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AURELIEN

AURELIEN

by
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Translated by Eithne Wilkins

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CHAPTER I

THE first time that Aurelien saw Berenice, she struck him as definitely plain. In fact, he did not take to her. He did not like the way she was dressed ; he had his own ideas about dress materials, and this was one he had seen on a number of women. It made him augur ill of a woman who bore the name of an Oriental princess without, apparently, being sensitive enough to live up to the name in matters of taste. Her hair was lack-lustre that day, and untidy. Short hair is something that needs constant attention. Aurelien could not have said whether she was dark or fair; he had hardly looked at her. He was merely left with a vague general impression of something irksome, something that got on his nerves.

Why ? he caught himself wondering. It was quite uncalled for. He thought again. Wasn't she on the small side, and rather pale ? If she had had some such name as Jeanne or Marie, he would not have given the matter a second thought. But Berenice ! How absurd one is about such things. And that was just what irritated him.

There was a line from Racine that all this had set running in his head, a line that had haunted him during the war, in the trenches, and afterwards, too, when he was demobilised. It wasn't even a particularly beautiful line; or at any rate its beauty seemed dubious, unaccountable, and yet haunting, as it haunted him still.

Je demeurai longtemps errant dans Cesaree

As a rule he hadn't much use for poetry. But this particular line kept on coming back. Why ? He couldn't imagine ; especially as it had nothing to do with the story of Berenice, the other Berenice, the real one. Actually he only remembered the general outlines of that old legend. The Berenice

of the tragedy was dark, of course. " I tarried long, a wanderer, in Caesarea." Caesarea, that's somewhere down Antioch way, near Beirut. Mandated territory. A blackamoorish sort of place, bangles galore, veils and all sorts of trinkety odds and ends. Caesarea ... a lovely name for a town. Or for a woman. Caesarea . . . " I tarried long . . ." damn it, I must be going daft I I simply cannot remember what the chap was called who said that, a tall, gaunt fellow, gloomy looking, with eyes like smouldering lumps of coal . . . malaria, I suppose. Anyway, he hung about without coming to the point until Berenice was on the brink of setting up house in Rome with a chubby, pretty young fop who wore his toga like a draper showing off a dress-length. Titus ! Believe it or not, that was his silly name. Titus.

"... a wanderer, in Caesarea . . . , ."

It must have been a very silent, empty town, with wide streets. A town struck by disaster, perhaps by some defeat. Abandoned. Just the town for men of thirty whoVe lost interest in life. A stone town that one could walk about in all night long without believing dawn could ever come. Aurelien saw, in his mind's eye, the dogs slinking to hide behind pillars, startled away from a carcase they had been tearing to shreds, and swords and armour left lying on the ground, relics of an inglorious battle, their owners fled.

Curious how little sense he had of being a conqueror. That came, perhaps, from having travelled in the Tyrol and the Salzkammergut; from having been in Vienna when there was that epidemic of suicides and the Danube was chockablock with floating corpses ; when the collapse of the exchange made tourists feel as if the bottom had dropped out of things. Though Aurelien never put it into so many words, still he had the feeling, shadowy at the back of his mind, that he had been beaten, thoroughly beaten, by life. Nor was it any use reminding himself: " But, damn it all, we won this war ! "

He had never quite recovered from the war. It had got hold of him before he had really started life, for he belonged to the age-group that had just done its three years' military service and was looking forward to being released when August 1914 came along. So he had spent nearly eight years in the army.

He had not been a precocious young man ; and there was hardly any difference between Aurelien in barracks and the callow student his family had dumped on the Latin Quarter round about 1908. War had borne him away from the barracks and then flung him back, high and dry, after those interminable years of shift and makeshift, when one never planned more than an hour or two ahead. Danger had never really meant much to him, one way or the other, any more than the women he had had (since that was what they had been there for); none of these experiences had really left their imprint on him. He had neither lived nor loved. Anyway, he had come out of it alive, that was something.

There were times when he would look down at his long, thin arms, his skinny legs, his youthful body that had come through unscathed, and shudder in retrospective horror, thinking of the maimed, those men with whom he had fought side by side and <who now lurched along the streets on crutches, or had one sleeve pinned to their jacket; and those others who would never come home.

For nearly three years now he had been a free man, responsible to no one. All he had to do was to fend for himself. There was no longer any authority to provide his daily pittance for him along with everybody else's; but to make up for that he no longer needed to salute anyone. Here he was, just turned thirty ; his last birthday had been in June. Quite grown up now ! He smiled. He could never take himself quite seriously enough to think, " Well, I'm a man."

Not for the first time, he felt sorry the war was over. Well,

not the war, but that part of his life, with all the war had meant for him. He had never quite got it out of his system. He had never again picked up the rhythm of civilian life, or been able to shake off the tomorrow-we-die attitude of the war years. It was not that he had not tried; but for three years he had been putting 'off the decisive moment from day to day. Sometimes he imagined how his future, after that drastic moment) would unfold into a quite new life, something faster, livelier, and with more kick in it. That was how he liked to think of it, but it never got beyond that. And now he was thirty and hadn't even begun to live—what was he waiting for? There was nothing he was any good at but drifting. So he drifted.

"I tarried long, a wanderer, in Caesarea. . . ." Perhaps that was how this tag from classical drama came to have a meaning for him. He had been through the campaign in the East, and picked up malaria on the way. With something like regret, he remembered the free and easy life of Salonika, the Greek women, the cheap glamour that didn't take anybody in, the medlfey of nationalities, and that persistent soliciting everywhere, in the streets, at the baths, all over the place.

Aurelien was above the average height, with thick black eyebrows that met between his eyes, large features, and an uneven, rather blotchy complexion. In the old days, in the army, he had worn a moustache; but he shaved it off when he came back to civil life. Not that anyone had asked him to. No, but someone else had been asked to, while Aurelien was there. It was at a hospital mess dinner to which he had been asked by a friend, a medical student.. This young man was the brother of a writer whom Aurelien had come across while on active service and who, if he had lived, would certainly have been a great writer. This was why the young brother, on coming to Paris, frequented literary circles; and the bulk of his guests that evening were somehow

connected with literature or journalism. Among them was a very pretty woman with an unblushing manner, who remarked that she never looked twice at a man with a moustache. Was this aimed at Aurelien ? He didn't think so; but the medical student withdrew for a moment and returned shorn of his moustache. The story is not remarkable or even new; for there was a publisher among the guests and he passed it on, and then several of his authors used it in their books, with variations. The only explanation seems to be that some kinds of trivial incident catch the fancy. This particular anecdote hasn't even the merit of being unpublished, and the only excuse for repeating it is that, without anyone noticing, Aurelien shaved his upper lip a week later. It aroused no comment, for Aurelien was not a subject of interest. He was just a law student, failing in his examinations and hanging about in the office of a barrister—a successful barrister, no doubt, but still not one of those brilliant counsel who are the star turns at Assizes. Still, this incident is a very good illustration of the time-lag in Aurelien's reactions and how much of his life was passed in waiting for the penny to drop.

A month passed before it occurred to him that his friend the medical student was probably enamoured of that impertinent young woman. It simply hadn't struck him before; nor had he realised that she had made quite an impression on him, too. Yet she must have done so; else why had he shaved off his moustache ? And it was as something rather like her that he imagined a woman must be, if her name were Berenice: a dark, slender girl, with the glimmering pallor of a pebble washed by the sea. So when Barbentane had talked about his cousin Berenice, that was how he had visualised her—even though it was almost two years after the episode of the moustache.

Hence his sense of disappointment with the Berenice he had met. He tried to recall her face, and though he didn't

succeed, what did stick in his mind was how he had disliked her dress, which was made of woollen stuff, rubbed with wear. But what the devil did it matter to him ?

He ran his long fingers through his curly hair, like a comb. He was picturing the statues in the market-places of Caesarea : those wild huntresses, all those Dianas, and every one a huntress with a fierce, wild air. And the beggars asleep at the base of the statues.

