall and slender, slowly taking form against the white effulgence, it became a ship, a huge and hueless hull stippled with lights and drawing in its wake a low, dark ribbon of smoke.

The *Romania* was swinging round to make the fairway.

His hands clenched on the iron rail, his cheeks lashed by the rain, Antoine, unknowing what he did, began to count the decks and masts and funnels. . . . Suddenly he awakened from his trance. Rachel—Rachel was there, only a few hundred yards away, straining towards him as now he strained towards her, watching him with unseeing eyes, blinded with tears; and all their ruined love that urged them for the last time each to each was powerless to grant that final consolation, a gesture of farewell. Only the shaft of light, veering in radiant circles over Antoine's head, touched with a fugitive caress the blind, dark mass that was passing, out of the mist into the mist, bearing hence its secret, this last precarious meeting of their eyes.

For a long time Antoine stood there with no mind to go, tearless and void of thoughts. His ears had grown accustomed to the fog-horn and no longer heard its piercing blasts. At last he glanced at his watch, and started back to the town. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he splashed his way ahead through pools of water, without seeing them. The dockyards on the seafront were ablaze with violet light and the thudding of hammers set up dull vibrations in the fog-bound air. Beyond the beach on which a flood-tide beat the city glimmered like the fabric of a dream. Long trains of lorries clattered across the shingle to an accompaniment of shouts and cracking whips. It was a relief to Antoine to regain the world of human sounds, and he paused to listen to the iron rims grinding upon the flints.

Suddenly it occurred to him that the train did not leave till ten; not once so far had he bethought himself of the three hours of waiting. Rachel's

departure had meant the beginning and the end of his preoccupations. What was to be done about it? The hateful prospect of those three empty hours was the last straw; he yielded to his grief and, leaning against the paling beside him, broke down and wept.

Unconsciously he started on again, walking straight ahead. Life was returning to the streets, and hordes of draggled children were wrangling for first turn at the street-fountains. Huge vans, spanning the roadway, thundered down towards the docks. Presently he grew aware that it was broad daylight and he was standing amongst the flower-stalls in the market-square facing their hotel; here it was that yesterday, just before dinner, he had been on the point of buying a sheaf of chrysanthemums for Rachel. But then the same motive had deterred him as that which had led them to refrain, till it was time to part, from any gesture, any word, that might weaken their fixed resolve, open the flood-gates of a grief they strove their hardest to repress.

He suddenly remembered that he had his cloak-room ticket to pick up at the office of the hotel, and he was seized by a desire once more to see their room. But it was no longer free; two women had just engaged it.

In a mood of blank despair he walked down the steps and drifted aimlessly across another square; then, recognizing a street in which they had walked together, he retraced his steps to the café where the Neapolitans had given their performance. An impulse to enter it came over him.

He tried to discover the table where they had dined, the waiter who had served them; but somehow everything seemed changed. A garish light flowed in through the glazed roof, transforming the scene of nightly revelry into a place of squalor, like a bleak, abandoned warehouse. Chairs were stacked upon the tables and, with its prostrate music-stands, a 'cello cribbed in its black coffin, the piano draped in oilcloth like the scaly hide of some dead pachyderm, the bandsmen's platform might have been a raft piled high with corpses, adrift on a sea of dust.

'By your leave, sir!'

A waiter was preparing to sweep the floor under the table. Antoine swung his legs up on to the seat and idly watched the busy broom at work. A cork, two matches, a scrap of orange-peel—no, a tangerine, more likely. A gust of wind drove through the room, fanning the dusty litter into movement. The waiter coughed. Antoine woke from his trance; had he missed the train? He sprang from his seat, spied out a clock; no, he had been here only seven miserable minutes.

He decided against sitting down again, and went out. Haunted by the notion that, were he once seated in the train, his grief would be allayed, he jumped into a cab and set out for the station, as to a haven of refuge.

But, when he had booked his luggage through, he still had time and to spare. Over an hour to go! He set to walking up and down the platform with hurried strides, as though an enemy were at his heels. ‘What the hell do *you* want with me?’ he muttered, glaring at an engine-driver who was eyeing him from the foot-plate of his locomotive. Turning round, he noticed a group of railway hands observing him curiously.

Then, stiffening his back, he retraced his steps, opened the door of the waiting-room and sank into a chair. The room was bleak and gloomy; he had it to himself. Outside an old woman was squatting against the glass door with her back to him; he could see her grey hair bobbing up and down as she dandled a child in her arms, crooning in a toneless, yet almost girlish voice the old song with its sickly-sweet refrain that Mademoiselle so often sang to Gisèle in the past.

We’ll go no more a-fishing,
A-fishing in the sea . . .

His eyes filled with tears. Ah, if only he could never hear another sound, see nothing, nothing more for ever!

He buried his face between his palms. And, in a flash, Rachel was in his arms again! Last night his hands had toyed with her necklace and its fragrance clung about them still. He could feel the smooth curve of her shoulder against his chest; under his lips the warm, soft texture of her skin. So violent was the shock it gave him that he jerked his head back, tautening every sinew; his fingers stiffened round the chair-arms and he thrust his head back violently into the thick upholstery. Something Rachel had said came back to him. ‘I thought of killing myself.’ Yes, to have done with it all! Suicide: for such despair as this, the one way out. An unpremeditated, almost involuntary death; simply to make an end, no matter how, of this intolerable spasm of anguish that gripped him like a vice, tightening across his temples—to cut it short before its unbearable climax!

Suddenly he started up from his seat; someone had approached him unawares and tapped him on the arm. He all but yielded to a blind impulse to lash out at the intruder, hurl him away.

‘Here! Watcher gettin’ at?’ It proved to be a venerable ticket-collector, going his rounds.

‘The . . . the Paris train?’ Antoine stammered.

‘Platform Number Three.’

Antoine stared blindly at him, like a sleep-walker, then moved away unsteadily towards the platform.

‘There ain’t no hurry,’ the old man shouted after him. ‘Train’s not in yet.’ His eyes followed Antoine as he left the waiting-room, observed him stagger, colliding with the door.

‘And these young ’uns think they’re everybody!’ he muttered under his breath, shrugging his shoulders disdainfully.

PART IV

THE clocks were striking the half-hour after noon when the taxi halted in the Rue de l'Université. Antoine sprang out and plunged below the portico. 'It's Monday,' he reminded himself; 'my consulting-day.'

'Morning, sir!'

He swung round; in a corner of the lobby two little boys had taken shelter, apparently, from the wind, and the bigger of the two, cap in hand, perked up to Antoine a little bird-like face, round and restless as a sparrow's, but without a trace of shyness. Antoine halted.

'It's like this, sir; we want to know if you'll give some medicine to this young 'un here, what's ill.'

Antoine went up to the 'young 'un,' who was hovering in the background.

'What's the trouble, my boy?'

A gust of wind, lifting the little boy's cape, revealed an arm in a sling.

'It's nothing much,' the older boy asserted confidently. 'Not even an accident at his job, though, sure enough, it was at the printing-works he got that ugly lump on his arm. It gives him twinges right up to his shoulder.'

Antoine was pressed for time.

'Has he a temperature?'

'A what, sir?'

'Fever. Has he any fever?'

'Yes, that's what it must be,' the elder boy agreed, wagging his head gravely and watching Antoine's face with an anxious eye.

'You'd better tell your parents to take him to the Charité at two and have him seen to—the big hospital over there on the left, you know.'

A twitching of the little bird-like face, quickly controlled, betrayed the youngster's disappointment; then his lips half parted in a coaxing smile.

'I thought as perhaps you'd be nice enough . . .'

But he checked himself at once and went on in the tone of one who long has learnt to bow to the inevitable.

'That's all right, sir. We'll fix it up somehow. Thank you, sir. Come along, Eddie!'

With a frank, good-humoured smile and a flick of his cap to Antoine, he began to move away towards the street.

Antoine's curiosity was aroused; he hesitated for a moment.

'Were you waiting for me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Who told you . . . ?' He opened the door leading to the staircase. 'Come in anyhow, don't stay out in the draught. Who told you to come here?'

'No one.' The child's face lit up. 'Of course I know you quite well. Why, I'm the office-boy at the solicitor's—at the bottom of the courtyard, you know.'

Unthinkingly Antoine had clasped the hand of the little invalid beside him, and somehow he could never help being moved by the contact of a clammy palm or fevered wrist.

'Where do your parents live, my boy?'

The younger boy raised his lack-lustre eyes towards his companion.

'Robbie!'

Robert came to the rescue.

'We haven't any, sir,' he said; then added after a short pause: 'We're living in the Rue de Verneuil.'

'Neither father nor mother?'

'No.'

'Grand-parents, perhaps?'

'No, sir.'

The boy's composed expression, his candid eyes, made it evident he had no wish to play on Antoine's sympathy, or even curiosity; nor did he seem the least dejected. Indeed, it was Antoine, rather, whose amazement struck a puerile note.

'How old are you?'

'Fifteen.'

'And—his age?'

'Thirteen and a half.'

Confound them! Antoine thought. Why, it's quarter to one already! I must telephone to Philip; lunch; see them upstairs; then go back to the Faubourg Saint-Honoré before my consultations. To-day of all days!

'Come along!' he suddenly exclaimed. 'Let's have a look at it!'

Robert's face lit up with joy, though he did not seem at all surprised; to avoid meeting his happy eyes, Antoine stepped hastily in front of him, pulled out his latch-key and opened the door of his flat. Then he shepherded the boys into his consulting-room.

Léon appeared at the kitchen door.

'Luncheon will have to wait a bit, Léon. . . . Now then young 'un'—he turned to the child—'hurry up and get your things off. Your brother will help you. . . . Gently does it. . . . Right, come here!'

A puny arm, swathed in a bandage that was almost clean. Just above the wrist a superficial boil, clearly defined, seemed to have come to a head. Antoine, no longer mindful of the passing minutes, laid his forefinger on the pustule while, with two fingers of the other hand, he gently pressed another aspect of the swelling. Good! He could distinctly feel the liquid shifting under his forefinger.

'Does it hurt there as well?' He ran his hand along the swollen forearm, then up along the upper arm as far as the dilated glands of the axilla.

'Only a little bit,' the child whispered. He was holding himself stiffly, his eyes fixed on the other boy.

'No, it hurts a lot,' Antoine corrected him gruffly. 'But I can see you're a plucky little chap.' He fixed his gaze full on the child's eyes and, as the contact was established, a spark of sudden confidence flickered in their misted depths, then boldly leapt out towards him. When at last Antoine's lips relaxed into a smile, the little boy dropped his eyes at once. Antoine patted his cheek and gently lifted the boy's chin, which seemed to yield reluctantly.

'Look here! We'll make a tiny puncture just there and in half an hour it'll hardly hurt at all. Now then, come along with me!'

The child, duly impressed, advanced bravely enough for a few steps, but, as soon as Antoine's eyes were turned, his courage faltered, and he looked imploringly at his brother.

'Robbie! You come with me, too!'

The adjoining room, with its tiled floor, linoleum, sterilizer and white-enamelled table placed under a powerful lamp, served on occasion for minor operations. In earlier days a bathroom, it had become what Léon styled 'The Surgery.' The ground-floor flat under M. Thibault's which Antoine and his brother used to share had proved quite inadequate, even after Antoine had become its only occupant. He had jumped at an opportunity which had recently presented itself of entering a four-room flat, also on the ground-floor, in an adjoining house, and had shifted his consulting-room and

bedroom to his new quarters, where he had had the 'surgery' installed as well. His whilom consulting-room had been converted into the patients' waiting-room. A passage had been opened in the party-wall between the two flats, which were thus merged in one.

A few minutes later he was neatly puncturing the abscess with his scalpel.

'Keep your pecker up, old chap. . . . Here goes! . . . Once more now. There, it's over!' Antoine stepped back a pace and the child, pale and half-fainting, sank into his brother's waiting arms.

'Hi there, Léon!' Antoine shouted cheerfully. 'A spot of brandy for these young hopefuls!' He dipped two lumps of sugar in a finger's depth of cognac. 'Here, get your teeth into that! You, too!' He bent towards the little patient. 'Not too strong for you?'

'It's nice,' the child whispered, with a wan smile.

'Show me your arm. Don't be frightened. I told you it was over. Washing and bandaging—that doesn't hurt a bit.'

A ring at the telephone; Léon's voice in the hall. 'No, Madam, the doctor is engaged. Not this afternoon, it's the doctor's consulting-day. Oh, hardly before dinner-time. Very good, Madam, thank you.'

'Yes, a gauze drain, to make sure,' Antoine murmured. 'Right. And the bandage pretty firm, that's essential. . . . Now you, the big boy, listen to what I say. You'll take your brother home at once and see that he's put to bed, to be sure he doesn't move his arm. Whom do you live with? Surely there's someone who looks after your little brother?'

'I do.'

There was a glow of honest self-assurance in his eyes, and in his look such dignity that it was quite impossible to smile at the emphatic declaration. Antoine glanced at the clock and once more had to repress his curiosity.

'What number in the Rue de Verneuil?'

'37 B.'

'Robert what?'

'Robert Bonnard.'

When he had jotted down the address Antoine looked up and saw the two boys side by side, gazing at him with candid eyes in which he read no trace of gratitude, but only self-surrender, illimitable confidence.

'Now then, young men, off you go! I'm in a hurry. I'll look in some time between six and eight to change the drain. Got that?'

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the elder boy, who seemed to take it quite as a matter of course. ‘It’s the top floor, Door 3, opposite the stairs.’

No sooner were the children gone than Antoine told Léon to serve luncheon. Then he went to the telephone.

‘Hullo, Elysées 0132.’ On the hall table, beside the telephone, his engagement-book lay open. Holding the receiver to his ear, Antoine bent over it and read the entries. 1913. *October 13, Monday. 2.30 p.m., Mme. de Battaincourt.* I shan’t be back; she can wait. 3.30. *Rumelles, yes, Lioutin,* right! *Mme. Ernst,* don’t know her. *Vianzoni . . . de Fayelles. . . .* Right! Hullo, 0132? Is Professor Philip back yet? Doctor Thibault speaking. There was a pause. ‘Hullo! Good-morning, Chief. Hope I’m not taking you from your lunch. It’s about a consultation. Very urgent. Héquet’s child. Yes, Héquet, the surgeon. . . . In a very bad way, I fear, hopeless; an otitis that’s been neglected, all sorts of complications, I’ll explain. . . . A bad business. . . . No, Chief, it’s you he wants, he’s set on seeing you. You surely can’t refuse him that. . . . Of course, as soon as possible, immediately. I’m in the same boat, Monday’s my consulting-day. . . . Right, that’s settled then; I call for you at a quarter to. Thanks, Chief.’

Hanging up the receiver, he went over the day’s appointments once again. ‘Whew! What a day!’ But the sigh was mere convention and his contented look belied it.

Léon stood before him, a rather fatuous grin rippling his clean-shaven cheeks.

‘Do you know, sir, the cat had her kittens this morning?’

‘Really?’

Smiling, Antoine followed his man-servant to the kitchen. Snug in a cosy nest of rags, the cat lay on her side amid a writhing mass of small black lumps of sticky fur which she was scrubbing vigorously with her rasp-like tongue.

‘How many are there?’

‘Seven. My sister-in-law would like one kept for her.’

Léon was the concierge’s brother. For the two years and more that he had been in Antoine’s service he had performed his duties with ritual assiduity. He was a man of few words and uncertain age; his skin was colourless and on his elongated head straggled a scanty growth of pale, downy hair; his overlong, drooping nose and his trick of lowering his eyelids gave him an air of sheepishness, which his smile accentuated. But all this was only a convenient mask, even, perhaps, a studied pose; behind it lay a keen intelligence, shrewd common-sense, and a natural gift of humour.

‘How about the other six?’ Antoine asked. ‘Will you drown them?’

‘Well, sir,’ Léon placidly replied, ‘do you wish me to keep them?’

Antoine smiled, turned on his heel and hastened to the room which once was occupied by Jacques and now served as a dining-room.

His meal was all laid out ready on the table: an omelette, veal cutlets on spinach, and fruit; for Antoine could not endure waiting between courses. The omelette smelt deliciously of melted butter and the frying-pan. . . . Brief interlude of fifteen minutes between a morning at the hospital and the afternoon’s engagements.

‘No message from upstairs?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Did Madame Franklin telephone?’

‘Yes, sir. She made an appointment for Friday. It’s down in the book.’

There was a ring at the telephone. ‘No, Madam,’ Léon answered, ‘he will not be free at 5.30. Nor at 6. Thank you, Madam.’

‘Who?’

‘Madame Stockney.’ He made bold to shrug his shoulders slightly. ‘About a friend’s little boy. She will write.’

‘Who is this Madame Ernst, at 5?’ Without waiting for an answer, he went on. ‘Will you ask Madame de Battaincourt to excuse me; I shall be at least twenty minutes late. The newspapers, please. Thank you.’ He glanced at the clock. ‘They should have finished upstairs, eh? Give them a ring, please. Ask for Mademoiselle Gisèle and bring the receiver here. At once, along with the coffee.’

As he picked up the receiver his features relaxed and he smiled towards an unseen face, almost as though he had taken wings and been transported to the other end of the wire.

‘Hullo! Yes, it’s I. Yes, I’ve almost done. . . .’ He began laughing. ‘No, grapes; a present from a patient, and very good they are! . . . And how are things upstairs?’ As he spoke a shadow fell upon his face. ‘What? Before or after the injection? Anyhow the great thing is to convince him that it’s quite normal.’ Another pause, and now his face brightened up again. ‘I say, Gise, are you by yourself at the ’phone? Look here, I must see you to-day. I’ve something to say to you. Something important. Why, here, of course. Any time you like after half-past three. Léon will see you haven’t to wait. . . . Good. I’ll just finish off my coffee and come along upstairs.’

ANTOINE had the key of his father's flat; he entered without ringing, and went directly to the linen-room.

'The master has been taken to the study,' Adrienne informed him.

He made his way on tiptoe down a passage reeking like a chemist's shop, to M. Thibault's dressing-room. 'Curious the sort of oppression I always feel the moment I set foot inside this flat,' he said to himself. 'For a doctor, you'd think . . . But here, of course, it isn't the same for me as in other people's houses.'

His eyes went straight to the temperature-chart pinned to the wall. The dressing-room looked like a laboratory; table and whatnot were littered with phials, china recipients and packets of cotton-wool. 'Let's have a look at the bottle,' he said to himself. 'Yes, it's as I thought; the kidneys aren't working properly—the analysis will bring that out. And the morphia—how much is gone?' He opened the box of ampoules whose labels he had camouflaged to keep the patient from suspecting anything. 'Half a grain in twenty-four hours. Already! Let's see, where's the sister put—ah, here it is—the measuring-glass.'

With brisk, almost light-hearted gestures he set about the analysis; just as he was heating a test-tube over the spirit-lamp the door creaked on its hinges; the sound made his heart beat faster and he turned hastily to see who had come in. But it was not Gise. It was Mademoiselle, bent double like an old witch, who was ambling towards him; nowadays her stoop was so pronounced that, even when she craned her neck, she could hardly lift her eyes, which still shone bright as ever behind the smoked-glass spectacles, to the level of Antoine's hands. Were she in the least upset or frightened, her tiny forehead, yellow as old ivory between the snowy bandeaus, started swaying like a pendulum.

'Ah, so you've come, Antoine,' she sighed and, in a voice that quavered with each wobble of her head, plunged into her subject: 'Really, since yesterday, things have been going from bad to worse. Sister Céline took it into her head to waste two jars of broth and a quart of milk quite needlessly. She's always peeling bananas for him to eat—they cost a pretty penny, too—and then he won't touch them. And the things he leaves can't be used, because of the microbes. Oh, I've nothing against her, or anyone; she's a good religious young woman. But do speak to her, Antoine, do tell her to stop! What's the good of pressing food on an invalid? Much better wait till

he asks for it. But she's always trying to foist things on him. This morning it was an ice—just think! Fancy offering him an ice—why, the chill of it might make his heart stop! And where's Clotilde to find the time to go running round to the ice-man, with all the household to cook for? Tell me that!

Antoine was patiently completing the test, giving her only non-committal grunts by way of answer. 'She's had to put up with the old fellow's harangues,' he said to himself, 'for a quarter of a century without saying a word, and now she's getting her own back!'

'Do you know,' the old lady went on, 'how many mouths I have to feed—how many they come to with the nursing sister and Gise as well? Three in the kitchen, three of us, and then your father. Work it out for yourself! And really considering I've turned seventy-eight, and the state of my——'

She drew aside abruptly; Antoine had stepped back from the table and was on his way to the basin. She was still as terrified as ever of infection and disease; for a year past she had been obliged to live in the shadow of a serious illness, to rub shoulders with doctors and nurses and breathe a sick-room atmosphere; the experience had affected her like a slow poison, taken in daily doses, and was hastening the general decline that had set in three years ago. Moreover, she was not wholly unaware of her decrepitude. 'Since it was His will,' she would lament, 'to take Jacques out of my life, I'm only the ghost of what I used to be.'

When Antoine showed no sign of moving and went on lathering his hands above the basin, she took a timid step towards him.

'Talk to the sister, Antoine, do please give her a talking-to. She'll listen to *you*, anyhow.'

He humoured her with a compliant 'Yes' and, paying no more attention to her, left the room. Her eyes glowed with affection as they followed his receding limbs, for (as she proclaimed) she had come to see in Antoine, since he so rarely answered her and never contradicted, 'the light of her life.'

He went out into the passage so as to enter his father's study from the hall, and seem to have only just arrived.

M. Thibault was alone with the sister. 'So Gise is in her bedroom,' Antoine murmured; 'she must have heard me go by. She's avoiding me.'

'Good afternoon, father,' he said in the breezy manner that now he always assumed at his father's bedside. 'Afternoon, sister.'

M. Thibault's eyelids lifted.

'Ah, there you are.'

He was in his big arm-chair, upholstered in tapestry, which had been dragged beside the window. His head seemed to have become too heavy for his shoulders, his chin was squeezed against the napkin the sister had tucked round his neck, and the two black crutches, propped against the chair on either hand, seemed tall out of proportion with his hunched-up body. A stained-glass pseudo-Renaissance window lit with rainbow gleams the fluttering white wings of Sister Céline's headdress, casting wine-red stains upon the tablecloth and a steaming soup-plate of milk and tapioca.

'Come along now!' the sister wheedled, and, lifting a spoonful of the liquid, drained off the drops along the edge of the plate; then, with a cheerful 'Up-a-daisy!' as if she were coaxing a child to take his pap, she tilted the spoon between the old man's lips, and emptied it down before he had time to turn away. His fingers, splayed upon his knees, twitched with annoyance. It galled his self-respect to seem so helpless, unable to feed himself. He lunged forward to grasp the spoon the sister was holding but his fingers, stiffened with the years and swollen now with dropsy, refused their service. The spoon slipped from his hand, clattered on to the floor. With an angry sweep of his arm he thrust them all aside—table, plate, and nursing-sister.

'Not hungry. Won't be forced to eat!' he cried, turning towards his son, as though to call for his protection. Antoine's silence gave him heart, it seemed, for he cast a furious glance at the nurse. 'Take all that mess away!' Unprotesting, the sister beat a hasty retreat out of the old man's eyeshot.

He coughed. At frequent intervals he emitted a short dry cough which, mechanical though it was and unaccompanied by loss of breath, made him clench his fists and pucker his tightly-shut eyelids.

'Let me tell you'—M. Thibault spoke with asperity, as though to voice a rankling grievance—'last night and this morning again I've been having bouts of vomiting.'

Antoine felt himself being stealthily observed, and assumed a detached air.

'Really?'

'That doesn't surprise you, eh?'

'Well, to tell the truth, I half expected it,' Antoine rejoined smilingly. He had little trouble in playing his part. Never had he treated any other patient with such long-suffering compassion; he came every day, often twice a day, and at each visit, indefatigably—as though he were renewing the dressing on a wound—racked his brains to conjure up new arguments, logical, if insincere, and repeated in the same tone of certitude the selfsame words of comfort. 'What can you expect, father? Your digestive organs aren't what

they were when you were a young man, and they've been pestered for at least eight months with drugs and medicines. We may count ourselves lucky they didn't show signs of revolt very much sooner.'

M. Thibault was silent, thinking it over. Already Antoine's words had taken effect and given him new heart; moreover it was a relief to be able to fix the blame on something or someone.

'Yes,' he said, clapping his large palms noiselessly together, 'those idiots with their drugs, why they've . . . Ow, my leg! . . . Yes, they've—they've ruined my digestion. Ow!'

The twinge was so acute and sudden that for a moment his features were convulsed. He let his body slip to one side; then, resting his weight on Antoine's and the sister's arms, he managed to stretch out his leg, halting the stream of liquid fire that was shooting down the limb.

'You told me that . . . that Thérivier's injections would . . . do my sciatica good,' he shouted. 'Well now, out with the truth! Is it any better?'

'It is,' said Antoine coolly.

M. Thibault cast a bewildered look at his son.

'Monsieur Thibault himself told me that he'd been having much less pain since Tuesday last,' the sister put in shrilly; she had formed a habit of pitching her voice as high as she could, to make herself heard. Seizing the auspicious moment, she slipped a spoonful of tapioca into her patient's mouth.

'Since Tuesday?' the old man spluttered, making a valiant effort to remember. Then he held his peace.

In silent distress Antoine observed the symptoms of disease upon his father's face; every mental effort loosened the muscles of his jaw and made his eyelids rise, his lashes flutter. The poor old man was only too eager to believe that he was getting better, and indeed, till now, had never doubted it. Once more, taken by surprise, he let himself be spoon-fed; then, in desperate disgust, he pushed the sister away so angrily that she thought better of it and began undoing the napkin round his neck.

'They've ru-ruined my digestion,' he mumbled, as the woman wiped his chin.

No sooner had she left the room with the tray than M. Thibault, who had, it seemed, been waiting for this chance of a heart-to-heart talk with Antoine, slewed himself round and, with a confidential smile, motioned him to come and sit beside him.

‘Sister Céline,’ he began in a tone of deep emotion, ‘is an excellent creature, yes, Antoine, a really saintly soul. We can never be too . . . too grateful to her. But there’s the convent to consider, and . . . Oh, I know that the Mother Superior is under obligations to me. And that’s just the point! I have scruples about it; I’m loth to take advantage of her devotion when there are more pressing calls, sick and suffering folk who need her help. Don’t you agree?’

Forestalling Antoine’s protest, he silenced him with a gesture; then, his chin thrust forward with an air of meek entreaty, he went on in phrases broken by fits of coughing.

‘Needless to say, it isn’t to-day I’m thinking of, nor yet to-morrow. But . . . don’t you think that . . . that quite soon . . . well, as soon as I’m really on the mend . . . this excellent woman could be released from her duties here? You can’t imagine, my dear boy, how disagreeable it is always to have someone at one’s elbow. As soon as possible, then, do let’s . . . get rid of her.’

Antoine, lacking the heart to answer, made feeble gestures of approval. So that inflexible authority, against which all his youth had vainly struggled, had come to—this! In earlier days the old autocrat would have dismissed without a word of explanation the offending nurse; now he was growing weak, defenceless. At such moments his father’s physical decline struck Antoine as even more apparent than when he gauged, under his fingers, the wastage of the inner organs.

‘What? Are you going already?’ M. Thibault murmured, seeing Antoine rise. There was a note of protest in his voice, of pleading and regret; almost of tenderness. Antoine was touched.

‘I’ve no choice,’ he said with a smile. ‘My whole afternoon’s taken up with engagements. But I’ll try to look in again this evening.’

He went up to his father to kiss him; a habit he had recently formed. But the old man turned away his head.

‘All right then, off you go, my boy! Have it your own way!’

Antoine went out without replying.

In the hall, perched on a chair, Mademoiselle was in wait for him.

‘I’ve got to speak to you, Antoine. It’s about the sister. . . .’

But he could bear no more. He picked up his coat and hat, and closed the front-door behind him. On the landing he suddenly felt depressed; struggling into his overcoat, he was reminded of the jerk he used to give his shoulders in his soldiering days, to hoist the pack into position before he set out on the march again.

Out in the street the tides of traffic and the passers-by, struggling against an autumn gale, restored his spirits, and he hastened forward in quest of a taxi.

3

‘JUST twenty to,’ Antoine observed as the taxi passed the Madeleine clock. ‘A near thing. The Chief’s so infernally punctual—I’d bet he’s getting ready for me now!’

As Antoine surmised, Dr. Philip was standing waiting for him at the door of his consulting-room.

‘Afternoon, Thibault,’ he rapped out. He always spoke in a curious Punch-and-Judyish *staccato*, with what sounded like an undertone of irony. ‘Exactly quarter to. Let’s be off.’

‘Right, Chief,’ Antoine cheerfully assented.

Antoine welcomed every occasion that placed him once again in Dr. Philip’s tutelage. For two consecutive years he had worked as his resident assistant and lived in constant intimacy with his senior. Though, after that, he had been transferred to another branch, he had never lost contact with his former teacher and, in the years that followed, Dr. Philip, to the exclusion of all others, had remained for him ‘the Chief.’ Antoine was known as ‘Thibault, Philip’s pupil,’ but he was more than that; he was his senior’s right-hand-man, his spiritual son. Yet, often enough, his adversary, too—in the clash of youth with riper age, of adventurousness and a proclivity for taking risks, with prudence. The bond that had grown up between them during their seven years’ friendship and professional co-operation was proof against all rupture. No sooner was Antoine in Philip’s company than, insensibly, his personality underwent a change, dwindled, as it were, in bulk; the self-contained world-in-himself that he had been a moment before lapsed automatically into a satellite. But this circumstance, far from displeasing him, flattered his self-esteem and deepened his affection for his Chief; for the Professor’s unquestioned eminence, coupled with his reputation for being hard to satisfy where colleagues were concerned, conferred a special value on his attachment for Antoine. Whenever master and pupil were

together good humour was the order of the day; both were convinced that the common run of mortals consisted of numskulls and incapables; they themselves were lofty exceptions to the general rule. The manner in which the Chief, so reticent by habit, spoke to Antoine, his confident expansiveness, the meaning smiles and winks which accompanied certain remarks, even the terms he used—comprehensible only to a few initiates—all seemed to prove that Antoine was the only person with whom Philip could talk freely, by whom he was assured of being precisely understood. On the occasions when they disagreed the subject of dispute was always of the same order; Antoine accused Philip of hoodwinking himself and taking the brilliant sallies of his sceptical mind for reasoned conclusions. Or, it might be, after threshing out a problem with his junior and finding their views concur, Philip would suddenly sheer off on the opposite tack and ridicule all they had just been saying: ‘Viewed from another angle, you know, those ideas of ours are bunkum’—which was tantamount to saying: ‘It’s waste of time pondering over things; one “truth” is as true as another!’ Antoine’s blood boiled; he could not stomach such an attitude, and it galled him like a physical infirmity. On such occasions he would bid his Chief a prompt but courteous farewell and, flinging himself into his work, redress his mental balance in a wholesome burst of energy.

On the landing they met Thérivier who had come to seek urgent counsel from the Chief. Thérivier, too, had worked under Philip; an older man than Antoine, he was now a general practitioner. M. Thibault was one of his patients.

The Professor halted. Slightly stooping, motionless, with dangling arms, his garments floating round his tall, slight form, he looked like a gaunt marionette dangling from its unpulled strings. The man who was addressing him, plump and stocky, fidgeting and smiling, struck a comical contrast with him. They stood in the full light of the landing window and Antoine, posted in the background, amused himself watching his Chief; he always relished such sudden glimpses from an unwonted angle of people he knew well. Just now Philip was observing Thérivier with his keen, pale eyes, truculent as ever under the beetling eyebrows, which had kept their blackness despite the grey streaks in his beard—a goat’s beard, almost too unsightly to be natural, and looking like an absurd fringe of straggling hair tacked on to his chin. Everything, indeed, about the man was disconcerting, not to say repellent: his general untidiness, his off-hand manner and certain personal idiosyncrasies—a red and over-prominent nose, the hissing intake of his breath, his caustic grin and pendulous, moist lips whence a nasal drawl seemed to trickle out laboriously, rising now and then to a shrill falsetto

when he let fly a shaft of satire or a scathing comment. At such moments his simian eyes twinkled behind their bushy thickets with a glint of secret exultation that asked no reciprocity.

But only novices and nonentities were estranged from Philip by their unfavourable first impression. As a matter of fact, as Antoine had observed, no other doctor was more popular with patients, no teacher more esteemed by his colleagues, more ardently sought after by the unruly youngsters training in the hospitals. His bitterest gibes were aimed at human folly, life's absurdities; and only fools resented them. None could watch him at his professional task without admiring, not merely the bright activity of a master-mind devoid of pettiness or any real scorn, but, what was more, a sensitive, warm-hearted being who was genuinely distressed by his daily intercourse with suffering. It was obvious at such moments that that acid wit of his was only Philip's way of fighting down depression, only another facet of his clear-visioned sympathy; obvious, too, that the cutting remarks which turned so many fools against him were, in the last analysis, a part and parcel of his philosophy.

Antoine paid little attention to what the two doctors were saying. They were talking about one of Thérivier's patients whom the Chief had visited on the previous day. A serious case, it seemed. Thérivier stuck to his guns.

'No, my boy,' Philip declared, 'one c.c. is the most I'd care to give. Better still, the half of that. And in two doses, if you please.' And, when the younger man grew restive, obviously hostile to such half-measures, Philip, laying a moderating hand upon his shoulder, continued in a nasal drawl: 'Look here, Thérivier, when a patient's come to that pass, there are just two forces fighting it out over his body: nature and disease. Up comes the doctor and deals a blow at a venture. Heads or tails. If his blow lands on the malady, it's heads. But, should he knock nature out, it's tails, and the patient's *moriturus*. That's how it works out, my lad. So, when a man has reached my age, he walks warily and takes care not to hit too hard.' For some seconds he stood motionless, swallowing his saliva with little hissing noises. With a twinkle in his eye he was studying Thérivier's face. Then he dropped his hand and, with a humorous glance at Antoine, started to go down the stairs.

Antoine and Thérivier followed behind.

'How's your father?' Thérivier enquired.

'He's been having vomiting attacks since yesterday.'

'Is that so?' Thérivier frowned and pursed his lips. After a short silence he went on: 'Have you examined his legs recently?'

‘No.’

‘They seemed a trifle more swollen the day before yesterday.’

‘Albumen?’

‘Phlebitis setting in, more likely. I’ll give him a visit between four and five. Will you be there?’

Philip’s car was waiting at the door. Thérivier said good-bye and hopped briskly away. Considering what I spend in taxis nowadays, Antoine reflected, it would pay me to invest in a small car.

‘Where are we going, Thibault?’

‘Faubourg Saint-Honoré.’

Philip, who seemed to feel the cold, crouched in a corner; before the driver slipped in the gear, he put a question to Antoine.

‘Give me an outline of the case, my boy. Really hopeless, is it?’

‘Quite hopeless, Chief. It’s a little girl, two years old, a premature child and malformed from birth, poor little thing; hare-lip and congenital cleft palate. Héquet himself operated last spring. Functional debility of the heart as well. Got it? Right. To make things worse, there was a sudden and acute attack of otitis; it developed when she was in the country. She’s their only child, let me tell you.’

Philip, who was gazing into the distance along the transient vista of the streets, made sympathetic noises in his throat.

‘Unfortunately Madame Héquet’s seven months pregnant, and it’s a hard pregnancy. She doesn’t take the least care of herself, I imagine; anyhow, to avoid another accident of the kind, Héquet had his wife leave Paris and stay at Maisons-Laffitte where an aunt of hers lent them a house—as a matter of fact I know these people, they were friends of my brother. It was there that the otitis set in.’

‘What day?’

‘We can’t be sure. The nurse can’t say; most likely it escaped her notice. The child’s mother has to stay in bed; at first she didn’t notice anything; then she put it down to toothache. Not till Saturday evening . . .’

‘The day before yesterday?’

‘Yes. Héquet went to Maisons to spend the Sunday there as usual; he saw at once that the child was in danger. He arranged for an ambulance and rushed his wife and child to Paris that night. He rang me up first thing when he arrived and I saw the child early Sunday morning. I’d arranged for

Lanquetot, the ear specialist, to be present. We found every possible complication: mastoiditis, of course, infection of the lateral sinus, and so on. Since yesterday we've tried all sorts of treatments, but none of them helped. She's going from bad to worse. This morning there were meningeal symptoms.'

'Operation?'

'Impossible, so it seems. Péchot, whom Héquet called in last night, was firm on the point; the state of the heart rules out an operation. And we can't do anything to allay the pain—it's terrible—except applying ice.'

Philip, his eyes still fixed on some far-off point, grunted again.

'Well, that's how things are,' Antoine concluded in an anxious voice. 'Now it's up to you, Chief.' After a pause he added: 'Personally, I confess, my only hope is that we've come too late and—all is over.'

'Héquet has no illusions about it, eh?'

'None.'

Philip was silent for a moment; then he laid his hand on Antoine's arm.

'Don't you be so sure about it, Thibault. As a doctor, of course, poor Héquet must *know* there's no hope left. But, as a father . . . The worse things are, the more a man's inclined to throw dust in his own eyes.' A disillusioned smile flickered on his face as he added in a high-pitched drawl: 'And it's just as well, isn't it? Just as well.'

4

HÉQUET'S flat was on the third floor. The front-door opened at the sound of the ascending lift; they were expected. A fat man in a white coat, with a black beard that emphasized his semitic cast of features, shook Antoine's hand. Antoine introduced him.

'Isaac Studler.'

Studler had once been a medical student and, though he had given up medicine, was a familiar figure in medical circles. On Héquet, a former fellow-student, he lavished a blind affection, a dog-like devotion. A

telephone-call had apprised him of his friend's abrupt return and, cancelling all engagements, he had hastened to the sick child's bedside.

All the doors stood open and the flat had a lugubrious aspect; things had been left just as they were when it was vacated in the spring. There were no curtains up, the blinds were drawn and lamps lit everywhere. Under the garish light the pyramids of furniture stacked in the middle of each room and covered with white sheets looked like so many children's catafalques. The floor of the study where Studler left the two doctors when he went to summon Héquet was strewn with a medley of objects scattered round a partially unpacked trunk.

A door was flung open and a scantily attired young woman burst in, her face convulsed with grief and her bright golden hair disordered. She hastened towards them as quickly as her cumbered gait permitted, one hand steadying her womb, the other holding up her dressing-gown so as not to trip over it. Her breath came in gasps and she could not speak; her lips were quivering. She went straight up to Philip and gazed at him with tear-dimmed eyes, and a look of silent entreaty so heart-rending that he did not think of greeting her but held out both hands towards her in an instinctive gesture of reassurance and profound sympathy.

Héquet entered suddenly from the hall.

'Nicole!'

His voice shook with indignation. Pale, his features twitching, he sprang towards his wife and, paying no heed to Philip, caught her up and swung her off her feet into his arms with an access of energy that took the others by surprise. Sobbing, she offered no resistance.

'Open the door!' he gasped, turning towards Antoine who darted forward to his aid.

Antoine went with them, supporting Nicole's drooping head. A desolate lament broke from her lips and Antoine caught the broken phrases. 'You'll never forgive me. I'm to blame for everything, everything. It's my fault she was born a cripple. You've been angry with me so long! Now it's my fault again. If only I'd understood, if I'd looked after her at once . . . !' As they entered the bedroom Antoine caught sight of a large, gaping bed, and it struck him she had been listening for the doctors' coming and risen in haste despite her husband's orders.

Seizing Antoine's hand, she clung to it with the frenzy of despair.

'I beg you, doctor . . . Félix would never forgive me. I'd lose all hope of being forgiven, if . . . Try everything you possibly can. Oh, I implore you, doctor, save our child!'

Her husband had gently laid her in the bed and was drawing back the quilt. She let go Antoine's hand and ceased speaking.

Héquet stooped over her and Antoine caught the expression in the eyes of each; in hers a look of forlorn hopelessness; in his, exasperation.

'I forbid you to get up, do you hear?'

She shut her eyes. Bending more closely over her, he touched her hair with his lips, then pressed a kiss on her closed eyelids that seemed to seal a pact between them, almost as if he promised her his pardon, come what might. Then he led Antoine from the room.

Studler had taken the Chief to the child's bedside and when they joined him there Philip had already taken off his coat and put on a white apron. Calmly, impassively, as though he and the child inhabited a world apart, he was proceeding with a minute, methodical examination of his patient, though he had realized from the first that nothing could be done to save her.

Héquet's eyes were fixed on his face; his hands were trembling and he did not speak.

The examination lasted ten minutes.

When it was ended Philip raised his head and turned his eyes on Héquet. Héquet had changed out of recognition; his face was sombre, and between the eyelids, red and shrivelled as though a dusty wind had parched them up, his eyes were deathly still. A frozen calm that masked the inner tragedy. From the quick glance he cast at Héquet, Philip knew there was no need to beat about the bush and said nothing of the treatment which, out of pity, he had intended to prescribe. He took off the apron and quickly washed his hands. The nurse handed him his coat, he put it on and, without another glance at the little bed, went out of the room. Héquet, then Antoine, followed him.

Standing in the hall, the three men gazed at each other.

'Anyhow it was very kind of you to come,' Héquet murmured.

Philip gave a slight shrug and his lips smacked with a little watery hiss. Focussed on his across the glasses, Héquet's eyes grew hard, then scornful, almost malevolent; but all at once their angry light died out and he stammered in an apologetic voice:

'Somehow, one can't help hoping for the impossible.'

Philip made a vague, ambiguous gesture and placidly reached for his hat. But, instead of opening the door, he turned back to Héquet and, after a brief hesitation, laid his hand awkwardly on Héquet's arm. There was another

silence; then Philip seemed to collect himself, gave a slight cough, and at last went out.

Antoine went up to Héquet.

‘It’s my consulting-day, but I’ll look in to-night, at about nine.’

Héquet stood stock-still, staring blindly towards the open door through which, with Philip’s going, his last hope had vanished; he moved his head to show that he had understood.

Followed by Antoine, Philip went quickly down the two flights of stairs without speaking. Suddenly he halted, sucked back his saliva with a little hissing sound, like the lisp of running water, and, when he spoke, his drawl seemed more pronounced than ever.

‘I suppose it was up to me to prescribe something, eh? *Ut aliquid fieri videatur*. But, upon my word, I didn’t dare.’ He went down a few steps in silence, then muttered, without looking towards Antoine:

‘Personally I’m not so optimistic as you are. It may well drag on for another day or two.’

When they came to the foot of the staircase, they met two ladies who were just entering.

‘Monsieur Thibault!’

Antoine recognized Mme. de Fontanin.

‘Well?’ she asked in a level voice from which she studiously excluded any sound of apprehension. ‘We are just on our way to make enquiries.’

Antoine’s only response was a slow movement of his head from side to side.

‘No, no! Can one ever be sure?’ Mme. de Fontanin exclaimed with a shade of reprobation, as though Antoine’s demeanour constrained her to avert, as quickly as she could, an evil omen. ‘Let’s have confidence, doctor, confidence! No, *that’s* out of the question, it would be too horrible! Don’t you think so, Jenny?’

Only then did Antoine notice the girl standing in the background. He made haste to apologize. She seemed ill at ease, irresolute; at last she held out her hand to him. Antoine saw her look of utter dejection, the nervous flutter of her eyelids, but, knowing Jenny’s affection for her cousin Nicole, was not surprised.

Yet he could not help murmuring to himself, as he followed up the Chief: ‘How changed she is!’ And memory lit up a picture of the past, already so remote: a summer evening in a garden, a young girl in a light,

bright dress. The chance encounter stirred the embers of a latent grief. ‘Poor old Jacques!’ he thought. ‘He wouldn’t have recognized her, that’s sure.’

Philip was crouching morosely in a corner of his car.

‘I’m off to the School of Medicine,’ he said. ‘I can drop you at your place.’

He did not utter three words all the way. Only when they were at the corner of the Rue de l’Université and Antoine was about to say good-bye did he seem to shake off his lethargy.

‘By the way, Thibault, you’ve specialized a bit in cases of defective speech. I sent someone to you the other day, a Madame Ernst.’

‘I’ve an appointment with her to-day.’

‘She will bring her little boy; he’s five or six years old, but talks in monosyllables, like a baby. What’s more, there are some sounds he seems unable to form at all. But, if you ask him to say his prayers, he goes on his knees and rattles off “Our Father” from beginning to end, and articulates almost perfectly. Seems an intelligent child, too. You’ll find it quite an interesting case, I imagine.’

5

LÉON came forward as soon as he heard his master’s key turn in the lock.

‘Mademoiselle de Battaincourt has come.’ Then, with his usual air of diffidence, he volunteered the information: ‘There’s a governess, I think, come with her.’

‘She’s not a Battaincourt really,’ Antoine amended, *sotto voce*. ‘She’s Goupillot’s daughter—Goupillot of the “Goupillot’s Stores.”’

He stepped into the bedroom to change his coat and collar, for he set store by his appearance and dressed with sedulous good taste. Then he went to the consulting-room, glanced round to see that all was spick and span, and, exhilarated by the prospect of the strenuous afternoon before him, briskly drew aside a curtain and opened the door of the waiting-room.

A slim young woman rose when he entered. (He recognized her as an English girl who had accompanied Mme. de Battaincourt and her daughter

in the previous spring, and at once a freak of memory brought back to him a little detail which had struck him at the time. When the visit had ended, as he was writing out the prescription at his desk, he had chanced to look up and his eyes fell on Mme. de Bataincourt. She and the English governess, in summery frocks, were standing close together at the bay-window and he had caught a curious gleam—it haunted his memory yet—in the fair Anne's eyes as she stroked back into place a vagrant lock on the younger woman's smooth, fair forehead, with fondling, gloveless fingers.)

The English girl, with a casual nod for Antoine, motioned to the child to enter first. As Antoine drew aside to let them pass, the subtle fragrance of two young, delicately nurtured bodies was wafted towards him. Both girls had fair hair and glowing cheeks, were tall and slim.

Huguette was carrying her coat slung over her arm; though barely thirteen, she was so tall that it came as a surprise to see her in so juvenile a frock; short and sleeveless, it showed to full advantage her childish skin, gloriously burnished by the summer sun. Her hair, a rich, warm gold, tumbled in wanton ringlets round her cheeks; its look of youthful gaiety was oddly out of keeping with the listless eyes that gave an impression of profound melancholy, and her nervous smile.

The English girl turned to Antoine. The bloom on her cheeks grew rosier still as she set about explaining in her French, melodious as bird-song, that her employer was lunching out, had asked her to be sure and send back the car, and would be coming presently.

Antoine had gone up to Huguette and, tapping her lightly on the shoulder, made her turn towards the light.

'And how do we feel to-day?' he vaguely enquired.

Huguette's only answer was a wan smile and a shake of the head.

Meanwhile Antoine was summarily examining the coloration of lips and gums, and of the conjunctivæ; but his deeper thoughts had taken another trend. Just now in the waiting-room he had noticed the awkward way in which the girl, for all the natural grace which obviously was hers, had risen from the chair, and a hint of stiffness in her walk as she approached him. After that, too, when he had tapped her on the shoulder, a slight wince and an almost imperceptible grimace had not escaped his vigilant attention.

This was only his second time of seeing the child; he was not the family doctor. It was no doubt Simon de Bataincourt, an old friend of Jacques, who had persuaded his wife to pay a surprise visit to Antoine during the spring, and take his opinion on the general health of her daughter, who, she said, had outgrown her strength. On that occasion Antoine had not discovered any

trace of lesion, though her general condition had impressed him unfavourably. He had prescribed a strict regimen and told the mother to bring the child to see him every month. She had never come again.

‘Now will you take your things off, please?’ he said.

Huguette turned to the governess.

‘Please come, Miss Mary.’

Seated at his desk, Antoine read through the diagnosis he had made in June, with studied impassivity. Though so far he had failed to detect any definite symptom, he had his suspicions. Often enough such first impressions had led him to put his finger on diseases still in the latent state; nevertheless, he refused on principle to accept their verdict over-hastily. He spread out on the table the X-ray photograph that had been taken in the spring and examined it carefully. Then he rose.

Perched on the arm of a chair in the middle of the room, Huguette was indolently letting herself be undressed. Whenever she tried to help her governess to undo a ribbon or a hook, she set about it so clumsily that the Englishwoman pushed her hand aside. At one moment her irritation was so great that she rapped the child smartly over the knuckles. Her fretful gesture and a hint of sullenness that flawed the madonna-like purity of ‘Miss Mary’s’ features, convinced Antoine that the pretty governess had little liking for the child. Moreover Huguette seemed afraid of her.

‘Thanks, that will do,’ he said, going up to the girl.

The young girl raised her eyes to his—beautiful blue eyes, clear and luminous, for, though she could not say why, she had taken a liking to this ‘big doctor-man.’ (Indeed, for all his opinionated airs and the unrelaxing tension of his features, Antoine seldom gave his patients the impression of being really stern. Even the youngest and least observant were rarely led astray; the line across his forehead, his deep-set, insistent eyes, his strong jaw and firmly cut mouth impressed them, rather, as the outward signs of forcefulness and wisdom. ‘The only thing patients really want,’ the Chief had once remarked with a sardonic grin, ‘is—to be taken seriously.’)

Antoine began by a systematic examination. The lungs: nothing wrong there. Like Philip, he proceeded step by step. The heart’s in order, too. But ‘Pott’s Disease,’ something was whispering in his ear. ‘What about Pott’s Disease?’

‘Bend forward,’ he suddenly commanded. ‘No, wait a bit! Pick something up—your shoe, for instance.’

To avoid flexing her back, she bent her knees. A bad sign, that. He still hoped he was wrong, but the thing was to make certain.

‘Hold yourself straight. Cross your arms. Like that. Now lean forward, please. Bend . . . more than that!’

As she straightened herself again, her lips slowly parted with a languid grace and smiled towards him coaxingly.

‘That hurt!’ Her voice was soft, apologetic.

‘Right!’ said Antoine. He considered her a moment covertly. Then he met her eyes and smiled. She was a quaint little thing, desirable too, as she stood there in her young nakedness, with her shoe in her hand and the wondering, tender gaze of her big eyes fixed on Antoine. She had grown tired already of standing up and was leaning now on the back of a chair. The mellow glow of a ripe apricot coloured her shoulders, her arms, her rounded thighs, and made them look almost dark in contrast with the gleaming whiteness of her torso.

‘Lie down there!’ he told her, spreading a sheet upon the couch. Once more a feeling of deep concern had mastered him, and the smile died from his face. ‘Lie on your face. Quite flat, please.’

The decisive moment had come. Antoine knelt down, resting the weight of his body on his heels, and thrust his arms out to free his wrists from the cuffs. For a couple of seconds he seemed lost in thought and did not move; his brooding eyes roamed over the firm, muscular skin of the back from the shoulder-blades to the shadowed flexure of the loins. Then, placing his hand on the warm neck that flinched a little under its touch, he laid two exploring finger-tips upon the spinal column, and, palpating each segment with an even pressure, told one by one the beads of living tissue, like a rosary. . . . Suddenly the child’s body twitched, winced from his touch, and Antoine hastily withdrew his hand. A laughing, but emphatic voice, half stifled in the cushions, protested.

‘Now you’re hurting me, doctor!’

‘Really? Where exactly?’ To divert her attention, he touched some other parts of her skin.

‘Here?’

‘No.’

‘And here?’

‘No.’

Then, to make assurance the more sure, he briskly tapped the affected vertebra with his forefinger.

‘And here?’

The girl uttered a little cry that quickly changed to a forced laugh.

There was a silence.

‘Turn over, please,’ said Antoine with a fresh, unwonted gentleness in his voice.

He ran his fingers over her neck, her chest and arm-pits. Huguette braced herself up, determined not to cry out again. But, when he pressed the groins, she could not keep back a little moan of pain.

Antoine stood up; his face was impassive, but he eluded the child’s enquiring eyes.

‘Well, I’m through with you!’ he grumbled, making believe to scold her. ‘I never saw such a cry-baby!’

There was a knock at the door. Before the girl could answer, it swung open and the fair Anne made a tempestuous entrance.

‘Here I am, doctor!’ There was a warm resonance in her voice. ‘You must forgive me for being so shockingly late. But really, doctor, you live at the back of beyond!’ She laughed. ‘Anyhow I hope you didn’t wait for me,’ she added, eyeing her daughter. ‘Mind you don’t catch cold!’ There was no tenderness in her tone. Then a sudden change came over her voice; losing its overtone of harshness, it sank to a deep, sensuous contralto. ‘Mary dear, will you be very sweet and put something round her shoulders?’

She moved towards Antoine. There was a frank appeal in her lithe body, but beneath her lively gestures there lay a vein of hardness, a ruthless obstinacy, mellowed and disciplined though it was by years of practice in the game of seduction, with femininity as her trump card. A pungent perfume, too heavy, as it seemed, to rise, hung about her. With an airy gesture she held out a white-gloved hand, tinkling with bangles.

‘How do you do?’

Greyly her eyes bored into Antoine’s. On her temples, below the waved brown hair, an imperceptible tracery of tiny lines gave the skin round her eyelids a look of great fragility. He turned away his eyes.

‘Well, doctor, are you satisfied?’ she asked. ‘How far have you got with your examination?’

‘As a matter of fact it’s just over for to-day,’ Antoine replied with a constrained smile; then he turned to the English girl. ‘You can dress her now.’

‘Anyhow you can’t deny she’s ever so much better,’ Mme. de Battaincourt gaily exclaimed, seating herself, as was her habit, with her back to the light. ‘Did she tell you that we spent . . . ?’

Antoine, who had gone to the basin, turned his head politely in her direction, as he began to wash his hands.

‘. . . two months at Ostend, and all on her account. You can see the effects; brown as a berry, isn’t she? But you should have seen her six weeks ago! Shouldn’t he, Mary?’

Antoine was thinking things out. Doubt was no longer possible about the presence of tuberculosis; it was undermining the foundations of the child’s body and already deeply rooted in the spine. He tried to persuade himself that the lesions were curable, but he did not really think so. Despite appearances, her general condition was alarming. The whole glandular system was inflamed. Huguette was old Goupillot’s daughter and the shadow of an evil heredity menaced her future, even her life.

‘Did she tell you she got the third prize in the sun-tan contest at the Palace Hotel? And a consolation prize at the Casino?’

She had a very slight lisp, just enough to lend a reassuring touch of childishness to her rather formidable charms. The grey eyes seemed curiously out of place in her dark complexion and at times, for no apparent reason, a rapid, disconcerting gleam would flash out from their pupils. She had taken a vague dislike to Antoine at first sight. Anne de Bataincourt liked to feel she exercised a physical attraction on men and women and, though with the years she turned it less often to account, the more her pleasure in it tended to remain platonic, the greater seemed her eagerness to be assured on every possible occasion of her sensual charm. Antoine’s attitude vexed her, just because the attentive, if slightly quizzing way in which he looked at her showed he was not wholly insensitive to her appeal; yet, as she saw only too well, he had not the slightest difficulty in controlling his feelings, and would remain coolly critical in every circumstance.

‘You must excuse me,’ she remarked with a low-pitched laugh, ‘but I’m simply stifling in this coat.’ Remaining seated in the chair and keeping her eyes fixed on the young man, with a lithe movement that set her trinkets jingling, she slipped out of her furs and let them sink on to the seat behind her. Her bosom heaved more freely, and the opening of her blouse revealed a willowy neck, almost a young girl’s neck, that had a quaintly authoritative air—so proudly did it flaunt the little helmeted head with the clean-cut, hawk-like profile.

Leaning forward to dry his hands, Antoine listened to her with half an ear; he was moodily picturing to himself the progressive inflammation of the bony structures, the gradual softening and ultimate collapse of the carious

spine. There was just one chance of saving her, and it must be tried at once. She must be immobilized in a plaster jacket for months, perhaps for years; a living death!

We had a very gay season at Ostend last summer,' Mme. de Battaincourt went on, raising her voice so as to compel Antoine's attention. 'The place was simply packed—rather too much so for my liking. A regular omnium gatherum!' She laughed. Then, seeing she could not catch the doctor's ear, she gradually lowered her voice, and ceased speaking, casting an approving glance at Mary who was helping Huguette into her frock. But she could not bear to play the part of a mere onlooker for long, somehow she had to make her presence felt. Rising abruptly, she smoothed out a crease in Huguette's collar and settled her blouse with an emphatic little tug. Then, bending familiarly towards the English girl, she began to talk to her in undertones.

'You know, Mary, I like that chemisette from Hudson's much better; we must get Suzy to copy it. Stand up!' she angrily addressed her daughter. 'Always sitting down! How are we to know if you've got your dress on straight?' Then with a sinuous movement of her body she turned to Antoine. 'You can't imagine, doctor, what a lazybones she is, this great gowk of a girl of mine. It's maddening for anyone like me who wants to be always up and about.'

Antoine's eyes met Huguette's look of vague interrogation and he could not withhold a little conspiratorial twinkle, which started the child smiling too.

'Let's see'—he hastily thought out a programme—'it's Monday to-day. She must be put in plaster by Friday or Saturday. After that, we'll see.'

After that? As he stood there, lost in thought, a picture formed before his eyes: the terrace of a sanatorium at Berck-sur-Mer and, in the row of beds like open coffins tilted towards the sea-breeze, one bed, a trifle longer than its neighbours, and, prone on the pillowless mattress, the cripple's upturned face, blue eyes roaming the low horizon of the dunes.

Meanwhile Mme. de Battaincourt continued airing her grievances against her daughter's laziness.

'Just imagine! When we were at Ostend there was a dancing-class each morning at the Casino and of course I took her there. Well, after each dance, our young lady used to collapse on to the sofa and start whimpering, trying to look interesting, I suppose.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'Personally, I loathe the pathetic touch!' Such was her vehemence, and so ruthless the steely look she flashed at Antoine, that he suddenly remembered certain rumours he once had heard—that Goupillot, turned jealous in old age, had

conveniently succumbed to poison. There was a vicious edge to her voice as she added: 'In fact she made herself so ridiculous that I had to let her have her way.'

Antoine gave her an unamiable look. He had come to a swift decision. Any serious conversation with this woman was out of the question; he would get rid of her at once and send an urgent summons to her husband. True, Huguette was not Battaincourt's daughter, but Antoine remembered Jacques' description of the man: 'Deficient in grey matter, but a heart of gold.'

'Is your husband in Paris?' he asked.

At last, thought Mme. de Battaincourt, he means the interview to take a more sociable turn. About time, too! She had a service to ask of Antoine and, to that end, wanted to be in his good books. She burst out laughing and called the English girl to witness.

'Did you hear what he said, Mary? No, my dear doctor, there's no escaping Touraine till February—the shooting keeps us there. It was all I could do to get away this week, between two house-parties. On Saturday I'm expecting another houseful.'

Antoine made no comment; his silence gave the final touch to her vexation. Really there was nothing to be done with such a boor! How ridiculous he looked with that absent-minded air of his; ill-mannered, too!

She crossed the room to get her coat.

'Yes,' Antoine was saying to himself. 'I'll wire to Battaincourt at once; I've got his address. . . . He'll be in Paris to-morrow or the day after at the latest. X-ray examination on Thursday. And, to make sure, a consultation with the Chief. We'll have her in plaster by Saturday.'

Huguette, seated in a chair, was demurely putting on her gloves while her mother, resplendent in a vast fur-coat, settled her little casque of golden pheasant's plumage, shaped like a Valkyrie's helmet. There was an undertone of rancour in her voice when she spoke again.

'Well, doctor, what about it? So there's no prescription? What's your advice for her this time? Anyhow, I suppose you won't say no to her attending some meets with Mary, in the dog-cart. . . .'

AFTER seeing Mme. de Battaincourt off Antoine returned to the consulting-room and once again opened the curtained door. Rumelles entered with the brisk alacrity of a man who has never a minute to spare.

‘I fear I kept you waiting,’ Antoine suggested politely.

With an urbane gesture the visitor waved the apology aside and cordially held out his hand, as though to imply: ‘Here I am merely one of the common herd of patients.’

‘Hullo!’ Antoine exclaimed quizzingly. ‘You look as if you’d just been visiting the President of the Republic, to say the least of it!’

Rumelles gave a self-satisfied laugh. He was wearing a silk-lined frock-coat and there was a top-hat in his hand. A well set-up man, he carried off the habit of officialdom with no mean success.

‘Not quite that, my dear fellow. But I’ve just been at the Servian Embassy, where there was a luncheon in honour of the Janilozsky mission who are visiting Paris this week. And I shall be on duty again presently; the minister has deputed me to receive Queen Elisabeth, who has had the lamentable notion of announcing that she will visit the Chrysanthemum Show at five-thirty. Luckily I know her; she’s quite simple really, a delightful woman. She adores flowers as much as she detests ceremony, so I shall confine myself to a few quite informal words of welcome.’

He smiled to himself, and it struck Antoine that he was thinking out a neat conclusion for his speech, something gallant and respectful, with a spice of wit in it.

Rumelles was a man in the early forties, with a lion’s mane of shaggy, yellowish hair brushed back from his temples, the rather heavy features of a Roman emperor, a truculent, upcurled moustache, and clear blue eyes on which he studiously imposed a keen, alert expression. ‘But for the moustache,’ Antoine sometimes reflected, ‘our lion would have the profile of a sheep.’

‘And what a lunch it was, my dear fellow!’ He paused, his eyes half closed, wagging his head in feigned dismay. ‘Twenty or twenty-five of us sat down to table, functionaries and front-rankers all; yet, with the best of good will, you couldn’t point to more than two or three intelligent men amongst them. Shocking, isn’t it? Still, I fancy I made rather a useful move. Happily the minister has no idea of it; whenever he gets on to anything; he’s like a

dog with a bone, and he'd be sure to botch it.' His emphatic delivery and the subtle smile which rounded off his simplest phrases gave a distinct, if uniform, incisiveness to all he said.

'Excuse me a moment.' Antoine went to his desk. 'I've an urgent telegram to write. . . . But I'm listening just the same. How are you feeling after your Servian beanfeast?'

But Rumelles, seeming to ignore the question, continued beating the air with words. Once he starts speechifying, thought Antoine, you'd never think him pressed for time. As he scribbled the telegram to Battaincourt, some scattered phrases caught his inattentive ear.

'Now that Germany is on the war-path . . . The Leipzig demonstrations at the unveiling of the memorial . . . They jump at any pretext . . . The hundredth anniversary of 1813 . . . It's coming, my dear fellow, it's coming like a house on fire. Just wait another two or three years, and you'll see!'

'What's coming?' Antoine asked, looking up with an amused glance at Rumelles. 'A war, do you mean?'

'Yes; war.' Rumelles' voice was earnest. 'We're heading straight for it.'

He had always had a harmless mania for predicting an impending European war. It sometimes looked as if he positively banked on it—a view which his next words bore out. 'And that will be the moment for a man to show the stuff he's made of.' An ambiguous remark, which might have meant: 'to go on active service,' but Antoine had no doubt about his meaning: 'to scramble into power.'

Rumelles, going up to the desk, leant towards Antoine and instinctively lowered his voice.

'You've been following what's going on in Austria?'

'Well . . . Yes—like anyone else who's not in the know.'

'Tisza is putting himself forward as Berchtold's successor. Well, I had a close-up view of Tisza in 1910—he's the deadliest of fire-eaters; he made that clear enough when he was President of the Hungarian Chamber. Did you read that speech of his in which he addressed an open threat to Russia?'

Antoine had finished writing and risen from his chair.

'No,' he replied. 'But ever since I've been old enough to read the papers, I've always seen Austria referred to as the danger-spot of Europe. Still, so far, that hasn't led to much harm.'

'Because Germany was putting the brake on. But just at present, owing to the change which has come over Germany in the past month or so, the

Austrian attitude is becoming definitely alarming. And of that change the general public has not the least idea.'

'Tell me about it.' Antoine could not repress his interest.

Rumelles glanced at the clock, then drew himself erect.

'I need hardly tell you that, in spite of the ostensible alliance and the fine speeches of the two emperors, relations between Germany and Austria during the last six or seven years——'

'Well,' Antoine broke in, 'and if they're strained, doesn't that mean a guarantee of peace, so far as we're concerned?'

'The best of guarantees. Indeed it *was* the only one.'

'"*Was*," you say. Then . . . ?'

'All that, my dear fellow, is in the melting-pot.' He looked at Antoine and, as though he were wondering how far he dare commit himself, muttered between his teeth: 'And it's our fault, perhaps.'

'Our fault?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so. But that's another story. Supposing I were to tell you that the most clear-sighted people in Europe are convinced that we have bellicose projects at the back of our minds?'

'We? What nonsense!'

'The Frenchman doesn't travel. The Frenchman, my dear fellow, has no conception how his flag-wagging propensities may strike outsiders. Anyhow the understanding which has been growing up between France, England and Russia, their latest military pacts, all the diplomatic wire-pulling that has been going on for the last two years, are, rightly or wrongly, beginning seriously to alarm Berlin. Confronted with what she describes in quite good faith as the "menace" of the Triple Entente Powers, Germany is waking up to the possibility that she may find herself isolated. She knows that Italy is only in theory a member of the Triple Alliance. So she has only Austria to fall back on, and that is why in the last few weeks Germany has made it her business to tighten up the bond of amity between them. What was the price she paid—was it the offer of important concessions, or a deviation from her former line of policy? You catch the point? From that to a quick reshuffle of the cards, an acquiescence in, not to say the active championship of, Austria's Balkan policy, it was only a step; and, so they say, that step has been taken. What makes it all the more serious is that Austria, seeing how the wind lies, has seized the occasion, as you have observed, to force the pace. So now we have Germany deliberately backing the wildcat ambitions of the Austrians, and heaven alone knows where those ambitions, backed by Germany, may land us at any moment! It can only mean that Europe will be

drawn, drawn ineluctably, into the Balkan imbroglio. Now do you see why one can't help being pessimistic, or, at the least, uneasy, if one is even a little in the know?'

Antoine maintained a sceptical silence. He knew from experience that experts in foreign politics have a way of predicting 'inevitable' wars. He had rung for Léon and, standing near the door, waited for him to appear; after that, he would divert his visitor's attention to serious topics. Meanwhile he watched Rumelles with an uncharitable eye as he paced to and fro before the fireplace, oblivious of the time, all for his verbiage and obviously delighted with himself.

The late Senator Rumelles, his father, had been a friend of M. Thibault, and had died just in time to miss his son's elevation to high official rank. Antoine had come across the younger Rumelles now and then in the past, but till a week ago had not seen much of him. His opinion of the man, never a favourable one, had gained in definition with each visit. He had observed that Rumelles' incessant flow of talk, his premature adoption of a statesmanlike urbanity, and his interest in world-problems always disclosed, sooner or later, a streak of meanness, a crude concern with personal advancement. Indeed ambition seemed the only strong emotion known to Rumelles, an ambition aiming somewhat higher than his mental equipment (Antoine thought little of it) warranted. He was far from being well-educated, timid though by no means modest, and unstable as water; but these defects were artfully concealed under the semblance of a 'rising man.'

Meanwhile Léon had come and gone. 'That's enough of politics—and psychology,' Antoine said to himself, and stemmed the spate of words.

'Well then? No improvement?'

Rumelles' face fell.

One evening during the previous week—it was nearly nine o'clock—Rumelles had entered Antoine's consulting-room, white with emotion. Two days previously he had discovered that he was suffering from a disease which he dared not disclose to his family doctor, still less to a total stranger. 'You see, my dear fellow,' he explained, 'I'm a married man, and something of a public figure, too; for both these reasons I can't afford to fall into the hands of a babbler or a blackmailer.' He had remembered that old Thibault's son was a doctor, and now begged Antoine to treat his case. After trying without success to induce him to consult a specialist, Antoine had consented; he was always ready to practise his art, and curious to see what kind of man this politician was.

'Really no improvement at all?'

Rumelles' only answer was a tragic shake of the head. For all his loquacity he could not bring himself to talk about his ailment, or admit that at times he endured the tortures of the damned, and that just now, after the official lunch, he had been obliged to break off an important conversation and beat a hasty retreat from the smoking-room, so violent had been the spasms of pain.

Antoine thought it over.

'Then,' he announced in a firm voice, 'we shall have to try the silver nitrate treatment.'

He opened the 'surgery' door for Rumelles, whose flow of words had quite dried up, to enter. Then, turning his back on him, he prepared the solution and charged a syringe with cocaine. When he returned, his victim had doffed the ceremonial frock-coat; collarless and trouserless, he looked like any poor afflicted mortal—a suffering, uneasy, shamefaced man, removing his soiled underlinen with awkward gestures.

But he would not own himself beaten yet. When Antoine came up he raised his head a little and forced his lips into a would-be casual smile. He suffered none the less, and in a myriad ways. Even his spiritual loneliness was preying on his mind. For, in his present plight, it was an added tragedy that he could never wholly lay aside the mask, could not impart to anyone his loathing for this grotesque misadventure, which galled not only his body, but his pride. For—in whom could he confide? Not in a friend, for he had none. For ten years his political career had forced him to lead a life apart, behind a barrage of feigned and dubious good-fellowship. He had not a single genuine affection to fall back on. Yes, there was one; his wife's. She was, in fact, his only friend, the one person in the world who knew and loved him for what he really was, the only being to whom he could have unburdened his heart—and she, she was the one person in the world from whom, above all and at all costs, he must conceal this damnable mishap!

A stab of physical pain cut across his musings; the nitrate was beginning to take effect. Rumelles stifled his first cries of agony, but presently, despite the action of the sedative, he clenched his fists and teeth in vain, and could restrain himself no longer. Deep in his body coursed a stream of liquid fire, and he groaned like a woman in her pangs, while big tears rose and glistened in his blue eyes.

Antoine felt sorry for him.

'Bear up, old chap; it's over now. Painful, of course, but there was nothing else for it and it won't last. Keep quite still; I'll give you some more cocaine.'

But Rumelles was not listening. Stretched out on the table under the harsh light, he was jerking his legs spasmodically, like a frog on the dissecting-table.

At last Antoine managed to bring down the pain.

‘It’s quarter-past,’ he said. ‘When have you to be off?’

‘Not . . . not till . . . till five o’clock,’ his victim stammered. ‘I’ve my car . . . wait—waiting.’

Antoine bade him take heart with a good-natured smile, but there was a touch of irony behind it; he could not help picturing the dapper chauffeur with his tricolour cockade awaiting, statue-like, upon his seat, His Excellency’s delegate. And then—at this very moment, perhaps, they were unfurling under the awnings of the Flower Show the roll of carpet along which, only an hour hence, friend Rumelles, who now lay there wriggling and writhing like a new-born babe, would advance in solitary state with measured steps, resplendent in his frock-coat, his cat-like moustache uptilted in a smile, to greet the little queen. But, on the instant, the vision faded; now, under the doctor’s eyes there lay merely a patient—less than that, a ‘case’; less still, a chemical process, the action of a caustic on a mucous substance, an action which he had deliberately provoked, for which he was responsible, and whose latent but inevitable operation he was now observing with his mind’s eye.

Léon’s three discreet taps on the door deflected his attention to the outside world. ‘Gise has come,’ he said to himself as he slapped his instruments into the tray of the sterilizer. Eager though he was to see the last of Rumelles, it was against his principles to palter with the duties of his calling, and he waited patiently till the painful effects of the nitrate had eased off.

‘Make yourself at home and rest a bit,’ he said as he went out. ‘I shan’t be needing this room. I’ll come and tell you when it’s ten to the hour.’

‘WILL you be so good as to wait there, miss?’ Léon had said to Gise.

By 'there' he meant Jacques' old room, which now was darkening with the nightfall, sombre and silent as a crypt. Her heart-beats quickened as she crossed the threshold and the effort she had to make to master her distress took, as usual, the form of a prayer, a brief appeal to Him who never leaves His children unconsolated. Instinctively she went towards the bed-sofa where, at so many different periods of her life, she had sat and talked the happy hours away with 'Jacquot.' Gise could hear—was it in the street or in the waiting-room?—a child's tempestuous sobs. She always found it difficult to control her feelings. Nowadays, for nothing at all, her eyes would brim with tears. A good thing she was alone just now. Yes, she would have to see a doctor. Not Antoine, however. She was out of sorts, losing weight—her insomnia, most likely. Anyhow it wasn't normal for a girl of nineteen. . . . For a minute or two she let her mind dwell on the curious sequence of those nineteen years, her never-ending childhood passed in the company of two old people; then—in her sixteenth year—heavy with cruel mystery, the blow had fallen!

Léon came in and turned on the light; Gise did not dare to tell him she would rather have been left in semi-darkness. Now, under the lamplight, she knew each object in the room for a familiar friend. Obviously enough, out of devotion to his brother's memory, Antoine had made a point of not disturbing anything; and yet, by slow degrees, once he had started using the room for meals, each object had been shifted from its place or changed its function, till everything looked different—the table, for instance, planted with its leaves outspread plumb in the middle of the room, and the tea-service lording it on the disused desk between the bread-basket and a bowl of fruit. Even the bookcase. . . . Yes, those green curtains behind the glazed doors used not to be like that. One of them was gaping a little and, when Gise stooped to look at it, she caught the glint of glass and silver. Léon had piled up all the books on the top shelf. If poor Jacques could have seen his bookcase transformed into a sideboard . . . !

Jacques! Gise refused to think of him in terms of death; not merely would it not have startled her in the least suddenly to see him standing there on the threshold, but she was always expecting him to reappear at any moment. And for the last three years her fanatic expectancy had kept her in a daydream, ecstatic—yet depressing.

Here, in these familiar surroundings, phantoms of the past flocked round her. She could not move and hardly dared to breathe, lest the faint movement of the air should desecrate the silence. There was a photograph of Antoine on the mantelpiece and, as her eyes fell on it, she remembered the day when Antoine had given that copy to Jacques; he had presented

Mademoiselle with another like it, which she still had upstairs. It brought back to her an Antoine of earlier days, the Antoine who had been her standby in the three dark years that followed. How often since Jacques had left them had she come downstairs to talk to him about the fugitive, how often all but shared with him her secret! But now—everything had changed. Why? What had come between them? She could not fix on anything definite; the only thing she could recall was that brief scene last June, just before she left for London. The imminence of her departure, of whose secret motive he had no inkling, had seemed to throw him off his balance. What exactly had he said to her? She had gathered that his love for her was no longer a mere elder-brotherly regard, but he felt towards her in ‘quite another way.’ Surely she was mistaken, she must have dreamt it! Yet, no; even the letters he had written to her—how puzzling they had seemed, too tenderly effusive and, for all that, so reticent!—no longer conveyed the tranquil affection of former years. And so, ever since her return to France, she had instinctively kept out of his way, and during the past fortnight avoided being alone with him at any moment. And now to-day—what did he want of her?

She started at a sound; rapid yet measured footsteps: Antoine’s steps. He entered the room and stood before her, smiling. He looked rather tired, but his brow was calm, his eyes were gay and sparkling. Gise, who had been feeling herself adrift, pulled herself together at once; Antoine’s presence had always that effect on others, it seemed to emanate a vibrant energy.

‘Hullo, Blackie!’ he hailed her with a smile. (‘Blackie’ was a nickname which M. Thibault, in a burst of good humour, had bestowed on her. It dated from those far-off days when circumstances had compelled Mlle. de Waize to adopt her little orphan niece, the daughter of a Madagascan half-caste woman, and, taking the child under her wing, had introduced into the staid Thibault household what at the time had seemed to them an untamed little savage.)

‘I suppose you have a crowd of patients this afternoon,’ Gise remarked, to make conversation.

‘All in the day’s work,’ he cheerfully replied. ‘Will you come to the consulting-room? Or shall we stay here?’ Without waiting for her answer he sat down beside her. ‘How are you getting on? We hardly ever seem to see each other nowadays. That’s a pretty shawl. . . . Give me your hand.’ He took the little unresisting hand without more ado, laid it flat upon his fist, and held it up to his eyes. ‘Not so plump as it used to be, your little hand.’ Gise smiled good-humouredly and Antoine saw two little dimples form in her brown cheeks. She made no effort to withdraw her arm, but Antoine felt that she was on her guard, ready to shrink from him. He all but murmured:

You're not so nice as you used to be before you went away,' but thought better of it, and lapsed into a moody silence.

'Your father insisted on going back to bed, on account of his leg,' she said evasively.

Antoine made no comment. What an age it was since he was last alone with Gise! He riveted his gaze on the small, dark hand, and his eyes followed the blue tracery of veins along the slender, well-knit wrist; then, examining the fingers one by one, he tried to laugh it off. 'Do you know what they remind me of? Dainty little half-a-coronas!' But all the while, across a shimmering haze that seemed to rise before them, his eyes were lingering in an insidious caress on all the sinuous curves of her lithe, bent body, from the soft roundness of her shoulder to the angle of her knee under the silk shawl. It made his senses tingle, that languid grace of hers, so naïve . . . and so near. Sudden and catastrophic, like a rush of blood to the head or a pent-up torrent chafing at the flood-gates, came a rush of desire. He almost yielded to an impulse to slip an arm around her, draw the young, lithe body closely to his side. But then . . . he only bowed his head and lightly pressed his cheek against the little hand. 'How soft your skin is, Blackie!' he murmured. He lifted his eyes slowly towards her face and when she saw the look in them, a look of famished, almost insensate craving, instinctively Gise turned aside, withdrew her hand.

'What did you want to tell me?' she asked in a level tone.

Antoine pulled himself together.

'I've some terrible news to give you, my dear.'