CHAPTER II

HE preferred dark women, and Berenice was fair, in a toneless way. He preferred women to be tall, like himself; Berenice was small, yet without having that childlike air that sometimes goes with a slight build. Her short hair was straight, and her complexion pallid, as though the blood did not circulate under the skin. Though her forehead was not low, the fringe she wore narrowed it too much. What was startling in this face with the marked cheekbones were the eyes; jet-black behind colourless lashes, they were strange not so much because of their darkness as because they were so full and liquid, like the eyes of a deer. They gave her an almost Asiatic look, heightened by the arch of the brows, skimming up towards the temples. The mouth was startling too ; amply-moulded lips that were just not too full, with a natural red that emphasised the pallor of the face, and sudden gossamer-light tremors at the corners, which turned down in an expression of melancholy there was nothing to justify. Wanton lips, thought Aurelien. Her nose was short and delicate, with slightly exaggerated nostrils that trembled with any emotion, however slight. It seemed to Aurelien that the features here assembled belonged to several quite

different women. All that gave them whatever harmony they did possess was simply the smoothness of the contours, the slant of the cheekbones where the light fell in a curve of sheer perfection, which was yet somehow perturbing, as though the sculptor had fallen in love with the cheekbones, giving all his art to their completion and neglecting the rest.

When Aurelien tried to form a mental picture of Berenice's body, he failed to imagine anything. He kept on reminding himself that she was small; and that was all the impression that she had left in his mind. No doubt he would have noticed if she had been misshapen, or if she had been full-breasted. At last, after a considerable effort, he recalled the colour of her dress; but that was all. There was, he reflected, nothing about her that suggested the child; so her body must be mature, must be alive. But how? For instance, her legs were slender, and yet the day Aurelien met her she had them covered up in woollen stockings, which struck him as affected. It annoyed him.

The only thing he liked about her at once was her voice. It was a warm contralto, deep and shadowy, mysterious as those deer's eyes under the schoolmarmish style of hair-dressing. Berenice talked rather slowly, in abrupt spurts, quickly checked again, that went with the luminous quality of the eyes, like the lights in an onyx. Then suddenly, very quickly, it was as though the girl felt she had given herself away, and the corners of her mouth would turn down, the lips begin to tremble, and the whole thing finish in a smile, while the sentence she had begun faded out. Only a helpless, rather clumsy gesture of the hand completed the expression of a reckless idea, which everything about her now tried to deny she had ever meant. It was then that there came a lowering of the eyelids, shadowy-mauve and so light that it seemed they might easily tear like tissue-paper.

Another thing about Berenice was a little movement of the shoulders, as if she were trying to stop a shawl from

slipping off. This was generally her way of saving the situation, when she did not want to continue a conversation or wanted to change it to other lines.

" You aren't a bit like a Provencjale," he had said to her. In her voice there was a trace, not of accent, but an uncertainty, as if she had learnt a new accent. She replied that there was nothing odd in that; her mother had come from the Franche-Comte and all she had inherited from her father were her black eyes.

Edmond Barbentane drove Aurelien to desperation with his questions : " Well, you've seen my cousin Berenice, have you ? Is that all you have to say about her ? " and countless other remarks to which Aurelien had to answer along the lines of: " She's quite delightful . . . most unusual person . . . oh, yes, of course, most attractive." For to have said that he found her unattractive, which was the truth, would have meant having to explain why, and the talk would go on indefinitely.

Edmond thought it very amusing. What on earth could it matter to him, after all, what Aurelien thought of his cousin ? She had come to stay with the Barbentanes in Paris, and she was going back to the country, where she lived. It was a mere fluke that Aurelien, having nothing else to do with his time, had come to see his old comrade-in-arms. He was embarrassed by the elegant comfort of the Barbentanes' home; on the other hand, he appreciated Barbentane's brandy, and his cynicism. They had gone out together after lunch, and they were coming back down from Passy along the quays, along the Cours-la-Reine. It was a fine day, slightly chilly. The air and the streets were clear, trim as Edmond Barbentane himself, whom one was always surprised to see going about on foot; in spite of himself Aurelien kept looking back to see if his friend's car were not following him. Yet Barbentane was stalwart as a footballer.

" Well, is that all you have to say about Berenice ? "

A craze Edmond had got into his head. Aurelien had nothing to say about her. But since silence would make Edmond leap to conclusions, very well then: "There's something extremely gentle about her. It must be restful to have a woman like that about the house."

He had been less concerned to say something he really meant than to make a not entirely trite remark, after which Edmond might, with luck, cry quits. But as a matter of fact, now he had happened to speak of gentleness, it struck him that the little country mouse really had something gentle about her. But it seemed to have been the wrong thing to say. Well, we all know what people are like, how they work up their own idea of a person and repeat it half a dozen times without meeting any opposition, or even agreement either, for that matter. By then the thing has gained the currency of a truism. Edmond had not escaped this mechanical vice.

He guffawed. This was a tall story !

"Gentle ? Berenice gentle ? All I can say, old man, is I wish you a handful of such gentle creatures ! Funniest thing I ever heard ! You're pulling my leg. You can't have looked at her at all. As for restful, oh, I say, that's rich ! A cat on hot bricks, that's what you mean. ... A perfect hell-cat."

Aurelien's eyebrows went up in surprise. Cat ? Hell-cat ? What's this about hell ? He did not want to tell Edmond his real opinion, namely that this Berenice of his didn't strike him as being in the least remarkable, and as for hell-cat, well that was going rather far. After all, one doesn't find oneself face to face with the infernal without getting some sort of thrill. He muttered something to this effect, which Edmond didn't catch. It was one of those sunlit days at the end of November, when the cars went rolling along the tarmac, soundlessly, dustlessly, and the leafless trees sketched out their black tracery above the avenues, like a

piece of filigree. Everything was utterly neat and spruce, even the frightful Petit-Palais which Aurelien regarded in the light of a personal enemy.

However, for the sake of saying something, • he added, " Tell me what you are getting at ..." and regretted it the next moment, because Edmond would deduce from this remark that he was taking an interest in the country cousin, and no number of denials would do anything but confirm him in this conviction. Barbentane plunged into the story of Berenice's life.

" But, I mean, it's quite obvious. The woman's in flames. Like one of the damned. As a matter of fact, her life probably is hell. A dull little life, absolutely, no joking. After all, I mean, the provinces, eh ? The husband is a distant relation of mine, too. Decent sort of chap, you know the type I mean. By no means brainless, in his small way. She was a mere child when she fell in love with him, or he fell in love with her, whichever it may have been. Anyway, it was the old story. Once she got involved with him she wouldn't give him up, just because the family had opposed the marriage at first. . . . And now, since he was twenty-two or three he's been putting on flesh, losing his looks, well, don't ask me, all I know is, the sight of the two of them together gives me a pain. But she wanted him, and she hasn't gone back on her word. . . . They got married after the war. I suppose in that little town he was her idea of intellectual life, the novels he handed on to her, the philosophy he used to read and she didn't understand or at any rate only got the hang of in a series of unrelated pictures. . . . And then, you know, she's too proud to recognise that precisely that is the drama. She wouldn't yield an inch, and she won't. She sticks to this ridiculous marriage at any price. She insists that she adores her husband, and perhaps she does love him. . . . He collects plates. Oh, quite intelligently. It's interesting to hear him on the subject. Specialists are always

interesting, when they talk about their own subject. But plates, I ask you ! It's a pretty narrow sort of hobby. And he's a chemist, of course, keeps a shop. But if you get him away from his plates, there's nothing left. ... A thorough-going idiot. ..."

They took leave of each other at the Place de la Concorde. There isn't a smarter, a more extravagantly elegant place in the world. Aurelien couldn't help thinking that a grain of dust would be noticed there. He wasn't nearly so pre-occupied with the subject of Berenice as with the idea of elegance ; he felt an overwhelming necessity to think about luxury. He watched Barbentane disappearing into the distance, with his well-cut suit, his expensive shoes, and the broad shoulders of a society athlete. He remembered him in the mud of Champagne, shapeless, swathed in a hotchpotch of woollies, unshaven, filthy, drinking paregoric as if it were fresh milk, to get rid of the fiendish colic that was making his legs shake like jelly, Aurelien shrugged his shoulders. . . .