Terrible news? A dreadful fear leapt into her mind. Supposing. . . ? Was this the bitter end of all her hopes? Her terror-stricken eyes swept round the room, lingering for an agonizing moment on each familiar landmark of her love.

'Father is dangerously ill, you know,' Antoine went on.

At first it seemed she had not heard him; her thoughts had been so far away.

Then 'Dangerously ill?' she repeated and, as she spoke, grew suddenly aware that she had known it all the time. Her eyebrows lifted and her eyes showed an anxiety that was partly feigned.

'Do you mean that he will . . . ?'

Antoine nodded. When he spoke again his tone implied that he had long foreseen that it would come to this.

‘The operation last winter, the excision of the right kidney, served only one purpose, really: it prevented us from nursing any more illusions as to the nature of the tumour. The other kidney became infected almost immediately after. But since then the disease has taken a new turn, it’s become generalized, and that’s just as well, in a way. It helps us to keep the truth from the patient, he has no suspicions, no idea that it’s a hopeless case.’

There was a brief silence before Gise spoke again.

‘How long do you think . . . ?’

He observed her with satisfaction. She would make a good wife for a doctor. She knew how to face up to the inevitable; she had not shed a single tear. Those months she passed abroad had formed her character. And he regretted his habit of always regarding her as more of a child than she really was.

‘Two or three months at the most,’ he replied in the same tone. Then added, rather hastily: ‘Very much less, perhaps.’

Though inclined to be slow in the uptake, Gise guessed that Antoine’s last remark had some special application to her, and was relieved when he went on to explain himself at once.

‘Look here, Gise, now that you know the truth, can you really leave me all by myself? Must you go away again?’

She did not reply, but gazed sedately at the wall in front with bright and steady eyes. Her round little face seemed quite composed, but for a tiny wrinkle that came and went incessantly between her brows, the only outward sign of her inward struggle. Her first response had been a thrill of affection; his appeal had touched her. It had come as a surprise that anyone should appeal to her for support—Antoine most of all, whom the whole family looked up to as a tower of strength.

No! She had seen through his ruse, guessed why he wanted to detain her at Paris; and all her being rebelled against it. Only by going to England could she carry out her great project, the one thing in the world for which she lived. If only she could have told Antoine all about it! No, that would be a betrayal of her heart’s secret; more, a betrayal of it to the last person on earth to welcome such a confidence! Later on, perhaps. . . . In a letter. But not now.

Her eyes remained obdurately focussed on the middle distance. A bad sign, Antoine thought, but nevertheless persisted.

‘Why won’t you answer?’

A tremor shook her body, but her look was as determined as ever.

‘But surely, Antoine, it’s just the other way round. There’s all the more reason for me to hurry up and get my English certificate. I shall have to start earning my living much sooner than I expected.’

Antoine cut her short with a gesture of annoyance. On her tight mouth and in her eyes he was surprised to see what seemed the shadow of a despondency past all redress, and, at the same time, a rapture, a passion of wild, unreasoning hope. Obviously, there was no place for him in such feelings as those. In a spasm of vexation he tossed back his head. Vexation or despair? Rather, despair; a lump rose in his throat, tears to his eyes. For once he did not try to check them or conceal them; they might help him yet to break down her incomprehensible resistance.

Gise was deeply touched; she had never seen Antoine cry, had never even dreamt he could do so. She avoided looking at him. Her affection for him was tender and profound, and she never thought of him without a quickening of the heart, a thrill of enthusiasm. For three years he had been her only comforter, a tried and stalwart comrade whose nearness was the one bright spot in her life. And now—why should he seem to want of her more than her trust, her loyal admiration? Why must she now conceal her sisterly regard?

A bell tinkled in the hall. Instinctively Antoine pricked up his ears. A sound of closing doors; then, once again, silence.

They sat there side by side, unmoving, unspeaking, while their thoughts raced on and on along divergent paths. . . .

At last the telephone rang. There was a footstep in the hall, and Léon appeared at the door.

‘It’s a call from upstairs, miss. Dr. Thérivier has come to see M. Thibault.’

Gise got up at once. Antoine called Léon back and asked in a weary voice:

‘How many people in the waiting-room?’

‘Four, sir.’

Then he, too, rose; life took charge again. ‘And there’s Rumelles expecting me at ten minutes to the hour!’ he said to himself.

‘I must go upstairs at once,’ she said, without coming near him. ‘Good-bye, Antoine.’

He gave a slight shrug and his lips parted in a forced smile.

‘All right, then, off you go . . . Blackie!’ In the sound of his own voice he seemed to hear an echo of his father’s ‘All right then, off you go, my

boy,' earlier in the day—and the reminder galled him. He added in a different tone: 'Please tell Thérivier that I can't get away just now. If he has anything to say he can drop in here on his way out. Got it?'

She nodded and opened the door; then, as if she had come to a sudden decision, she turned back to Antoine. No, it was useless. What could she say to him? Since she couldn't tell him everything, what would be the good? Wrapping her shawl more closely round her, she went out, her eyes still fixed on the ground.

'The lift's just coming down,' Léon pointed out. 'Won't you wait for it, miss?'

Shaking her head, she began to walk up the stairs, slowly, broodingly. All her will was bent on that one obsession: London! Yes, she must leave at the earliest moment, must not even wait till the end of her holiday. Oh, if only Antoine could guess all that it meant to her—to be over there, across the Channel!

It had happened two years ago, ten months after Jacques' disappearance. One morning in September Gise had chanced to meet the postman coming up the garden-path at Maisons-Laffitte, and he had handed her a hamper bearing the label of a London flower-shop and addressed to her. Puzzled, but with a sudden intuition that somehow it concerned her deeply, she contrived to reach her room without being seen, cut the string, tore off the lid and all but fainted with emotion when she saw, lying on a bed of damp moss, a simple bunch of roses. Her thoughts flew to Jacques. *Their* roses! Crimson roses with tiny dusky hearts; exactly, yes, exactly the same. And September: the anniversary! The meaning of the nameless gift was as clear to her as a code-telegram, worded in a familiar code. Jacques was not dead, M. Thibault was wrong, Jacques was living in England and—*Jacques loved her!* Her first impulse was to open the door wide, call out for all to hear: 'Jacques is alive!' Just in time, she pulled herself together. Fortunately. How could she have explained just why it was these crimson roses conveyed so wonderful a meaning? They would badger her with questions and—anything, anything rather than betray her secret! Closing the door, she prayed to God for strength to hold her peace, till the evening, anyhow; for she knew that Antoine was expected back at Maisons for dinner.

That evening she led him aside and spoke to him of a mysterious present, a box of flowers sent her from London, where she knew no one; mightn't it be Jacques? In any case the clue should be followed up without delay. Antoine's interest was aroused, though a series of failures during the past year had made him sceptical, and lost no time in setting an enquiry on foot in London. The florist supplied a detailed description of the customer

who had sent the flowers, but the man in question was not in the least like Jacques. So this line of enquiry also had been dropped.

But not by Gise. She alone had certain knowledge. But she said no more about it. With a power of self-control extraordinary for her seventeen years, she kept her secret. But she was determined to go to England and, cost what it might, to follow up Jacques' trail herself. The plan seemed doomed to fail. But, for two long years, with the subtle, silent assiduity of the dark jungle-folk from whom she sprang, she had paved the way for her departure, and plotted it out, step by step. And what a struggle it had been! She recalled each gradual advance. She had needed all her patience, every artifice, to instil certain ideas into her aunt's reluctant mind. First, she had needed to convince her that a penniless young girl, even though she came of a good family, should be able to earn her living; then she had had to bring her round to the idea that her niece, like herself, had a vocation for educating young children, and furthermore that, considering the keen competition for such posts, it was essential nowadays for any would-be teacher to have a good command of English. Next, she had to inveigle her aunt into meeting a local woman-teacher who had just finished a course at an English training-school, established in the neighbourhood of London by a group of Catholic nuns. As good luck would have it, M. Thibault was moved to make enquiries and received a favourable report on the institution. In the previous spring, after a thousand and one delays, Mlle. de Waize had at last been won over to her niece's view, and Gise had spent the summer in England. But those four months had not given the results she hoped for; she had been victimized by shady enquiry-agencies, nothing but disappointment had come of her attempts. Now at last she would be able to take action and pull the necessary strings. She had just sold some jewellery and realized her savings. Moreover, she had at last got into touch with honest agencies. Best of all, she had managed to interest the daughter of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner in her romantic quest; she had been invited to lunch with the Commissioner on her return to England, and he well might prove a very useful friend in need. How then could she do otherwise than hope?

Gise had to ring at the door of the Thibaults' flat; her aunt had never let her have a latch-key.

'Yes, how can I do otherwise than hope?' she asked herself, and suddenly the certainty that she would find Jacques again came back with overwhelming force, sweeping all doubt before it. Antoine had said 'it' might last three months. 'Three months?' she murmured; 'why, in less than that I shall have succeeded!'

Meanwhile, downstairs, Antoine was standing where she had left him in Jacques' room, facing the closed door with a steadfast gaze that seemed to beat in vain against its dark, impenetrable barrier. He felt his life had reached a turning-point. Often in the past he had pitted his will against the most formidable difficulties, and overcome them, but never had he vainly grappled with a sheer impossibility. And, just now, something was being wrenched from his existence; it was not Antoine's way to persevere in a hopeless struggle.

He took two hesitating steps, glanced into the mirror, then, leaning on the mantelpiece, with his face thrust forward, gazed intently for some seconds at his reflected self. 'And supposing she'd said it, like that: "Yes, marry me!"' A thrill of retrospective apprehension ran through his body. 'Playing with fire—a fool's game!' He turned on his heel. 'Good Lord! It's five o'clock! And . . . how about Queen Elisabeth?'

As he hurried to the surgery Léon met him, his eyes impassive as ever, a whimsical smile flickering on his lips.

'Monsieur Rumelles has left. He's made an appointment for the same time to-morrow.'

'Good,' said Antoine, much relieved. And for the moment this small relief sufficed to blunt the edge of his chagrin.

He went back to the consulting-room, crossed it diagonally and, slipping back the curtain with the familiar gesture which, every time he made it, gave him a vague satisfaction, opened the door of the waiting-room.

'Hullo!' he exclaimed, with a friendly pinch of the cheek for a pale-faced little boy who came towards him, looking thoroughly scared. 'So you've come all by yourself, like a big boy! How are your father and mother?'

Taking the child's arm, he led him to the window and, seated on a stool with his back to the light, pressed back the docile little head gently but firmly, so as to have a clear view of the throat. 'Well, well,' he murmured without raising his eyes, 'there's no mistaking them this time, those tonsils of yours!' His voice had automatically regained the brisk and sonorous, almost astringent, quality which acted like a tonic on his patients.

As he bent forwards, gazing intently at the little boy, a sudden twinge of wounded pride fretted his mind and he could not repress the thought: 'Anyhow, if I think fit, we can always wire for her to come back.'

As he was seeing the boy off, Antoine was not a little surprised to discover Mary, the English girl with the peach-bloom complexion, sitting in the hall. When he went up to her she rose and bestowed on him a leisurely, bewitching smile; then, silently but with a resolute air, she handed him a pale blue envelope.

Her present attitude, so changed from her aloofness of two hours ago, and her bold, if enigmatic, look convinced Antoine—though he could have given no reason for his belief—that there was something abnormal about her errand.

Much mystified, he remained standing in the hall and was hastily opening the envelope, when he observed the English girl deliberately making for the consulting-room, the door of which stood open. He followed her, unfolding the letter as he went.

MY DEAR DOCTOR,

I have two small requests to make of you and, to ensure they won't be frowned on, I send them by the least forbidding messenger I can find.

Firstly, my scatter-brained little Mary was silly enough to wait till she had left your place before telling me that she'd been feeling off colour for some days past, and couldn't sleep for coughing the last few nights. Would you be so good as to give her a thorough overhaul, and also your advice?

Nextly; we have an old fellow, a retired keeper, living on the estate, who suffers most terribly from arthritis; the poor old chap goes through agonies at this time of the year. Simon has taken compassion on him and gives him injections to ease the pain. We usually keep some morphia in the house, but his last attacks have quite used up our little reserve and Simon has asked me to be sure and bring some back—which I can't do without a doctor's prescription. I quite forgot to tell you about it this afternoon. Now will you be terribly nice and give the charming bearer of this note a prescription—one which can be used again, if possible—so that I can get five or six dozen tubes *at once*?

Thanks in advance for attending to my little 'nextly.' As to my request number one, which of us, my dear Doctor, should be the

grateful one? I feel sure you often have much less attractive patients to examine!

Very sincerely yours,

ANNE-MARIE S. DE BATTAINCOURT.

P.S.—You may think it odd that Simon shouldn't ask our local doctor to fix it up. Well, he's a narrow-minded, fanatical old curmudgeon who always votes against us and has his knife into the 'château people'—meaning us—for refusing to call him in. Otherwise, of course, I wouldn't have troubled you.—A.

Though Antoine had read the last word he did not raise his eyes from the page. His first feeling was one of indignation—whom did they take him for? Then the whole business struck him as rather comic; why not laugh over it instead?

There were two mirrors in the consulting-room and Antoine, who had once been caught that way himself, had learnt a trick that could be played with them. From where he stood, resting his elbow on the mantelpiece, he had only to change the angle of his gaze under his lowered eyelids to study the English girl without her seeing it. He did so. Mary was sitting a little way behind him. She had unfastened her cape, freeing her neck and throat, and, while she pulled off her gloves, kept her eyes fixed, with a show of absent-mindedness, on her toecap, toying with a fringe of the carpet. She looked perturbed, but on her mettle. Thinking he could not see her without moving from where he was, with a sudden lift of her long eyelashes, she sped a quick glance at him, blue as lightning and as vivid.

Her indiscretion did away with any doubts that lingered still in Antoine's mind. He began to laugh and, with bent head, perused the fair tempter's letter for the last time; then slowly refolded it. Smiling still, he drew himself up and looked Mary in the face; each experienced a sudden shock, sharp as a blow, as eye met eye.

For a moment the English girl seemed in a quandary. He did not say a word but, dropping his eyelids, shook his head slowly from one side to the other several times, to signify an unequivocal 'No.' He still was smiling, but his expression made his meaning so clear that Mary could not be mistaken. It was exactly as if he were saying in so many words, with cool effrontery: 'No, my dear young lady, there's nothing doing; it simply won't work. Don't imagine I'm shocked. I'm too old a hand at the game, you see, to be anything but amused. Only I must regretfully inform you that, even on the terms you offer, you'll get nothing out of me!'

She rose, speechless, her cheeks aflame with vexation, and, stumbling over the carpet, backed out into the hall. He escorted her out as calmly as if her hurried exit were not in the least unusual, but chuckling inwardly. Tongue-tied, her eyes fixed on the ground, she continued to retreat, trying to button up her collar with feverish, ungloved fingers that showed deathly pale against her blazing cheeks.

In the hall, when he moved to her side to open the door, she made as if to bow. He was just about to return her greeting when, with a brusque movement, she snatched the letter from his fingers and darted through the doorway; a professional pickpocket could not have done it more neatly.

Antoine could but pay grudging tribute to the girl's adroitness and presence of mind.

When he returned to his room he tried to picture their faces when the three of them—the fair Anne, Mary and himself—would have their next encounter (in a few days, presumably) and, at the prospect, smiled again. A glove lay on the carpet; he picked it up and sniffed it before flinging it light-heartedly into the waste-paper basket. . . .

Those English girls . . . a queer lot! And Huguette, he wondered—what sort of life would she have, poor little thing, with those two women in charge of her?

Night was falling; Léon came in to close the shutters.

'Has Madame Ernst come?' Antoine asked, after a glance at his engagement-book.

'Yes, sir, she's been here quite a time. There's a whole family of them: the mother, father, and a little boy.'

'Good!' said Antoine cheerfully, as he swung back the curtain.

9

A LITTLE man, in the sixties, came forward to meet him.

'Would you be so very kind, doctor, as to see me first?' He spoke in a thick, somewhat drawling voice; his manner was that of a well-bred, rather timid man. 'There are some things I should like to tell you.'

Antoine carefully closed the door and pointed to a chair.

‘My name is Ernst. Dr. Philip has told you, I presume. . . . Thank you,’ he murmured, settling down into the chair.

M. Ernst impressed Antoine favourably. He had deep-set eyes and a gaze that, for all its melancholy and wistfulness, glowed with youthful fervour. Not so his face, an old man’s face; furrowed and worn, dried up yet fleshy, it was all in pits and ridges, without a level inch on it; chin, cheeks and forehead, all seemed gouged and modelled out by some rough sculptor’s thumb. A short, stiff, iron-grey moustache seemed to cut his face in two; his hair was sparse and drab, like the rank grass that sprouts on sand-dunes. It was impossible to tell if he were conscious of Antoine’s tactful scrutiny.

‘Anyone might take us for our little boy’s grandparents,’ he observed sadly. ‘We married late in life. . . . I am a graduate of the Paris University and German master at the Lycée Charlemagne.’

‘Ernst,’ said Antoine to himself, ‘and that accent of his. An Alsatian, most likely.’

‘I don’t want to trespass on your time, doctor, but as you have kindly consented to take up our child’s case it is my bounden duty, as I see it, to inform you of certain matters, *confidential matters*. . . .’ He looked up, and a shadow fell across his eyes as he went on. ‘Matters, I mean to say, of which my wife knows nothing.’

Antoine’s nod conveyed his understanding of the secrecy required of him.

‘Well then, to begin. . . .’ He seemed to be nerving himself for the plunge. Doubtless he had thought out all he was to say, for he now began to talk, his eyes fixed on the wall in front, in the easy, measured rhythm of one versed in the use of words. Antoine had a feeling that Ernst would rather not be looked at while he spoke.

‘In 1896, doctor, I was forty-one and a master at the Versailles Lycée.’ His voice lost something of its assurance. ‘I was engaged.’ He pronounced the word in three syllables, giving them a curious lilt, like three notes of a major chord, played in *arpeggio*. ‘I was, moreover,’ he continued in a more emphatic tone, ‘a fervent champion of the cause of Captain Dreyfus. You are too young, doctor, to realize all it meant, the moral drama of the Dreyfus case’—‘tramma,’ he pronounced it, with a deep-pitched, solemn resonance—‘still you are doubtless aware how dangerous it was then for a man to be at once a government servant and a militant Dreyfusite. I was one of those who . . . who took that risk.’ His tone was calm, devoid of any bravado, but its firmness gave Antoine a good idea of what, some fifteen years before,

had been the faith, the enterprise and rashness of this sedate old fellow with the gnarled forehead, obstinate chin and eyes still darkly glowing with enthusiasm.

‘I tell you this,’ M. Ernst went on, ‘to explain why it was that after the summer of ’96 I was exiled to the Lycée at Algiers. Meanwhile’—his voice grew gentler—‘my engagement had been broken off; my brother-in-law to be, a naval officer (in the merchant service, as it happens—but that made no difference), did not see eye to eye with me, you understand.’ Obviously he was doing his utmost to present the facts impartially.

‘Four months after I landed in Africa,’ he continued in a lower voice, ‘I found that I was . . . ill.’ His voice faltered once more, but he mastered his weakness. ‘Why be afraid of words? I had developed syphilis.’

So that’s it, Antoine thought. The little boy . . . That explains everything.

‘I lost no time in consulting several doctors attached to the Faculty of Medicine at Algiers, and on their advice put myself in the hands of the best local specialist.’ He seemed reluctant to give the name. ‘It was Dr. Lohr; you know his work very likely,’ he said at last, without looking towards Antoine. ‘The disease was taken at its first stage; only the primary lesion had developed. I was the type of man who obeys his doctor’s orders, however irksome, to the letter. That is what I did. When four years later the excitement of the Dreyfus case had died down and I was recalled to Paris, Dr. Lohr assured me that, for a year past, he had considered me completely cured. I believed him. Anyhow since then I have not detected any indications, not the slightest symptom, of a relapse.’

He turned calmly towards Antoine and looked him full in the eyes. Antoine’s gesture indicated that he was listening attentively.

But he was not merely listening; he was observing the man himself. Both the look and the demeanour of the little schoolmaster told Antoine of a life of faithful, unremitting service. He had met others of his kind before, but in this case he deemed the man superior to his calling. Obviously, too, his attitude of reserve had long since become a second nature with him; he had cultivated the fastidious aloofness that, for certain finer natures, is their only refuge from the struggle for existence, a life of thankless toil which, for all its scant rewards, is accepted with a loyal, steadfast heart. The tone in which he had alluded to the broken-off engagement expressed better than any words how much that thwarted love had counted in his lonely life, and the veiled emotion that sometimes lit his eyes was poignant evidence that the grey-haired pedagogue was no less keenly sensitive than a youngster in his ’teens.

‘Six years after my return to France,’ he went on, ‘my *fiancée* lost her brother.’ He groped for words, then added simply: ‘So I could see her again.’

His feelings overpowered him, he could not continue. Antoine kept his eyes lowered and observed a tactful silence. He was almost startled by the sudden outburst of emotion that ensued.

‘Doctor, I don’t know what opinion you may have of a man who acts as I did then. My illness—why, it was ancient history, ten years had elapsed! Past and done with. I was over fifty. . . .’ He sighed. ‘And my loneliness had been weighing on me all those years. . . . But I’m afraid it’s a muddled sort of story I’m telling you, doctor!’

Antoine looked up, but, even before he saw the face of the man before him, he had understood everything. That he had begotten a mentally defective son would in itself be a bitter enough trial in all conscience for a man of erudition. But what was that beside the agony of a father who, racked by remorse, aware that the responsibility was his alone, could only watch the progress of a nemesis that he had set in action, and could not avert?

‘All the same I wasn’t easy in my mind about it,’ Ernst continued in a weary voice. ‘I intended to consult a doctor and nearly did so. No, that’s not true. One mustn’t burke the truth. I convinced myself that it was needless. I reminded myself of Lohr’s opinion, and tried to find some easier way out. One day I met a doctor at a friend’s house and steered the conversation towards that topic, just to have him confirm Lohr’s opinion—that the disease can be *permanently* cured. That was all I needed to set my mind at rest.’

He paused again.

‘And then, I said to myself, a woman of her age—there’s . . . there can’t be any danger of her having a . . . a child.’

His voice failed in a sob, but he still kept his head high, and as he sat there, unmoving, his fingers tightly clenched, such was the nervous tension of all his body that Antoine could see the muscles throbbing in his neck, while across a film of unshed tears his eyes glowed still more deeply. He made an effort to go on speaking, but his voice broke in a strangled cry of grief.

‘Doctor . . . I’m so sorry for . . . for the poor little chap!’

Antoine was deeply moved. Happily for him such violent emotions were apt to key him up to a pitch of feverish excitement, an almost frenzied urgency to make a prompt decision, and act upon it.

He did not hesitate for a second.

‘Eh? What’s that?’ he exclaimed in a tone of feigned bewilderment. He stood up, knitting his brows; it seemed that he had only the haziest idea of what his visitor was driving at, and hesitated to believe his ears. ‘What possible connection can there be between that . . . that little misfortune of yours, which was taken in hand at once and completely cured, and your little boy’s infirmity—which very likely will pass away quite soon?’

Ernst stared at him, dumbfounded.

Antoine’s face lit up with a genial smile.

‘If I’ve grasped your meaning, my dear sir, your scruples do you credit. But, speaking as a professional man, let me tell you quite frankly: from the scientific point of view they’re simply . . . ludicrous!’

M. Ernst rose, as though some sudden impulse drew him towards Antoine. But then he stood stock-still, his eyes distraught with emotion. He was one of those beings whose mental life is deep-set, all of one piece, and who, when once a noxious thought begins to fester in their minds, unable to restrict its influence, surrender to it heart and soul. For years it had been rankling in his heart, that infinite remorse whose secret he had never dared to share even with his companion in distress; this was his first moment of respite, his first hope of deliverance.

Antoine had diagnosed his feelings. But, fearing to be pressed with questions and driven back on detailed and complicated lies, he deliberately changed the subject. . . . And, anyhow, why waste more time on such futile and depressing fancies?

‘Was the child born before term?’

M. Ernst blinked at Antoine; the question took him by surprise.

‘What? Before term? . . . No.’

‘Was it a difficult labour?’

‘Very much so.’

‘Forceps used?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah,’ Antoine murmured as though it threw a flood of light on the problem. ‘That, I should say, explains quite a lot.’ Then, to cut things short, he added: ‘Well, let’s have a look at our little patient,’ and began to move towards the waiting-room.

But then the child’s father stepped quickly forward and clutched Antoine’s arm.

‘Is that true, doctor? Is it really true? You’re not saying it just to . . . ? Oh, doctor, will you give me your word for it? Your word of honour?’

Antoine swung round towards him and saw a look of entreaty, of famished hunger to believe, mingled with boundless gratitude. The joy that surged across him was that which follows only on successful effort, on a good deed well done. The child? Well, he would see what he could do. Meanwhile, where the man before him was concerned, his duty was plain; at all costs he must lift the load of anguish from that tormented soul.

He let his gaze sink into the other’s eyes, and answered in a deep, emphatic voice:

‘I give you my word of honour!’

After a moment’s silence he opened the door.

In the other room he saw an elderly lady in black and a playful little scamp with curly brown hair whom she was trying to keep quiet, penning him between her knees. Antoine’s first glance was for the child who, at the sound of the opening door, had stopped playing, to gaze with big, dark, intelligent-looking eyes at the stranger. He smiled; then, scared by his own smile, turned sulkily away.

Antoine shifted his gaze towards the child’s mother. There was a sad and gentle beauty in her care-worn features that went straight to Antoine’s heart. ‘Courage!’ he said to himself. ‘It’s only a matter of putting one’s back into it. It’s *always* possible to get results.’

‘Would you mind coming this way?’

Raising the curtain to let her pass, followed by the child, he gave the poor woman a reassuring smile—that crumb of comfort, anyhow, he could bestow on her at once. He could hear the laboured breathing of the man behind him as, patiently holding back the curtain, he watched mother and child coming towards him, and a wave of elation swept over his mind. ‘What a fine profession it is!’ he murmured to himself. ‘Yes, by God, the finest in the world!’

NIGHT had come before the steady stream of patients ceased, but Antoine was oblivious both of the time and of his own exhaustion; as often as he raised the curtain, his energy revived without an effort to meet the new occasion. When he had seen out the last consultant, a handsome young woman hugging a strapping baby that was threatened, he feared, with almost total blindness, he was amazed to discover it was eight o'clock. 'Too late for the kid with the boil,' he said to himself. 'I'll look in on my way back from Héquet's, later in the evening.'

He went back to the consulting-room, opened the window to change the air and, standing at a low table piled with books, hunted for one to read while he was dining. 'Ah yes,' he reminded himself, 'I've got to check that reference—the Ernst child's case.' He fluttered the pages of some back numbers of the *Neurological Review*, trying to trace the epoch-making symposium on aphasia that took place in 1908. 'A really typical case, that Ernst boy; I must tell Treuillard about it.'

A smile of amusement flickered on his face as he remembered Treuillard's eccentric ways, a byword in the profession. He called to mind the year he had spent as the nerve-specialist's assistant. 'What the devil possessed me to do it?' he asked himself. 'Looks as if I've always had a hankering after that branch of medicine. Perhaps I'd have done better to devote myself to nervous and mental diseases. That's a field where much remains still to be discovered.' Suddenly a picture formed before his eyes . . . of Rachel. Now what association of ideas had brought her into his mind? She'd had no medical or scientific training of course; yet psychological problems of every kind had always appealed to her very strongly. Yes, there was no doubt she had played a part in developing the keen interest he now felt in other people's lives. In any case—he had noticed it time and time again—she had changed him in a thousand different ways.

A far-away look, a shade of melancholy, dimmed his eyes as he stood beside the table, his shoulders bowed with weariness, swinging the medical journal to and fro between his thumb and forefinger. Rachel! He never could recall without a rush of bitterness the enigmatic girl who had flashed across his life. Never had he received a line of news from her. And, indeed, this did not surprise him; that somewhere in the world Rachel was still alive seemed most improbable. She had succumbed, more likely, to the climate, or malaria, or the tsetse. Or, perhaps, she had come to a violent end, been drowned or, quite possibly, strangled. Dead she was—of that he was convinced.

He drew himself up and, slipping the journal under his arm, went out into the hall and told Léon to bring his dinner. One of the Chief's sallies

came back to his mind. Philip had been away and, on his return, Antoine had given him a brief account of the new patients who had come for treatment; laying his hand on Antoine's arm, the Chief had observed in a tone of affectionate irony: 'Better look out, my boy! You're getting more and more interested in your patients' mentalities, and less and less in their complaints!'

As Antoine settled down into his chair before the steaming soup-tureen, he realized how tired he was. 'Still, it's a fine profession!' he consoled himself.

His talk with Gise came back to him and, to dispel the memory, he made haste to open the bulky review. In vain; the very air of the room where something of her presence lingered still seemed charged with cruel evidences of his failure. He recalled certain obsessions of the last few months. How was it he had dallied a whole summer long with so impossible a project? Now he could look upon his shattered dream as on the wreckage of some flimsy palace on a stage, crumbled into a heap of insubstantial dust. He suffered little or not at all. Only his vanity was wounded. And now it seemed to him that there had been something shoddy about the whole affair, something puerile and beneath him.

A timid ring at the door-bell came as a welcome interruption. He put down his napkin and pricked up his ears, his hand resting on the tablecloth, ready to rise from his seat at a moment's notice.

He heard a palaver in the hall, and women whispering. Then the door opened and, to his surprise, Léon showed two women into the room without more ado. They proved to be M. Thibault's maids. At first, in the dim light, Antoine failed to recognize them; then it suddenly struck him that they had come to fetch him, and he jumped up so hastily that his chair toppled over behind him.

'No, sir, no!' they cried in the utmost confusion. 'Please excuse us, sir. We thought we'd give less trouble if we came at this time.'

'Yes, I thought father had died,' Antoine said to himself so calmly that he realized how well prepared he was for that to happen. The possibility that the phlebitis might have caused an embolism had crossed his mind immediately. When he thought of the lingering agony that such a development would have averted, he could not help feeling almost disappointed.

'Sit down,' he said. 'I'll go ahead with my dinner, as I've some more visits to do this evening.'

The two women remained standing.

Jeanne, their mother, had been M. Thibault's cook for a quarter of a century. She was now past work, her legs were raddled with varicose veins, and she herself admitted that her place was 'on the shelf.' Now the old woman's working days were done, her daughters installed her daily in an arm-chair facing the kitchen range, and there she spent her days, wielding an ineffectual poker. She still enjoyed a feeble illusion of responsibility, for she had a finger in every pie, occasionally whipped the mayonnaise, and plagued her daughters (both women in the thirties) with good advice from morn till night. Clotilde, the elder of the two, was a sturdy wench, devoted if somewhat disobliging, a chatterbox but a hard-worker. She had been employed on a farm for many years and had retained a rough-and-ready manner and a racy vocabulary like her mother's; she did the cooking. Adrienne, who had had a convent education and always been in service in town, was more refined than her elder sister; she had a weakness for dainty lingerie, sentimental ballads, a nosegay on her worktable and 'pretty services' on church-days.

Clotilde, as usual, did the talking.

'It's along of mother we've come to see you, Mr. Antoine. It's been hurting her something awful for the last few days, poor thing, and no mistake! There's a big lump she has in front, on her right side. She can't sleep of nights and when she goes to the double-U, poor old soul, you can hear her whimpering like a child. But she's a well-plucked 'un, is mother; she never says a word. You might have a look at her, sir, without letting on what you're about—eh, Adrienne?—and then you're sure to see the great bulge she has there, under her apron.'

'Right you are!' said Antoine, taking out his note-book. 'I'll find some excuse for visiting the kitchen to-morrow.'

While her sister talked, Adrienne busied herself changing Antoine's plate, moving the bread within his reach and making herself generally useful at table—by force of habit. She had said nothing so far, but now she put a question in an unsteady voice.

'Do you think, sir, that it's . . . it's likely to be dangerous?'

A tumour which develops so quickly . . . Antoine reflected. And, an operation at her time of life—much too risky! He visualized with pitiless precision the course a case like the old woman's might take: the huge proliferation of the neoplasm, its fatal progress, the gradual constriction of the organs, and most horrible of all—the body's slow decomposition; a death in life.

Lacking courage to meet her anxious gaze, which he could not have brought himself to answer with a lie, he looked askance, with knitted brows and lips set sulkily. Making an evasive gesture, he pushed his plate away from him. But just then fat Clotilde, who never could let a pause elapse without putting in a word, came opportunely to his rescue.

‘Of course there’s no knowing it right away like that; Mr. Antoine must have a look at her first. But there’s one thing I can tell you; my poor husband’s mother, well, she died of a cold on her chest after going about for fifteen years and more with a lump just like that one in her belly!’

11

A QUARTER of an hour later Antoine had made his way to No. 37 of the Rue de Verneuil and was entering a dark courtyard surrounded by a block of antiquated buildings. Room No. 3 was on the sixth storey, the first door in a passage that reeked of gas.

Robert opened the door; he had a lamp in his hand.

‘How’s your brother?’

‘Quite well now, sir.’

The lamplight fell full on the boy’s eyes, cheerful and candid eyes, but with a glint of hardness in them, wise before their time; a childish face, tense with precocious energy.

Antoine smiled.

‘Let’s have a look at him.’

Taking the lamp from the boy’s hand, Antoine held it aloft to get a better view of his surroundings. A round table spread with oilcloth took up most of the room. Robert had evidently been writing; a bulky register lay open between an uncorked ink-bottle and a pile of plates, on top of which reposed a hunk of bread and a couple of apples: a humble still-life. The room was tidy, almost comfortable. A kettle was singing on the little stove in front of the fireplace.

Antoine went up to the high-pitched mahogany bedstead at the far end of the room.

‘Asleep, were you?’

‘Oh no, sir!’

The little boy, who had obviously wakened with a start, was propping himself on his unbandaged arm, wide-eyed and smiling fearlessly.

His pulse was regular. Antoine placed on the bedside table the box of gauze which he had brought, and began to take off the bandage.

‘What’s that you’re boiling on the stove?’

‘Just water.’ Robert laughed. ‘We were going to have something hot to drink; the concierge gave me some lime-flowers to flavour it.’ Suddenly his eyelashes began to quiver. ‘Won’t you have some, sir? With sugar. Do try it, sir! It’s awfully nice like that!’

‘No, thanks, really.’ Antoine was amused by the boy’s eagerness. ‘What I want is a little boiled water for washing his arm. Just pour some into a clean plate. Right. Now we must wait for it to cool off.’ He sat down and looked at the children, who were beaming at him as if they had known him all their lives. Yes, he thought, they look decent little lads—but can one ever be really sure? He turned to the older boy.

‘How is it that two kids like you come to be living here on your own?’

The boy’s eyelashes fluttered and he made a vague gesture, as if to say: ‘Beggars can’t be choosers!’

‘What about your father and mother?’

‘Oh, they . . . !’ Robert’s tone implied that such a question really harked back much too far into the past. ‘We used to live with auntie.’ He pointed to the big bed with a meditative air. ‘She died there in the middle of the night; on the tenth of August it was, over a year ago. And a shockin’ bad time we had after that, eh Eddie? Luckily we were on the soft side of the concierge and she didn’t say anything to the old landlord, so we hadn’t to quit.’

‘How about the rent?’

‘It’s paid.’

‘Who pays it?’

‘We do.’

‘Where does the money come from?’

‘Why, what d’you think? We earn it. *I* do, that’s to say. He, you see—well, that’s where the shoe pinches. Got to find him another job. He’s at Boul’t’s—do you know the shop?—in Grenelle; he’s their errand-boy. Forty francs a month all told. Rotten pay, isn’t it? Why, you’ve only got to reckon out what he costs in shoe-leather!’

He paused, all eyes for Antoine who had just removed the bandage. The abscess showed little suppuration, the swelling of the arm had gone down, and the wound looked healthy.

‘And how about you?’ asked Antoine, as he dipped the dressing in the water.

‘Me?’

‘Well, you earn your living somehow, don’t you?’

‘Me . . . ?’ Robert repeated in a dawdling voice that suddenly slapped out like a flag in the wind. ‘You bet I do! I know a trick or two, what’s more!’

Antoine glanced up in some surprise and his eyes met a look, keen as a razor-blade, a rather disconcerting look, on the high-strung, resolute little face.

The boy asked nothing better than to talk. How to earn one’s living—that was the theme of themes, the only one that counted, the dominant of all his thoughts since ever he began to think. He started with a rush, eager to pour out everything, to unload all his secrets.

‘When auntie died I was only making sixty francs a month as a copyist. Now that I attend the courts as well, my pay’s a hundred and twenty francs. Then Monsieur Lamy, the head-clerk, fired the office-cleaner—the man who shines the floor each morning—and gave me his job. A lazy old codger he was, too; never cleaned the floor except there’d been a rainy day, and then only in front of the window where the mud shows. They did well out of the change, you bet! I get another ninety-five francs for that, and it’s fine sport polishing the floor every morning, just like roller-skating it is!’ He gave a little whistle. ‘But that’s not all. I’ve got some other little wheezes.’

He paused, waiting for Antoine to look again in his direction; then, at a glance, he seemed to sum his man up once for all. Favourable though the judgment was, he evidently thought it best to lead off with a word of warning.

‘I don’t mind telling you, as I know it’s safe with you. But you mustn’t ever let on you know about it, eh?’ He began to speak more loudly, warming up to his subject as he went on. ‘You know Madame Jollin, the concierge at No. 3 in front of your place. Well—but mum’s the word, don’t forget!—well, the old dame makes cigarettes on the q.t. I say, I wonder if you’d care to . . . ? No? They’re A1 fags, you know—mild and not too tight-packed. Dirt cheap, too. I’ll bring you some to sample. Anyhow it seems it’s the hell of a business if you get copped making cigarettes to sell like that. So she needs someone to take round the packets and collect the cash, someone who

knows his way about. That's my job; after office-hours, from six to eight, I go my rounds, looking as if butter wouldn't melt in my mouth. She gives me lunch every day except Sundays for my trouble. And a mighty good cook she is, I'll say that for her. Just think what I save! Not to mention that the customers—they're all of them real swells—nearly always slip a nice little tip into my hand, a franc or fifty centimes, it's a matter of luck. Anyhow every little helps, as they say, and we won't do too badly.'

He paused. From his tone Antoine could guess the look of pride that sparkled in his eyes, but he purposely refrained from looking up.

Robert, now he was started, rattled on cheerfully.

'When the kid comes back in the evening, he's dog-tired, so we have our grub here; soup, or eggs, or a hunk of cheese, it don't take long anyhow. That's much better than traipsing round the coffee-stalls, eh Eddie? Now and then, like to-night, I spend the evening writing up headings for the cashier. They're lovely—aren't they?—big, fat round-hand titles like that; why I could write 'em just for the fun of it. At the office they . . .'

'Hand me the safety-pins, will you?' Antoine broke in, feigning indifference to the boy's chatter; he was afraid of giving the youngster a taste for showing off. Inwardly, however, he said to himself: 'These kids are worth keeping an eye on!'

The dressing had been renewed, the arm was back in its sling. Antoine glanced at his watch.

'I'll look in once again to-morrow, about noon. After that you can come to my place. You'll be fit to go back to work on Friday or Saturday, I expect.'

After a moment's silence the little boy stammered: 'Th . . . thank you, sir.' His voice was just breaking and he jerked the words out with such incongruous emphasis, they cut so quaintly through the silence, that Robert burst out laughing. There was an unnatural shrillness in his laugh, which gave a sudden indication of the state of nervous tension in which the high-strung little fellow always lived.

Antoine took twenty francs from his purse.

'To help you through the week, young fellows.'

Robert recoiled as if he had been stung; frowning, he faced up at Antoine.

'No, sir, no! We couldn't think of it. Didn't I tell you we've all we need?' Then, to convince Antoine who, in haste to be off, was beginning to insist, he launched his Parthian shot: 'Do you know how much we've saved, just us two? A proper little nest-egg—guess! Seventeen hundred of the best!

Yes, sir. Haven't we, Eddie?' Then suddenly his voice dropped to a whisper like the villain's in a melodrama. 'Not to mention a heap more that will be rollin' in, if my little scheme comes off!'

Such eagerness was in his eyes that Antoine's curiosity was whetted and he halted on the threshold.

'Yes, quite a new dodge. It's like this. . . . Bassou—he's a clerk in our office—has a brother who travels in wine, olive-oil and so forth. Here's the idea! On my way back from the Courts in the afternoon—that's nobody's business, eh?—I drop in at all the pubs, grocers', wine-merchants', and show them my stuff. I haven't got the patter off yet—but that'll come with practice. Anyhow I've placed quite a lot of kegs this last week. Forty-four francs rake-off. And Bassou says that, if I'm fly . . .'

Antoine chuckled as he hurried down the six flights of stairs. Yes, they'd quite won his heart, the youngsters, and he'd do anything for them. 'All the same,' he added to himself, 'I'd better watch out and see they don't become *too* "fly!"'

12

IT was raining; Antoine took a taxi. As he neared the Faubourg Saint-Honoré his cheerfulness evaporated and a frown settled on his brows.

'If only all were over!' he said to himself as, for the third time that day, he gloomily climbed the three flights of stairs. When he reached the door of the Héquets' flat he fancied for a moment that his wish had been fulfilled. The maid who opened the door looked at him in a peculiar manner and stepped forward hastily to whisper something in his ear. But it was only a private message from Mme. Héquet that she imparted; her mistress wanted Antoine to see her first, before going to the child.

There was no eluding it. The light was on in Nicole's room; the door stood open. As he entered he saw her head prone on the pillow. He walked up to the bedside. She did not stir. She had obviously dozed off, and it would have been brutal to disturb her. In repose she looked much younger, care-free, now that sleep had smoothed away the lines of grief and weariness. Antoine gazed at her, holding his breath, afraid to move; it startled him to

read upon those features, whence sorrow had withdrawn itself only so short a while ago, this all so sudden ecstasy, so keen a longing for oblivion and happiness. The pearly lustre of her closed eyelids, fringed with fine-spun, tenuous strands of gold, her languid grace and air of unconcern—all the naked, self-revealing beauty of the face before him made his senses tingle. How fascinating, too, the drooping curve of her mouth and the half-parted lips, that now in their repose seemed to express only relief and hopefulness! ‘Why,’ Antoine asked himself, ‘why should the face of any young being seen asleep appeal to us so strongly? What instinct lies behind the thrill, the almost sensual thrill of pity it evokes in every one of us?’

Turning away, he tiptoed soundlessly from the room. Though the doors were shut the child’s hoarse, incessant wailing came to his ears as he proceeded down the passage. With an effort he nerved himself to turn the handle, cross the threshold and renew contact with the dark powers at work within.

The child’s cradle had been placed in the middle of the room and Héquet was seated beside it, his hands resting on the edge, rocking it slowly, intently, to and fro. On the far side of the cradle the night-nurse, her hands pressed tight against her apron, her veiled grey forehead bent above the child, sat waiting like an effigy of disciplined, indomitable patience. Isaac Studler, ungainly as ever in his white linen coat, was leaning against the mantelpiece, with folded arms, stroking his jet-black beard.

The nurse rose as the doctor came in. But Héquet, his eyes fixed on the child, did not seem to notice anything. Not till Antoine went up to the cradle did Héquet raise his head towards him, with a sigh. Antoine had hastily grasped the burning little hand that fluttered on the coverlet, and, as he did so, the child’s body seemed to shrink away, like some tiny insect trying to wriggle back into its hole. The child’s face was red and mottled, almost the colour of the ice-bag placed behind her ear; her curls, as fair as Nicole’s, clammy with sweat and wetted by the compresses, were smeared across her cheeks and forehead. Her eyes were half shut and between the eyelids the swimming pupils had a dull metallic lustre, like the eyes of butchered animals. The movement of the cradle rocked her head slowly to and fro, giving a rhythmic cadence to the moans that issued from the little, parched-up throat.

The nurse made as if to fetch the stethoscope, but Antoine signed to her he did not need it.

‘It’s an idea of Nicole’s,’ Héquet suddenly remarked in an unnatural, almost high-pitched tone. Then, seeing Antoine’s puzzled look, he explained in a studiously level voice: ‘The cradle. Yes. It’s Nicole’s idea.’ He smiled

uncertainly; across the twilight of his mind such details seemed to loom out in preternatural relief. ‘Yes,’ he added almost in the same breath, ‘we went and fetched it from the attic. Covered with dust. It’s the only thing that calms her a bit, you see, being rocked like that.’

Antoine gazed at him compassionately and, as he did so, realized how very far his pity, for all its deep sincerity, fell short of such a sorrow. He placed his hand on Héquet’s arm.

‘You’re utterly fagged out, old man. You’d much better go and lie down for a while. What’s the use of wearing yourself out?’

Studler put in a word.

‘Yes, it’s the third night you haven’t slept.’

‘Do be reasonable now,’ Antoine insisted, bending towards his friend. ‘You’ll be needing all the strength you have—very soon.’ He felt an almost physical impulsion to drag the unhappy man away from contact with the cradle, to plunge as soon as might be all that unavailing anguish in the anodynes of sleep.

Héquet did not answer, but went on rocking the cradle. His shoulders sagged more and more, as though Antoine’s ‘very soon’ had laid on them a burden not to be endured. Then, of his own accord, he rose, beckoned to the nurse to take his place beside the cradle and, without waiting to dry his tear-stained cheeks, moved his head slowly round as if in search of something. At last he went up to Antoine and tried to look him in the face. Antoine was struck by the changed expression of his near-sighted eyes; their look of keen alertness had lost its edge, they seemed to move stiffly in their sockets, tending to settle down into a heavy, torpid stare.

Héquet gazed at Antoine and his lips moved before the words came out.

‘Something—something *must* be done,’ he murmured. ‘She’s in great pain, you know that. Why let her go on suffering? Don’t . . . don’t you agree? We must have the courage to . . . to do something.’ He paused, seeming to look to Studler for support; then once again his heavy gaze rested on Antoine. Look here, Thibault, you *must* do something.’ Then, as though to elude Antoine’s answer, he let his head fall, shambled across the room and left the two men to themselves.

For some moments Antoine seemed incapable of movement; then a sudden blush darkened his cheeks. His mind was a ferment of conflicting thoughts.

Studler tapped him on the shoulder.

‘Well?’ he asked in a low tone, watching Antoine’s face. Studler’s eyes resembled those of certain horses—over-large and elongated eyes, with

languid pupils slackly floating in pools of watery whiteness. Just now, however, his look, like Héquet's, was searching, masterful.

'Well, what are you going to do about it?' he whispered.

In the brief silence that ensued each felt the impact of the other's thought.

'What will I do?' Antoine echoed evasively. But he knew that Studler would not let him off an explanation. 'Damn it!' he broke out. 'Of course I realize. . . . But when he says "do something" one daren't even appear to understand!'

'Hush!' Studler whispered, glancing towards the nurse; then he led Antoine into the passage and closed the door.

'You're convinced, aren't you, that nothing can be done?' he asked.

'Quite convinced.'

'And that there's not the least, not the very faintest hope?'

'Not the faintest.'

'Well then?'

Antoine felt a mood of tense excitement gaining on him, and took refuge in an acrimonious silence.

'Well then?' Studler insisted. 'There's no use beating about the bush; the sooner it's ended, the better.'

'And I assure you I want it to end quite as much as you do.'

'Wanting's not enough.'

Antoine raised his head and answered resolutely:

'That, unfortunately, is all that can be done.'

'No!'

'Yes!'

The dialogue had grown so vehement that Studler kept silence for some seconds.

'Those injections,' he presently observed. 'I wonder now. . . . Supposing the doses were doubled . . .'

Antoine cut him short.

'Hold your tongue, damn it!'

His mind was seething with exasperation. Studler watched him without speaking. Antoine's eyebrows stood out like an iron bar, in an almost straight line across his forehead, the muscles of his face twitched uncontrollably, dragging his mouth awry, and now and then a little stream of

ripples fretted the tight-drawn skin, as though the nervous system just below the surface were in a state of violent commotion.

A minute passed.

‘Hold your tongue!’ Antoine repeated, but less harshly, stammering a little with excitement. ‘I know what you feel. We’ve all f-felt like that, wanted to cut things short; but that’s just a beg-ginner’s weakness. Only one consideration counts: the sanctity of human life. Yes. The sanctity of life. If you’d gone on with medicine you’d see things in the same light as every other doctor. The necessity for certain fixed principles. A limit to our powers. Otherwise . . .’

‘A limit? If a man’s a man at all, the only limit is—his conscience.’

‘Exactly! His conscience; his professional conscience. But just think, man! Supposing doctors were to claim the right to . . . Anyhow, Isaac, there isn’t one who would, not one. . . .’

‘In that case——’ Studler hissed the words out. Antoine cut him short.

‘Héquet has dealt with cases every bit as hopeless, as pitiful as this one, dozens of times. But he’s never once deliberately . . . Never. Nor has Philip, nor Rigaud, nor Treuillard. No doctor worthy of the name would dream of it, do you hear me? Never!’

‘In that case,’ Studler broke out, ‘you doctors may set up to be the high-priests of the world to-day, but, to my mind, you’re just a pack of scrimshankers!’

As he moved back a step the light from the hanging lamp fell on his face. Its look conveyed more than his words had said; not only scorn and indignation, but a sort of challenge, almost a threat—a secret will to *act*.

‘That being so,’ Antoine said to himself, ‘I’ll stay here till eleven and make the injection myself.’ He said no more but, with a shrug of his shoulders, went back to the bedroom and sat down.

The rain drummed on the shutters an endless monotone, and drippings from the eaves pattered incessantly upon the sill while, in the room, the swaying cradle timed the moaning of the dying child to its slow rhythm; and, across the hush of night, tense with death’s immanence, all the sounds blended in a sad, persistent counterpoint.

‘I stammered once or twice just now,’ Antoine, whose nerves were still on edge, muttered to himself. He was not often taken that way; it only happened when he had to keep up a distasteful pose—when, for example, he was forced to tell a complicated lie to some over-perspicacious patient, or when in conversation he was led to bolster up some conventional idea regarding which he had so far no personal convictions. ‘It’s all the Caliph’s

fault!’ With the corner of his eye he saw the ‘Caliph’ back at his old place, leaning against the mantelpiece. He remembered Isaac Studler in his student days, when he had met him for the first time, ten years ago, in the neighbourhood of the Ecole de Médecine. Bearded like a Persian king, with his silky voice and Rabelaisian laugh, the Caliph had been a familiar figure in the Latin Quarter of those days; then, too, there had been a truculent, subversive and fanatical side to his character; half-measures were not the Caliph’s way. An exceptionally brilliant future was predicted for him. Then one day the news went round that he had dropped his studies and set to earning his living; it was said that he had taken under his wing the wife and children of one of his brothers who had just killed himself after embezzling money from the bank where he was employed.

A shriller cry from the child cut short his musings. Antoine fixed his eyes for a moment on the writhing little body, trying to estimate the frequency of certain spasms, but there was nothing to be made of them; the movements were as incalculable as the palpitations of a chicken that is being bled. Then suddenly the feeling of unrest against which Antoine had been struggling ever since his passage of words with Studler grew to an acute distress. Ready though he always was to take the utmost risks when a patient’s life was in danger, it was more than he could bear thus to come up against a hopeless situation, to feel so utterly at a loss for any form of action, condemned to watch the unseen enemy’s triumphant progress with folded hands. And to-night the child’s interminable struggle, her inarticulate cries, were working on Antoine’s nerves with a peculiar urgency. Yet the sight of suffering, even the agony of little children, was nothing new to him. How was it that to-night he could not hold his feelings in? Confronted with the element of mystery and horror that attends a death-agony, he found himself to-night as impotent to curb his anguish as if he were the veriest novice. He was stirred to the depths of his being; his self-confidence was shaken—and, with it, his confidence in science, in activity, in life itself. Like a great wave, despair broke over him, dragging him down into the depths. In a ghastly pageant they streamed before his eyes, all the patients he had written down as ‘hopeless cases.’ Why, taking only those whom he had seen on this one day, the list was formidable in all conscience! Four or five hospital patients, Huguette, the Ernst boy, the blind baby, and now the child before him. And, doubtless, others too. Yes, his father; an old man with thick, milk-sodden lips, prisoned in an arm-chair. In a few weeks, after some days and nights of pain, the robust old veteran, too, would go their way. The way they all must go, one following the other. And in all this worldwide suffering there was no sense, no meaning. . . . ‘No, life’s absurd, a beastly thing!’ he adjured

himself furiously, as though to argue down some quite incorrigible optimist; and who was that confirmed, pig-headed optimist if not—himself, his normal self?

The nurse rose soundlessly. Antoine glanced at his watch; it was time for the injection. The pretext for moving, doing something, came as a vast relief; he felt almost cheerful, too, at the prospect of being able to get away from this room in a few minutes.

The nurse brought all he needed on a tray. Clipping off the tip of the ampoule, he plunged the needle in, filled the syringe to the prescribed level, then tipped out the contents of the ampoule (still three-quarters full) into the slop-pail. He could feel Studler's gaze intent on him.

After making the injection he sat down again; it seemed to have eased the pain a little. He bent over the child, took her pulse once more—it was terribly weak—and whispered some instructions to the nurse. Then he rose without haste, washed at the basin, shook Studler's hand without a word and left the room.

He made his way out on tiptoe. The lights were on but no one was visible; Nicole's door was shut. As he moved away the sound of wailing seemed to grow fainter. He opened and shut the hall-door noiselessly. Outside, on the landing, he paused and listened. Not a sound. With a deep sigh of relief he sped briskly down the stairs.

Out in the street he could not refrain from gazing up towards the dark façade cut by a string of lighted windows as though a party were being given in the Héquets' flat.

The rain had only just stopped and the pavements were streaming after the downpour. As far as eye could reach the empty streets shimmered with liquid light.

Antoine felt a sudden chill; turning up the collar of his coat, he quickened his steps.

A SOUND of water dripping; rain-drenched pavements. Suddenly the picture rose before him of a face streaming with tears, of Héquet standing there, Héquet's insistent gaze. 'Look here, Thibault, you *must* do something!' For all his efforts to dispel it, the harrowing vision held his eyes a while. 'A father's love,' he mused; 'yes, that's a feeling utterly unknown to me, however much I try to picture it.' Suddenly the thought of Gise leapt to his mind. 'A home. Children.' An idle dream, all that, and, happily, unrealizable. That idea of marriage, why now it struck him as more than premature; grotesque! 'Am I an egoist?' he wondered. 'Or is it simply cowardice?' His thoughts turned a new corner. 'Anyhow there's someone damns me for a coward just now, and that's the Caliph!' He remembered disgustedly the way Studler had cornered him in the passage, the man's hot, vulgar face and stubborn eyes. He struggled to brush away the swarm of ideas which ever since that moment had been buzzing in his brain. 'A coward?' Rather an obnoxious word, that! 'Over-cautious,' perhaps. 'Studler thought me over-cautious. The damned fool!'

He had reached the Elysée. A patrol of military police had just completed their circuit of the Palace. There was a clatter of rifle-butts on the pavement. Before he could avert their onset a horde of wild imaginings, like the protean pageant of a dream, streamed through his mind. He pictured Studler sending the nurse out of the room, taking a syringe from his pocket. Presently the nurse came back and passed her fingers over the little corpse. Then . . . ugly rumours; a report to the police; burial refused; an autopsy. The coroner; the police. 'I'll take the blame.' He was passing a sentry-box just then, and glared defiantly at the sentry within. 'No,' he heard himself affirming boldly to a phantom coroner, 'no injections were made by anyone except myself. I administered an over-dose—deliberately. It was a hopeless case, and I take upon myself all the . . .' Shrugging his shoulders, he smiled and quickened his step. 'What drivel I'm thinking!' But well he knew he had not laid the spectres of his mind. 'If I'm so ready to take the blame for a fatal dose administered by another man, why did I so emphatically refuse to administer it myself?'

Whenever a brief but strenuous mental effort failed, if not to clarify a problem, at least to throw some light on it, he always felt intensely irritated. He recalled the passage of words with Studler, when he had lost his temper, stammered. He did not regret it in the least; yet he was unpleasantly aware that he had played a part and voiced opinions which were somehow out of keeping with his personality as a whole, disloyal to his truest self. He had moreover a vague but galling presentiment of a day to come when his outlook and conduct might well belie his attitude and words on this

occasion. His sense of self-disapproval must have been keen indeed for Antoine now to feel so impotent to shake it off; as a rule he firmly refused to pass judgment on any of his acts, the feeling of remorse was wholly foreign to his nature. True, he enjoyed studying himself; of recent years, indeed, he had made a veritable hobby of self-analysis—but always from a strictly scientific point of view. Nothing could be more alien from his character than to sit in moral judgment on himself.

Another question shaped itself in his mind, adding to his perplexity. ‘Would it not have needed greater strength of mind to consent, than to refuse, to act?’ Whenever he had to choose between two alternatives and when, all things considered, one seemed as cogent as the other, he usually chose the line of action involving the greater exercise of will-power; experience had taught him, so he averred, that this was almost always the better one to follow. But to-night he had to admit that he had chosen the line of least resistance, followed the beaten track.

Some of his own remarks still echoed in his ears. He had prated to Studler of ‘the sanctity of life.’ A ready-made phrase, and treacherous like all its kind. We ‘reverence’ life, we say—or do we make a fetish of it?

He recalled an incident which had struck his imagination at the time—the case of the bicephalous child at Tréguineuc. Some fifteen years earlier, at the Breton seaport where the Thibaults were passing the summer holidays, a fisherman’s wife had given birth to a freak of nature, with two separate, perfectly formed heads. Father and mother had begged the local doctor to put an end to the little monstrosity, and, when he refused to do so, the father, a notorious drunkard, had flung himself on the new-born child and attempted to strangle it. It had been necessary to secure him, lock him up. There was great excitement in the village and it was a burning topic at the dinner-tables of the summer visitors. Antoine, who was sixteen or seventeen at the time, had embarked on a heated discussion with his father (it was one of the first occasions on which father and son came into violent conflict), Antoine insisting, with the naïve intractability of youth, that the doctor should be permitted to cut short a life, doomed from the outset, without more ado.

It startled him to find how little his point of view regarding such a case had changed. ‘What view would Philip take?’ he asked himself. The answer was not in doubt; Antoine could but admit that the idea of ending the child’s life would never have crossed Philip’s mind. What was more, did any dangerous malady develop, Philip would have strained every nerve to save its miserable life. Rigaud would have done the same thing. Terrignier, too. And Loiselle. So would every doctor. Wherever the least spark of life

remains, the doctor's duty is imperative. Saviours of life, like trusty Saint-Bernards! Philip's nasal voice droned in his ears: 'You've no choice, my boy; you haven't the right. . . .!'

Antoine rebelled. "The right?" Look here, you know as well as I do what they amount to, those ideas of "right" and duty. The laws of nature are the only laws that count; they, I admit, are ineluctable. But all those so-called moral laws, what are they really? A complex of habits, foisted upon us by the past. Just that. Long ago they may have served their purpose, as furthering man's social progress. But what of to-day? Can you, as a thinking man, assign to all those antiquated rules of hygiene and public welfare a sort of divine right, the status of a categorical imperative?' And, as no answer was forthcoming from the Chief, Antoine shrugged his shoulders and, thrusting his hands deeper into his overcoat pockets, crossed to the opposite pavement.

He walked blindly ahead, debating still—but only with himself. 'One thing's sure; for me, morality simply doesn't exist! "Ought" and "ought not," "right" and "wrong," are meaningless to me—just words I use, like everyone else, as the small-change of conversation; but in my heart I've always known they have no application to reality. Yes, I've *always* thought like that. No, that's going too far. I've thought like that since . . .' Rachel's face rose suddenly before his eyes. Well, for quite a long time, anyhow.' For a while he made a conscientious effort to sort out the principles governing his daily life. He could find none. 'A sort of sincerity?' he ventured tentatively. He thought again and found a better definition. 'Isn't it rather a sort of clear-sightedness?' His mind was still unsettled, but he was fairly satisfied with his discovery. 'Yes. Obviously it doesn't amount to much. But, when I look into myself, my impulse to think clearly—well, it's about the only sure and solid thing I can find. Very likely I've made of it—unconsciously, no doubt—a kind of moral principle, my private creed. "Complete freedom, provided I see clearly." That sums it up, I imagine. Rather a risky principle, when you look into it. But it does me pretty well. The way one sees things, that's the only thing that matters. To profit by one's scientific training and examine oneself under the microscope coolly, impartially. To see oneself as one is; and, as a corollary, to accept oneself as one is. And then? Then I could almost say: Nothing is forbidden me! Nothing, provided I don't dupe myself. I know what I am doing and, as far as possible, why I am doing it.'

But, almost at once, a wry smile pursed his lips. 'The queerest thing is that, if I look into it carefully—my life, I mean, with its famous gospel of "complete freedom" that does away with good and evil—the queer thing is,

my life is almost entirely devoted to “doing good” as people call it! What has it brought me to, my precious emancipation? To acting not merely just like everybody else, but, oddly enough, in the very way which according to the present code of morals sets me amongst the best of men! The way I behaved just now is a case in point. Can it be that, for all practical purposes and despite myself, I’ve come to kowtow to the cut-and-dried morality of those around me? Philip would smile. . . . No, I can’t allow that our human obligation to behave as social animals should over-rule our impulses as individuals. How then explain the line I took just now? It’s fantastic how little the way we think fits in with, or even influences, the way we act. For, in my heart of hearts—why quibble over it?—I think Studler right. The platitudes that I hurled at him carried no weight at all. It’s he has logic on his side; that poor child’s sufferings are so much needless agony, the issue of her fight with death is a foregone conclusion, foregone and imminent, too. Well then—the least reflexion tells me that if her death can be accelerated, it’s so much the better on every count. Not only for the child, but for her mother; it’s obvious that in her present condition the sight of the baby’s lingering agony may well prove dangerous to her—as Héquet, no doubt, is well aware. And there’s no two ways about it; on a purely logical view the soundness of such arguments is as plain as daylight. But isn’t it odd how mere logic seldom or never really satisfies us? I don’t say that just to condone an act of cowardice; indeed, I know quite well that what drove me to act as I did this evening, or, rather, to refuse to act, was not mere cowardice. No, it was something as urgent, as imperative as a law of nature. But what it was, that urgency—that’s what passes me.’ He ran over in his mind some possible explanations. Was it one of those inchoate ideas (he was convinced that such exist) that seem to sleep below the level of our lucid thoughts, but sometimes come awake and, rising to the surface, take control of us, impel us to an act—only to sink back once more, inexplicably, into the limbo of our unknown selves? Or—to take a simpler view—why not admit that a law of herd-morality exists and it is practically impossible for a man to act as if he were an isolated unit?

He seemed to be turning in a circle, his eyes blindfolded. He tried to recall the wording of Nietzsche’s well-known dictum: that a man should not be a problem, but the solution of a problem. A self-evident axiom, he used to think, but one with which, year after year, he had found it ever harder to conform. He had already had occasion to observe that some of his decisions—the most spontaneous, as a rule; often the most important ones he made—clashed with his reasoned scheme of life; so much so, indeed, that he had sometimes wondered: ‘Can I be really the man I think I am?’ The mere

suspicion left him dazed and startled; it came like a lightning-flash that slits the shadows, leaving them the darker for its passing. But he was always quick to brush the thought aside, and now again he flouted it.

Chance befriended him. As he came into the Rue Royale a whiff of parbaked bread, warm as a living creature's breath, came to his nostrils from the vent-hole of a bakery, and started off his thoughts on a new tack. Yawning, he looked about him for an open tavern; then he was suddenly impelled to go and have something to eat at Zemm's, a little café near the Comedie Française, which stayed open till dawn, and he sometimes dropped in at night before proceeding homewards across the river.

'Yes, it's a queer thing,' he admitted to himself after a moment of no thoughts. 'We can doubt, destroy, make a clean sweep of all our beliefs, but, whether we like it or no, there remains a solid kernel proof against every doubt, the human instinct to trust our reason. A truism of which I've been the living proof for the last hour or so!'

He felt tired, disconsolate, and hunted for a reassuring formula, apt to restore his peace of mind. He fell back on an easy compromise. 'Conflict is the common rule, and so it has always been. What is happening in my mind just now is going on throughout the universe: the clash of life with life.'

For a while he walked on mechanically, thinking of nothing in particular. He was nearing the serried tumult of the boulevards and questing women here and there pressed on him their companionable charms; he shook them off good-humouredly.

But all the time his brain was unconsciously at work, his thoughts were crystallizing round an idea.

'I am a living being; in other words I am always choosing between alternatives and acting accordingly. So far so good. But there my quandary begins. What is the guiding principle on which I choose and act? I've no idea. Is it the clear-sightedness I was thinking of just now? No, hardly that. That's theory, not practice. My zeal for clarity has never really guided me to a decision or an act. It's only *after* I have acted that my lucidity comes into play—to justify to me what I have done. And yet, ever since I've been a sentient being, I've felt myself directed by a kind of instinct, a driving force that leads me almost all the time to choose this and not that, to act in this way, not in another. But—most puzzling thing of all!—I notice that all my acts follow precisely the same lines; everything takes place as if I were being controlled by an unalterable law. Exactly. But what law? I haven't a notion! Whenever at some critical moment of my life that driving force inside me leads me to take a certain course and act in consequence, I ask

myself in vain: What was the principle that guided me? It's like running up against a wall of darkness! I feel sure of my ground, intensely alive, lawful in my occasions, so to speak—yet I'm outside the law. Lawful and lawless! Neither in the teaching of the past, nor in any modern philosophy, not even in myself can I find any satisfactory answer. I see clearly enough all the laws which I can't endorse, but I see none to which I could submit; not one at all the standard moral codes has ever seemed to me even approximately to fit my case, or to throw any light upon the way in which I act. Yet, all the same, I forge ahead, and at a good pace, too, without the least hesitation, and keeping, what's more, a pretty straight course. Yes, it's extraordinary! Driving full-steam ahead like a fast liner whose steersman's scrapped the compass! It almost looks as if I were acting under orders. Yes, that's exactly what I feel; my way of life is ordered. Under orders, yes; but *whose* orders? . . . Meanwhile I don't complain; I'm happy. I've not the least to change; only I'd like to know why I am as I am. It's more than simple curiosity; there's a touch of apprehension in it. Has every man alive his mystery, I wonder? And shall I ever find the key to mine? Shall I know one day what it is: my guiding principle?

He quickened his steps. Beyond the cross-roads a flashing shop-sign, Zemm's, had caught his eye, and hunger drove out thought.

So quickly did he dive into the entrance of the café that he stumbled over a pile of oyster-baskets that filled the passage with the sour smell of brine. The restaurant was in the basement, to which a narrow spiral staircase, picturesque and vaguely conspiratorial in appearance, gave access. At this late hour the room was full of night-birds taking their ease in a warm bath of vapour, thick with the fumes of alcohol, cigar-smoke and odours from the kitchen, all churned up together by the whizzing fans. With its polished mahogany and green leather seats the long, low, windowless tavern had the aspect of a liner's smoking-room.

Antoine made for a corner of the room, deposited his overcoat beside him and sat down. He felt a mood of calm well-being gaining on him. Then all at once there rose before his eyes a very different scene: the nursery, the little body soaked in sweat and vainly struggling against its unseen foe. He seemed to hear the rhythmic cadence of the swaying cradle, like a tragic footfall marking time. A spasm of horror gripped him and he shrank together.

'Supper, sir?'

'Yes. Roast beef and black bread. And some whisky in a big tumbler; iced water, please, not soda.'

‘Will you have some of our cheese-soup, sir?’

‘Very well.’

On each table stood a generous bowl of potato-chips, spangled with salt-flakes, brittle and thin as ‘honesty’ pods, infallible thirst-producers. The zest with which he crunched the chips gave Antoine the measure of his hunger, as he waited for the Gruyère-soup to come; simmering and cheese-scummed, stringy and crisped with shreds of onion, it was one of Zemm’s specialities.

At the cloak-room near his corner some people were calling for their coats. One of the noisy group, a girl, glanced covertly at Antoine and, as their eyes met, gave him a faint smile. Where was it he had seen that smooth, sleek face, that brought to mind a Japanese print, with its etched-in eyebrows and tiny, slightly oblique eyes? He was amused by the clever way in which she had signalled to him without being noticed by the others. Why, of course, she was a model he had seen several times at Daniel de Fontanin’s place—his old studio in the Rue Mazarine. It all came back to him now quite clearly: the sweltering summer afternoon, the model on the ‘throne’; why he could remember even the hour it was, the lighting of the room, the model’s pose—and then the emotion which had made him linger on, though he was pressed for time. His eyes followed her as she went out. What was it Daniel called her? Some name that sounded like a brand of tea. She looked back at him from the door. Yes, now he remembered how he had then been struck by the flatness of her body; an athlete’s body, clean-limbed, sinewy.

While, during the last few months, he fancied himself in love with Gise, other women had hardly counted in his life. In fact, since he had broken off with Mme. Javenne—the liaison had lasted two months and all but ended in a catastrophe—he had dispensed with mistresses. Now, for a few seconds, he bitterly regretted it. He took a few sips of the whisky which had just been brought; then, lifting the lid of the soup-tureen, relished its appetizing fumes.

Just then the page-boy brought him a crumpled fragment of a music-hall programme, folded envelope-wise, in the corner of which some words were scrawled in pencil.

Zemm’s to-morrow, 10 p.m.???

‘Anybody waiting for an answer?’ he asked with interest, but in some perplexity.

‘No, sir. The lady’s gone.’

Antoine was determined to take no action on the assignation; all the same he slipped the note into his pocket before beginning his meal.

‘What a damned fine thing life is!’ he suddenly reflected as an unexpected rout of cheerful thoughts danced through his brain. ‘Yes, I’m in love with life!’ He took a moment’s thought. ‘And, in reality, I don’t depend on anyone at all.’ Once more a memory of Gise flitted across his mind. Now he was sure that life itself, even if love were lacking, sufficed to make him happy. He honestly admitted to himself that when Gise had been away in England he had not felt her absence in the least. Truth to tell, had any woman ever held a large place in his life or in his happiness? Rachel? Yes. But what would have been the outcome, had not Rachel gone away? Anyhow he had said good-bye to passions of that order once and for all. No, as he saw things now, he would no longer dare to describe his feeling towards Gise as ‘love.’ He tried to find another, apter word. ‘An attachment?’ For a few moments yet Gise held the foreground of his thoughts and he resolved to clarify his feelings of the last few months. One thing was sure; he had imagined an ideal Gise, the mirror of his dreams, quite other than the flesh-and-blood Gise who, only this afternoon . . . But he declined to work out the comparison.

He took a pull of his whisky and water, tackled the roast beef and told himself once more he was in love with life.

Life, as he saw it, was a vast, open arena into which the man of action has but to launch himself enthusiastically. By ‘love of life’ he really meant self-love, self-confidence. Still, when he visualized his own life in particular, it presented itself as something far more definite than a wide field of action placed by some miracle at his disposal and offering an infinity of possible achievements; he saw it, rather, as a clean-cut track, a long, straight road leading infallibly towards a certain goal.

There was a familiar ring about the phrases he had just employed, but their sound was always welcome to his ears. ‘Thibault?’ the inner voice went on. ‘He’s thirty-two: the very age when great careers begin. What of his body? Remarkably fit; he’s always in fine fettle, and strong as a cart-horse. And his mind? Quick in the uptake, adventurous, a pioneering intellect. His capacity for work? All but unlimited. . . . And comfortably off, into the bargain. All that a man can want, in fact! No vices, no bad habits, nothing to trammel his vocation. . . . On the crest of the wave!’

He stretched his limbs and lit a cigarette.

His vocation. . . . Since he was fifteen all things medical had always had a singular appeal for him. Even now it was his firm conviction that in the

science of medicine we may see the fine flower of all man's intellectual efforts in the past, the most signal reward of twenty centuries' research in every branch of knowledge, and the richest field available for human genius. It knew no limits on the speculative side, yet it was founded on the very bedrock of reality and kept in close and constant contact with humanity itself. He had a special leaning towards its human aspect. Never would he have consented to shut himself up in a laboratory and glue his eyes upon a microscopic field; no, what most delighted him was the doctor's never-ending tussle with proteiform reality.

'What is needed,' the inner voice resumed, 'is that Thibault should work more on his own account and not, like Terrignier or Boistelot, let himself be hamstrung by his practice. He should find time to organize and follow up experiments, collate results, and thus evolve the outlines of a *system*.' For Antoine pictured for himself a career akin to those of the great masters of his profession; before he was fifty he would have a host of new discoveries to his credit and, above all, he would have laid the foundations of a system of his own, glimpses of which, vague though they were as yet, he seemed to have at certain moments. 'Yes, soon, quite soon. . . .'

Leaping an interval of darkness, his father's death, his thoughts came out again into the cheerful sunlight of the near future. Between two puffs at his cigarette he contemplated his father's death from a new angle, without the least misgiving or distress. Rather, he saw it now as a prime condition of his long-awaited freedom, opening new horizons and favouring the swift ascension of his star. His brain teemed with new projects. 'I'll have to thin out my practice at once so as to get some spare time for myself. Then I shall need an assistant for my research-work, or a secretary, why not? Not a collaborator; no, quite a youngster, someone open to ideas whom I could train, who'd do the spade-work for me. Then I could really get down to it, put my back into it! And make discoveries. Yes, one day, that's certain, I'll bring off something big!' The ghost of a smile hovered on his lips, an upcrop of the optimistic mood that buoyed him.

He threw his cigarette away, struck by a sudden thought. 'That's a queer thing, now that I think of it! The moral sense that I've cast out of my life, from which I felt only an hour ago that I'd escaped for good and all—why here it is, all of a sudden, back again in its old place! Not skulking furtively in a dark by-way of my awareness; no, on the contrary, solid and serene, and very much in evidence, standing up like a rock in the plumb centre of my active life—the nucleus of my professional career! No, it's no use beating about the bush; as a doctor and a scientist I've an absolutely rigid code of right and wrong and, what's more, I'm pretty certain I'll stand by it, come

what may. But then—how, the devil, is one to fit that in with . . . ? Oh, after all,’ he consoled himself, ‘why want to make every blessed thing “fit in”?’ And very soon he gave up the attempt, letting his thoughts grow blurred, and indolently yielding to a mood of vague well-being, mingled with fatigue, a comfortable lethargy.

Two motorists had just come in and settled down at a neighbouring table, depositing their bulky overcoats on the seat beside them. The man looked about twenty-five, the girl a year or two younger. A handsome couple, slim and athletic, dark-haired both, with forthright eyes, large mouths set with a valiant array of teeth, cheeks ruddied by the cold; a perfect match in age and health, in natural elegance and social standing, they shared, presumably, the same tastes. In any case their appetites ran neck to neck, for side by side and at exactly the same speed they munched their way through a pair of sandwiches as like as like could be; then, with the selfsame gesture, drained their beer-mugs, donned their fur-coats and, keeping step together, moved springily away. Antoine watched them with interest, so typical they seemed of the ideal couple, of cordial *entente*.

Just then he noticed that the room was almost empty. His eyes lit on the dial of a clock above his head, reflected in a distant mirror. ‘Ten past ten. No, the wrong way on. Eh? Nearly two.’

Shaking off his lethargy, he rose. ‘A fine state I’ll be in to-morrow morning!’ he ruefully bethought himself.

As he went up the narrow staircase, passing the page-boy drowsing on a step, a cheerful thought flashed through his mind; so realistic was the picture it evoked that he smiled furtively. ‘To-morrow, 10 p.m.’

He hailed a taxi, and was home five minutes later.

On the hall table where the evening post awaited him a slip of paper was laid out, well in view. He recognized Léon’s writing.

They rang up from Dr. Héquet’s about 1 a.m. The little girl is dead.

He held up the sheet between his hands for some moments, then read it over again. ‘One a.m.? Very soon after I left. . . . Studler? With the nurse looking on? No. Most decidedly, no. What then? My injection? Possibly. A minimal dose, however. Still, the pulse was so weak . . .’

Once the shock had spent itself, his feeling was one of relief. Hard though the blow must be for Héquet and his wife, at least it had cut short their horrible suspense. He remembered Nicole’s face in sleep. Quite soon another little one would fill the absent place between them. So life is served,

and every wound heals up at last. ‘Still I’m sorry for them,’ he thought with a tightening of the heart. ‘I’ll look them up on my way to hospital.’

In the kitchen the cat was mewling plaintively. ‘She’ll keep me from sleeping, damn her!’ Antoine grumbled. Then suddenly he remembered her kittens and opened the door. The cat flung herself across his legs and rubbed herself against him in a frenzy of caress, with desperate importunity. Antoine stooped over her basket; it was empty.

‘You’ll drown them, of course.’ Yes, those had been his words. Yet that, too, was life—why make a distinction? By what right——?

Shrugging his shoulders, he glanced at the clock, and yawned.

‘Four hours’ sleep. No time for dawdling!’

Léon’s note was still in his hand; he rolled it into a ball and tossed it cheerfully on to the dresser.

‘And now for a good cold shower. The Thibault System: Sluice away your tiredness before you go to bed!’

PART V

‘ANSWER: “No!”’ M. Thibault said peremptorily, without opening his eyes. He cleared his throat with the dry, rasping sound that members of the household called his ‘asthma cough’; his head, sunk in the pillow, hardly moved at all.

Installed in a high chair beside a folding table, M. Chasle was only just opening the morning mail, though it was well after two.

That day the one kidney which still was functioning had worked so badly and the pain had been so continuous that, throughout the forenoon, M. Thibault had not been able to receive his secretary. This had gone on till twelve o’clock, when Sister Céline had thought it best to find an excuse for making then the hypodermic injection which normally she deferred till much later in the day. The pain had died down almost at once, but M. Thibault, whose sense of time was greatly impaired, had fumed and fretted at being obliged to wait till M. Chasle came back from lunch to have his letters read to him.

‘What next?’ he said.

M. Chasle skimmed the contents of another letter.

‘Aubry (Félicien), ex-sergeant in a Zouave regiment, applies for a post as warder at the Crouy Penitentiary.’

‘“Penitentiary”? Why not say “prison” right away? Put it in the waste-paper basket. Next.’

‘Eh? “Why not say ‘prison’?”’ M. Chasle repeated *sotto voce* in a puzzled tone. Then, giving up hope of understanding the remark, he settled his glasses on his nose and hastily opened another envelope.

‘From the Villeneuve-Joubin Vicarage. Profound gratitude . . . thanks for the improvement in a boy’s character. There’s nothing in it.’

‘Nothing in it? Read it, M. Chasle.’

DEAR SIR,

My sacred calling gives me the opportunity of fulfilling a very welcome task. I am requested by one of my parishioners, Mme. Beslier, to express her profound gratitude . . .

‘Louder!’ M. Thibault commanded.

. . . her profound gratitude for the beneficial effects his stay at Crouy has had on young Alexis. When you were so good as to allow him to enter the Oscar Thibault Foundation four years ago, we had all but given up hope of making anything of the unfortunate lad. His depraved instincts, evil ways and propensity for violence boded ill for his future. But within three years a miracle, which we owe to you, has taken place. Alexis has now been nine months back at home. His mothers, sisters, neighbours and myself, as well as M. Jules Binot, the local carpenter, who employs him as an apprentice, can all speak highly of the lad's docility, keenness for his work and zeal in performing his religious duties.

I pray Almighty God to grant His blessings on an Institution which is capable of bringing about such moral reformations, and I would express my deep respect for its illustrious Founder, in whom the spirit of charity and generous vision of a Saint Vincent de Paul are once more incarnate in our midst.

J. RUMEL P.P.

M. Thibault's eyes were still closed, but the tip of his short, pointed beard was quivering; the old man was in such a weak state that the least emotion had an overwhelming effect.

'A very fine letter, Monsieur Chasle,' he said, once he had mastered his feelings. 'Don't you agree it's well worth printing in our next year's *Bulletin*? Please be good enough to refresh my memory, when the time comes. Next.'

'A letter from the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Prisons Department.'

'What's that . . . ?'

'No,' M. Chasle amended. 'It's only a circular of some kind or other. Incomprehensible.'

The door opened slightly; Sister Céline sidled in.

'Must get the letters finished first,' M. Thibault said gruffly.

The nurse made no protest but went to the fireplace and added another log. (She always kept a log-fire burning, to counteract the odour in the sick-room, which, as she sometimes put it, making a wry face, 'smelt of hospital.')

After a moment she went out.

'What next, Monsieur Chasle?'

'The Institute of France. A meeting on the 27th.'

'Speak louder. Next?'

‘The Diocesan Charities. Governing Committee Meetings on the 23rd and 30th November. In December, on——’

‘Send a card to the Abbé Baufremont, asking him to excuse my absence on the 23rd. And on the 30th as well,’ he added after a moment’s thought. ‘Note the December meetings in the engagement-book. Next.’

‘That’s all, sir. That’s to say, only a subscription form from the Parish Relief Fund. And some visiting-cards; the callers yesterday were Father Nussey, M. Ludovic Roye, the Secretary of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and General Kerigan. This morning the Vice-President of the Senate called to enquire for you. And some circulars. Parish magazines. Newspapers.’

The door opened again; this time inexorably. Sister Céline entered, and now she carried a steaming poultice laid out on a plate.

M. Chasle lowered his eyes and left the room—on tiptoe, to prevent his boots from squeaking.

The Sister had already begun turning back the blankets. Fomentations were her latest fad. As a matter of fact, though they reduced the pain, they did not have the effect on the sluggish organs that the nun had hoped. Indeed, so ineffectual were they that now, notwithstanding M. Thibault’s repugnance, she had no option but to use a sound again.

Once the operation was over, he felt some physical relief, but the nurse’s activities had left him in a despondent mood. It had just struck half-past three; the close of the afternoon threatened to be a gloomy one. The effects of the morphia were beginning to wear off, the five o’clock enema was not due for over an hour. To keep her patient’s mind off his troubles, the nun took on herself to call M. Chasle back.

The little man entered discreetly and took his seat again by the window.

He was feeling worried. When, a moment before, he had met fat Clotilde in the corridor, she had whispered in his ear: ‘This last week the master’s been going downhill fast, there’s no denying it.’ And, while M. Chasle gazed at her with startled eyes, she had added: ‘No, that disease he has don’t let no one off.’

M. Thibault lay quiet in bed, though now and then he gave a little gasp, or groaned—from sheer force of habit, for the pain had not come back yet. Indeed just now he was feeling comfortable, at ease. But, always fearing that the twinges might return, he wanted to doze off, and his secretary’s presence fretted him.

Lifting an eyelid, he cast a melancholy glance towards the window.

‘Don’t waste your time waiting here, Monsieur Chasle. Any more work is out of the question for me to-day. Look at me!’ He tried to raise his arm.

‘Yes, I’m at the end of my tether.’

M. Chasle made no attempt to hide his feelings. ‘Already!’ he exclaimed, in a tone of consternation.

Surprised, M. Thibault turned his head; there was a glint of humour in his half-closed eyes.

‘Can’t you see my strength is failing day by day?’ he sighed. ‘What’s the good of nursing false hopes? If one’s got to die, the sooner it’s over the better.’

‘What’s that? To die!’ M. Chasle wrung his hands emotionally.

M. Thibault was amusing himself.

‘Yes, to die,’ he repeated in a gruff tone, opened both eyes suddenly, and closed them again.

Speechless with horror, M. Chasle stared at the puffy, inert face, which seemed already corpse-like. Had Clotilde been right? In that case, what about himself? The prospect of a penniless old age loomed up before him.

M. Chasle began trembling as he always did when he had to screw up his courage; soundlessly he slipped off his chair.

‘There comes an hour,’ M. Thibault went on in a low voice—he was already on the brink of sleep—‘There comes an hour when rest is all one yearns for. Death should have no terrors for a Christian.’

With closed eyes he listened to the echoes of the words he had just uttered buzzing in his head. He gave a start on hearing M. Chasle’s voice almost in his ear.

‘That’s so. Death should have no terrors.’ The little man was scared by his own temerity. He stammered: ‘Yes, indeed, for me, m—mother’s death . . .’ He stopped short as if his breath had failed him.

A set of false teeth, which he had only recently adopted, gave him difficulty in speaking. It was a prize he had won in a puzzle competition promoted by a dental institute in the South of France, the speciality of which was treatment by correspondence and the supply of dentures built to the model of wax impressions sent by their clients. As a matter of fact M. Chasle found his false teeth quite satisfactory, provided he took them out for meals and when he had a good deal to say. He had developed a technique of jerking them out of his mouth and catching them in his handkerchief, while pretending to sneeze. He did so now.

Freed from his incubus, he spoke more briskly.

‘For me, too, my mother’s death—would you believe it?—has no terrors. Why should I be afraid of it? Still, it’s a quiet time for us just now with her

away in the Home; and a quiet time, that's what makes the charm of life, even in childhood.'

He paused again, trying to link up what he had said with what he had in mind.

'I don't live by myself, you know; that's why I said "for us." Perhaps you know it, sir? Aline has stayed on with me; she used to be mother's servant. And Dédette, her niece, the little girl Monsieur Antoine operated on, that famous night. Yes,' he added with a smile that lit up his face with a sudden glow of tenderest affection, 'the little girl's living with us, why she even calls me "Uncle Jules"—it's a way she's got into. What makes it so funny is that I'm not really her uncle.'

The smile died from his lips and a shadow crossed his lace. Then he blurted out in a rather harsh voice:

'Three mouths to feed—my word, that needs a lot of money.'

With an unwonted familiarity he had edged up quite near the bed, as if he had some pressing information to disclose, but he took good care not to look M. Thibault in the face.

Taken by surprise, the invalid had not yet quite closed his eyes, and now was scrutinizing M. Chasle. The little man's remarks, for all their incoherence, seemed to be hovering round some unstated project; there was something unusual not to say disquieting about it all that vanquished M. Thibault's desire to be left to sleep.

Suddenly M. Chasle stepped back and fell to pacing up and down the room. His shoes were squeaking, but now he paid no heed to it.

When he spoke again there was a certain bitterness in his voice.

'What's more, the thought of my own death doesn't scare me, either. When all is said and done, that's my Maker's concern, not mine. But life's a different story. Ah yes, I'm afraid of life, and I don't deny it. Growing old, you know.' He turned on his heel and murmured 'Eh?' in a puzzled voice, before continuing. 'I'd saved up ten thousand francs. I brought them one evening to the Superannuates' Home. "Here's my mother and here's ten thousand francs. Take them!" That was the fee they charged. Things like that oughtn't to be allowed. It meant a quiet life, that's sure—but, ten thousand francs . . . I ask you! All my savings. What about Dédette? Nothing in hand, nothing coming in. Less than nothing, as Aline's advanced me two thousand francs, her own money. For our living expenses, just to keep us afloat. Now suppose we reckon it out; the four hundred francs a month I'm getting here isn't such a great deal. Not for three of us. The little girl, you see, she needs her bread and butter, too. She's only an apprentice and doesn't earn anything

as yet, so she costs money. But I ask you to believe me, sir, on my bible oath—we're thrifty folk. Thrifty about everything, even the newspapers; nowadays we read the old ones that we'd put by.' There was a quaver in his voice. 'I hope you'll excuse me, sir, if I'm lowering myself by telling you about the newspapers. But such things oughtn't to be allowed, no, they shouldn't indeed, after twenty centuries of our Christian era, not to mention all they say about our civilization.'

There was a slight flutter of M. Thibault's hands, but M. Chasle could not bring himself to look towards the bed. He began speaking again.

'Suppose I stopped getting those four hundred francs, what would become of us?' Turning away towards the window, he cocked his ear as if hoping to hear 'voices.' Then suddenly, as though a sudden light had come to him, he exclaimed: 'Why, of course! A legacy!' Almost at once he frowned. 'Heaven knows, four thousand eight hundred francs, that's the very least the three of us can do on. Well, if God is just and merciful to us, He'll provide a bit of capital to yield that much. Yes, sir, He'll send us a—a little nest-egg.'

He took out his pocket-handkerchief and mopped his forehead, as if he had just put forth a herculean effort.

'"Have confidence, Monsieur Chasle!" That's what they're always saying—the gentlemen at St.-Roch, for instance. "It isn't as if you hadn't got a protector. *You* have nothing to fear." Well, I'm not denying it; it's not as if I hadn't a protector. And, as for confidence, I'd be only too glad to have that, too. Only I'd like to have that bit of capital first, that nest-egg.'

He had halted at the bedside, but still refrained from looking towards M. Thibault. 'It'd be easier to have confidence,' he murmured, 'if one could be *sure*. Yes, indeed, sir!'

Little by little his gaze, like a bird that is getting over its first panic, was hovering nearer the old man; lightly it skimmed the face upon the pillows, sped back and settled on the quiet brows, fluttered away again, again alighted, and finally came to rest for good, as if it had been snared, on the closed eyes. The light was failing now. When at last M. Thibault's eyelids lifted, he saw across the dusk M. Chasle's eyes riveted on his.

The surprise finally dispelled his lethargy. For a long time past he had regarded it as his duty to provide for his secretary's future by a legacy; indeed the bequest was explicitly included in his will. But it seemed to him essential that the beneficiary should be unaware of this until the will was read. M. Thibault, who thought he understood human nature, mistrusted everyone. He believed that, if M. Chasle got wind of the bequest, he would

cease being a punctual employee—and his generosity would defeat itself. ‘I think I take your meaning, Monsieur Chasle.’ His tone was amiable.

A sudden flush rose to the secretary’s cheeks, and he looked away.

M. Thibault pondered for some moments before continuing.

‘But—how shall I put it?—isn’t there more courage, in certain cases, in rejecting a suggestion such as yours, on the strength of well-established principles, than in yielding to it, without consideration, out of blindness or a false sentiment of charity—out of weakness, in a word?’

Standing at the bedside, M. Chasle nodded meekly. The tone of self-assurance in his employer’s harangues always had such a compelling effect on him, he was so used to falling in with all M. Thibault’s opinions, that now as usual he was quite unable to stand up against them. It only struck him later that, by thus agreeing with what had just been said, he was approving the frustration of his hopes. He resigned himself at once. He was used to disappointments. How often had he made the most legitimate petitions in his prayers—and they had not been granted! But he did not rebel, for that, against Divine Providence. And M. Thibault, likewise, had come to be credited by his secretary with supreme, impenetrable wisdom, to which, as a matter of course, he bowed.

He had resigned himself to silence and assent with such finality that he decided to put back his artificial teeth. He thrust his hand into his pocket . . . His cheeks went scarlet. The plate was no longer there.

Meanwhile M. Thibault was placidly continuing his homily. ‘Don’t you realize, Monsieur Chasle, that, when you handed over your savings, the fruits of honest toil, to a secular and questionable institution like that Home, you were the victim of sharp practice? For we could easily have found some religious institution where old folk are looked after free of charge, providing the applicant is penniless and backed by somebody of influence? Were I to fall in with what you seem to be requesting, and include you in the provisions of my will, isn’t it obvious that, when I’m gone, you’d fall again into the clutches of some swindler who would drain you of the last sou of my bequest?’

But M. Chasle had stopped listening. He could remember having taken out his handkerchief; then, presumably, the set of false teeth had dropped on the carpet. He had a horrid vision of this all-too-revealing—possibly malodorous—appliance, in the rude hands of strangers. Craning his neck, his eyes starting out of his head, he was peering under each piece of furniture, flustered and fluttering like a scared hen.

M. Thibault noticed him, and now was stirred to compassion. 'I might increase that legacy,' he thought.

Thinking it would calm his secretary's ruffled feelings, he went on in a genial tone.

'And after all, Monsieur Chasle, isn't it a mistake we often make, comparing penury with poverty? Penury, of course, is deplorable; it's an evil counsellor, for one thing. But poverty—isn't it often a manifestation, in a disguised form, of God's grace?'

His employer's voice came in vague, fitful gusts to M. Chasle's ears, which were buzzing like those of a drowning man. He made an effort to collect his scattered wits, patted the pockets of his coat and waistcoat, thrust a despairing hand into his coat-tails. Suddenly a cry of joy all but escaped his lips. There they were, the false teeth, entangled in his bunch of keys!

M. Thibault was still discoursing on the same topic. 'Has poverty ever been incompatible, for a Christian, with happiness? And is not the inequality of worldly goods a prime condition of social equilibrium?'

'Rather!' M. Chasle exclaimed, with a little gleeful chuckle, rubbing his hands. And added absent-mindedly: 'That's just what makes the charm of it.'

M. Thibault's energy was flagging, but he turned his eyes towards the little man, touched to find him displaying such proper sentiments, and pleased to feel himself approved of. He made a special effort to be agreeable.

'Yes, Monsieur Chasle, I've instilled sound methods into you, and, with your careful, painstaking habits, I don't doubt that you'll always find employment.' After a pause he added, '. . . even if I left this world before you.'

The calmness with which M. Thibault contemplated the misfortunes of such as would outlive him had a sedative effect that was contagious. Moreover the vast relief that M. Chasle was feeling had for the time being allayed all his worries for the future. His eyes were twinkling with joy behind the glasses as he exclaimed:

'Yes, sir, as far as that's concerned, you can die in peace. I can always keep my head above water, that's sure! I've got several strings to my bow, I have. Useful inventions, gadgets, as they call them, and so forth,' he added with a laugh. 'I have it all worked out already, my little plan. A business I'm going to start—when you're gone.'

The invalid opened one eye wide; M. Chasle's involuntary thrust had struck home. 'When you're gone!' What exactly did the old fool mean by

that?

Just as M. Thibault was about to put a question, the Sister entered and turned on the switches, flooding the room with sudden light. Like a schoolboy when the bell rings announcing lessons over, M. Chasle deftly swept his papers together and with little gestures of farewell slipped out.

2

IT was the hour of M. Thibault's enema. Sister had already whisked back the sheets and now was bustling round the bed, making the ritual gestures. M. Thibault was brooding. His mind was haunted by M. Chasle's last remark and, above all, by the tone in which he had made it. 'When you're gone.' In so natural, so matter-of-fact a tone! Obviously for M. Chasle it was a foregone conclusion that his employer was to 'go' in the very near future. 'The graceless fool!' M. Thibault muttered irritably. He was only too glad to give way to his vexation; it took his thoughts off the question hovering in the back of his mind.

The Sister had rolled up her sleeves. 'Up with you!' she called out briskly.

She had no easy task. A thick layer of towels had to be built in beneath the invalid. M. Thibault was heavy and gave no assistance, merely letting himself be rolled this way and that, like a dead body. But each movement cost him a stab of pain along his legs and in the hollow of his back, and the physical pain was worsened by mental distress. Each phase of this daily ordeal was another outrage on his pride and sense of decency.

Sister Céline had developed a tactless habit of seating herself at the foot of the bed during the period, more prolonged each day, while they waited for her ministrations to take effect. At first her nearness at such a moment had infuriated the invalid. Now he put up with it; perhaps, indeed, he preferred not being left to himself.

His eyes shut, with wrinkled brows, M. Thibault was turning over and over in his mind that nerve-racking question: Am I really in such a bad way? He opened his eyes, which by chance alighted on the bed-slipper that the nurse had placed within easy reach and well in view on the chest of drawers.

Huge, preposterous, it loomed before him with an air of insolent expectancy. He looked away.

The Sister turned the brief respite to account by telling her beads.

‘Pray for me, Sister,’ M. Thibault suddenly remarked in a tense whisper, more solicitous and earnest than his usual tone.

She finished the last *Ave*, then replied: ‘I do, sir, indeed; several times a day.’

There was a short silence, broken abruptly by M. Thibault.

‘I am very ill, Sister, as you know. Very, very ill.’ The words caught in his throat; he sounded on the brink of tears.

She protested, with a rather forced smile. ‘Very ill! What an idea!’

But M. Thibault was not to be convinced. ‘Everyone shirks telling me the truth. But I can feel it in my bones; I shall never get well again.’ Noticing she did not interrupt, he added with a certain challenge in his tone: ‘Yes, I know that I have only a little while to live.’

He was watching her. Shaking her head, she went on with the prayer.

M. Thibault became alarmed.

‘I wish the Abbé Vécard to come at once,’ he said in a hoarse voice.

The nun merely protested: ‘Oh, you received Holy Communion last Saturday. There can be nothing on your conscience now.’

M. Thibault made no reply. His forehead was beaded with sweat, his jaws were chattering. The enema was beginning to work—seconded by his fears.

‘The slipper!’ he gasped.

A minute later, in the pause between two spasms of colic, two groans, he shot an angry glance at the nun.

‘I’m getting weaker,’ he panted, ‘every day. I’ve got to see—to see the Abbé.’

She was too busy pouring hot water into the basin to notice the desperate anxiety with which he was watching her expression.

‘As you like,’ she said evasively, then put back the kettle and tested the water with her finger. Without raising her eyes, she went on mumbling over the basin.

‘. . . can never be too careful,’ was all that M. Thibault caught.

His head dropped over his breast; he gritted his teeth.

A few minutes later, after a wash and change of nightshirt, he was lying in cool, clean sheets—with nothing to do but to nurse his pain.

Sister Céline was back in her chair, still toying with her beads. The ceiling-light had been put out, and the room was lit only by a low table-lamp. There was nothing to take the sufferer's mind off his apprehensions, or the neuralgic, lancinating pains which grew sharper and sharper, shooting along the posterior surface of his thighs and radiating in every direction, then becoming suddenly localized, as sharp, stabbing twinges, in definite spots on his loin, knee-caps and ankle-joints. During the momentary lulls when the pain sank to a dull ache, the irritation of the bed-sores left him no peace.

M. Thibault opened his eyes, and stared into vacancy, while his all too lucid thoughts turned in the same sad circle: 'What do they all really think? Can one be in danger without knowing it? How to find out the truth?'

Noticing that her patient was in more and more pain, the nurse decided to make the nightly injection of a half dose of morphia at an earlier hour.

M. Thibault did not see her going out. Suddenly he found he was alone, made over helpless to the malignant influences hovering in the silent, darkened room, and a wild panic came over him. He tried to cry out, but just then the pain came back with unwonted violence; he tugged frantically at the bell.

It was Adrienne who rushed into the room.

He was unable to speak; only hoarse, meaningless sounds broke from his writhing lips. The sudden effort he made to draw himself up into a sitting position seemed to be tearing his body in two. He sank back groaning on to the pillow.

At last he managed to speak. 'What do they mean by leaving me to die, all by myself? Where's the Sister? Send for the Abbé. No, fetch Antoine. Quickly!'

Panic-stricken, the maid stared at the old man; the consternation in her eyes was the last straw.

'Go away! Fetch Monsieur Antoine. D'you hear me—immediately!'

The Sister came back with the hypodermic syringe ready. She saw the maid rush past her out of the room, but had no idea what could have happened. Sprawled half across the bolster, M. Thibault was paying the penalty of his excitement with a new bout of pain. As it happened, he was in a good position for the injection.

'Don't move,' the Sister said, uncovering his shoulder. And, with out more ado, pressed the needle home.

Antoine was stepping forth into the street when Adrienne caught him up.

He ran up the stairs at once.

As he entered, M. Thibault turned his head. Antoine's presence, which in his panic he had invoked with no great hope that it would prove forthcoming, was an immediate solace. He murmured mechanically:

'Ah, so there you are!'

The injection was already beginning to take effect, he felt better. Propped on two cushions, with his arms stretched out, he was inhaling a few drops of ether which the Sister had sprinkled on a handkerchief. Through the opening of the nightshirt Antoine could see the old man's emaciated neck, and his Adam's-apple jutting between two stringy muscles. The nerveless immobility of the forehead was in striking contrast with the constant tremor of the heavy under-jaw. The huge cranium, the ears, and large, flat temples had something of the pachyderm about them.

'Well, father, what is it?' Antoine smiled.

M. Thibault made no reply, but for some moments stared at his son; then he closed his eyes. He would have liked to cry: 'Tell me the truth. Is everybody hoodwinking me? Am I really going to die? Speak out, Antoine—and save me!' But he was tongue-tied by the steadily increasing deference he felt towards his son, and by a superstitious dread that, if he put his apprehensions into words, he would suddenly give them an inexorable reality.

Antoine's eyes met the Sister's gaze, which led them towards the table where the thermometer was lying. He went up to it and saw it read 100.5. The sudden rise puzzled him; till now there had been practically no temperature. Going back to the bed, he took his father's pulse, more to tranquillize the patient than for any definite reason.

'The pulse is good,' he said almost at once. 'What's wrong?'

'What's wrong, I'm suffering the torments of the damned,' M. Thibault exclaimed. 'I've been in pain all day. I—I nearly died. Isn't that so?' He shot an imperious glance at the nurse. Then his tone changed and a look of fear came into his eyes. 'You mustn't leave me, Antoine. I'm so nervous, you know. I'm afraid it may start again.'

Antoine's compassion was aroused. As it so happened, there was no urgent reason for him to go out. He promised to stay with his father till dinner-time.

'I had an appointment,' he said, 'but I'll ring up and call it off.'

Sister Céline followed him to the study where the telephone was installed.

‘What sort of day did he have?’

‘Not too good. I had to make the first injection at noon, and I’ve just given him another. A half dose,’ she added. ‘But the real trouble’s his state of mind. He has such terrible ideas. “Everyone’s lying to me,” he says. “I want to see the Abbé, I’m going to die,” and heaven knows what else.’

Antoine’s troubled eyes seemed asking a specific question: ‘Do you think it possible that he suspects . . . ?’ The nun, no longer daring to say ‘No,’ merely nodded.

Antoine was thinking it over. That was not enough to explain the temperature, in his opinion.

‘What we’ve got to do’—he made an emphatic gesture—‘is to root out immediately the least trace of suspicion from his mind.’ There flashed across his thoughts a method, fantastically rash, but drastic; he kept it to himself. ‘The first thing,’ he continued, ‘is to make sure that he has a calm evening. Please have another eighth of a grain of morphia ready to give him when I tell you.’

He re-entered the bedroom with a cheerful exclamation. ‘I’ve fixed it! I’m free till seven.’ His voice had its incisive ring, and his face the tense, determined look he wore at the hospital. Now, however, he was smiling.

‘There was the devil to pay! When I rang up the house where the little girl is ill, I got on to her grandmother. The poor old thing was dreadfully upset. She kept on wailing down the ’phone: “What? You can’t mean it, doctor? Won’t you be coming this evening?”’ He suddenly assumed an air of consternation. ‘“I’m so sorry; but I’ve just been called to the bedside of my father, who is dangerously ill.”’ (M. Thibault’s face grew tense.) ‘But a woman isn’t put off so easily. She said: “That’s bad news, doctor. What’s he suffering from?”’

Carried away by his temerity, Antoine scarcely hesitated a moment before taking the last, fantastic plunge.

‘What was I to say? Guess! I said to her, cool as a cucumber: “My father, Madam, if you want to know, has a . . . a prostatic cancer!”’ He added with a nervous laugh: ‘After all, why not? In for a penny, in for a pound!’

He saw the nurse’s arm—she was pouring water into a tumbler—go rigid. And suddenly he realized that he was playing with fire; almost he lost his nerve. But it was too late to draw back now.

He burst out laughing.

‘But that lie, father, I set down to your account, you know.’

On the bed M. Thibault seemed to be listening with every fibre of his being. His body was taut; only the hand on the counterpane was trembling. Never could the most precise denials have swept away his fears so utterly. Antoine's diabolical audacity had laid low, with one deft stroke, the phantoms of his mind, and brought the sick man back to hope and confidence. Opening both eyes, he looked at his son, and could not bring himself, it seemed, to drop the lids again. A new emotion, a warm glow of affection, was quickening in the old man's heart. He tried to speak, but a sort of dizziness came over him, and at last, after a brief smile, of which the young man caught a fleeting glimpse, he shut his eyes once more.

Any man other than Antoine in a like case would have mopped his brow, murmuring perhaps, 'Ouf! That was a near thing!' But Antoine, only a trifle paler than before and well pleased with himself, was thinking merely: 'The great thing for stunts like that is to make up one's mind, definitely, to bring them off.'

Some minutes passed. Antoine would not meet the Sister's eyes. M. Thibault's arm moved; then he spoke, as if continuing a discussion.

'In that case will you explain why I've more and more pain? It almost looks as if the drugs you're pumping into me made it more acute, instead of ...'

'Of course,' Antoine broke in. 'Of course they make it more acute; that's what shows they're taking effect.'

'Really?'

M. Thibault asked nothing better than to let himself be convinced. And, as in point of fact the afternoon had not been quite so trying as he made out, he felt almost sorry that his sufferings had not lasted longer.

'What do you feel just now?' Antoine asked. The rise in his father's temperature was worrying him.

If M. Thibault had been frank, he would have replied: 'I'm feeling extremely comfortable.' Instead, he muttered: 'I've a pain in my legs, and a dull ache in the small of my back.'

'I passed a sound at three,' Sister Céline put in.

'And a sort of weight, a feeling of oppression, here . . .'

Antoine nodded. 'Yes, it's rather curious,' he began, turning to the Sister. He had no idea this time what new story he was going to concoct. 'I'm thinking of certain—certain phenomena I've observed in connexion with changes of treatment. Thus in skin diseases, we often get unlooked-for results by using different treatments alternately. I dare say Thérivier and I

were wrong in deciding to use so continuously this serum, Number—er—17.’

‘Most certainly you were wrong.’ M. Thibault spoke with firm conviction.

Good-humouredly Antoine broke in. ‘But that’s your fault, Father. You’re in such a hurry to get well. We’ve been forcing the pace, that’s it.’ Turning to the Sister, he addressed her with the utmost gravity. ‘Where did you put the ampoules I brought yesterday—the D.92, you know?’

She made an awkward gesture; not because she had the least objection to mystifying a patient, but because she had some difficulty in finding her way about amongst all the new ‘serums’ Antoine kept on inventing whenever the occasion arose.

‘Please make an injection immediately with D.92. I want it made before the effects of No. 17 have worn off. I’d like to see how the mixture affects the blood.’

M. Thibault had noticed the nurse’s hesitant air, and his glance in her direction had not escaped Antoine. To cut short any suspicion that might have been aroused, he added:

‘I’m afraid you’ll find this injection a bit more painful, Father. D.92 is less fluid than the others. But that’s only a moment’s discomfort. Unless I’m greatly mistaken, you’ll feel very much relieved to-night.’

Antoine was saying to himself, ‘I’m getting smarter at this sort of thing every day,’ and noted it with satisfaction, as a sign of his professional progress. Moreover, in the macabre game he was playing, there was not only a constant element of difficulty but a spice of risk, which, Antoine had to own, appealed to him.

The Sister came back.

M. Thibault submitted to the injection with a certain nervousness; before the needle had even touched his skin, he began to whimper.

‘Most painful, this new stuff of yours,’ he muttered, when it was over. ‘Much thicker than the other. Like liquid fire under the skin. And it has a smell—don’t you notice? The other anyhow was scentless.’

Antoine was sitting down. He made no reply. There was not the faintest difference between this last injection and the one before it; the ampoules came out of the same box, the needle and the hand that used it were identical. Only—it was supposed to have a different label. Yes, he thought, one has only to set the mind off on a wrong track, and all the senses ‘play up’ to the delusion. What feeble instruments, those senses of ours, which we fancy infallible! . . . And what of that childish craving we all have to

humour, at all costs, our intellect? Even for a sick man the tragedy of tragedies is not to ‘understand.’ Once we have managed to give a name to what is happening, and assign it to a plausible cause; once our poor brain contrives to link up two ideas with a show of logic, we’re pleased as Punch. ‘And yet,’ Antoine murmured, ‘surely intelligence is the one fixed point in the eternal flux. Without it, where’d we be?’

M. Thibault had closed his eyes again.

Antoine signed to Sister Céline to leave the room. They had noticed that the patient was apt to be more fretful when they were together at his bedside.

Though the young man had been seeing his father daily, he was struck now by the change in his appearance. The skin had an amber translucence, and a peculiar gloss that augured ill. The face was puffier than ever, and flabby pouches had formed under the eyes. The nose, however, had shrunk to a long lean ridge, which oddly changed the whole expression of the face.

The old man made a movement. Little by little his features were growing animated, losing their moroseness. And between the eyelashes, which parted more and more frequently, the dilated pupils had an unwonted brilliance.

‘The double injection is taking effect,’ Antoine thought. ‘In a few moments he’ll be getting talkative!’

M. Thibault was experiencing a sort of general relaxation and a desire for repose, all the more agreeable for being unaccompanied by any sense of weariness. Nevertheless, his thoughts still turned on his death; only, now that he no longer believed in it, he found it possible, not to say pleasant, to discourse about it. What with the added stimulus of the morphia, he was unable to resist the temptation of staging, for his own benefit and his son’s, the edifying spectacle of a Christian death-bed.

‘Listen to me, Antoine!’ he said abruptly, in a solemn tone. Then, without more preamble, he began: ‘In the will that you will find after my death——’ He made a slight pause, like an actor waiting for his cue.

Good-humouredly Antoine played his part. ‘Really, Father,’ he exclaimed, ‘I didn’t know you were in such a hurry to see the last of us!’ He laughed. ‘Why, only a moment ago I was pointing out how eager you were to get back into harness again.’

Satisfied, the old man raised a monitory hand.

‘Let me speak, my dear boy. It is possible that, on the strictly scientific view, my life is not in danger. But, within myself I know—I have a feeling that . . . In any case, death. . . . The good—alas so little!—that I have tried to do in this world will be set down to my account. And, if the day has come

when . . .’ He cast a fleeting glance at Antoine to make sure the incredulous smile was still on his lips. ‘Well, well. We must not lose heart. God’s mercy is infinite.’

Antoine listened in silence.

‘But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. At the end of my will you will find a list of bequests. Old servants. I’d specially like to draw your attention to that codicil, my dear boy. It’s several years old now. Perhaps I haven’t been quite—quite generous enough. I’m thinking of Monsieur Chasle. That worthy man owes much to me, I grant you. Indeed he owes everything to me. But that’s no reason why his—his devotion should not be rewarded, even if the reward’s . . . superfluous.’

His remarks were frequently interrupted by a cough, which obliged him to stop and take breath. ‘It looks as if the disease is rapidly becoming generalized,’ Antoine thought. ‘That cough is getting worse, so is the nausea. The tumour must be becoming disseminated to other parts of the body. The lungs and stomach are involved. His vitality’s at the mercy of the first complication that may arise.’

‘I have always,’ continued M. Thibault, whom the drug was rendering at once more lucid and more incoherent, ‘I have always been proud of belonging to that prosperous middle-class which in all ages has been the mainstay of my country and my Church. But, my dear boy, that relative affluence imposes certain duties.’ Again his thoughts took a new turning. ‘You, Antoine, have a most regrettable tendency; you’re much too self-centred.’ He spoke abruptly, casting an angry look at his son. ‘But you’ll change when you grow up.’ He corrected himself. ‘When you’re older and, like me, have founded a family. A family,’ he repeated. The word ‘family,’ which he always spoke with a certain emphasis, called forth a host of vagrant echoes in his mind, fragments of speeches he had made in former days. Once more he dropped the thread of his thoughts. His voice grew rotund. ‘Undoubtedly, my boy, once we grant that the family must be regarded as the germ-cell of the social organism, is not its proper function to build up that—that plebeian aristocracy from which the leaders of the nation will henceforth be recruited? Ah, the Family! I ask you, are we not the pivot on which turn the middle-class democracies of to-day?’

‘Why, of course, Father, I quite agree with you,’ Antoine said gently.

The old man did not seem to hear him. Gradually his tone was becoming less pompous, and his real meaning easier to grasp.

‘You’ll grow out of it, my boy. I’m positive of that, and so’s the Abbé. You’ll get over certain views of life, and my prayer is that the change of

heart may come quite soon. Ah, Antoine, how I wish that change had come already! When I am about to leave this world, isn't it a bitter thought that my son . . . Brought up as you were, living under this roof, should you not have . . . ? Some religious zeal, in short. A faith that's more robust, more loyal to its duties.'

Antoine was thinking: If he had the least idea of what my 'faith' amounts to!

'Who knows,' M. Thibault sighed, 'if God will not set it down against me? Ah, if only that dear, departed saint, your mother, had not been taken from us so soon, had been spared to help me in that Christian duty!'

Tears were welling up between his eyelids; Antoine watched them brim over and trickle down the old cheeks. He had not expected this, and could not help being stirred by an emotion which increased when he heard his father's next remark. M. Thibault began speaking in a confidential, almost urgent undertone Antoine had not heard before; and he now was perfectly coherent.

'I have other accounts to render to my Maker. For Jacques' death. Poor lad! Did I do all I should have done for the boy? I wanted to be firm; I was hard. Yes, I accuse myself before the Judgement Seat of having been hard towards my son. I never managed to win his trust. Nor yours, Antoine. No, don't protest; that's the truth. It was God's will to withhold from me my children's trust. My two sons! They've respected me, feared me—but from their youth up they've kept aloof from me. Pride! Mine, and theirs. . . . And yet, did I not do my whole duty by them? Didn't I make them over to the Church from their early years? Didn't I take the utmost care of their education? Ingratitude! O Father in Heaven, judge if the fault was mine. Jacques was always up in arms against me. And yet——! How could I possibly give my consent to that . . . to such a thing? How could I?'

He was silent for a moment, then suddenly exclaimed: 'Go away, shameless son!'

Antoine stared at his father in bewilderment. The words were obviously not addressed to him. Was the old man getting delirious? His jaws were set, his forehead clammy with sweat, he was waving his arms as if bereft of reason.

'Go away!' he said again. 'Have you forgotten all you owe to your father, to his name and rank? Are they nothing to you—the family honour, your soul's salvation? There are certain acts which—which take effect beyond ourselves, which imperil all traditions. I'll—I'll break you! Go away!' Fits of coughing cut across the phrases. He took a deep breath. His

voice sank lower still. ‘O Lord, I am not assured of Thy forgiveness. . . .
“What did you make of your son?”’

Antoine broke in: ‘Father . . . !’

‘Alas, I failed to shield him. Evil influences. The plotting of those Huguenots . . .’

Antoine thought: Ah, the Huguenots again! No one had ever discovered the origin of the old man’s fixed idea about the ‘Huguenots.’ Antoine’s theory was that shortly after Jacques’ disappearance, while the enquiries were still in progress, thanks to some indiscretion, M. Thibault had discovered that throughout the previous summer Jacques had been seeing a great deal of the Fontanins, at Maisons-Laffitte. From that moment there had been no way of shaking the old Catholic’s obsession; blinded by his aversion for all Protestants, harking back presumably to memories of Jacques’ escapade to Marseilles in Daniel’s company, and perhaps confounding the present with the past, he had never ceased to hold the Fontanins wholly responsible for his son’s disappearance.

‘Where are you going?’ he shouted, trying to raise himself on the pillow.

Then he opened his eyes, and seemed to take heart when across his tears he saw Antoine beside him.

‘Poor lad!’ he murmured brokenly. ‘Those Huguenots lured him away. Yes, they stole him from us, my dear boy. It’s all their fault. They drove him to suicide.’

‘Oh come, Father!’ Antoine exclaimed. ‘Why do you persist in imagining that he——?’

‘He killed himself. He went away; he went out and killed himself.’ Antoine seemed to hear a faint whisper, ‘my curse’; but the words were meaningless, he concluded he had been mistaken. The rest of the phrase was stifled by weak, heart-rending sobs, which gave place to a fit of coughing that died down almost at once.

Antoine had an impression that his father was falling asleep, and was careful not to make a sound.

Some silent minutes passed.

‘Antoine!’

Antoine gave a start.

‘That boy, Aunt Marie’s son—do you remember Aunt Marie who lived at Quillebœuf? No, of course you can’t have known her. Well he—he did the same thing. I was a youngster when it happened. With his shot-gun one evening; he’d been out shooting. They never learnt. . . .’

In a half dream, his mind adrift on a flood of memories, M. Thibault was smiling to himself.

‘How she used to rile Mamma with her songs—she was always singing! What was that song now? About the “pretty pony”; “clinkety-clankety” something. In the summer holidays, at Quillebœuf. You didn’t know old Niqueux’s shandrydan, of course. Ha! Ha! Ha! That time the servants’ luggage tumbled off it. Ha! Ha! Ha!’

Antoine rose abruptly; his father’s merriment was even more painful than his sobs. During the last few weeks M. Thibault had often shown a tendency, especially after the injections, to hark back to trivial details of bygone days. In the old brain, half emptied now of memories, these details took on an ampler resonance, like murmurs in a hollow shell. Then for days on end he would con them over and over, laughing to himself like a baby.

Turning cheerfully to Antoine he began singing in a soft, almost childish voice.

I have a pretty pony,
And her name is . . . something trot,
And I wouldn’t give my pony
For all the—yes—all the gold you’ve got.
So clinkety and clankety. . . .

‘There!’ he exclaimed petulantly. ‘I’ve gone and forgotten the rest. Mademoiselle knows that song, too, quite well. She used to sing it when Gise was little.’

He had ceased thinking of Jacques’ death, and of his own. And indefatigably, till Antoine left, he delved into his memories of Quillebœuf, trying to link together the old nursery song.

3

ALONE now with Sister Céline, M. Thibault had recovered his solemnity. He bade her bring his soup, and submitted to being spoon-fed without a word. After they had said the evening prayer together, he had her turn off the ceiling-light.

‘Sister, will you be kind enough to ask Mademoiselle to come. And send for the servants, please; I wish to speak to them.’

Though put out at being disturbed at such an hour, Mademoiselle de Waize hobbled across to the bedroom at once and halted, out of breath, just inside the door. Vainly she tried to raise her eyes towards the bed; her bent back made it impossible for her to see above the chair-legs and, in the zone of lamplight, the darns in the carpet. When the nun brought up a chair for her, Mademoiselle recoiled in horror. She would rather have stayed like a water-fowl perched on one leg for ten consecutive hours than let her skirts come in contact with that germ-infested chair.

Ill at ease, the two maids kept as near each other as they could; two dark forms lit up, now and again, by the flickering firelight.

M. Thibault meditated for some moments. His conversation with Antoine had not been enough; he was torn by an irresistible desire to round off the evening with another dramatic scene.

‘I feel’—he gave a slight cough—‘I feel that my last hour is rapidly approaching, and I desire to take advantage of a brief respite from my pain, the cruel sufferings that are imposed on me, to bid you farewell.’

The Sister, who was busy folding towels, stopped short in amazement; Mademoiselle and the two servants were too startled to say a word. For a moment M. Thibault fancied that the announcement of his death came as a surprise to no one, and a hideous fear gripped his heart. Fortunately, the Sister had more presence of mind than the others, and exclaimed: ‘But, Monsieur Thibault, you’re getting better every day! How ever can you talk about dying? What would the doctor say if he heard?’

At once M. Thibault felt his moral courage revive; and, frowning, made a feeble gesture, to impose silence on the babblers.

Then, like an orator declaiming a set speech, he continued.

‘On the eve of my appearance before the judgement seat of heaven, I ask to be forgiven, forgiven by all. Too often I have lacked indulgence for others; I have been harsh, and perhaps wounded the feelings of my—of those who live under my roof. Now I acknowledge my . . . my debts—the debts I owe to all of you. To you, Clotilde and Adrienne, and, above all to your good mother who is now confined to a bed of suffering, as I am. And lastly, to you, Mademoiselle: you, who gave up—’

At this point Adrienne burst into tears so copious that M. Thibault all but broke down himself. He gulped a sob down, hiccuped; then, recovering his self-control, proceeded:

‘. . . you who abandoned a quiet, unpretentious existence, to come and take your place in our bereaved home and—and tend the sacred flame, the flame of our family life. Who was there better qualified than you to—to look after the children, whose dear mother you had brought up from her earliest days?’

Whenever he halted to take breath the women’s sobs could be heard in the background. The little spinster’s back was more hunched than ever, her head bobbed up and down, and, in the pauses, a faint sucking sound came from her quivering lips.

‘We owe it to you, and to your constant care, that the family has been enabled to follow its appointed course, under the eye of Heaven. For this I thank you, Mademoiselle, in public; and it is to you, Mademoiselle, that I address a final request. When that last, dread moment comes . . .’ The effect of the words was so devastating that, to master his brief panic, M. Thibault paused, and took stock of his present state, the comfortable afterglow of the morphia injection, before continuing. ‘When the dread moment comes, I would ask you, Mademoiselle, to say aloud that noble prayer—you know the one I mean—the “Litany of the Happy Death,” which I read with you at the death-bed of my—my poor wife, in this same room—do you remember?—under that crucifix.’

His dim eyes strove to pierce the shadows. Of the bedroom furniture, mahogany upholstered in blue repp, nothing had been changed. In this selfsame setting years ago, at Rouen, he had seen his parents die. Then, in his youth, he had brought it with him to Paris, and later, it had furnished the bedroom he had shared with his wife. In this bed Antoine had been born one cold March night, and ten years later, on another winter’s night, his wife had died in it, bringing Jacques into the world. A picture formed before his eyes of the white, wasted form laid out on the huge, violet-strewn bed.

His voice was shaken with emotion.

‘And I trust that my dearly loved wife, that saintly soul, will befriend me when I meet my Maker—will inspire me with her courage, her resignation—yes, the courage she displayed at her last hour.’ He closed his eyes, and with an awkward effort folded his hands.

He seemed asleep.

Sister Céline signed to the maids to leave the room as quietly as possible.

Before leaving their master, they gazed earnestly at his face, as if already taking their last leave of a body laid out for burial. The sound of Adrienne’s sobs and Clotilde’s subdued, flustered chatter—she had given the old lady

an arm—receded down the corridor. At a loss where to turn, the three women with one accord took refuge in the kitchen, round the table. All were weeping. Clotilde decreed that none of them must go to bed, so as to be ready to go and fetch a priest at a moment's notice. No sooner had she spoken than she began grinding coffee.

The nun was alone in knowing how things really were; she was used to such scenes. In her view, the serenity of a dying man was always a proof that in his heart of hearts he believed—often quite wrongly—that his life was in no immediate danger. So now, after tidying the room and banking up the fire, she opened the folding bed on which she slept. Ten minutes later, without having exchanged a word with her patient, the nurse slipped tranquilly, as she did each night, from prayer to sleep.

M. Thibault, however, did not fall asleep. The double dose of morphia, while prolonging his agreeable sensations, was keeping him awake, in a voluptuous lethargy peopled with a host of schemes and fancies. The act of spreading panic around him seemed to have definitely cast out of his mind his own alarms. True the heavy breathing of the sleeping nurse was rather irritating, but he consoled himself by picturing the day when he would dismiss her with a word of thanks—and a handsome donation to the Order. How much? Well, that could be settled later . . . very soon. He was fretting with impatience for a return to active life. What was becoming of his charitable Societies now he could not attend to them?

A log collapsed into the embers, and he half-opened a sleepy eye. A little, vacillating flame set the shadows dancing on the ceiling. And suddenly with his mind's eye he saw himself, a lighted candle in his hand, groping his way along the corridor of Aunt Marie's house at Quillebœuf, that musty old corridor which smelt year in year out of apples and saltpetre. There, too, great shadows had suddenly loomed before him and gone dancing up across the ceiling. And he remembered the terrifying black spiders that always lurked at night in the dark corners of the closet. In his mind just now there was so little difference between the timorous boy of many years ago and the old man of to-day that it cost him an effort to distinguish between them.

The clock struck ten. Then the half-hour . . . Quillebœuf. The shandrydan. The poultry-yard. Léontine . . .

All this jetsam of the past that a chance play of light had stirred in the abyss of memory, kept floating up to the surface of his mind, refused to be thrust down again into the depths. And like a desultory burden to these evocations of his childhood, the tune of the old nursery song ran in his head. He could as yet recall hardly any of the words, except the first few lines,

which he had gradually pieced together, and part of the refrain which had unexpectedly flashed up across the twilight of his thoughts.

I have a little pony
And her name is Trilbytrot,
And I would not give my pony
For all the gold you've got . . .
So clinkety and clankety
Along the lanes we go. . . .

The clock struck eleven.

I have a little pony
And her name is Trilbytrot . . .

4

AT about four on the following day, it so happened that the journey from one professional call to another took Antoine so near home that he dropped in to hear the latest news. That morning his father had seemed to him considerably weaker; the fever showed no sign of abating. He wondered if some new complication was setting in; or was it merely symptomatic of the general progress of the disease?

Antoine did not want to be seen by the invalid, who might have been alarmed by this unexpected visit, and entered the dressing-room directly from the hall.

There he found Sister Céline, who reassured him in an undertone. So far the patient had had a fairly good day. For the moment M. Thibault was under the influence of a morphia injection. These repeated doses of the drug were becoming imperative, to enable him to bear the pain.

The door leading into the bedroom was not completely closed and a vague murmur, a sound of singing, could be heard. Antoine listened. The nurse shrugged her shoulders.

‘He went on at me till I had to go and fetch Mademoiselle; he wanted her to sing him some old song or other. It has been running in his head all

day; he can't talk of anything else.'

Antoine tiptoed to the door. The little old lady's quavering voice floated to him across the silence.

I have a pretty pony
And her name is Trilbytrot,
And I would not give my pony
For all the gold you've got,
When clinkety and clankety
Along the lanes we go
To where my lovely Lola
Is waiting for me now.

Then Antoine heard his father's voice like a wheezy bagpipe taking up the refrain.

When clinkety and clankety
Along the lanes we go . . . !

The quavering soprano broke in again.

I'll cull me yonder floweret
While Trilby browses near,
The fairest, rarest floweret
To deck my dark-eyed dear.

'That's it!' M. Thibault broke in triumphantly. 'We have it. Aunt Marie could never get that right. She used to sing "La-la-la-la my dear!" No words. "La-la-la-la!"'

They joined in the chorus together.

Then clinkety and clankety Along the lanes we'll go To where my lovely Lola Is waiting for me now.

'Anyhow he don't complain while he's at it,' the Sister whispered.

Sad at heart, Antoine left the room.

As he was going out into the street, the concierge called to him from the doorstep. The postman had just delivered some letters for him. Antoine took them absent-mindedly. His thoughts were still on what was happening upstairs.

Then clinkety and clankety
Along the lanes we go . . .

He was amazed to find himself so distressed by his father's illness. When, a year earlier, he had realized that there was no hope of saving the

old man, he had detected in himself a puzzling but indubitable affection for the father whom, as he had thought till now, he had never loved. It came to him then as a new-born impulse, and yet it somehow had the semblance of a very old, latent affection, which the approach of the irreparable had merely fanned to sudden flame. Moreover as the malady dragged its course, natural emotion had been implemented by professional instinct; he felt a special interest in this patient of whose death-sentence he alone was aware, and whose last months it was his task to make as bearable as could be.

Antoine had begun walking down the street when his eyes fell on one of the letters in his hand.

He stopped short.

Monsieur Jacques Thibault
4a, rue de l'Université.

Now and again a stray pamphlet or bookseller's catalogue addressed to Jacques still came in; a letter was quite another matter. . . . The envelope was pale blue, the address was written in a tall, flowing, faintly supercilious hand, whether a man's or a woman's was hard to say. Antoine turned back. This needed thinking over. He shut himself up in his study. But before even sitting down, he had boldly, unhesitatingly, opened the envelope.

The very first words came as a shock.

1, Place du Panthéon,
November 25, 1913.

DEAR SIR,

I have read your story . . .

A short story! 'So Jacques is a writer?' he murmured. Then triumphantly: 'He's alive. This proves it!' The words danced before his eyes. Feverishly he ran his eyes down the page, looking for the signature: *Jalicourt.*

I have read your short story with the keenest interest. Of course you do not expect an elderly 'don' like myself . . .

Jalicourt! Antoine thought. Yes, it's Valdieu de Jalicourt, the professor, Member of the Academy and so forth. Antoine knew him well, by repute; in fact he had two or three books by Jalicourt on his shelves.

. . . an elderly 'don' like myself to give it an unqualified approval; obviously the classical traditions in which my mind is moulded, not to say most of my personal preferences, run counter to the romantic technique you employ. I cannot whole-heartedly commend either the manner or the matter of your tale. But I must own that even in its extravagances, this work is stamped by the creative impulse and a knowledge of human nature. Reading your story, I was several times reminded of a remark made by a great composer, a friend of mine, to whom a young musician—one, I imagine, of your clan—showed an experimental work of the most provocative audacity: 'Take it away at once, Sir; I might get to like it!'

JALICOURT.

Antoine was trembling with excitement. He sat down, unable to take his eyes off the letter lying open before him on the desk. Not that it came as any great surprise to learn his brother was alive; personally he had seen no reason to suppose Jacques had killed himself. The first effect the coming of this letter had had on him was to arouse his hunting instinct; three years earlier he had played the sleuth for months on end, following up each clue that seemed to lead towards the fugitive. And now, with the revival of his detective zeal, came a rush of such affection and so intense a longing to see Jacques again that he felt almost dizzy. Often lately—indeed that very morning—he had had to fight down a feeling of resentment at being left alone to bear the brunt of his father's illness; so crushing was the burden that he could not help feeling aggrieved with the runaway brother who was deserting his post at such an hour.

This letter changed everything. Now it looked as if he could get in touch with Jacques, tell him what was happening, bring him back—and no longer stand alone.

He glanced at the address on the letter, then at the clock, then at his engagement-book.

'Right!' he murmured. 'I've three more appointments this afternoon. Can't miss that one at half-past four, in the Avenue de Saxe; it's urgent. Must look up, too, those people in the Rue d'Artois, that scarlatina case just starting; no time fixed, however. Number three: the child's getting better; that can wait.' He rose. 'Yes, I'll go to the Avenue de Saxe first, and see Jalicourt immediately after.'

Antoine was in the Place du Panthéon soon after five. It was an old house without a lift. In any case he was feeling too impatient just then to

waste time with lifts. He raced up the stairs.

‘Monsieur Jalicourt is out. It’s Wednesday. He has his lecture at the Ecole Normale from five to six.’

‘Keep cool now!’ Antoine admonished himself as he went down the stairs. ‘There’s just time to see that scarlatina case.’

At exactly six he alighted from his taxi, outside the Ecole Normale.

He recalled his visit to the Principal just after his brother’s disappearance; then, that already distant summer day when he had come to this same grim-looking building with Jacques and Daniel to learn the results of the entrance examination.

‘The lecture isn’t over yet. You’d better go up to the second floor. You’ll see the students coming out.’

An incessant draught whistled through the cloisters, up the staircases, along the corridors. Few and far between, the electric lights had the dull glow of oil-lamps. Flagstones, arcades and banging doors, an enormous, dark, dilapidated staircase along which, on the dingy walls, tattered notices were flapping in the autumn wind—the whole place with its air of general decay, its silence and solemnity, gave the impression of some provincial bishop’s palace left mouldering for eternity.

Some minutes slowly passed, while Antoine waited outside the lecture-room. Soft footsteps sounded on the flags; a hirsute, down-at-heel student, carrying a bottle of wine, came down the corridor, giving Antoine a keen glance as he slip-slopped by. Silence again. Then a confused buzz which, when the door of the lecture-room was flung open, rose to the hullabaloo of a parliamentary session. Laughing, shouting to each other, the students came flocking out and rapidly dispersed along the corridors.

Antoine stayed, waiting. Presumably the lecturer would be the last to leave. Only when the hive seemed to have disgorged its last inmate, he entered. The room was large and badly lighted, panelled with wood and flanked with busts. At the far end, he saw a tall, drooping figure; an elderly white-haired man was lethargically arranging sheets of foolscap on a table. Obviously Professor Jalicourt.

Jalicourt had fancied himself alone; on hearing Antoine’s footsteps he looked up with a frown. To see in front of him he had to turn his head to one side; he was blind in one eye and on the other wore a monocle thick as a magnifying-glass. When he saw he had a visitor, he moved a little forward and with a courteous gesture signed to Antoine to approach.

Antoine had expected to encounter a venerable don of the old school. This well set-up man in a light suit, who looked more as if he had just

dismounted from a horse than stepped down from a lecture platform, took him by surprise.

He introduced himself. 'I'm the son of Oscar Thibault, your colleague at the Institute, and the brother of Jacques Thibault to whom you wrote yesterday.' As Jalicourt made no sign and continued observing him, affable but aloof, with lifted eyebrows, Antoine went straight to the point. 'Can you give me any news, sir, of my brother Jacques? Where is he now?'

Jalicourt made no answer, but his forehead puckered, as if he had taken offence.

'I must explain, sir,' Antoine hastened to add. 'I took the liberty of opening your letter. My brother has disappeared.'

'Disappeared?'

'Yes, he left home three years ago.'

Jalicourt thrust his head forward abruptly and with his keen, short-sighted eye scrutinized the young man at close range. Antoine felt his breath fanning his cheek.

'Yes, three years ago,' he repeated. 'He gave no reason for leaving us. Since then he hasn't communicated with his father or myself. Nor with anyone—except with you, professor. So you'll understand why I've rushed to see you like this. We didn't even know if he was still alive.'

'Alive he certainly is—as he has just had this story published.'

'When? Where?'

Jalicourt did not reply. His clean-shaven, pointed chin, cleft by a deep furrow, jutted with a certain arrogance between the high peaks of his collar. The slender fingers were toying with the drooping tips of his long, silky, snow-white moustache. When he spoke, his voice was low, evasive.

'After all, I can't be sure. The story wasn't signed "Thibault"; but with a *nom de plume*—which I believed I could identify as his.'

The disappointment was a cruel blow to Antoine. 'What was the *nom de plume*?' he asked in an unsteady tone.

Jalicourt, his one eye still intent on Antoine, seemed somewhat touched by his anxiety.

'But, Monsieur Thibault,' he said firmly, 'I do not think I was mistaken.'

He was obviously on the defensive; not from any exaggerated fear of taking responsibility, but because he had an instinctive aversion from meddling in the private affairs of others, from anything resembling an indiscretion. Realizing that he had to overcome a certain mistrust, Antoine hastened to explain the situation.

‘What makes it so urgent is that my father has been suffering from an incurable disease for a year, and his state is getting rapidly worse. The end will come in a few weeks. Jacques and I are the only children. So you understand—don’t you?—why I opened your letter. I know Jacques well enough to be sure that if he is alive and I can get at him, and tell him what is happening, he’ll come home.’

Jalicourt pondered for a moment. His face was twitching. Then, with a quick, impulsive gesture he held out his hand.

‘That puts a new complexion on it,’ he said. ‘In that case I’ll be only too glad to help you.’ He seemed to hesitate, and glanced round the lecture-room. ‘We can’t talk here. Would you mind coming with me to my place, Monsieur Thibault?’

Quickly, without a word, they made their way across the huge, draughty building. When they came out into the quiet Rue de l’Ulm, Jalicourt began speaking, in a friendly tone.

‘Yes, I’ll be glad to help. The *nom de plume* struck me as pretty obvious: *Jack Baulthy*. Don’t you agree? I recognized the writing, too; your brother had written to me once before. I’ll tell you the little I know. But tell me first—why did he run away like that?’

‘Why indeed? I’ve never been able to find a plausible reason for it. My brother has an impulsive, ill-balanced nature; there’s something of the mystic in him. All his acts are more or less erratic. Sometimes one fancies one has got to know him; then the next day he’s quite different from what he was the day before. I may as well tell you, Monsieur de Jalicourt, that Jacques ran away from home once before, when he was fourteen. He induced a school-friend to go with him; they were found three days later on the Toulon road. To the medical profession—I’m a doctor, by the way—this type of escapade has long been familiar; it has a morbid origin and its characteristics have been diagnosed. It’s just possible that Jacques’ first escapade was of a pathological order. But how can we account for an absence lasting three years? We’ve not found anything in his life that could justify such an act. He seemed happy, he had had a quiet summer holiday with his family. He had done brilliantly in the entrance exam, for the Ecole Normale, and was due to join it at the beginning of November. The act can’t have been premeditated; he took hardly any of his things with him, and little or no money; only some manuscripts. He hadn’t let any of his friends know of his project. But he sent a letter to the Principal, resigning from the Ecole; I’ve seen the letter, it bears the date on which he left us. Just then I happened to be away from home for a couple of days; Jacques left during my absence.’

‘But—hadn’t your brother some reluctance about entering the Ecole?’ Jalicourt suggested.

‘Do you think so?’

Jalicourt did not continue, and Antoine put no further question.

Never could he recall that dramatic period of his life without emotion. The absence of which he had just spoken was the occasion of his journey to Havre. . . . Rachel, the *Romania*, that last farewell. And no sooner had he come back to Paris, still in the throes of his emotion, than he had found the household in an uproar; his brother vanished on the previous day, and the police called in by his father who, it seemed, had lost his head completely, and was obstinately repeating ‘He’s gone and killed himself!’ without deigning to give the least explanation. The domestic catastrophe had come on top of the raw wound left by the tragic ending of his love, and, now he came to think of it, he felt the shock had been a salutary one. That fixed idea of tracking down the runaway had taken his mind off his personal obsession. What little time was left over from his duties at the hospital had been spent in hurried visits to the police-offices, to the Morgue and to enquiry-agencies. He had borne the brunt of everything: his father’s morbid, blundering agitation, and the anxieties caused by Gise’s breakdown, which for a time had endangered her life; letters that must be answered, the importunities of callers, the endless investigations carried on by private detectives abroad as well as in France, constantly raising hopes that came to nothing. When all was said and done, the strenuous life imposed on him at that time had saved him from himself. And when, after some months of vain endeavour, he had been forced little by little to give up his enquiries, he found he was inured to living without Rachel.

They were walking fast, but this did not check Jalicourt’s flow of conversation; his sense of the amenities precluded silence. He chatted of one thing and another with easy-going affability. But the more affable he seemed, the more he gave an impression that his thoughts were elsewhere.

They came to the Place du Panthéon. Jalicourt took the four flights of stairs without slackening pace. On his landing, the elderly gentleman drew himself erect, removed his hat and, standing aside, threw open the door of his flat, with the gesture of one ushering a visitor into a State Room at Versailles.

The hall was redolent of all the vegetables known to the French *cuisine*. Without lingering in it, Jalicourt ceremoniously showed his guest into a drawing-room that opened into his study. The little flat was crowded up with richly inlaid furniture, chairs upholstered in tapestry, ancient portraits, and

knick-knacks of all sorts. The study was dark, and gave the impression of being a very small, low-ceiled room, the reason being that the back wall was entirely covered by a gaudy tapestry depicting the Queen of Sheba paying an official visit to King Solomon, and out of all proportion with the height of the room. The top and bottom edges had needed to be folded back, so that the figures, which were larger than life-size, touched the cornice with their diadems and had their legs cut short.

M. de Jalicourt motioned Antoine to a seat, and seated himself on the flattened, faded cushions piled on a grandfather's chair that stood in front of the mahogany desk, littered with books and papers, at which he worked. Against the background of olive-green velvet, between the projecting wings of the old chair, his gaunt features, the large aquiline nose, slanting forehead, and the white curls that looked like a powdered wig, gave him the air of an old eighteenth-century dandy.

'Let's see now,' he began, fiddling with the signet-ring that kept on slipping down his lean finger. 'I must set my memories in order. The first relations I had with your brother were by letter. At that time—it must be four or five years ago—your brother was, I believe, studying for his entrance examination. If my memory serves me right, he wrote to me about a certain book I brought out in that bygone era.'

'Yes,' Antoine put in. '*The Dawn of a Century*.'

'I think I've kept his letter. I was struck by its tone, and I answered it. In fact I asked him to come and see me. He did not do so, however; not just then. He waited till he had passed the Entrance before visiting me. That began the second phase of our acquaintance. A brief phase—an hour's conversation. Your brother dropped in quite unexpectedly, rather late in the evening, three years ago—a little before term began, in the first week of November.'

'Just before he went away.'

'I let him in; my door is always open to young folk who want to see me. I haven't forgotten the determined, passionate, almost feverish expression of his face that evening.' (As a matter of fact, Jacques had struck him as over-excited and rather conceited.) 'He was torn between two projects, and came to ask my advice. Should he join the Ecole and complete his general education there in the usual way? Or should he take another line altogether?' He didn't seem to have a clear notion of what exactly it should be, that "other line." But I gathered he meant: to turn his back on the examinations, and start working as the spirit moved him—writing.'

‘I had no idea,’ Antoine murmured. His mind was full of memories of what his own life had been during that last month preceding Rachel’s departure. And he reproached himself for having left Jacques so completely to himself.

‘I must confess,’ Jalicourt went on with a touch of affectation that became him charmingly, ‘that I can’t remember very well what advice I gave him. Obviously I must have told him not to think of dropping the Ecole. For young men of his calibre, our curriculum is really quite harmless; they pick and choose by instinct; they have—how shall I put it?—a healthy intolerance of constraint, and refuse to be kept in leading-strings. The Ecole can damage only the timid, over-scrupulous type of mind. In any case it struck me that your brother had come to ask my advice merely as a matter of form; he had already made his mind up. And that’s the surest proof that a youngster has a real vocation—has it in the blood. Don’t you agree? He showed a rather—rather callow violence, when speaking to me of the “university mentality,” of the discipline, of certain tutors—even, if I remember rightly, of his family life and social *milieu*. Does that surprise you? I have much affection for young people—they prevent me from ageing too quickly. They have an inkling that under the Professor of Literature I officially am, there lurks an incorrigible old poet to whom they can open their hearts. Your brother, if my memory serves me, did not fail to do so. I must say that the intolerance of the young appeals to me. It’s a good sign when a youngster is temperamentally in revolt against the world in general. All those amongst my pupils who have gone far were natural rebels, born, as my teacher Renan puts it, “with an imprecation on their lips.”

‘But let’s come back to your brother. I can’t recall exactly what our last words together were. All I know is that some days later—yes, a day or two later, I should say—I got a communication from him. I have it still. The instinct of the literary collector!’

Rising, he opened a cupboard and came back with a sheaf of papers, which he laid on the table.

‘It’s not a letter; just the copy of a poem by Walt Whitman. No signature. But your brother writes the sort of hand that one never forgets. A fine handwriting, isn’t it?’

As he spoke, he was glancing over the sheet before him. He passed it to Antoine, who felt his heart beating faster as his eyes fell on it. Yes, that was Jacques’ writing; emotional and simplified to excess, yet level, sinewy, rough-hewn.

‘I’m afraid,’ Jalicourt was saying, ‘I must have thrown away the envelope. I wonder from what place he sent it. Anyhow it’s only to-day I realize exactly what he was driving at when he sent that poem.’

‘My English isn’t up to understanding it right off, I fear,’ Antoine confessed with a smile.

Jalicourt picked up the sheet, brought it near his eye-glass and began reading the poem, translating it line by line.

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.

When he had finished, Antoine gave a sigh. A short silence followed, which he was the first to break.

‘And the short story?’

Jalicourt extracted from the file a foreign magazine.

‘Here it is. It appeared in the September issue of *Calliope*, a “modernist” review, brim-full of new ideas, which is published at Geneva.’

Antoine had reached forward at once and was turning the pages excitedly. Suddenly once again he was startled by the sight of his brother’s writing. Over the title of the story, *La Sorellina*, Jacques had written in his own hand.

Did you not say to me, on that famous November evening,
‘Everything is subject to the influence of two poles; the truth is
always double-faced’? So, sometimes, is love.

JACK BAULTHY.

‘Meaning . . . ?’ Antoine asked himself. Oh well, that could wait! The magazine was edited at Geneva; did that mean Jacques was in Switzerland? *Calliope: 161 Rue du Rhône, Geneva*. Yes, it would be damnably bad luck if he couldn’t trace Jacques now! All impatience, he rose from his seat.

‘I received this magazine,’ Jalicourt explained, ‘at the end of the vacation. I found no time to acknowledge it till yesterday. I nearly sent my letter to *Calliope*, as a matter of fact. Then it struck me that publishing in a Swiss magazine doesn’t necessarily mean the author has left Paris.’ (He

omitted to mention that his choice had been influenced as well by the cost of the postage-stamp.)

But Antoine was not listening. His eagerness to *know* had outrun his patience, his cheeks were flushed, and he was mechanically turning over the pages that were a token of Jacques' return to life, catching here and there a baffling, enigmatic phrase. He was in such haste to be alone—as though the story were to give him some amazing revelation—that he took his leave rather curtly.

To an accompaniment of amiable phrases, Jalicourt escorted him to the door; all his remarks and gestures seemed part of a set ritual. In the hall he stopped and pointed with his forefinger at *La Sorellina*, which Antoine had tucked under his arm.

'You'll see,' he said. 'I fully recognize that quite a deal of talent has gone to that. But, personally, I must confess . . . No! I'm too old.' When Antoine made a politely deprecating gesture, he added: 'Yes, I am. It's no use burking the truth: I've lost the power of understanding the ultra-modern. Yes, one fossilizes. Music's another story; there I've had the luck of being able to keep in step. After having been a fanatical Wagnerite, I managed to understand Debussy. But only in the nick of time. A near thing, and I'd have missed Debussy! Well, Monsieur Thibault, I'm certain that I'd miss a Debussy—in modern literature.'

He had straightened his shoulders again. Looking at him, Antoine could not withhold his admiration. There was no doubt about it; the old professor cut a stately figure. As he stood below the hanging lamp, his white hair gleamed silver, and the craggy brows beetled above two gulfs of shadow, one of which the heavy lens lit up at moments with a golden glow, like a window touched by the setting sun.

Antoine made a last effort to express his gratitude. But Jalicourt seemed determined to regard polite amenities as his own prerogative. He cut the young man short, and, raising his arm, proffered a nonchalant, wide-open hand.

'Please give my best wishes for his recovery to Monsieur Thibault. And I hope you'll be good enough to let me know what news you have of your brother.'

THE wind had fallen and a drizzle had set in; the street-lamps showed as blurs of light across the misty air. It was too late to think of taking any active steps, and Antoine's only idea was to get home as soon as possible.

There were no taxis on the rank. He had to make his way on foot down the Rue Soufflot, hugging *La Sorellina* to his side. But his patience was flagging with every step, and he soon felt he could wait no longer. At a corner of the boulevard the lights of the Grande Brasserie offered, if not isolation, at least a convenient backwater. Antoine decided for it.

As he moved through the swing-door, he passed two beardless youths coming out, arm in arm, laughing and chattering—of their love-affairs, he surmised. Then he heard one of them remark, 'No, old chap, if the human mind could envisage a relation between those two concepts . . . ,' and realized he was in the heart of the Latin Quarter.

On the ground floor all the tables were occupied and he walked to the staircase through a haze of tepid smoke. The upper floor was set apart for games of various sorts. Round the billiard-tables young men were laughing, shouting, quarrelling. '13, 14, 15.' 'No luck!' 'Mis-cued again, damn it!' 'Eugène, buck up with that pint!' 'Eugène, a Byrrh!' Light-hearted clamour fretted by the staccato, Morse-like click of billiard-balls. Everywhere youth in its first flush: pink cheeks glowing across the fledgling down, bright eyes behind pince-nez, callow exuberance, eager smiles—nothing but told of the joy of breaking from the chrysalis, of hopes untrammelled, life for life's sake.

Antoine threaded his way between the tables, looking for a quiet corner. The noisy gaiety of the youngsters round him took his mind for a moment off his own preoccupation; for the first time weighing on him he felt his thirty years of life.

'The youth of 1913,' he mused. 'An excellent vintage. Healthier and perhaps even more go-ahead than mine, their seniors by ten years.'

He had travelled little, and rarely thought about his country; that night he was conscious of a new feeling towards France and her future as a nation—a feeling of confidence and pride. But then a shadow fell on his mood; Jacques might have been one of these promising young men. Where was Jacques? What was he doing at this moment?

Antoine noticed at the far end of the room some unoccupied tables which had been used as a dump for overcoats and hats. There was a bracket-lamp above them, and it struck him that he might do worse than settle down there, behind the rampart of piled-up garments. The only people in that part of the room were a quiet-looking couple; a youngster smoking a pipe, and reading *L'Humanité*, oblivious of the girl beside him, who was sipping a glass of hot milk. She was whiling away the time by counting her small change, polishing her nails and examining her teeth in a pocket-mirror, while watching from the corner of an eye the people coming in. An elderly, worried-looking student held her interest for a moment, till, without waiting to order a drink, he opened a book and became absorbed in it.

Antoine had started reading, too, but somehow could not fix his attention on the words before him. Absent-mindedly, he felt his pulse; it was too fast—rarely had he been so little master of his emotions. In any case the first lines he read were baffling enough.

The hottest hour. Odours of parched soil: dust. The path drives upwards. Sparks flash from the rock under the horse-hoofs. Sybil rides in front. Ten o'clock striking at San Paolo. A tattered foreshore ribboning the garish blue: gold and azure. On the right, endlessly, Golfo di Napoli. To the left a speck of solid gold, poised on liquid gold: Isola di Capri.

So Jacques was in Italy? Impatiently Antoine skipped some pages. . . . What an odd jerky style of writing!

His father. Giuseppe's feelings for his father. That secret corner of his heart, a prickly cactus, ingrowing spines. Years of unconscious, frantic, restive adulation. Every impulse of affection rebuffed. Twenty years before he brought himself to hate. Twenty years before realizing hatred was incumbent on him. Whole-hearted hatred.

Antoine stopped short. He felt ill at ease. Who was this Giuseppe? He turned back to the opening pages, bidding himself keep cool.

The first scene described the two young people riding out together: Giuseppe, who seemed like Jacques, and Sybil, presumably an English girl, judging by her remarks.

'In England we do with tentative arrangements, when they're called for. That gives us time to choose our line and act on it. You

Italians want everything cut-and-dried from the start.’ She was thinking: In this respect, anyhow, I’m Italian already; but no need for him to know it.

On the summit Sybil and Giuseppe dismount, to rest.

She alights before Giuseppe, flicks the scorched grass with her hunting-crop to drive the lizards away, sits down. On the furnace-hot soil.

‘In the sun, Sybil?’

Giuseppe stretches himself on the fringe of shade along the wall. And rests his head on the warm bricks, watching her, thinking: All her movements cry out to be graceful, but never will she yield to herself.

Antoine was so carried away by his eagerness that he jumped from one paragraph to another, trying to understand before he had read the phrases out. His eye lit on a sentence.

She is English, Protestant.

He read the whole passage.

For him all in her is new and strange. Adorable and hateful. That charm of hers, to have been born, to have lived, to be living still in a world of which he knows all but nothing. Her sadness. Her purity. Her friendliness. Her smile. No, Sybil smiles with her eyes, never with her lips. And his feelings for her—harsh, intense, embittered. She wounds him. Wishing, it seems, to think him of a lower breed, and suffering by it. ‘You Italians,’ she says. ‘You southerners.’ She is English, Protestant.

Presumably, ‘Sybil’ was some girl whom Jacques had met and loved. Perhaps he was living with her now.

Down they ride through vineyards, lemon-groves. The beach. A herd driven by a bambino, sombre-eyed, bare shoulders peeping through the rags. He whistles, calling two white dogs to heel. The bell on the leader, clanging, clanging. Infinite space. Sunlight. Their steps leave water-holes in the sand.

Wearied by the descriptive passages, Antoine skipped two pages. His eyes fell on an account of Sybil's home.

Villa Lunadoro. A ramshackle old house, rose-beleaguered. A double garden, riotous with flowers.

Literature! Antoine turned the page; a sentence caught his attention.

The rose-garden, crimson drifts of blossom, low cloisters coved with roses, a fragrance so intense under the fires of noon that it is hardly to be borne—fragrance that seeps through the pores and permeates the blood, blurring the eyes, slowing or speeding up the heart-beats.

That rose-garden, of what did it remind him? Yes, it led straight to the cote where 'white pigeons flutter.' Maisons-Laffitte. And Sybil, the Protestant, could she be——? Wait, here was more about her!

In her riding-habit Sybil sinks on to a garden-seat, arms outspread, tight lips, hard eyes. Now she is alone, everything is clear again: life has been given her to one end only—to make Giuseppe happy. But it's when he isn't here I love him. On the days when I have waited most desperately for him to come, I'm certain to make him suffer. What futile, shameful cruelty! Ah, women who can cry are the lucky ones! My heart is frozen, indurated.

At 'indurated' Antoine smiled. 'A medical term, that. He must have picked it up from me.'

Can he read my feelings? Ah, how I wish he could! And the moment he seems to understand me, I cannot, cannot bear it, I shrink away, I lie, I do anything, anything to elude him!

There followed a description of Sybil's mother.

Mrs. Powell is coming down the terrace steps. Her hair is silver in the light. Shielding her eyes with her hand, she smiles before she speaks, before she has seen Sybil. 'A letter from William,' she announces. 'Such a nice letter. He's just begun two sketches. He intends to stay some weeks more at Poestum.'

Sybil bites her lips. Despair. Should she await her brother's return to solve the riddle of her heart, to understand herself?

Now Antoine had no doubts left. These were Madame de Fontanin, Daniel, Jenny—figures mustered from the past. He turned hurriedly over to the next chapter, anxious to find again the portrait of the father, Seregno.

Yes, here it was. . . . No, this was the Palazzo Seregno, an ancient mansion on the shore of the Bay.

. . . tall, arched windows set in frescoed foliage.

Descriptions followed of Vesuvius and the Bay.

Antoine skipped some pages, sampling a passage here and there, so as not to lose the thread.

Giuseppe was staying, it appeared, at his father's country house, by himself except for the servants. Annetta, his 'little sister,' was abroad. His mother was dead—naturally. His father, the Judge Seregno, had to remain in Naples where the Court was in session, and only came on Sundays or, occasionally, on weekdays, for a night. 'Just as father did at Maisons,' Antoine observed to himself.

He landed from the boat at dinner-time. After dinner, the digestive process. A cigar, a stroll up and down the courtyard. Rose early to admonish stable-boys and gardeners. Taciturn as ever, caught the first morning boat.

Then, the father's character-sketch. Antoine felt a qualm of apprehension as he broached it.

Judge Seregno. A worldly success. Everything about him interlocks, fits in. Social standing, family, wealth, professional acumen, genius for organization. The majesty of office, consecrated, truculent. Adamantine probity. The steeliest virtues. And a physical appearance in keeping. Massive self-assurance. Violence at full pressure, always menacing, always under control. . . . A mighty caricature that inspires respect in all, and awe. Spiritual son of the Church, and model citizen. At the Vatican, as on the Bench, in office and at home—everywhere lucid, commanding, exemplary, complacent, imperturbable. A force or, rather, a dead weight to reckon with; the might of an inertia that does not move but crushes.

A well-built unity, four-square. A monument. And ah, that small, secret, bitter laugh of his . . . !

For a moment the page grew blurred under Antoine's eyes. How ever had Jacques dared to write such words? The ruthlessness of the boy's revenge appalled him when he pictured the old man's pitiful declension.

Then clinkety and clankety
Along the lanes we'll go . . .

And suddenly the gulf between his brother and himself seemed to yawn wider.

Ah, that small, secret, bitter laugh of his, following a sneering silence! For twenty years Giuseppe has endured that laugh, those silences. Fostering vengeance.