CHAPTER III

EDMOND BARBENTANE'S career had been rapid and brilliant. It had begun badly ; but by the time he was thirty he had settled down, and his brilliant position made it impossible to bring up the indiscretions of his youth against him. The war, too, had come between and put another perspective on things. Who was going to rake up the old stories ? It was enough that both the Barbentanes, Edmond and Blanchette, were the right sort of people, well-off, and easy to get on with. For the rest, rather hard on their acquaintances.

Arriving from his home in the provinces round about 1910,

the son of a country doctor who went in for parish pump politics, Edmond had been lucky enough to become secretary—and later right-hand man—to Quesnel, the great Quesnel, the taxi magnate, whose dealings in real estate were considerable. The story went that Edmond had had the good luck to be able to prove to his chief that his agents were fleecing him ; and Quesnel, who had just made a big deal in Morocco, became convinced that in this brilliant young secretary, who was a raging success with women, was the man to carry on his work after his death. Anyway, that was what people said ; and they also said that Barbentane had shown guts in giving up his medical studies in order to plunge into the world of business. The fact of the matter was that people preferred to forget that Edmond was the lover of Quesnel's mistress, a very beautiful creature, an Italian, and that Quesnel knew and had wanted to assure their happiness by making Edmond's fortune. Nor was there any reason for remembering it, since in the end Carlotta had made Quesnel marry her, when she realised that Edmond was slipping through her fingers : for he had fallen in love with his chiefs daughter. And Blanchette Quesnel, a passionate and strong-willed girl, had forced her father to agree to her becoming Madame Edmond Barbentane. Then came the war. Quesnel died. Carlotta had given her house at Cap d'Antibes to the Red Cross, and her devotion to the wounded earned her the Legion d'Honneur. Her daughter-in-law, who had almost entirely lost her jealousy of the past, saw her only rarely, because Carlotta spent her time travelling from Cairo to London and from Venice to India. The house in the Pare Monceau had been sold to pay death duties, which were considerable; neither the widow nor her young in-laws wanted it. The young couple lived in the rue Raynouard, where they occupied two storeys of a house with a terrace. In the summer they were at their villa at Biarritz, as Bottin will have informed you. Edmond

from time to time took the chair at a directors' meeting, representing his wife and his mother-in-law. He belonged to the golf club at La Boulie. He regarded all this more or less as a joke, and he was amusing to listen to on the subject. He did not believe in the magical operations which had, nevertheless, been the source of his fortunes. In practice, the taxi syndicate no longer needed him; it had grown like a mushroom up over the heads of its founders. The new generation of its masters did not concern themselves with its affairs as minutely as Quesnel and his partners had done. Instead there were numerous able managers of a vast machine that had become impersonal. If indeed Barbentane had kept on an office (Quesnel's old office), to which he was supposed to make regular visits, it was, obviously, more as a means of keeping his liberty than of giving it up to business. The syndicate, to avoid the undesirable complications of capitalisation, went in for real estate, and built houses; and it was at the headquarters of a subsidiary company that Edmond had his office. In short, he confined himself to being rich and made a joke of the whole thing.

Aurelien rather enjoyed the special tone that Barbentane used in talking about money matters. Anything but pompous ; indeed, he had something of the mountebank about him. He was not a bit of a fool, but he regarded it all as something of a joke. Aurelien caught himself using, in his own thoughts, this expression " something of a," such a handy expression, one that can be used for anything one doesn't know how to define, anything that isn't quite all of a piece. It was the fashion at that time, very much the fashion. That sort of thing emanated from the world of the *Bœuf-sur-le-Tait*, the Ballets Russes public. Aurelien, who didn't by any means belong to that world, succumbed, having been infected by such " carriers " as the young medical student already mentioned. Well, then, something of a mountebank. Birth and alchemy of money. A peculiar

passion, that of gentlemen seated round a table, while one of them reads a report to which no one is listening, and signatures are exchanged, and the lying-in takes place at bank grilles, special accounts, of course, on the first floor, not where the *vulgum pecus* sit waiting their turn on an oaken bench, holding a copper token with a number on it.

It was almost unthinkable that this young man, with his sportsman's build and superbly-cut clothes, could have anything in common with the mysterious, faceless figures of which, in Aurelien's imagination, the world of high finance consisted : those accountant fellows that one can trace, like following up an electric current, to the coal mines and from the textile industry to the railways, in all the company reports. It almost scared him to think about it, but it had a fascination for him, too, because it was the frontier of an unknown world. At the same time he said to himself that it was a result of the war, a sort of rejuvenation of society, a sign. . . . He had been brought up in an atmosphere of regret for the Napoleonic era and 25-year-old generals.

One evening in the summer of 1916, in the Hauts de Meuse, 2nd-Lieut. Aurelien Leurtillois had witnessed the arrival of a newly-appointed first-aid officer, attached to the 9th infantry battalion, where he was in charge of a platoon, the 13th company. It was a company of tough old sweats, with a captain risen from the ranks, all hard drinkers and skirt-chasers, who were fond of a shindy, and the medals had to be seen to be believed. This company had smashed four young doctors; one had been killed in action, the others hadn't been able to stay the pace with the hoaxes, the liquor, the need to be everlastingly on their toes. The last hadn't liked the shocks that can be expected at the picquet outpost, the noise the frogs make in the barbed wire, so that one thinks all the time there is a counter-attack coming up, or a patrol; he had got heart-disease from it. So they had watched the new chap's arrival with a critical eye. Here

he was, a medical student who had given up his course and then had remembered his few terms when the war was in full cry, in order to get out of a rifle battalion where he was graded 62. His medical studies had already gained him provisional exemption in peace-time. The men took the view that they were going to be well looked after. And besides, this Barbentane fellow had a good flow of language and a singing voice. In the mess, he sang after dinner; they pushed off the job of mess secretary on to him, and he didn't do too badly at it. He *hadfoie gras* sent by post. He didn't lack courage. He was accepted as one of themselves.

Although they were of the same age and the same age-group, it took Aurelien almost a year to get on to close terms with him; and that was just before his departure for Salonika, in '17 at the time when there had been a good deal of trouble. By then, Aurelien had given up believing in anything. The war had been going on too long; and on top of that were the years in barracks that he had already gone through. Morale was wretched, not only with the men, but the officers too. There was too much talk about how the Jerries were throwing in everything they had. And then always the same scenery, Verdun, Artois or Champagne. And the winter they had had. In fact that was what made Aurelien put his name down, in spite of the Dardanelles business, when volunteers for the Middle East were called for. Anyway, it would be a change of scenery from this damned mud. Had he actually ever believed in anything? . . . Anyway, better not ask. Those who get jumpy and keep looking back over their shoulders are bound to trip up sooner or later. That's the way you get bumped off. You begin to get the jitters. You start saying you won't get out of it alive, and then you don't, of course. Lots of stories about that. Coincidences, perhaps. But if you're living in a world of coincidences, well—a man and a bullet that meet, that's what a coincidence is.

It was then that the good humour and "fore-warned is fore-armed" attitude of first-aid officer Barbentane had taken a hand in looking after 2nd-Lieut. Leurtillois. The more fed-up he was, the less he could help liking this fellow whom he would have thought both superficial and affected, if there had been any sense in such terms under the circumstances, when everyone was haunted by the feeling of all being potential food for the worms. You don't choose your friends in the army any more than you choose them in peace-time. What Aurelien needed just then was someone to hang on to. They played chess together ; badly, both of them. That was the way it began. Then they had lost sight of each other. If it hadn't been for the wound he got right at the end of the war, and that long voyage by sea, his return to the Cote d'Azur, and the hospital, fate wouldn't have thrown him back into the path of that friend of his Vauquois days whom he had almost forgotten. The hospital where he had been treated, with his leg in plaster and the wound in his side which refused to heal over, turned out to be the house of Mme Quesnel, Edmond's mother-in-law. This he thought must be an omen, and so he had written to his former medical officer, perhaps with the private hope of being better looked after, and even spoilt a little. They met again. And so one thing had led to another.

CHAPTER IV

THE fact is that Aurelien did not care for talk about the war ; and he was just as much afraid of the chatter of those who had been through it as of the others' unhealthy curiosity. He could not have accounted for it logically, but post-war politics got on his nerves in much the same way. Although

he had been approached by several ex-service organisations, he had not joined any, nor even replied to their invitations. He carried his war about with him, and for himself alone, like a hidden wound. He had very little idea of what was going on in politics, and didn't care; he never read that sort of thing in the newspapers, preferring the sports news and the sensations. When people talked politics, his attention wandered; and two or three remarks that had escaped him at that time betrayed his ignorance and marked him down among his friends as a right-wing man. All right then, keep to the right. A right-winger like you. . . . Aurelien the conservative

He did not recover from that long illness, the war. He did not succeed in collecting his thoughts; he could not focus his energy; or rather, there was nothing that he really wanted. Strange, this result of a violent state of things generally supposed to be the school of courage and of manly resolution. But a soldier does not decide for himself; or at least, he only decides within the framework of action that is imposed upon him from without. Aurelien told himself that the war could not have undermined everyone's power of decision in this way, and he concluded that his own character was to blame. He did not realise that he was one of many suffering from a very widespread disease.

Had he been obliged to work for his living, then hunger and misery would have stepped into the place of his superior officers and dictated new battle orders; but he had the agreeable misfortune of not needing to take thought for the morrow. What his parents had left was to be divided after their death between him and his elder sister; to her went the factory, which her husband had already been managing for nearly twenty years; and he had had the Saint-Genest estate, with a good rent-roll from the farms, which, together with what Armandine's husband sent him every year, brought in thirty thousand francs. This was

wealth, in terms of his bachelor quarters in the He Saint-Louis, and his little runabout, which for him meant liberty.

Purely as a concession to public opinion, he had put his name down at the Law Schools. He had no intention of wearing out the seat of his trousers studying law, and he did it chiefly as an alibi, for the sake of having something to say when he met the friends of his youth again and was asked what he was doing. The fact was that he had had time to forget what he had learnt before the war, or rather, before his military service began ; a gap of eight years is no joke, after all. At that time he had passed his second-year examinations. He never did any more. In the lecture-rooms at the Schools the most he did was getting to know girls who had made their studies an excuse for escaping from home. So he made contact with various aspects of society, and he took far more interest in the diversity of people and their backgrounds than in the laws that governed them. Gradually, perhaps because he had exhausted the possibilities of the Schools, like a cafe he had been going to far too long, he gave up the lectures and the young girls he met there. By and large he felt very old among these young people, ten years his junior. And there had never been anything really serious in keeping his term under Maitre Bergette.[^] The great lawyer had taken him on as an extra pupil because he had known the elder Leurtillois couple, but he had always known that Aurelien was a mere dilettante; a highly intelligent fellow, certainly, and very good at disentangling a client's story, especially if that client were a woman. Sending him along to cross-examine someone with paper and pencil was a way of saving time; he found the sore point at once. But though that was all very well, one could not count on him, one never knew when he was going to be there. In any case, Maitre Jergette understood him, realised that he was not out after money, with such an income. . . . He did not preach at him, merely gave up regarding him as a

student and asked him to dinner. In the end, without any discussion of the matter, Leurtillois had abandoned the course. After that he did nothing at all.

His idleness fed upon an anxiety rather like that he had known during the long leisure hours in the trenches. It was that uneasiness of his war experience, no doubt, which had opened up the way for this state of mind and made it natural for him to wait endlessly without a goal and without perspective. The only difference, the essential difference, was that now he was in a position to think he could control his own life.

What then did he need ? What more or what else ? It would be a mistake to judge Aurelien over-hastily, thinking him complacent, or to read his uneasiness as a sign of higher ambition or of greed. The life that fate had given him, all this material ease and apparent security, did not count with him at all, for he had neither sought nor desired it. He had simply found it all there when he came back ; even his flat had belonged to a friend who was in financial difficulties, and he had taken it over by way of doing a good turn ; his car had been sold to him by a former comrade-in-arms who was setting up as an agent. Everything ready-made : he had not even had to go to the tailor. He did not even possess the sort of initiative belonging to people who consider food important, for he did not care what he ate. Having done nothing about the subject at home, he was quite satisfied with the little *bistro* on the quai de Bethune, a cheap eating-house where bargemen took their meals, and he had been leading this picnic life for three years. If one considers* that these three years were actually his whole life, after eight years of military service and the irresponsible days of the Latin Quarter after he left school, it becomes clear that at thirty he had known so little of life that he still felt as if he were going about in somebody else's clothes, an outsider, or rather like a child that has found its way into

the drawing-room of some house in the country, where the blinds are drawn and the furniture draped in dust-covers.

The queer thing was that he had reached this stage by way of the terrible plains of Champagne and Artois, under the Thracian sun and through murderous violence. The queer thing was that he had lived in the chalky trenches, in the mud, in the earth, in fate, before landing on this perch kept by Madame Duvigne, his charwoman. The queer thing was his strength, which seemed to be asleep, and the memory that accompanied him of those who had died at his hands. He scarcely ever thought of that; he pushed aside, as everyone does, those disquieting images of past time that nothing need resurrect, pushing them aside until they fade imperceptibly into the level of dreams and the vagueness of older dreams, with only a sense of something that has been seen before and dreamt before. Aurelien was not very sure, for instance, about certain episodes in his childhood, such as disputes between his father and mother in the house in the rue de Courcelles, where they had come to settle down as soon as Jacques Debrest had been able to take over the management of the factory without the constant presence of M. Leurtillois senior. And many other things of his childhood had this vague, uncertain quality of dreams; perhaps it is even not too much to say that he had a vivid memory of some incidents that, in cold waking hours, he was sure he had dreamed. ... As for instance that burglars used to climb over the balcony and into the bedroom where he slept as a child, every night, with a creaking of the floor-boards, and how his heart had thumped in a way it would again years later, when he was lying among the barbed wire, at les Sparges

M. and Mme Leurtillois had got on very badly, without ever reaching the point of separating. The same causes have, or seem to have, opposite effects. Family quarrels had plunged Armandine into marriage, as a way of escape.

But Aur[^]lien insisted that if he had neither mistress nor wife, it was due to having been the eye-witness of so much domestic misery. Any word to do with family life sounded bitter from his lips, as indeed mrrffty words did. Perhaps he protested too much. To be candid with himself, he did admit in his own mind that this explanation was a convenient excuse he had invented and then gone on repeating in order not to be bothered with other people's questions. A man of thirty is expected to have put his cards on the table ; by that time his life should have taken the same shape as other people's lives. Well, more or less. Anyone who does not fit in with this rule causes a kind of friction; he is a subtle disturber of the peace; that is, unless he has some obvious disability or the suggestion of something lacking. There are, of course, husbands who break the rule ; but a single man without any ties, without a mistress, is the very devil. One had only to see Aurelien's gaze fixed on a woman to realise the danger. He was by no means a Don Juan, but other people knew nothing about that. And a permanent condition of being free and unattached makes a man not only susceptible, but almost intolerable for those who are not as he is, above all if he has an extra two or three inches in height, broad shoulders, and a general air of not caring a damn.

It must always be remembered that his destiny had had only three years of freedom in which to take shape : three years in which Aurelien had enjoyed experimenting with lost time, his own master, no longer caught up in the toils of the military machine. His sister had at once wished to get him married. His sister was altogether a great match-maker, for life outside marriage was something she could not bear to think of; she had thrown herself at Jacques Debrest the moment he came of age, had done it resolutely, and now thought well of the result. She had a fundamental need of a man's love, and that was the basis of her universe ;

nor could this excellent woman imagine how anyone could refrain from marriage, unless it were from a hateful spirit of frivolity amounting to the immoral. She had, it must be said, no influence at all on her young brother, and all her schemes came to nothing, or even made it, if that were possible, still less likely that Aurelien Leurtillois would ever marry.' She and her brother were too unlike each other : it was enough that she should take a certain view for him to come to an opposite conclusion.