Giuseppe's youth, a forcing-bed of hatred and revolt. When he thinks of his boyhood, a thirst for revenge sears his throat. From his earliest days all his instincts, as they took form, urged him against his father. All, without exception. Idleness, disrespect, disorderliness, flaunted by way of reprisal. A wilful dunce, and heartily ashamed of it. But these were his best weapons of revolt against the hated system. An insatiable craving for the worst. Each act of disobedience with a sweet savour of revenge.

A heartless child, they said. Heartless he, whom the moan of a hurt animal, a street-musician's riddle, the smile of a signora met in a church porch, sent sobbing to his sleep of nights! A waste land, loneliness, a childhood of frustration. Giuseppe came to man's estate without once having heard a gentle word spoken to him but by his little sister.

'What about me?' Antoine thought. A note of tenderness crept into the story when he spoke of the 'little sister.'

Annetta, Annetta, *sorellina*. A miracle that such a flower could grow in that dry land! Sister of his childish despairs, revolts. Sole gleam of light, cool spring in a waste of arid gloom.

'What about me?' Ah, a little further on was something about an elder brother, Humberto.

Sometimes Giuseppe seemed to catch in his brother's eyes a faint gleam of affection . . .

A faint gleam! What ingratitude!

. . . of affection, tainted with condescension. But between them lay ten years, an abyss of time. Humberto hid his true self from Giuseppe, who lied to Humberto.

Antoine stopped reading. His disagreeable first impression had passed; what did it matter if the subject of these pages touched him so nearly? After all, what real importance had Jacques' opinions about people? For that matter, what he said about Humberto was substantially correct. What amazed him was the bitterness behind it all. After three years' separation, three years by himself without news of the family—yes, Jacques must have loathed his past with a vengeance to write such words! One thing worried him; though he might find his brother again, could he find the way back to his brother's heart?

He skimmed the remaining pages to see if there was more about Humberto; and found he was hardly mentioned. With a secret disappointment. . . .

Then his eyes lit on a passage, the tone of which whetted his curiosity.

Without friends, curled up into a ball against the fisticuffs of circumstance, watching his life fall to pieces . . .

That was Giuseppe's life, alone in Rome; had that been Jacques' life in some foreign city?

Some evenings. The air in his room unbreathable. The book falls. He blows out the lamp, goes forth into the night, like a young wolf. Messalina's Rome, squalid districts, everywhere death-traps, lures. Furtive gleams between the provocatively drawn curtains. Crowded darkness, shadows offering themselves, cajoling: lasciviousness. He slips past walls honeycombed with lust. Is he fleeing from himself? What can quench the thirst consuming him? For hours, his mind a chaos of wild deeds undone, he drifts on, unheeding. His eyes are burning, hands fever-hot, throat parched. As foreign to himself as if he had bartered body and soul. Sweating with fear and lust, he moves in a circle. Slinks down by-streets, skirting the same pitfalls again and again. Hour after hour.

Too late. The lights are dying out behind the furtive curtains. Streets grow empty. He is alone now with his evil genius. Ripe for any lapse. Too late. Impotent, drained dry by the riot of imaginative lust.

Night is ending. Belated purity of silence, lonely hush of daybreak. Too late. Sick at heart, dead beat, unsatisfied, degraded, he drags himself to his room, slips between the sheets. Without remorse. Bewildered. And lies there till the sky pales, chewing the cud of bitterness; bitterness of not having dared . . .

Why did Antoine find this such painful reading? It gave him no surprise that his young brother had taken his fill of life, had declined on sordid adventures; indeed he was quite prepared to smile it off with a genial ‘Why not?’ or even, ‘So much the better!’ And yet . . .

Hastily he turned over some more pages. He could not bring himself to read methodically, and merely guessed, with more or less success, at the development of the story.

The Powells’ villa, on the shore of the Bay, was near the Palazzo Seregno. Thus Giuseppe and Sybil were neighbours during the holidays. They went out for rides together, and boating in the Bay.

Giuseppe went daily to the Villa Lunadoro. Sybil never refused to see him. The mystery of Sybil. Giuseppe dangled round her, joylessly.

Antoine was getting bored by the descriptions of this love-affair; it held up the story. Still, he brought himself to read a portion, anyhow, of a rather long scene, following a seeming estrangement of the two young people.

Sundown. Giuseppe comes to the villa. Sybil. Drunk with the perfumes of sun-steeped flowers, the garden is sobering down as night comes on. Like the Prince of an Arabian Night, Giuseppe walks between two walls of flame, the pomegranates in flower fired by the sunset. Sybil! . . . Sybil! No one. Closed windows, drawn blinds. He stops. Round him the swallows weave shrill, dizzying circles in the air. No one. Is she under the pergola, behind the house? With an effort he keeps from running.

At the corner of the house, an eddy of soft sounds. Sybil playing the piano. The bay-window is open. What is she playing? A murmur of heart-rending sighs, a sad, unanswered plea rising on the calm

evening air. An almost human tone, a phrase spoken yet inapprehensible, beyond translation into words. Listening, he comes nearer, steps on to the threshold. Sybil has not heard him. Her face, shamelessly naked. Fluttering eyelids, parted lips—all reticence gone. Shining through that face, the soul; no, her soul, her love, is there incarnate. In solitude revealed, a startled secret, love's offering, stolen, ravished. She is playing; tendrils of light sound float up, entwining in a supreme ecstasy. A sob abruptly stifled, then a sad arpeggio that rises up and up, attenuated, rarefied, mysteriously hovering on the silence, before taking wing into the blue, like a sudden flight of birds.

Sybil has lifted her fingers from the keys. The piano is throbbing still; a hand pressed on the lid would feel the tumult of a pulsing heart. She thinks she is alone. She turns her head. With a slowness, a grace unknown to him. And then . . .

Antoine was exasperated by this mania for short, jerky phrases. 'Literature' run wild! Still—had Jacques really fallen in love with Jenny?

But his imagination was running ahead of the story; he came back to the text.

Again his eye was caught by the name 'Humberto.' The passage described a brief scene at the Palazzo Seregno; one evening the Judge came back unexpectedly to dinner, accompanied by his elder son.

The vast dining-hall. Three vaulted windows, opening on a pink sky ribboned by the smoke from Vesuvius. Stucco walls, green pilasters supporting a false dome painted on the ceiling.

Benedicite. The Judge's thick lips flutter. He crosses himself. The gesture flows about the room. Humberto follows suit, for appearance' sake. Giuseppe obstinately refrains. They take their seats. Immaculate, austere, the huge white tablecloth. Three places laid, too far apart. Filippo, felt-shod, with the silver dishes. . . .

Antoine skipped some paragraphs. Then:

In the father's presence the Powells' name is never uttered. He refused to know William. That foreigner. A painter, too. Poor Italy, the happy hunting-ground of every vagabond! A year ago, he put his foot down. 'I forbid you to see those heretics.'

Does he suspect he is being disobeyed?

Impatiently Antoine turned some pages, and came on another reference to the elder brother.

Humberto puts in some innocent remarks. Then silence closes in again. A handsome forehead, Humberto's. Proud, thoughtful eyes. Elsewhere, most likely, he is young, expansive. He has studied. A brilliant career lies before him. Giuseppe loves his brother. Not as a brother. Like an uncle who might become a friend. Were they together long enough, Giuseppe would speak out, perhaps. But their talks are brief, and only on set occasions. No, intimacy with Humberto is ruled out.

'Obviously,' Antoine murmured, remembering the summer of 1910. 'That was because of Rachel.—My fault, of course.'

He stopped reading for a moment and let his head sink back dejectedly on to the cushion. He was disappointed; all this high-flown verbiage led nowhere, left unsolved the mystery of Jacques' disappearance.

The orchestra was playing the refrain of a Viennese waltz; the people in the café were humming it in undertones, with here and there an unseen whistler joining in. The sedate couple near him had not moved. The woman had drunk her milk and now was smoking, with a bored expression. Now and again, resting her bare arm on her companion's shoulder—he had just unfolded *Les Droits de l'Homme*—she absent-mindedly stroked the lobe of his ear, while yawning like a cat.

'Not many women here,' Antoine observed. 'What there are, are mostly youngish. And relegated to a secondary plane; merely bedmates.'

A discussion had sprung up between two groups of students, who were hurling the firebrand names of Jaurès and Péguy from one table to the other with noisy truculence.

A young, blue-jowled Jew had sat down between *Les Droits de l'Homme* and the yawning girl; she no longer seemed bored.

With an effort Antoine started reading again. He had lost his place. Turning the pages, he lit on the closing lines of *La Sorellina*.

Here life and love are impossible. Good-bye.

Lure of the unknown, lure of a wholly new to-morrow, ecstasy.
The past forgotten, take to the open road.

The first train to Rome. Rome, the first train to Genoa. Genoa,
the first liner . . .

No more was needed to rekindle Antoine's interest. 'Slowly now!' he adjured himself. 'Jacques' secret is hidden somewhere in these pages, and I've got to find it.' He must go right through the story, paragraph by paragraph, carefully, composedly.

He turned back, and, propping his forehead on his hands, settled down to work.

He began with the homecoming of Annetta, Giuseppe's foster-sister, from the Swiss convent where she was completing her education.

A little changed, Annetta. Before, the servants used to boast of her. *E una vera napoletana*. Plump shoulders. Dusky skin. Fleshy lips. Eyes that flashed into laughter on the least pretext.

Why had he dragged Gise into this story? Moreover, from the first scene between brother and foster-sister, Antoine began to feel a certain discomfort.

Giuseppe had gone to meet Annetta; they were driving back to the Palazzo Seregno.

The sun has dipped behind the summits. The antiquated barouche rocks under the shak hood. Shadows. Sudden coolth.

Annetta, chatterbox Annetta. She slips her arm through Giuseppe's. And prattles away. He laughs. How alone he was—till just now! Sybil does not dispel his loneliness. Sybil, a dark, deep, ever translucent lake, blinding depths of purity.

The landscape tightens round the old barouche. Dusk closing in. Nightfall.

Annetta snuggles up, as in the past. A hurried kiss. Warm, supple, dust-roughened lips. As in the past. In the convent, too, laughter, chatter, kisses. In love with Sybil, what warm, sweet comfort he finds in the *sorellina's* caresses! He gives her kiss for kiss. Anyhow, on her eyes, on her hair. Noisy, fraternal kisses. The driver laughs. She prattles on. At the convent, you know . . . Oh, those exams! Giuseppe, too; of anything and everything: their father, next autumn, plans for the future. But keeps one thing to himself; not a word about the Powells. Annetta is religious. In her bedroom, six candles burn at the Madonna's shrine. The Jews crucified Christ; they did not know He was the Son of God. But the heretics knew. They denied the Truth wilfully, through pride.

During their father's absence, the two young people settle down together at the Palazzo Seregno. Some passages were painful reading for Antoine from the first word to the last.

Next morning Annetta runs in while Giuseppe is still in bed. Yes, now he notices, she has changed a little. Her eyes are still as large and pure as in the past, and full of vague wonder, but a new glow is in them; the least thing might blur their serenity for ever. Warm, yielding flesh. She has come straight from her bed. Her hair all rumpled; a child she is, no coquetry. As in the past. Already she has fished out of her boxes her 'souvenirs' of Switzerland. 'Just look at this—and this!' Gleams of white, well-formed teeth behind the fluttering lips. Telling about her fall, out ski-ing. A spike of rock pierced her knee. Look, the mark's not gone! Under the dressing-gown, the smooth curve of her leg, her thigh; warm naked flesh. She strokes the scar, a white patch on the warm brown skin. Absent-mindedly. She loves fondling herself; doats on her mirror every morning, every night, smiling to her body. Now she is chattering again. All sorts of memories. Riding-lessons. 'I'd like to go out riding with you—in my riding costume; we'd have gallops along the beach.' Still stroking her leg. Crooking, straightening her knee; ripple of silken skin. Giuseppe's eyelids flutter, he lies back in bed. At last the dressing-gown falls back. She runs to the window. Sunbeams romping on the bay. 'Lazy-bones, it's nine! Let's go for a swim!'

For several days they see each other thus, each morning. Giuseppe shares his time between his *sorellina* and the sphinx-like English girl.

Antoine skimmed the pages rapidly. Then one day when Giuseppe has come to take Sybil for a boating expedition in the Bay, a scene, seemingly decisive, takes place between them. Overcoming his distaste for the insufferable 'lushness' of the writing, Antoine read almost every word of it.

Sybil under the pergola, on the edge of the sunlight. Lost in dreams. Her hand resting on a white pillar, in the light. Waiting for him? 'I expected you yesterday.' 'I stayed with Annetta.' 'Why don't you bring her here?' Her tone displeased Giuseppe.

A few lines further on.

Giuseppe stops rowing. Round them the air grows still. Winged silence. The bay is all quicksilver. Sheen. Water-music. Ripples lapping against the boat. 'What are you thinking about?' 'And you?' Silence. A change in their voices. 'I'm thinking of you, Sybil.' 'And I am thinking of you, Giuseppe?' He is trembling. 'For all our lives, Sybil?' Yes, her head droops. He sees her lips part with a painful effort, her hand clasp the gunwale. A silent pledge, almost a regret. The sea ablaze under the flaming noon. Dazzling effulgence. Heat. Immobility. Time and life halted, in suspense. Unbearable oppression. Then a sudden flight of gulls brings life back to the listless air. They soar and dive and skim the sea; dip their beaks, and soar again. Gleams of sunbright wings, clash of swords. 'We are thinking about the same things, Sybil.'

Actually Jacques had seen a great deal of the Fontanins that summer. Antoine began to wonder if the explanation of his flight might not be the failure of his love-affair with Jenny.

Some pages further on, the action began, it seemed, to move more quickly.

Among descriptions of everyday events that recalled to Antoine the life Jacques and Gise had led at Maisons, he followed the disturbing trend of the affection between Giuseppe and Annetta. Did the young people realize the nature of their intimacy? As for Annetta, all she knew was that the whole set of her being drew her towards Giuseppe; but so simple was her faith, so entire her innocence, that she lent her feelings the colour of a harmless, sisterly devotion. For Giuseppe, the love he confessedly had for Sybil seemed at first to absorb his thoughts, blinding him to the nature of the physical attraction Annetta exercised on him. The question was how long would he be able to keep up this self-deception?

Late one afternoon Giuseppe made a suggestion to the *sorellina*.

'What do you say to a stroll, now it's getting cooler; then dinner at a country inn, and a good long tramp afterwards, till it's dark?' She claps her hands. 'Oh Beppino, I do love you so when you're cheerful!'

Had Giuseppe laid his plans in advance? After a rough-and-ready meal in a fishing village, he led the girl along paths she did not know.

He is walking quickly. Along the stony paths between the lemon-groves which he had trod a hundred times with Sybil. Annetta grows anxious. 'Sure you know the road?' He turns left. The path slopes down. An old well, a low, curved gateway. Giuseppe stops. 'Now come and see,' he laughs. She moves forward, unsuspecting. He pushes the door open, a bell tinkles. 'What on earth are you doing?' Laughing, he draws her into the black garden. Under the firs. She is frightened, puzzled.

She steps into Villa Lunadoro.

That low, curved gateway, the tinkling bell, the fir-grove; Antoine recognized each detail, unmistakably.

Mrs. Powell and Sybil are in the pergola. 'May I introduce my sister, Annetta?' They give her a seat, question her, make much of her. Annetta fancies she is dreaming. The white-haired lady's welcome, her smile. 'Come with me, my dear; I want to give you some of our roses.' Vaulted shadows of the rose-garden, drenching the air with heady fragrance.

Sybil and Giuseppe are alone now. Should he take her hand? She would only shrink away. That steely reserve of hers is stronger than her will, than her love. He thinks: How hard it is for her to let herself be loved!

Mrs. Powell has picked the roses for Annetta. Small, close-set crimson roses, without spines; crimson petals with black hearts. 'You must come again, dear; Sybil has so few friends, you know.' Annetta fancies she is dreaming. Are these people the 'gang of heretics'? Is it possible she once feared them like the plague?

Antoine skipped a page and came to the description of Annetta and Giuseppe's walk home.

The moon is veiled. The darkness deeper. Annetta feels light-headed, buoyed on wings. She lets the full weight of her young body hang on Giuseppe's arm; Giuseppe guides her through the darkness, his head high, heart far away, lost in a dream. Shall he tell her his secret? Why not? He bends over her. 'It's not only for Will's sake, you know, that I go to see them.'

His face is hidden in shadows, but she hears the low intensity of his tone. 'Not only for Will's sake!' Wildfire racing through her

veins. She had never dreamt—. Sybil, then? Sybil and Giuseppe . . . ? Choking, she breaks loose, tries to escape, stricken, barbed death in her flanks. No strength. A few steps more. Her teeth are chattering. She goes limp, stumbles, drops back on to the grass under the tall lime-trees.

Uncomprehending, he kneels beside her. What is wrong? But then, her arms shoot up like tentacles. And now—he understands. She winds her arms around him, clings desperately, sobs. ‘Giuseppe! Oh, Giuseppe!’

The love-cry. He has never heard it. Never before. Sybil, cloistered in her secrecy. Her alien blood. And pressed to him now a young, sensuous body, aching with regret, yielding, yearning. Thoughts dance through his brain, memories of childhood, the love they bore each other, the trust and tenderness; how can he not love her?—she is of his own kind; he must comfort her, make her well. Flowing round him, clinging, the soft warmth of a living body, fluent limbs. Then a sudden wave sweeping all before it, drowning consciousness. In his nostrils a new, yet familiar fragrance of loosened hair; under his lips a tear-drenched face, throbbing mouth. All love’s accomplices: darkness, perfumes, ungovernable ecstasy, a fever of the blood. On the moist lips he presses his mouth’s kiss; on the half-parted lips, awaiting they know not what, a lover’s kiss. She gives herself to his caress, does not return it yet, but only yields, surrenders, offers her mouth again and again. Floods of longing surge up from their hearts; meet and clash as the wet lips cling together. Bitter yearning . . . Sweetness. Mingled breaths, limbs, desires. Overhead the green darkness eddies, the stars go out. Clothes scattered, disarrayed, all resistance gone, all barriers falling, close, closer, flesh to flesh surrendering, a thrill of happy pain, consummate, ah consummate joy . . .

Ah! A single sigh, and time stands still.

The silence throbs with echoes, blurred sounds. Elemental fear. Arrested movement. The man’s face, panting, pillowed on the young breast; thud of racing heart-beats, two separate rhythms, unconsonant, irreconcilable.

Then suddenly a questing moonray, a prying, callous eye, flicks them like a whiplash, tears them apart.

Abruptly they stand up. Bewildered, lost. Tormented lips. Shuddering, but not with shame; with joy, with joy and wonder. With

joy and new desire. In a little grassy hollow the bunch of crimson roses sheds its petals under the moon. Annetta makes a romantic gesture, picks up the roses, shakes them. A cloud of petals flutters down over the crushed grass, that bears the imprint of a single body.

Antoine was profoundly shocked, quivering with disgust. Unthinkable that Gise should have acted thus!

And yet——! Everything rang so precisely true—not only such details as the old wall, the rose-garden, the gate-bell. At the moment when they sank on to the grass, locked in an embrace, the mask of fiction fell. That was no stony path in Italy, nor were the shadows those of lemon-trees. No, that was unmistakably the rank grass of Maisons, which Antoine was recalling now only too clearly; and the trees were the centenarian lime-trees of the Green Avenue. Yes, Jacques must have taken Gisèle to the Fontanins, and on such a summer night, on the way back . . . Simpleton—to have lived beside them, so close to Gisèle, and to have guessed nothing of it all. . . ! And yet—no, Antoine did not believe; in his heart of hearts he could not bring himself to admit that that chaste, elusive little Gise could shelter such a secret.

Still, there were so many pointers, the crimson roses for instance. Now he understood Gisèle's emotion when she received that anonymous hamper from a London florist and why, on the strength of what seemed so slender a clue, she had pressed him to have enquiries made immediately in England. Obviously she alone had read the message of those crimson roses—sent a year, to the very day perhaps, after the love-scene under the lime-trees.

So Jacques must have stayed in London. Perhaps in Italy, too. And Switzerland. Could he be still in England? He might very easily contribute to a Genevan review while living there.

Then, of a sudden, other facts that had baffled him grew clear, as if screening shadows were withdrawing from a nucleus of light. Gisèle's departure, her insistence on being sent to that English convent. Obviously, it had been in order to trace Jacques. And now Antoine reproached himself for not having followed up, after his first failure, the clue provided by the London florist.

He tried to set his data in order, but in vain; too many theories—too many memories, as well—kept cropping up. He was coming to see the whole past in a new light. How easy now it was to understand Gise's despair when Jacques disappeared! He had never suspected all the implications of her grief, though he had done his best to allay it. He remembered how sorry he had been for her then; indeed it was out of his sympathy that another feeling for her had been born.

In those days he had found it impossible to talk about Jacques to his father, who obstinately clung to his theory of the boy's suicide, or to Mademoiselle, immersed day in, day out, in her prayers and religious exercises. But Gise had been different; her fervour for the quest had brought her very near him. Daily after dinner she had come down to hear the latest news. He had enjoyed imparting to her his hopes, and the steps he was taking. And it was in the course of those long intimate talks that he had begun to feel drawn towards the high-strung little girl, whose secret love was the keynote of her existence. Unknowingly, perhaps, he had yielded to the heady lure of the young body already bespoken to another. He recalled her sudden outbursts of affection, the little coaxing ways that reminded him of a suffering child's. Annetta! Yes, she had tricked him well! Of course, in his utter sentimental isolation after Rachel's eclipse, he had been only too ready to imagine—things. He shrugged his shoulders angrily. Damned fool! He had been taken by Gise, only because his emotions had been at a loose end. And he had fancied Gise was drawn to him, merely because, in the throes of her frustrated passion, she had clung to him as the one person capable of finding her lost lover.

Distasteful ideas! Antoine tried to brush them aside. He reminded himself that he had found nothing so far to explain Jacques' hasty flight from home.

With an effort he turned back to *La Sorellina*.

Leaving the roses scattered on the grass, Giuseppe and Annette walked back to the Palazzo.

Homewards. Giuseppe helps Annetta on her way. What lies before them? That brief ecstasy can have been but a prelude. The long night towards which they are walking, their night together in the great lonely house—what will it bring?

Antoine could hardly endure to read further. Again, he felt the blood rising to his cheeks.

Yet of moral disapproval there was little in his mood. When confronted with a passion running its course, he gave short shrift to moral codes. But he was unable to repress a feeling of outraged surprise, touched with rancour; he could not forget the day when Gise had so indignantly repulsed his timid advances. Almost *La Sorellina* rekindled his desire for her—a purely physical, unequivocal craving. So much so that, to fix his attention on what he was reading, he had deliberately to expel the haunting picture of a young, lithe, nut-brown body from his mind.

. . . that night together in the great lonely house—what will it bring?

Love bows them to its yoke. Silent, possessed, in an enchanted dream, they walk, escorted by the intermittent moon. Moonlight is playing on the Palazzo, beckoning from shadows the painted pillars. They cross the first terrace. As they walk, cheek brushes cheek. Annetta's cheeks are burning. Already, in that childish body, what natural hardihood for sin!

Abruptly they draw apart. A shadow has loomed up between the pillars.

The father is there. Awaiting them. He has returned unexpectedly. 'Where can the children be?' He has dined alone in the great hall; ever since then paced to and fro on the marble terrace. 'Where can the children be?'

His voice jars the silence.

'Where have you been?'

No time to think out a lie. A brief flash of revolt. Giuseppe cries:

'With the Powells.'

Antoine gave a start. Then had his father known . . . ?

'With the Powells.'

Annetta slips away between the pillars, crosses the vestibule, runs up the stairs to her bedroom, locks herself in and flings herself, in the dark, upon her narrow, virginal bed.

Downstairs, for the first time, the son is facing up to his father. And—strangest thing of all, for the sheer joy of bravado he affirms that other, wraithlike love in which he believes no more. 'I took Annetta to see Mrs. Powell.' He pauses, then adds in a clear, emphatic tone: 'I am engaged to Sybil.'

The father bursts out laughing. A terrifying laugh. Extended by the shadow that prolongs it, the massive form looks more imposing still, of more than human stature, a Titan haloed with moonlight. Laughing. Giuseppe wrings his hands. The laugh ends. Silence. 'You shall come back with me to Naples, both of you, to-morrow.' 'No!' 'Giuseppe!' 'I do not belong to you. I am engaged to Sybil Powell.'

Never yet has the father met a resistance that he has not crushed. He feigns calmness. 'Be silent, boy! They come here to eat our bread, to buy our land. To take our sons as well—that's too much.

Did you imagine a heretic could ever bear our name?' 'My name.' 'Fool! Never. A Huguenot intrigue. . . . The salvation of a soul. . . . Honour of the Seregnos. But they reckoned without me. I can defend my own.' 'Father!' 'I'll break your will. I'll cut you off. I'll have you enlisted in the Piedmont regiment.' 'Father!' 'Aye, I'll break you. Go to your room. You shall leave this place to-morrow.'

Giuseppe clenches his fists. He wants his father to . . .

Antoine drew a deep breath.

. . . to die.

Somehow he brings himself to laugh: the last affront. 'You're comic!'

He walks past his father. His head high, mouth twisted in a mocking laugh, he goes down the steps.

'Where are you going?'

The boy stops. What poisoned barb shall he launch before he disappears for ever? Instinct gives him the words that will tell most. 'I am going to kill myself.'

With a quick movement he is down the steps. The father has raised his arm. 'Go away, you shameless son.' For the last time the father's voice is heard, shouting an imprecation. 'My curse on you!'

Giuseppe runs across the terrace, out into the night.

Antoine had half a mind to pause again, and ponder; but only a few pages remained and impatience got the better of him.

Giuseppe runs blindly forward. Then stops, breathless, perplexed, his wits at sea. In the distance a thin, plaintive melody rising, falling; mandolins on some hotel verandah. Melting languor. How blissful death, veins opened, in the soft warmth of a bath!

Sybil does not like the music of Neapolitan mandolins. Sybil, a foreigner. Remote, unreal, as a heroine one has loved madly—in a book.

Annetta. The memory of a bare arm nestling in his hand, enough! A buzzing in the ears. Dry lips.

Giuseppe has planned it all. He will come back at daybreak, carry off Annetta, fly with her. He will steal into her room; she will jump out of bed, bare-limbed, welcoming. Ah, sweetness of her

embrace; smooth, yielding sinews; the warm fragrance of her body! Almost he feels her now, straining to him, with lightly parted lips, moist lips, Annetta!

Giuseppe plunges into a side-path. His heart beats wildly. At a bound he crosses a ridge of rock. Bracing airs, the countryside under the moon.

At the edge of a thicket he lies on his back, arms outspread. Passes his fingers through his open shirt-neck, strokes his heaving breast. Overhead, a milk-white sky, star-scattered. Peace, purity.

And Sybil?

Giuseppe jumps up. Strides hotfoot down the hillside. Sybil. For the last time; before the daybreak.

Lunadoro. The wall, the curving gateway. On that newly whitewashed wall, the exact place of his shadow-kiss. His first avowal, here. On such a night; moon-enchanted. Sybil had come to see him off. Her shadow clean-cut on the white wall. He took courage, bent and kissed the shadow of her face. She ran away. On such a night as this.

Why have I come back to the little gate, Annetta? Sybil's pale face, wilful, unyielding. Remote? No, near, and real, yet still all unknown. Can he give Sybil up? No, rather unlock that fast-shut heart, with love the key. Release her stifled soul. What is the secret sealing it? Ah dream of purity, unsoiled by instinct, real love! His love of Sybil, real love.

Why those meek eyes and too submissive lips, Annetta? No flame leaps in your all too docile flesh. Short-lived desire. Love without mystery, depth, horizons. With no to-morrow.

Annetta, let us forget those kisses, lightly given, lightly taken; let's be children again. Dear Annetta, little, lovely girl. Little sister!

Submissive lips, yes, but eager, too; moist, melting, clinging lips. Ah fatal, criminal desire, who shall deliver us from this body of desire?

Annetta, Sybil. Love rent in twain. Which? Why have to choose? I meant no wrong. Dual attraction; necessary, hallowed equilibrium. Twin impulses, equally legitimate, for they spring from the depth of my being. Why, in reality, irreconcilable? How pure it might be, under the free, broad light of day! Why this ban, if in my heart all is harmony?

Only one solution; one of the three must drop out. Which?

Sybil? Ah, vision unbearable—Sybil in pain; not Sybil. Annetta, then?

Annetta, *sorellina*, forgive me.

Not one without the other; well then—neither! Renouncement, oblivion, death. No, not death; death's likeness. Eclipse. Here a curse lies on all, an interdiction; the prison-house.

Here life and love are impossible. Good-bye.

Lure of the unknown, lure of a wholly new to-morrow, ecstasy. The past forgotten, take to the open road.

Turn away. Hurry to the station. The first train to Rome.

Rome, the first train to Genoa. Genoa, the first liner. To America; or to Australia.

Suddenly he laughs.

A woman, women? No, it's life I love. Forward!

JACK BAULTHY.

Antoine closed the magazine with a bang, crammed it into his pocket, and stood up. For a moment, dizzily, he blinked at the lights; then, feeling his head spinning, he sat down again.

While he was reading, the room had been emptying; the band had stopped, the billiard-players gone off to dinner. Alone in their corner the Jew and the *Droits de l'Homme* were finishing off a game of backgammon, under the pert eyes of the girl beside them. Her friend was puffing at a dead pipe; each time he threw the dice, the minx rubbed her head against the Jew-boy's shoulder with a little provocative giggle.

Antoine stretched his legs, lit a cigarette, and tried to set his thoughts in order. But for some minutes his mind kept wandering, like his gaze; there was no steadying it. The picture of Jacques and Gise kept rising before him; at last he thrust it aside, and regained some measure of calm.

The crucial problem was to draw a sharp dividing line between facts and fiction. That stormy interview between father and son, he was convinced, had actually taken place as Jacques described it. Some of the phrases used by the old judge, Seregno, rang obviously true. 'Huguenot intrigues.' 'I'll break you.' 'I'll cut you off.' 'I'll have you enlisted.' And the remark about a heretic 'bearing our name.' Antoine could almost hear his father's angry voice as he stood there raging on the terrace, hurling his curse into the darkness. And true, undoubtedly, was Giuseppe's threat: 'I am going to kill myself'—which at last explained M. Thibault's fixed idea. From the very start, he had always refused to believe that Jacques was still alive, and he

had telephoned four times a day to the Morgue. That too explained his remorse, his half-disclosed admission that he had been to blame for Jacques' disappearance. Quite conceivably this rankling self-reproach might have some connexion with the attack of albuminuria the old man had had just before the operation. In the light of these facts many events of the last three years took on a new complexion.

Antoine picked up the magazine and read again the dedication, written in Jacques' hand.

Did you not say to me on that famous November evening, 'Everything is subject to the influence of two poles; the truth is always double-faced'? So, sometimes, is love.

JACK BAULTHY.

Evidently, he mused, that would account for many things—the tangle Jacques had got into with those two love-affairs. If Gise was Jacques' mistress and, at the same time, he was so desperately in love with Jenny, life must have been infernally difficult for him. And yet . . .

Antoine could not help feeling that there remained something, elusive and obscure, which he so far had failed to grasp. Try as he might he could not bring himself to think that Jacques' departure was accounted for merely by what he had just learned of the boy's emotional dilemma. That desperate resolve must have been enforced by other circumstances as well, some sudden impact of imponderable factors.

Then all at once it struck him that these problems could very well stand over. The great thing now was to make the most of the clues he had just lit on, and to get on his brother's tracks as soon as possible.

It would be an obvious blunder to write directly to the offices of the review. That Jacques had given no sign of life proved that he was still determined to lie low. To risk letting him guess that his retreat had been detected, involved the danger that he might be prompted to move on again, and be lost sight of irretrievably. Yes, Antoine mused, there was only one way to a successful issue, and that was to launch a surprise attack, and in person—for he had no real confidence in anyone except himself.

Promptly he pictured himself alighting from the train at Geneva.

But what would he do, once there? Jacques might be living in London. No, the best thing would be first of all to send an enquiry agent to Switzerland, to ascertain Jacques' whereabouts. 'And then,' he murmured, rising from the table, 'I'll go and dig him out, wherever he is. If only I can take him by surprise, we'll see if he escapes me!'

That evening he gave his instructions to a detective bureau. Three days later he received the following document.

Private and Confidential.

M. Jack Baulthy is, as you surmised, resident in Switzerland. He is not living at Geneva, however, but at Lausanne, where we learn he has had several successive residences. Since April last he has been staying at the Pension Kammerzinn, No. 10, Rue des Escaliers-du-Marché.

We have not yet been able to verify the date on which he entered Swiss territory. Meanwhile, however, we have taken steps to discover his position as regards the military authorities.

From information elicited by private enquiries at the French Consulate we learn that M. Baulthy presented himself in January, 1912, at the military bureau of the said consulate, bringing various identity and other papers in the name of Jacques Jean Paul Oscar-Thibault, of French nationality, born in Paris in 1890. We were unable to procure a copy of his description on the military registration form (this description is, however, identical with that already cited), but we would inform you that the said form shows that M. Baulthy was granted a provisional exemption from military service on the ground of functional disorder of the heart, in 1910, under an order of the Board of Military Examiners, in Paris; and an extension of the said exemption, in 1911, in virtue of a medical certificate submitted in 1911 to the French Consul at Vienna. He underwent another medical examination at Lausanne in February, 1912; the decision of the Board was transmitted through the proper channels to the Recruiting Bureau of the Seine Department. A third extension was granted by the Bureau, and as a result he has nothing to apprehend from the French Authorities as regards the question of his military service.

We gather that M. Baulthy is leading a respectable life, and his friends are for the most part journalists and students. He is a registered member of the Swiss Press Club. The literary work he does for several daily papers and periodicals ensures him an honest livelihood. We are told that M. Baulthy writes under several names besides his own, which we shall be pleased to ascertain if further advices are received from you to that effect.

The report was marked *Urgent*; and was brought to Antoine on a Sunday at 10 p.m. by a special messenger from the Enquiry Bureau.

It was quite impossible for Antoine to leave the following morning, but M. Thibault's condition was such that he dared not delay. After consulting his engagement-book and the time-table, he decided to take the Lausanne express on Monday evening. All that night he did not sleep a wink.

6

THAT MONDAY was already bespoken as a particularly heavy day, but somehow Antoine, owing to his departure, had to fit into it several extra visits. He left for the hospital at an early hour and spent the rest of the day rushing to and fro in Paris, without even finding time to snatch a lunch at home. He did not get back till after seven in the evening. The train left at 8.30.

While Léon packed his suit-case, Antoine ran up to see his father, whom he had not visited since the previous day. There had been, he noticed, a definite change for the worse. M. Thibault had been unable to take food, was in a very weak state and in constant pain.

It was an effort for Antoine to greet him as usual with that cheery 'Hullo, father!' which acted on the old man as a never-failing tonic. He sat down in his usual chair and began putting the daily series of questions, eschewing like a pitfall the least interval of silence. Though outwardly he looked cheerful as ever, a thought kept running in his mind insistently: 'He is very near his end.'

Several times he was struck by the brooding gaze his father cast on him, dark with unuttered questions.

Antoine wondered how far the dying man guessed the truth as to his actual condition. M. Thibault often spoke with resignation and solemnity of his approaching end. But what did he really think in his heart of hearts?

For some minutes father and son, each absorbed in his unspoken thoughts—the same thoughts, very likely—exchanged trivial remarks about symptoms and the latest treatments. Then Antoine rose, remarking that he

had an urgent case to visit before dinner. M. Thibault, who was in pain, made no effort to detain him.

So far Antoine had let no one into the secret of his departure. His intention had been to tell no one but the nurse that he would be away for the next thirty-six hours. Unfortunately, when he was leaving the sick-room, she was busy with the invalid.

There was no time to lose. He waited some moments in the corridor; then, when she failed to appear, looked in on Mademoiselle de Waize, who was writing a letter in her room.

‘I’m so glad you’ve come, Antoine,’ she began at once. ‘You must lend me a hand! Do you know, a hamper of vegetables has somehow gone astray!’

He had immense difficulty in making her understand that he had been summoned to the country that night for an urgent case, that he would probably not be back next day, but that there was no need for anxiety; Dr. Thérivier had been informed of his departure and would come immediately, if necessary.

It was after eight; Antoine had not a minute to lose. He told the taxi-driver to make haste, and to the accelerated tempo of an adventure film, the Place du Carrousel, the sleek, black bridges and deserted quaysides scudded past the windows. For Antoine, who rarely travelled, there was a thrill in speeding thus across the darkness; the sense of sudden crisis, the myriad thoughts fermenting in his brain, and, most of all, the element of risk in his rash quest, had plunged him into an exciting world of high adventure.

The carriage in which his seat had been reserved was nearly full. In vain he tried to sleep. His nerves on edge, he began counting the stops. Towards the end of the night, when he was just dropping off, the engine emitted a long, lugubrious shriek; the train was slowing down for Vallorbe station. After the customs formalities, after queueing up in bleak, cold passages, and gulping down a cup of strong Swiss coffee, he abandoned hope of getting to sleep again.

The visible world was slowly taking form in the tardy December dawn. The train was following the bed of a valley, and dim hillsides loomed on either hand. No colour anywhere; in the harsh grey light the landscape showed like a charcoal sketch, all in blacks and whites.

Antoine’s gaze registered the scene impassively. Snow crowned the hilltops, and sprawled in slabs of melting whiteness along pitch-black ravines. Sudden shadows of tall fir-trees etched the grey slopes. Then all grew blurred; the train was passing through a cloud. Presently he had a

glimpse of open country studded everywhere with pin-point yellow lights glimmering through the mist, tokens of a thickly populated countryside and early-rising folk. Already clusters of houses were becoming visible, and as the tide of darkness ebbed, fewer lights shone in the buildings.

Gradually the blackness of the soil was fading into green, and soon the whole plain showed as a bright expanse of luxuriant meadows, streaked with white bands marking each fold of the ground, each watercourse and furrow. In the low farmhouses squatting on their crofts like broody hens, all the little window-shutters were swinging open. The sun had risen.

Gazing vaguely across the trembling pane, Antoine felt the melancholy of this foreign landscape colouring his mood. A sense of hopelessness came over him, and now the difficulties of his project seemed insuperable. Moreover, he was alarmingly conscious that after his sleepless night he was in the worst possible form to face them.

Meanwhile Lausanne was drawing near; the train was already passing through the suburbs. He gazed at the still, sleep-bound house-fronts; tiered with balconies, four-square and standing on its own ground, each block of flats looked like a miniature sky-scraper. Quite possibly behind one of those light-hued Venetian blinds, Jacques was getting up at this very moment.

The train stopped. An icy wind was sweeping the platform. Antoine shivered. The passengers were flocking down a subway. Dog-tired, his nerves in rags, his mind and will for once completely out of hand, he followed the crowd, wearily dragging his bag along, uncertain what step to take next. A notice, 'Wash and Brush-up. Baths. Cold Showers,' caught his eye. The perfect thing! A warm bath first to relax his muscles, followed by an invigorating shower. He could shave, too, and change his shirt. His last chance of getting in trim again.

His ablutions proved a wonder-working tonic; he left the bathroom feeling a new man. Hastening to the cloak-room, he deposited his bag there, and set out determinedly on his quest.

Rain was coming down in torrents. He jumped into a tram bound citywards. It was barely eight, but the shops were already open, and many people up and about, silently going their busy ways, in waterproofs and galoshes. Though there was no wheeled traffic in the street these people took care, he noticed, to keep to the pavements, which were crowded. 'An industrious, level-headed folk,' he observed to himself. Antoine was fond of rapid generalizations. Helped by his plan of Lausanne, he found his way to the little square beside the Town Hall. When he peered up at the belfrey, it

was striking half-past eight. The street where Jacques lived was at the far end of the square.

The Rue des Escaliers-du-Marché seemed to be one of the oldest streets in Lausanne. It was less a street, indeed, than a truncated alley, consisting of a steep ascent with houses only on the left. The little *rue* climbed tier by tier; facing the houses rose a wall ribboned by an ancient wooden staircase, which was roofed over with mediaeval timber-work painted a purplish red. This sheltered staircase offered a convenient observation-post, of which Antoine took advantage. The few houses in the alley followed an irregular alignment; they were small and tumble-down and the lower stories gave the impression of having served as hucksters' shops in, perhaps, the sixteenth century. A low doorway, overweighted by its lavishly carved lintel, gave access to No. 10. On one of the panels was a weather-worn inscription: *Pension J. K. Kammerzinn*. . . . So that was where Jacques lived.

After those three weary years without news, after feeling that the whole world lay between him and his brother, the thought that in a few minutes he would see Jacques again, came with an unexpected thrill. But Antoine had the knack of mastering emotion—his profession had schooled him well—and as he summoned up his energy, his thoughts grew lucid, untouched by feeling. 'Half-past eight,' he said to himself. 'He's at home presumably. Half-past eight—why, it's the usual time for police arrests! If he's in, I'll say I've an appointment and go straight into his room, unannounced.' Screening his face with his umbrella, he crossed the street with a decided step and climbed the two steps leading to the street-door.

A paved hall led up to an old-fashioned staircase, flanked by banisters; it was wide and well kept, but dark. There were no doors. Antoine began going up the stairs. Presently he heard a vague murmur of voices. When his head was above the level of the landing he saw, through the glass door of a dining-room, some ten or twelve boarders seated round a table. 'Lucky the stairs are so dark,' he thought. 'They can't see me.' Then: 'The boarders are having their breakfast. *He* isn't there yet. He'll be coming down.' And suddenly—yes, it was Jacques—his voice and intonation. He had just spoken. Jacques was there, living, large as life!

Antoine tottered and, gripped by a sudden panic, retreated hastily some steps back. His breath came in gasps; surging up from the depths, that rush of affection seemed flooding his lungs, suffocating him. A nuisance, all those strangers! What was he to do? Go away for a bit? No. He pulled himself together; as usual, difficulty was a rowel to his energies. There must be no delay; he must act promptly. He could see Jacques' profile only now and then because of the people round him.

A little old man with a white beard was sitting at the head of the table, five or six men of various ages were in the other seats; opposite the old man was a good-looking, fair-haired woman, still young, with a little girl on each side of her. Jacques was bending forward, speaking in quick, eager tones. He seemed at his ease amongst these people. Antoine, whose presence hovered like an instant threat over his brother's peace of mind, was struck by the unawareness of what the next instant is to bring, the insouciance, which attends the most critical moments of a lifetime. The others seemed interested in the discussion, the old man was laughing; Jacques appeared to be holding his own against two youths sitting opposite him. Twice, to emphasize a remark, he made that commanding gesture with his right hand which Antoine had forgotten. Unexpectedly, after a swift exchange of repartees, he smiled. Jacques' smile!

Then, without more ado, Antoine went up the steps again, walked to the glazed door and softly opened it, taking off his hat.

Ten faces swung round towards his, but he did not see them. He did not see the little old man rising from his chair to put a startled question. Gay and resolute, his eyes were fixed on Jacques, and Jacques returned his brother's gaze, his pupils large with wonder, his lips half parted. Cut short in the midst of a remark, he still had on his frozen features the look of merriment that had accompanied it, changed to an odd grimace. The deadlock lasted only a few seconds; Jacques rose to his feet, with one idea in his head—above all, to pass it off and to avoid any appearance of a 'scene'.

With hurried steps, with a clumsy effusiveness meant to give the impression that his caller was expected, he walked straight up to Antoine, who, playing his part, moved back towards the landing. Jacques joined him there, then closed the door behind him. Neither was conscious of shaking hands, though they must have done so, automatically. Neither could utter a word.

Jacques seemed to hesitate, made an awkward gesture, as if inviting Antoine to follow, and began walking upstairs.

Two, three flights of stairs. Jacques walked heavily up, clinging to the banisters, without looking back. Behind him, Antoine was feeling perfectly calm and collected; so much so that he was surprised at being so little moved. Indeed, there had been occasions in his life when he had asked himself not without a qualm: 'What's one to make of a composure so easily come by? Is it presence of mind, or just absence of emotion, callousness?'

On the fourth floor there was one door only; Jacques opened it. Once they were in the room he turned the key, and for the first time looked his brother in the eyes.

'What do you want of me?' he asked in a low, grating voice.

But the truculence of his gaze could not stand up against Antoine's affectionate smile; under his geniality, Antoine was shrewdly biding his time, willing to temporize, but prepared to hold his own. Jacques lowered his eyes.

'What do you want of me?' he repeated. The tone was bitterly indignant, but tremulous with apprehension, almost plaintive. Antoine was surprised at feeling so little stirred by it. He had to feign emotion.

'Jacques!' he murmured, drawing nearer. While he played his part, he was studying his brother with keen, observant eyes. Jacques' commanding presence surprised him, as did his general aspect and expression, all so changed from what they once had been, from what he had imagined.

Jacques' eyebrows contracted. Vainly he tried to control his feelings; it was all he could do to keep his lips closed on the sobs that welled up from his heart. Then suddenly his ill-temper passed out in a deep sigh, he seemed to give up the struggle, and, yielding to his weakness, let his forehead sink on Antoine's shoulder.

'Oh, Antoine,' he cried again, 'what do they want of me? Tell me!'

Antoine had an intuition that he must answer at once, and strike hard.

'Father is in a very bad way. He's dying.' After a pause he added. 'That's why I've come to fetch you, dear old chap.'

Jacques had not flinched. So his father was dying? But why suppose that in this new life he had carved out for himself his father's death could affect him, draw him forth from his retreat, or change one jot of the circumstances that had compelled him to leave home? Nothing in what Antoine had just said had deeply moved him; nothing except the last three words: 'Dear old chap!' What years since he had heard them!

The silence was so embarrassing that Antoine hastened to continue. 'I'm all by myself.' Then he had a sudden inspiration. 'Mademoiselle doesn't count, of course, and Gise is away in England.'

Jacques looked up. 'In England?'

'Yes, she's at a convent near London, studying for a diploma, and can't get away. I'm all alone, and I want your help.'

Though he was unaware of it, Jacques' dogged resistance had been shaken and, while as yet unformulated in his mind, the notion of a possible return had lost something of its sting. He drew away, took some faltering steps; then as though he preferred to let his mood of black despondency engulf him, he sank into the chair in front of his desk, burying his head in his hands, and broke into a storm of sobs. He did not feel the hand that Antoine laid on his shoulder. He was picturing this place of refuge he had so laboriously built up, in pride and solitude, stone by stone, during the last three years—falling in ruin. In the twilight of his thoughts there was enough clear vision left to face up to the inevitable, to see that any resistance on his part was bound to fail, that sooner or later he would have to go home, and his glorious isolation, if not his freedom, had come to an end—that the wisest was to come to terms with what must be. But his inability to resist made him choke with rankling despite.

Antoine had remained standing, keeping his eyes on his brother, in a thoughtful attitude, as though his affection were for the moment in abeyance. The sight of the bent back shaken with sobs brought to his mind Jacques' fits of despair in early youth; meanwhile, however, he was coolly weighing his chances. The longer the fit lasted, the better chance there was that Jacques would bring himself to yield. He had withdrawn his hand and, while he took stock of his surroundings, his brain was busy with a host of thoughts. The room, he noticed, was not merely clean, but cosy. Though the low ceiling showed that it was a converted attic, it was well-lit, spacious, and the colour-effect of limpid yellow was agreeable to the eye. Wax-hued and highly polished, the floor was emitting faint crackling sounds, due no doubt to the heat from the little white porcelain stove in which a log-fire roared cheerfully. There were two easy-chairs covered with a gay cretonne, and several tables strewn with newspapers and documents. Some books, not more than fifty in all, stood on a shelf above the still unmade bed. Not a single photograph, nothing to recall the past. Antoine's disapproval was tempered with a spice of envy.

He noticed that Jacques was growing calmer, and wondered if it meant that he had yielded, would come back to Paris. Actually Antoine had always been certain he would bring off his project. And now the flood-gates were open, a great wave of affection swept over him, an overpowering rush of love and pity, he would have liked to strain his unhappy young brother to his breast. Bending over the bowed back he whispered:

‘Jacques!’

With a brusque movement Jacques swung himself erect. Furiously he dried his eyes and glared at his brother.

‘You’re angry with me?’ Antoine asked.

No reply.

‘Father’s dying, you know,’ he continued, as though to excuse himself.

Jacques looked away.

‘When?’ His tone was curt, almost indifferent, but his eyes were haggard. He realized what he had just said, when he caught Antoine’s look.

‘When,’ he murmured, staring at the floor, ‘when . . . do you want to start?’

‘As soon as possible. His state’s alarming.’

‘To-morrow?’

Antoine hesitated. ‘This evening, if it can be managed.’

Their eyes met for a moment. Then Jacques shrugged his shoulders; tonight, to-morrow, what did it matter now?

‘The night express then,’ he agreed in a toneless voice.

Antoine understood that *their* departure had been settled. But he was still awaiting what he had desired with all his heart; actually he felt neither pleasure nor surprise.

Both were standing now, in the centre of the room. No sound came from the street; they might have been in the heart of the country. Rain was streaming down the steep-pitched roof and sudden gusts of wind came whistling under the loose tiles. And every moment the tension between them was increasing.

Antoine had a feeling that Jacques wished to be alone.

‘I expect you’ve plenty to do,’ he said. ‘I’ll go out for a bit.’

Jacques flushed. ‘Plenty to do? No, why should I?’ Hastily he sat down again.

‘Quite sure?’

Jacques shook his head.

‘In that case,’ Antoine remarked with a cordiality that rang false, ‘I’ll sit down too. We’ve lots to say to each other.’

What he really wanted was to ask questions, but his courage failed him. To gain time he launched out into a detailed and, despite himself, technical account of the various phases of their father’s illness. These details did not merely recall to his mind a hopeless case; they summoned up the sick-room,

the bed, and the dying, swollen, pain-racked body on it, the convulsed features and the piteous cries wrung from an agony which it was almost impossible to quell. And it was Antoine's voice now that trembled with emotion, while Jacques, hunched up in his chair, stared at the stove with a look of stubborn aloofness, as if to say: 'Father is dying and you've come to drag me away—well and good, I'll go. But ask no more of me.' At one moment Antoine fancied he saw Jacques unbend a little from his impassibility. It was when he described how he had heard through the door the sick man and Mademoiselle singing together the old nursery song. Jacques remembered the 'pretty pony' and, while his eyes remained fixed on the stove, a slow smile formed on his lips. A wan, far-away smile—exactly the smile he used to have as a little boy.

But, almost immediately after, when Antoine said in conclusion: 'After all the suffering he's been through, it will be a happy release,' Jacques, who till now had not said a word, remarked in a harsh, incisive voice:

'For us, undoubtedly.'

Antoine was too profoundly shocked to answer. In Jacques' callous attitude there was, he realized, a good deal of bravado, but behind it was only too apparent an animosity that would not be disarmed, and this hatred for a sorely afflicted, dying man was more than Antoine could stomach. To his mind it was unjust, and to say the least of it, quite ill-timed, as things were now. He remembered the evening when M. Thibault had shed tears, accusing himself of being responsible for his son's suicide. Nor could he forget the effect Jacques' disappearance had had on the old man's health. Grief and remorse might well have played a part in bringing on the nervous depression which had enabled the malady to take root, and but for which, perhaps, the present complications would not have developed so rapidly.

Then, as if he had been waiting impatiently for his brother to finish speaking, Jacques stood up abruptly and burst out with the question:

'How did you find out where I was?'

Evasion was impossible.

'Oh, through—through Jalicourt.'

'Jalicourt!' It seemed as if this was the last name he had expected. He repeated it syllable by syllable, incredulously. 'Ja-li-court?'

Antoine, who had taken out his pocket-book, quietly handed the letter from Jalicourt which he had opened to his brother. This seemed the simplest course; no verbal explanations would be needed.

Jacques took the letter and glanced over its contents; then going to the window, perused it carefully, his eyes half hidden by the lids, and his lips

tight-set, inscrutable.

Antoine was observing him. Surely Jacques' face, which three years earlier had still the undecided features of an adolescent, should not, clean-shaven as it was, now seem so very different? He scanned it with interest, puzzled to define exactly how it had changed. He found in it more energy, less pride, and less unrest as well; less obstinacy and more self-reliance. Jacques had certainly lost his charm, but he had gained in physique. His build was almost stocky; his shoulders had widened and his head, which had grown larger, seemed set too low between them. Jacques had a way of holding his head well back—giving an impression of pugnacity not to say of arrogance. His under-jaw was formidable, and, for all their melancholy droop, the lines of his mouth were firm and forceful. Indeed, what particularly struck Antoine was the changed expression of Jacques' mouth. His complexion was as pale as ever, with a few freckles over the cheekbones. Jacques' hair had changed colour—its auburn tint had darkened into brown—and, growing in a thick, unruly mop, it made the resolute features seem more massive still. A lock of hair, dark-brown with glints of gold, which Jacques was always pushing back impatiently, kept falling over his forehead, shadowing a portion of it.

Antoine saw the forehead twitching; two deep furrows had formed between Jacques' brows. He realized what a shock they must be for Jacques, all the thoughts that letter was evoking, nor was he in the least surprised when, letting the hand that held the letter drop to his side, his brother turned to him and muttered:

'I suppose you . . . you, too, have read my story?'

Antoine's only answer was a flutter of the eyelashes. The affection in his gaze—he was smiling less with his lips than with his eyes—gradually got the better of his brother's vexation. When Jacques spoke again it was in a less aggressive tone.

'And who . . . who else has read it?'

'No one.'

Jacques looked incredulous.

'No one else, I assure you,' Antoine said emphatically.

Jacques thrust his hands into his pockets, and said nothing. As a matter of fact, he was rapidly getting used to the thought that his brother had read *La Sorellina*, and would even have liked to hear his opinion of it. Personally he judged with severity this work, written in a mood of fiery exaltation—but a year and a half earlier. He believed he had made vast strides since that period, and he now found unbearable its 'experimentalism' and lyrical

effusion, its juvenile exuberance. The oddest thing was that he did not give a thought to its theme, so far as that theme linked up with his own life. Once he had transmuted past experience into terms of art, he felt that he had got it definitely out of his system. Whenever nowadays he chanced to think of those troublous times, it was to tell himself at once: 'Well, I've got over all that, thank goodness!'

Thus, when Antoine had said, 'I've come to fetch you,' his first response had been to reassure himself: 'Anyhow I've got over all that,' following it up with, 'What's more, Gise is away, in England.' For, if needs were, he could bear with being reminded of Gise, and hearing her name; only of the faintest allusion to Jenny was he fanatically intolerant.

For a moment he stood unmoving, silent, in front of the window, gazing into the distance. Then he turned again.

'Who knows that you've come here?'

'No one.'

This time he insisted. 'What about father?'

'I tell you, he knows nothing.'

'And Gise?'

'No. Nobody knows.' To reassure his brother still further, Antoine added: 'After what happened, and as Gise is in London, it's best for her to know nothing, for the present.'

Jacques was watching his brother; the glint of an unspoken question flickered in his eyes, died out.

Again there was a silence—Antoine had come to dread these silences; unhappily, the greater his desire to break the tension, the more an opening eluded him. Obviously a host of questions suggested themselves, but he dared not voice them. He kept on groping for some harmless, neutral topic which might pave the way for greater intimacy; no such theme presented itself.

The tension was growing strained to breaking-point when suddenly Jacques threw the window open, then stepped back from it. A superb Siamese tom-cat, dusky muzzle and thick cream-brown coat, sprang lithely down on to the floor.

'Ah, a visitor!' Antoine exclaimed with relief.

Jacques smiled. 'A friend. And the nicest kind of friend, an intermittent one.'

'Where does he come from?'

‘I’ve not been able to find out. From some distance, I imagine. No one in our street knows anything about him.’

The handsome cat made a lordly circuit of the room, purring like a German humming-top.

‘Your friend is soaked through,’ Antoine observed; he felt that dreaded silence on the point of closing in again.

‘Yes,’ Jacques said, ‘he usually honours me with a visit when it’s raining. Sometimes as late as midnight. He scratches on the pane, jumps in and does a brush-up in front of the stove. Once he’s done, he asks to be let out. I’ve never persuaded him to let me stroke him, still less to feed him.’

After his inspection of the room, the cat went back towards the window, which was still ajar.

‘Look!’ Jacques said almost cheerfully. ‘He didn’t expect to find you here; he’s off again.’

The cat sprang lightly on to the zinc window-sill and, without a look behind, was off along the tiles.

‘Your protégé is rather tactless,’ Antoine remarked half in earnest, ‘rubbing it into me like that—that I’m an intruder.’

Jacques went up to the window and shut it; a pretext for not replying. But when he turned round, his cheeks were scarlet. He fell to pacing slowly up and down the room.

Silence again, uneasy, hostile silence.

As a last resort, in the hope, presumably, of changing Jacques’ attitude, and because his mind was haunted by thoughts of the dying man, Antoine began speaking again of his father. He laid stress on the changes that had come over M. Thibault’s character since the operation, and went so far as to observe:

‘You’d judge him differently, perhaps, if you’d seen how he has aged, as I have, during these last three years.’

‘Perhaps,’ Jacques replied evasively.

But Antoine was not to be discouraged so easily.

‘In any case,’ he went on, ‘I’ve often wondered if you and I ever really understood what sort of man he was, at bottom.’ It struck him that he might describe to Jacques, while on this subject, a little incident which had befallen him quite recently. ‘You remember that hairdresser, Faubois, don’t you, in front of our place, next door to the cabinet-maker’s, just before you turn into the Rue du Pré-aux-Clercs?’

Jacques, who was walking to and fro with lowered eyes, stopped short. Faubois . . . that little side-street! It was like the sudden, blinding inrush of a world he had fancied out of mind for ever, into the dark seclusion he had deliberately sought. How vividly it all came back, down to the smallest detail: each slab of the pavement, every shop-front, the old cabinet-maker with his fingers stained walnut brown, the gaunt-faced man and his daughter who kept the curiosity shop, and then 'our place' (as Antoine called it), with its carriage entrance always kept ajar, and the concierge's quarters on the ground floor, and Lisbeth, and, further back in time, all the childhood he had abjured! Lisbeth, his first experience. At Vienna he had known another Lisbeth whose husband had killed himself out of jealousy. Suddenly he remembered he must warn Sophia, old Kammerzinn's daughter, that he was leaving.

Antoine was going on with his anecdote.

One day, Jacques gathered, being pressed for time, his brother had dropped in at Faubois' shop for a shave. The brothers had always refused to give their patronage to Faubois as this hairdresser had their father's custom, trimming his beard each Saturday. The old man, who knew Antoine well by sight, had at once begun talking to him about M. Thibault. And, little by little, Antoine, as he listened absent-mindedly, a towel round his neck, found to his amazement the old barber's gossip blocking out a portrait of his father far different from any he had anticipated. 'For instance,' Antoine said, 'he was always talking about us to Faubois. About you, especially. Faubois well remembers the day when "Monsieur Thibault's little lad"—that's you—passed his "matric." As he was going by, Father pushed the shop-door open and announced: "Monsieur Faubois, my youngster's got through his exam." "Pleased as Punch, your old dad was that day; it did one good to see it!" That's how Faubois put it. Surprising, isn't it? But what staggers me most is what's been happening—the change—in these last three years.'

A slight frown had settled on Jacques' face; Antoine wondered if he were not blundering. Still he had gone too far to stop.

'Yes. Ever since you left. I discovered finally that Father had never let the truth leak out, that he'd faked up a whole yarn to hoodwink everybody. Here's the sort of thing Faubois said to me that day. "There's nothing like foreign travel. Your father did well to send his young lad abroad, seeing he had the money to pay for it. Why, with the post, there ain't no trouble nowadays getting letters from anywhere on earth, and your father, he told me he got a letter each week from his young 'un, regular as clockwork."'

Antoine refrained from looking at Jacques, and decided to sheer off these memories that touched him too nearly.

‘Father used to talk to him about me, too. “My elder boy will be a Professor at the Medical College one of these days.” About Mademoiselle, too, and the maids. Faubois knows all about the household. About Gise, as well. By the way, that’s a curious thing; it seems that Father talked quite a lot about Gise. I gathered that Faubois used to have a daughter of about the same age; I believe she’s dead. He would say to Father, “My girl does so-and-so,” and Father’d cap it with, “My girl does so-and-so.” Would you believe it? Faubois reminded me of a great many things I’d forgotten and Father’d told him of—childish pranks, things Gise said when she was little. And there’s something else. I can quote the exact words Faubois used. “Your dad was always sorry he hadn’t had a daughter. ‘But,’ he says to me, ‘this little girl, she’s just like a daughter to me.’” Exactly that! Well, I can tell you, I was simply staggered! Yes, under all his gruffness Father had a heart—shy, perhaps, and over-sensitive—that no one ever dreamt of.’

Without a word, without once looking up, Jacques was still walking to and fro; though he rarely glanced in his brother’s direction, none of Antoine’s movements escaped him. He was not moved, but he was torn by violent, contradictory impulses. What was most painful to him by far, was the feeling that the past was breaking into his life inevitably, whether by force or with his free assent.

Confronted by Jacques’ silence, Antoine was losing heart; it seemed quite futile trying to get a conversation under way. He kept a close watch on his brother’s face, hoping against hope to catch some gleam of a responsive thought. But all he saw was gloomy, stubborn indifference. And yet he could not bring himself to feel resentful. Even with its aloofness from him, for all its dourness, that was the face he loved more than all other faces, his brother’s. And once again, though he dared not betray it by word or gesture, a wave of deep affection swept over him.

But now silence had set in again—oppressive, ineluctable. The only sounds were the ripple of water in the gutters, the crackling of the fire, and now and then the creak of a loose board as Jacques stepped on it.

Going up to the stove, he opened it and put in two logs; as he crouched before it, almost on his knees, he turned to his brother, who was following him with his eyes, and muttered in a surly tone:

‘You judge me harshly. But I don’t care; you’re wrong.’

‘But I don’t judge you, Jacques,’ Antoine hastened to put in.

‘I’ve a perfect right to be happy in my own way,’ Jacques went on. He drew himself up with a quick jerk, was silent for a moment, then added through his clenched teeth: ‘And here I’ve been completely happy.’

Antoine bent forward. 'Do you really mean that?'

'Yes. Completely.'

After each remark they gazed intently at each other for a moment. In their eyes was curiosity, but behind it loyalty, the deeper for its reticence.

'I believe you,' Antoine said. 'In any case, your leaving home . . . Still, there are so many things that I—well, that puzzle me.' He made haste to add: 'Don't think I want to blame you in the least, my dear Jacques . . .'

Then for the first time Jacques noticed his brother's smile. The Antoine he remembered had been so painfully strenuous, so aggressively the man of action, that the charm of that changed smile came as a surprise. Fearing perhaps to yield to his emotion, he clenched his fists and made a gesture of annoyance.

'Oh, Antoine, stop it! Don't talk about that any more!' Then, as if to qualify his outburst, added: 'For the present.' A look of real distress passed over his face; turning towards a dark corner of the room, he said in a low, veiled voice: 'You don't, you can't possibly understand . . .'

They were silent again; but the oppression had lifted from the air.

Antoine rose, and in a casual tone, which however he was careful not to overdo, enquired: 'Don't you smoke? I'm dying for a cigarette, if you don't mind.' He felt it necessary to keep the situation on an undramatic level; gradually, by cordiality and easy manners, to wean his brother from his churlishness.

He took a few puffs at his cigarette, then went to the window. Below him he saw the roofs of old Lausanne cataracting down towards the lake in an inextricable tangle of black humps and ridges, the outlines of which blurred into the vapour steaming off them. Coated with lichen, the tiled roofs looked sodden as rain-drenched felt. A range of mountains with the light behind them fretted the far horizon, their snow-caps gleaming white against the drab grey sky, and long pale streaks trailing down the leaden-hued slopes. It was as if a range of black volcanoes had erupted milk, depositing a creamy lava.

Jacques went up to him.

'Those are the Dents d'Oche,' he said, pointing towards the snow-caps.

Falling away in tiers, the city masked the nearer bank and, against the light, the further shore loomed through the veil of rain like a sheer cliff of darkness.

'So much for your charming lake!' Antoine remarked. 'To-day it looks more like the Channel in a squall.'

Jacques vouchsafed a fleeting smile. He stayed unmoving, at the window, unable to take his eyes off the far bank; lost in a daydream, he was picturing its green woods and villages, the fleets of little boats moored along the piers, the winding paths leading to rustic inns perched on the mountain-side. There he had wandered, lived adventurously, and now he was to leave it all—for how long? he wondered.

Antoine tried to divert his attention. 'I'm sure you've heaps to do this morning. Especially if——.' He was going to say, 'if we're to leave to-night,' but thought better of it.

Jacques shook his head pettishly. 'No, I've nothing to do. I tell you I'm quite independent. Everything's as simple as daylight when one lives alone—when one keeps . . . free.' The word seemed to linger on the air after he had spoken it. Then the cheerfulness went out of his voice; gazing fixedly at his brother, he sighed: 'But of course you can't understand.'

Antoine wondered what sort of life Jacques might be leading at Lausanne. 'There's his writing, obviously. But what does he live on?' He made some guesses at it, then by way of giving expression to his thoughts, remarked in a careless tone:

'Really, now that you've come of age you might have claimed your share of what mother left us.'

A gleam of amusement lit Jacques' eyes. He all but put a question. For a moment he felt a slight regret; yes, on occasion, there'd been jobs he would have gladly forgone! At the Tunis docks, in the *Adriatica* basement at Trieste, in the *Deutsche Buchdruckerei* at Innsbruck. But the feeling passed at once, and the thought that M. Thibault's death would make him definitely well off did not even cross his mind. No! He did not need them, or their money. He could stand on his own feet.

'How do you manage?' Antoine ventured to ask. 'Have you any trouble in earning enough to live on?'

Jacques cast a glance round the room. 'You can see for yourself,' he said.

Antoine could not refrain from asking a direct question.

'But what exactly do you do?' he asked.

The stubborn, secretive look came back to Jacques' face. His brows knitted, then grew smooth again.

'Don't imagine,' Antoine hastened to explain, 'that I'm trying to poke my nose into your affairs. There's only one thing, dear old chap, that I want, and it's for you to make the most of your life, to be happy.'

‘Happy!’ Jacques sounded almost startled. It was as if he had said: ‘I—happy! What an idea!’ Then hastily he added in an exasperated tone: ‘Oh, do drop it, Antoine. You’d never really understand.’ He tried to smile, took a few uncertain steps, then went back to the window and stared vaguely out across the lake. Seemingly unconscious that it contradicted his exclamation of a moment past, he murmured: ‘I’ve been completely happy here. Completely!’

He glanced at his watch and, without giving Antoine time to put in another word, remarked:

‘I’d better introduce you to old Kammerzinn. And to his daughter, if she’s in. Then we’ll go and have lunch. Not here; somewhere outside.’ He had opened the stove again and was replenishing it as he spoke. ‘He used to be a tailor. Now he’s a town-councillor. A keen trade-unionist, too. He has started a weekly paper which he runs almost single-handed. A very decent old chap, you’ll find.’

They found Kammerzinn sitting in his over-heated office. He was in his shirt-sleeves, busy correcting proofs. The old man wore curious rectangular glasses with gold stems, supple as hairs, coiling round his small, fleshy ears. Sharp-witted for all his airs of guilelessness, inclined to rant, but with a redeeming twinkle in his eye, he had a way of looking his interlocutor full in the face, above the gold-rimmed lenses, chuckling to himself. He sent for beer at once. He started by addressing Antoine as ‘My dear sir,’ a moment later it was ‘My dear boy.’

Jacques informed him briefly that his father’s health obliged him to absent himself ‘for some time’; he was leaving that night, but would keep his room on, paying the month’s rent in advance, and would leave ‘all his things’ in it. Antoine heard without moving a muscle.

Waving in the air the sheets he was correcting, old Kammerzinn launched into a voluble harangue about a project for co-operative printing of the various ‘Party’ newspapers. Jacques seemed interested and put in suggestions. Antoine listened. It looked as if Jacques were in no hurry to be alone with him again. Or was he waiting for someone who did not appear?

At last he made a move.

OUT in the street a bitter wind was blowing, driving before it flurries of melting snow.

‘It’s turned to sleet,’ Jacques said.

He was trying to be less taciturn. As they walked down a flight of wide stone steps flanking a public building, he volunteered the information that this was the University. His tone implied a certain pride in the city of his choice. Antoine duly admired. But the alternating blasts of icy rain and snow made them little inclined to linger out-of-doors.

At the junction of two narrow streets, thronged with pedestrians and cyclists, Jacques made straight for a row of large windows along the pavement; the only indication of the nature of the premises was an inscription on the glass entrance-door in white capitals:

GASTRONOMICA

Panelled in old oak, the interior gleamed everywhere with beeswax. The proprietor, a fat, active, red-faced man, puffing and blowing but obviously well pleased with himself, his health, his staff and cheer, was fussing round his customers, treating them all like unexpected guests. The walls were plastered with black-letter devices such as ‘Our motto: Honest Fare, not Chemicals,’ and ‘At Gastronomica, no dry Mustard on the Rims of Mustard-pots.’

Jacques, who since the interview with Kammerzinn and his walk in the rain had been seeming less on edge, smiled amiably at his brother’s amused interest. It was quite a surprise to him to find Antoine so eager to observe the world around him, taking stock so zestfully of every little touch of ‘local colour,’ so avid of peculiarities.

In earlier days, when the brothers happened to dine together in the restaurants of the Latin Quarter, Antoine had never noticed anything; the first thing he always did had been to prop against the carafe on the table some medical journal.

Antoine was conscious that Jacques was watching him.

‘Do you find me changed?’ he asked.

Jacques made an evasive gesture. Indeed Antoine seemed to him greatly changed. But how? Most likely during the last three years he had forgotten many of his brother’s traits; now he was rediscovering them one by one. The way Antoine squared his shoulders, spread his fingers out when he was making an explanation, the flicker of his eyelids—each little movement came suddenly back to him; it was like coming on a once familiar picture the memory of which had vanished with the years. But there were other

characteristics that baffled him, for they did not fit in with anything remembered: the general expression on his face, his attitude, his calmness and conciliatory disposition, the absence of hardness and impatience in his eyes. All that was new to Jacques. He tried to explain it in a few stumbling phrases. Antoine smiled. That was Rachel's doing. For several months that passionate adventure had stamped his face—till now inapt for any show of happiness—with a kind of gay self-confidence, even, perhaps, the complacency of the favoured lover; and those months had left their trace for good.

The food was excellent; the beer light and well-iced; the atmosphere congenial. Antoine displayed a cheerful interest in the local specialities; he had noticed that his uncommunicative brother unbent more readily when talking on such subjects. All the same whenever Jacques opened his mouth he seemed to be flinging himself, desperately, into the conversation. The words came with an obvious effort, in jerks; then, on occasion, for no apparent reason, they would pour out in a torrent, cut by sudden silences. And all the time his eyes were boring into Antoine's.

'No, Antoine!' he exclaimed. His brother had just made a humorous comment. 'You're quite wrong if you think . . . I mean, it's not fair to say the Swiss are like that. I've seen a lot of other countries, and I can assure you . . .'

The involuntary look of curiosity on Antoine's face cut him short. Presently, perhaps regretting the access of ill-humour, he went on, of his own accord.

'That chap over there, on our right, is far more typical, really—I mean the one who's talking to the proprietor. A pretty good specimen of the Swiss man-in-the-street. His look, his way of behaving, his voice . . .'

'Which sounds,' Antoine put in, 'as if he'd a cold in the head.'

'No,' Jacques expostulated with a slight frown. 'It's a rather slow, drawling voice, the voice of someone who thinks deeply. But what's most striking is his look of being sufficient unto himself, always minding his own business. That's thoroughly Swiss. Also that air of feeling secure, always and everywhere.'

'He has intelligent eyes,' Antoine conceded, 'but oh, what a lack of any sort of animation!'

'Well, at Lausanne, there are thousands and thousands like him. From morn till night, without wasting a second, without fluster, doing what they have to do. They may run up against other modes of life, but they take no

part in them. They rarely cross their frontiers; at every instant of their lives they are wholly taken up with what they're doing or will do a moment later.'

Antoine listened without interrupting; his attentiveness rather intimidated Jacques, but encouraged him too. And it gave him a secret feeling of importance which made him more loquacious.

'You talked of animation just now,' he said. 'People think the Swiss are "heavy." That's easily said, but false. They've a different mentality from—from yours. More compact, perhaps. Almost as supple, when in action. Not heavy—but *stable*. Which is a very different thing.'

'What surprises me,' Antoine said, taking a cigarette from his case, 'is to see you of all people so much at home in this hive of industry.'

'Why shouldn't I be?' Jacques moved aside the empty cup he had just missed upsetting. 'I've lived everywhere, you know; in Italy, Germany, Austria . . .'

Antoine, his eyes fixed on his watch, ventured to add, without looking up:

'And in England?'

'No. Why in England?'

For a moment, in silence, each tried to read the other's thoughts. Antoine was still looking down. Puzzled though he was, Jacques went on.

'Well, I'm sure I'd never have been able to settle down in any of those countries. It's impossible to work in them. One's always at fever-heat. This is the only place where I've found my equilibrium.'

Indeed just then he seemed to have achieved a certain poise. He was sitting aslant, in what seemed to be a frequent attitude of his, with his head bent to one side, the side on which was the unruly lock—as if his brows were overburdened by the mass of hair. His right shoulder was thrust forward. All the upper portion of his body seemed buttressed by his right arm, with its hand solidly planted on his thigh. His left elbow rested lightly on the table and the fingers of the left hand were toying with the bread-crumbs on the cloth. It was a man's hand now, sinewy, expressive.

He was thinking over what he had just said. 'Yes, these people are restful.' There was a note of gratitude in his voice. 'Obviously, that stolidity of theirs is only on the surface. There are passions in the air here, as in other countries. But, you see, emotions which day in day out are so well kept in hand, aren't very dangerous. Not so contagious, I mean.' Suddenly he flushed, and added in a low voice: 'For, in these last three years, you know _____.'

He paused, nicked back the lock of hair with a quick gesture, and shifted his position.

Antoine did not stir, but swept his eyes over his brother's downcast face. In his look there was a tacit invitation; at last, perhaps, Jacques was going to say something about himself.

Deliberately Jacques changed the subject, rising from the table.

'It's still pouring,' he said. 'But we'd better be getting back, hadn't we?'

As they were leaving the restaurant, a passing cyclist jumped off his machine and ran up to Jacques.

'Have you seen anyone from over there?' he panted, without a word of greeting. The mountaineer's cape which he was wresting from the wind, his arms locked tightly over his chest, was drenched.

'No,' Jacques replied, without betraying any sign of surprise. 'Let's go in there,' he added, pointing to a building, the street-door of which stood open. Antoine, out of discretion, lingered behind; Jacques, however, turned and called to him. Still, when they were together in the doorway, he made no introductions.

With a toss of his head the cyclist jerked back the hood covering his eyes. He was a man in the thirties, and, despite the somewhat abrupt way in which he had accosted them, his expression was mild, almost over-affable. His face was reddened by the biting wind, and across it ran a streak of livid white, the trace of an old scar that, half closing his right eye, slanted up across the eyebrow, and disappeared under his hat-brim.

'They're always falling foul of me,' he said in an excited tone, paying no heed to Antoine's presence. 'And I don't deserve that, do I now?' He seemed to attach particular importance to Jacques' verdict. Jacques made a calming gesture. 'Why do they go on like that? They say it was done by paid agents. Why blame me? Anyhow, now they're well away, they know they won't be informed against.'

'Their scheme can't work out,' Jacques said decisively, after a moment's thought. 'It's a choice of two things; either——.'

'Yes, yes,' the man broke in, with a fervour, a thankfulness, that came as a surprise. 'Yes, that's exactly it! Only we must mind the political papers don't put a spoke in our wheel before we're ready.'

'Sabakin will be off the moment he scents trouble,' Jacques replied, lowering his voice. 'So, you'll see, will Bisson.'

'Bisson? Well, possibly.'

'But—how about those revolvers?'

‘Oh, that’s easily accounted for. Her former lover bought them at Basel, when a gunsmith’s shop was sold up, after the owner’s death.’

‘Look here, Rayer,’ Jacques said. ‘You mustn’t count on me for the present; I can’t do any writing from here for some time to come. Go and see Richardley. Get him to hand over the papers to you. Tell him you’re acting for me. If he needs a signature, he can ring up MacLair. Got it?’

Rayer clasped Jacques’ hand without replying.

‘What about Loute?’ Jacques asked, still holding Rayer’s hand.

Rayer dropped his eyes. ‘I can’t do anything about it,’ he replied with a timid laugh. Then, looking up, he muttered ragefully: ‘No, I can’t do a thing. I love her.’

Jacques dropped Rayer’s hand, was silent for a moment, then said gruffly: ‘And where’s it all going to land you, the two of you?’

Rayer sighed. ‘It was such a terribly hard birth, she’ll never get over it; anyhow, never-well enough to do any work.’

‘Do you know what she said to me?’ Jacques broke in. ‘“If I’d an ounce of pluck, there’d be a way out sure enough.”’

‘There you are! That’s how it is, and I can’t do a thing, not a thing, about it!’

‘What about Schneeback?’

The man made an angry gesture, and a gleam of hatred kindled in his eyes.

Jacques’ fingers closed tightly on Rayer’s arm.

‘Where will all that land you, Rayer?’ he repeated sternly.

The other man gave an impatient jerk of his shoulders. Jacques withdrew his hand. There was a pause, then Rayer raised his right arm with a certain solemnity.

‘For us, as for them, death is waiting round the corner—and that’s all there is to it,’ he said in a low voice. Then added with a little soundless laugh, as if what he was going to say was childishly self-evident: ‘Otherwise the living would be the dead, and the dead alive!’

Gripping his cycle by the seat, he swung it up with one arm. The scar across his face turned an angry red. Then he drew the hood of his cape over his face, like a cowl, and held out his hand.

‘Thanks. I’ll see Richardley. You’re a damned fine chap, Baulthy, one of the best.’ He sounded cheerful, sure of himself again. ‘Yes, just meeting you almost reconciles me with the world—with men and books, even the newspapers. *Au revoir.*’

Though he had not the least idea what it was all about, Antoine had not missed a word of the conversation. From the start he had been struck by the attitude of the man who had just left them. He was obviously a good deal older than Jacques, yet treated him with the affectionate deference usually shown to seniors. But what had most impressed, indeed dumbfounded him, during the interview, was the change in Jacques' appearance; not only had the wrinkles left his forehead, not only was no trace of sulkiness left, but he gave an impression of ripened wisdom and indeed authority. For Antoine it was a revelation. For some minutes he had had a glimpse of an entirely unknown Jacques, of whose existence he had never had an inkling—yet this undoubtedly was the real Jacques for all the world, the Jacques of to-day.

Rayer had mounted his cycle, and, without troubling to bid Antoine good-bye, rode off between two sudden spurts of mud.

9

THE two brothers moved on; Jacques did not volunteer the slightest comment on this meeting. In any case, the wind which forced its way under their clothes and seemed bent especially on playing havoc with Antoine's umbrella, made any attempt at conversation almost hopeless.

Just when things were at their worst, however, as they came out into the Place de la Riponne—a spacious esplanade where all the winds of heaven seemed to be running riot—Jacques, impervious to the pelting rain, suddenly slackened his pace and asked:

'Tell me, when we were at the restaurant just now, what led you to mention . . . England?'

Antoine was conscious of an aggressive intent behind the question. Ill at ease, he mumbled a few vague words which were swept away by the wind.

'What's that, you say . . . ?' Jacques had not caught a single word. He had drawn closer and was walking crab-wise, thrusting his shoulder forward like a prow breasting the windstream. The questioning look he bent upon his brother was so insistent that Antoine, brought to bay, scrupled to tell a lie.

'Well—er—on account of the red roses, you know,' he confessed.

The tone in which he spoke was rougher than he had intended it to be. Again the memory of Giuseppe and Annetta's passion had forced itself upon his thoughts; he seemed to see her stumbling, falling upon the grass, and the attendant horde of visions, only too familiar now, yet unbearable as ever, surged through his imagination. Annoyed and irritable, raging against each gust of wind that buffeted him, he swore aloud and angrily snapped-to his umbrella.

Dumbfounded, Jacques had come to a sudden halt; he was evidently miles from expecting such an answer. Then, biting his lips, he took a few steps without saying a word. . . . How often had he not already lamented that moment of incredible sentimentality, and regretted the sending of that basket of roses, bought abroad through an obliging friend—an incriminating message, proclaiming to all and sundry: 'I am alive and my thoughts are with you'—at the very time when he wished to be looked upon as dead and buried by all his family! But it had at least been possible for him, until now, to believe that his rash act had been kept a profound secret. Such indiscreetness on the part of Gise, unexpected and incomprehensible as it was for him, provoked him beyond measure. Nor could he now restrain his bitterness.

'You've missed your calling,' he sneered. 'You were born to be a detective!'

Annoyed by the tone in which he was addressed, Antoine flared up.

'My dear fellow,' he replied, 'when a man's so keen on keeping his private life a secret, he should not flaunt it publicly in the pages of a magazine.'

Stung to the quick, Jacques shouted in his face:

'Really? Do you mean to say it was my story that informed you of my sending those flowers?'

Antoine was no longer master of himself.

'No,' he replied, with feigned composure, and added, spacing the syllables, in a biting voice: 'But anyhow it did enable me to appreciate the full meaning of the gift.'

Having launched this retort, he forged ahead in the teeth of the wind.

But, immediately, the feeling of having blundered past recall came over him so overpoweringly that it took his breath away. Just a few words too many and everything was in jeopardy: he would now lose Jacques once for all. . . . Why had he suddenly lost control of himself, given way to that outburst of temper? Because Gise was concerned, most likely. And what was to be done now? Have it out with Jacques, apologize to him? Probably it

was too late. Well, he could only try; he was prepared to make all possible amends.

He was about to turn to his brother and as affectionately as possible admit he was in the wrong, when suddenly he felt Jacques lay hold of his arm and cling to him with all his might: an impassioned, utterly unexpected hug, a rough, brotherly embrace, doing away in one second, not only with the acid remarks that had passed between them, but with the whole of the three long silent years they had spent apart from each other. Then a broken voice faltered, close to Antoine's ear.

'Why, Antoine, what can you have imagined? Did you really suppose that Gise—that I——? You thought that possible . . . ? You must be dreaming!'

They gazed deep into each other's eyes. Jacques' eyes were sorrowful now, and younger-looking; and over his cheeks offended modesty sent a wave of indignation to mingle with his sorrow. To Antoine it came as an all-healing revelation. Joyfully he pressed his brother's arm against his side. Had he really suspected the two young people? He could no longer tell. He thought of Gise with intense emotion, and a sense of relief, of deliverance, of splendid happiness came over him. At last he had found his long-lost brother.

Jacques remained silent. A flood of painful memories had come back to him; that evening at Maisons-Laffitte, when he had discovered both the love of Gise and the unconquerable physical attraction she awoke in him—that brief, shrinking kiss, snatched in the dark under the lime-trees, the girl's romantic gesture as she strewed rose-petals over the spot where that shy token of love had passed between them.

Antoine, too, was silent. He would have liked to say something, but he felt tongue-tied and self-conscious. He did, however, attempt by a pressure of his arm to convey some such message to Jacques as: 'Yes, I've been a damned fool—and how glad it makes me!' His brother reciprocated the pressure. And they understood each other better, that way, than by the spoken word.

They walked on, arm in arm, under the rain. The over-affectionate, unduly prolonged contact was making both of them uncomfortable, but neither dared to be the first to break away. Then, as they came under cover of a wall that screened them from the wind, Antoine put up his umbrella again; thus it seemed as though they had drawn together for the shelter it afforded.

They reached the boarding-house without having spoken another word. But just outside the door, Antoine stopped short, unlinked his arm and observed in a natural voice:

‘I say, you certainly have lots of things to attend to here. I’d better leave you, hadn’t I? I’ll take a stroll round the town.’

‘In this sort of weather?’ Jacques asked. He was smiling, but Antoine had caught a fleeting hesitation. As a matter of fact, both were dreading the long afternoon alone together. ‘No,’ he added, ‘I’ve two or three letters to write, a twenty minutes’ job, and perhaps a business call to pay before five. That’s all.’ The prospect seemed to cast a gloom upon his features. With an effort he drew himself up. ‘Till then I’m quite free. Let’s go upstairs.’

While they were away, the room had been tidied up. There was a roaring fire in the stove. They helped each other off with their overcoats, hung them up to dry before the fire.

One of the windows had remained open. Antoine stepped over to it. Among the multitude of roofs sloping down to the lake a pinnacled tower rose high aloft, its lofty spire coated with verdigris and gleaming under the rain. He pointed to it.

‘That’s Saint Francis’ church,’ Jacques said. ‘Can you make out the time?’

On one side of the steeple glowed a red-and-gold clock-face.

‘A quarter-past two.’

‘Lucky fellow! My eyesight’s grown very bad. And I simply can’t get used to wearing spectacles, on account of my headaches.’

‘Your headaches?’ Antoine exclaimed, closing the window. He turned round abruptly. His look of professional interrogation made Jacques smile.

‘Why yes, doctor. I had a bout of fearful headaches and I haven’t quite got over them.’

‘What kind of headaches?’

‘A throbbing there.’

‘Is it always on the left side?’

‘No.’

‘Any giddiness? Any trouble with your eyes?’

‘It’s nothing, really.’ Jacques was beginning to be embarrassed by his brother’s questions. ‘I’m much better, now.’

‘Better, be damned!’ Antoine was not to be put off so easily. ‘Look here, I’ll have to give you a thorough overhaul. . . . Your digestion, for one thing, how’s it working?’

Though he had obviously no intention of starting the ‘overhaul’ at once, he unconsciously came a step nearer Jacques, who could not help drawing back slightly. He was no longer used to having people fuss over him. The slightest attention seemed an encroachment on his independence. Almost at once, however, he began to remonstrate with himself. Indeed, his brother’s concern had left behind it a comforting sensation, as though a gentle warmth had breathed upon some secret fibre of his being that had long lain atrophied, inert.

‘You never used to have any trouble of that kind in the old days,’ Antoine remarked. ‘How did it start?’

Jacques, who was sorry to have shrunk back as he had, did his best to answer, to explain things more clearly. But dare he tell the truth?

‘It came on after some kind of illness; quite a sudden attack, it was—perhaps it was the flue, or it may have been a touch of malaria. . . . I was about four weeks in hospital.’

‘In hospital? Where?’

‘At . . . Gabès.’

‘At Gabès? That’s in Tunisia, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, I was delirious, it appears. And for months afterwards I had frightful pains in my head.’

Antoine made no reply, but he was obviously saying to himself: What an idea, when one has a comfortable home of one’s own, in Paris, and is the brother of a doctor, to run the risk of dying like a dog in an African hospital!

‘What saved me,’ Jacques went on, hoping to turn the conversation into a different channel, ‘was fear. The fear of dying in that furnace-heat. I thought of Italy as a shipwrecked sailor, on his raft, must think of land, of wells and running streams. . . . I had only one idea in my head: dead or alive to get on board the steamer, to escape to Naples.’

Naples. . . . Antoine’s thoughts reverted to Lunadoro, to Sybil, to Giuseppe’s boating trips in the bay.

‘Why Naples?’ he ventured to ask.

Jacques flushed up. He seemed to be struggling to say something by way of explanation; then his steel-blue eyes grew hard.

Antoine hastened to break the silence.

‘What you needed, to my mind, was just rest, but in some bracing climate.’

‘To Naples, first,’ Jacques repeated. Obviously he had not been listening. ‘I had a letter of introduction to a man in the Consulate. You see, it’s easier

to get a postponement of one's military service when one is abroad.' He straightened his shoulders. 'And, besides, I'd rather have been reported as a deserter than go back to France to be boxed up in their barracks!'

Antoine gave no sign of disapproval. He changed the subject.

'But had you—had you the money for your fares?'

'What a question! That's you all over!'

He started walking up and down the room with his hands in his pockets.

'I was never very long without money, just the needful, I mean. At first, of course, out there, I had to turn my hand to anything that cropped up.'

He flushed again, and looked away. 'Oh! that was only for a few days. One finds one's feet pretty soon, you know.'

'But what on earth did you do?'

'Well, for instance, I used to give French lessons in an industrial training-school. Then proof-reading, at night, for the *Courrier Tunisien* and the *Paris-Tunis*. It often did me a good turn to be able to write Italian as fluently as French. Fairly soon, they began to publish articles of mine. Then I was given the Press summary to do for a Weekly, and the news items, all the odd jobs, in fact. And after that, as soon as I was able to manage it, I got a reporter's job.' His eyes sparkled. 'That was something like a job, and if only my health had held up, I'd still be at it. What a life! I remember, one day, at Viterbo . . . Look here, do sit down. No, personally I'd rather go on walking. I was sent to Viterbo, as no one else dared to go there, for that fantastic Camorra case—you remember that, I suppose? In March 1911, it was. What an experience! I put up with some Neapolitans. A regular den of thieves, I must say. During the night of the 13th they all decamped. When the police turned up, I was sound asleep, alone in the house. I had to . . .'

He broke off in the middle of the sentence, in spite of Antoine's sustained attention—on account of it, perhaps. How could mere words convey even a faint idea of the breathless life he had led, for months on end? Though his brother's questioning eyes urged him to go on, he dropped the thread of his reminiscences.

'How far away it all seems! Oh, let it go! Let's talk of something else. . . .'

He was conscious that these evocations of the past were laying their spell on him, and to break it, he forced himself to go on speaking. He continued in a calm, detached voice:

'What were you asking me about? Ah yes, those pains in my head. Well, you see, Italy in the spring never agreed with me. As soon as I was able, the

moment I was free——’ He stopped, frowning; once again, it seemed, he had come up against distressing memories. ‘As soon as I was able to get away from it all,’ he went on, with a violent swing of his arms, ‘I travelled northwards.’

He had come to a stop, looking down at the stove, with his hands in his pockets.

‘To Northern Italy?’ his brother asked.

‘No!’ Jacques exclaimed. A tremor ran through his body.

‘Vienna, Budapest; then Saxony, Dresden. And after that, Munich.’

His face suddenly became overcast; this time he darted a sharp glance at his brother and really seemed to be on the verge of speaking out; his lips moved slightly. But after a few seconds he made a wry face, and merely muttered, clenching his teeth so tightly that the last words were almost inaudible:

‘Ah, Munich! Munich, too, is a dreadful place, simply appalling.’

Antoine cut him short hastily.

‘Anyhow, you should . . . Until we’ve ascertained the cause . . . Headache isn’t a disease, of course, but only a symptom.’

But Jacques was not listening and Antoine fell silent. Several times before the same thing had happened: one could have sworn that Jacques suddenly felt the need to unbosom himself of some rankling secret, and then, all of a sudden, it seemed as if the words stuck in his throat, and he stopped short. And each time, Antoine, inhibited by some absurd apprehension, instead of helping his brother over the jump, shied off the topic, turning away stupidly on a side-track.

He was wondering how he could best bring back Jacques into the straight, when a patter of light footsteps sounded on the staircase. There was a knock. The door half-opened almost immediately and Antoine had a glimpse of an untidy mop of hair and a boyish face.

‘Oh! I beg your pardon. Am I in the way?’

‘Come in,’ Jacques said, walking across the room.

On a better view, the caller proved to be not a boy, but an undersized clean-shaven man of no definite age, with a cream-white complexion and tousled, tow-coloured hair. He hung back for a moment in the doorway, and seemed to dart a timorous glance towards Antoine, but the pale lashes fringing his eyes were so thick that the movements of the pupils were hidden.

‘Come over to the stove,’ Jacques said and helped the visitor off with his dripping overcoat.

Again he seemed set upon not introducing his brother. Still he wore an entirely unconstrained smile, and appeared to be by no means put out by Antoine’s presence.

‘I came to tell you that Mithoerg has arrived. He is bringing a letter,’ the new-comer explained. He had a jerky, sibilant voice, but spoke now in a low, almost apprehensive tone.

‘A letter?’

‘From Vladimir Kniabrovski.’

‘From Kniabrovski!’ Jacques exclaimed, his features lighting up. ‘Sit down, you look tired. Will you have a glass of beer? Or a cup of tea?’

‘No, thank you, nothing at all. Mithoerg arrived during the night. He has come from over there. . . . So what am I to do? What do you advise me to do? Shall I have a try?’

Jacques thought it over for some little time before answering.

‘Yes. It’s now the only way of finding out.’

The other man grew excited.

‘Capital! Capital! I thought as much. Ignace advised me not to, and so did Chenavon. But you know better. Good work!’

He stood facing Jacques, his little face radiant with trustfulness.

‘Only—mind!’ Jacques put in severely, lifting an admonitory finger.

The albino nodded assent.

‘By kindness—that’s the way,’ he declared solemnly. An iron determination was discernible in that frail body.

Jacques was observing him intently.

‘You haven’t been ill, have you, Vanheede?’

‘No, no. Just a bit run down. I feel so uncomfortable, you know, in that big shanty of theirs!’ he added with a wry smile.

‘Is Prezel still there?’

‘Yes.’

‘And Quilleuf? Tell Quilleuf from me that he talks too much. Just that, eh? He’ll understand.’

‘Oh, Quilleuf! I told him straight “You behave, the whole of you, just as if you were the scum of the earth, yourselves.” He tore up Rosengard’s proclamation without so much as reading it! Everything’s putrid in that

group. Yes, everything's putrid,' he repeated in a hollow, indignant voice, while at the same time an indulgent, angelic smile lit up the girlish lips.

In a high-pitched sibilant tone he went on: 'Saffrio! Tursey! Paterson! Every one of them. And even Suzanne! They stink of rottenness!'

Jacques shook his head.

'Josepha, perhaps, but not Suzanne. Josepha, mind you, is a despicable creature. She'll set you all by the ears.'

Vanheede had been watching him silently, sliding his doll-like hands over his diminutive knees, bringing into view fantastically pale and fragile wrists.

'I know. But what is to be done about it? We can hardly consign her to the gutter at this time of day. Would *you* do so, tell me now? Is that a reason? She's a human being, when all's said and done, and one that isn't bad through and through. And she has put herself under our protection, after all. Something can be done, surely. By kindness, perhaps, by kindness. How many such creatures haven't I met in the course of my life!' he added with a sigh. 'There's rottenness everywhere.'

Again he sighed, shot a veiled glance at Antoine, then going up to Jacques, he burst out excitedly:

'That letter of Vladimir Kniabrovski's is a damn' fine letter, let me tell you.'

'Tell me,' Jacques enquired, 'what exactly are his plans for the present?'

'He's looking after his health. He has gone back to his wife, to his mother, to his kiddies. Getting in trim for a new lease of life.'

Vanheede was pacing up and down in front of the stove; now and then he locked his hands in a sudden access of excitement. As though talking to himself, he added with a rapt expression:

'A pure in heart, that's what old Kniabrovski is!'

'Yes, indeed—none purer!' Jacques echoed immediately, in the same tone of voice, adding after a pause: 'When does he expect to bring out his book?'

'He doesn't say.'

'Rushkinoff tells me it's a simply amazing work.'

'How could it be otherwise? A book he wrote from beginning to end in a prison cell!' He took a few steps. 'I haven't brought you his letter to-day. I've lent it to Olga to take to the club. I'll have it back this evening.' Without looking at Jacques, like a dancing will-o'-the-wisp he flitted about the room, his eyes uplifted, beatifically smiling. 'Vladimir tells me he has never been

so completely himself as he was in that prison. Alone with his loneliness.’ The singing quality in his voice grew more pronounced, though he spoke in a lower tone. ‘He says that his cell was nice and light, right at the top of the building, and that he used to stand on the boards of his bed, so as to bring his forehead level with the edge of the barred window. He says he used to stand there for hours, thinking, watching the snow-flakes swirling above. He says he could see nothing else, not a roof, not a tree, never anything at all. But as soon as the spring came round and all through the summer, late in the afternoon a ray of sunlight would fall across his face. He says he used to wait for that moment all day long. You shall read his letter. He says he once heard a little child crying in the distance. Another time he heard the report of a gun.’ Vanheede glanced across at Antoine, who was listening to what he said and could not help following his movements interestedly with his eyes. ‘But I’ll bring you the letter itself to-morrow,’ he added, returning to his seat.

‘Not to-morrow,’ Jacques said, ‘I shan’t be here to-morrow.’

Vanheede showed no surprise. But he looked round at Antoine again and rose to his feet after a short pause.

‘Please excuse me. I’m afraid I’ve been intruding; I only wanted to let you know about Vladimir.’

Jacques, too, had risen.

‘You’re working a bit too hard just now, Vanheede. You should take care of yourself.’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Still at Schomberg and Rieth’s?’

‘Why, yes.’ He smiled mischievously. ‘I do the typing. I say, “Yes, Sir,” from morn to night and strum the typewriter. What harm can that do? When the day’s over, I am my own self again. Then I’m free to think “No, Sir,” all night long if I choose—till the next morning.’

As he spoke, little Vanheede was holding his small head very high and his tousled flaxen fore-lock gave him the air of drawing himself up still further. He turned slightly, as though addressing Antoine for the first time.

‘I starved and starved for ten years, gentlemen, for the sake of my ideals, and I’m not going to give them up.’

Then he moved back to Jacques, held out his hand, and a note of distress came into the high-pitched, reedy voice.

‘You are leaving us, perhaps? That’s a shame! It always did me a lot of good, coming here, you know.’

Deeply moved, Jacques made no answer; but placed his hand affectionately on the albino's arm. Antoine remembered the man with the scar. Him, too, Jacques had greeted in the same friendly, encouraging and rather patronizing manner. He really seemed to hold a place of his own in these queer groups of people. They consulted him, sought his approval, and feared his censure; obviously, too, it did their hearts good to be in his company.

'He's a regular Thibault!' Antoine thought with satisfaction. But, immediately after, a feeling of sadness came over him. 'Jacques will never remain in Paris,' he mused; 'he'll come and live in Switzerland again—that much is quite certain.' In vain did he say to himself: 'We'll write to each other, I'll come and see him, it won't be the same now as these last three years.' That sense of disappointment rankled. 'But what will he turn his hand to, what sort of life will he lead amongst these people? What use will he make of his talents? Ah, it will be very different from the wonderful career I'd mapped out for him in my dreams!'

Jacques had caught hold of his friend's arm and was steering him discreetly towards the door. There, Vanheede turned round, took leave of Antoine with a shy nod, and disappeared on to the landing, followed by Jacques.

Once more, and for the last time, Antoine heard the small indignant voice.

'Everything's gone so rotten. They won't have anyone about them but fawning toadies.'

10

ON his return, Jacques volunteered no more information about this visitor than he had given about the hooded cyclist they had met in the street. He had poured out a glass of water and was sipping it slowly.

Antoine, to keep himself in countenance, lit a cigarette, and got up to throw the match into the stove; after a glance out of the window, he returned to his seat.

The silence lasted a few minutes. Jacques was again pacing up and down the room.

‘Look here, Antoine!’ he said abruptly, still walking to and fro. ‘Do try to understand me a bit! How could I possibly have given three whole years, three years of my life, to that Ecole Normale of theirs?’

Antoine was startled, but at once assumed an attentive, studiously indulgent air.

‘It would only have been my school-life all over again,’ Jacques went on, ‘with a thin veneer of freedom. Lectures, and lessons, and everlasting essays! And “proper feelings” of respect for all authority. And then the promiscuousness of it all! Every idea peddled round, and torn to tatters by that half-baked mob in the poky dens they call their “digs.” Why, even the jargon they use—“freshers” and “dons” and “bloods”—it’s all in keeping! No, I could never have put up with life in such conditions.

‘Don’t misunderstand me, Antoine. I don’t mean . . . Of course I have a high opinion of them. The teacher’s job is one that can only be carried on in an honourable way, as an act of faith. There’s something attractive, I grant you, in their self-respect, the mental efforts they put forth, and the faithful service they give for so beggarly a reward. Yes, but . . .

‘No, you can’t really understand,’ he muttered after a pause. ‘It wasn’t only to escape that barrack-like existence, nor from a distaste for all that machine-made education—that wasn’t it. But, just think of the footling life, Antoine!’ He broke off, then repeated the word ‘footling,’ with his eyes stubbornly fixed on the floor.

‘When you went to see Jalicourt,’ Antoine asked, ‘I suppose you’d already made up your mind to——?’

‘Certainly not!’ Jacques remained standing where he was, with his brows raised, staring at the floor; he was making a genuine attempt to reconstruct the past. ‘Oh, that month of October! I’d come back from Maisons-Laffitte in a really dreadful state!’ He hunched his shoulders as if a heavy load weighed on them, murmuring: ‘There were too many things that wouldn’t fit together.’

‘Ah yes, I remember that October.’ Antoine was thinking of Rachel.

‘Then, on the last day before the beginning of term—with that crowning misfortune, the threat of the Ecole looming just ahead, a sort of panic came over me. Just think how strange it all is! At the present moment I realize quite clearly that till my call on Jalicourt, I’d had only a deep-seated fear of what was coming, nothing more. Of course, I’d often felt heartily sick of the whole business and thought of giving up the Ecole, even of running away.

But all that was no more than a vague dream. It was only after that evening with Jalicourt that it all took definite shape. You can hardly believe me, eh?’ he said, looking up at last and noticing his brother’s bewilderment. Very well, you shall read the very words I jotted down in my diary that night, on reaching home; it so happens I came across them only the other day.’

Again he fell to pacing gloomily up and down; the memory of that visit seemed still to upset him, even after so long an interval.

‘When I think of it all——’ he began, shaking his head. ‘But tell me, how did you get in touch with him? Did you write to each other? You went to see him, of course. How did he strike you?’

Antoine merely made an evasive gesture.

‘Yes,’ Jacques said, supposing his brother’s impression of the Professor to have been unfavourable, ‘you can hardly realize what he meant to youngsters of my generation!’ And with a sudden change of mood, he came and sat down opposite Antoine, in an arm-chair beside the stove. ‘That chap Jalicourt!’ he exclaimed with an unexpected smile. His voice had softened. He stretched out his legs luxuriously towards the fire. ‘For years, Antoine, we’d been saying to one another: “When I am a pupil of Jalicourt . . .” By “pupil” we really meant “disciple.” And whenever some misgiving came over me, as regards the Ecole, I’d comfort myself by thinking: “Yes, but there’s always Jalicourt.” He was the only one whom we thought worth while, you see. We knew all his poems by heart. We retailed all we could pick up about him and his ways, we quoted his witticisms. His colleagues were jealous of him, so we were told. He’d not only succeeded in making the University put up with his lectures—long extempore effusions, full of bold views, digressions, sudden confidences and broad jokes—but with his eccentricities, his dandified get-up, his eye-glass and even that jaunty soft hat of his. A curious character, whimsical, enthusiastic, a bit of a crank in his way—but what a mind, so well-stocked and generous! What was so fine about him was his feeling for the modern world; he was the one man, for us, who had managed to lay his finger on its pulse. I had corresponded with him. I had five letters from him—my most valued treasures. Think of it! Five letters, three of which, if not four, are, I still believe, simply masterpieces!

‘Now listen to this. One spring morning at about eleven o’clock, we met him, I and a friend, in the street. How could one ever forget such a thing? He was walking up the Rue Soufflot, with long springy steps. I can still see him with his coat-tails ballooning behind him, his grey spats, the white hair peeping out under the wide brim of his hat. Very upright, his monocle screwed into position, his Roman nose jutting out like a tall ship’s prow, and

the drooping white moustache that brought to mind a Gallic chieftain's. The profile of an old eagle, ready to strike. A bird of prey, with the spindle-shanks of a heron. And something of an old-school English nobleman, as well. Unforgettable, he was!

‘Yes, I can see him!’ Antoine exclaimed.

‘We shadowed him up to his door. We were spell-bound. We visited a dozen shops, trying to get a likeness of him!’ Jacques jerked back his legs under him with sudden violence. ‘And now that I think of it, I loathe him!’

‘I’m pretty sure he’s never had the faintest idea of *that!*’ Antoine grinned.

But Jacques was not listening. Facing the fire, a pensive smile on his lips, he went on speaking in a far-away voice.

‘Shall I tell you all about it? Well, it was after dinner, one night, I suddenly made up my mind to go and call on him. To explain, well, everything to him. So off I went, on the spur of the moment, without giving the matter a second thought. By nine o’clock I was ringing his bell, in the Place du Panthéon. You know the house, don’t you? A dark entrance hall, a stupid-looking Breton maid, the dining-room, the rustle of a vanishing skirt. The table had been cleared, but there was a work-basket left behind, with clothes to be darned in it. A smell of food, of pipe smoke, a stuffy heat. The door opened. There was Jalicourt. Not a thing to remind one of the old eagle of the Rue Soufflot, or of the writer of those marvellous letters. Nothing of the poet, or the lofty thinker! Or any Jalicourt we knew. Nothing whatever. A round-shouldered Jalicourt, minus the eye-glass, an old pea-jacket mottled with dandruff, a dead pipe, a peevish mouth. He must have been quietly snoring, digesting his boiled cabbage, with his big nose nodding over a stove. I certainly shouldn’t have been admitted if the maid had known her job. Well, he’d been caught napping, taken off his guard, and had to see it through. He showed me into his study.

‘I was too excited to think. I just blurted out what I had come to say. “I’ve come to ask you, sir,” and so forth. He pulled himself together, came to life, more or less, and I got a glimpse of the old eagle again. He put up his eye-glass and motioned me to a seat. There was a touch of the old peer in his manner. “So you want my advice?” he asked in a surprised tone. As if he meant: “Have you no one else to apply to?” True enough. I’d never thought of that. You see, Antoine, it’s not your fault, but it was very seldom I could bring myself to follow your advice—or any one else’s, for that matter. I preferred to steer my own course, I’m built that way. My answer to Jalicourt was to that effect. His attentiveness led me on. I told him straight out: “I

want to be a novelist, a great novelist!" I had to tell him; no use beating about the bush. He never turned a hair. I went on pouring my heart out, I explained to him—well, everything, in fact. That I was conscious of a store of energy within me, of a deep-seated, vital impulse that was my very own, personal, unique! That for years past every step forward that I made in "culture" had always been made at the expense of what was best in me, that vital force. That I had developed an intense dislike for study, for schools, and learning, for pedantry and idle chatter, and that this aversion had all the violence of an instinct of self-defence, of self-preservation! Yes, I'd taken the bit between my teeth! I said to him: "All that is weighing on me, sir; it's stifling me, and it's warping all my natural impulses!"'

As he spoke Jacques' expression was constantly changing; at one moment his eyes were obdurate, smouldering with passion, then suddenly the hardness would go out of them; they grew tender, wistful, almost appealing.

'Antoine!' he cried. 'It's true, every word of it, you know.'

'I quite realize that, old man.'

'But don't imagine that there's pride behind it,' Jacques went on. 'I've no wish to be above the rest, not a trace of what most people call ambition. You've only got to look at the way I'm living. And yet, Antoine, believe me, I've been perfectly happy here!'

After a few seconds, Antoine spoke again.

'Well, what happened next? What was his answer?'

'Wait a bit. He made no answer, so far as I can remember. Ah yes, in the end, I came out with some lines from a poem I'd begun. It was called *The Spring*. A sort of prose-poem, it was. Awful nonsense really!' he added, with a blush. 'I'd written that I aspired "to bend above myself as one bends over a flowing spring," and so forth. "To draw aside the tall grass and peer unhindered into the crystal depths." There he stopped me. "A pretty conceit." That's all he had to say! The crabbed old pedant! I tried to catch his eye. But he would not look at me; he kept on fiddling with his signet-ring.'

'I can quite picture him!' Antoine said.

'Then he embarked on a regular lecture. "It doesn't do to be too scornful of the beaten track. The advantages, indeed the mental agility, one derives from being subjected to discipline," and so forth. Oh, he was just like the rest of them. He hadn't understood a thing, not a thing! All he could do was to offer a few well-worn platitudes. I was furious with myself for coming, for having laid bare my heart to him! He kept on for some time in the same

strain. The one thing he seemed concerned with was to pigeon-hole me neatly. He'd say, for instance, "You are the type of person who . . . Young fellows of your age are . . . You might be classed among those characters whom . . ." Finally, I lost my temper. "I loathe classifications and I hate the people who make them. Under the pretext of classifying you, they maim you, whittle you down. By the time you're out of their clutches you're no more than a mutilated fragment of yourself—a cripple." He kept on smiling; he seemed quite ready to take any amount of punishment! Then I began to shout at him. "Yes, sir, I hate professors. That's the reason I came to see you, and none of the others." He was still smiling, as though I'd flattered him. To make himself agreeable, he asked me a few questions. Maddening questions! He wanted to know what I had done? "Nothing!" What I intended to do? "Everything!" The old humbug hadn't even the pluck to laugh me down. He was much too frightened of being sized up by one of the rising generation. For that was his obsession: what the coming generation thought of him. From the time I'd crossed his threshold, the only thought at the back of his mind was for the book he was writing, *My Experiences*. (It must have been published, by now, but I shall never read it.) He was in a blue funk at the idea his book wouldn't be up to the mark, and, whenever a youngster like myself crossed his path, he would hark back to that anxiety of his: "I wonder what this young fellow will think of my work?"

'Poor devil!' Antoine exclaimed.

'Oh yes, I don't deny it; he was really to be pitied. Still I hadn't come there just to have a view of his anxieties. I was still hankering after the Jalicourt of my dreams. Under any of his avatars; the poet, the philosopher, and so on—any of them except the one he was showing me just then. Finally I got up to leave. It was a grotesque performance. He followed me out, keeping up his patter. "So difficult to advise the younger generation. . . . No hard-and-fast rules of life. . . . Every man must blaze his own trail," and so forth. I walked in front, without saying a word; my nerves were on edge, as you may well imagine! The drawing-room, then the dining-room, then the hall. I opened the door myself, in the dark, stumbling over his rubbishy antiques; I hardly left him time to find the electric switches.'

Antoine could not help smiling; well did he recall the arrangement of the flat—the 'period' furniture, the upholstered chairs, the bric-à-brac. But Jacques had not finished yet; a look of something like alarm came over his face.

'Then—wait a bit!—I can't quite remember how it happened. Perhaps it dawned on him why I was bolting like that. I heard his raucous voice behind me in the hall. "What more do you want me to say? Can't you see I'm

played out, done for?" I turned round, couldn't believe my ears. What a pitiful figure he cut just then! He kept on repeating: "Played out . . . Done for! And my whole life wasted!" I began to protest. Yes, I meant it; I'd stopped being annoyed with him. But he wouldn't give in. "I've done nothing," he said. "Nothing at all. And I'm the only one who knows that." And as I went on protesting, rather clumsily, he flew into a sort of rage. "What on earth is it that humbugs you all? My books? Zero for them! I've put nothing into them, not a scrap of what I might have. Well then, what's left? My diplomas? My lectures? The Academy? What's left, I ask you? This thing?" He caught hold of the lapel of his coat, with the *Légion d'honneur* rosette on it, and was shaking it pettishly. "This thing, I ask you? This 'riband to stick on my coat'?"

Carried away by his reminiscences, Jacques had risen from his seat, and was acting the scene with ever-increasing vehemence. And Antoine was put in mind of the Jalicourt he had had a glimpse of, in the same setting, holding himself erect, preening himself, in his brightly lit room.

'All of a sudden he calmed down,' Jacques proceeded. 'I fancy he was afraid of being overheard. He opened a door and showed me into a sort of pantry that smelled of oranges and beeswax. His lips were drawn back in a sort of derisive grin, but his expression was hard and bitter, and his eye bloodshot behind the monocle. He was leaning against a shelf on which were some glasses and a fruit-dish. It was a marvel how he managed not to knock anything over. All that happened three years ago, but the tone of his voice and his words are still ringing in my ears.'

'He began talking, endlessly, in a low, monotonous voice. "Listen! I'm going to tell you the whole truth, nothing but the truth. At your age, I too . . . I was a trifle older, perhaps; I'd just gone down from the Ecole. And I, too, felt myself called to be a novelist. I, too, had that vital energy which needs freedom if it is to realize its full potentialities. And I, too, felt intuitively that I was taking the wrong road. Just for a moment. And I, too, had the notion of asking an older man's advice. Only I applied to a novelist. Guess who it was! No, you'd never understand, you can't conceive what that man stood for in the minds of the younger generation, in 1880. I called on him at his house, he let me ramble on, watching me with his auger eyes, and fumbling with his beard. He was in a hurry—he always was in a hurry—and he got up without hearing me out. Oh, there was no hesitation, in his case! He said to me, with that peculiar lisp he had that turned the S's into F's. 'There's only one royal road for the would-be novelift, and that's journalivm!' Yes that's what he told me. Well, I left, no wiser than I'd come, my young friend—like the fool I was! I went back to my manuals, to my tutors, to my fellow-

students, to the examination-rooms, the ‘young’ Reviews, the debating-societies and all the rest of it. With a fine future before me. A fine future, indeed!” Bang! Jalicourt’s hand crashed on my shoulder. Never shall I forget his eye, that Cyclops eye blazing behind the monocle. He had drawn himself up to his full height, he spluttered in my face. “What’s it you want of me, my boy? A piece of advice? Well, here it is, but beware of it! Drop your books, and follow your instincts! Here’s a home-truth for you, my friend; if there’s a spark of genius in your composition, your only way of making something of yourself is from within, under the stress of your natural impulses. Perhaps, in your case, it’s still not too late. Waste no time about it. Go out and live. Anywhere, anyhow! You’re a lad of twenty, you have eyes and legs, haven’t you? Trust Jalicourt. Join the staff of a newspaper. Keep on the look-out for ‘stories.’ Do you hear me? I know what I’m talking about. ‘Stories.’ The plunge into the pauper’s grave! Nothing else will rub the cobwebs off you. Go at it, all out, morning, noon and night; mind you don’t miss a single accident, a single suicide, or scandal in high life, or murder in a brothel! Keep your eyes wide open; notice everything that the tide of civilization sweeps along with it—the good, the bad, the unsuspected, the unimaginable! And after that, perhaps, you may venture to say something about men, about society, about yourself!”

‘Believe me, Antoine, at that moment I wasn’t just looking at him, I was devouring him with my eyes, thrilled through and through. Only, a moment later, all was over. Without saying a word, he opened the door and good as pushed me out, across the entrance-hall on to the landing. I’ve never been able to make out why he did so. Had he pulled himself up deliberately? Was he sorry he had let himself go like that? Was he afraid I might tell people about it? I can still see that lanky jaw of his quivering with emotion. He kept on mumbling in a low voice: “Go away! Go away! Go back to your libraries, *Monsieur!*”

‘The door was slammed in my face. A fat lot I cared! Ah, you should have seen me racing down the four flights of stairs and out into the street, kicking up my heels in the darkness, like a colt just turned out to grass!’

Emotion had taken away his breath; he poured out another glass of water and drank it at a gulp. As he set down the glass with an unsteady hand, it jarred against the water-jug. In the long silence, the thin, crystalline sound seemed lingering on interminably.

Hardly less overwrought than his brother, Antoine was trying to piece together the events that had led up to Jacques’ flight. There were many gaps still to be filled in. He would have liked to elicit a few confidences as regards Giuseppe’s emotional dilemma. But that was a delicate subject. ‘Too

many irreconcilable things,' Jacques had said just now, with a sigh. That was all he had to go on; but Jacques' stubborn reticence showed how large a part those sentimental entanglements had played in his decision to run away. Antoine wondered how far, at the present time, his heart was still preoccupied with them.

He endeavoured roughly to muster the facts. In October, then, Jacques had come back from Maisons. Of what nature at that moment were his relations with Gise, his meetings with Jenny? Had he tried to break off? Or entered into commitments impossible to fulfil? Antoine pictured his brother in Paris, lacking a clearly defined course of study, alone and far too free, turning the inextricable problem over and over in his mind. He must have been living in a precarious state of mingled rapture and depression; with nothing to look forward to but the beginning of term, and the cloistered routine of the Ecole Normale, the mere thought of which must have sickened him. Then, suddenly, his visit to Jalicourt had shown him a way out of it all, a bright rift in the drab horizon of his future. How he must have exulted in that prospect of escape from an impossible situation and of a new, adventurous existence, living his own life! Yes, Antoine mused, that accounts for the fact not only that Jacques left us, but that for three whole years he persisted in that silence of the tomb. He was embarking on a new life, and, to achieve this, to blot out the past entirely, he needed to be forgotten, dead to his family and friends.

But he could not help remembering how Jacques had taken advantage of his trip to Havre, had not waited even one day to see him and talk things over. His resentment was stirring again, but he fought it down, subdued his grievances, and made an effort to renew the conversation, to lead his brother to the sequel.

'So that was it,' he remarked. 'And it was the next day that you——?' He paused.

Jacques had sat down again by the stove, resting his elbows on his knees, his shoulders hunched and his head bent low; he was whistling.

Now he looked up.

'Yes, the next day.' Then, in a reluctant tone he added: 'Immediately after the scene with——'

The scene with their father, of course, the scene at the Palazzo Seregno! Antoine had forgotten that.

'Father never breathed a word of it to me,' he added quickly.

Jacques looked surprised. Nevertheless he averted his gaze, making a vague gesture as if to imply: 'Oh, let it go! I haven't the heart to speak of

that again.'

Antoine was thinking: Of course that accounts for his not waiting till I came back from Havre—and felt a certain consolation in the thought.

Jacques had resumed his meditative attitude, and started whistling to himself again. His eyebrows were twitching nervously. Despite his efforts to blot it out, that tragic scene had flashed across his memory once more. Father and son had been left alone together in the dining-room, just after lunch; M. Thibault had asked some question about the beginning of term at the Ecole Normale, and Jacques had bluntly told his father he had decided not to enter it. An altercation had followed, of ever-increasing violence. M. Thibault had pounded on the table with his fist. At last Jacques had thrown discretion to the winds and in an unaccountable fit of madness had blurted out Jenny's name—as a direct challenge to his father. By now he had lost his head completely, answering threats with counter-threats, and launching out into a series of irrevocable declarations. And then had come that tragic climax when, now he had burned his boats and rendered all compromise impossible, he had uttered that last cry of rebellion and despair, had rushed out of the room, shouting: 'I'll go and kill myself!'

The picture evoked was so clear-cut, so poignant, that he jumped up as if he had been stung. Antoine just had time to catch a glint of madness in his brother's eyes; but Jacques quickly pulled himself together.

'It's past four,' he said; 'I must be off, if I'm to attend to that business of mine.' He was already putting on his overcoat; he seemed impatient to get away. 'You'll stay here, won't you? I shall be back before five. My bag won't take long to pack. We can dine at the refreshment-room at the station; that will be simplest.' He had laid on the table some files stuffed with papers of various shapes and sizes. 'Here,' he said, 'dip into these, if you feel inclined to. They're articles in magazines, short stories. The least worthless of the things I've written these last few years.'

He was already outside the door when, turning round awkwardly, he threw out in a detached manner: 'By the way, you haven't told me anything about—about Daniel?'

Antoine had the impression his brother had been going to say, 'about the Fontanins.'

'Daniel? Why, just fancy, we've become great friends! After you went away, I found him so loyal, so devoted, so affectionate!'

To cover up his confusion, Jacques feigned extreme astonishment; Antoine made as if he were taken in by it.

‘That’s a surprise now, isn’t it!’ he laughed. ‘Of course he and I are pretty different, but I’ve come to accept his attitude to life; it may very well be justifiable in so gifted an artist. Do you know, his success exceeds all our expectations! His private show in 1911 at Ludwigson’s brought him slap into the limelight. He could sell any number of pictures if he chose; only he paints so few. We are very unlike each other—or, rather, we *were* unlike,’ he amended, pleased to grasp an opportunity for putting in a few words about himself, and showing Jacques that the portrait of Humberto’s character no longer fitted him. ‘I’ve become much less rigid in my way of looking at things, you see. I’m inclined to think that one needn’t——’

‘Is he in Paris?’ Jacques cut in rudely. ‘Does he know that . . . ?’

Antoine had some difficulty in keeping his temper.

‘Why, no; he’s doing his military service, as a sergeant, at Lunéville. He’s there for another ten months or so, till October ’14. I’ve hardly come across him at all for a whole year.’

He stopped speaking, chilled by the gloomy, far-away look in his brother’s eyes.

Once Jacques felt sure that his voice would no longer betray his agitation, he said:

‘Don’t let the fire go out in the stove, Antoine.’ And with these words he was gone.

11

LEFT to his own devices, Antoine went over to the table and untied the files lying there. His interest was aroused.

All sorts of documents were contained in them. First, a selection of articles on topical events, cut out from newspapers and signed *Jacques le Fataliste*. Then a number of poems, rhapsodies on mountain scenery, which had appeared in a Belgian magazine over the pseudonym *J. Mühlenberg*. Lastly a series of short stories with a general title *Leaves from the Black Book*; they were in the nature of sketches more than stories, by-products, it seemed, of Jacques’ experiences as a reporter, and signed *Jack Baulthy*.

Antoine read some of these: *The Octogenarians*, *The Child who Killed Himself*, *A Blind Man's Jealousy*, *A Fit of Rage*. The characters were drawn from everyday life, and though etched only in outline, all seemed to stand out in bold relief. Jacques used the graphic, choppy style of *La Sorellina*, but divested in these sketches of all poetic verbiage—which imparted to them a faithfulness to life that gripped the reader's interest.

Yet, despite the pungency of these literary efforts, Antoine's attention wandered. There had been too many unexpected happenings that morning. And, above all, now that he was left to himself, his thoughts kept drifting back to the sick-bed he had left the day before; what terrible events might be in progress there at this very moment! Had he done wrong to leave? No, certainly not, since he was bringing Jacques home.

A gentle, though determined tap at the door roused him from his musings.

'Come in,' he said.

He was surprised to see a woman's form outlined against the dark background of the staircase. He seemed to recognize the girl he had caught sight of at breakfast-time that morning. She was carrying some logs of firewood in a basket, of which he hastened to relieve her.

'My brother's just gone out,' he said.

She nodded, as though to say, 'I knew that'; perhaps indeed, 'That's why I've come upstairs.' She was taking stock of Antoine with undisguised curiosity, but there was nothing in the least pert in her attitude; on the contrary it seemed that she had carefully thought out the bold step she was taking now, and had compelling reasons for it. Antoine gathered the impression that she had been crying a very short time before. Presently her eyelashes began to quiver; then brusquely, in a bitterly reproachful voice, she asked him:

'Are you going to take him away?'

'Yes. My father is very ill.'

She seemed not to have heard.

'Why?' She stamped her foot angrily. 'I don't want you to!'

'I tell you, my father is at death's door,' Antoine replied.

But explanations were obviously lost on her. Slowly her eyes filled with tears. She swung round towards the window, folded her hands and wrung them. Then she let her arms fall limply to her side.

'He'll never come back!' she murmured in a broken voice.

She was tall, broad-shouldered and rather plump; febrile in her movements, and listless when in repose. Two sleek, heavy braids of flaxen hair encircled her low brow, and were twisted into a knot at the back of her head. Under this diadem, her regular, if somewhat coarse, features had an almost queenly air, which was enhanced by the classical mould of her full, sinuous, yet determined lips, that ended unexpectedly on either side in two attractive dimples.

She turned round to face Antoine.

‘Promise me,’ she said, ‘swear to me by Jesus Christ that you will not prevent him from coming back.’

‘Of course I won’t! Why should I?’ he said, with a conciliatory smile.

She did not smile in return, but stared fixedly at the young man across a mist of shining tears. Under the close-fitting fabric, her bosom heaved convulsively. She gave herself quite shamelessly to Antoine’s interested scrutiny. From between her breasts she took out a tiny handkerchief, screwed up into a ball, and applied it to her eyes, and then, with a sniff, to her nostrils. The slumberous pupils, slotted between the half-closed lids, had a velvety, voluptuous appeal. They brought to mind deep, stagnant pools, in which now and again welled up an eddy of inscrutable thoughts. At such moments, she bent down or turned away her head.

‘Did he speak to you of me? Of Sophia?’

‘No.’

A steely blue flash shot from between her eyelids.

‘You won’t let him know I told you all this, will you?’

Antoine smiled again. ‘But you haven’t told me anything!’

‘Oh yes, I have,’ she retorted, throwing back her head and half closing her lids again.

She looked round for a chair, then drew it up near Antoine’s and sat down in feverish haste, as though she had not a minute to lose.

‘I say,’ she remarked, ‘you’ve something to do with the stage, haven’t you?’ He shook his head. ‘Yes, you have. I’ve a picture-postcard of someone just like you. He’s a stage-star in Paris.’ She was smiling now. A sentimental, almost sensual smile.

‘So you’re very keen on the theatre?’ he asked; it was too much bother trying to undeceive her.

‘On the cinema—yes! And real dramas. I adore them!’

Now and then a brief, unlooked-for change came over the girl’s features, ruffling their composure. At such moments her mouth, which for the least

remark she opened wide, opened still wider, disclosing her broad white teeth and coral-pink gums.

He maintained a reserved attitude.

‘I suppose you have quite good companies here, haven’t you?’

She drew closer still. ‘Have you ever been at Lausanne before?’ Her whole attitude, as she bent towards him, even her way of speaking in low, fluttering undertones, seemed to suggest that she was expecting and prepared to reciprocate ‘advances.’

‘Never,’ he replied.

‘Do you think you’ll come back?’

‘Quite likely.’

Her eyes hardened for a second, as her gaze sank into his. Then, shaking her head emphatically, ‘No, you won’t,’ she said.

She opened the door of the stove, to put fresh fuel in.

‘Oh come, now!’ Antoine protested. ‘It’s too hot in here, already.’

‘That’s so.’ She put the back of her hand to her cheek. None the less she picked up a log and dropped it on to the glowing embers, then a second one, a third. ‘Jack likes it better that way,’ she said defiantly.

She remained on her knees, her back towards him, her eyes bent upon the blazing fire, which was toasting her cheeks. Night was falling. Antoine’s gaze wandered over the rippling curve of her shoulders, the nape of her neck, her thick, plaited hair haloed by the glow. What was she waiting for? Obviously she was conscious that his eyes were fixed on her. He seemed to glimpse a smile hovering on what little he could see of her averted features. But then, with a supple twist of her body, she rose to her feet. After slamming to the door of the stove with her foot, she took a few steps across the room, caught sight of a sugar-basin on a side-table, dipped her fingers greedily into it, and began crunching a lump of sugar. Fishing out another, she held it towards him, from a distance.

‘No, thanks,’ he laughed.

‘Else it’s bad luck,’ she exclaimed, tossing the lump of sugar towards him; he deftly caught it.

They eyed each other shrewdly. Sophia’s eyes seemed to be asking: ‘Who are you?’—even ‘What’s it to be, between you and me?’ Her indolent, insatiate eyes, necked with motes of gold by the long translucent lashes, had the pale lustre of a sandy beach just before a summer storm breaks. Yet they were heavy with listlessness rather than with desire. One of those minxes, Antoine was thinking, who yield at the first touch. And bite you as they kiss

you! And hate you ever after. And give you no peace till they've played some dirty trick on you—by way of vengeance.

As if she had guessed his thoughts, she moved away and began staring out of the window at the grey downpour that was hastening the shut of day.

The silence was so prolonged that Antoine began to feel uncomfortable.

'What are you thinking about?' he asked.

'Oh! I don't often think,' she confessed, without moving from the window.

'But when you do think, what is it about?'

'Nothing!'

Hearing him laugh, she left the window and gave him an engaging smile. Her movements now did not seem in the least hurried. She walked vaguely towards the door, her arms dangling. When she came beside it, her hand happened to brush against the key.

Antoine had an impression that she was turning it in the lock; the blood rose to his cheeks.

'Good-bye,' she whispered without looking up.

She had opened the door.

Surprised and obscurely disappointed, Antoine leant forward, hoping to catch her eye. Like an echo, half playfully, in a soft, almost appealing tone, he murmured:

'Good-bye.'

But the door closed. She had vanished, without turning back.

He heard the rustle of her skirt against the banisters, and the song she was forcing herself to sing as she went downstairs.

LITTLE by little darkness was filling the room, but Antoine, lost in a maze of thoughts, could not find the energy to get up and turn on the lamps. Over an hour and a half had passed since Jacques had gone out. And a reluctant suspicion, try as he might to repress it, kept hovering at the back of

Antoine's mind. As the minutes passed he felt his anxiety steadily increasing; then all at once it vanished—he had recognized his brother's footstep outside the door.

Jacques entered without a word, and did not even seem to notice that the room was in darkness. He sank wearily into a chair beside the door, his face just visible in the faint glow from the stove. His hat was down over his eyes, he still had his overcoat across his arm.

He gave a little, sudden sigh.

'Oh Antoine, don't take me away. Go to Paris by yourself and leave me here. Do you know, I very nearly didn't come back just now!' Then, before Antoine had time to put in a word, he cried out, 'No, don't speak, don't say anything! I *know*. I'll come with you.'

Rising, he turned on the light.

Antoine carefully refrained from looking in his direction; to tide over the awkward moment he pretended to go on reading the clippings on the table.

Jacques began moving lethargically to and fro about the room. After tossing various articles on to the bed, he opened a suit-case and began packing his clothes and personal effects in it. Now and then he whistled under his breath—always the same tune. Looking up, Antoine saw him drop a bundle of letters into the stove, and stow away in a cupboard all the loose papers lying about the room. Then he locked the cupboard, putting the key in his pocket. Presently he sat down in a corner, his head sunk between his shoulders, his back bent, and began scribbling letter-cards on his knee, nervously pushing back his long hair from his forehead as he wrote.

Antoine's heart softened. Had Jacques said to him just then, 'Do please go away without me,' he would have embraced his brother and gone back alone, without another word.

It was Jacques who broke the silence. After changing his shoes and closing the suit-case he went up to his brother.

'It's seven o'clock, you know. We'd better be off.'

Without replying, Antoine stood up at once. After getting into his overcoat, he turned to Jacques.

'Can I give you a hand?'

'Thanks. Don't bother.'

They spoke in lower tones than they had used during the day.

'Let me take your suit-case.'

'It's not heavy, thanks. You go in front!'

They crossed the room almost without a sound. Antoine went out first. He heard Jacques switching off the light behind him and closing the door gently.

They snatched a hasty meal at the refreshment-room. Jacques did not speak a word and hardly ate anything. Antoine, whose mind was as heavy as his brother's, respected his desire for silence and made no pretence of cheerfulness.

The train was in; they walked up and down the platform till it was time to start. From the subway a never-ending stream of passengers came pouring up.

‘Looks as if the train will be crowded,’ Antoine remarked.

Jacques made no reply. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, he volunteered a confidence.

‘Do you know, I’ve been here for two and a half years.’

‘At Lausanne?’

‘Not only at Lausanne. In Switzerland, I meant.’ After a few steps along the platform he murmured: ‘Ah, what a wonderful time that was for me, the spring of 1911!’

Once more they walked the full length of the train without speaking. Jacques’ thoughts were evidently following the same trend as before, for suddenly he launched into an explanation.

‘I’d been having such dreadful headaches in Germany that I put by every penny I could so as to be able to escape, to come to Switzerland and live an open-air life. I got here at the end of May, when the spring was at its height. I lived in the Mountains, at Mühlenberg in the Canton of Lucerne.’

‘Ah, Mühlenberg—that explains.’

‘Yes. That’s where I wrote nearly all the poems which I signed “Mühlenberg.” I was working very hard at that period.’

‘Did you stay there long?’

‘Six months. In a farmhouse. Only the two old people, the farmer and his wife; no children. I’ll never forget that spring, nor that summer. The day I arrived, and for the first time looked out of my window—the beauty of it all! A spacious, rolling countryside, all in simple outlines—Nature at her noblest! I was out-of-doors from dawn to dusk. The meadows were full of flowers and wild bees, and the huge pastures billowed up to the skyline, with cows grazing everywhere, and little wooden bridges over the mountain streams. I’d walk for miles and miles, working as I walked. I’d tramp all day, and sometimes I went out at night as well. Ah, those nights at

Mühlenberg!’ His arm rose slowly, described a wide circle, slowly sank again.

‘What about your headaches?’

‘Oh, I began to feel ever so much better almost from the day I settled in. Yes, Mühlenberg cured me outright. In fact, I’ve never felt in better form, or my mind so untroubled.’ His face lit up at the memory of it. ‘Untroubled, without a worry in the world—and all the time full of thoughts and projects, the maddest fancies! I almost think the seeds of everything I’ll write in all my life were sown during that wonderful summer, in that bright air. I can remember days when I was so carried away—oh, I knew then what it means to be drunk with happiness. Why—I hardly dare to talk about it—there were times when I started jumping in the air and scampering up hill and down dale as if I’d gone off my head! Then I’d fling myself on my face, on the grass, and start sobbing, crying my heart out for the ecstasy of it all. Can you believe that? Well, it’s true, yes, so true that I remember some days when I’d been crying like that and had to come back by a roundabout path, so as to bathe my eyes at a little spring I’d discovered on the mountain-side.’ He lowered his eyes, walked some steps in silence, then, without looking up, repeated: ‘Yes, but all that was two and a half years ago—ancient history!’

He did not speak again before they left.

The train drew out without a whistle, with the obdurate insistence and docile force of machines that function to a schedule. Dry-eyed, Jacques watched the empty platform recede and, as the rhythm of speed intensified, the myriad lights of the suburbs dancing past the pane. Then all was darkness, and now he pictured himself being pitched headlong and defenceless into the black night.

Cooped up amongst all these strangers, he looked round for Antoine, and saw him standing a few yards away, in the corridor. His back was half turned and he, too, seemed to be lost in thoughts, staring out into the darkness. Jacques felt a sudden wish for closer contact with him and, once again, an irresistible yearning to unburden his heart.

He edged his way to his brother’s side and tapped him briskly on the shoulder.

Wedge between other passengers standing in the corridor and a pile of luggage, Antoine supposed that Jacques had merely a word to say to him and, without shifting his position, turned his head and leaned a little to one side. In the crowded corridor where they were penned like cattle, across the roar and rattle of the train, Jacques brought his mouth near Antoine’s ear and began speaking in a hurried whisper.

‘Look here, Antoine, you’ve got to know. . . . To start with, I led——.’

He had intended to say, ‘I led an unspeakable life. I sank lower and lower. I was an interpreter, a guide, lived by my wits. I got in tow with Achmet—worse, with the whole underworld, the *Rue-aux-Juifs*. My friends were down-and-outs: old Krüger, Celadonia, Carolina, and their like. One night, on the quays, they clubbed me on the head; that was when my headaches started. Then I was in Naples. In Germany I lived with Rupprecht and “little Rosa”—what a pair they were, those two!—and at Munich because of Wilfried I was held by the police.’ But the more fluently such avowals rose to his lips, and the more copiously the turbid flood of memories came pouring from the depths—the more he realized that the ‘unspeakable’ life he had led was quite literally unspeakable; no words could cope with it.

Losing heart, he merely said to his brother in a low voice: ‘Antoine, I led an unspeakable life. Yes, unspeakable.’ He tried to put into the flat, ungainly epithet all the indignities, the foulness of the world. ‘Unspeakable!’ he said again, with an accent of despair, and gradually the repetition of the word acted as an anodyne, as efficacious as a full confession.

Antoine had turned round and was facing him, decidedly ill at ease and worried by the nearness of so many strangers. Still, despite his fear that Jacques might raise his voice, and apprehensions of what he might be going to say, Antoine did his best to put a good face on it.

But Jacques, who was leaning against a panel of the corridor, did not seem inclined to embark on further explanations.

Presently the passengers began to file out of the corridor to their seats in the crowded carriage. And soon Antoine and Jacques were sufficiently isolated to be able to talk without being overheard.

Jacques, who till now had been in a silent mood, seemingly reluctant to go on with the conversation, suddenly turned to his brother again.

‘You know, Antoine, the really appalling thing is: not feeling sure of what is . . . normal. No, not “normal”—that’s a stupid word. How shall I put it? Not knowing if one’s feelings, or, rather, instincts are . . . But you’re a doctor, of course; you must know.’ His brows were knitted and his eyes fixed on the darkness. He spoke in a low tone, hesitating over his words. ‘Listen! There are things that work up one’s feelings; one gets a sort of sudden impulse towards this or that. An impulse that rushes up from what lies deepest in one. Don’t you agree? Well, it’s impossible to know if other people have similar feelings, similar impulses; or if one’s just a—a freak of nature. Do you see what I mean? You, Antoine, you’ve had to deal with so

many people, so many cases, that I suppose you know what is—how shall I put it?—ordinary, and what’s exceptional. But for the rest of us, who don’t know—well, you can guess how agonizing it can be. Let me give you an example. There are all sorts of inexplicable desires that, when a boy’s thirteen or fourteen, crop up all of a sudden—vague, incoherent thoughts that get hold of his mind, and he can’t shake them off. But he feels ashamed of them; they seem like festering sores and he tries to hide them, at all costs, from the world. Then one day he discovers that nothing’s more natural; why, they have even a beauty of their own! And that everyone, without exception, has the same desires. Do you see what I mean? Well, there are other dark impulses, things of the same sort, instincts that well up in one, and about which—even when one’s grown up, Antoine, even at my age—one wonders, one can’t be sure. . . .’

Suddenly his face grew tense, exasperated; a disturbing thought had flashed across his mind. He had just realized how quickly, how easily, the old allegiance to his brother had come back, linking him up, through Antoine, with his past and all its implications. Only yesterday that chasm had seemed unbridgeable. And now—a few hours together had been enough to . . . ! He clenched his fists, lowered his eyes, fell silent.

A few minutes later, without once having raised his head or opened his lips again, he went back to his seat.

When, surprised by his abrupt departure, Antoine decided to follow, he found his brother settled down for the night, it seemed, in the dimly lit compartment; his eyelids shut upon his tears, Jacques was feigning sleep.

PART VI

WHEN at eight in the evening, just before taking the train to Lausanne, Antoine had looked in on Mlle. de Waize, to tell her he would be away for twenty-four hours, his remarks had failed to take immediate effect on the old lady. For nearly an hour she had been seated at her desk struggling to concoct a letter to the Railway Company, complaining that a hamper of vegetables had gone astray between Maisons-Laffitte and Paris; and exasperation had prevented her from thinking of anything else. It was only later on, when she had disposed of the letter more or less to her liking, had undressed for bed, and was saying her prayers, that one of Antoine's remarks flashed back into her mind. 'Please tell Sister Céline that Dr. Thérivier has been warned and will come, if needed, at a moment's notice.' At once, all eagerness to shift her responsibility then and there, without troubling about the hour, without even finishing the prayer, she hurried across the flat to transmit the message to the nurse.

It was nearly ten o'clock. The lights were off, and M. Thibault's room was in darkness but for the fitful glow from the log fire, kept constantly burning to purify the air. Every day the need for ventilation made itself more acutely felt, and this expedient was proving inadequate to carry off the pungent vapour from the poultices, the smell of the menthol in the liniments, and, worst of all, the odours emanating from the old man's person.

For the moment the pain had abated; he lay in an uneasy doze, snoring and groaning in the darkness. For many months he had not enjoyed the deep oblivion of real sleep. Going to sleep, for him, had ceased to mean the loss of consciousness; it only meant that for a brief spell he lost track of the slow lapse of time, minute by minute, and let his limbs sink into a partial torpor. But never for an instant did his brain stop working, calling up a stream of pictures, like an incoherent film in which scraps of his past life were flashed upon the screen; and though this pageant of the past might hold his interest, it was exhausting as a nightmare.

That night M. Thibault's torpor was not profound enough to free him from a haunting dread, which, mingling with his hallucinations and growing stronger every moment, set him running before an invisible pursuer, across the buildings of his old school, along the dormitory, down the corridors, through the chapel and out into the playground. There, outside the gymnasium door, in front of the statue of St. Joseph, he crumpled up, his head buried in his arms. And then, suddenly, from a coign of darkness, that

terrifying, nameless Thing, which had been on his track night after night, leapt forth on him. Just as it was about to crush his life out, he awoke with a start.

Behind the screen, an unwonted candle was lighting up a corner usually left in darkness; two shadows wavered on the wall, cornice-high. He heard whispering. Mademoiselle's voice. Once before she had come like that, by night, to call him; Jacques was having a fit. One of the children ill? What time was it?

Then Sister Céline's voice recalled him to the present. He could not quite catch what they were saying; holding his breath, he listened hard.

A few words came clear. 'Antoine told me the doctor had been warned . . . will come at once . . .'

Someone ill? Of course—*he* was ill. But—why the doctor?

Again that nameless form of fear was prowling in the shadows. Was he worse? What had happened? Had he slept? He had not noticed any change for the worse in his condition. Still, the doctor had been called in. In the middle of the night. He was dying. No hope left.

Then all he had said—without believing it—announcing that his last hour was near, came back to his mind. A cold sweat broke out on his body.

He tried to shout: 'Help! Antoine!' But all that passed his lips was a wordless cry—so agonizing, however, that Sister Céline, thrusting aside the screen, rushed to the bed and turned on the light.

Her first notion was that he was having some sort of fit. The old man's face, usually a sickly yellow, had turned scarlet; his eyes were wide open, his lips working inarticulately.

M. Thibault, meanwhile, paid no attention to what was happening round him. Centred on its fixed idea, his brain was functioning with ruthless clarity. In a few seconds he had reviewed the whole course of his illness: the operation, the months of respite, the relapse, and then the gradual decline of his strength, the way his pain was growing more and more recalcitrant to treatment. It all linked up together, everything grew clear. And all at once a bottomless abyss yawned where, a few minutes past, had been that bedrock of security, lacking which it is impossible to live. So sudden was that glimpse of the abyss that his whole balance was thrown out; his mind went limp, incapable of thought. Human reason is so vitally bound up with the future that once all likelihood of a to-morrow is ruled out, and every prospect seems converging on the blind alley that is death, the faculty of thinking falls to pieces.

The old man's hands clutched at the sheets in blind, desperate panic. He tried to cry out, but in vain. The world was toppling over, dissolving into chaos, and he was being swept under, foundering in floods of darkness. Then fear forced a way across his strangled throat in a hoarse gasp that rose and fell, choked out at once.

Unable to straighten up her bent back so as to see on to the bed, Mademoiselle began screaming.

'Bless and save us, what is it? What's happening, Sister?'

The nurse did not answer. The old woman fled from the room.

Somebody must be sent for—but who? Antoine was away. Then she remembered the priest, Abbé Vécard.

The servants were still in the kitchen; they had heard nothing. At Mademoiselle's first words Adrienne crossed herself, while Clotilde, pinning her shawl round her shoulders and picking up her purse and keys, made for the door.

2

THE ABBÉ VÉCARD was living in the Rue de Grenelle, near the administrative offices of the Archbishopric, where he was now in charge of the Department of Diocesan Charities. When Clotilde came he was still up, working at his desk. She had kept her taxi and, a few minutes later, they were at M. Thibault's door.

Perched on one of the hall chairs, Mademoiselle was awaiting them. At first the priest failed to recognize her, so different she seemed without the braids encircling her forehead; tightly drawn back, her hair fell squirming down her dressing-jacket in corkscrew wisps.

'Please, Monsieur l'Abbé,' she pleaded, 'oh please do go to him at once, to make him less afraid.'

Nodding to her, without stopping, he went to the sick-room.

M. Thibault had flung away the counterpane; to get away from this bed, from this accursed house was now his one idea—anywhere to escape the

Thing hounding him down. He had got back his voice and was hurling abuse at the women.

‘Filthy strumpets! Bitches! Ah, I know all about you and your beastliness!’

Suddenly his eyes fell on the priest standing in the doorway, lit up by the corridor lamp. He showed no surprise, and merely paused a moment before crying:

‘Not you! I want Antoine. Where’s Antoine?’

Dropping his hat on a chair, the priest moved quickly forward. Impassive as ever, his features did not reveal how deeply he was moved; only the slightly raised arms, the half-opened hands, conveyed his longing to help his old friend. Going up to the bed, without a word, in all simplicity, he made the sign of benediction.

Then his voice rose through the silence, saying the Lord’s Prayer.

*Pater noster, qui es in coelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum.
Fiat voluntas tua sicut in coelo et in terra.*

M. Thibault had ceased tossing to and fro and was gazing up at the Abbé. His lips began quivering, and a wry look settled on his face, the look of a child who is on the brink of tears. His head swayed slowly this side and that, then sank on to the pillow. Gradually the sobs, which sounded like suppressed guffaws, grew fewer, ceased altogether.

Meanwhile the Abbé had gone up to the nun.

‘Is he in much pain just now?’ he asked, in a low voice.

‘Not much. I’ve just made an injection. Usually the pain doesn’t come back till after midnight.’

‘Good. Leave us alone now. . . . But please ring up the doctor,’ he added with a gesture that seemed to imply: ‘I can’t work miracles!’

Quietly Sister Céline and Adrienne left the room.

M. Thibault seemed almost unconscious. Before the priest had come he had sunk thus several times into a sort of coma. But these welcome lapses never lasted long; abruptly he came back to the surface, where panic lay in wait for him, and once more with a new lease of strength began the desperate struggle.

The priest guessed that the lull would be brief; he must make the most of it while it lasted. He felt the blood coming to his head; of all the duties of his calling, the ministrations to the dying was the one he dreaded most.

He went up to the bed.

‘You are suffering, my friend. You are going through an hour of bitter trial. Do not try to fall back on yourself, but open your heart to God.’

M. Thibault turned towards his confessor, and there was such anguish in his look that the priest’s gaze faltered. For a moment the sick man’s eyes darkened with anger and malevolent contempt. Only for a moment. The look of dreadful fear came back almost immediately. And now it was so terrible in its intensity that the priest could not face it and turned away.

The dying man’s teeth were chattering; he was muttering feebly: ‘Oh dear! Oh dear! I’m so frightened.’

The priest pulled himself together.

‘I have come to help you,’ he said in a gentle voice. ‘First, let us pray. Let us invoke God’s presence in ourselves. Now, my friend, we will pray together.’

M. Thibault cut him short. ‘But—but . . . ! Don’t you see? I’m . . . I’m at the point . . .’ He dared not affront death by naming it.

Frantically his eye ranged the dark corners of the room. Was there no help, none anywhere in all the world? The shadows were deepening, deepening round him. From his lips came a scream that jarred the silence, and to the priest was almost a relief. Then, with all his might, he shouted:

‘Antoine! Where’s Antoine?’ The Abbé made a vague gesture. ‘No, I don’t want you. Antoine!’

The priest changed his methods. Drawing himself up, he gazed sadly down at the furious face on the pillow, and with a sweeping gesture, as if he were exorcizing a man possessed, blessed him a second time.

His calmness was the last straw for M. Thibault. Propping himself on an elbow, despite the agony the effort cost him, he shook his fist.

‘Ah, the swine! The ruffians! And now you and your clap-trap—I’ve had enough of it.’ Then a despairing sob broke from his lips. ‘I’m . . . I’m dying, dying, I tell you! Will no one help me?’

The Abbé gazed down, and did not contradict him; convinced though he was already that his end was near, the priest’s silence came as a final blow. Shaking from head to foot, feeling what little strength remained ebbing away, unable even to keep back the saliva dribbling down his chin, he kept on repeating in a tone of pitiful entreaty, as though perhaps the priest had not heard him, or had failed to understand:

‘I’m dying. I’m dying.’

The Abbé sighed, but made no gesture of denial. It is not always the truest charity, he thought, to lavish vain illusions on the dying; when the last

hour is actually at hand, the only remedy against the terrors that invest it, is not to deny its onset—against which the body, warned by instinct, is already up in arms—but to look death in the eyes, and be resigned to meet it.

He let some seconds pass, then mustering his courage, said in clear, even tones:

‘And supposing it is so, my friend, is that a reason to be so terribly afraid?’

The old man fell back on to the pillow, as if he had been struck in the face.

‘Oh dear me!’ he whimpered. ‘Oh dear me!’

All was lost now; the storm had broken, sweeping him from his last foothold; there was no refuge anywhere, he was sinking, sinking . . . ! And the last gleam of consciousness served only to reveal the black gulf of non-being. For other people death was a vague notion that did not touch them personally, one more counter in the common coin of words. For him it was the Now and Here, the one thing real—himself! Dazed and dilated, his eyes peered into the sheer abyss; then very far away, on the other side of nothingness, he saw the priest’s face, the face of a living man, denizen of another world. He was alone, cut off from the world of men. Alone with his fear, plunged in the nethermost depth of loneliness.

Through the stillness came a voice, the priest’s.

‘Reflect! It was not God’s will that death should steal on you unawares, *sicut latro*, like a thief in the night. Surely then, you should prove yourself worthy of this grace—for a grace it is, and the greatest God can bestow on us, miserable sinners—that on the threshold of eternal life a warning should be granted.’

From an infinite distance M. Thibault listened to the words that, like weak waves fretting a rock, beat on the brain that fear had turned to stone, and for a moment by mere force of habit, his mind sought refuge in them, in the idea of God. But the impulse died still-born. Eternal Life, Grace, God—the words had lost all meaning, dwindled to futile sounds that had no relevance to the terrible reality.

‘Let us thank God,’ the Abbé continued. ‘Blessed are those whom He snatches from their earthbound cravings; blessed are those who die in the Lord. Let us pray, my friend. Let us pray together, with all our hearts, and God will help you in your time of trouble.’

M. Thibault swung his head round. Under his terror a sediment of rage was seething still. Had he been able, how gladly now he would have crashed his fist on the priest’s face! Blasphemies rose to his lips.

‘God? What’s that? What help? It’s sheer nonsense when you come to think of it. Isn’t it He precisely, whose will it is that I——?’ The words choked in his throat. ‘What help can I expect of Him, tell me!’ he shouted furiously.

His taste for controversy had come back to him so strongly that he forgot his agony of mind had denied God just a moment before. ‘Ah, why should God treat me thus?’ he groaned.

The Abbé shook his head. ‘Remember the words of the *Imitation of Christ*: “In the hour when thou deemest thyself very far from Me, then it is often I am nearest thee.”’

M. Thibault pondered. After some moments’ silence he turned to his confessor; and now he made a gesture of distress.

‘Abbé, Abbé!’ he pleaded. ‘Do something—pray—anything at all! Surely it can’t be possible that I . . . ? Save me, oh save me!’

The Abbé drew up a chair to the bed, sat down, and clasped the swollen hand, the least pressure on which left a pale imprint.

‘Ah,’ the old man cried, ‘you’ll see what it’s like, my friend, one day—when your turn comes!’

The priest sighed. ‘No one can say, “I shall be spared temptation,” but I pray God to send me, in the hour of death, a friend who will help me to overcome my weakness while there is yet time.’

M. Thibault shut his eyes. The movements he had been making had irritated the bed-sores in the small of his back, and they were smarting like fire. He stretched himself out in the bed; now and again a feeble groan escaped his clenched lips: ‘Oh dear me! Oh dear me!’

‘Consider now!’ the priest began in his measured, melancholy tones. ‘You, as a Christian, knew well this life on earth must end. *Pulvis es* . . . Had you forgotten that this mortal life does not belong to us? You are protesting now; as if you were to be robbed of something that was yours in your own right. Yet you knew our lives are only lent us by our Maker. It may be that the hour has come when you shall be required to pay your debt—how ungrateful it would be, my friend, to haggle!’

Through his half-opened eyelids M. Thibault shot a malevolent glance at the priest. Then, very slowly, his gaze roamed round the room, pausing on all the things he recognized so easily despite the feeble light, things that were his, that he had seen—seen and possessed—so many and many a day.

‘To leave all that?’ he murmured. ‘No, I don’t want to.’ A sudden tremor shook the old body. ‘I’m afraid.’

Compassionately the priest bent towards him.

‘Our Divine Master, too, endured the agony and bloody sweat. And He, too, for a brief moment, doubted His Father’s love, and cried, saying, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? Think, my friend; is there not a remarkable analogy between your sufferings and those of our Divine Master? But Jesus in His hour of trial took new strength in prayer. With all the fervour of His love He cried: O My Father, here am I! Father, I trust in Thee. Father, I yield to Thee. Not as I will be done, but as Thou wilt.’

The Abbé felt the swollen fingers quiver. After a pause, he continued in the same tone.

‘Have you reflected that for centuries, nay for thousands of centuries, our poor human race has been working out its destiny on earth?’ Then, realizing that such arguments were too vague to serve his end, he fell back on precise examples. ‘Only think of your own family, your father, your grandfather, and your ancestors—of all these men who went before you, lived and struggled, hoped and suffered like you; and all of them irrevocably, one following the other, at the hour appointed from the beginning, returned whence they came. *Reverti unde veneris, quid grave est?* Is it not a comforting thought that all creation, every one of us, returns to the bosom of the Heavenly Father?’

‘Yes,’ M. Thibault groaned. ‘Only . . . not yet!’

‘How can you complain? Only think—how many of those men I spoke of enjoyed your advantages? You have had the privilege of reaching an age denied to many. God has shown you mercy in granting you so long a life in which to work out your salvation.’

M. Thibault shuddered. ‘That’s just what is so terrible!’

‘Terrible, yes. But you have less right than many another to feel fear.’

Roughly the old man withdrew his hand.

‘No!’ he exclaimed.

‘Indeed you have.’ The Abbé’s voice was gentle, consoling. ‘I’ve watched you at work, my friend. Always, with all your heart, you have aimed at something higher than worldly gain. You have loved your neighbour, fought the good fight against poverty and sin. You have lived the life of an upright man, and death should have no terrors at the close of such a life.’

‘No,’ the dying man repeated hoarsely.

When the Abbé tried to clasp his hand again, he freed himself angrily. The priest's remarks had touched him on the raw. No, he had not aimed at something higher than worldly success. On that score he had humbugged everybody, including the priest—and himself, too, almost always. In reality he had spared no effort to shine in the eyes of men. All his motives had been vile, wholly vile—under the surface. Selfishness and vanity. A thirst for riches, for ordering others about. A display of generosity, to win honours, to play a specious part. Sins of the flesh, hypocrisy, a whited sepulchre—ah! the falsehood of it all! If only he could wipe the slate clean, make a fresh start! That 'life of an upright man'—he was heartily ashamed of it. He saw it now as it had really been. Too late. The day of reckoning had come.

'A Christian like you . . .'

M. Thibault could not contain himself. 'Keep quiet, you! I, a Christian? I'm no Christian. All my life I've—I've aimed at . . . what? "Love of my neighbour?" Nonsense! I've never known what it is to love—anybody, anybody in the world.'

'My poor friend!' the Abbé murmured. He was expecting M. Thibault to accuse himself once more of having driven Jacques to suicide. But no, not once in these latter days had the father thought of his missing son. All he could conjure up at present were much remoter phases of his past: his youth consumed with ambition, his start in life, his early struggles, first distinctions—sometimes, too, the honours he had earned in middle age. The last ten years had already faded out into the mists of oblivion.