This dissimilarity between them lay not merely in their outlook. Even in appearance they had nothing in common but their height. Armandine Debrest was a tall woman, but, unlike Aurelien, broadly built, with a kind of overflowing autumnal richness ; her smooth skin and full curves were those of a woman who had never looked twenty and would never look forty. She was fair, with a modulated fairness that contrasted with her brother's black hair, and her hair was as straight as his was curly. There was something strong and restful about her. In fact, she was just the woman for Jacques Debrest, that full-blooded, girded-up man, who did regular exercises to keep off the threat of fat and preserve his alert bearing, whose hair and moustache were brushed up stiffly, his chin huge, and such a neck that it was impossible to find shirts for him. He was lavishly unfaithful to Armandine ; but he was one of those men for whom one woman is not enough, not even one with such a devouring greed for love as his wife.

In the quarrels between M. and Mme. Leurtillois, this physical dissimilarity between their two children was a theme that recurred constantly; for though Armandine took after her father, Aurelien resembled neither M. Leurtillois nor that pretty mother who was as fragile, as lightly and delicately built, as all of her family. It was generally believed that this was the explanation of how the Leurtillois fortune had been divided up in the parental

will, and why M. Leurtillois had left the factory to his daughter and not to his son-. The Saint-Genest estate came from the mother's side. From time to time Aurelien had even thought that he was not a Leurtillois, and that his mother had had a lover, some tall, dark fellow like himself. What is more, various good people had given him to understand as much. A sailor, apparently. Nothing very special. Aurelien himself was so casual that he had never tried to find out the rights of the story. Occasionally he was quite pleased to think that it might be true. He had been rather fond of his trivial, unreasonable mother, although she had given so little time to the tall son of hers who seemed to have fallen from the clouds.

Armandine was eight years older than himself. He was thirteen when she married. She had scarcely ever played the elder sister, except when he came back from the war; then she introduced him to girls in whom she took an interest and whom she would have been glad to see as her sisters-in-law. As a boy he had been sent to school as a boarder, because he was in his father's and mother's way. He was the cause of continual bickerings between them, and, once Armandine was married, he was the only disturbing factor in the social life of the beautiful Fernande Leurtillois. He loved his pretty mother, after his fashion. She had been his first ideal of what a woman should be, with the extraordinarily elaborate preparations she made in dressing and the care she took of herself. He was not at all fond of his father, who was far too like Armandine to be pleasant. His father, with the long moustache and the monocle. Young Aurelien was at Commercy with his regiment when he learnt how brutally his parents' long, tangled story had been snapped short: they had both been killed in a motoring accident, together, on the road near Avignon. An accident—Aurelien had never been able to convince himself completely that it had really been an accident. His father had been driving,

when the car, travelling at a furious speed, crashed into a tree. Aurélien's father was a very good driver. Nothing explained that mad racing, the senseless speed, the sudden leap off the road where there was no other traffic. Perhaps anger—a quarrel. Fernande Leurtillois was forty-six at that time, with a reputation as a well-dressed woman. Aurelien could not stop himself thinking of his dead father as a murderer; for twenty years he had had the light of murder in his eyes. One day when father and son had come home together, alone, when Aurelien was five

When your father and mother are killed motoring, you are given compassionate leave to go to the funeral. The funeral took place at Avignon, in the depths of the winter of 1912 ; there was a terrible mistral blowing. Among those who had hurried along was an old friend of the Leurtillois family, whom the children called Uncle Blaise, although he was not related to them, and his wife, a worthy woman with a deep voice and tightly drawn hair, who might perhaps have been beautiful forty years earlier. They welcomed Aurelien with open arms. It was not until the procession started that he saw his sister, who had waited twenty-four hours for her mourning before setting out. Debrest and his wife, already in deepest black, followed the two coffins, side by side with this tall, military fellow, and the family lawyer. Debrest held Armandine by the arm to prevent her weeping aloud ; his big, business-like fist crushed her arm so thoroughly that later, in the evening, he could have counted the consoling marks of his five fingers on his wife's flesh. It was then that Aurelien realised once and for all that he would never have anything in common with this couple, who were all that remained of his family.

But if the Debrests' determined attempts to make him marry had deepened his dislike of marriage, still he might easily have found some way of linking his life with a woman's, outside the bonds of marriage: to a woman such as he

dreamt of, or to some woman who found him attractive, as to many he was indeed attractive. But never, by so much as a gesture, did he make any attempt to hold a woman. The only knot that ever formed between him and his conquests—and the word is somewhat inaccurate in Aurelien's case—had always worked loose again very quickly, because women cannot endure absent-minded respect of the sort that Aurelien offered them. And another reason for his celibate life lay in all the years when he had had no one. From the very first morning with him women felt they were intruders. They did not forgive him for that.

Nevertheless. . . . He had sometimes thought, about two or three women whose lover he had been, that they might have stayed, or that they might come back, and come back more and more often, until . . . These were vague dreams, mere uncertain outlines of a fancy. Aurelien was afraid of lying to women, or rather, of having to lie to them. He had never told any woman that he loved her, although he had tried to think it. He had a very high ideal of what love should be, and also that shyness of recognising it which, more than anything else, prevents love from coming into being. The long and the short of it was that he had never loved ; and this was so obvious that no one had ever loved him, either. There were some women of whom it might be said that they had picked Aurelien up ; but nothing more. In this he resembled those pretty girls who have so much success and no love affairs. It was, indeed, a feeling that he had often given his mistresses ; it upset them completely, especially when taken together with his far from delicate frame ; and they shook him off gently, a shade disappointed, without bearing him much malice, glad that he offered no resistance, but sorry about the whole thing. Physically an odd fellow.

He went on being friends with a woman when he ceased being her lover. He even became a useful confidant. The point was that he did not carry anything to its logical

conclusion; this was surprising, since he could cause a woman ecstasy—but only once. There was hardly ever a second time, though no one could have said why.

CHAPTER V

" BUT, my dear Edmond, he didn't even look at me ! " Berenice said with a look of utter petulance that seemed to increase her pallor.

Barbentane went on : " But I tell you he didn't talk about anything else but you, all the way along. He kept on asking questions, in a roundabout way, the way people do when they don't want you to guess "

" Darling, it's too bad of you to tease Berenice," Blanchette interrupted. " You can see she doesn't like it."

" And why shouldn't she like having made an impression, especially on a chap like Aurelien, who's not only good-looking but also socially presentable ? If Berenice makes such a fuss about it, I shall end up by thinking that she, too "

JJerenice got up and crossed the drawing-room. She really had a martyred air, and Edmond watched her as she passed between the pouffes and the armchairs, like a sailing-ship tacking among the reefs. Three wide steps led down into the library, with its ceiling of Cordova leather in red, black, and gold. But it was not in a book that the young woman, in her blue dress, was going to seek diversion. There was a door from the library into the garden ; and the breeze that billowed into the room was evidence that she had opened the window.

Blanchette was now 27. She had her father's long face, and it suited her very well to have grown a little plump, with

her schoolgirl's fair plaits twisted in rolls over her ears. She almost always wore black. She had that family gesture, spreading both hands out palms upward, that Edmond made fun of.

" Now, you see ! You've upset her again. You know quite well she's over-sensitive. She comes to stay with us for a bit of a change and to brush up her ideas, and there you go . . . "

" My dear little silly, what can brush up a woman's ideas better than to have a man falling in love with her ? "

" But he hasn't fallen in love with her."

" He will/

" What's this, a plot ? "

" No, it's just an idea."

On the terrace, in the wind, Berenice, in dismay, was regarding all the hardware of the roofs below her : tin hats, smoke helmets. Knights and Don Quixotes, chimneys. . . . Where in the world is there a more fascinating view than from the height of those mansions in Passy that mount one upon the other, forming a sort of New York fading out to the horizon ?