Despite the twinge it cost him, M. Thibault raised an arm.

'It's all your fault!' he burst out passionately. 'Why didn't you warn me, while there still was time?'

Then anger yielded to despair, and he burst into tears. Like ghastly laughter, sobs convulsed his body.

The Abbé bent towards him.

'In every human life there comes a day, an hour, a fleeting moment, when suddenly God deigns to reveal Himself as a very presence and extends His hand to us. Sometimes that moment comes after a life of sin, and sometimes at the close of a long life which has passed for Christian. Who can say? Perhaps it is to-night that God, for the first time, holds out His hand to you.'

M. Thibault's eyelids lifted. In the twilight of his mind a certain confusion had grown up between God's hand and the human hand, the priest's, beside him. He put forth his hand to grasp it.

'What must I do?' he panted. 'Tell me what to do!'

His tone had changed; the panic terror at death's advent had gone out of it. He spoke as one who asks a question that can be answered; already tempered with contrition, the fear that still persisted in his voice could be dispelled by absolution.

God's hour was approaching.

But, for the priest, this was of all hours the hardest. He communed with himself for a while, as he did in the pulpit before beginning a sermon. Though he had given no sign of it, M. Thibault's reproach had stung him to the quick. For many years he had had spiritual charge of this proud nature; how far had his influence been efficacious? How had he fulfilled his task? Well, there was still time to make good the lapses—on both sides. He must lay hold of this poor, wavering soul, and guide it back to the Redeemer's feet.

Then his knowledge of the man suggested a pious expedient.

'What we must deplore,' he said, 'is not that your earthly life is drawing to a close, but that it was not as it should have been. Still, even if your past life has not always been a source of edification, let the leaving of it, at least, furnish a fine example of a truly Christian end. Let your bearing, when that moment comes, be a pattern for all who have known you to observe, and imitate!'

The dying man made a movement and freed his hand. The priest's words were sinking in. Yes, let it be said that Oscar Thibault had had a noble end, worthy of a saint. He locked his fingers awkwardly, and closed his eyes; his under-jaw, the priest observed, was trembling. He was praying God to grant him the grace of an edifying death.

Now fear was giving way to a vague dejection, a sense of feebleness; he was a small, pathetic atom, amongst myriad others, all like him ephemeral. But after those cataclysms of terror, there was some relief in this self-pity.

The Abbé raised his head.

'The Apostle Saint Paul has bidden us not to be sorry, as men without hope. You, my poor friend, are amongst those men. How sad that, at this crucial hour, your faith should have forsaken you! You have forgotten that God is your Father before He is your Judge, and you do your Father grievous wrong to doubt His mercy.'

The old man gazed at him with troubled eyes, and sighed.

'Come now, take heart!' the priest continued. 'Be assured of the divine compassion, and remember that, granted sincere and thoroughgoing repentance, a pardon given in the extremity of death will cancel the sins of a lifetime. You are one of God's creatures; does He not know, better than we

do, the clay in which He has shaped us? For, mind you, He loves us as we are; and this assurance should be the corner-stone of our courage and our confidence. Yes, *confidence*; for in that word lies the whole secret of a Christian death. *In te, Domine, speravi*. The Christian trusts in God, in His goodness and infinite compassion.'

The Abbé had a manner of his own, placid yet weighty, of emphasizing certain words; whenever he used them, his hand would rise with a slight gesture that added to their force, Yet there was little warmth in his monotonous delivery, any more than in the long-nosed, impassive face. And it was proof of the essential virtue of these hallowed words, it showed how centuries of usage had formed them to the exact requirements of the death-bed, that their effect was so immediate on such panic and revolt as M. Thibault's.

His head had sunk, and his beard was brushing his chest. Stealthily a new emotion was permeating him, an emotion less sterile than self-pity and despair. Tears were rolling down his cheeks again, but tears of joy; and all his spirit yearned towards the Omnipotent Consoler. Now his one desire was to lay down the burden, yield his life to Him who gave it.

But then he clenched his teeth; the pain had come on again, shooting through his leg, from the thigh downwards. He ceased listening, stiffened. After a moment the pain died down.

' . . . like the climber,' the priest was saying, 'who has reached the summit and looks back to see the path that he has travelled. And what a sorry retrospect is a man's life! A series of struggles, never-ending, unavailing, in a preposterously narrow field of action. Vain activities, tawdry pleasures, an undying thirst for happiness that nothing, nothing in the world can quench. Am I exaggerating? Such was your life, my friend; such, indeed, is the lot of every man on earth. How can a being created by God be content with a life like that? Has it anything worthy of an iota of respect? Very well! To what, I ask you, is it that you cling so much? Is it to your suffering body, this weak, miserable body, that always plays you false, that shirks its proper functions, that nothing can safeguard from pain and decay? Ah, let's face the facts! It's a blessing that after being so long enslaved to our vile bodies, held prisoner by them, we can at last discard them, slough our mortal skins, cast them away and leave them like a beggar's rags upon the wayside.'

For the dying man the words had such immediate cogency that all at once the prospect of escape seemed utterly delightful. And yet—what was this new-found solace but once more the life-impulse, the stubborn hope of survival under a new disguise? And it struck the priest, whose insight had

not failed him, that the prospect of another life, of living for eternity in God's presence, is as necessary in the hour of death as in life the certainty of living the next moment.

After a brief silence the Abbé spoke again.

‘Turn your eyes heavenwards now, my friend. Now you have judged how little it is, what you are leaving, see what awaits you! An end of all the pettiness of life, its harshness and injustice. And ended, too, its trials and responsibilities. Ended, those daily acts of sin, with their after-taste of remorse. Ended, that anguish of the sinner torn between good and evil. There, in the Kingdom of Heaven, you will find peace and plenitude, and the rule of divine order. You are leaving behind the things that are corruptible, to enter into the realm of things everlasting. Do you understand, my friend? *Dimitte transitoria, et quaere aeterna*. You were afraid of dying; your imagination was picturing some vague horror of great darkness. But a Christian death is just the opposite of that; it opens out a vista of unfading light. It brings us peace, the peace that passes understanding, rest eternal. What am I saying? It does more than that. It brings Life to its perfection, consummates the union of human and divine. “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Not merely an escape, a sleep, or a forgetting; but an awakening, the opening of a flower. To die is to be born again. Death is a resurrection to a New Life, in the fullness of understanding, in the communion of the saints. Death, my friend, is not merely the rest that nightfall brings when the labourer's task is done; it is a progress upward and onward into the light of an eternal dawn.’

While the priest was speaking, M. Thibault had nodded several times, approvingly. Now a smile was hovering on his face. The shadows had lifted, a dazzling effulgence was kindling facets of the past. With his mind's eye he saw himself a little boy kneeling at the foot of his mother's bed, this very bed on which he now was lying; his mother clasped his childish fingers while in the radiant light of a summer morning he repeated one of the prayers which first had opened heaven to him: *Gentle Jesus, who art in Paradise* . . . He saw himself at his first communion, trembling with awe before the Host, for the first time vouchsafed to him. And then he saw himself as a young man, one Whit-Sunday after Mass, walking with his *fiancée* up the garden path at Darnetal, between the peonies. Back with those sunny memories, he had forgotten his old, dying body; he was smiling.

Not merely had all fear of death departed, but what troubled him just now was that he had still to live, if only for a little while. The air of this world had become unbreathable. ‘A little patience,’ he thought, ‘and I'll have done with it all.’ It seemed to him that he had discovered his true

centre of gravity, had reached the vital core of his being; he had found himself at last. And this gave him happiness such as he had never known before. True, his energies seemed broken up, dispersed, lying as it were in havoc round him. What matter? He had ceased to belong to them; they were the rags and tatters of an earthbound being, with whom he felt that he had broken for good and all; and the prospect of a still more complete disruption, very near at hand, gave him an intense delight—the only joy of which he now was capable.

The Holy Spirit was hovering in the room. The Abbé had risen, full of thankfulness to God. And with his humble gratitude mingled a very human self-satisfaction—like that of a lawyer who has won his suit. No sooner was he conscious of this feeling, than he upbraided himself for it. But this was no time for self-analysis. A sinner was about to appear before his Maker.

Bowing his head, he folded his hands under his chin and prayed aloud.

‘O Lord, the hour has come. Father of mercies and God of all comfort, I beseech Thee to vouchsafe this last grace, and grant me to die in peace and in Thy love. *De profundis*—out of the darkness, from the deep pit where I lay trembling with dread, *clamavi ad te, Domine*, have I called to Thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice. The hour has come; I am on the brink of Thy eternity, when at last I shall see Thee face to face, Almighty God. Consider my contrition, accept my prayer, and let me not be outcast in my unworthiness. Let Thy gaze fall upon me, pardoning my sins. *In te, Domine, commendo*. Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit. My hour has come. Father, O Father, forsake me not.’

The dying man’s voice came like an echo. ‘Forsake me not.’

There was a long silence. Then the Abbé bent over the bed.

‘To-morrow morning I will bring the holy oil. Meanwhile, my friend, make your confession, so that I may give you absolution.’

M. Thibault’s swollen lips began to move; with a fervour he had never shown before, he stammered a few phrases, in which the confession of his sins had less place than a passionate avowal of repentance. Then, raising his hand, the priest murmured the words that wash all sins away.

‘*Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis. In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.*’

The man on the bed was silent. His eyes were wide open—open as if they were never to close again—and in his gaze there was as yet only the faintest hint of questioning or wonder. The bland innocence of the eyes made the dying old man look strangely like the pastel portrait of Jacques, hanging on the wall above the lamp.

He felt the last threads linking his soul to the world of men strained almost to the point of snapping; but their tenuity, their brittleness, filled him with abounding joy. He was no more now than a frail, defunctive flame gently flickering out. Life was flowing on without him, as a river goes on flowing after the swimmer has made the further shore. And he felt not only beyond life, but beyond death as well. He was rising, floating up into a zenith, bathed, as is sometimes a midsummer night-sky, with supernatural light.

There was a knock at the door. The Abbé ceased his prayer, crossed himself, and went towards it. The doctor had just come; Sister Céline was with him.

‘Carry on, sir!’ Thérivier said, when he saw the priest.

The Abbé caught the Sister’s eye, and discreetly moved aside.

‘Come in, doctor,’ he said in a low voice. ‘I’ve finished.’

Thérivier went up to the bed, rubbing his hands. He thought it best to assume a hearty, hopeful tone—his bedside manner.

‘Well, well? What’s the trouble to-night? A touch of fever, eh? That’s the new injection doing its job, of course.’ Stroking his beard, he glanced at the nun, as if calling her to witness. ‘Antoine will be back any moment. Meanwhile, there’s no need to worry. I’ll put you right. That new serum, you know . . .’

Without a word M. Thibault watched this man lying to him. He could see through it all now—the doctor’s cheerfulness-to-order, his professional play-acting. He was no longer taken in, as he had been too often and too readily, by these infantile ‘explanations.’ The make-up had worn thin; he knew them all for what they were: mummers in a macabre comedy that they had been playing for his benefit, for months. Was Antoine really coming back? Could anything they said be trusted? In any case, it was all the same to him. Nothing mattered; nothing whatever mattered now.

It did not even surprise him to read so clearly other people’s minds. . . . The universe was a closed system, something apart, remote, in which he, the dying man, had no place. He stood outside it all. Facing the great mystery alone. Alone with his Creator. So utterly alone that even God’s nearness left him still alone.

Unwittingly he had let his eyelids fall. He had ceased caring to distinguish vision from reality. A great peace, murmurous with music, had descended on him. He submitted to the doctor’s tedious examination without a murmur; inert, aloof, indifferent—in another world.

IN the night train that was taking them back to Paris, the two brothers had long given up any idea of sleep; but each, lying back in his corner seat, half stupefied by the stuffy air in the dim-lit compartment, persisted in feigning slumber, so as to be left to his own devices as long as might be.

Antoine's anxiety was keeping him awake. Now that he had started on the return journey, the alarming state in which he had left his father had come back vividly to his mind, and through the long hours of semi-darkness loud with the roaring wheels, his imagination was running riot, picturing the worst. But steadily as the train came nearer Paris, his fears diminished; once he was on the spot, he could attend to the situation, take charge again. Then another complication crossed his mind. How should he announce to M. Thibault the fugitive's return? How let Gise know? The letter he proposed to send immediately to London was no easy one to write; he would have to inform Gise not only that Jacques was safe and sound and had been traced, but that he had returned to Paris; nevertheless, somehow she must be prevented from rushing home at once.

Someone uncovered the ceiling-light; the people in the carriage began to stretch their limbs. Jacques and Antoine opened their eyes, looked at each other. The expression on Jacques' face, resigned yet hag-ridden, was so poignant that Antoine felt a swift compassion.

He tapped his brother's knee. 'Slept badly, eh?'

Jacques made no attempt to smile; with a vague gesture of indifference he turned towards the window and relapsed into a silent lethargy which, it seemed, he had neither the power nor the will to shake off. The train sped through the suburbs, still in darkness. A hasty cup of coffee in the dining-car—grinding brakes—the platform in the grey chill before the dawn—a few steps in Antoine's wake as he hunted for a taxi—there was a curious unreality about it all; each successive act seemed blurred in the dank, fog-bound air, yet guided by some dark necessity which spared him conscious acquiescence.

Antoine said little, just enough to tide over the difficult moment, making only casual remarks which Jacques had not to answer. Indeed he managed to give such a matter-of-fact air to the whole proceedings that Jacques' homecoming took the aspect of a perfectly ordinary event. Jacques found himself alighting on the pavement, then standing in the entrance-hall, without having had any clear idea of what was happening, even of his own

supineness. And when Léon, hearing the door open, stepped out of the kitchen, it was with perfect self-possession, though without meeting his man-servant's startled gaze, that Antoine bent above the pile of letters on his hall-table, and remarked in a completely casual tone:

'Good-morning, Léon. Monsieur Jacques has come back with me. You'd better . . .'

Léon cut him short.

'Haven't you heard, sir? You haven't been upstairs yet?'

Antoine stiffened up; his face was white.

'Monsieur Thibault's been taken worse, sir. Dr. Thérivier's spent the night here. I hear from the maids that . . .'

But Antoine had already rushed out of the flat. Jacques remained standing in the hall; the impression that he was living in a dream, a nightmare, grew stronger. After a brief hesitation, he darted forward, and followed his brother.

The staircase was in darkness.

'Quickly!' Antoine panted as he pushed Jacques into the lift.

The metallic clang as the outer door sprang to, the brittle click of the glazed doors closing, the drone of the motor as the cage began to rise—all those well-remembered sounds, following immutably in the same order and now, after what seemed like centuries, echoing-in the past, one after the other, plunged Jacques back into his youth. And suddenly came a vivid, galling memory: that bygone day when he had been pent in this selfsame cage with Antoine, trapped and tamed, after being brought back from Marseilles and his escapade with Daniel.

'Wait on the landing,' Antoine whispered.

Chance outwitted his precautions. Mademoiselle, who was fluttering distractedly to and fro about the flat, heard the lift stop. Antoine—at last! She ran to the door as fast as her bent back permitted, saw four feet, stopped in amazement, and only recognized Jacques when he bent to kiss her.

'Bless and save us!' she exclaimed, but without much real wonder. For the last twenty-four hours she had been living in a state of such immense bewilderment that no new surprise could take effect on it.

All the lights were on in the flat, all the doors open. From the study a flabbergasted face peered out, M. Chasle's; blinking, he launched his usual, 'Ah, so it's you!'

And, for once, suitably enough, Antoine could not help thinking. Paying no more attention to his brother, he was hurrying to the bedroom.

There all was darkness, silence. The door stood ajar; as he threw it open, he saw at first only the faint glow of a bedside lamp; then, on the pillow, his father's face. Despite the shut eyes and the immobility, unmistakably alive.

He went in.

No sooner had he crossed the threshold than he saw grouped round the bed, as if something had just happened, Sister Céline, Adrienne and a second nun, an elderly woman whom he did not know.

Thérivier emerged from the shadows, buttonholed Antoine, and led him into the dressing-room.

'I was afraid you wouldn't get back in time,' he said hurriedly. 'Look here, old chap, his kidney is blocked up. No longer secreting. Not a drop. And, I'm sorry to say, the uraemia has reached the convulsive stage. I've spent the whole night here, so as not to leave the women by themselves, and, if you hadn't come, I was going to send out for a male nurse. He's had three acute attacks since midnight—the last of them a very bad one.'

'When did the kidney stop working?'

'Twenty-four hours ago, it seems, from what the Sister tells me. Since yesterday morning. Naturally she's stopped the injections.'

'Naturally,' Antoine repeated, but with an air of hesitation.

Their eyes met; Thérivier read Antoine's thoughts easily enough. 'When for two months on end we've been deliberately injecting poison into a sick man who has only one kidney working, it's perhaps rather late in the day to develop scruples. . . .'

Thérivier craned forward, an arm extended in expostulation. 'All the same, old chap, we aren't murderers. One can't go on pumping morphia into him in the middle of an attack of uraemia.'

Obviously. Antoine nodded, but said nothing.

'Well, I'm off now,' Thérivier said. 'I'll ring you up some time before twelve.' Then suddenly added: 'By the way, how about your brother?'

Antoine half closed his eyes, then as he opened them again, a sudden gleam lit up the golden-yellow pupils.

'I've found him,' he said with a quick smile. 'What's more, I've brought him back. He's here.'

Thérivier thrust his plump hand into his beard, and his shrewd, merry eyes scanned Antoine's face. But it was not the place or time for questions. Sister Céline had come in, bringing Antoine's white coat. Thérivier glanced at the nun, then at his friend.

'Well then, I'm off!' And added bluntly: 'You've a hard day before you.'

Antoine frowned and turned to the Sister. 'He's in terrible pain, isn't he, without the morphia?'

'I'm applying very hot fomentations. Mustard-plasters.' Seeing Antoine's sceptical expression, she added: 'It relieves the pain a bit, you know.'

'Anyhow I hope you put some laudanum on the fomentations. No?' He knew only too well that, without morphia . . . But never would he acknowledge he was beaten. 'I've all that's needed downstairs,' he said to the nurse. 'I'll be back right away.' Then he turned to Thérivier. 'Come along, we'll go down together.'

Crossing the flat, he wondered what Jacques was up to; but he had no time to give to his brother now.

The two doctors went down the stairs in silence. At the bottom step Thérivier held out his hand. As Antoine took it he asked abruptly:

'Tell me, Thérivier—frankly, what's your prognosis? Surely the end is bound to come pretty quickly, eh?'

'Bound to, if we can't stop the uraemia.'

Antoine's only answer was to grip his friend's hand warmly. He felt confident in himself, he would see it through. It was only a matter of hours now. And Jacques had been found.

Upstairs, in the bedroom, Adrienne and the other nun, who were watching at the old man's bedside, had failed to notice that another attack was coming on. When his gasps attracted their attention, his fists were already clenched and his neck stiffening, dragging the head back.

Adrienne rushed out into the corridor.

'Sister!'

No one. She ran into the hall.

'Sister Céline! Monsieur Antoine! Come quick!'

Jacques had stayed in the study with M. Chasle. Hearing the cries, he ran without thinking to the bedroom.

The door stood open. He tripped over a chair. At first he could see nothing, only indistinct figures moving against the glow of the bedside lamp. At last he made out a dark mass sprawling across the bed, arms thrashing the air. The old man had slipped sideways, over the edge of the mattress; Adrienne and the nurse were vainly trying to lift him back. Jacques ran up, grasped his father with both arms, and propping a knee on the sheets, managed to shore up his shoulders, and thrust them back into the centre of the bed. As he crouched above the sheets, holding down the huge body

racked by spasms, he felt a warm chest heaving violently against his; saw, under his gaze, a mask-like face with only the whites of the eyes showing—a face that he could hardly recognize.

Gradually the paroxysms began to lose their violence, and the blood to circulate. The pupils of the eyes came back, wavering at first, then growing fixed; it seemed as if the eyes had come to life again and were discovering the young face bent above them. Did the old man recognize his lost son? And if so, was he still able in that flash of lucidity to distinguish between realities and the vague phantasms of his wandering mind? His lips moved, the pupils dilated. And suddenly those lustreless eyes brought back to Jacques a definite memory; it was just that expression of dim attention, that far-away look, that used to come into his father's eyes whenever he was trying to recall a forgotten name or date.

Jacques felt a tightening at his throat; propping himself on his fists, he stammered unthinkingly:

‘Well, father? How are you feeling, Father?’

Slowly M. Thibault's eyelids closed; his underlip and the tip of his beard were faintly quivering. Then his chest and shoulders began to heave with increasing violence, his face became convulsed; he burst into sobs. Sounds came from the flaccid lips like the gurgles of an empty bottle plunged in water. The old nun reached forward to wipe his chin with a wad of cotton-wool. Blinded by tears, not daring to move, Jacques stood bending over the sob-racked body, repeating mechanically, idiotically:

‘Well, Father? Tell me, Father! How are you feeling now?’

Antoine, who was coming in, followed by Sister Céline, stopped short when he saw his brother. He could not imagine what had happened; in any case, he did not pause to find out. He was carrying a half-filled glass measure. The nun had a basin and towels.

Jacques straightened up. The others thrust him aside, grasped the sick man and began turning back the sheets.

He retreated to the far end of the room. No one took any notice of him. What was the point of staying there, hearing his father's groans, watching his agony? None. He moved to the door and crossed the threshold with a sense of deliverance.

The passage was dark. Where was he to go? There was the study, but he had had his fill of the company of M. Chasle, who was self-installed there, riveted to his chair, his shoulders rounded, hands splayed on his knees, and smiling the angelic smile of a martyr *in extremis*. Mademoiselle was even more maddening; bent double, with her nose to the ground, she went

snuffling her way from room to room like a lost dog, trailing after everyone who crossed her line of vision. Small as she was, and large as was the flat, she made it seem overcrowded.

There was only one room unoccupied, Gise's room. As she was away in England, why not take refuge there? Jacques tiptoed in, and locked the door.

At once he felt a vast relief; at last he was alone after a day and a night of continuous strain. The room was cold and the lights would not come on. The shutters were closed and the belated half-light of a December morning was glimmering across the slats. For a while he could not associate this darkened room with any memory of Gise. He stumbled against a chair, sat down. Folding his arms for warmth, he stayed there, huddled up, his mind a blank.

When he came out of his doze, daylight was filtering through the curtains, and suddenly he recognized their blue floral pattern. While he had been asleep a whole forgotten world had come back to life around him. Paris . . . Gise . . . Each object he set eyes on had been touched at some time by his hands—in a former existence. What had become of the photograph of himself? There was a light patch on the wall-paper where it used to hang, beside Antoine's. So Gise had taken it down. Offended with him? No, of course, she had carried it off with her to England. And that meant—all the trouble would begin again. Savagely he lunged forward like an animal trapped in a net, whose every struggle makes it worse entangled. Anyhow Gise was in England. Thank goodness! And suddenly he heard himself cursing under his breath. Yes, it was always the same thing when he thought of her; he felt degraded, humiliated.

Anything to lay those spectres of the past! He sprang up from the chair, to escape the memory-haunted room. But he had forgotten about his father, the death-bed. Here at least he had only a phantom to contend with; it was the nearest thing to solitude. He came back to the centre of the room and sat down at the table. On the blotting-pad were imprints in violet ink—her ink. With a faint stirring of emotion he tried, for a moment, to puzzle over the inverted writing. Then he pushed the pad aside. Again his eyes grew blurred with tears. Ah, if he could sleep, forget! He folded his arms on the table and let his head droop on them—thinking of Lausanne, his friends, his loneliness. Yes, at the first opportunity he must escape! Leave this place again, for ever . . . !

He was roused from his half-sleep by someone trying to open the door. Antoine was hunting for him. It was long past twelve, and for the moment all was quiet in the sick-room; this opportunity for a hasty meal must not be missed.

Two places were laid in the dining-room. Mademoiselle had packed M. Chasle off to his own place for lunch. As for her, Bless and save us, No, she couldn't dream of eating, what with all the things she had to attend to!

Jacques had little appetite. Antoine gulped his food down, in silence. They shunned each other's eyes. What an eternity since they last had sat at that table, facing each other! But events were moving too precipitately to allow them time for sentiment.

'Did he recognize you?' Antoine asked.

'I don't know.'

After another silence Jacques pushed back his plate and looked up.

'Tell me, Antoine . . . How exactly do things stand? What do you expect to happen?'

'Well, for the last thirty-six hours the kidneys have failed to secrete. You understand what that means?'

'Yes. And in that case . . . ?'

'In that case, if something doesn't stop the poisoning that has ensued . . . well, it's hard to be definite, but I should say to-morrow, perhaps even to-night. . . .'

With an effort Jacques repressed a sigh of relief.

'And what about the pain?'

'Ah—that's the difficulty.' A look of gloom settled on Antoine's face.

He stopped, as Mademoiselle herself was coming in with the coffee. When she was beside Jacques and about to fill his cup, the coffee-pot began to tremble so violently that Jacques reached out his hand to take it. The sight of those ivory-yellow, skinny fingers, which were associated with so many of his childish memories, suddenly brought a lump to his throat. He wanted to smile towards the little old woman but, even when he stooped, could not manage to meet her eyes. She had accepted without demur her dear 'Jacquot's' return, but for three years she had been weeping over him as dead and, now he had come back, she could not bring herself to look this phantom frankly in the face.

'I'm afraid,' Antoine continued, when she had left them, 'that the pain will probably become more and more acute. Usually uraemia gives rise to an increasing amount of anaesthesia, so that the end is practically painless. But when it takes this convulsive form . . .'

'In that case,' Jacques said, 'why have the morphia injections been stopped?'

‘Because the kidneys have ceased secreting. A morphia injection would kill him as he is now.’

The door was flung violently open. A terrified face, the maid’s, looked in, then vanished. She had tried to say something, but could not get out a word.

Antoine ran out after her. An involuntary hope, of which he was frankly conscious, spurred him on.

Jacques, too, had risen, moved by the same hope. After a moment’s hesitation he followed his brother out.

No, it was not the end; only another attack, but a sudden and very acute one.

The dying man’s jaws were clenched so tightly that, from the door, Jacques could hear the grinding teeth. The face had turned a purplish crimson and the whites of the eyes showed between the slotted lids. His breathing was uneven and occasionally ceased altogether; the stoppages seemed never-ending and, while they lasted, Jacques felt his own heart stop, and, himself unable to draw breath, turned desperately towards his brother. The bodily spasm was already such that only the back of the old man’s head and his heels touched the bed; yet every moment his body grew more steeply arched. Only when the muscular tension had reached its maximum intensity, did it become stabilized in a vibrant equilibrium which, more than any movement, conveyed the tremendous strain to which the body was subjected.

‘A whiff of ether,’ Antoine said. The calmness of his voice struck Jacques with wonder.

The attack was running its course. At intervals hoarse, roaring grunts, louder and louder, issued from the twisted lips. Then the head began lolling from side to side; a confused tremor set in along the limbs.

‘Grasp his arms,’ Antoine whispered, while he seized the other wrist and the nuns struggled to hold down the legs which now were threshing to and fro, tearing off the sheets.

The struggle went on for several minutes. Then the violence of the spasms diminished and the epileptiform convulsions grew less frequent. The head ceased rolling from side to side, the limbs relaxed, and at last the exhausted body lay flat and still upon the bed.

Then the moans began again. ‘Ah! Aah! Aaah! . . . Ah! Aah! Aaah!’

Jacques laid back on the bed the arm that he was holding. He noticed that his fingers had left their marks on it. The sleeve of the nightshirt was torn and one of the collar buttons had snapped. Jacques could not take his

eyes off the wet, swollen lips incessantly moaning that dreadful ‘Ah! Aah! Aaah!’ And suddenly everything seemed to take effect at once: his emotion, the interrupted lunch, the fumes of ether. He felt himself retching, his cheeks turning green. With a great effort he brought himself to turn away, stumble hastily out of the bedroom.

As Sister Céline, helped by the old nun, was about to tuck in the sheets, she suddenly turned to Antoine. Holding up the top sheet, she pointed to a large moist patch, at the place where the old man had been struggling.

Antoine betrayed no feeling. But, after a moment, he moved away from the bed and leaned against the mantelpiece. Now that the functions of the kidney had been temporarily restored, the effects of the poisoning were staved off—for how long it was impossible to say. Nothing, Antoine knew well, could avert the fatal issue; only, now, it was postponed. Two or three days’ reprieve, perhaps. He pulled himself together; he did not believe in brooding over distasteful facts. Well, the fight would last longer than foreseen; there was nothing for it. And the longer it was to last, the greater need for good staff-work. The energies of his helpers must be husbanded.

He decided to organize two shifts of nurses, with fixed periods on and off duty. Léon could be enlisted. He, Antoine, would be on duty in both teams; he was determined not to quit the sick-room. Fortunately, before leaving for Switzerland, he had cancelled his engagements for some days ahead. If some emergency call came in from any of his patients, he would send Thérivier. What else was there? Ah yes; warn Philip. And ring up the hospital. What else? He was conscious of forgetting something important. (‘A symptom of fatigue. Have some cold tea on tap,’ he noted.) Why, of course! Gise must be told. He must write to her this afternoon. Lucky that old Mademoiselle hadn’t yet spoken of sending for her niece!

He was standing in front of the fire, his hands resting on the marble mantelpiece, mechanically stretching first one foot, then the other, towards the warmth. For him planning was the equivalent of action; he had recovered his poise.

At the other end of the room, M. Thibault’s groans were growing louder; the pain was setting in again, fiercely as ever. The two nuns were seated. A chance, this, not to be missed of putting through some telephone calls. But when Antoine reached the door, something made him walk back to the bed for a closer view of the dying man. It looked as if, already, another attack was coming on; M. Thibault’s face was becoming more and more darkly flushed, his breath was failing . . . Where had Jacques got to?

Then he heard voices in the corridor. The door opened and, followed by Jacques, the Abbé Vécard entered. Antoine noticed his brother's sullen expression; but the priest's eyes were sparkling, though his face was impassive as ever. M. Thibault's groans were coming faster; suddenly he jerked his arm forward and the finger-joints contracted with the brittle sound of cracking nuts.

'Jacques!' Antoine called, as he reached towards the ether.

The priest hesitated, then, after crossing himself discreetly, retired without a word.

4

ALL that afternoon, all night, and throughout the following morning the two shifts organized by Antoine took turns every three hours at M. Thibault's bedside. The first group consisted of Jacques, the maid and the older nun; the second of Sister Céline, Léon and Clotilde, the cook. Antoine so far had not taken a moment's rest.

The attacks were growing more and more frequent, and so terrific was their vehemence that, after each, those who had been holding down the sufferer were as worn out as he was, and fell back, gasping for breath, on to their chairs. After that they had to watch him suffer, with folded hands; there was nothing to be done. In the intervals between the attacks the neuralgic pains returned with increased violence, localized in almost every portion of the body; never had their ears a moment's respite from the groans and screams of agony. The old man's brain was too exhausted now to grasp what was happening; sometimes, indeed, he passed into a state of raving delirium. But his nervous responses were cruelly intact and he kept on indicating by gestures each place where he felt pain. Antoine was dumbfounded by the strength that remained in the old body, bedridden for so many months. And so were the two nuns, though long experience had inured them to the vagaries of disease. Indeed they were so convinced that the uraemic intoxication could not but get the better of this extraordinary resistance that they inspected the bed several times an hour to see if it was still dry, and the kidney had not resumed its functions.

On the first day the concierge had come to ask that, if possible, the shutters as well as the windows might be closed, so as to deaden the groans that echoed across the courtyard, spreading consternation in the building. The tenant of the flat above, a young woman with child, whose bedroom was just over M. Thibault's, had been so upset as to be obliged to leave the house in the middle of the night and take shelter with her parents. So all the windows had to be kept shut. The only light was the small bedside lamp. Despite the wood-fire kept constantly burning to carry off the noxious odours, the atmosphere in the room was unpleasant to a degree. The emotions of the last three days had taxed Jacques severely, and now under the stupefying effects of the foul air and semi-darkness, he kept on dropping off to sleep for a few seconds at a time, standing, his arm in air, then waking up with a start, and completing the unfinished gesture.

Whenever he was off duty in the sick-room Jacques went downstairs to Antoine's flat, the key of which he had got back; there he was sure of being alone. He hurried at once to his old room and flung himself fully dressed on to the sofa-bed. But rest eluded him. Across the flimsy window-curtains he saw the snow-flakes eddying, blurring the outlines of the houses and deadening all the noises of the street. And then pictures rose before him of Lausanne, the Kammerzinn *pension*, Sophia, his friends. All grew confounded in his thoughts, the present and the past, snows of Paris and Swiss winters, the warmth of the room where he was now and that of his little stove, the smell of ether clinging to his clothes and the tang of resin from his pitch-pine floor. He got up to try a change of atmosphere, dragged himself across to Antoine's study, and, dizzy with exhaustion, sank into an easy-chair. He felt sick of everything, as if he had been kept in suspense eternally and to no purpose, torn by sterile longings that nothing could assuage, and haunted by the feeling that nowhere, nowhere on earth, was any place where he could feel at home.

From noon onwards there were practically no intervals between the attacks, and it was obvious that M. Thibault's condition had taken a turn for the worse. When Jacques came with his shift for his spell of duty at the bedside, he was horrified by the changes that had taken place since the forenoon. The ceaseless convulsions of the facial muscles and, most of all, the swelling caused by the toxic condition had blotted out the features. The dying man's face had become almost unrecognizable.

Jacques would have liked to put some questions to his brother but their several tasks gave them no respite. In any case he was far too exhausted, too weary in mind and body, to make the effort of framing intelligible phrases to express his thoughts. Sometimes, between two attacks, racked by

compassion for this never-ending agony, he would gaze at his brother with haggard, questioning eyes, but always Antoine gritted his teeth and looked away.

After a series of convulsions of increasing violence, Jacques' nerves gave way, and a fit of blind rage came over him. His forehead dripping with sweat, he strode towards his brother, gripped his arm, and dragged him to the far end of the room.

'Look here, Antoine! This has got to stop, you can't let it go on.' His voice was vibrant with reproach.

Antoine turned his head, with a slight shrug signifying helplessness.

'But, *do* something!' Jacques shook his brother's arm. 'Find some way of stopping the pain. There must be something that can be done. Do it!'

Antoine's eyebrows lifted a shade contemptuously; then he gazed towards the bed whence long-drawn, agonizing screams of pain were rising. Perhaps a hot bath might be tried; obviously that idea had crossed his mind several times already. Was it feasible? The bathroom was at the other end of the flat, next the kitchen; the last door in a corridor which had a right-angled turn. A difficult proposition. Still . . .

In a few seconds he had weighed the pros and cons, formed his decision, and was mapping out a plan of campaign. He must take advantage of one of those periods of prostration, lasting two or three minutes, which usually followed each attack. To bring it off everything must be made ready in advance. He looked towards the nurse.

'Sister, stop what you're doing now, please, and fetch Léon. Sister Céline, too. Tell her to bring me two sheets. *Two*, you understand. Adrienne, will you go to the bathroom and turn on the hot tap. Get the water to a hundred degrees and see it stays at that temperature till we come. Then tell Clotilde to warm some towels in the oven. And to fill the warming-pan with charcoal. Be quick, please.'

Sister Céline and Léon, who had been resting, entered just in time to take Adrienne's place at the bedside. An attack was just beginning; it was violent, but brief.

When it was over and a rapid but calmer respiration had followed the stertorous breathing which now accompanied the periods of convulsion, Antoine cast a rapid glance over the helpers he had mustered.

'Now's the time,' he said, and added, turning to Jacques: 'No hurrying, please—but there's not a second to lose.'

The nuns had already begun untucking the bed; a cloud of powder rose from the sheets, and an odour of mortifying flesh filled the room.

‘Get off his nightshirt quickly,’ Antoine commanded; then turned to Léon. ‘Two more logs on the fire, in readiness.’

There was a feeble moaning from the bed. ‘Ah! Aah! Aaah!’ Daily the bed-sores spread and deepened; the shoulder-blades, buttocks and heels were an angry mass of sores which, though powdered with talc and bandaged, stuck to the sheets.

‘Wait,’ Antoine said. With his penknife he slit the nightshirt from end to end. As the blade hissed through the cloth Jacques could not repress a slight shudder.

The whole body lay before him, naked. Huge, flaccid, sickly-white, it gave the impression of being at once enormously distended, and emaciated. The swollen hands hung like boxing-gloves on the wizened arms. The queerly elongated legs had the look of bones coated with hair. A patch of coarse grey stubble mantled the chest. . . .

Jacques looked away. Many a time in after years he was to recall that moment, and the strange thoughts that crowded on his brain, as for the first time he looked on the nakedness of the man who had begotten him. Then, in a flash, he saw himself back in Tunis, reporter’s note-book in hand, looking at another body, naked like this, and like this bloated, blotched with grey—the body of an old Italian, a huge, obscene monster of a man who had just hanged himself. It had been lying in the street out in the sun, and a motley horde of brats from neighbouring streets was scampering and squalling round it. And Jacques had seen the dead man’s daughter, little more than a child, rush weeping bitterly across the courtyard, drive away the children with kicks and cuffs, then sprinkle handfuls of dry grass over the corpse. Out of modesty, perhaps—or because of the flies?

‘Now, Jacques!’ Antoine whispered.

He would have to slip his hand under the body to catch an end of the sheet which Antoine and the Sister had worked underneath the hips.

Jacques obeyed. And suddenly the contact of the clammy flesh produced an extraordinary, quite unforeseen effect on him—a starkly physical emotion, far more potent than any gust of pity or affection: the self-regarding love of man for man.

‘Get him in the middle of the sheet,’ Antoine ordered. ‘Right. Not so much that way, Léon, give a tug at this end. Now take away the pillow. You, Sister, lift his legs. A bit more. Mind the bed-sores! Jacques, take your corner of the sheet, beside his head; I’ll take the other. Sister Céline and Léon will hold the lower ends. Got it? Right. Let’s lift him now, just to try. One, two, three—hoist!’

Hauled energetically by the four corners, the sheet bellied and rose clear of the mattress; but the weight was almost too much for them.

‘Good work!’ Antoine sounded almost cheerful. Indeed all of them were feeling just then the joy of action.

Antoine turned to the older nun.

‘Sister, put the blanket over him. And please go in front, to open the doors for us. . . . Everyone ready? . . . Go!’

Staggering, they filed out and entered the narrow corridor. M. Thibault was screaming. For a moment M. Chasle’s face showed, peeping from the kitchen door.

‘A little lower, please, at his feet,’ Antoine panted. ‘That’s better. Shall we stop a bit? No? Then, carry on. Mind that cupboard key, you’ll get caught on it. Stick it out, we’re almost there. Mind the turning now.’ He had a glimpse of Mademoiselle and the two servants crowding up the bathroom. ‘Out of it, all of you!’ he yelled. ‘There’s barely room for the five of us. Adrienne, Clotilde! Now’s the moment to go and make the bed. Heat it with the warming-pan. Steady on now! We’ve got to turn, for the door. That’s right. No, damn it, don’t put him on the floor. Raise him! Up! More than that! We must get him over the bath-tub first. Then we’ll lower him gently. In the sheet of course. One more effort! Easy does it. Lower a little. More. Yes, like that. She’s filled it too full, confound her! We’ll be deluged. Now lower away, everyone!’

As the bulky mass, slung within the sheet, gently descended into the bath, the water it displaced splashed over on all sides, drenching everyone and flooding the whole floor.

‘Well, that’s that!’ Antoine panted. ‘Ten minutes’ breathing-space, thank goodness!’

For a moment M. Thibault’s screams had ceased—an effect doubtless, of the shock of the hot water; but now they started again, and shriller than ever. He began struggling convulsively; fortunately the folds of the sheet hampered the movements of his arms and legs.

In any case his restlessness gradually declined; the screams sank to a low, whimpered ‘Ah, Aah! Aaah!’ And soon he ceased to whimper. It was obvious that he was feeling a vast relief. The little ‘Ah’s!’ sounded like grunts of satisfaction.

The five of them stood round the bath, their feet in water, thinking with dismay of the task that still lay before them.

Suddenly M. Thibault opened his eyes and began speaking.

‘Ah, so it’s you? No, not to-day. . . .’ His eyes wandered round the room, but obviously he had no idea where he was. ‘Let me be,’ he added. (These were the first intelligible words he had uttered for forty-eight hours.) Then he fell silent, but his lips went on moving as if he were saying a prayer. Now and again a weak sound issued from them. Bending his ear, Antoine caught a word here and there. ‘Saint Joseph . . . friend of the dying.’ And a moment later: ‘Miserable sinner.’

The eyelids had dropped again. The face was calm, the breathing rapid, but regular. No more to hear those screams of agony was for them all an incredible relief.

Suddenly the old man gave a little laugh, like a child’s laugh, strangely crystalline. Antoine and Jacques stared at each other. What thought was stirring in the dying brain? The eyes were still closed. Then in a voice roughened by days of screaming, yet fairly clear, he sang once more the refrain of the old song, the words of which he had relearned from Mademoiselle.

Then clinkety and clankety
Along the lanes we go
To where my lovely Lola
Is waiting for me now.

Like an echo he muttered: ‘clankety,’ ‘clinkety and clankety . . .’ Then the voice ceased.

Antoine dared not meet his brother’s eyes. ‘My lovely Lola!’ It distressed him to hear such words at such a moment on his father’s lips. Whatever must Jacques be thinking?

Jacques had exactly the same feeling; his discomfort came not from what he had heard but from the fact he had not been alone to hear it. Each of them felt embarrassed—not for himself but for the other. . . .

The ten minutes were up.

While watching the bath, Antoine had been planning the return journey.

‘It’s out of the question shifting him in that wet sheet,’ he said in an undertone. ‘Léon, fetch the mattress belonging to the folding bed. And ask Clotilde to bring the towels she has in the oven.’

They laid the mattress on the wet tiles of the floor. Then, under Antoine’s directions, they grasped the four corners of the sheet, heaved the heavy body out of the bath and lowered it, dripping, on to the mattress.

‘Sponge him—quickly!’ Antoine said. ‘Right. Now wrap him up in the blanket and slip the dry sheet under. Hurry up, or he’ll catch cold!’

No sooner spoken than he thought: 'And what matter if he does catch cold?'

He glanced round the bathroom. There was not a dry spot anywhere; mattress, sheets and towels sprawled in pools of water. In a corner a chair lay upside down. The little room looked as if a free fight had taken place in it, during a flood.

'Back to your places now, and—hoist!' he ordered.

The dry sheet bulged, and the body swayed for a moment as if suspended in a hammock; then staggering, floundering through pools of water, the little procession started on its way, and slowly receded round the corner of the passage, leaving in its wake a trail of sodden footprints.

Some minutes later M. Thibault was lying pale and motionless in his new-made bed, his head in the centre of the pillow, his arms stretched limp upon the counterpane. For the first time for many days he did not seem to be in pain.

The respite was short-lived. It was striking four and Jacques had just left the bedroom, intending to go down to the ground floor flat and snatch a few hours' rest, when Antoine caught him up in the hall.

'Quick! He's suffocating. Ring up Coutrot. Fleurus 5402. Coutrot, Rue de Sèvres. Tell him to send at once some oxygen, three or four containers. Fleurus 5402. Got it?'

'Hadn't I better take a taxi?'

'No, they've a delivery van. Hurry up. I need your help.'

The telephone was in M. Thibault's study. Jacques dashed into it with such haste that M. Chasle jumped from his chair.

Father is suffocating,' Jacques cried to him as he unhooked the receiver.

'Hullo! Are you Coutrot, the chemist? What? Isn't that Fleurus 5402? . . . Hullo? Please put me through at once; it's urgent, a dying man: Fleurus five-four-oh-two . . . That Coutrot's? Good. Dr. Thibault speaking. Yes. Please send——'

Bending above the shelf on which the telephone stood, he had his back to the room. As he spoke, he looked up vaguely at the mirror on the wall. Reflected in it was an open door and, framed in the doorway, Gise was standing, gazing at him, mute with wonder.

THE day before, in London, Gise had received the telegram which Clotilde, with Mademoiselle's approval, had taken on herself to despatch while Antoine was away at Lausanne. She had travelled by the early boat-train and arrived in Paris without warning anyone of her coming; had driven straight to the house and, not daring to question the concierge, had gone, with a wildly beating heart, straight up to the flat.

Léon had opened the door. Alarmed at seeing him on this floor, she had murmured:

‘And—how is . . . ?’

‘Not yet, Mademoiselle.’

Someone was shouting down the telephone in the next room. ‘What? Isn't that Fleurus 5402?’

A tremor ran through her body. Had her ears deceived her?

‘*Hullo!* Put me through at once; it's urgent.’

The valise dropped from her hand. Her limbs seemed giving way under her. Unknowing what she did, she stumbled across the hall and with both hands pushed open the study door.

Leaning on the shelf, he had his back to her. Dimly she saw, or seemed to see, the outlines of his face, the half-closed eyes, wraithlike in the green depths of the tarnished mirror. So Jacques had been found again—she had never believed him dead—and he had come back to his dying father.

‘*Hullo!* Dr. Thibault speaking. Yes. Please send——’

Slowly her gaze fastened on his, his eyes sank into hers. Then Jacques swung quickly round, still holding the receiver from which came a drone of words.

‘Please send——’ he repeated. His throat was choked. With a violent effort he gulped back his saliva; all he could get out was a strangled cry, ‘*Hullo!*’ He had lost all notion of where he was, why he was telephoning. It cost him a prodigious struggle to reconstruct it all—Antoine, the death-bed, oxygen. ‘Father's suffocating,’ he told himself. Shrill reverberations were jarring in his brain.

‘Go on! I'm listening!’ An impatient voice at the other end.

Suddenly he felt a blind rage sweep over him, rage against the intruder. What was she after? What did she want of him? Why remind him of her

existence. Wasn't everything over, dead and done with?

Gisèle had not moved. In the brown face, the big black melting eyes, luminous with dog-like devotion, had a tender glow, intensified by wonder. She had grown much thinner. An impression crossed Jacques' mind—so fleeting that he hardly noticed it—that she had become quite pretty.

Into the silence burst M. Chasle's voice, like a belated bomb.

'Ah, so it's you,' he said with a half-wit grin.

Jacques was pressing the receiver nervously to his cheek. He could not bring himself to take his eyes off the charming figure in the doorway, but they had gone blank and betrayed nothing of his seething rage. He stammered down the telephone.

'Please send me at—at once some oxygen. Yes, by a—delivery van. What? In rubber containers, of course. For a patient who's suffocating.'

Rooted to the spot, Gise watched him, without a flicker of the eyelids. She had pictured to herself a hundred times this moment—the moment when, after the years of waiting, she would see him again, let herself sink into his arms. Well, she was living out that moment now and here. He was there, only a few yards away, but taken up by others; not hers—a stranger. And in Jacques' eyes her eyes had met a hardness, a presage of rebuff. The reality confronting her, so different from her dreams, had given her an intuition, though she was hardly conscious of it yet, that she was still to suffer by him.

He, too, while speaking, had all the time his eyes fixed on her; they seemed linked together by that mutual, unfaltering gaze. Meanwhile Jacques had straightened up; his voice became assured again, over-assured.

'Yes, three or four containers. *At once.*'

Higher pitched than usual, his voice had an unwonted vibrancy, almost a nasal twang, a bluffness that was unlike him. 'Ah yes, so sorry, the address! Dr. Thibault, 4a, Rue de l'Université. No, 4a I said. Come straight up to the third floor. And be quick, please, it's extremely urgent.'

Without haste but with an unsteady hand he hung up the receiver.

Neither he nor Gise felt able to make a move.

'Hullo, Gise!' he said at last.

A tremor ran through her body. Her lips half parted in an answering smile. Then as if he had suddenly awakened to reality, Jacques moved abruptly forward.

'Antoine's waiting for me,' he explained, as he hurried across the room. 'Monsieur Chasle will tell you all about it. *He*—he's suffocating. You've

come at the worst possible moment. . . .’

‘Yes,’ she said, drawing aside as he passed close in front of her. ‘Go at once, at once!’

Her eyes filled with tears. She had no clear thought, no definite regret; only an aching sense of weakness and disheartenment. Her eyes followed Jacques along the hall. Now that she saw him moving he seemed more alive, more as he used to be. When he was out of sight she clasped her hands impulsively, murmuring ‘Jacquot!’

Stolid as a piece of furniture, M. Chasle had watched the whole scene, and had noticed nothing. Left by himself with Gise, he felt called on to make conversation.

‘Well, Mademoiselle Gise, here I am, such as I am, at my post.’ He patted the chair on which he was perched. Gise turned her head, to hide her tears. After a moment he added: ‘We’re waiting to begin.’

His tone was so impressive that Gise was taken aback.

‘Begin what?’ she enquired.

The little man’s eyes flickered behind the glasses; he pursed his lips confidentially.

‘Why, Mademoiselle Gise—the prayer!’

This time Jacques had fled to his father’s room as to a place of refuge.

The ceiling lamp was on. M. Thibault, who was being propped up in the sitting position, was a terrifying sight; his head flung back, his mouth agape, he seemed to have lost consciousness. The wide-open eyes, starting out of their sockets, were glazing. Leaning over the bed Antoine was holding his father in his arms while Sister Céline was shoring up his back with cushions the older nun was passing her.

‘Open the window!’ Antoine shouted when he saw his brother.

Cold air poured in, bathing the trance-bound face. And now the nostrils began to flutter; a little air was penetrating to the lungs. The inhalations were feeble and jerky, the expirations interminably protracted; it seemed with each slow sigh that it must be the last.

Jacques had gone up to Antoine. He whispered in his ear: ‘Gise has just come.’

Only a slight lift of the eyebrows betrayed Antoine’s surprise. Not for a second would he let his attention be diverted from the duel he was fighting with death. The least inadvertence, and that feeble breath might fail for ever. Like a boxer, with his eyes riveted on his opponent, brain alert and every muscle set for action, he kept watch. Not for a moment did he pause to think

that for the last two days he would have welcomed, as a deliverer, that last enemy whose onset he was now resisting with all his might. He had even forgotten, or all but forgotten, that the life in peril was his father's.

'The oxygen's on its way,' he was thinking. 'We can hold out five minutes more, perhaps ten. Once it's here . . . But I'll have to have my arms free, so will the Sister.'

He called to his brother. 'Jacques, go and fetch someone else. Adrienne, Clotilde—anyone. Two will be enough to hold him up.'

There was no one in the kitchen. Jacques ran to the linen-room. Only Gise was there, with her aunt. He hesitated for a moment. There was no time to lose. . . .

'Why not? Yes. Come, Gise!' He steered the old lady out into the hall. 'Wait on the landing. Some oxygen gas-bags will be coming. Bring them to us at once.'

When they entered the bedroom M. Thibault was sinking into a coma. His face had turned a purplish-blue, and a brown sordes was oozing from the corners of his lips.

'Quickly!' Antoine said. 'Stand here!'

Jacques took his brother's place; Gise, that of Sister Céline.

Antoine turned to the Sister. 'Pull his tongue forward. . . . No, with a towel. With a towel.'

Gise had always shown a certain aptitude for nursing and had been attending first-aid classes in London. While preventing the old man from slipping sideways, she grasped his wrist and, after glancing at Antoine to see if he approved, began performing artificial respirations, keeping time with the nurse who was pulling at his tongue. Jacques took the other arm and copied her movements. But M. Thibault's face was growing darkly suffused with blood, as if he was being strangled.

'One, two. One, two,' Antoine repeated, keeping them in rhythm.

The door opened.

Adrienne ran in with one of the containers in her arms.

Antoine snatched it from her and without a moment's delay turned on the tap and applied it to the old man's mouth.

The following minute seemed interminable. But before it was over there had been a visible improvement. Gradually the breathing became stronger, more regular. And soon, unmistakably, the face was getting less blue; the circulation of the blood was coming back.

At a signal from Antoine, who, keeping his eyes fixed on his father, was gently pressing the gas-bag to his side, Jacques and Gise ceased raising and lowering the arms.

Gise could not have gone on, she was at the end of her endurance. The whole room seemed spinning round her. The smell from the bed was more than she could bear. She moved away and clung to the back of a chair to prevent herself from collapsing.

The two brothers remained bending over the bed.

Propped on the cushions, his lips kept open by the mouthpiece of the gas-bag, M. Thibault was breathing easily, his features calm. Immediate danger was over, though it was necessary to keep him in the sitting position and watch his breathing with attention.

Handing the container to the Sister, Antoine seated himself on the edge of the mattress to take his father's pulse. He, too, was suddenly conscious of his utter weariness. The pulse was irregular and very low. 'Ah,' he thought, 'if only he could pass away as he now is, peacefully!' It did not strike him yet, the inconsistency between this wish and the desperate fight he had just been putting up against the onset of asphyxia.

Looking up, he caught Gise's eye, and smiled. A moment past he had been using her as a convenient subaltern, without a thought for who she was; now suddenly he felt a thrill of joy at seeing her there. Then his gaze swung back towards the dying man. And now at last he could not withhold the thought: 'If only the oxygen had come five minutes later, by now all would be over.'

6

THE fit of choking had deprived M. Thibault of the temporary relief which otherwise the hot bath might have given him. Very soon another attack of convulsions came on, and what strength the dying man had drawn from his brief repose served only to enable him to suffer more.

There was an interval of over half an hour between the first and second attacks. But evidently the visceral pain and neuralgia had set in again with

extreme intensity, for all the time he kept on groaning and tossing on the bed. The third attack came on a quarter of an hour after the second, and, after that, attacks of varying violence followed in quick succession, at only a few minutes' interval.

Dr. Thérivier had looked in that morning and telephoned several times during the afternoon. When he came again, a little before nine, the paroxysms were at such a pitch of frenzy that those who held the patient down were losing control, and the doctor hurried up to help them. But the leg he had grasped wrenched itself free, dealing him a kick that almost knocked him over. How the old man still had such reserves of strength passed their understanding.

When the convulsions had died down, Antoine led his friend to the far end of the room. He tried to speak and indeed managed to get out a few words—which the screams coming from the bed prevented Thérivier from hearing—then suddenly stopped short. His lips were quivering, and Thérivier was shocked by the change that had come over his face. With an effort Antoine pulled himself together, and stammered a few phrases in his friend's ear.

'Look here, old chap! you can see—see for yourself. It can't go on like—like this. I can't—stand any more.' There was an affectionate insistence in his gaze, as if he were appealing to his friend for some miraculous intervention.

Thérivier dropped his eyes. 'Now let's keep calm!' he murmured, adding after a pause: 'And let's review the facts. The pulse is weak. No micturation for thirty hours. The uraemic intoxication is getting worse, and the symptoms are becoming masked. I quite understand how you're feeling. But, be patient—the end is near.'

His shoulders bent, his eyes fixed vaguely on the bed, Antoine made no reply. The expression of his face had changed completely. He seemed half asleep. 'The end is near!' After all, it might be true!

Jacques came in, followed by Adrienne and the old nun. It was the change of shift.

Thérivier went up to Jacques. 'I shall stay the night here, so that your brother can get a bit of rest.'

Antoine had heard. The temptation of escaping for a while from the sick-room, of rest and silence, of being able to lie down, to sleep perhaps, and to forget, was so strong that he was on the point of accepting Thérivier's offer. But, almost at once, he pulled himself together.

‘No, old chap.’ His voice was firm. ‘Thanks—but I’d rather not.’ Something within him had told him—though he could not have accounted for it—that it was his duty to refuse. He must face his responsibility alone; confront fatality alone. When his friend seemed about to protest, he added: ‘Don’t insist. I’ve made up my mind. To-night we’re in full force and fairly fit. Later on, perhaps, I’ll call on you.’

Thérivier shrugged his shoulders. Still, as he suspected the present state of things might last another day or two, and as in any case he had the habit of always giving in to Antoine, he now made no protest.

‘Very well. But to-morrow night, whether you agree or not. . . .’

Antoine did not flinch. ‘To-morrow night?’ Would they still be going on—these paroxysms and screams of pain? Obviously that was possible. And the next day, too. Why not? His eyes met his brother’s. Jacques alone guessed his anguish, and shared it.

Hoarse cries were coming from the bed, announcing another attack. They had to go back to their posts. Antoine held out his hand to Thérivier, who clasped it warmly, on the point of whispering, ‘Courage, old chap!’ But he dared not, and left without a word. Antoine watched his receding back. How often had he, too, when leaving the bedside of a patient on the brink of death—after he had shaken a husband’s hand, forcing his mouth into an optimistic smile, or shunned a mother’s eyes—how often had he, too, once he had turned his back on them, hurried from the room with the same sense of relief that Thérivier’s brisk step betrayed!

At ten that night the attacks, which were now proceeding without intermission, seemed to reach a climax.

Antoine felt that the energies of his helpers were flagging, their endurance weakening; they were getting slower and less careful in their movements. As a general rule such lapses would have spurred him on to greater personal efforts. But he had reached the stage when his morale could no longer cope with bodily fatigue. It was his fourth night without sleep since leaving for Lausanne. He had given up eating; with an effort he had forced himself to drink a glass of milk earlier in the day, but he had been living most of the time on cold tea, gulping down a mugful every few hours. His nerves were getting steadily worse, though their tension gave him a semblance—but no more—of energy. For what a situation like the present one called for—never-ending patience, coupled with bursts of spurious activity sapped by the knowledge of its impotence—was something against which his whole character rebelled. His endurance was being taxed to the

breaking-point; yet he must keep on, wear himself out in never-ending efforts, without an instant's respite.

Towards eleven, when an attack was just ending, and the four of them were stooping over the bed, watching the last paroxysms, Antoine suddenly straightened up, with a movement of annoyance. Another patch of moisture was spreading on the sheet; the kidney had begun working again, copiously.

Dropping his father's arm, Jacques made a rageful gesture. This was the last straw! The only thing keeping him on his feet had been the thought that, owing to the spread of the toxaemia, the end was imminent. What would happen now? Impossible to know. It was as if, during these last two days, death had been persistently setting his trap, and each time the spring was drawn tight, the teeth about to close, the catch had slipped—and all had to begin again.

After that, he did not even try to conceal his mortification. Between the attacks, he flung himself angrily into the nearest chair, and dozed for a few minutes, his elbows on his knees and his fists against his eyes. When a new attack developed, he had to be called, tapped on the shoulder, shaken into wakefulness.

Shortly before midnight, things had come to such a pass that it looked as if the struggle could no longer be kept up. Three exceptionally violent attacks had followed in quick succession, when there were signs of a fourth under way.

It promised to be catastrophic; all the usual symptoms were present, but in a hideously intensified form. The breathing had nearly stopped, the face was congested, the eyes were starting from their sockets, the fore-arms tensely contracted and flexed so sharply that the hands were hidden and the wrists, folded beneath the beard, had the look of amputated stumps. All the limbs were quivering with the formidable tension, and the sinews seemed on the point of snapping under the strain. Never before had the phase of rigidity lasted so long; the seconds went by and it showed no sign of easing. Antoine fully believed the end had come.

Then a feeble, gasping breath issued from the mouth, while a frothy saliva formed on the lips. The arms relaxed suddenly, and he passed into the convulsive state. From the very start the paroxysms had a maniacal violence that nothing less than a strait-waistcoat could have restrained. Helped by Adrienne and the elder nun, Antoine and Jacques clung to the old man's arms and legs. He was flinging himself about like a madman, and the four of them were dragged this way and that, hurled against each other, their arms half wrenched from their sockets. Adrienne was the first to let go, and after

that, try as she might, could not recapture the leg she had been holding. Then, swept almost off her feet, the nun lost her balance and the other ankle broke free. Out of all constraint, the two legs beat the air; blood spirted from the heels which were drumming on the woodwork of the bed. Panting, streaming with sweat, Antoine and Jacques braced themselves to prevent the huge heaving mass from rolling off the bed.

Then, as suddenly as they had begun, the frenzied paroxysms ceased. After settling his father in the middle of the bed, Antoine stepped back some paces. His nerves were frayed to such a point that his teeth were chattering; he was shivering with cold. Going towards the fire to warm himself, he suddenly caught sight of his reflected self, lit by the firelight, in the mirror. His face was haggard, his hair in disorder, there was blind fury in his eyes. He swung round, sank into a chair and, letting his forehead sink between his hands, broke into sobs. No, he could bear no more. . . . What little capacity for reaction yet remained to him centred in a wild desire for it all to end—anything rather than to have another night, another day, and perhaps a second night to pass watching this hellish agony, for which he could do nothing—nothing . . . !

Jacques went up to him. At any other moment he would have flung himself into his brother's arms; but, like his energies, his feelings had been blunted, and the sight of Antoine's prostration, instead of quickening his emotion, numbed it. As he gazed down wondering on the twisted, tear-stained cheeks, suddenly it seemed to him he was discovering a picture from the past, the tearful face of a little boy whom he had never known.

Then a thought, which had several times already crossed his mind, came back.

'Look here, Antoine! Supposing you called someone else in, for a consultation . . . ?'

Antoine merely shrugged his shoulders. Needless to say he would have been the first to call in all his colleagues if the case had presented any difficulties. He muttered some impatient remark that his brother could not hear; the screams of pain had started again, indicating that an attack would soon be coming on.

Jacques lost his temper. 'But, damn it, Antoine—think of something! There must be *something* you can do.'

Antoine clenched his jaws. When he raised his eyes towards his brother, they were tearless, hard.

'Yes. There's always *one* thing can be done.'

Jacques understood. He did not flinch.

Antoine threw him a questioning look; then murmured:

‘And you, Jacques, haven’t you ever thought of that?’

Jacques gave an almost imperceptible nod. As his gaze sank deep into his brother’s, he had a fleeting impression that at that moment they must be looking very much alike—with the same crease between the eyebrows, the same expression of reckless despair, the same ruthlessness.

They were in shadow, near the fire, Jacques standing, Antoine seated. The screaming was so loud that the two women kneeling beside the bed, half stunned by fatigue, could not overhear what they were saying.

After a short pause Antoine spoke again.

‘What about you, Jacques? Would *you* do it?’

For all the blunt directness of the tone, there was a faint, almost imperceptible quaver in Antoine’s voice. Jacques would not meet his brother’s eyes. At last he brought himself to mutter:

‘Really I don’t know. Perhaps not. . . .’

Antoine broke at once. ‘Well *I* would . . . and I will!’

He had sprung hastily from the chair. But now he halted, and, making an uncertain gesture, bent towards his brother.

‘Do you disapprove, Jacques?’

Quietly, without hesitation, Jacques answered: ‘No, Antoine.’

Again their eyes met, and for the first time since their return from Switzerland they had a feeling that was almost joy.

Antoine went back to the fire and, extending his arms, gripped the marble mantelpiece with both hands. Bending forward, he stared into the flames.

His mind was made up. The only problem was that of ways and means, of when and how? No one except Jacques must be in the room. It was getting on for midnight. Sister Céline and Léon’s shift would be returning to duty at one. It must be done before they came. Nothing could be simpler. A blood-letting to begin with; it would weaken the patient and induce a state of torpor—a pretext for sending off Adrienne and the old nun to take a rest before their time was up. Once he was alone with Jacques . . .

Patting the inner pocket of his white coat, he felt the little bottle of morphia he had had there since—since when? Since the morning of his return. Yes, he remembered now. When he had gone downstairs with Thérivier to get the laudanum, he had slipped the little bottle under his coat, on the off chance . . . The chance of what? It seemed as if he had had the

whole programme mapped out in his mind—all he had now to do was to execute the details of a long thought-out plan.

A new attack was coming on. He would have to wait till it was over. Jacques, full of zeal once more, had hastened to his post. ‘The last attack,’ Antoine was thinking and as he went up to the bed and saw Jacques’ eyes fixed on his, he seemed to read the same thought in his brother’s gaze.

It so happened that the period of rigidity was shorter than usual; but the paroxysms were no less severe.

The suffering man was tossing wildly on the bed, foaming at the mouth. Antoine turned to the nurse.

‘It might ease him if we let some blood. When he’s calm again, please bring me my instrument-case.’

The effects were almost instantaneous. Weakened by the loss of blood, M. Thibault seemed to fall asleep.

The women were so worn out that they were only too glad to go off duty before the next shift came; no sooner had Antoine made the suggestion than they hastened away to snatch a little extra rest.

Antoine and Jacques were alone.

Both were at some distance from the bed; Antoine had just gone to shut the door that Adrienne had left ajar, and Jacques, without knowing why he did so, had moved away to the fireplace.

Antoine paid no attention to his brother. Just now he had not the least desire to feel an affectionate presence at his side, and he had no need of an accomplice.

He felt in his pocket for the little nickel box. He allowed himself two seconds’ grace. Not that he wished once more to weigh the pros and cons; it was a principle with him never, when the time came for action, to rehearse the arguments that had led up to it. But as his eyes lingered on his father’s face reposing on the whiteness of the pillow—the face that the long course of the malady had rendered day by day yet more familiar—he yielded for a moment to the melancholy thrill of a last impulse of compassion.

The two seconds were up.

‘It would have been less distasteful,’ he reflected as he walked quickly towards the bed, ‘to do it during an attack.’

He took the bottle from his pocket, shook it, and fitted the needle into the syringe. While he did so, his eyes were roving round the room. Then he shrugged his shoulders, ironically: from force of habit he had been looking for the spirit-lamp on which to sterilize the needle.

Jacques saw nothing from where he stood. His brother's bent back hid the bed from him. So much the better! Then 'No!' he muttered, and took some steps aside . . .

His father seemed asleep. Antoine had unbuttoned a sleeve of the nightshirt and was rolling it up.

'The right arm, yes, for the injection,' Antoine murmured. 'It was the left I bled.'

Nipping a fold of flesh between his fingers, he raised the hypodermic syringe.

Jacques shuddered, and pressed his hand to his mouth.

A whimper came from the sleeping man, his shoulder twitched. In the silence, Antoine's voice.

'Don't move, father. It's to ease your pain.'

The last words, Jacques thought, that any voice will say to him.

The process of expelling the contents of the glass syringe seemed interminably slow. Supposing somebody came in! Finished now? No. Leaving the needle sticking in the skin, with a deft movement Antoine detached the container and refilled it. The level of the liquid went down more and more slowly. Supposing somebody came in . . . ! Another eighth of a grain. What a time it took! Only a few drops more.

Quickly Antoine withdrew the needle, then wiped clean the tiny scar from which a small pink drop was oozing. He buttoned up the nightshirt and drew back the counterpane. Surely, had he been alone, he would have bent over the pale forehead; for the first time in twenty years he found himself wanting to kiss his father. But then he straightened up, stepped back, slipped his instruments into an inner pocket, and took a look round to see that all was in order. At last he turned towards his brother; stoically calm, his eyes seemed to be saying simply: 'It's done.'

Jacques had an impulse to go up to Antoine, grasp his hand, convey his feelings by an affectionate gesture. But Antoine had already turned away; drawing up Sister Céline's chair, he seated himself beside the bed.

The dying man's arm lay outside the bedclothes; the hand was almost as white as the sheets and faintly quivering, like a magnetic needle. As the drug gradually took effect, the features were relaxing, the marks of many days of agony being smoothed away, and the mortal lethargy now settling on the tranquil face might have been the calm of a refreshing sleep.

Unable to fix his mind on any definite thought, Antoine had taken his father's wrist; the pulse was weak and rapid. All his attention was absorbed

in counting the beats mechanically, forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight.

His consciousness of what had just taken place was growing more and more blurred, his notions of reality lapsing into a dark bewilderment. Fifty-nine, sixty, sixty-one. The fingers on the wrist relaxed. He felt himself slipping away into a blissful nonchalance, a backwater of dreams where nothing, nothing mattered. Then came a great flood of darkness; oblivion.

Jacques dared not sit down, for fear of waking his brother. Stiff with fatigue, he kept his eyes fixed on the lips of the dying man. They were growing paler and paler, and had all but ceased to flutter with the failing breath.

A sudden fear came over Jacques; he made an abrupt movement.

Waking with a start, Antoine saw the bed, his father; gently he clasped the wrist again.

‘Fetch Sister Céline,’ he said after a short silence.

When Jacques returned, followed by the Sister and the cook, the breathing had become a little stronger and more regular, but accompanied by a peculiar rumbling in the throat.

Antoine was standing, with folded arms. He had lit the ceiling lamp.

‘The pulse is imperceptible,’ he said when Sister Céline came up to him.

But it was the nun’s opinion that the last moments of a life are outside the competence of doctors; experience is needed. Without replying, she sat down on the low chair, felt the pulse, and contemplated for a while the tranquil face. Then, turning, she made a sign of affirmation to Clotilde, who slipped out of the room.

The gasping intensified, with a rattling, nerve-racking undertone; Jacques’ face grew convulsed with horror and distress. Antoine, who had noticed this, was going up to him, to say, ‘You needn’t be anxious. He can’t feel anything now,’ when the door opened. There was a sound of whispers and Mademoiselle appeared in her dressing-jacket, leaning on Clotilde’s arm, her back bent more than ever. Adrienne followed and, after her, came M. Chasle on tiptoe.

Vexed by this intrusion, Antoine signed to them to stand back in the doorway, but already all four were kneeling just inside the door. And suddenly Mademoiselle’s piercing voice broke the silence, drowning the gasps of the dying man.

‘O Lord Jesus I draw nigh to Thee with a con-trite and hum-ble heart ...’

Jacques sprang up and ran to his brother. ‘Stop her! For mercy’s sake!’ he panted hysterically.

But Antoine’s calm, melancholy gaze sobered him down at once. ‘Let her be,’ he whispered in Jacques’ ear. ‘It’s almost over. He can’t hear anything.’ It had come back to him, that evening when M. Thibault had solemnly charged Mademoiselle to recite, as he breathed his last, the *Litany for a Happy Death*; and the memory touched him.

The two nuns were kneeling now; one on each side of the bed. Sister Céline’s hand still rested on the dying man’s wrist.

‘When my lips, pale and trem-bling, shall utter for the last time Thine adorable name, gentle Jesus have mercy on me.’

The poor old creature had mustered up what little will-power still remained to her after twenty years of servitude to redeem the promise she had made.

‘When my face, pale and wan, shall inspire the beholders with pity and dismay, gentle Jesus have mercy on me.

‘When my hair, bathed in the sweat of death and stiffening on my head . . .’

Antoine and Jacques kept their eyes bent on their father. The jaws were opening. The eyelids slowly drew apart showing the glazing eyes set in a blank stare. Was it the end? Sister Céline, who was still holding the wrist and watching the face, made no sign. Mademoiselle’s voice, wheezy as a punctured concertina, squeaked on indefatigably, syllable by syllable.

‘When my im-ag-in-ation, beset by hor-rid spectres, shall be sunk in an abyss of an-guish, gentle Jesus have mercy on me.

‘When my poor heart, oppressed with suf-fer-ing . . .’

The mouth was still opening. A gold tooth glinted. Half a minute passed. Sister Céline did not move. At last she let go the wrist and looked up at Antoine. The mouth was still gaping. Antoine bent forward at once; the heart had ceased to beat. Then he laid his hand on the tranquil forehead and very gently, with the ball of his thumb, pressed shut the unresisting eyelids, one after the other. Without removing his hand—it was as though he wished its loving pressure to befriend his father on the threshold of eternal rest—he turned to the Sister and said in a voice that was almost loud:

‘The handkerchief, please.’

The two servants burst into tears.

Kneeling beside M. Chasle, her hands resting on the carpet so that she seemed to be crouching on all fours, with her pigtail dangling on the white

dressing-jacket, Mademoiselle, oblivious to what had taken place, proceeded with her litany.

‘When my soul, trembling on my lips, shall bid farewell to the world ...’

They had to help her to her feet, and lead her away. Only when she had turned her back to the bed did she seem to realize what had happened; and she began sobbing like a child.

M. Chasle, too, was weeping; clawing Jacques’ arm, he kept on saying, wagging his head to and fro like a Chinese doll:

‘Things like that, Monsieur Jacques, they shouldn’t be allowed.’

As Antoine shepherded them all out of the room, he was wondering what had become of Gise.

Before, in his turn, leaving the room he gave it a final look round. At last, after so many weeks, silence had returned to it.

And suddenly grown larger than life, it seemed, propped on the pillows under the glare of the lamp, with the ends of the handkerchief that swathed his chin standing up in two quaint horns above his head, M. Thibault had taken on the far-fetched, enigmatic aspect of a personage in some fantastic folk-tale.

7

As he left the flat Antoine found Jacques standing outside the entrance door, and they went down together. The whole house was asleep, the stair-carpet muffled the sound of footsteps. They did not speak; their minds were void of thoughts, and their hearts light—for there was no withstanding the sense of purely physical well-being that had come over them.

Léon, who had gone down earlier, had lit the lamps in the ground-floor flat and, of his own initiative, laid a cold supper in Antoine’s study. Then, discreetly, he had retired from view.

Under the bright light, the little table, with the white cloth and the two places laid opposite each other, had quite a festive air—though neither would acknowledge it. They sat down without a word, each abashed at

feeling so hearty an appetite, and trying to keep up an appearance of dejection. The white wine was well-iced; the cold meat, bread and butter rapidly disappeared. At one moment their hands went simultaneously towards the cheese-plate.

‘Help yourself.’

‘No, after you.’

Antoine cut what remained of the Gruyère in half, and helped Jacques to his share.

‘It’s really in excellent condition, this cheese,’ he murmured, as if in self-excuse.

These were the first remarks they had exchanged. Their eyes met.

‘Shall we——?’ Jacques raised his finger, pointing to the upstairs flat.

‘No,’ Antoine replied. ‘We’ll go to bed now. There’s nothing to be done upstairs before the morning.’

As they were bidding each other good-night at the door of Jacques’ room, suddenly a pensive look came over Jacques’ face.

‘Did you notice, Antoine,’ he murmured, ‘how, at the end, the mouth keeps on opening wider and wider?’

They gazed at each other in silence. The eyes of both were filled with tears. . . .

At six o’clock Antoine, feeling somewhat rested, returned to his father’s flat.

To stretch his legs he went upstairs on foot. ‘Got to send out the usual notices,’ he was thinking. ‘That’s obviously right up M. Chasle’s street. Then the report at the Registrar’s; not before nine, however. Let’s see, who exactly should be written to? Not many in the family, luckily. The Jeannereaus will look after our relations on my mother’s side; Aunt Casimir will see to the rest. For the cousins at Rouen, a wire. An obituary notice in to-morrow’s papers, of course. Must send a line to old Dupré; to Jean, too. Daniel de Fontanin’s at Lunéville; I’ll write to him this afternoon; his mother and sister are staying on the Riviera—just as well they can’t come. Anyhow, I doubt if Jacques will feel like going to the service. Léon can ring up the charitable societies; I’ll give him a list. I’ll look in at the Hospital. Philip. Good Lord, I was forgetting the Institute!’

Adrienne came up. ‘There’s two men been round, sir, from the undertaker’s. They’re coming back at seven. Oh, and did you know, sir,’ she added rather awkwardly, ‘Miss Gisèle has been taken ill.’

They knocked at Gise's door. She was in bed; her cheeks were flushed and her eyes fever-bright. It was nothing serious, however. Clotilde's telegram, coming at a moment when she was already rather out of sorts, had been the first shock; after that, the scramble for the train, and, above all, the thrill of seeing Jacques again had thrown her off her balance. The cumulative effect of these emotions on her young, unstable constitution had been so overwhelming that immediately after leaving the sick-room on the previous night, she had had an attack of violent internal pains and flung herself on to the bed. She had been suffering all night, listening to every sound and guessing what was happening, but unable to move.

Her answers to Antoine's questions were so reticent that he desisted. 'Thérivier's coming this morning. I'll send him to you.'

Gise gave a little jerk of her head in the direction of M. Thibault's room; she felt little grief, and was at a loss for words.

'Then . . . it's over?' she asked timidly.

His only answer was a nod; then suddenly the thought came to him, stark, clean-cut: 'And it was I who killed him!'

He turned to Adrienne. 'Bring her a hot-water bottle and a poultice to go on with.' Then, with a smile to Gise, he went out.

He repeated to himself, 'Yes, it was I who killed him.' For the first time he stood back from his act, viewed it in the round. At once he added: 'And I did right.' His mind was working swiftly, lucidly. 'No humbug now; there was an element of cowardice in it—I couldn't face that nightmare experience any longer. But because I had a personal interest in his death, was that a reason for staying my hand? Certainly not.' He did not shirk the terrible responsibility. 'Obviously it would be dangerous to authorize doctors to . . . However absurd and inhuman a rule like that may be, theoretically it's got to be obeyed to the letter.' And the more he recognized the cogency and soundness of the principle as such, the more he approved of himself for having knowingly infringed it. 'It's a question for one's conscience to decide. I don't want to generalize. All I say is: In this particular case, what I did was right.'

He had come to the death-chamber. He opened the door softly, as he had always done, not to disturb the invalid. And, as his eyes fell on the quiet face, his heart missed a beat. There was something so startling, so incongruous in having to associate the mental picture he had of his father with the notion of a corpse, familiar though this was to him. He paused a moment at the door, holding his breath. That dead thing had been his father! That body with the hands serenely folded on the breast; ennobled; calm, so

grandly calm. All the chairs had been pushed back against the walls, leaving the death-bed in the centre to make its full theatrical effect. In attitudes of grief, like two mourning dark-robed figures on an ancient vase, the nuns were stationed on either hand of the dead man, whose statue-like repose lent a real grandeur to the scene, for all its artifice. That man had been Oscar Thibault, a master of men. Now that proud voice was stilled, all that power reduced to impotence. Antoine hardly dared to make a gesture, break the silence. Then again he told himself it was his work; and, as his eyes lingered tenderly on the familiar face which he had so well reconciled with silence and repose, he all but smiled.