The house looked over the Seine, the aqueduct and the metro bridge with the Trocadero, the Champs-de-Mars, the Eiffel Tower and the whole city, all of the city down there in its whiteness, and from the far distance a glitter of gold from a spire in the winter sunshine. And the streets deep as wells.

Berenice could not help feeling a kinship with this tremulous, unknown, mysterious Paris, and that tall, silent man whose glance she had met only once and who had done nothing to obtrude himself on her, but had merely passed the dishes at dinner. The wind blowing along the-terrace overturned a flowerpot, which broke, and Berenice, startled, felt the tears coming to her eyes. (An omen ? No, it doesn't do to let oneself believe in omens, the way one did in those days long ago in the big house. It won't do.) Paris lay all

round her, immense, inhospitable, with great rosy lights on its grey breast.

His name was Aurelien.

Marie-Rose and Marie-Victoire came into the drawing-room with their nannie. Marie-Rose was seven, born in 1915 while Blanchette had been without news of Edmond, who was at Verdun. Marie-Victoire was born in the year of victory and was now three and a half. Both were dressed in white, with their hair tied up on the tops of their heads with pink ribbon ; both took after their mother and their grandfather of taxi fame.

" I'm going to take them to Ranelagh," nannie said.

But Blanchette's eyes were on her husband, who was fiddling with the telephone.

" What's the matter with you, Edmond ? (Very well, nannie, you may take them along.) Who is it you want to ring up without my hearing ? "

She knew him. . . . How she knew him ! He blushed, irritated at having been found out once again.

" Oh, you can listen if you like ! Well, Marie-Rose, aren't you going to kiss Daddy ? I've nothing to say to Mme de Perseval that you can't. . . . There you are, there's a good little girl. And how about you, Victoire, my pet ? " (He lifted the smaller one into the air, balancing her on one hand, as if to dance her about in the light, and then set her down on the floor again. His other hand had not let go of the telephone.)

" Oh, it's Mme de Perseval . . . ? "

Nannie, unobtrusive, colourless, gathered up the two children and led them to the door. When she had left the room, Edmond said:

" Is this going to be a scene ? "

" A scene ? Good heavens, no ! Some of your girl-friends may cause me some jealousy, but the Perseval woman isn't one of them. She must be . . . "

" Thirty-six."

" That's what she says ! And she dates back, among your crazes, to—let me see——"

" Nineteen-eighteen, my dear," Edmond drawled. " You were having a baby, and leaves were short."

" I'm not reproaching you."

" That would be the last straw. By the way, what's the exchange ? You remember. Passy, or——? "

" Ternes. Really, you ought to know it better than I."

He asked Ternes for the number. While he waited, holding the receiver, he murmured over his shoulder: "I simply can't see why the rue des Belles-Feuilles should have Ternes for its exchange. ..."

Mme de Perseval was not at home.

" Very well, I'll call in," he said.

Blanchette said : " Take her some violets. She likes them, and they're in season. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Leurtillois received Mme de Perseval's invitation, a mauve card engraved with a wild goat leaping from one tiny mountain to another, under the motto *Je perce val*, he turned it over half a dozen times, wondering what it could mean. He had been introduced six months earlier, one day in the Bois, he couldn't remember by whom, to the widow of that dramatist who had been the rage of the Boulevard before the war. Then, suddenly, here was an invitation from her. It was not the usual formal At Home card, but a note in her handwriting, saying: " I wonder if you even remember me ? ? ? I am having some friends in on Thursday evening, do be so CHARMING, dear

M. Leurtillois, as to join us about ten o'clock. Dinner-jacket, because it suits you so well!!! But as you like. . . . Come five minutes early, I want to talk to you before the others come. If you simply must bring me something, let it be a quite tiny bunch of violets, not Parma, just ordinary violets. I never accept anything else from people I like !!! Mary de Perseval."

He called up a picture of her as he remembered her : not tall, but not exactly small, either, with hennaed hair, and moving like a ship cleaving its way through the deep, with good legs that she liked to show off, but a rather too obvious ripeness of the arms and bosom. And that narrow, greedy mouth.

He looked at the mauve card again, and was struck by the abundance of exclamation marks, question marks, double and triple, and that " charming " in capitals.

" I won't go/* he thought to himself, and looked in his engagement book. . . . Thursday. He was free.

Robert de Perseval had been much older than his wife, and very old when he died, during the war, which robbed him of the newspaper obituaries that he had the right to expect. It was at the time of the Nivelle offensive ; death had become pretty cheap and had lost its sensational value. But it came just in time to prevent him from disinheriting Mary, who was over-fond of flying-men, Tommies, and even civilians ; though they had actually separated after something in the nature of a scandal. The Americans did not arrive till later; a stars-and-stripes handkerchief looked very pretty with widow's weeds. Thus it was that the author's rights of *Make Baby Laugh*, *A Slipper and a Heart*, *Nini Pull Your Skirt Down*, and a great many other roaring successes, made life possible for this still young woman who never passed her thirty-sixth birthday. She had turned her flat in the rue des Belles-Feuilles into a sort of curiosity shop of baroque objects, all white : funeral wreaths, bridal

bouquets, White Horse inn-signs, vases of white opaline, porcelain poodles, little English china houses, a fairground negro dressed in white, which stood, lifesize, at the door of the dining-room, and in the dining-room the most extravagant collection of dickeys and white shirts, with all the pleating, all the stripes, all the drawn-thread work that can be done in white on white, from Caux aux Landes to the galas at the opera.

In the vases, more or less everywhere, there were violets and the kind of gilded flowers generally used to decorate altars. The furniture was gilded, which was no longer in fashion, with white satin on the chairs and the sofa and white curtains roped with gold at the windows.

This mania for white had caused a great deal of comment, both in conversation and in the gossip columns. There had been a paragraph about it in *Figaro*. Mme de Perseval used to say that since other people decorated their walls with plates that ought to have been on the table, she did not see why she should not decorate hers with men's shirts. It was said that they were the shirts of her lovers. The truth is always simpler.

Above the grand piano, a white Énard, hung a portrait of the mistress of the house, by Van Dongen. It showed her with immense green circles round her eyes, her hair scarlet, the orange dress daringly caught up to show her legs crossed at the knee, and blue smoke rising from a cigarette between her fingers. The relation of the original to the portrait was obvious enough to give rise to thought. Just as the relation between the transitory and the eternal also, no doubt, gives rise to thought.

Aurelien arrived at twenty-five past ten, very conscious that the whole thing was absurd. He did not know if he had been invited to join people who had been dining, or if this was the beginning of the party. In fact, there was no one there, and the manservant showed him into the large studio

that lay half in shadow, in the midst of ghostly white forms, a jumble of bric-d-brac. The negro stood guard over the door of a further room where he could see glasses, plates, piles of sandwiches, caviare, bottles, the cocktail shaker, all bathed in warm light.

He waited a good twenty minutes with his bunch of violets, overcome by a feeling of absurdity, especially since there was already a vast profusion of violets in vases all round. What a lot of people Mme de Perseval must like !

A voice from up above, from the gallery behind him, put an end to the sullen fury that had gripped him.

" M. Leurtillois ! I knew you would come ! "

She came down the stairs in a sheath-like golden dress, high-necked and sleeveless, and she wore on her hair a little gilded cap with short wings from under which the smouldering, fiery hair billowed out. Aurelien had the impression that there was nothing to be seen in this very white face but the mouth, a mere line of bright red. She was coming down towards him with her right hand held out, the left slightly raising a corner of her dress, which, in spite of its train, was quite short. The object was to show off her legs. But when at last she reached the floor, Aurelien felt a thrill going up his spine as he watched her advancing, for she did not walk, she advanced. She advanced with that authority that emanates from the body itself, that dancing approach, which makes some women irresistible, on little black-and-golden shoes with heels so high that to move in them is like dancing on a tight-rope. Aurelien thought, irreverently enough: Her ladyship's car drew up ... and his gaze settled heavily on that tense, firm bosom coming towards him in its golden sheath.