Entering the room, he was surprised to observe Jacques, who he had thought was still in bed, sitting with M. Chasle in a corner of the room.

The moment he saw Antoine, the little secretary sprang from his chair and tiptoed towards him. Behind the tear-dimmed glasses his eyes were fluttering. He grasped both Antoine's hands, and at a loss for better words to voice his regard for the dead man, he spluttered out: 'A charming—charming—charming fellow!' perking his chin towards the bed at every 'charming.'

'Of course one had to know him,' he went on; there was a note of petulance in his tone as if he were arguing down a possible detractor. 'A bit crushing at whiles, that's so. But so just, so very just!' He stretched forth an arm, like a witness making affirmation. 'An upright judge indeed!' Then he tiptoed back to his chair.

Antoine sat down.

A sediment of memory, settled at the deepest levels of his consciousness, was being stirred up by the odours drifting in the air. Across the reek of stale chemicals—an aftermath of recent days—and the new warm fumes of the wax candles, he could make out the musty smell of the old blue repp upholstery that dated from his grandparents' time—an odour of dry wool, to which the polish, daily applied half a century through to the mahogany, had added a faint tang of resin. He recalled the cool fragrance of clean linen that would issue from the wardrobe, were its doors opened, and the odours of varnished wood and old newspapers, mingling with a clinging pungency of camphor, that came from the chest-of-drawers. And he knew, too—how often had he inhaled it closely, as a little boy, when it was the only seat low enough for his small legs!—the dusty smell of the tapestry-upholstered *prie-dieu* which two generations of obeisant knees had worn to the thread.

All was still; not a breath stirred the candle-flames.

Like all the others in the room, Antoine was gazing at the corpse, fixedly, in a sort of trance. In his tired brain dim wraiths of thought were struggling to take form.

‘That something which made father a being like myself, the life that still was in him yesterday—what has become of it? Lost for ever? Or is it still existing—somehow, somewhere? Under what form, then?’ He pulled himself up disgustedly. ‘That sort of thing leads straight to muddled thinking. Really one would think I’d never seen a corpse before! I know that idea of something “blotted out,” of “nothingness” is totally unsuitable. The continuity of lives—life germinating life *ad infinitum*—that’s the right way to look at it.

‘Yes, I’ve said that to myself often enough. And yet, gazing at that dead man, I don’t feel so sure. That idea of “nothingness” forces itself on me, almost it seems defensible. When all is said and done, death is the only reality—it refutes everything, baffles all argument . . . preposterously.’

Then ‘No!’ he said, with an angry shake of his shoulders, ‘that’s morbid nonsense. When one’s on the spot with *that* right under one’s nose, suggestions filter in. That shouldn’t count. It doesn’t count.’

With an effort he pulled himself together, sprang briskly up from his chair. And at once an emotion, urgent, warm and comforting, came over him.

Signing to Jacques to follow, he went out into the passage.

‘Before settling anything we must find out father’s last wishes. Come with me.’

They went together to M. Thibault’s study. Antoine turned on all the lights—ceiling lamp and wall lamps—and the sudden glare seemed like an outrage on this room where hitherto the only light had come from the green-shaded desk-lamp. As Antoine went up to the desk, the bunch of keys he had taken from his pocket jingled merrily.

Jacques kept in the background. Unconsciously he had moved near the telephone, was standing at the place where yesterday . . . Could it have been only yesterday, fifteen hours ago, that Gise had appeared behind him, at the door?

He cast a hostile glance round this room which for so long he had regarded as an inviolable sanctuary, where of a sudden nothing remained to guard it from intrusion. The sight of his brother kneeling, like a burglar, in front of the gaping drawers made him feel embarrassed. What did his father’s last wishes, all those old papers, matter to him?

Without a word he stole away from the room.

He went back to the death-chamber, which had a morbid fascination for him, and in which he had passed the greater part of the night, in a calm limbo midway between dreams and waking. He foresaw that very soon he would be driven from it by a stream of pestering intruders, and he did not wish to lose a moment of this tragic confrontation with his youth. For nothing could ever conjure up the past to him so vividly as the mortal remains of that omnipotent being whose hand had ever barred the way of his ambitions, and whose authority had now passed away, wholly and abruptly, like a tale that is told.

Walking on tiptoe, he softly opened the door, entered, and sat down. Jarred for a moment, the silence of the room closed in again, and once more Jacques could plunge himself, with a mournful ecstasy, into the contemplation of his dead father.

Immobility.

That brain which day and night, for all but three-quarters of a century, had never ceased one moment to link thought to thought, impression with impression, had run down for ever. So had the heart. But the cessation of thought was what touched Jacques most nearly; how often had he bewailed, as if it were a bodily disease, the never-ceasing activity of his own mind! Even at night he felt his brain, when sleep had let the gears out, racing like a motor out of control, rumbling and roaring in his head, churning together the kaleidoscopic visions that he called dreams, when memory had retained some fleeting atoms from their endless flux. One day fortunately all that furious activity would stop. One day he, too, would be freed from the torment of thinking. Then at last silence would come; and, with the great silence, rest. He remembered that river bank at Munich, on which he had dallied, a whole night long, with alluring thoughts of suicide. And suddenly, like the memory of a phrase of music, some words he once had heard came echoing through his brain. 'We shall have rest.' It was the closing sentence of a Russian play he had seen at Geneva. He still could hear the voice of the actress, a Russian with a childish face, and candid, fanatic eyes. Swaying her little head from side to side, she had repeated, 'We shall have rest.' In her voice there had been a dream-like quality, with elfin, bell-like overtones; and her eyes had been a little weary, with less hope in them than resignation. 'You have had no joy in life. . . . But patience, Uncle Vanya, patience! We shall have rest. . . . We shall have rest.'

THE influx of visitors began a little before noon; first, the tenants of the other flats, and various neighbours to whom M. Thibault had done kindness, came to declare their sympathy. Jacques made off before any of the family appeared. Antoine, too, was out, attending to urgent calls. Each of the charity societies to which M. Thibault had belonged included some of his personal friends on its committee. The stream of callers did not cease till nightfall.

M. Chasle had transported to the death-chamber the chair which he called his office stool; it was the chair sitting on which he had worked day after day for many years. Throughout the day he refused to leave 'the deceased.' He ended up by seeming as much part of the defunctive lay-out as the wax candles, the sprig of consecrated box, and the kneeling nuns. Each time a caller entered, M. Chasle would slip from his seat, proffer a mournful greeting to the new arrival, then hop back on to his perch.

Mademoiselle had made several attempts to shift him—out of jealousy, most likely; it vexed her to see him cutting so fine a figure of posthumous devotion. She was suffering—probably she was the only person in the household to feel genuine grief—but her sorrow took a different form; she was unable to keep still. The poor old creature who all her life had lived in others' homes, and had never possessed anything of her very own, was for the first time, perhaps, feeling the possessive instinct, and feeling it intensely: M. Thibault was *her* corpse. At every moment she would go up to the bed (which the curvature of her spine did not permit her to see in its entirety) and pull a sheet straight or smooth out a crease, murmuring the while a fragmentary prayer. Then shaking her head, and locking her thin fingers, she would exclaim as if it were something quite unbelievable:

'He has entered into rest—*before me!*'

Her heart had grown so parsimonious, so sparing of emotion, that neither Jacques' return nor the presence of Gise seemed to have stirred it to any deep response. The two young people had been so long absent from the family circle that she had lost the habit of thinking about them. Only Antoine counted, and the maids. And just now she seemed to have a curious animosity for Antoine. Indeed she embarked on a downright wrangle with the young man when the day and hour for confining the body had to be fixed. Antoine wanted this to take place as soon as possible; once a coffin had replaced the corpse visible in their midst, the nerves of all would be the

better for it. Mademoiselle protested as violently as if she were being robbed of all that remained to her on earth—the mortal remains of the master of the house, the last sad token of his physical existence. She seemed obsessed with the idea that M. Thibault's disappearance was a *finale* for her and for her dead alone. For the others, and most of all for Antoine, it stood for a beginning, the dawn of a new era. But before her lay no future; the past had fallen to pieces, and with it her world come to an end.

Towards the close of the afternoon, when Antoine had walked home, exhilarated by the keen, raw air that stung his eyes and braced his sinews, he found Félix Héquet, in full mourning, standing at his door.

'No, I won't come in,' the surgeon said, 'I only wanted to express my sympathy with you to-day.'

Tournier, Nolant, and Buccard had already dropped cards. Loisille had telephoned. The manifestations of sympathy from his colleagues had produced such an effect on Antoine that when that morning Dr. Philip had called in person, it was on hearing his 'Chief's' expressions of condolence that Antoine had realized something he had been forgetting till now: not only was M. Thibault dead, but he, Dr. Antoine Thibault, had just lost his father.

'Yes, old chap, I'm terribly sorry for you,' Héquet sighed discreetly. 'As doctors we may be always rubbing shoulders with death, but when it visits someone near and dear to us—why, it's as if we'd never seen a death before! . . . I know what it is,' he added. Then straightening up, he held out his black-gloved hand.

Antoine saw him to his car.

It was the first time the parallelism of the cases crossed his mind. For the present he had no time to think 'that problem' out all over again, but he now perceived that there was no denying it—the issue was a graver one than he had thought it on that previous occasion. He understood that the decisive act he had carried out on the previous day in cold blood—an act which he still whole-heartedly commended—was something which he must now assimilate, as it were, with his personality, fit into his scheme of things. It was one of those crucial experiences which have a far-reaching influence on the shaping of a man's character; and he felt that his mental centre of gravity would have to be readjusted to meet the stress of this new increment.

He returned to his flat in a brown study.

A youngster—hatless, with a muffler round his neck and cold-nipped ears—was sitting waiting for him in the hall. When Antoine came in, he stood up, blushing to the roots of his hair. It was the office-boy from the

lawyer's office, and Antoine, when he recognized him, felt a qualm of compunction for never having gone to see the two boys again.

'Hullo, Robert! Come this way. Well, what's wrong?'

The boy's lips moved, he was obviously struggling to say something but too shy to get the words out. Then from under his cape, he fished out a bunch of violets and held them towards Antoine, who understood at once.

'Thanks, old chap. Thanks very much. I'll take your flowers upstairs. It was very nice of you to think of bringing them.'

'Oh, that was Eddie's idea,' the boy put in at once.

Antoine smiled. 'And how is Eddie getting on? What about you—as "fly" as ever?'

'Sure!' Robert replied briskly. His shyness had passed off at once when Antoine smiled—he had not expected him to smile on such a doleful day. Now he was all eagerness to chatter—but that evening Antoine had no time to spare.

'Look here!' he said. 'Come along with Eddie and see me some day soon. How about a Sunday?' He felt a genuine affection for these two children, whom he hardly knew. 'Is it a promise?' he smiled.

Robert's face grew suddenly earnest. 'It's a promise, sir.'

While Antoine was seeing the boy out into the hall, he heard M. Chasle's voice in the kitchen.

'Someone else who wants to talk to me,' he muttered testily. 'Oh damn it! Better get it over!' He bade the little secretary enter his study.

M. Chasle trotted across the room, and perched himself on the furthest chair; a knowing smile was flickering on his lips, though his eyes held a profound distress.

'What have you to say to me, Monsieur Chasle?' Antoine enquired. His tone was friendly, but he remained standing, and began opening his letters.

'What have I to say?' M. Chasle looked startled.

Antoine folded the letter he had been reading. 'Yes,' he murmured to himself, 'I'll try and get there to-morrow morning, after hospital.'

M. Chasle was staring at his dangling feet. In a solemn voice he declared:

'Things like that, Monsieur Antoine, shouldn't be allowed.'

'What?' Antoine was opening another envelope.

'What?' M. Chasle parroted.

‘What,’ Antoine asked in exasperation, ‘what is it that shouldn’t be allowed?’

‘Death.’

Somewhat startled by the answer, Antoine looked up and saw M. Chasle’s eyes blurred with tears. The little man took off his glasses, unfolded his handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

‘I’ve been to see the “gentlemen at Saint-Roch,”’ he began, pausing to sigh between each phrase. ‘I’ve asked them to say masses—to satisfy my conscience, Monsieur Antoine, no more than that. Because, speaking for myself, till further—further evidence is forthcoming . . .’ His tears continued flowing, but penuriously, in little spurts; now and again he carefully wiped his eyes, then spread his handkerchief on his knees, folded it up along the creases and slipped it flat into an inner pocket, like a wallet.

Abruptly he swerved to a new subject. ‘I’d saved up ten thousand francs . . .’

‘Aha!’ Antoine smiled to himself. ‘Now we’re coming to it!’ Then he said aloud: ‘I don’t know, Monsieur Chasle, if my father had time to make provision for you in his will, but have no anxiety; my brother and myself will guarantee to you, for the rest of your days, the monthly salary you were drawing here.’

This was the first time Antoine had been called upon to settle a money-matter in the capacity of his father’s heir. It seemed to him that, all things considered, he was dealing generously by M. Chasle in pledging himself thus to support him till his death. And it was pleasant to feel in a position to make such generous gestures. Despite himself, his thoughts strayed to the financial aspect of the situation: what would his father’s estate amount to, and what would be his share? But he had nothing definite to go on.

M. Chasle had gone scarlet. To keep himself in countenance, presumably, he had produced a penknife, and begun trimming his nails.

‘Not an annuity!’ He spoke with an effort, emphatically, his eyes still fixed on his nails. In the same tone he added: ‘A lump sum, yes; not an annuity.’ His voice grew sentimental. ‘Because of Dédette, Monsieur Antoine; the little girl you operated on. You remember her, don’t you? You see, it’s just the same as if I had a daughter of my own. So an annuity’s no earthly use; there wouldn’t be a sou for me to leave the little pet.’

It all came back to Antoine: Dédette, the operation, Rachel, the sunlit bedroom, her body glowing golden in the shadowy alcove, the perfume of the amber necklace. With a far-away smile on his lips—he had dropped his letters on the table—he listened vaguely to the old man rambling on,

following his movements with a casual eye. Suddenly he spun round on his heel; M. Chasle had nicked his penknife into his thumb-nail calmly, like a man tapering off a cork, was slicing off at one stroke a crescent-shaped shred, that rasped along the blade.

‘Oh, stop it, Monsieur Chasle!’ Antoine exclaimed, his teeth on edge.

M. Chasle hopped off his chair.

‘Yes, yes . . . I’m wasting your time, of course. So sorry!’

But the issue at stake was so vitally important to him that he ventured on a last offensive.

‘A little lump sum, Monsieur Antoine, that’s the thing. What I need is capital. I’ve had a little scheme in mind for quite a while, you know. I’ll tell you about it,’ he murmured in a far-away voice, ‘some other time. Later on.’ Then, with a blank stare in the direction of the door, he added in a quite different tone: ‘Yes, it’s right and proper to say masses for him, I don’t deny it. But, if you ask my opinion, the deceased doesn’t need any help from us. A man like that leaves nothing to chance. No, in my opinion, it’s all fixed up. At this moment, Monsieur Antoine, at this very moment. . . .’ With little rabbit-like skips he scurried to the door, nodding his grey head and repeating with an air of firm conviction: ‘At this very moment he—he has settled in already, in his Paradise.’

Hardly had M. Chasle left than Antoine had to face the tailor, to try on his mourning suit. His weariness had come back and this tiresome parade before the looking-glass was the last straw.

He had just decided for an hour’s rest when, as he was showing the tailor out, he found Mme. de Bataincourt at his door, her finger on the bell. She had rung up previously to make an appointment, and learnt the ‘sad news.’ So she had cancelled an engagement to come and see him.

Antoine greeted her politely, but did not invite her in. She squeezed his hand effusively, expressing her sympathy for his bereavement in a high-pitched voice and with a certain gusto. She showed no sign of leaving, and it seemed difficult to keep her standing there; the more so as she had contrived to make Antoine move back a step, and was now inside the flat.

Jacques had stayed the whole afternoon in his bedroom, the door of which was near by. It struck Antoine that his brother would hear this woman’s voice, recognize it, perhaps; and the notion was displeasing to him, though why, he could not have explained. Putting a good face on necessity, he opened his study door and slipped on his coat. He had been in his shirt-sleeves, and the fact of having been caught thus unawares added to his annoyance.

During the last few weeks something of a change had come over his relations with his attractive patient. She had been coming to see him oftener, on the pretext of bringing news of her invalid daughter, who was spending the winter on the North Coast, with her stepfather and the English nurse. For Simon de Battaincourt had cheerfully abandoned his country home and shooting to settle down at Berck with the young girl and his wife—whereas the latter was always ‘having to run up’ to Paris, on one pretext or another, and staying away several days each week.

She refused to sit down; bending lithely towards Antoine, her breast heaving with little sympathetic sighs, her eyes half closed, she was bidding her time to squeeze his hand again. When looking at a man, she always kept her eyes fixed on his lips. Now, through her long lashes, she could see his gaze, too, hovering persistently upon her mouth—and her senses tingled. That evening Antoine struck her as downright handsome; there was more virility in his expression—it was as if the series of decisions he had had to make during the last few days had stamped his face with a look of self-reliance.

‘You must be feeling it dreadfully, poor man!’ She gave him a commiserating glance.

Antoine found nothing to reply. Ever since she had come, he had been keeping up a vaguely solemn air, which if it helped him through the interview, involved a certain strain. He continued watching her furtively; and suddenly, when his eyes fell on the breasts rising and falling under the light tissue, swift fire coursed through his veins. Looking up, he caught a glimpse of little, dancing lights flickering in her eyes; a project, tempting for all its rashness, was taking form behind the pretty forehead—but she was careful not to betray it.

‘The hardest time,’ she said in a soft, sentimental voice, ‘is—afterwards. When one’s caught up again by life, and finds nothing but emptiness everywhere. I hope you’ll let me come and see you sometimes—may I?’

He looked her up and down. Then with a sudden rush of hatred, he flung out brutally, his lips twisted in a mirthless smile:

‘Your sympathy is wasted, Madame. I did not love my father.’

At once he bit his lip remorsefully. He was more shocked at having thought such a thing than at having said it. ‘And,’ he reflected bitterly, ‘who knows if it wasn’t the truth she wrung from me then, the minx!’

For the moment Mme. de Battaincourt was too taken aback to reply; not so much startled by the words as cut to the quick by Antoine’s tone. She moved back a step, to collect her wits.

Then ‘In that case——!’ she exclaimed, and began laughing. After all the make-believe that strident laugh, at last, rang true.

While she slipped on her gloves her lips were working oddly, whether with suppressed rage or an incipient smile it was impossible to tell. With truculent eyes Antoine watched the enigmatic, fluttering mouth, prolonged by a slim streak of colour vivid as a scratch. At that moment, had she indulged in a frankly brazen smile, very likely he would have been unable to keep himself from throwing her out, then and there.

Reluctantly he found himself inhaling the scent with which her lingerie was liberally sprinkled, and once more his eyes lingered on the amply moulded bosom heaving beneath the flimsy blouse. And as he pictured crudely, unashamedly, her nakedness, a thrill ran through his body.

After buttoning her fur coat she moved further away, and faced him coolly, with an air of asking, ‘Are you afraid?’

They confronted each other with the same cold fury, the same rancour—yet with more than these; with, perhaps, the same sense of disappointment, the vague impression of a missed opportunity. Then, as he still said nothing, she turned her back, opened the door for herself and went out, paying no further heed to him.

The front-door slammed behind her.

Antoine turned on his heel. But instead of re-entering his study, he stayed thus for a moment, unable to move. His hands were clammy, and his ears buzzing with the tumult of his blood; greedily he inhaled the insidious perfume that lingered like a living presence in the hall, playing havoc with his thoughts. For a brief moment only the notion flicked his mind like a whiplash, that, after wounding so brutally that ungovernable nature, it was going to be a perilous feat, trying to win her back. His eyes fell on his hat and overcoat hanging on the wall; he snatched them off the hook and, with a furtive glance in the direction of Jacques’ room, hurried outside.

GISE had not left her bed. Her body ached all over and the least movement hurt her. From where she lay half asleep, she could hear a muffled sound of footsteps in the passage on the far side of the wall, just behind her head—the steady stream of callers entering and leaving the flat. One thought shone bright and steadfast in the twilight of her mind: ‘He has come back. He’s here, quite close; at any moment I may see him. He’s sure to come.’ She listened for his footstep. But all Friday, then all Saturday went by, and he did not come.

Not that Jacques had put Gise out of mind; far otherwise, he was haunted, harassed by thoughts of her. But he dreaded this interview too much to go out of his way to bring it on; he was biding his time. Moreover, he had deliberately dug himself in, in the ground-floor flat, hardly going out at all, lest he should be recognized and spoken to. Only at nightfall had he gone upstairs, crept into the flat like a thief and settled down again in a corner of the death-chamber, where he had stayed till dawn.

On Saturday evening, however, when Antoine casually asked him if he had seen Gise again, he brought himself, after dinner, to go and knock at her door.

Gise was recovering. Her temperature was almost normal and Thérivier had told her she could get up next day. She was just dozing off when Jacques knocked.

‘Well, how are you feeling?’ he asked in a cheerful tone. ‘I must say you’re looking remarkably fit.’ In the soft, golden light of the little bedside lamp her eyes shone large and lustrous, and indeed she looked the picture of health.

He had halted at some distance from the bed. After an embarrassed moment it was she who held out her hand. The loose sleeve fell back and he saw her bare arm glowing in the lamplight. Taking her hand, he played at being the doctor, and instead of clasping it, patted the soft skin; it was burning hot.

‘Still a touch of fever?’

‘No, it’s gone down.’

She glanced towards the door, which he had left open as if to show that he had dropped in only for a moment.

‘Feeling cold?’ he asked. ‘Shall I shut it?’

‘No. Well—if you don’t mind . . .’

He acquiesced good-naturedly. Now, with the door closed, they were safe from intrusion.

She thanked him with a smile, then let her head sink back; her hair made a patch of velvety blackness upon the pillow. The rather low-cut night-dress yielded a glimpse of the young curve of her breast; she put her hand up to the collar to keep it closed. Jacques was struck by the graceful outline of the wrist and the colour of her dusky skin which, against the whiteness, had the hue of moistened sand.

‘What have you been doing all day?’ she asked.

‘Doing? Nothing at all. I’ve been lying low, dodging the callers.’

Then she remembered M. Thibault’s death, Jacques’ bereavement. She was vexed with herself for feeling so little grief. Was Jacques feeling sad? she wondered. She could not find the words of affection that perhaps she ought to have addressed to him. Her only thought was that, now the father was no more, the son was completely free. In that case, she reflected, there’ll be no need for him to leave home again.

‘You should go out a bit, you know,’ she said.

‘Yes? Well, as a matter of fact to-day, as I was feeling rather muzzy, I took a stroll.’ He hesitated, then added: ‘Just to buy some papers.’

It had not been so simple, however, as he put it; at four, chafing against these hollow hours of waiting, and prompted by obscure motives of which he was not aware till later, he had gone out to buy some Swiss newspapers, and then, without fully realizing where he was going . . .

‘I suppose you were out-of-doors a lot over there, weren’t you?’ she asked after another silence.

‘Yes.’

Her ‘over there’ had taken him by surprise and involuntarily he had answered in an ungracious, almost cutting tone—which he instantly regretted. And it struck him now that ever since he had set foot in this place everything he did and said, even his thoughts, rang false.

His eyes kept straying back to the bed on which the shaded lamp cast a pale lure of light, bringing out, under the white coverlet, every graceful line of the young body: the long lithe limbs, the full curve of the flanks, and two small round knolls over the slightly parted knees. He was feeling more and more ill at ease, and in vain tried to assume a natural air and speak in casual tones.

She wanted to say, ‘Do sit down!’ but could not catch his eye, and dared not speak.

To keep himself in countenance, he was examining the furniture, the tiny altar faceted with glints of gold, the little decorative objects in the room. He

remembered the morning of his homecoming, when he had taken refuge in it.

‘What a pretty room this is!’ he said pleasantly. ‘You usedn’t to have that arm-chair, did you?’

‘Your father gave it to me, for my eighteenth birthday. Don’t you remember it? It used to be on the top landing at Maisons-Laffitte, under the cuckoo clock.’

Maisons! Suddenly it came back to him, that third-floor landing, the sunlight flooding through the dormer window, the flies that swarmed there all the summer and, when the sun was setting, filled the air with the buzz of a hive of angry bees. He remembered the cuckoo clock with its dangling chains; he heard again along the silent staircase the little wooden bird cooing the quarter-hours. So, all the time he had been away, life for them had gone on just the same. And now he thought of it was not he, too, ‘just the same,’ or nearly so? Ever since he was back, had he not at every instant, in each spontaneous gesture, been acting as his old self would have acted? The special way he had of rubbing his shoes on the doormat, for instance, then shutting the hall-door with a bang; his trick of hanging his overcoat on the same two pegs before switching on the light. And, when he walked up and down his room, was not each movement little more than a latent memory revived in action?

Meanwhile Gise was quietly taking stock of his appearance: his stubborn jaw, his sturdy neck, his hands and his expression of alert unrest.

‘How big and strong you’ve got!’ she murmured.

He turned to her, smiling. Inwardly he was all the prouder of his robustness because, throughout childhood, his puniness had galled him. Suddenly, unthinkingly—yet another reflex!—to his own surprise he solemnly declaimed:

‘“Major Van der Cuyp was a man of exceptional strength.”’

Gise’s face lit up. How often had she and Jacques read those magic words together, poring on the picture underneath which they were printed! It was in their favourite adventure-book, a tale of the Sumatra jungle, and the picture showed a Dutch officer laying out, with the utmost ease, an immense gorilla.

‘“Major Van der Cuyp had been rash enough to go asleep under the baobab-tree,”’ she capped him merrily. Then throwing her head back, she closed her eyes and opened her mouth wide—for in the picture the rash Major was shown thus, snoring lustily.

Laughing, they watched each other laugh—forgetting all the present, as they delved in that quaint treasury of bygone memories, to which they alone had access.

‘Do you remember the picture of the tiger?’ she smiled. ‘And how you tore it up one day, when you were in a temper?’

‘Yes. . . . Why was I?’

‘Oh, because we’d had a laughing fit when Abbé Vécard was there.’

‘What a memory you have, Gise!’

‘I wanted later on, like the man in the book, to have a “baby tiger” of my own. When I went to sleep at night I used to fancy I was nursing it in my arms.’

There was a pause. Both were smiling at their childish fancies. Gise was the first to come back to seriousness.

‘Still,’ she said, ‘when I think of those days, almost all I seem to remember is dreary, never-ending boredom. What about you?’

Fever and fatigue, and now these memories of the past, had given her a look of melancholy languor which went well with her melting eyes and the warm, exotic colour of her skin.

‘Yes,’ she went on, noticing that Jacques merely knitted his brows without replying, ‘it’s terrible being bored with life when one’s a child. And then, when I was fourteen or fifteen, quite suddenly, it came to an end. I can’t think why. Something changed inside me. Nowadays I’m never in the blues. Even when . . .’ (She was thinking: Even when *you* make me unhappy.) ‘Even when things go badly.’

His hands thrust into his pockets, his eyes fixed on the carpet, Jacques kept silent. Such evocations of the past sent waves of fury racing through him. Nothing in his earlier life found favour in his eyes. Nowhere, at no stage of his career, had he felt at home, settled down for good in his vocation—as Antoine felt. Always, everywhere, a misfit. In Africa, and Italy, and Germany. At Lausanne, even, almost as much as elsewhere. And not merely homeless, but at bay—hounded down by society, by family and friends, by the very conditions of life, and also by something else, something he could not define, which seemed to come from within himself.

‘“Major Van der Cuyp . . . ,”’ Gise began. She was lingering on these echoes of their childhood because she dared not breathe a word of the more recent memories haunting her mind. But she did not continue; she had learned her lesson: nothing now could fan those dead ashes into flame.

Silently watching Jacques, she tried in vain to solve the dark enigma. Why had he gone away, despite what had passed between them? Some vague remarks Antoine had let fall had disturbed her without explaining anything. What could have been the message the red roses sent from London were to convey?

Suddenly she thought: How different he is from my 'Jacquot' of the past!

With an emotion that now she could not hide, she said in a low voice:

'How you've changed, Jacquot!'

From the evasive smile, the brief glance Jacques cast her, she guessed that her emotion had displeased him. With a quick change of tone and expression, she launched gaily out into a description of her experiences in the English convent.

'It's so nice, the healthy, well-regulated life one has. You simply can't imagine how fit one feels for work after gymnastics in the open air and a hearty English breakfast.'

She did not say that, while she was in London, the one thing that had buoyed her up was the hope of finding him again. She did not tell him how that early-morning energy evaporated hour by hour, nor of the sombre moods that settled on her nightly in the dormitory bed.

'English life's so different from ours, and so fascinating.' A commonplace, but to have hit on it was a relief, and, to stave off the menace of another silence, she kept to the theme. 'In England everybody laughs, on purpose, on the least pretext. They simply won't hear of life being treated as "a vale of tears." So you see, they think as little as possible; they play. They make a game of everything—beginning with life!'

Jacques listened to her chatter, without interrupting. He, too, would go to England. To Russia and America. He had all his future before him—for travelling, for seeking. . . . He smiled approvingly, nodding assent now and then. Gise was no fool, and those three years seemed to have ripened her wits considerably. Made her prettier, too, and daintier. His eyes roved back to the slim, frail body which, under the counterpane, seemed as it were relaxed in its own warmth. And suddenly, crudely, it all came back—that gust of passion, their embrace under the great trees in the park. A chaste embrace; and yet even after all those years, after all he had gone through since, he still could feel that vibrant body swaying in his arms; under his mouth's kiss those inexperienced lips. And in a flash all thoughts of prudence, self-constraint, were dust before a fiery wind. . . . Why not? He went so far as to ask himself again, as in his maddest moments: Why not

marry her, make her mine? But no sooner thought, than he came up against some dark, dimly apprehended obstacle sundering him from her; somewhere in his inmost being lay an invincible impediment.

Then, as his gaze rested once more on the lithe, living form before him on the bed, his imagination, rich already with so many memories, cast across the screen the picture of another bed, and such another glimpse of slim, rounded flanks outlined under the bedclothes; and the desire that had just thrilled him melted into remembered pity. He saw again, laid out on her small iron bedstead, that little prostitute at Reichenhall, a girl of seventeen, who had been so stubbornly resolved to die, that she had been discovered squatting on the floor, strangled by a noose tied to the cupboard lock. Jacques had been one of the first to enter the room; he still remembered the smell of sizzling fat that pervaded it, but, clearest of all, the flat, enigmatic face of the woman, still fairly young, who stood breaking eggs over a frying-pan in a corner of the room. A schilling or two had loosened her tongue and she even gave some curious details. And, on Jacques' asking her if she had known the dead girl well, she had exclaimed with a look of unforgettable sincerity: '*Ach nein! Ich bin die Mutter!*'

Strange answer! 'Heavens, no—I'm her mother!' He was on the point of telling Gise the story, but thought better of it. To mention his life 'over there' would open the door to questions.

Snug in her bed, with half-closed eyes, Gise was observing him hungrily. She was feeling desperate, on the brink of blurting out: 'Speak to me, Jacques! What have you become? What of me? Have you forgotten—everything?'

He was pacing the room, bringing his weight down on one foot then upon the other, in a brown study. Whenever his eyes met hers, he grew aware how hopelessly their minds worked at cross purposes, and at once feigned an extreme aloofness. There was not the faintest hint of his real feelings—how thrilled he was by her childish charm, and the innocence he glimpsed in her, as naïve as the young throat shyly revealed between folds of filmy whiteness. He felt all the affection of an elder brother for this suffering little girl. But what a horde of impure memories kept forcing their unwelcome way between them! Bitterly he regretted feeling so old, so worn out—so soiled. . . .

'I expect you're fearfully good at tennis now, aren't you?' he asked evasively; he had just noticed a racket on the top of the wardrobe.

Her moods changed quickly; now she could not repress a smile of childish triumph.

‘You’ll see for yourself!’

At once she felt dismayed. When would he see—and where? What a silly reply to make!

But Jacques did not seem to have noticed. His thoughts were far from Gise. The tennis-courts at Maisons-Laffitte, a white dress . . . That brisk way she had of jumping off her bicycle at the club entrance. What was the meaning of the closed shutters of their flat in the Avenue de l’Observatoire? (For that afternoon when he had taken a stroll, uncertain where to go, he had walked on to the Luxembourg Gardens, and down their street. The sun was just setting. He had walked rapidly, with his collar up. He always made haste to yield to a temptation, so as to be through with it the sooner. Then suddenly he had halted, looked up. All the windows were shuttered. Of course Antoine had told him Daniel was at Lunéville, doing his military service. But what of *them*? It was not late enough to account for the closed shutters. . . . What did it matter anyhow? What could it matter? He had turned on his heel, and walked home by the shortest way.)

Perhaps she realized how far from her Jacques’ thoughts had drifted. Unconsciously she stretched out an arm, as though to touch him, clasp him, draw him back.

‘What a wind!’ His voice was cheerful; he did not seem to have noticed her gesture. ‘I say, doesn’t it worry you, that rattle in your fireplace? Wait a bit!’

He went down on his knees and wedged an old newspaper between the loose iron slats of the fire-curtain. Worn out by emotions, by thoughts she dared not utter, Gise watched him at work.

‘That’s better!’ he exclaimed as he got up. Then he sighed and, for the first time, spoke without much weighing his words, ‘Yes, this beastly wind—how it makes one wish the winter was over, and spring returning!’

Obviously his mind was busy with the springtimes he had spent abroad. And she could guess what he was thinking: ‘Next May I’ll be doing this, I’ll be going there. . . .’

‘And in this coming spring,’ she mused, ‘what place does he allow for me?’

A clock had just struck.

‘Why, it’s nine!’ Jacques said. His tone suggested it was time to go.

Gise, too, had heard the clock strike. ‘How many nights,’ she thought, ‘have I spent here, with this lamp beside me, waiting, hoping! Hearing that hour strike as it struck now—and Jacques far away, lost. Now he is here, beside me. He is with me to-night. Hearing with me the clock strike . . .’

Jacques had come back to the bed.

‘Well, well,’ he said, ‘it’s high time I let you go to sleep.’

‘He is with me!’ she was repeating to herself, her eyes half closed to watch him better. ‘And yet life, the outside world, everything round us is going on exactly as if nothing had happened, nothing changed.’ And indeed she had an impression, bitter as remorse, that, truth to tell, she too had not changed—had not changed enough.

Not wishing to seem in too much haste to leave her, Jacques had remained standing at the bedside. Without the least flicker of emotion he lightly clasped the small brown hand lying on the counterpane. He could smell the odour of the cretonne curtains, mingled to-night with a faint acid tang, which he rather disliked so long as he attributed it to her fever, but cheerfully inhaled when he saw a sliced lemon in a saucer on the bedside table.

Gise did not move. Her eyes, wide-open, were brimming with the bright tears that she was keeping back.

He made as if he noticed nothing.

‘Good-night then! To-morrow you’ll be quite well.’

‘Quite well? Oh, I’m not so keen about it, really!’ she sighed, with a wan smile.

She hardly knew, herself, why she had spoken thus. Her indifference about recovering expressed her lassitude, her lack of courage to face life again—and, most of all, her sadness for the ending of this long-awaited hour, so disappointing, yet so sweet. Tense with emotion, her lips would hardly move, but somehow she managed to cry gaily:

‘Thank you for having come to see me, Jacquot.’

Once more she was on the point of holding out her hand to him; but he had reached the door. Turning, he nodded to her cheerfully, and went out.

She turned off the light and snuggled down between the sheets. Her heart was thudding violently. She crossed her arms, hugging her sorrow to her breast, as long ago she used to hug the ‘baby tiger.’ Mechanically she murmured: ‘O Holy Virgin, my guide and sovereign Queen, into thy dear hands I commend my hopes and comforts, my griefs and sorrows. . . .’ She prayed in fervent haste, trying to lull her brain to rest with the sing-song cadences. Never did she feel so happy as when she was praying, praying her heart out, in a limbo of no thought. Her arms were tightly locked upon her breast. Everything was growing vague, merging into an insubstantial dreamworld, till presently it seemed to her that she was clasping to her heart’s warmth a real baby, hers and hers alone; and, bending a little forward

to enfold this phantom gift of love in a soft, safe nest, she strained him to her bosom, weeping over him, as she fell asleep.

10

ANTOINE was waiting for his brother to leave Gise's room and come downstairs to bed; he proposed that night to sort out, in a rough-and-ready way, the personal papers left by M. Thibault, and he preferred to be alone when doing this. Not that he wished to keep Jacques in the dark as regards any of his father's affairs, but on the day following the old man's death, when he was rummaging for the will, his eyes had chanced to fall on a sheet of paper headed '*Jacques*' and though he had then lacked time to give it more than a brief glance, he had seen enough to realize it would make painful reading for his brother. Very likely there were other documents of the same order; it was undesirable for Jacques to light on them—for the present, anyhow.

Before going to the study, Antoine crossed the dining-room to see what progress M. Chasle was making with his task. The table had all its extra leaves in, and on it were stacked some thousands of envelopes and the printed notices of M. Thibault's death to be sent out to friends and acquaintances. Instead of getting on with his job of addressing the envelopes, M. Chasle seemed absorbed in checking up the packets of notices which he was ripping open one after the other.

Puzzled by the sight, Antoine approached him.

'Ah, there's a lot of dishonest folk in the world,' the old fellow grumbled, peering up at Antoine. 'Each package ought to contain 500. Well, here's one with 503 in it, and another with 501.' As he spoke, he was tearing up the notices in excess of the round five-hundred. 'Of course it's nothing very serious,' he allowed indulgently, 'but all the same, if we kept them, we'd soon be snowed under by these notices over and above . . .'

'Over and above . . . what?' Antoine was completely flabbergasted.

M. Chasle raised a monitory finger, with a little knowing cackle of laughter.

‘Exactly. That’s the point.’

Antoine turned on his heel, leaving it at that. He was smiling to himself. ‘The oddest thing is that when one talks to that old loonie, one always gets the impression, for a moment, that one’s even loonier than he!’

Once in the study, he turned on all the lights, drew the curtains and closed the door.

M. Thibault’s papers were arranged methodically. ‘Charities’ had a cupboard to themselves. In the safe were a few share certificates, but mostly old ledgers and documents relating to the administration of the Thibault property. As for the desk, the left-hand drawers contained deeds, contracts, and business papers; those on the right—the ones in which just now Antoine was interested—seemed reserved for personal and private matters. In one of them he had found the will and, under the same cover, the paper relative to Jacques.

He knew where he had replaced it. It turned out to be merely an excerpt from the Bible: Deuteronomy xxi, 18-21.

If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother:

Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place;

And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious;

And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you: and all Israel shall hear, and fear.’

The sheet was headed ‘*Jacques*,’ and underneath was written, ‘*Stubborn and rebellious*.’

Antoine read it with emotion. There were signs it had been written fairly recently. The verses had been carefully copied; each letter was neatly rounded off. The whole document seemed to breath an atmosphere of moral certitude, of ripe reflexion and tenacity of purpose. And yet did not the very existence of this sheet of paper, which the old man had (deliberately, Antoine felt quite sure) placed in the envelope that contained his will—did it not testify to certain qualms of conscience, a desire to justify himself?

Antoine picked up his father’s will again. It was a huge affair, with numbered pages, divided into chapters, subdivided into clauses, like an official report, and boxed in cardboard. It was dated, *July* 1912. So M.

Thibault had made his will at the start of his illness, shortly before the operation. No reference was made to Jacques; the testator spoke throughout of 'my son,' 'my heir,' in the singular.

On the previous day Antoine had only glanced through the chapter headed '*Instructions for the Obsequies.*' Now he studied it in detail.

I desire that, after a Low Mass has been said at Saint Thomas Aquinas' Church, my remains shall be taken to Crouy. I desire that my obsequies shall be solemnized in the Chapel of the Foundation in the presence of the assembled children. I desire that, unlike the funeral service at Saint Thomas Aquinas' Church, the ceremonies at Crouy shall be performed with all the dignity the Committee may deem fitting to accord my mortal remains. I wish to be carried to my last resting-place by representatives of the Charitable Organizations which for many years have availed themselves of my whole-hearted service; and also by a delegation from the Institute of France whose reception of myself into their midst was the proudest moment of my life. Further, in view of my rank in the Order of the Légion of Honour, I desire, provided the Regulations admit of it, that military honours may be accorded me by our Army; whose cause I have defended my life long in all I have said and written, and by my vote as an elector. Lastly, I wish that those who may express a wish to say a few words of farewell beside my grave, may be permitted to do so without hindrance.

Let there be no mistake: in writing thus, I have no illusions as to the vanity of posthumous encomia. I tremble at the thought that one day I shall stand before the Judgement Seat. But, after seeking heavenly guidance in prayer and meditation, I am led to believe that my true duty is to shun the counsels of an unprofitable humility, and to take steps that, when death befalls, my light may, God willing, for the last time so shine before men that other Christians who belong to our great French middle class may be encouraged to devote themselves likewise to the service of the Faith and Catholic Charity.

A clause followed, headed: '*Detailed Instructions.*' M. Thibault had gone to the trouble of arranging the whole ceremony step by step, and Antoine had no say in the matter. Up to the last moment the head of the family was exercising his authority; and, indeed, Antoine found a certain grandeur in the old man's determination to play his patriarchal part up to the very end.

M. Thibault had even drawn up the intimation of his death for circulation to his friends, and Antoine had sent it on, as it stood, to the printers. M. Thibault's numerous distinctions were set forth in an order that had evidently been meticulously worked out, and took up a full dozen lines of print. 'Member of The Institute' was in capital letters. Following this came not only such descriptions as Doctor of Laws and Sometime Member for the Eure Department, but Honorary President of the Committee of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Paris, Founder and President of the Social Defence League, Chairman of the Governing Board of the Society for the Protection of Children, Sometime Treasurer of the French Branch of the United Catholic Defence League, President of the Church Council in the Parish of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Antoine could make little of certain descriptions, such as, Corresponding Member of the Brotherhood of Saint John Lateran. The imposing catalogue concluded with a list of orders, that of the Légion of Honour coming after the Orders of Saint Gregory and Saint Isabella, even after that of the Southern Cross. The insignia of all these Orders were to be pinned above the coffin.

The greater part of the will consisted of a long list of legacies to various charities and individuals, many of whom were unknown to Antoine.

Then his eye was caught by Gise's name. M. Thibault bequeathed in the form of a dowry a large sum of money to 'Mademoiselle Gisèle de Waize,' whom he had 'brought up and regarded almost as a daughter.' She was charged to provide, from this sum, for 'the declining years of her good aunt.' Thus the girl's future was comfortably provided for.

Antoine stopped reading for a moment, to savour the enjoyable surprise of finding the self-centred old man capable of such kindness, such open-handedness. He was blushing with pleasure, and he felt a thrill of gratitude and respect, fully justified by what he learnt from the succeeding pages. M. Thibault seemed indeed to have given his mind to ensuring the welfare of those around him: his servants, the concierge, the gardener at Maisons-Laffitte—no one was forgotten.

The last sheet dealt with various endowments, all of which were to bear Oscar Thibault's name. Antoine dipped at random into the lengthy list. There was an 'Oscar Thibault Bequest' to the French Academy: a prize for moral excellence. Naturally! Antoine smiled. An 'Oscar Thibault Prize,' to be awarded quinquennially by the Ethical Institute for the best literary work, 'serving to assist in the fight against prostitution, and to combat the tolerance that the present Government of the French Republic'—obviously!—'shows towards the social evil.' Antoine smiled again. Gise's legacy inclined him to indulgence. Moreover, in this constantly expressed desire of

the testator to promote the spiritual well-being of mankind, Antoine could discern—not without emotion—an obscure craving, from which he himself, for all his maturity of mind, was not wholly immune: the craving to outlive his death in the temporal world.

The least foreseeable, most naïve, of the bequests was the donation of a fairly large sum to the Lord Bishop of Beauvais, for the publication of an ‘Oscar Thibault Annual.’ As many copies as possible were to be printed, and sold at a low price at all the stationers’ and book-stalls in the Diocese. Described as a ‘mine of daily information for gardeners and agriculturists,’ it was to include ‘an entertaining section of edifying stories for recreation on Sundays and winter evenings,’ and steps were to be taken to see it found its way into every Catholic home.

Antoine folded up the will. He was anxious to get on with his task. As he slipped the bulky document back into its case, he caught himself thinking, not without satisfaction: ‘If he could be so lavish in his bequests, it means he’s leaving us a pretty handsome sum.’

The first drawer contained a large leather portfolio, inscribed *Lucie*: Madame Thibault’s Christian name.

As he undid the strap Antoine had a vague feeling of discomfort—quite unjustified, as he reminded himself.

Miscellaneous objects, to begin with. An embroidered handkerchief; a small box with a little girl’s earrings in it; a white satin purse ribbed with ivory and containing a confession note folded in four, with some writing in ink that had become illegible. Some faded photographs that Antoine had never seen before showed his mother as a child, and in her ’teens. Antoine was surprised that a man so unsentimental as his father should have preserved these tender relics, especially in the drawer which stood nearest to his hand. His heart warmed towards the merry, winsome girl shown in the photographs, though as he scanned them he was thinking more of himself than of his mother. When Madame Thibault died, at Jacques’ birth, he had been nine or ten. A serious-minded, stubborn, rather priggish small boy, with—he had to admit it—little natural affection. Without lingering over these distasteful memories, he investigated the other flap of the portfolio.

He found two bundles of letters, of equal size: *Lucie’s Letters*, *Oscar’s Letters*. The latter packet was tied with a silk ribbon, and inscribed in a sloping, school-girlish handwriting. Probably M. Thibault had piously preserved it exactly as he had found it, after his wife’s death, in her *escritoire*.

Antoine hesitated about opening it; he could come back to it later. But it happened that the ribbon was loose and, as he pushed the packet away, his eye was caught by some phrases which stood out, words instinct with reality, that called up from the shadows a past of which he had never dreamt, still less had a glimpse.

I shall write to you again from Orleans, before the Congress opens. But, my darling, I want to tell you to-night that my heart beats for you alone, to beg you to have patience, and to try to help you through this first day of our week of separation. Happily Saturday is not so very far off. Good-night, my love. Why not have baby with you in your room, so as not to feel so lonely?

Before continuing reading Antoine got up and locked the door.

I love you with all my heart and soul, my best beloved. To be separated from you has for me a sharper sting than the bitter frosts of this foreign land. I shan't wait at Brussels for W. P. to come. Before next Sunday I shall press you in my arms again, my darling Lulu. No one can ever guess what our hearts know; no two people have ever loved as we two love each other . . .

That his father should have penned such phrases was to Antoine so amazing that he could not bring himself to slip the ribbon round the packet and lay it aside. All the letters, however, had not the same fervour.

Something you wrote in your last letter has, I must own, displeased me. I beg you, Lucie, do not take advantage of my absence to waste time practising the piano. Mark well my words; the sort of ecstasy that music induces is apt to have a pernicious effect on the temperaments of young persons; it accustoms them to idleness, to letting their imagination run away with them, and may even lure a woman from her proper duties.

Sometimes a note of actual bitterness crept in.

You don't understand me, and I now realize that you have *never* understood me. You accuse me of egoism—me of all people, whose whole life is spent in serving others! Ask Abbé Noyel (if you dare to) what he has to say on that subject! You would thank God for, and be proud of, the life of self-abnegation that I lead, could you but

grasp its inner meaning, the high moral purpose and spiritual fervour that inform it. Instead of that, you give way to sordid jealousy, and all you can think of is how best to hinder, for your own selfish ends, the claims of these philanthropic societies which so greatly need my guidance.

This, however was an exception. Most of the letters were couched in a deeply affectionate tone.

Not a line from you yesterday, not a line to-day. I want you so badly that I hunger for a letter from you each morning in the most absurd way; it's my daily ration and when I wake and find it missing I have no heart for the day's work. Well, to-day I consoled myself by re-reading that exquisite letter you sent on Thursday—breathing of true love, and purity, and noble feelings. Surely you, my dear one, are the guardian angel God has posted at my side. I am vexed with myself for not loving you as you deserve. True, you have never complained; but that, my love, I know is because you make a rule of not complaining. But how base of me it would be, were I to feign to ignore my short-comings, and to hide from you my remorse!

Our delegation has had a very fine reception here, and I have been given a flattering place in it. Yesterday there was a dinner for thirty, with toasts to us and all the rest of it. I gather that the speech I made in acknowledgement was much appreciated. But don't think that such success in public makes me forgetful; between the sessions, all my thoughts are for you, my best beloved, and for our little one.

Antoine was greatly moved. His hands were trembling a little as he put the packet back in the drawer. M. Thibault had always referred to the 'dear, departed saint' with a special kind of sigh and a glance ceilingwards, when recalling some past incident in which his wife had been concerned. But this brief insight into an unsuspected period of his parent's younger days had told Antoine more about them than all the allusions made by his father over twenty years.

The second drawer likewise contained bundles of letters. *Letters from the Children. Reformatory Boys.* 'The rest of his family,' Antoine thought.

He was more at home with that phase of the past—but no less surprised. Who would have dreamed that M. Thibault thus preserved all Antoine's

letters, and all Jacques', even the few letters Gise had sent, and kept them in a special *dossier*, *Letters from the Children*?

On the top of the pile lay an undated, but very early note: a few words awkwardly pencilled by a little boy, whose hand his mother must have guided.

MY DEAR PAPA,

I kiss you lovingly and wish you many happy returns of the day.

ANTOINE.

For a moment he lingered pensively over this prehistoric relic, then passed on.

The 'Reformatory' group of letters seemed comparatively dull.

HONOURED SIR,

We are being transferred this evening to the Ile de Ré. Before leaving the prison, I would like to express my gratitude for all your kindnesses . . .

TO MY KIND BENEFACTOR

SIR,

He who writes to you and signs this missive is one who has returned to the fold of honesty so I make bold to ask you for your kind testimonial and enclose a letter from my Father asking you kindly not to pay too much attention to the gramma. My two little girls pray every night for Fathers Godfather as they call your honored self . . .

SIR,

I have now been 26 days in custody and am at my wits' end because the investigating Magistrate has come to see me only once in all that time, in spite of the petition I submitted showing cause . . .

A stained sheet of paper, headed *Montravel Prisoners' Camp, New Caledonia*—the ink was yellow with age—ended as follows:

' . . . hoping always for better days, I beg to remain, honoured sir,
Most gratefully yours,

CONVICT No. 4843.

Antoine could not help feeling moved by these expressions of trust and gratitude, all these pathetic invocations of his father's helping hand.

'I must get Jacques to have a look at these letters,' he said to himself.

At the bottom of the drawer was a little package without any inscription; it contained three amateur photographs, dog-eared at the corners. The largest showed a woman some thirty years of age, standing at the edge of a pine forest on a mountain-side. Antoine held it near the lamp; the woman's face was totally unknown to him. In any case the style of dress—ribboned bonnet, muslin collarette and leg-of-mutton sleeves—showed that the photograph must be a very old one. The second, a smaller picture, showed the same woman sitting bareheaded in a public square, or possibly the garden of an hotel; under the bench on which she sat a white poodle crouched sphinx-like. In the third the dog had been taken alone, perched on a table, its muzzle pointing upwards and a bow-knot of ribbon on its head. In the box was also an envelope containing the negative of the large photograph, the mountain scene. No name, no date. On a closer view, though the figure had not lost its slimness, the woman, Antoine judged, might be older than he had thought at first—forty perhaps, or more. She gave an impression of warm vitality and, despite the gaily smiling lips, of thoughtfulness; Antoine, who found the face attractive, pored over it for a while, unable to bring himself to put the photograph back into the box. Most puzzling of all—or was it only autosuggestion?—he was getting less sure that he had never seen this woman before.

The third drawer, otherwise almost empty, contained an old ledger, which Antoine all but failed to open. It was bound in morocco leather stamped with M. Thibault's initials, and, as a matter of fact, had never been used as an account-book.

On the front end-paper Antoine read: *A Present from Lucie for the First Anniversary of our Wedding*, 12.ii.1880.

In the middle of the next page M. Thibault had inscribed, likewise in red ink:

NOTES

for a

HISTORY OF PARENTAL AUTHORITY
from the Earliest to Modern Times.

But this title had been struck out. Evidently the project had been dropped. 'A quaint hobby, that,' Antoine smiled to himself, 'for a man who'd been married a year, and whose first child was yet unborn.'

After skimming through some pages, his curiosity was whetted. Few were blank. The changes in the handwriting showed that the ledger had served as a note-book for many years. It was not, however, a diary, as Antoine had begun by thinking—and hoping—but a collection of quotations noted presumably in the course of reading. Still, Antoine reflected, the choice of the quotations might well be enlightening, and he studied the first pages with an inquisitorial eye.

Few things are more to be feared than making the least change in established order. (Plato)

Buffon on “The Sage.” Content with his lot, his one wish is to remain as he has always been, to go on living as he has lived; sufficient unto himself, he has small need of others.

Some of the excerpts were rather unexpected.

There are sour, bitter and naturally churlish hearts which render likewise sour and bitter all that enters into them. (St. Fr. de S.)

There is no soul in the world that cherishes more warmly, more tenderly and passionately than mine; nay, I even exceed somewhat in loving-kindness. (St. Fr. de S.)

Prayer may have been accorded man to permit him to utter a daily cry of love for which he need not blush.

The last aphorism was written in a fluent hand, and no source was given. Antoine assumed his father was its author.

Thereafter, indeed, M. Thibault seemed to have got into the way of inserting the fruits of his own musings between his gleanings from the works of others. And, as Antoine turned the pages, he discovered, with keen satisfaction, that the commonplace-book seemed very soon to have diverted from its original usage and become almost entirely a record of its owner’s personal meditations.

At the outset most of these apophthegms had a political or social trend. It looked as if M. Thibault had jotted down from time to time such general ideas as might come in handy for his public speeches. There were quite a number of those phrases opening as a query cast in the negative form—‘Is it not obvious that . . . ?’ ‘Must there not be . . . ?’ and so forth—which had been so characteristic of the old man’s thought and conversation.

The authority of the head of a business is amply justified by the efficiency that lies behind it. But is there not more in it than that? For industry to achieve its maximum output must there not be loyal co-operation between all those contributing to that output? And nowadays is not the management the only organization which can ensure that spirit of co-operation amongst the workers?

The proletariat is up in arms against the inequalities of life, and stigmatizes as ‘injustice’ the marvellous *variety* ordained by God.

Do we not tend to forget nowadays that what a man is ‘worth,’ on the material plane, almost invariably determines also his worth as a good citizen?

Antoine skipped two or three years. Opinions on topics of general interest were gradually giving place, it seemed, to meditations of a more personal order.

Is not what gives the Christian his wonderful sense of security the fact that the Church of Christ is *also* a temporal power?

Antoine smiled. ‘These high-principled folk,’ he mused, ‘given zeal and courage, can be more dangerous than real scoundrels. They impress everyone—especially the better class of people, and they’re so convinced they have the Truth (with a capital “T”) in their pockets that they stick at nothing to ensure the triumph of their principles. At nothing! Yes, I’ve seen father at work; for the good of his party, for the success of one of his charities—well, there were times he did some rather curious things! Things he’d never have dreamed of doing for his own sake, to make money, or for his personal advancement.’

His eyes roamed the pages, settling now and then upon a phrase.

Is there not a proper, nay beneficent form of egoism—or rather, a way of putting egoism to the service of virtuous ends: for example, using it to buttress our religious zeal, not to say our faith?

Some of the aphorisms might have struck a reader ignorant of M. Thibault’s personality and life as positively cynical.

Charities. The grandeur and, above all, the inestimable social service rendered by our Catholic institutions (Benevolent Societies, the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul Sisterhood, etc.) lies in the fact that the relief they distribute rarely finds its way to other than deserving folk,

such as accept their lot; they run no risk of encouraging discontented, rebellious spirits, such as are always chafing at their humble station, and prating of 'social injustice' and their 'rights.'

True charity does not aim at the happiness of others. May God give us the strength to deal harshly by those whom it is our duty to save from themselves!

The same ideas seemed still to be obsessing him several months later.

One must be ruthless with oneself—to have the right to be severe for others.

Among the virtues unrecognized as such, should we not set in the first rank, considering the hard schooling it requires, what I have so long called in my prayers, 'case-hardening'?

In the midst of an otherwise blank page stood the injunction, peremptory as a trumpet-call.

We must compel respect by dint of virtue.

'Case-hardening!' Antoine mused. He was learning that his father had been not only rigid but—deliberately—case-hardened. Yet he would not shut his eyes to a certain sombre grandeur in such self-repression—even though it led to sheer inhumanity. Almost he pictured it as a deliberate amputation of every natural sentiment. Sometimes, indeed, it seemed that being the man he was, the merit he had acquired at such a cost made M. Thibault suffer.

Respect does not necessarily preclude friendship, but rarely, it would seem, invites it. To admire is not to love and, if virtue wins esteem, it does not open hearts.

A rankling regret, which led him so far as to write, a few pages later:

The just man has no friends; God compensates him with recipients of his benevolence.

Here and there, if rarely, a truly human note was struck—so out of tune with the rest that Antoine was dumbfounded.

If to do good does not come natural to us, let us do good out of despair—or, at least, so as to refrain from doing evil.

‘There’s something of Jacques in all that,’ Antoine murmured. But it was hard to lay a finger on it. There was the same emotional tension, the same harshness, the same dark ferment of the instincts. He even wondered if his father’s aversion for Jacques’ adventurous disposition had not been sometimes implemented by a secret similarity of temperament.

A good many of the aphorisms were headed ‘Lures of the Tempter.’

A Lure of the Tempter: fetish-worship of the Truth. Sometimes is it not harder, and more courageous, to be loyal to oneself and persevere in a belief, even if it be undermined, than presumptuously to shake the pillars and risk bringing down the whole edifice?

Is not the cult of consistency higher than the cult of truth?

A Lure of the Tempter: To mask one’s pride is not to be modest. It is far better to flaunt the failings one has not been able to overcome, and to convert them into energy, than to lie, and weaken oneself by hiding them.

‘Pride,’ ‘modesty,’ and ‘vanity’ were words that cropped up on each page.

A Lure of the Tempter: Self-belittlement, speaking humbly of oneself—is not that a stratagem of Pride? The right course is to keep silent about oneself. But that is impossible for any man, unless he feels assured that others, anyhow, will speak well of him.

Antoine smiled once more—but with an irony that soon froze on his lips. What melancholy there was even in a commonplace like this, when written by the pen of M. Thibault!

Are there any lives, even those of saints, in which falsehood does not play a daily part?

Moreover—and this was far from fitting in with Antoine’s impression of the last phase of his father’s life—it seemed that, crusted though it was with certainties, the old man’s peace of mind had steadily diminished with the years.

The output of a man’s career, the scope and value of his activities, are determined, more than one would fancy, by the natural affections. Some there are who have missed achieving a life’s work worthy of their talents for lack of a beloved presence at their side.

Occasionally there were intimations of a secret frailty of the flesh.

Can a sin that has not been committed warp a man's character, and cause as much havoc in his spiritual life as an achieved misdeed? Its effect is similar, and the sting of remorse as keen.

A Lure of the Tempter. We must not confound with love of our neighbour the emotion that sometimes we experience at the sight of or contact with . . .

The rest of the line had been struck out; but, holding the page up to the light, Antoine made out the missing words.

. . . young people, even mere children.

There was a pencilled note in the margin: July 2nd, July 25th, August 6th, August 8th, August 9th.

A few pages further on a new note was struck.

O God, Thou knowest my unworthiness and my affliction. I have no right to Thy pardon, for I have not broken, I cannot break with my sin. Fortify my resolve that I may shun the Tempter's lure.

Antoine suddenly remembered certain obscene words which had escaped his father's lips when he was delirious, on two separate occasions. M. Thibault's self-examinings were interspersed with appeals to the Creator's mercy.

O Lord, behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick.

Keep watch over me, O Lord, for if Thou leavest me alone I shall betray Thee.

Antoine turned some more pages. A date added in pencil in the margin, '*August, '95,*' caught his eye.

A charming token of love. He had left his book lying on the table; his place marked with the wrapper of a newspaper. Who can have been up and about so early this morning? A cornflower, surely from that nosegay she was wearing yesterday evening, now replaced the strip of paper.

August, 1895. Completely baffled, Antoine searched his memory. In 1895 he had been fourteen. That year M. Thibault had taken the family to a place near Chamonix. Someone he had met at the hotel? His mind went back at once to the lady with the poodle. Perhaps the following pages might clear the matter up. No, there was not another word about the lady of the cornflowers.

Still, a little further on, he found a flat, dry, faded flower—the very flower, perhaps—between two pages, on one of which stood a quotation from La Bruyère.

‘She has the makings of a perfect friend; and, with it, something that might lead one beyond friendship.’

In the same year, dated December 31st, came as if by way of conclusion, an entry recalling M. Thibault’s schooling with the Jesuits.

Saepe venit magno foenore tardus amor.

But vainly Antoine racked his brain for memories of the summer holidays of ’95—the leg-of-mutton sleeves and the white poodle. . . .

It was impossible to read the whole book at a sitting and anyhow the entries gradually fell off during the last ten or twelve years. M. Thibault had become a leading light in the world of Charities, and his duties in connexion with them left him little spare time. Except during the holidays he rarely wrote in the ledger, and excerpts from religious literature once more bulked large. Not a line had been written since Jacques’ departure, nor during the old man’s illness.

One of the last entries, written in a less firm hand, conveyed a mood of disillusionment.

When a man achieves distinction, he has already ceased to merit it. But may it not be that God in His mercy grants him this eminence in the world’s esteem to enable him to bear the disesteem in which he holds himself, and which first poisons, then dries up, the well-springs of all happiness, nay, even of all charity?

The last pages of the book were blank.

At the end was a small pocket in the silk lining of the leather cover; it contained odds and ends: two amusing photographs of Gise as a small child, a calendar for 1902 in which the Sundays were nicked off, and a letter on mauve paper.

April 7, 1906.

DEAR W.X.99,

I could echo word for word all you tell me about yourself. Yes, I cannot now conceive what prompted me to put such an advertisement in the paper, considering how I was brought up; and I am quite as shocked at my having done so as you can be at having studied the Matrimonial Column in your newspaper and yielded to the temptation of writing to a Total Stranger whose identity was concealed by two mysterious initials.

For I, like you, am a fervent Catholic, and most attentive to my Religious Duties, indeed I have never neglected them even for a single day; in fact it's all so wonderfully romantic, don't you agree, that one would think a Sign had been given us, and God wished you and me to have that moment of weakness when I put in the advertisement, and you read it and cut it out. I should tell you that I have been seven years a widow and am feeling more and more the sadness of a loveless life; what makes it harder is that I have no children, and so that consolation is denied me. Still it can't be always such a consolation, as you who have two grown-up sons, in fact a real Home, and as far as I can make out a very strenuous business life, you too complain of loneliness and lovelessness. Yes indeed I agree that this urge for Love we feel must come from God, and in my prayers to Him morning and night I always ask it may be granted me to know once more the joys of having someone tender and true always at my side, joined in the bonds of Holy Wedlock. And to this man, sent me by heaven, I too will bring a faithful, loving heart, and a youthfulness of the emotions, which surely is a Pledge of Happiness. But though I hate to think I may be giving you pain, I can't send you what you ask, though I quite understand your desire. You do not know the kind of woman I am, or who my dear Parents were, now dead but always living for me in my prayers—or my place in Society. Once more I beg you not to judge me by that momentary weakness when I put that Notice in the paper, and please understand that, feeling as I do, I can't bring myself to send you a photo, even a flattering one. But what I will gladly do is to ask my Confessor, who since last Christmas has been Senior Curate in one of the Paris parishes, to get in touch with the Abbé V. of whom you spoke in your second letter; my Confessor will give all the information required. As for my personal appearance—I might go

myself and call on the Abbé V., in whom you have confidence; he will then be able . . .

The fourth page ended with these words. Antoine hunted for the next one in the silk flap; it was not there.

He could not doubt the letter had been meant for his father; the references to the 'Abbé V.' and the two sons proved it. Should he tackle the Abbé Vécard? But the priest, even if he had played a part in this matrimonial project, would certainly refuse to speak about it.

Could it be the lady with the poodle? Antoine wondered. No, this letter was dated 1906—only the other day. The year when he had been working under Philip at the Hospital, and Jacques was in the reformatory. The bonnet, wasp-waist and leg-of-mutton sleeves wouldn't fit in with any date so recent as 1906. Well, there was no finding out now; he would never know the truth.

He put back the ledger, locked the drawer and looked at the clock; half-past midnight. He rose from his seat. 'The rags and tatters of a man's existence!' he murmured. 'And yet what a full life it was, a life like father's! There's always far more to a human life than anyone imagines.'

As if to wrest a secret from it, he stared for some moments at the leather-upholstered mahogany chair from which he had just risen; in which, over so many years, solidly planted and leaning a little forward, M. Thibault, turn by turn ironical or cutting or portentous, had pronounced his dooms.

'What did I really know of him?' he mused. 'Only one side of him, the patriarchal side—the authority which by divine right he exercised over me, over us all, for thirty years; but I must say this for him, always conscientiously. Stern and ruthless, but always just according to his lights; devoted to us, as to his duties. And, of course, I knew him, too, as the social despot all looked up to, and feared. But the real man, the man he was in solitude, communing with himself, what was that man? I haven't a notion. Never once did he drop the mask and utter in my presence a thought or sentiment in which I could detect anything genuinely personal, anything which came from deep down in his heart.'

Now that Antoine had dipped into these papers, lifted a corner of the veil and had a glimpse into his father's privacy, he realized with a thrill that was almost pain, that, for all the pomp and circumstance, the man now in his coffin had been a man like others, and pitiable perhaps as they; and of this man who was his father, he, Antoine had known absolutely nothing.

And suddenly he asked himself: 'And what did he know of me? Still less. Less than nothing! Any school-friend, who has lost sight of me for fifteen years, knows more about me. Was that his fault? Wasn't it, rather, mine? Here was a well-read old man whom many eminent people regarded as shrewd and level-headed, one whose advice was well worth taking—and I, his son, never asked him his opinion except as a matter of form, after I'd consulted others and already made up my mind. Surely, when we were alone together, two men like us, of the same blood and the same type of character, might have exchanged ideas—and yet between us, father and son, there was no common language, no possibility of communication; we were strangers.'

He took a few steps up and down the room. 'Yet—no!' he murmured. 'I'm wrong. We weren't strangers to each other. That's the terrible thing. There was a bond between us, a very real one—the bond that links father with son and son with father—absurd though it seems, considering our relations with each other, to think of such a thing. That unique, instinctive sense of kinship—it existed, sure enough, deep down in our hearts, in his and in mine. In fact that's why I'm feeling so bowled over just now; for the first time since I was born I've had a glimpse of something that lay behind our life-long estrangement, something I never could have guessed—a possibility, a quite exceptional possibility, of mutual understanding. And I'm now convinced that despite appearances, and though there was never the least glimmer of an *entente* between us, there has not been and there will never be in the whole world another person—not even Jacques—so well fitted to be understood by me as to the real man he was under the surface, or so well qualified to penetrate, almost at a glance, the secret places of my personality. Because he was my father, because I am his son!'

He was standing by the study door. His fingers settled on the key. 'High time to go to bed.' But before switching off the light, he turned back and gazed again at the familiar room, once tenanted by a busy mind, and empty now as an abandoned shell.

'Too late,' he thought. 'There's nothing to be done—for ever.'

Light was filtering beneath the dining-room door.

Antoine threw it open. 'Hurry up, Monsieur Chasle! It's time for you to be going.'

His bowed head flanked by two tall piles of notices, M. Chasle was addressing envelopes.

'Ah, so it's you. Glad you've come. Have you a minute to spare?' he mumbled, without looking up.

Supposing that the little man needed his help for an address, Antoine went up to him unsuspectingly.

‘Only a minute,’ M. Chasle repeated, still writing. ‘Eh? Yes, I’d like to make quite clear what I was saying just now, about that little nest-egg.’

Without waiting for a reply, he laid down his pen, whisked out his false teeth and began staring at Antoine with a disarming twinkle in his eye.

‘Don’t you want to go to bed, M. Chasle?’

‘Oh no! My mind’s too busy with ideas for that.’ He perked his little bird-like head and shoulders towards Antoine. ‘I’m writing addresses, yes, but all the time, Monsieur Antoine,’ he chuckled with the knowing smile of a conjuror who is about to ‘explain’ one of his tricks—‘my brain is teeming, fairly buzzing with ideas, *ad lib.*’

Before Antoine could create a diversion, he went on.

‘Well, with that little nest-egg you spoke to me about, Monsieur Antoine, I’ll be able to bring off one of my ideas. Yes, one of my pet ideas. The Mart. That’s the name I’d thought of—a natty little name, eh? A sort of office, you know. Well, a shop, really. Yes, a shop to start with. In a busy street somewhere hereabouts. But the shop, that’s only what meets the eye; there’s the idea behind it. . . .’

When, as now, M. Chasle took his theme to heart, he spoke breathlessly, in little spasmodic sentences, his body swaying like a pendulum, his fingers spread and interlocked. The breathing-space between each phrase enabled him to muster ideas for the next remark; once that was ready, it was as if a trigger had been pulled, shooting his shoulders forward and the words out simultaneously. Then he would pause again, as if incapable of secreting more than a thimbleful of thought at once.

Antoine wondered if M. Chasle’s wits were not even more addled than usual, after the alarms of the last few days and several sleepless nights.

‘Latoche would explain all that much better than I can,’ the little man went on. ‘I’ve known him for quite a while now, and from what I hear of his past, he has a very good record, has Latoche. A master-mind. Bursting with ideas. Like mine. And he shares the credit, you know, of that great idea I mentioned, the “Mart.” The Mart of Modern Discoveries . . . Do you see what I mean?’

‘Well—I can’t say I do.’

‘It’s like this. There’s a lot of little inventions nowadays, useful in the home—gadgets as they call them. And lots of small inventors who think up something and don’t know how to handle it. Well, we shall make a sort of

clearing-house, Latoche and I. We'll put advertisements in the papers of the district . . .'

'What district?'

M. Chasle stared at Antoine as if he did not understand the question. After a pause he went on.

'In the lifetime of the deceased, I'd have blushed for very shame to talk about such things. But now it's different. I've been turning it over in my mind for thirteen years, Monsieur Antoine. Ever since the Exhibition. What's more, I've thought up, all on my own, some A 1 little gadgets. Oh yes, indeed! A patent heel, that records the steps you take. An automatic, ever-ready stamp-moistener.' Jumping down from his chair, he went up to Antoine. 'But my masterpiece, if I may say so, is an Egg. The square egg. The trouble's in discovering the right solution, but I'm in touch with researchers about that. The country priests, I've great hopes of them; on winter evenings, after the Angelus, they've heaps of time on their hands for tinkering with inventions, haven't they? I've set them all off on the track of my solution. But that's child's play, hitting on the solution. The idea—that was the difficult thing to hit on.'

Antoine gazed at him open-eyed.

'And when you've got your solution . . .?'

'Why, then I steep the eggs in it, just long enough to soften the shell without spoiling the egg. You see what I mean?'

'No.'

'Then I put them to set in moulds . . .'

'Square moulds?'

'Naturally.'

M. Chasle was squirming like a sliced worm; Antoine had never seen him in such a state.

'Hundreds, thousands at once. A square-egg factory. No more egg-cups. My egg stands four-square on its base! And the shells come in handy in the home. For match-boxes, or mustard-pots. Square eggs can be packed side by side in ordinary crates; no more trouble about shipment, don't you see?'

He began climbing back on his 'office stool,' but jumped away at once, as if he had been stung. His cheeks were crimson.

'Excuse me, sir, I'll be back in a moment. Bladder trouble. Nerves, you know. Once I get talking of my Egg . . .!'

ON the next day, a Sunday, Gise woke to find her temperature definitely back to normal; her limbs no longer ached, and she now felt resolute, eager to be up and doing. She was, however, still too weak to go to church, and spent the morning in her room, in prayer and meditation. It was annoying to find she could not come to any profitable conclusion as to the changes Jacques' return might bring about in her life. She had nothing clear to go on; daylight filled the room, she was alone, and still in vain she racked her brain to find some adequate reason for the after-taste of disappointment, almost of despair, Jacques' visit on the previous evening had left behind it. Yes, they must have an explanation, do away with every misunderstanding. Then, all would become plain.

But the morning passed and Jacques did not appear. Even Antoine had not shown up since the body had been placed in its coffin. Aunt and niece had a solitary lunch, after which the girl retired to her bedroom.

The hours crept slowly through an afternoon of bleak, soul deadening gloom. At a loose end, tormented by thoughts she was unable to shake off, Gise felt the strain on her nerves becoming so unbearable that at four o'clock, while her aunt was still in church, she slipped on a coat, ran downstairs to the ground-floor flat and asked Léon to show her into Jacques' room.

He was sitting at the window, reading a newspaper.

Clean-cut against the grey light of the street, the outline of his head and shoulders showed in profile; Gise was struck by his robustness. Once he was no longer near her, she forgot the man he had become and could recall only her 'Jacquot,' the boy with the almost childish features who had strained her to his breast under the trees at Maisons three years before.

At her first glance she noticed, though she did not pause to analyse her impressions, the way he was sitting, uncomfortably perched on the corner of a light chair, and the general untidiness of the room—a suit-case gaping on the floor, a hat hung on the unwound clock, the unused desk, two pairs of shoes sprawling beside the bookcase—nothing but suggested a casual halting-place, a bivouac where there is no point in acquiring habits before the traveller moves on.

Rising, Jacques moved towards her. When she felt the blue sheen of his eyes, in which she caught a flicker of surprise, hovering like a caress upon

her face, she grew so flustered that the reasons she had planned to give accounting for this visit passed clean out of her mind. Only the real reason—her passionate desire to clear things up—persisted. Casting discretion to the winds, pale, determined, she halted in the middle of the room.

‘Jacques, we’ve got to have a talk, you and I.’

In the gaze lingering on her with an affectionate insistence she glimpsed a sudden steely flash, veiled almost at once by a flutter of the eyelids.

Jacques laughed. ‘Good heavens, how serious that sounds!’ His voice was a little shrill.

The jesting tone chilled her, but she contrived to smile, a small, woebegone smile that ended in a wince of pain. Her eyes were brimming with tears. Looking away, she took a few steps to the side and sat down on the sofa-bed. The tears were rolling down her cheeks now and, as she dabbed them with her handkerchief, she murmured in a reproachful tone to which she tried to lend a certain playfulness:

‘Look, you’ve made me cry—already! It’s silly of me.’

Jacques felt a rush of hatred stirring within him. Thus he had always been; even in childhood there had always smouldered deep in his heart a secret fire of anger—like the molten core, he pictured it, that seethes in the bowels of the earth—and now and again from that fiery underworld of rancour there would surge a gush of red-hot lava that nothing could hold back.

‘Very well! Have it your own way!’ he shouted furiously. ‘Say what you have to say. Yes, I too would rather get it over!’

She was so unprepared for such brutality, and the question she had meant to put was so completely answered by his outburst, that she sank back on to the cushions, with parted, quivering lips, as if he had actually struck her. With a weak gesture of self-defence she held her hand before her face, murmuring ‘Oh, Jacquot!’ in so heart-broken a voice that Jacques swung round at once.

Dazed, forgetting in a flash all he had been feeling, he passed without a break from the utmost, cruellest malevolence to a sudden, impulsive, yet self-deceptive mood of tenderness. Running to the sofa, he seated himself at Gise’s side, and strained the sob-racked body to his breast, murmuring in a broken voice, ‘Poor little girl! My poor little Gise!’ Close under his eyes he saw the velvety texture of her skin; the dark, translucent rings round the tear-stained eyes made them sadder, gentler still. But suddenly, overwhelmingly, keener indeed than ever, his lucidity returned and even as he bent above her, breathing-in the fragrance of her hair, he perceived, as

clearly as if he were looking at a stranger, the pitfalls of this purely physical attraction.

Thus far—and no further! Once already, on the treacherous descent of pity, he had saved them both from disaster by putting on the brakes in time—and leaving home. And, now he came to think of it, did not the mere fact that at such a moment he could take so detached a view, so clearly see the miserable risks they ran—did this not prove the superficiality of his feelings for her? And, also, did it not expose the hollowness of the self-deception which might play havoc with their lives?

No great heroism was needed on his part to fight down his emotion and resist the brief temptation to kiss the forehead that his lips were brushing. He contented himself with pressing affectionately to his shoulder, and gently stroking with his finger-tips, the warm, silken cheek still moist with tears.

With a wildly thudding heart Gise nestled in his arms, eagerly proffering her cheek and neck to his caress. She made no movement, but she was on the brink of letting herself sink to the floor, clasping Jacques' knees in humble ecstasy.

But he was conscious of his pulses slowing steadily down to normal as he regained an equanimity that almost shocked him. For a moment he actually felt annoyed with Gise for rousing in him such sordid, commonplace lust; and even despised her a little for it. Suddenly like a blaze of lightning, dazzling and dying down at once, the picture of Jenny flashed across his mind, jarring it into renewed activity. Then, with another breathless shift of mood, he began feeling ashamed of himself. How far, far better was Gise than he! That staunch devotion, like a steady flame, that after three years' absence still burnt bright as ever; that reckless self-abandonment to the dictates of her love, to the tragic destiny that she accepted, cost what it might, unflinchingly—these assuredly were stronger and purer emotions than any he could muster. . . . And now he found he could review it all with a sort of detachment, a frozen calm enabling him at last, without the slightest risk, to lavish tenderness on Gise.