" Oh, M. Leurtillois, it's such a pleasure for me to see you here that really I must have been crazy—or incredibly thoughtless—not to have asked you to come sooner. He has brought a bunch of violets ! "

She took them from him with a swift movement, as he straightened up after a hand-kiss that seemed to leave the impress of many rings upon his lips ; and she carried them along as though the little bunch were some very precious and rare object, something she had never seen before. She carried them held out before her, so as not to lose sight of them, her chin raised towards a white thing which she pulled out of the shadows, beyond the lamps. And she said:

" How perfectly sweet! "

Aurelien wondered if this was meant for the violets or for him. He was rather taken aback both by this and by the theatrical air with which she left the vase and came back to him. She made him sit down beside her, on one of those three-cornered sofas where one is both next to and facing the other person. He became aware of the perfume she wore, and she noticed it.

" Don't ask me the name of my perfume ! " she exclaimed. " We would have to begin our friendship with a refusal on my side, and that would be a bad sign ! A woman's perfume is something she keeps a secret. To reveal it would be like undressing in front of the first-comer. . . . "

And then she seemed to notice that this last phrase was not tactful, and put her hand on Aurelien's. He still felt the pressure of the rings on his lips. " You are not merely the first-comer. . . . "

He could quite believe it, and reflected that if he were to ask her to undress, their friendship might very well not begin with a refusal. Now what exactly was the drift of all this ? He was hesitating between coolness and impudence ; and the necessity of saying something drove him to impudence :

" I am wondering, dear lady, how it was that you suddenly remembered me. . . . If my memory serves me well, it was in the Bois de Boulogne that I had the honour . . . " he bowed slightly, " Then. . . . "

" Then, what, my dear M. Leurtillois ? Do you think it is less easy to remember you from having met you in the Bois ? "

" No. Well, but. . . . How could you know that a dinner-jacket suits me ? "

She looked at him, startled. Then she remembered, leaned back in order to laugh more freely, and then laughed, piercingly.

" First of all, one always has to tell men that. It intrigues them, it flatters them, they like to hear it, and then, what does one risk ? Every man looks better in a dinner-jacket than in a lounge suit."

She looked at him through her eyelashes to see if he was disappointed. He was not disappointed ; he was smiling, perhaps a little ill at ease. What was more, he had observed her little trick, the sidelong glance. She changed her mode of attack.

" But as far as *you* are concerned, I had seen you in dinner dress two or three times, from a distance, with Mme de Nettencourt. . . ."

His " Oh ! " showed that she had struck home. That made her laugh again. Mary de Perseval could not resist increasing his embarrassment.

" Yes, and of course you hadn't noticed my presence, being so accustomed to having all eyes on you. . . ."

" I assure you that really . . . oh, yes, but I do remember . . . at the Stravinsky concert. . . ."

" No . . . at the Bœuf. . . ."

" Oh, that was such a crush. . . ."

" And at the party where that girl did dadaist dances."

Once more he took refuge in impudence :

" At the Caryatis recital ? Maybe. . . . But I was wearing tails."

Mme de Perseval had her hunter's eye on the prey that had just taken a leap, a useless one perhaps, but one that made it necessary to aim again.

" How pretty Diane de Nettencourt is. Not precisely a great intellect, of course. . . . You are quite attached to her, aren't you ? "

Aurelien felt like saying : " That was last year," but gave way to cowardice:

" She is a delightful woman, I assure you."

" Oh, I know her. We belong to the same generation."

Once again Aurelien made a mental note in the margin : " H'm . . . the same generation . . . quite elastic, that." In any case, whatever he said aloud, there must have been some sparkle in his eyes that, however quickly it died out again, betrayed the existence of this interior monologue to his companion. She crossed her legs, and the gold uncovered her knees. She knew what she was doing. Aurelien dropped his eyes.

" Diane looks very young," she went on, " for thirty-six. Actually, both she and I might easily have been friends of your mother."

" My mother was very fond of little girls. ..."

" Flatterer, . . ."

" I am thirty."

He bit his lips : he had gone too far. And he was letting himself be diverted from his object, which was to find out why this woman had brought him here. He frowned.

" All this is taking us away from the question of the dinner-jacket, dear lady. What was it that reminded you of my existence, so fortunately for me ? "

She evaded the answer, and pulled down her dress, as if Aurelien's glances were causing her confusion.

" Oh, I know very well what you have come for this evening ! "

" Indeed ! "

" You may as well admit, you rash man, that it isn't for my sake ! "

He felt his head whirl. He protested.

" No, no," she said. " I know what your head is full of just now, and it isn't Mme de Nettencourt. Well, you will see her! I shall be your accomplice, since it can't be helped !"

She sighed. He was annoyed, and at the same time afraid that he might be showing it. He exclaimed :

⁴⁴ This is all Greek to me ! Of course it was you I came to see ! Besides, I haven't any idea at all whom you can be expecting. . . ."

" Oh, it's all right, don't worry : *she* is coming."

" But who ? What ' she ' ? There isn't any ' she ', I assure you."

" Oh, very well, very well. How discreet you are ! What a mediaeval knight! But don't tell me that it was for my sake. . . ."

He was within an ace of uttering something quite overwhelmingly convincing, as token of his good faith : the truth, in fact. That he had not come for Mme de Perseval, but for her exclamation marks, curious to meet the woman who scattered exclamation marks so lavishly. It might not have been well received, perhaps. But he would have said it, all the same, if at that moment someone had not come into the room.

It was a rather untidy young man who could scarcely be more than twenty, in a light grey suit, with dirty shoes and no crease in his trousers. Lanky, as boys of that age often are, with long hair thrown back from his forehead, and very expressive pale features.

" You're very late, and you haven't changed, Paul," Mme de Perseval said, giving him her fingers to kiss. " Don't you two know each other ? Paul Denis, the poet. M. Aurelien Leurtillois."

" How do you do. . . . You know quite well, Mary, my dinner-jacket isn't fit to wear. ..."

" No—what had happened to it ? "

" Look, I've told you three times. I burnt the back of it with a Bunsen burner."

" What an extraordinary idea ! "

" It isn't an idea. With a Bunsen burner. . . ."

" Dinner-jackets and Bunsen burners have absolutely no cause to meet, Paul, outside modern poetry."

" But I told you, it was the other evening, in the lab. . . ."

" So you've taken to changing into evening dress to go to the lab. ? "

She turned to Aurelien :

" Paul Denis doesn't confine himself to being a poet. He freezes all sorts of fishes and snakes at the Institute of Oceanography."

"I'm studying the cryoscopic point of the internal fluids of animals," the newcomer explained for the benefit of Leurtillois, in a confidential tone of voice very different from that in which he continued : "I had changed so that I wouldn't have to go back to Asnieres and keep you waiting—especially as I have got to stay in the lab. till after eight in the evening, with those confounded axolotls. Then while I was checking up that I'd put everything away, I turned round—and there was a Bunsen burner on, as a night-light—»"

" All right, let's leave the dinner-jacket. But you have a blue suit, and I suppose as long as I don't give you a nurse you will continue going out looking like a ragamuffin. And your shoes ! Darling, go to the kitchen and get them to brush you. I have people coming this evening. . . ."

The young man muttered something, but went out by a little door at the other end of the dining-room, seizing a sandwich on his way, with the casual gesture of one who feels quite at home. There was no longer any doubt what his position was in the house. Mary de Perseval followed him with her eyes.

" Twenty-two, just think ! Fourteen years younger than

me ! He plays, too. He is very gifted. You must hear him at the piano ! But fourteen years. . . . Well, after all. . . . It does seem funny to me, when I think that I have a great boy of fourteen, M. Leurtillois, me, a great boy of fourteen ! Isn't it incredible ? "

She waited for him to say : " Incredible ! " He did not say it. She went on :

" I married very young. . . . But it is extraordinary to have a son who is already almost—almost——You know what I mean. I see that you don't imagine. . . ."