While his mind drifted thus from thought to thought, Gise was stubbornly intent on one thing, and one only. Set wholly on her love, her mind was so keyed up, so sensitive to everything that emanated from him, that suddenly, though Jacques had not said a word, and though he was still caressing the little cheek that nestled to his hand, she *knew*. If only by the casual, vaguely affectionate way his fingers strayed from her lips to her forehead and back again, intuitively she had guessed all—that the link between them was snapped for ever, that for him she . . . did not count!

Desperately, like one who verifies something proved to the hilt ‘just to make sure,’ finally, indubitably—she slipped abruptly from his arms and gazed into his eyes. Taken unawares, he had no time to veil their hardness; and now everything was clear to her, clear beyond question. All was over, irremediably.

None the less she felt a childish dread of hearing it said aloud. The truth was horrible enough; that it should crystallize in cruel words, words they would be fated never to forget, was more than she could bear. She summoned up what little strength remained to her, so that Jacques should not suspect the havoc of her hopes. She even found the courage to move further away from him, to smile, to murmur, with a weak little flutter of her hand:

‘What an age it is since I last came to this room!’

Actually she had a clear memory of the last time she had sat where she was now, on the sofa—beside Antoine. That day she had fancied she knew what sorrow was; had thought that Jacques’ absence and her heart-racking anxiety about him were trials hardly to be borne. Yet what were they compared with what she now must bear? In those days all that was needed was for her to close her eyes—and there was Jacques, responsive to her call, exactly as her heart would have him be. And now—now, when he had come back, she was learning for the first time what it really meant, to have to live without him. ‘How is it possible?’ she asked herself. ‘How can this have happened?’ And her anguish grew so urgent that she had to keep her eyes closed for some moments.

Jacques had got up, to turn on the light. After going to the window to draw the curtains, he did not come back to the sofa.

‘Sure you haven’t caught cold here?’ he asked, noticing that she was shivering.

‘Well, it isn’t very warm in this room.’ She snatched at the pretext. ‘I think I’d better go upstairs.’

The sound of their voices, breaking the silence, roused her a little, and steadied her nerves.

Precarious though it was, the staying power she got from the pretence of easy conversation, her need to keep the truth at bay was so pressing that she went on talking by fits and starts, throwing out phrases as the cuttle-fish projects its ink-cloud. And Jacques played up to her pretence, with an approving smile, secretly pleased, perhaps, that to-night again he could evade an explanation.

With an effort she had risen, and they stood gazing at each other. They were of almost the same height. 'Never, never will I be able to live without him,' she was thinking. That was a way to avoid facing up to another thought, the cruellest of all: '*He* is so strong; how easily he can live without me!' Then suddenly it dawned on her that Jacques, with the callous unconcern of men, was choosing the way of life he wanted, whereas she—she had no power to choose, or give the least deflection to the course of hers.

She blurted out a question, trying to adopt a casual tone.

'When are you going away again?'

He kept hold on himself, took a few paces absent-mindedly, then half turned towards her.

'How about you—when are *you* going?'

How could he have made it clearer that he intended to leave, and assumed that Gise, too, would not be staying in France?

With a faint shrug of her shoulders, for the last time she forced a weak smile to her lips—she was becoming quite accomplished at it!—then opened the door and walked out.

He made no effort to keep her, but as his eyes followed her receding form, they had a sudden gleam of pure affection. If only, without risk, he could have taken her into his arms and shielded her! Against what? Against herself; against himself. Against the pain he was causing her (though he was only vaguely aware of it), and the pain he was yet to bring upon her—that he could not do otherwise than bring on her.

His hands thrust in his pockets, his feet planted well apart, he remained standing in the centre of the untidy room. Flaunting its motley labels, the suit-case gaped up at him, and he pictured himself back at Ancona, or perhaps Trieste, on the dimly lit steerage of a mail-steamer, jostled by emigrants cursing each other in exotic tongues. Then an infernal din broke out at the bows, the sound of metal rasping upon metal drowned the angry voices; the anchor was coming up. The swaying increased and everywhere there was a sudden hush, as the ship began to forge ahead into the black night.

Jacques felt his breast heave; that almost morbid craving for some undetermined struggle, some gesture of creation and fulfilment of his being, was baulked by everything about him: this house, the dead man upstairs, Gise—all the past with its snares and shackles.

His jaws clenched stubbornly. 'I must get away from all this,' he muttered. 'I must clear out.'

Entering the lift, Gise collapsed on to the seat. She wondered if she would have the strength to reach her room.

Yes, all was over now; that explanation on which, in spite of all, she had set such hope, had been attained, accomplished. ‘Jacques, we’ve got to have a talk,’ and his retort, ‘Yes, I too would rather get it over.’ Then the two questions, both unanswered: ‘When are you going away again?’ and ‘How about you?’ Four little phrases, echoing in her baffled brain . . . And now . . . what was she to do?

As she re-entered the huge, silent flat where in the background two nuns kept vigil at a bier, where nothing now was left of the fond dreams she had been dreaming in it half an hour before, a spasm of such distress shot through her heart that the dread of being alone proved more insistent even than her weakness and desire for rest. Instead of hastening to her own room, she entered her aunt’s.

Mademoiselle had returned and was sitting at her usual place, in front of her desk littered with bills and samples, pamphlets and medicine-bottles. Recognizing Gise’s footsteps, she turned stiffly round.

‘Ah, there you are? As a matter of fact——’

Gise stumbled towards her, kissed the ivory-yellow forehead between the snowy braids and, too big now to shelter in the little old lady’s arms, dropped at her knees, like a disconsolate child.

‘As a matter of fact, Gise, I meant to ask you: haven’t they told you anything about the house-cleaning, disinfecting the flat, you know? No? But there’s a law on the subject. Yes, ask Clotilde. I wish you’d speak to Antoine about it. The first thing is to call in the Sanitary Service. Then, to make quite sure, we’ll get some fumigator from the chemist’s. Clotilde knows; you have to stop up the doors and windows. You must give us a hand that day.’

‘But, Auntie,’ Gise murmured, her eyes filling again with tears, ‘I’ll have to be going back. They’re expecting me—over there.’

‘Over there? After what’s happened? You’re going to leave me by myself?’ The words came out in jerks, timed to the spasmodic shaking of her head. ‘Can’t you see the state I’m in? I’m seventy-eight, Gise.’

Yes, Gise was thinking, I shall go away. Jacques too. All will be as it was before—but with no hope left. Without a single ray of hope. . . . Her temples were throbbing, her thoughts in turmoil. Jacques had become incomprehensible to her; and it was the keenest pang of all—that he whom, as she thought, she had understood so well all the time he was away, should now be a sealed book to her. How had it come about?

What should she do? she wondered. Enter a convent? There she would have peace, the rest that Jesus gives the heavy-laden. But first she must renounce the world. Could she make that great renouncement?

Giving way at last, she burst into tears and, drawing herself up, clasped her aunt tightly in her arms.

‘Oh, it isn’t fair,’ she sobbed. ‘It’s not fair, Auntie—all that!’

Alarmed and somewhat vexed, Mademoiselle began to remonstrate. ‘What isn’t fair? I don’t follow. . . . What on earth are you talking about, Gise?’

Gise sank back to the floor, helplessly. Now and again, groping for some support, a friendly presence, she rubbed her cheek on the rough fabric under which jutted the sharp knees of Mademoiselle, whose voice went droning on indignantly, while the old head wagged this way and that.

‘Fancy being left alone at seventy-eight! Really, considering the state I’m in . . . !’

12

THE little chapel at the Crouy reformatory was full to overflowing. Raw though the weather was, the doors stood wide open, and in the courtyard where the snow had been trampled by the crowd into a morass of slime, the two hundred and eighty-six young inmates stood, bareheaded and unmoving, in serried files. The brass badges on their belts gleamed above their brand-new dungarees, and round them were stationed the warders in full uniform with revolver-holsters dangling at their hips.

The mass had been said by the Abbé Vécord; but the Bishop of Beauvais, who had a sepulchral bass voice, was in attendance to pronounce the final Intercession.

The responses floated up and hovered for a moment in the throbbing silence of the little nave.

‘*Pater noster . . .*’

‘*Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine.*’

‘*Requiescat in pace.*’

‘Amen.’

Then the instrumental sextet posted on the dais struck up the closing voluntary.

From the start Antoine had been following the ceremony with keen interest. ‘It’s odd,’ he thought, ‘the mania they have for playing Chopin’s Funeral March on these occasions; there’s precious little that’s funereal about it. The sadness doesn’t last, at once it strays off into a mood of joy—that craving for illusion, I suppose. Like the way consumptives have of thinking about their death light-heartedly.’ He remembered the last days of a young fellow named Dery—a composer, too—whom he had seen at the hospital. ‘Most people sentimentalize it; they fancy they’re watching the ecstasy of a dying man who sees heaven opening to him. We, of course, know better; it’s just a characteristic of the disease, almost a symptom of the lesions—like the high temperature.’

In any case he could but own that a mood of tragic grief would have been out of keeping with the present funeral, which was invested with the utmost pomp and circumstance procurable. He was—with the exception of M. Chasle, who the moment he arrived had slipped away into the crowd—the only member of the household present. Having attended the service in Paris, the cousins and distant relatives did not deem it necessary to make the pilgrimage to Crouy in such glacial weather. The congregation consisted exclusively of the dead man’s colleagues and delegates from Benevolent Societies. ‘Deputies,’ Antoine smiled, ‘like me; I’m deputizing for the Family.’ And added to himself, with a touch of melancholy: ‘Not a single friend.’ What he meant was, ‘No one who’s a personal friend of mine. And for a very good reason.’ Since his father’s death he had come to realize that he had no personal friends. With the possible exception of Daniel, he had only had colleagues or companions. It was his own fault; he had lived so long without a thought for others. Indeed till quite recently he had been inclined to pride himself on his detachment. Now, he discovered, it was beginning to pall on him.

He watched with interest the movements of the officiating priests. ‘What next?’ he wondered when he saw them retreat into the sacristy.

They were waiting for the undertaker’s men to shift the bier on to the catafalque erected at the entrance to the Chapel. Then once more the master of ceremonies came and bowed to Antoine with the prim elegance of a rather jaded ballet-master, ringing on the flags his ebony wand. The cortège formed up again, moved down the aisle and halted in the Chapel porch, to listen to the speeches. Dignified, holding himself erect, Antoine complied with the requirements of the ceremonial willingly enough; his consciousness

of being the focus of many eyes stimulated him to play his part. The mourners massed on either side strained forward to see, following Oscar Thibault's son, the *Sous-préfet*, the Mayor of Compiègne, the Crouy Town Council in full force and frock-coats, a young Bishop *in partibus* 'deputizing' for His Grace the Archbishop of Paris, and, amongst other eminent figures whose names were whispered round, some members of the Institute who had come unofficially to render homage to their dead colleague.

A powerful voice subdued the whispers of the crowd.

'Gentlemen, in the name of the Institute of France, I have the melancholy honour . . .'

The orator was Loudun-Costard, the jurist, a fat, bald-headed man, in a tight-fitting fur-lined coat with a fur collar. On him devolved the duty of sketching the dead man's career.

'With unflagging zeal he pursued his studies at Rouen College, near his father's factory. . . .'

Antoine remembered the photograph of a schoolboy, his arm resting on a pile of prizes. 'So that was father's boyhood,' he mused. 'Who on earth could have foreseen then . . . ? No, one never gets to understand a man till he is dead. While he's alive, the sum of the things he still may do is a wholly unknown factor, and it throws out every estimate. At last death comes and fixes every aspect once for all; it's as if the real man came clear at last of a vague cloud of might-have-beens. You can see him in the round, take a back view, form a general opinion. That, by the way, is what I've always said,' he added, with an inward smile; 'you can never make an absolutely certain diagnosis till you have your patient on the *post-mortem* table.'

He was well aware that he had not yet done with musing on his father's life and character; and that, for a long while yet, he was to derive from such musings interesting and instructive sidelights on his own psychology.

'When he was invited to bear a part in the labours of our eminent fraternity, it was not only his loftiness of purpose, his philanthropic zeal and his vast energy that we invoked; nor was it only that fine, unswerving probity which made him an outstanding figure of our generation . . .'

'Yet another "deputy,"' Antoine smiled to himself, as he listened to the flood of eulogy. But he was not insensitive to it; indeed he felt inclined to think that he had habitually underrated his father's true worth.

' . . . and, gentlemen, let us bow our heads in homage to that noble heart, which to its last beat, throbbed ever and alone for just and generous causes.'

The 'Immortal' had finished. He folded his sheaf of notes, hastily thrust back his hands into the fur-lined pockets, and modestly retreated to his place amongst his fellow-delegates.

'The President of the Joint Committee of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Paris,' the ballet-master announced in a discreet voice.

A venerable old man, armed with an ear-trumpet and supported by a footman nearly as ancient and infirm as his master, tottered up to the catafalque. The sole survivor of a group of young men from Rouen who had come in the same year as M. Thibault to study law in Paris, not only was he the dead man's successor to the presidency of the Charity Organization, but he had been his life-long friend. He was stone-deaf and had been thus afflicted for very many years; indeed since earliest childhood Antoine and Jacques had always referred to him as 'Old Door-nail.'

'Gentlemen, in the feelings which unite us here to-day, there should be something more than grief for our great loss,' the old man piped. The high-pitched, quavering voice brought back to Antoine's memory the 'Door-nail's' visit, two days previously, to the death-chamber. Then, too, he had tottered forward on the same servant's feeble arm. 'Orestes,' he had squeaked, on entering the room, 'wishes to give Pylades a last token of his friendship.' He had been led up to the corpse and his blear, red-rimmed eyes had pored on it for a long while; then, straightening up, he had gulped down a sob and yelled at Antoine as if they had been thirty yards apart: 'Ah, if you only knew what a handsome lad he was, at twenty!' At the time Antoine had been genuinely moved by the old man's remark. 'How quickly one's mood changes!' he thought. Recalling it to-day, he felt merely amused.

'What was the secret of his forcefulness?' the old man declaimed. 'To what did Oscar Thibault owe his unfailingly well-balanced judgement, his unruffled optimism, that self-confidence of his which made child's-play of every obstacle and ensured his triumph in the most arduous undertakings? . . . Is it not, gentlemen, one of the undying glories of the Catholic Faith that it gives the world such men as he was and such lives as his?'

'The old chap's right,' Antoine had to admit to himself. 'His Faith was a tremendous asset for father. Thanks to it he never knew what it can mean to be held up by scruples or an exaggerated sense of responsibility, or mistrust of oneself, and all the rest of it. A man with Faith can always drive straight ahead.' He even fell to wondering if people like his father and 'Old Door-nail' had not chosen, when all was said and done, one of the securest paths a man may follow from the cradle to the grave. 'From the social point of view,' Antoine reflected, 'they are amongst the few who best succeed in reconciling their lives as individuals with the life of the community. I

suppose they are obeying a human species of the instinct that brings about the ant-hill and the hive. And that is no small thing. Even those characteristics which I found so detestable in my father—his pride, his thirst for honours, his love of playing the despot—it's thanks to them, I must admit, that he got far more out of himself, as a social value, than if he'd been humble, easy-going and considerate. . . .'

'Gentlemen, for this glorious fighter in the good cause our tributes are superfluous to-day.' The old man's voice was growing hoarse. 'Never have the times been so critical. Let us not linger burying our dead, but let us replenish our strength at the same holy fountainhead, and waste no time . . . ' Carried away by the sincerity of his emotion, he tried to take a step forward, swayed, and had to clutch his servant's wavering arm. But this did not prevent him from ending his speech with a shrill: 'Let us waste no time, gentlemen, in returning to our posts, to fight the good fight side by side!'

'The Chairman of the Child Welfare Society,' announced the ballet-master.

The little man with the small white beard who now moved uncomfortably forward, seemed literally frozen to the marrow. His teeth were chattering, his face was blue with cold. Indeed he cut a pathetic figure, congealed and wizened by the glacial air.

'I am gripped—am gripped . . . '—he seemed to be making superhuman efforts to part his frost-bound lips—' . . . by a profound and melancholy emotion.'

'Those children there will catch their death of cold,' Antoine grumbled to himself. He was getting impatient; he, too, felt the cold creeping up his limbs and his stiff shirt-front like a slab of ice under his overcoat.

'He went his way among us doing good. Well might that be his glorious epitaph: *Pertransiit benefaciendo*.

'He leaves us, gentlemen, laden with tokens of our high esteem.'

'Esteem!' Antoine reflected. 'He's said it! But whose esteem?' He reviewed with an indulgent eye the phalanx of old gentlemen—all decrepit, shivering in their shoes, eyes watering with the cold, each putting his best ear forward to hear the speaker and greeting every panegyric with demonstrations of approval. Not one of them but was thinking of his own funeral, envious of these 'tokens of esteem' which they were lavishing to-day so copiously on their late lamented colleague.

The little man with the beard was short-winded; very soon he made way for his successor.

The new speaker was a handsome old man with pale, remote, steely eyes; a retired Vice-Admiral, who had taken to philanthropy. His exordium roused Antoine's dissent.

'Oscar Thibault was gifted with a shrewd, clear-sighted judgement, which always enabled him, in the lamentable controversies of our troubled times, to see which side was in the right, and to play his part in building up the future.'

Antoine registered a tacit protest. 'No, that's untrue. Father wore blinkers, and went through life without ever seeing more of it than the hedgerows of the narrow path that he had chosen. One might almost call him an incarnation of the partisan mentality. From his schooldays up, he never made an attempt to think for himself, to take an independent view, to discover, to understand. Always he followed the beaten track. He had donned a livery, and wore it till the end.'

'Could anyone desire a finer career?' the Admiral continued. 'Was not a life like his, gentlemen, the model . . . ?'

'Yes, a livery.' Once again Antoine reviewed the attentive audience with a keen glance. 'In fact, they're all exactly alike. Interchangeable. Describe one, and you've hit them all off. Shivering, doddering, myopic old buffers, who're scared of everything: scared of thinking, scared of progress, of whatever might take arms against their stronghold. . . . Steady, now! I'm waxing eloquent! Still, "stronghold" hits it off quite well. They've the mentality of a beleaguered garrison who're always checking up their numbers, to make sure they're in full force behind their ramparts.'

He was feeling more and more ill at ease, and had ceased listening to the orator. The sweeping gesture, however, that accompanied the peroration caught his eye.

'Farewell, beloved President. A last farewell. So long as those who saw you at your noble task shall walk the earth . . .'

The Superintendent of the reformatory stepped forth from the group of speakers. He was the last, and he, at least, seemed to have had a fairly close-up view of the man whose funeral oration he was going to pronounce.

'Our lamented Founder had not the habit of the specious, flattering phrase, when voicing an opinion. No; always eager to get down to facts, he had the courage to disdain those polite subterfuges that lead nowhere . . .'

Antoine pricked his ears; this sounded promising.

'A blunt, forthright manner disguised his natural kindness, and perhaps added to its efficacy. His uncompromising stands at our Council Meetings were an expression of his energy, his steadfastness in well-doing, and the

high standard he set himself as our President. For him all was a struggle, a struggle that quickly ended in a victory. Everything he said struck home at once; the word, for him, was a keen sword; sometimes, indeed, a sledge-hammer!’

It flashed on Antoine that his father had been a Force, and he was surprised to find himself thinking with already well-assured conviction: ‘Yes, father might easily have been something more—might have been a really great man.’

The Superintendent was pointing now towards the rows of boys aligned between their warders. All eyes turned to the young criminals, standing there motionless, blue with cold.

‘These juvenile delinquents, doomed from the cradle to fall on evil ways, these lads to whom Oscar Thibault stretched out a helping hand, these unhappy victims of an, alas, very far from perfect social order, are here to-day, gentlemen, to bear witness to their undying gratitude, and to mourn with us the Benefactor who has been taken from them.’

‘Yes, indeed, father had all the makings of greatness; what might he not have been?’ Behind Antoine’s insistence lurked a hope; an agreeable thought was hovering in the background of his mind. If nature had failed, in his father’s case, to endow the robust Thibault stock with its great man . . . ! Why not? With a thrill he pictured the future opening up before him. . . .

The bearers were shouldering the coffin. Everyone was eager to be gone. The master of ceremonies bowed again, clanging his black wand on the flagstones. Bare-headed, impassive, but inwardly exultant, Antoine took his place at the head of the procession bringing at last the earthly remains of Oscar Thibault to the grave. *Quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris* . . .

13

JACQUES had spent the whole of that morning in his room and, though he had the ground-floor flat to himself—Léon having naturally enough desired to attend the funeral—had double-locked his door. As a precaution against himself, to make sure that when the mourners were filing out he would not peep to see if certain well-remembered figures were amongst them, he had

kept the shutters tightly closed. Stretched on his bed, his hands in his pockets, his eyes fixed vaguely on the pale glow of the ceiling lamp, he was whistling under his breath.

Towards one o'clock, feeling bored and hungry, he decided to get up. The funeral service in the reformatory Chapel must by now, he judged, be well under way. Upstairs, Mademoiselle and Gise must have been back some time from the mass at St. Thomas Aquinas', and had presumably begun lunch without him. In any case he was quite decided not to see anyone all day. He would find something to eat, no doubt, in the pantry.

As he crossed the hall on his way to the kitchen, his eyes fell on the newspapers and letters that had been slipped under the front-door. And suddenly his heart missed a beat, he bent forward. Yes, that was Daniel's writing.

Monsieur Jacques Thibault

His hands were trembling so violently that he could hardly open the envelope.

My dear Jacques, dear old chap, Antoine's letter reached me yesterday evening . . .

Across his mood of black depression the friendly greeting struck like a sword-thrust at his heart and he savagely crumpled the letter tighter and tighter, crushing it in his clenched fist. Then angrily he flung back into his room and locked the door again, without the faintest memory of why he had gone out. After some aimless steps he halted under the lamp, unfolded the crumpled sheet and gazed at it with unsteady eyes, making no effort to read the words till the name he was looking for flashed across his vision.

During these last years Jenny has found the winters in Paris rather trying; both of them left for the South of France a month ago.

Again, as feverishly as before, he screwed up the letter into a ball and, this time, thrust it into his pocket.

For a while he felt shaken, dazed; then, of a sudden, infinitely relieved.

A minute later—as though the perusal of those lines had changed his decision—he ran to Antoine's desk and opened the time-table. Ever since he had got up, his mind had been on Crouy. If he started at once he could catch the two o'clock express. He would reach Crouy by daylight, but after the funeral was over and all the mourners had left by the return train; there

would be no risk of running across anyone he knew. He could go straight to the graveyard and return at once. 'Both of them left for the South of France a month ago.'

But he had not foreseen the effort of the journey on his already frayed nerves. He found it impossible to sit still. Luckily the train was empty; not only was he alone in the carriage, but in the whole corridor coach there was only one other passenger, an elderly lady in black. Jacques fell to walking up and down the corridor, like a wild beast pacing its cage. At first he did not realize that his curious behaviour had attracted the notice of his fellow-traveller, perhaps somewhat alarmed her. Furtively he examined her; never could he encounter anyone the least exceptional in look or manners without pausing a moment to take stock of the specimen of humanity that chance had thrown across his path.

It struck him that the woman had an attractive face. The cheeks were pale and ravaged by the years, but in her eyes there glowed a warm vitality, clouded now with grief, as if her mind were brooding on the past. A look of gentle candour and repose finely set off by her snow-white hair. She was tastefully dressed in black. Jacques pictured her as an old lady of the provincial middle class, who lived by herself, in quiet dignified surroundings, and was now on her way back to her home, at Compiègne, perhaps, or at Saint-Quentin. She had no luggage. On the seat beside her lay a large bunch of Parma violets, the stems of which were sheathed in tissue-paper.

Jacques' heart was thudding as he alighted on the Crouy platform. It was deserted. The frosty air was crystal clear.

As he left the station and saw the countryside, a spasm of remembrance gripped his heart. Scorning the short cut and the high-road alike, he took the road that led by the Calvary—a détour of nearly two miles.

Fierce gusts of wind came roaring up from all four quarters turn by turn, scouring with sudden, icy blasts the snowbound waste. Somewhere behind the dank, grey cloudwrack a hidden sun was sinking. Jacques walked on rapidly. Though he had eaten nothing since the early morning, he was no longer feeling hungry; the eager air was going to his head. He recognized every turning, every hillock, every thicket. In the distance, at the junction of three roads, the great Cross loomed up, ringed by its clump of leafless trees. That track yonder led to Vaumesnil, and this road-menders' cabin—how often during his daily walks with his attendant had he sheltered in it from the rain! On two or three occasions with Léon; once at least in Arthur's time. How well he recalled Arthur's blunt features and pale eyes, the typical face

of a decent Lorraine peasant, one would have thought, till suddenly that evil leer traversed it!

Crueller even than the glacial wind that flayed his cheeks and numbed his finger-tips, memory lashed his mind. He had altogether ceased thinking about his father.

Greyly the brief winter's day was hastening to its close, but there was still some light left.

On reaching Crouy, he all but took, as in the past, the turning that led off into an obscure back-street—as if he were still afraid of being pointed at by the village children. Yet who would recognize him now, after eight years? In any case there was no one in the street, and all the doors were shut. The life of the village seemed congealed by the cold, though smoke was pouring up from every chimney against the greyness of the sky. The inn came into view, flanked by its flight of steps, its signboard creaking in the wind.

Nothing had changed—not even the snow melting upon the chalky road into a grey slush—almost he fancied he was trudging through it still in his heavy 'regulation' boots. That was the inn where, to cut short their walk, old Léon used to imprison him in an empty wash-house, so as to be free to play cards with his cronies in the tap-room. Emerging from the side-street, a beshawled girl in goloshes slip-slopped up the steps. A new servant? he wondered. Or, perhaps, she was the proprietor's daughter, the child who always used to run away at the sight of the 'little jailbird.' Before entering the inn the girl cast a furtive glance at the young man walking by. Jacques quickened pace.

Now he was at the end of the village. Once he had left the last houses behind him, he saw, ringed round by its lofty walls, alone, aloof, in the midst of the grey plain, the huge, familiar building, snow-capped, pocked with rows of black-barred windows. He quivered in every limb. Nothing had changed. Nothing. The treeless avenue leading to the entrance-gate was now a river of mud. Probably in the wintry twilight a stranger to the place might have had trouble in deciphering the gold inscription on the cornice. But for Jacques the proud device on which his eyes were fixed was plain to read:

THE OSCAR THIBAUT FOUNDATION

Then only he remembered that the illustrious Founder was no more, that the ruts in the drive had been made by the carriages of the funeral procession, that it was for his father's sake he had made the pilgrimage to this place. With a sense of relief at being able to turn his back on those forbidding precincts, he turned and walked in the direction of the two big

evergreens flanking the cemetery gate. Usually closed, to-night the iron gate stood open. Wheel-marks showed the path to take. Jacques moved mechanically towards a mound of wreaths wilting in the cold and looking more like a refuse dump than a spread of flowers.

In front of the grave a large bunch of Parma violets, their stems wrapped in tissue-paper, lay all alone upon the snow; presumably it had been placed there after the other flowers.

‘That’s curious!’ Jacques mused, but gave no further thought to the coincidence.

And suddenly, bending over the fresh-turned soil, he had a vision of the dead body lying beneath the sodden turf—exactly as he had seen it at that tragic, ludicrous instant when the undertaker, after a courteous gesture for the family, had drawn the winding-sheet over the face that death had changed already.

‘“Then clinkety and clankety. Along the lanes we’ll go!”’ Like a bright gash of pain, the foolish jingle glanced across his mind; a lump came to his throat.

Ever since he had left Lausanne, he had let himself be hustled blindly on, hour after hour, by the sheer force of events. Now, suddenly, there welled up in his heart a long-forgotten, puerile, inordinate affection, as irrational as irrefutable, bitter with a sense of self-reproach and shame. Now at last he understood why he had come here. He remembered his fits of anger, the moods of scorn and hatred, and the lust for vengeance that had slowly poisoned all his youth. Trivial details that had passed out of memory sped back, like boomerangs, to wound him on the raw. And, for a while, all grievances discarded, restored to filial instinct, he wept on his father’s grave. For a brief while he was one of the two persons, unknown to each other, who on natural impulse, keeping aloof from the official rites, had felt a need to come that day and pay the dead the tribute of their grief; one of the only two beings on earth who had sincerely wept for M. Thibault.

But he was too well schooled to face facts squarely not to see almost at once that such sorrow and remorse were overdone. He was perfectly aware that, could his father come back to life, he would loathe and shun him as before. And yet he lingered beside the grave, yielding to a mood of vague sentimentality. He was regretting—he knew not what; perhaps, what might have been. He even let his fancy picture for a moment an affectionate, generous, understanding father, so as to have the thrill of regretting that he had not been the devoted son that such a father merited.

Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he turned and left the graveyard. . . .

The village seemed a little more animated now. Windows were lighting up. The peasants were coming back, their day's work over.

To avoid passing the houses, he took the road going to Moulin-Neuf, instead of that which led directly to the station, and was almost at once in open country.

He was no longer alone. Something persistent and insidious as an odour had dogged his steps, and clung about him, creeping into his each successive thought. It moved beside him in the silence of the plain, across the haze of broken lights that glimmered on the snow, and the air grown milder in a brief lull of the gale. Unresisting, he surrendered himself to death's obsession; indeed there was an almost sensual thrill in the vividness with which he now perceived the vanity of life, the futility of all endeavour. What was the use of striving? What was there to hope for? All life is vain, unprofitable. For, once we realize death's meaning, nothing, nothing whatever is worth the effort.

He felt that what lay deepest in him was being undermined. Gone was all ambition, all desire to be a leader, to achieve an aim in life. And now it seemed to him that never could he shake off that haunting presence, never regain any sort of peace of mind. He had lost even the impulse to believe that, short as is life's span, a man may yet find time to put something of himself out of the destroyer's reach; that sometimes it is given him to raise a fragment of his dream above the flood that sweeps him down, so that something authentically his may remain floating on the waters that have closed over his head.

He walked straight ahead with rapid, jerky strides like a fugitive hugging to his breast some fragile last possession. Ah, to escape from everything! Not only from the hydra-headed social organism; not only from the family and friends and love; not only from himself and from the tyrannies of atavism and habit—but to be rid of something latent and intrinsic in himself, that absurd vital instinct which makes the sorriest wrecks of humanity still cling to life. Once again as the supreme and logical solution, the idea of a voluntary eclipse, this time for good and all—of suicide—hovered in his mind. And suddenly there rose before him the serene beauty of his dead father's face.

'We shall have rest, Uncle Vanya. We shall have rest.'

Then his attention was caught, involuntarily, by the rumble of farm-carts coming towards him; he could see their lamps swaying as they jolted on the ruts, and hear the shouts and laughter of the cartmen. He could not face the thought of meeting people. Without a moment's hesitation he jumped the

snow-filled ditch bordering the road, stumbled across a ploughed field frozen hard as iron, came on a little wood, and plunged into its darkness. Viciously the thorny undergrowth lashed his face; frozen leaves crackled underfoot. He had deliberately thrust his hands into his pockets, finding a curious relish in the stinging blows across his cheeks, as in a frenzy of escape he forced his way through the dense undergrowth. He had no notion where he was going; his one idea was to escape from men, from their ways and highways—from everything.

There was no more than a narrow strip of woodland and he was soon across it. Again he saw in front of him the white plain, ribboned by a road, glimmering under the black sky and, straight ahead, looming upon the skyline, the reformatory, with a row of lighted windows along the floors reserved for classrooms and the workshops. As he gazed at it a fantastic daydream, vivid as a cinema film, took form in his imagination; he saw himself climbing the low penthouse wall, scrambling up the roof to the storeroom window, breaking the pane and flinging in a wisp of blazing straw. The pile of spare beds and bedding flared up like a torch, in a trice the fire had spread through the office building to his old cell, devouring everything in it—his bed, table, blackboard, chair, all went up in flames.

He ran his fingers over his scratched cheeks. With a rush of bitterness he realized his impotence—the folly of such dreams.

Resolutely he turned his back on the reformatory, on the graveyard, on his past, and began walking rapidly towards the station.

He had missed the 5.40 by a few minutes. There was nothing for it but to wait for the slow train at 7. The waiting-room was like an ice-box and smelt intolerably musty.

For a long while he paced the empty platform. His cheeks were smarting, and he was crushing in his pocket Daniel's letter. He had vowed to himself not to look at it again.

A lamp with a reflector faced the station clock; he went up to it, and, leaning against the wall, fished the crumpled sheets out of his pocket.

My dear Jacques, dear old chap, Antoine's letter reached me yesterday evening, and I couldn't sleep a wink. If somehow I could have managed to make a dash to you last night, and see you for just five minutes large as life, I wouldn't have hesitated to take the risk and climb the barrack wall; yes, I'd have done anything to see my oldest, dearest friend again. In this N.C.O.'s kip which I share with two other snoring stalwarts, all through the night I stared up at the whitewashed ceiling green with moonlight, and I watched a pageant

of our boyhood streaming past—all those wonderful hours we spent together, you and I, at school, and afterwards. You're like a second self to me, Jacques, my dear old chap; I can't imagine how I got on all these years without my second self! And you can be sure—never for a moment did I doubt your friendship. I've just got back from morning drill, and I'm writing to you at once, though I've only Antoine's little note to go on, without even stopping to wonder how you'll take this letter from me, without yet knowing for what earthly reason you maintained for those long years that silence of the grave. How I missed you during those years, and how I miss you now! Most of all, perhaps, I missed you before I was called up for service, when I was at home. Have you any idea of what you meant to me? I wonder. That energy you inspired in me, all the fine things that were latent in me as possibilities only—and which you brought out. Without you, without your friendship, I could never have . . .'

Jacques' hands were trembling as he held the crumpled pages near his eyes; in the dim light, across a mist of tears, he could hardly decipher the affectionate words. Just above his head an electric bell, piercing as an auger, was shrilling incessantly.

That was something I don't suppose you ever suspected; in those days I was too vain to admit it, especially to you. And then, when I learned you'd vanished, I simply couldn't imagine what had happened, couldn't believe my ears. I was terribly distressed—most of all by the mystery surrounding it all. Perhaps some day I'll understand. But in my worst moments of anxiety—even of resentment—never once did the idea enter my head that (assuming you were alive) your feelings for me had changed. And now too, as you see, I don't feel any doubt about them . . .

Had to stop. Some tiresome routine work came along. I've taken refuge in a corner of the canteen, though it's out of bounds at this hour. I don't suppose you've the faintest notion what it's like, this world of barracks and parades I was pitchforked into thirteen months ago. . . . But I'm not writing to you to describe a conscript's life!

The appalling thing, you know, is this feeling that one's lost touch; I don't know how or what to write to you. Of course you can guess the swarm of questions at the tip of my pen! . . . But—what's the use? Still I do hope you won't mind answering one of them, because it's something I have so terribly at heart. It's this: Am I

going to see you again? Is the nightmare over, and have you really come back to us? Or—will you be taking wing again? Look here, Jacques, as I'm pretty sure you'll anyhow read this letter, and as it may be the only chance I'll have of getting in touch with you, do listen to this appeal! I'm prepared to understand and to put up with everything you choose, but I beg you, whatever your future plans may be, don't vanish again so utterly from my life. I need you. If you only knew how proud I am of you, the great things I expect of you, and all that my pride in you can mean to me! Yes, I'm ready to accept all your terms. If you insist on my not knowing your address, on there being no intercourse between us, on my never writing—even if you tell me not to pass on to anybody, not even to poor old Antoine, the news I get from you—well, I agree to everything, I pledge myself blindly to obey. Only, please do send me a line now and then, just to show you are alive and sometimes think of me. I'm sorry for those last words—take them as struck out—for I know, I'm certain that you think of me. (That, too, I've never doubted. Never did it cross my mind that, were you alive, you had ceased thinking about me, about our friendship.)

I can't get my ideas straight; I just jot down whatever comes into my head. But that's no matter; just to write to you is such a relief after that appalling silence!

I ought to tell you about myself, so that, when you think of me, you can think of me as I am now, and not only as I was when you left us. Perhaps Antoine will tell you. He knows me quite well; we saw a lot of each other after you went. But I don't know where to begin. There's so much slack to take up, you see; it seems almost hopeless. And then—after all, you know the way I'm built; I keep moving, I live for the Now and Here, I can't look back. This military service cut across my work just when it seemed that I was getting a glimpse of really vital things about myself and about my art—the very things I'd been groping for all my life. Still, I don't regret anything; this experience of army life is something new and very thrilling. It's a great test and a great experience, especially now that I've men under my command. But it's idiotic talking to you about that to-day.

The one thing that really worries me is having been away from Mother for a year. Especially as I know this separation weighs terribly on both of them. I'm sorry to have to tell you Jenny's health is not all it might be; in fact, we've been quite alarmed about it on

several occasions. By “*we*” I mean, really, *I*, for you know how Mother is, she never will believe that things can turn out badly. Still, even Mother has had to recognize that, during these last years, Jenny has found the winters in Paris rather trying; both of them left for the South of France a month ago. They’re staying in a sort of convalescent home where, if it can be fixed up, Jenny will be under treatment till the spring. Poor things, they have more than their share of troubles and anxieties! My father hasn’t changed—the less said about him the better. He’s in Austria now, but as usual up to his neck in complications.

Dear old chap, it’s suddenly come back to me—about *your* father. I’d meant to start this letter with a reference to his death. But somehow I hardly know how to talk to you about your bereavement. Still when I think of what your feelings must have been, I sympathize most sincerely. For I’m almost certain it must have given you a terrible shock.

I’ve got to stop now; the orderly officer will be wanting me in a moment. I hope this letter reaches you safely, and promptly. Now there’s one thing more. I’ve got to write it to you, old chap—on the off chance! Personally I can’t get to Paris; I’m tied up here, with not a hope of getting leave. But Lunéville’s only five hours away from Paris. I’m in their good graces here; the Colonel’s put me on to doing some decorative panels in the orderly room—naturally! So I’m pretty free. They’ll give me the day off, if you . . . No, I don’t even want to dream of such a thing! As I said, I’m ready to accept and to understand *everything*, without loving any the less my one true friend, my friend for all my life.

DANIEL.

Jacques had read the eight sheets through without a break. He remained standing under the lamp, trembling, bewildered, deeply moved, his thoughts in a tumult. He was experiencing more than a swift renewal of his friendship—though this was vehement enough to make him feel like taking then and there the first train to Lunéville; there was something deeper, too: a brooding anguish rankling in a dark, acutely sensitive region of his emotions, on which he neither could nor would let in a ray of light.

He took a few steps, shivering less with the cold than with the fever of his ruffled nerves. He was still holding the letter. Moving back under the hideous stridence of the electric buzzer, he set to reading the letter again, as calmly as he could, from beginning to end. . . .

Half-past eight had just struck when he left the Gare du Nord. The air was keen and pure; the water in the gutters frozen; the pavement dry.

He was faint with hunger. A beer-house in the Rue Lafayette caught his eye and, turning in, he sank heavily on to a seat. Without taking off his hat or even troubling to turn down the collar of his overcoat, he dispatched three hard-boiled eggs, a plateful of sauerkraut, and half a loaf of bread.

After satisfying his hunger, he drank two glasses of beer in quick succession, and glanced round the room. It was almost empty. Facing him, at a table on the other side, a woman, dark, broad-shouldered and still young, was seated in front of an empty glass. The discreet, sympathetic glance she cast in his direction vaguely stirred him. She seemed too quietly dressed to be one of the professionals who prowl in the vicinity of the Paris railway stations. A beginner, perhaps. Their glances met. He looked away; at the least encouragement she would have come and joined him at his table. There was a look of sad experience on her face, yet with it a certain innocence, that had its charm. For a moment he was tempted, in two minds. She seemed a simple soul, very close to nature; and he was utterly unknown to her. It might soothe his nerves . . . Now she was gazing at him boldly, guessing perhaps his quandary. He, however, took care not to catch her eye.

At last he made a move, paid the waiter and went out quickly, without looking her way.

Out in the street the cold gripped him. Should he walk home? No, he was too tired. He went to the edge of the pavement, watched the traffic and hailed the first empty taxi.

As it drew up beside the kerb, he felt a light touch on his elbow. The girl had followed him.

‘Come to my place, if you feel like it,’ she murmured awkwardly. ‘It’s in the Rue Lamartine.’

Good-naturedly he shook his head, and opened the taxi door.

‘Anyhow, do please give me a lift, to No. 97, Rue Lamartine,’ she pleaded, as if she had some special reason for wanting to keep with him.

Grinning, the driver looked interrogatively at Jacques.

‘Well, sir, is it 97, Rue Lamartine?’

She thought, or made as if she thought, that Jacques had consented, and jumped into the taxi.

‘All right,’ Jacques said. ‘Make it Rue Lamartine.’

The taxi began moving.

‘Look here, what’s the good of trying to come it over me like that?’ There was a warm resonance in the voice that went well with her appearance. Then, bending towards him, she added in a tender, soothing tone: ‘Why, lad, anyone can see you’ve taken a nasty knock!’

Gently she pressed him in her arms, and the soft warmth of her caress melted Jacques’ reserve.

Yielding to the lure of being consoled, he half stifled a sigh, without replying. Then as if his silence and the sigh were a surrender, she hugged him tighter and, taking off his hat, drew his head on to her breast. He let her have her way. Then a wave of misery came over him, and, without knowing why, he burst into tears.

‘In trouble with the cops, ain’t you?’ she whispered. Her voice was trembling.

He was too dumbfounded to protest. But then it struck him that with his scratched cheeks and his trouser-legs caked in mud, he might well pass for an escaping malefactor, in this dry, frost-bound Paris. He closed his eyes; that this woman of the streets should take him for a criminal gave him an exquisite thrill.

As before she read assent into his silence, and pressed his face passionately against her bosom.

Her voice changed yet again; grew alert, conspiratorial.

‘Like to lie low for a while at my place?’

‘No,’ he replied, without moving.

She was schooled, it seemed, to obey, even when she could not understand. After a moment’s hesitation, she whispered:

‘If you’re short of cash, lad, I can help you out.’

This time he opened his eyes, sat up.

‘What?’

‘I’ve three hundred and forty francs in there.’ She patted her little bag. ‘Like to have them?’ In the vulgar voice there was a rather gruff, big-sisterly affection.

Jacques was so touched that he could not reply at once.

‘Thanks,’ he murmured at last, shaking his head. ‘I don’t need it.’

The cab slowed down, and drew up in front of a low doorway in an ill-lit, deserted street. Probably, Jacques thought, she would ask him to come in with her. In that case—what?

The problem was quickly solved. She got up and, resting a knee on the seat, hugged Jacques for the last time.

‘Poor kid!’ she sighed.

Her lips groped for his mouth and pressed it fiercely as if to wrest its secret, taste the savour of a crime; then quickly she released him.

‘Anyhow don’t go and get yourself copped, like a bloody fool!’

She jumped out of the cab and banged the door. Then she handed five francs to the driver.

‘Take the Rue Saint-Lazare. The gentleman will tell you where to stop.’

The car moved off. Jacques had just time to see the girl vanish down a lightless passage, without once looking back.

He was feeling dazed. He passed his hand over his forehead, let down the window. Cold, clean air fanned his cheeks; he drew a deep breath. Then, smiling, he bent forward to the driver.

‘Take me to 4a, Rue de l’Université, please,’ he called out gaily.

14

No sooner had the last mourners filed out of the graveyard than Antoine took a car to Compiègne on the pretext that he had orders to give the monumental mason. In reality he wished to avoid the crowd returning by the first train back. The 5.30 p.m. express would get him to Paris in time for dinner, and, with luck, he would travel back alone.

Luck was against him.

When, some minutes before the train was due, he stepped on to the platform, to his surprise he ran at once into the Abbé Vécard. It was all Antoine could do to conceal his vexation. The priest explained.

‘The Bishop was kind enough to bring me here in his car; he wanted to have a chat.’ Then he noticed Antoine’s look of weariness and gloom. ‘I’m afraid, my dear Antoine, you must be quite worn out. Such a crowd and all those speeches! Yet, later on, you’ll look back on this day as a very memorable occasion. What a pity Jacques wasn’t present!’

Antoine was beginning to explain how, in the present circumstances, his brother’s absence seemed to him natural enough, when the priest broke in.

‘Yes, yes, I quite follow you. It was wiser he should stay away. But I do hope you’ll let him know how—er—edifying the ceremony was. You’ll do that, won’t you?’

Antoine could not refrain from querying the term the priest had used.

‘“Edifying”? Well, for others, perhaps. But not for me. I assure you that all that pomp, all that eloquence-to-order . . .’

His eyes, meeting the priest’s, found in them an understanding twinkle. Obviously he shared Antoine’s views of the speeches they had heard that afternoon.

The train was coming in.

Noticing a carriage, ill-lit but empty, they entered it.

‘May I propose a cigarette, Abbé?’

Gravely the priest raised his forefinger to his lips.

‘Tempter!’ he smiled, taking a cigarette. Puckering his eyelids he lit it, puffed, withdrew it from his lips and examined it with gusto as he blew the smoke out through his nostrils.

‘In a ceremony of that kind,’ he continued good-humouredly, ‘there’s always bound to be a side that is—as your friend Nietzsche’d put it—human, all-too-human. And yet, when all that is discounted, the fact remains that such collective manifestations of the religious and moral sentiments have something that stirs our hearts, to which we can’t help responding. Don’t you agree?’

Antoine did not reply at once. Then ‘I wonder!’ he murmured dubiously. Again he fell silent, gazing pensively at the man in front of him.

For twenty years he had been familiar with the Abbé’s placid countenance, the shrewd insistence of his gentle eyes, his confidential tone, the air of constant meditation given him by the poise of his head always drooping a little to the left, and the way he had of fluttering his hands at the level of his chest. But to-night he found that something had changed in their relations. Hitherto he had always thought of the Abbé Vécard in terms of M. Thibault—as his father’s spiritual mentor. Now death had struck out the middle term. The reasons which formerly had led him to adopt a wise reserve in dealing with the priest had lost their cogency; now he could treat the Abbé as man to man.

After his trying day, he found it harder than usual to tone down the expression of his thoughts, and it was a relief for him to declare bluntly:

‘Well, I must own that sentiments of that kind mean nothing, nothing whatever, to me.’

The priest assumed a slightly bantering tone.

‘Still, unless I’m greatly mistaken, the religious emotion has its place amongst human emotions, and indeed is recognized as fairly widespread in mankind. What’s your opinion, my friend?’

Antoine was in no mood for trifling.

‘I’ve never forgotten something Abbé Leclerc, my tutor when I was reading for my philosophy degree, once said to me. “There are some quite intelligent people who have no feeling for art. You, I suspect, have no feeling for religion.” The worthy man was merely indulging in an epigram. But I’ve always thought that the remark was absolutely true.’

‘Supposing it were so,’ the Abbé replied, in the same tone of affectionate irony, ‘you’d be greatly to be pitied, I’m afraid! You’d be cut off from half of life. Yes, there are hardly any major problems of life of which it isn’t true to say that a man who’s unable to bring a religious sentiment to bear on them, is doomed to see only a paltry fraction. That’s what makes the beauty of our religion. . . . Why do you smile?’

Antoine could not think why he had smiled. Perhaps it was merely a trick of the nerves, natural enough after the emotions of the past week and the trying day he had been through.

‘Come now!’ the priest, in his turn, smiled. ‘Can you deny there’s beauty in our Faith?’

‘Of course not,’ Antoine cheerfully asserted. ‘I’ll allow it all the “beauty” you like,’ he added teasingly. ‘But, all the same . . .’

‘Well?’

‘All the same, beauty’s not enough. It should be rational as well.’

The Abbé’s hands fluttered in amiable deprecation.

‘“Rational!”’ The soft brooding tone suggested that the word conjured up a host of problems which, for the moment, he was not disposed to tackle, but to which he had the key. After some reflexion he went on in a more pugnacious tone.

‘Perhaps you are one of those who fancy religion is losing ground in the modern mind?’

‘Frankly, I haven’t a notion.’ Antoine’s moderation surprised the Abbé. ‘Very likely not. It’s even possible that the activities of the most modern minds—I’m thinking of the very men who are furthest from dogmatic faith—tend indirectly towards assembling the elements of a religion. Towards—how shall I put it?—bringing together concepts that, taken as a whole, would

constitute an entity not so very different from many Christians' idea of God.'

The priest nodded. 'How indeed could it be otherwise, human nature being what it is? Only in religion can a man find a compensation for the lower instincts he discovers in himself. It is his only dignity. And it is also the only solace for his griefs, his only source of resignation.'

'You're right there!' There was a ring of irony in Antoine's voice. 'Men who set a higher value on the truth than on their peace of mind are pretty rare. And religion is the supreme purveyor of peace of mind. But you must forgive me, Abbé, if I remind you there are others, in whom the desire to understand is more imperative than the craving to believe. And such people _____'

'Such people,' the priest broke in, 'cling to the cramped, precarious assurances of reasoning and the intellect; and never get beyond them. Well, we can only pity them—we whose faith lives and moves on another, infinitely vaster plane, the plane of feeling and volition. Don't you agree?'

Antoine's smile was non-committal. The light in the compartment was too dim for the priest to see it, but the fact that he proceeded to enlarge upon the theme showed he was not altogether dupe of the 'we' he had just used.

'People think they're very enlightened nowadays because they insist on "understanding things." But believing is understanding. No, it would be better to say that there's no common measure between understanding and believing. Some to-day refuse to accept as true what their intellect, inadequately trained or warped by a subversive education, is unable to prove to its satisfaction. The explanation's simple; they are the victims of their limitations. It's perfectly feasible to understand God's existence, and to prove it logically. From Aristotle on—and we mustn't forget he was the master of Saint Thomas Aquinas—logical proof has never been lacking. . . .'

So far Antoine had refrained from any overt protest, but now the gaze he cast on the priest was frankly sceptical.

His companion's silence was making the Abbé ill at ease, and he hastened to continue. 'Our religious philosophy, when dealing with these subjects, furnishes the most closely reasoned arguments . . .'

'Excuse me,' Antoine broke in at last, genially enough, 'but are you sure you've the right to talk about "religious philosophy" or "closely reasoned arguments" in such a connexion?'

'What's that?' The priest sounded positively shocked. 'Why shouldn't I have the right . . .?'

‘Well, for one thing, strictly speaking, religious “thought” is usually a misnomer, for behind all thinking there lies doubt . . .’

‘Steady on, my young friend!’ the Abbé cried. ‘Where’s that theory going to lead us?’

‘Oh, I know, the Church doesn’t boggle at trifles like that. But all the ingenious devices the Church has been applying, for a hundred years and more, to reconcile Faith with modern science and philosophy are—if you’ll forgive me the expression—more or less faked. Obviously so, since what keeps Faith alive and is its object—the quality which appeals so strongly to the religious mind—is precisely that supernatural element which is denied by science and philosophy.’

The Abbé was beginning to fidget on his seat; it was dawning on him that this was a serious argument. A note of petulance crept into his voice.

‘You seem to overlook the fact that it’s by dint of using their brains, by philosophical reasoning, that most of the younger generation nowadays come by faith.’

‘I wonder!’

‘Your reasons, please!’

‘Well, I must admit that I can’t picture faith as anything other than a blind, intuitive acceptance. And when it claims to be founded on logic . . .!’

‘Have you the old-fashioned notion that science and philosophy deny the supernatural? That’s a blunder, my dear fellow—a glaring blunder. Science leaves it out, and that’s a very different thing. As for philosophy, every philosophy worthy of the name. . . .’

‘“Worthy of the name”! Excellent! That way all dangerous opponents are put out of court.’

Ignoring Antoine’s irony, the priest went on. ‘Every philosophy worthy of the name leads us inevitably to the supernatural. But let’s go further; let’s suppose your modern scientists contrive to show that there’s a fundamental opposition between the “laws” they have discovered and the teachings of the Church—an absurd, not to say Machiavellian hypothesis in the present state of our Christian apologetics—what would that prove, I ask you?’

‘Ask me another!’ Antoine smiled.

‘Nothing at all!’ the priest exclaimed with gusto. ‘It would merely show that the human intellect is incapable of coordinating its data, and that its progress is a blundering one at best; a fact,’ he added with a friendly chuckle, ‘which is no news to a good many of us.’

‘Come, Antoine, we’re not living in Voltaire’s time. Need I remind you that the victories which the so-called reason vaunted by your atheist philosophers scored over religion were but short-lived, illusive victories? Is there a single article of faith regarding which the Church has ever been convicted of defective logic.’

‘Not one, I grant you willingly,’ Antoine broke in with a laugh. ‘The Church has always had the knack of holding its own in a tight corner. Your theologians are past-masters in the art of inventing subtle, seeming-logical arguments that save them from being badgered very long by rationalist appeals to reason. Especially of recent years, I’ve noticed, they have been displaying a skill at the logic-chopping game that’s positively staggering! Still all that only takes in those who start off by wanting to be taken in.’

‘No, my friend. You may be sure that if the logic of the Church has always the last word that is because it’s . . .’

‘. . . shrewder, more persistent. . . .’

‘No. More profound than yours. Perhaps you’ll agree with me that the human intellect, left to its own devices, can achieve nothing better than elaborate structures of mere words, which leave the heart, the emotions, unsatisfied. Why should that be? It isn’t only that there’s a whole order of verities which seems to lie outside the field of normal argument, nor yet because the idea of God seems to transcend the possibilities of normal understanding. It’s above all—please mark well my words—because our reasoning faculty left to itself fails us here, can get no purchase on these subtle problems. In other words, a real, lively faith has every right to insist on such explanations as may wholly satisfy the intellect; but our intellect itself must first submit to be schooled by Grace—for Grace enlightens the faculty of reason. The true believer does not merely set out, using his intellect to the utmost, in quest of God; he must also humbly offer himself to God, who is in quest of him. And when by dint of reasoning he has made his upward way into God’s presence, he should divest himself of thought, and—how shall I put it?—lay himself open to receive within him the recompense of his quest, the God that he has sought.’

After a pregnant silence Antoine rejoined: ‘Which is tantamount to saying that reasoned thought is not enough to guide us to the truth; we also need what you call Grace. That, I must say, is a very damaging admission.’

His tone was such that the priest could not help exclaiming:

‘Ah, I’m sorry for you indeed, Antoine! You’re one of the victims of our times—a rationalist!’

‘I’m . . . well, it’s always hard to say just what one is. Still I admit I stand by the satisfactions of the intellect.’

The priest’s hands fluttered. ‘And by the blandishments of doubt, as well. It’s a survival of the romantic era; that sense of glorious audacity—and Byronic anguish—tickles the vanity, of course.’

‘No,’ Antoine cried, ‘you’re absolutely wrong there. I haven’t the least sense of audacity or anguish, and I’ve no use for those muzzy states of mind you’re thinking of. Nobody could be less romantic than I. And I don’t suffer from “soul-searchings” as they call them.’ No sooner had he made the statement than he realized it was no longer strictly true. Doubtless he had no soul-searchings such as the Abbé Vécard had in mind—on the score of religion. But, during the last three or four years, he too had been apt to ponder, not without anguish, on the problem of man’s place and function in the universe. After a while he added: ‘What’s more, it would be wrong to say I’ve lost my faith; I rather think I never had it.’

‘Oh come now!’ the Abbé exclaimed. ‘Have you forgotten, Antoine, what a religious little boy you used to be?’

‘Religious? No. Docile; serious and obedient, nothing more. I was naturally amenable to discipline, and I performed my religious duties like the good little boy I was! That’s all.’

‘No, no! You’re deliberately understating your faith in early years.’

‘It wasn’t faith, but a religious upbringing, which is a very different thing.’

Antoine was trying less to startle the Abbé than to be sincere. His weariness had given place to a mild exhilaration, which urged him to hold his own in the argument. And now he launched out into a sort of stock-taking, such as he had rarely made before, of his early life.

‘Yes, it’s a question of upbringing. And, Abbé, just consider how neatly it all links up together. From when he’s four, his mother, his nurse, all the grown-ups on whom a child relies, keep dinning into his ears, on every pretext, “God is in heaven; God made you, and He watches you; God loves you, sees you, judges you; God will punish you if you’re naughty, reward you if you’re good.” What next? When he’s eight he’s taken to mass and sees all the grown-up people round him bowing and kneeling; a beautiful gold monstrance is pointed out to him, gleaming amongst flowers and lights, across a haze of incense and music—and it’s the same God who’s present there, in the white Host. Right! What next? When he’s eleven he is told about the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, Redemption, Resurrection, Immaculate Conception and all the rest of it—in a tone that carries

conviction, from the august eminence of a pulpit. He listens, and believes all he is told. How should he not believe? How could he feel the least doubt about beliefs publicly avowed by his parents, schoolfellows, masters, and by all the congregation in the church? How could a little chap like him query these holy mysteries? From the day he was born he's been coming up against equally bewildering phenomena; he is a small, lost waif in a mysterious universe. That, sir, in my opinion is a point of vital importance; indeed it's the key to the whole problem. For a child everything is equally incomprehensible. The earth, which looks so flat, is round; it doesn't seem to move, yet it's spinning like a top. The sun makes seeds germinate; a live chick comes out of an egg. The Son of God came down from heaven, and died on the Cross to redeem us from our sins. Why not? God was the Word, and the Word was made flesh . . . It may mean something, or it mayn't. No matter! The trick has worked.'

The train had just stopped. A voice in the darkness bawled the name of a station. Supposing the carriage empty, somebody opened the door hastily and slammed it to again, with a curse. A blast of icy wind buffeted their faces.

Antoine turned again towards the Abbé, but the light had grown still feebler, and he could make little of his expression.

As the priest made no remark, Antoine continued, in a calmer tone.

'Well, can that childish credulity be described as "faith"? Certainly not. Faith is something that comes later. It springs from different roots. And, personally, I can assure you I have never had it.'

'It would be truer to say that, though the soil was well prepared for it, you never gave it a chance of springing up in your soul.' The Abbé's voice was vibrant with indignation. 'Faith is a gift from God—like the faculty of memory; and like memory, like all God's gifts, needs to be cultivated. But you—you, like so many others, yielded to pride, to the spirit of contradiction, to the lures of "free thinking," to the temptation of rebelling against established order.'

No sooner made, than the priest regretted his outburst, justified though it was. He was firmly resolved not to be drawn into a discussion of religion.

Moreover, the Abbé misinterpreted Antoine's tone. Struck by its incisiveness, its ardour, and the gay truculence which gave the young man's words an air of rather forced bravado, he preferred to question the speaker's absolute sincerity. He still entertained the utmost respect for Antoine, and behind it lurked a hope—more than a hope, a firm conviction—that M.

Thibault's eldest son would not long persist in such lamentable, indefensible opinions.

Antoine was pondering.

'No,' he said composedly. 'You're wrong there. It came about quite naturally; neither pride, nor a rebellious spirit played any part. Why, I hadn't even to give it a thought. As far as I remember, I began, at the time of my first communion, to have a vague feeling that there was—how shall I put it?—that there was a catch somewhere in what we were taught about religion; a sort of murkiness, not only for us but for everyone, for the grown-ups as well. Even for our priests!'

The Abbé could not withhold a flutter of his hands.

'Don't imagine,' Antoine explained, 'that I doubted then, or have the least doubt now, as to the sincerity of the priests I've known, or their zeal—perhaps I should say, their need for zeal. But they certainly gave me the impression of men uneasily groping in the dark, uncertain of their bearings, and turning round and round those abstruse doctrines I've mentioned, with an unconscious diffidence. They made assertions, yes. But what did they assert? What had been asserted to them. Of course, they had no actual doubts about those doctrines of which they were the mouthpiece. But did they in their hearts of hearts feel quite so sure as their dogmatic tone implied? Well, somehow I couldn't convince myself they were so sure as all that. Do I shock you? We had, you see, another set of men to match them with—our masters. Those laymen, I confess, seemed to me much more at ease in their special fields of learning, much more sure of their ground. Whether they expounded history, grammar, or geometry, they anyhow gave us the impression that they knew their subjects from A to Z!'

The Abbé pursed his lips. 'Before making a comparison, one must be sure the things compared are comparable.'

'Oh, I'm not thinking of the subject-matter of their teaching; I only have in mind the angle from which those specialists approached their subjects. There was never anything evasive about their attitude, even when their knowledge happened to fall short; they made no secret of their doubts, or even of the blind spots in their learning. And that, believe me, inspired confidence; it ruled out the least suspicion of . . . of humbug. No, "humbug" isn't what I meant. Still I must admit that, in the next phase of my education, the more I came in contact with the priests at the Ecole, the less they inspired in me the feeling of security I had got from my lay teachers.'

'If the priests under whom you studied had been true theologians, you'd have got an impression of perfect security from your intercourse with them.'

The Abbé was thinking of the professors of his Seminary; of his studious youth unruffled by the faintest doubt.

Antoine did not seem to hear him. ‘Just think,’ he exclaimed, ‘what it means to a youngster, when he’s turned loose, by gradual stages, on mathematics, physics, chemistry! Suddenly he discovers that he has all space, the Universe, for his playground. And after that, religion strikes him as not only cramped, but false, illogical. Untrustworthy.’

This time the Abbé drew back and stretched forth his arm. ‘Illogical? Can you seriously apply that term to it: illogical?’

‘Yes!’ Antoine retorted vehemently. ‘And I’ve just hit on something I hadn’t realized before. You, the upholders of religion, start out with a firm belief and to shore up that belief you call in logic. Whereas people like myself begin with doubt, indifference, and we take reason for our guide, not knowing where it will lead us.

‘Of course,’ he went on at once with a smile, before the priest had time to put in a retort, ‘if you set to arguing it out with me, it will be child’s-play for you to prove I don’t know the first word on the subject. I admit that right away. I’ve given very little thought to such matters; perhaps never so much as to-night. So you see I’m not trying to set up as a thorough-paced rationalist. I’m only trying to explain why a Catholic upbringing has not prevented me from coming to my present state—a state of total unbelief.’

‘My dear fellow,’ the Abbé put in, with a slightly forced geniality, ‘your plain speaking doesn’t shock me in the least. For I’m sure you’re very far from being so black as you paint yourself! But go on; I’m listening.’

‘Well, I continued—like so many others—observing my religious duties all the same. With an indifference which I wouldn’t acknowledge even to myself; a polite indifference. Even in later years I never settled down to a serious stock-taking of my beliefs. Most likely because, at bottom, I didn’t attach enough importance to them. Yes, I was very far from the state of mind of one of my fellow-students who was taking the Applied Arts course; he said to me one day, after he’d been through a phase of soul-searching: “I’ve given the whole bag of tricks a thorough look-over; take my word for it, old boy, there’s far too many loose ends, it doesn’t hang together.” Personally, at that time, I was just starting my medical course, and the break—or, rather, estrangement—had already come about. I hadn’t waited for the semi-scientific studies of my first year to discover that one can’t believe without evidence . . .’

‘Without evidence!’

‘. . . and that we must dispense with any notion of immutable truth, since nothing should be considered “true” except conditionally, until the contrary is proved. Yes, I continue to shock you! But, if you’ll allow me to say so (in fact it’s what I’ve been driving at all the time), I’m that unusual thing—that freak of nature, if you like: a natural, congenital sceptic. Yes, I’m built that way. I’m in sound health and, so far as I can judge, pretty level-headed, I’ve an active mind, and I’ve always got on perfectly well without a spark of mysticism. Nothing of what I know, nothing I’ve observed, warrants my believing that my childhood’s God exists; and so far, I must confess I’ve found I can do admirably without Him.

‘My atheism and my mind developed side by side, so I’ve never had any allegiance to renounce. No, don’t imagine for a moment that I’m one of those believers who have lost their faith, and in their hearts are always craving after God; one of those uneasy souls who make desperate gestures towards the heaven they have found empty. No, desperate gestures aren’t in my line at all! There’s nothing about a godless world that afflicts me; indeed, as you see, I’m perfectly at home in it.’

The Abbé’s hand waved a mild disclaimer.

Antoine repeated: ‘Perfectly at home. And that’s been so for fifteen years.’

He expected the priest’s indignation to blaze up at once. But the Abbé said nothing for some moments, and merely shook his head composedly. At last he spoke.

‘But, my dear fellow, that’s pure materialism. Are you still at that stage? To listen to you, one would think you believe only in your body. It’s as if you believed in only half—and what a half!—of your self. Happily, all that is merely on the surface; an outer shell, so to speak. You don’t realize yourself that deep down in you is something vital and enduring, the influence of your Christian education. You may deny that influence; but it’s the directive force of your existence.’

‘What can I reply? I can only answer you that I owe nothing to the Church. My temperament, ambitions, intellect took form outside the pale of religion—I might even say in opposition to it. I feel as remote from Catholic mythology as from pagan mythology. I make no difference between religion and superstition. Indeed, to speak quite candidly, what remains to me of my Christian education is precisely—*nil!*’

‘What blindness!’ the Abbé exclaimed, with a quick uplift of his arms. ‘Can’t you see that your whole scheme of life—your conscientiousness, your sense of duty, your devotion to the service of your fellow-men gives

your materialism the lie direct? Few lives imply more clearly the existence of God. No one has more strongly than you the feeling of a mission to fulfil. No one has a better sense than you of his responsibilities in this world. Well, isn't all that a tacit admission that you're under orders from above? To whom if not to God can you feel yourself responsible?

Antoine did not reply at once and for a moment the Abbé could fancy his argument had told. In point of fact, on Antoine's view, it was the merest moonshine. His scrupulous performance of his work did not necessarily imply the existence of God, nor the value of Christian teachings, nor indeed any metaphysical truth. Was he not the living proof of it? Nevertheless he could not help recognizing, yet once again, that there was a baffling incompatibility between the extreme conscientiousness that inspired his conduct and his repudiation of any moral code. A man must love his work. Why that 'must'? he wondered. Because man is a social animal, and it's up to him to do his best for the smooth running of society, for progress. 'Up to him!' A gratuitous assumption, that; a question-begging postulate. Again there rose in his mind the query which he had put himself so often, to which he had never found a satisfactory answer: What then is this authority that I obey?

'Oh well,' he murmured, 'shall we call it conscience? The hall-mark left on everyone of us by eighteen centuries of Christendom. Perhaps I was over-hasty just now when I set down at *nil* the factor of my upbringing, or, rather, my heredity.'

'No, my friend, what has survived in you is the holy leaven to which I was referring. Some day it will become active once more—till the whole is leavened! And then your moral life, which now is following its own course more or less against your wish, will find its proper sphere, its true meaning. No man can understand God when he is rejecting Him, nor even while he is searching for Him. You'll see! One day you'll discover that, without wanting it, you've entered port. And then at last you'll know that it's enough to believe in God, for everything to become clear, everything to fall into place.'

'I grant you that,' Antoine smiled, 'readily enough. I'm aware that, oftener than not, our ailments create their own remedies; and I'm quite prepared to agree that the majority of people have such an instinctive, urgent craving to believe that they don't give much thought to whether what they believe deserves belief. They label "truth" whatever their need for faith impels them to accept. In any case,' he added in the tone of an aside, 'I'm not easily to be convinced that most intelligent Catholics, and particularly priests who are men of learning, aren't pragmatists more or less, without

their knowing it. What I find unacceptable in Christian dogma should be equally unacceptable to other cultivated men who think on modern lines. The trouble is, believers cling to their faith and, to avoid imperilling it, refrain from thinking things out. They take their stand on the emotional and ethical aspects of religion. And of course they've had it drummed into their heads so effectively that the Church has given an answer once for all to every possible objection, that they never think of looking into it for themselves. . . . But excuse me—that's only by the way. What I wanted to say was that however universal the craving to believe may be, that's not a sufficient justification for the Christian faith, cluttered up as it is with ancient myths and abstrusities. . . .'

'When one is aware of God,' the priest said, 'there's no need to "justify" Him.' For the first time his tone brooked no reply. Then leaning towards Antoine, with a friendly gesture, he went on: 'The amazing thing is that it should be you, Antoine Thibault, of all people who speak thus. In many Christian homes, alas, the children see their parents behaving, life going on, almost as if the God about whom they hear so much did not exist. But you—why, from your earliest childhood you could feel God's presence in your home, at every instant! You saw your late lamented father guided by God in everything he did.'

There was a pause. Antoine gazed at the Abbé fixedly, as if he were trying to keep himself from speech. At last, through close-set lips, he muttered:

'Yes. And that's the trouble. I've never seen God except through the medium of my father.' His attitude and tone expressed what he had left unsaid. Then, to cut short, he added: 'But this is no day to dwell on that topic.' He pressed his forehead to the pane.

'We're coming into Creil,' he said.

The train slowed down, stopped. The lamp in the carriage came on brighter. Antoine hoped some passenger would enter; his presence would break off their conversation. But the platform seemed quite empty.

The train drew out.

After a longish silence, during which each man seemed lost in his private meditations, Antoine turned again towards the Abbé.

'The truth is there are two things at least that will always prevent me from returning to the Catholic fold. One is the matter of sin. I'm incapable, it seems, of feeling any horror of sin. The other is the question of Providence; I shall never be able to accept the notion of a personal God.'

The Abbé said nothing.

‘Yes,’ Antoine went on, ‘all that you Catholics call sin is, on my view, precisely all that is strong and vital—instinctive and . . . instructive! It’s what enables us (how shall I put it?) to lay our hands on things. And to go ahead. No progress—oh, I’m not unduly hypnotized by that blessed word “progress,” but it comes in handy—no progress would have been feasible had men always, in blind obedience, kept from sin. But that topic would lead us too far afield,’ he added, countering the priest’s deprecative gesture with an ironic smile. ‘As for the theory of a Divine Providence—no, I can’t swallow it! If there’s one theory that strikes me as absolutely indefeasible, it’s that of the utter indifference of the universe.’

The priest gave a start. ‘But surely even that Science of yours, whether it wants to or not, has to take its stand on universal order. (I deliberately avoid using the more correct term: a Divine Purpose.) Don’t you see that if we ventured to deny that higher Intelligence which controls phenomena and whose mark is visibly on all things here below; if we refused to admit that everything in nature has its purpose and all has been created to fit into an harmonious whole—don’t you see it would be impossible to make sense of anything at all?’

‘Well, why not admit it? The universe is incomprehensible for us. I accept that as a premise.’

‘That “incomprehensible,” my friend, is God.’

‘Not as I see it. I haven’t yet succumbed to the temptation of labelling all I can’t understand as “God.”’

He smiled and fell silent for some moments. The Abbé watched his face, on the defensive. Still smiling, Antoine spoke again.

‘In any case, for the majority of Catholics, their idea of the divine resolves itself into the rather puerile conception of a paternal God, a small private deity who has his eye on each of us, who follows with sympathetic interest each flicker of the tiny flame of individual conscience, and whom each of us can perpetually consult in prayers beginning, “Enlighten me, O Lord,” or “Merciful God, grant me Thy aid,” and the like.

‘Please don’t mistake me. I haven’t the least wish to wound your feelings by cheap sneers at religion. But I can’t bring myself to imagine how anyone can seriously think there is the slightest mental intercourse, the least exchange of question and answer, between any given man—a tiny by-product of universal life—or even this Earth of ours, a speck of dust amid how many myriad others, and the great Whole, the Scheme of Things. How can we ascribe to it such anthropomorphic emotions as paternal love and kindness of heart? How can we take seriously the functions of the

Sacraments, the rosary and—only think of it!—a mass paid for and celebrated with a certain man “as a special intention,” for the benefit of a soul provisionally interned in Purgatory? When you come to think of it, there’s little real difference between these rites, these practices of Catholicism, and those of any primitive religion, the sacrifices and the offerings made by savages to their gods.’

The Abbé was on the point of replying that there certainly existed a *natural* religion common to mankind; a fact which, as it happened, was an article of faith. But once more he held his peace. Huddled in his corner, his arms folded, his fingers tucked inside his sleeves, he cut a figure of sage, mildly ironic patience, as he waited for the young man to conclude his tirade.

Moreover, they were approaching Paris; the train was already swaying upon the points of the suburban lines. Across the misted panes the darkness glittered with pin-point lights.

Antoine who had still something to say, made haste to continue.

‘By the way, sir, I hope you won’t misconstrue certain terms I’ve just employed. I admit that I’m a mere amateur in metaphysics and I’m not in the least qualified to discuss such matters; still I’d rather speak my mind out frankly. I talked just now about Universal Order and a Scheme of Things; but that was merely to talk to like everyone else. Actually it seems to me that we’ve just as many reasons to question the existence of a Scheme of Things as to assume it. From his actual viewpoint the human animal I am observes an immense tangle of conflicting forces. But do these forces obey a universal law outside themselves, distinct from them? Or do they, rather, obey—so to speak—internal laws, each atom being a law unto itself, that compels it to work out a kind of “personal” destiny? I see these forces obeying laws which do not control them from outside, but join up with them, which do nothing more than in some way stimulate them . . . And anyhow, what a jumble-up it is, the course of natural phenomena! I’d just as soon believe that causes spring from each other *ad infinitum*, each cause being the effect of another cause, and each effect the cause of other effects. Why should one want to assume at all costs a Scheme of Things? It’s only another bait for our logic-ridden minds. Why try to find a common “purpose” in the movements of atoms endlessly clashing and glancing off each other? Personally I’ve often told myself that everything happens just as if nothing led to anything, as if nothing had a meaning.’

The priest looked silently at Antoine; then lowered his eyes and remarked with an icy smile:

‘That said, I doubt if it’s possible for a man to sink lower.’

Rising, he began to button his overcoat.

Antoine was feeling genuinely remorseful. ‘I hope you’ll forgive me, sir, for telling you all this. That sort of conversation never leads to anything, and I can’t think what came over me this evening.’

They were standing side by side. The Abbé gazed sadly at the young man.

‘You’ve spoken to me frankly, as a man speaks to his friend. For that at least I’m grateful.’

He seemed on the brink of adding something. But the tram was drawing up.

‘May I drive you to your place?’ Antoine suggested in a different tone.

‘Thanks, that would be kind of you.’

In the taxi Antoine said little; his mind was once again engrossed by the difficult problems of the immediate future. And his companion, who seemed in a brown study, was equally taciturn. When, however, they had crossed the Seine, the priest bent towards Antoine.

‘You’re—how old exactly? Thirty?’

‘Nearly thirty-two.’

‘You are still a young man. Wait and see! Others have ended by understanding. Your turn will come. There are hours in every life when a man can’t dispense with God; one hour especially, the most terrible of all, the last . . .’

Yes, Antoine mused. That dread of death—how heavily it weighs on every civilized European! So much so that it ruins, more or less, his zest for life.

The priest had been on the point of alluding to M. Thibault’s death; but checked the impulse.

‘Can you imagine what it’s like,’ he continued; ‘coming to the brink of eternity without faith in God; without discerning, on the further shore, an almighty, merciful Father stretching out His arms in welcome? Do you realize what it means, dying in utter darkness, without a single gleam of hope?’

‘All that,’ Antoine put in briskly, ‘I know as well as you do.’ He, too, had been thinking of his father’s death. After a momentary hesitation, he went on. ‘My profession, like yours, takes me to the bedside of the dying. I, perhaps, have seen more unbelievers than you have, and I’ve such hideous recollections of those death-beds, that I wish I could give my

patients *in extremis* an injection of belief. I'm not one of those who feel a mystical veneration for the stoic's way of facing death. And, quite sincerely, I wish for myself that, at that moment, I may be open to all the consolations faith can give. I dread a death without hope as much as a death-agony without morphia.'

He felt the priest's hand touch his; it was trembling a little. Probably the Abbé was trying to construe this frank admission as a hopeful sign.

'How right you are!' The priest squeezed Antoine's arm with a warmth that seemed almost akin to gratitude. 'Well, take my advice, don't seal up every way of approach to this Consoler whose help you'll need, like all of us, one day. What I mean is: don't give up prayer.'

'Prayer?' Antoine shook his head. 'That blind appeal—to what? To that problematic Scheme of Things! To a deaf and dumb abstraction, that takes no heed of us!'

'Call it what you will, but that "blind appeal"—believe me, *tells*. Yes, Antoine, whatever may be the name which for the moment you assign to it, whatever form this notion of an Immanent Will behind phenomena, a Law of which you have brief glimpses, may now take in your mind, you should, however much it goes against the grain, turn towards it—and pray. Ah, do anything, I implore you, anything rather than immure yourself in blank aloofness. Keep in touch with the Infinite, address it in whatever terms you can, even if for the moment there's no reciprocity, if you seem to hear no answering voice. Call it what you like—inscrutable mystery, impersonal force, immeasurable darkness—but pray to it. Pray to the Unknowable. Only pray! Don't disdain that "blind appeal," for to that appeal, as one day you will know, there answers suddenly a still small voice, a miraculous consolation.'

Antoine said nothing. Our minds, he thought, are in watertight compartments. But, realizing the priest was deeply moved, he decided to say nothing further that might wound his feelings. In any case, they had reached his house and the car was slowing up.

Abbé Vécard took Antoine's proffered hand and clasped it. Before stepping out, he leaned forward in the darkness and murmured in a tone Antoine had not yet heard him use:

'The Catholic religion, my friend, is very different from what you think; believe me, it means far, far more than what you've been given to see of it up till now.'

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

SUMMER 1914, *concluding* THE THIBAUTS, *will be published uniform with the present volume after the shortest possible interval.*

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Thibaults* by Roger Martin du Gard]