" I might have a son of fourteen myself. I was very precocious."

" Really ? But you would have had to be. . . . Let's see. . . . You would have been fifteen ..."

" I wasn't quite. . . ."

" Oh, how dreadful ! When I think that perhaps Max—a son, you know. . . . Oh, you can't imagine how unbearable the idea is to a mother. ..."

" I had a mother, my dear lady."

Paul Denis came back, very pleased with the state of his shoes.

" Is that a good shine ? " he asked.

" You horrid boy ! Play us something, if you want to be forgiven I "

He pulled faces, then raised the lid of the grand piano, sat down, and began to bang out chords, not playing anything but making it up as he went along.

" You're really unbearable this evening, Paul, quite unbearable. . . . Come along, play something ! "

He amused himself with playing jazz. " *Et je te syncope, et je te syncope. . . .* "

" Don't pay any attention," she said to Aurelien, " it's the best way of getting something out of him. Yes, just imagine this big Max that I have—fourteen—with literary tendencies. He takes after my husband, of course. He

also writes verse. A little influenced by Jean Cocteau, perhaps . . . Heavens, why not ? Paul Denis isn't listening, luckily. . . . He can't bear the sound of Cocteau's name. It's something in his own line. When they talk about it, one would really think. . . . Personally, I'm fond of Jean, he has ideas, a lively mind. . . . Do you know him ? "

Aurelien had seen him, but did not know him.

" There, what did I tell you ! Now he's playing. *La Gazza Ladra*. . . . Oh, I adore Rossini, Donizetti . . . *L'Élizire*. . . . And all the rest of them from that period. . . . You know *l'Italienne d Alger* . . . and *Norma* . . . Nowadays nobody knows how to sing *Norma* ! "

Aurelien was wondering whom he was to meet this evening at Mme de Perseval's, and paying very little attention to this Italian music, which he did not care for at all, when a series of people made their entry close on each other's heels. Mary went about switching on more lights, a crowd of little lamps high and low, like stars in the studio, and a kind of white floodlight on the ceiling, above a stratum of shadow.

First of all there was an elderly couple, the woman in a spangled dress, with a green turban on her grey hair, and the man, a colonel, very much a colonel, with a military moustache and the sort of hair that will not lie down. Then the introductions left hanging in the air, then the Barbentanes with their country cousin: and a young Greek woman in black, everything about her on a large scale, nose, eyes, feet, her bare arms from which a light scarf kept on slipping away. Mme de Perseval bustled about. . . .

" Does everyone know everyone ? . . . M. Leurtillois. . . . Colonel and Mme David. . . . Mademoiselle Agathopoulos. . . . Everyone knows the Barbentanes. . . . Oh, don't you ? I'm so sorry. . . . Edmond Barbentane, Mile Agathopoulos, Mme Barbentane. . . . Oh, how silly of me ! And the most lovely creature, your delightful cousin—Madame—Madame. . . . "

Berenice found herself the centre of attention.

" Mme Lucien Morel/ " Blanchette Barbentane said promptly.

" Yes, of course—Mme Morel. What can I be thinking of! When I got the party up just for her, just for her ! Isn't she charming ! Come forward a little, let them see you, Mme Morel. What a pretty dress ! "

Yes, it was a pretty dress, a black background with a pattern of white stripes widening towards the top, like the rings that form on the water where a stone has been thrown in, and all white at the top, where it was cut low on Berenice's shoulders, whiter than the satin itself, and a little black cape hanging from the shoulders. Perhaps it was the dress, perhaps it was the woman that was striking, the body that was more rounded and full than the face, with its lack of harmony, led one to expect. In any case, Mile Agathopoulos tightened her lips, and all the men looked at Berenice. (Mme Lucien Morel, thought Aurelien.) She said, like a little girl coming to a sudden decision, and with a movement of her lips rather like a kiss :

" Lotus."

Mme de Perseval was startled : " What ? What does she say ? "

" Lotus."

She had really said that. The lady of the house, with the expression adults assume when they give up all hope of understanding a child, turned her mute interrogation towards Mme Barbentane, who was wearing a tight grey dress with no back and one of those little trains that were the fashion then, square and just big enough for tripping up the wearer.

"She says 'Lotus'," Blanchette explained, "it's the name of the dress in the designer's collection."

" Oh, I see. The designer. . . . "

" Poiret! "

Berenice uttered the name with such vigour that the

colour mounted to her cheeks. She was proud of having a dress by Poiret. Her eyes were shining. Mme de Perseval shook her head :

" I might have known it."

Aurelien felt that there was an implied criticism in the remark, a certain contemptuous pity for the little provincial who naturally went straight to Poiret. No one knew, of course, that it had been Blanchette's idea to get this dress for her husband's cousin, specially for this party.

" I am sorry, Mary, but you've forgotten about me. You're not introducing me."

It was Paul Denis, risen from his piano like Lazarus from the dead.

" Oh, Paul—so I have ! Paul Denis, the poet . . . Mme Barbantane, Mme Morel. . . ."

Mile Agathopoulos was already chatting with Mme David and the colonel, and Edmond pulled Mme de Perseval away into a corner. Berenice said to Blanchette in a very low voice, excitedly : " The poet! He's a poet! Have you read his poems ? " Blanchette signalled to her to be quiet. Aurelien observed this by-play. It was queer—the other time, he had thought her unattractive. Definitely, it must be the dress. . . .

" Well, are you pleased ? It's what you wanted ? " Mme de Perseval asked Barbantane.

" Yes, my dear, you haven't changed—still just as intelligent in friendship as in love."

" Hush ! If Paul heard you. . . . But, you know, I do deserve some praise : I find your friend Aurelien most attractive. . . ."

" You shall have him when you like, Mary. Berenice, you know—I mean, she's only in Paris for a short time—and if I want her to have something to remember when she's back at home, that doesn't mean she should break her heart. . . ."

" I don't understand you."

" Well, you see, our dashing Aurelien doesn't carry things to extremes, as plenty of people know. His little affairs come to an end as quietly as they begin, without any fuss. That's what I think is the thing for my cousin. A flirtation, ships that pass in the night. . . ."

" I admire you, Edmond. I admire you. You are managing the whole thing for her, and for him. Still, it hasn't got as far as that yet. ..."

" It will."

" Marvellous ! But it must have just the right temperature, the degree of intensity you want—not too high a flame—and then—pff ! you blow on it the instant you think it ought to be snuffed out. It's dangerous, you know ! "

" Oh, rubbish ! You talk about these things like a school-girl. Berenice is just exactly at the right stage to be unfaithful to her husband. And you can imagine I don't mind if she is ! What an ass, that Lucien of hers. ..."

" But then what do you need to produce M. Leurtillois for, my dear boy ? You're quite enough of a lad yourself."

" Good lord, no, what an idea ! Berenice is my cousin. And then there's Blanchette. . . ."

" As if that would stop you ! "

" Assuming that that doesn't matter . . ."

Mme Barbentane was coming towards them.

" I was telling your husband, my dear, that I find Mme Morel simply charming—and that if I were in his place—but he has no eyes for anyone but you. . . ."

" Do you really think so ? " Blanchette said. And she sat down beside them both with her most sophisticated air, perfectly at ease, and plunged into a conversation about Edmond's conquests which quickly made him take flight.

Aurelien, as usual, had taken some time to realise that the question he had put to Mme de Perseval was now answered by the facts of the situation. She was not expecting him to

make up to Mademoiselle Agathopoulos, nor to Mme Barbentane. Well then—obviously ! Besides, hadn't she said that the party was in honour of Berenice, of Mme Lucien Morel ? But what the devil had got into the woman's head to make her think he had come to see Berenice ?

At the moment Berenice was in conversation with the poet. And the poet, with his peculiar *gamin* air of depravity, seemed to be quite enjoying the distinction of talking to the lotus, as well as apparently finding it quite natural. Both were about the same age, though Berenice might be twenty-four or twenty-three.

" A little book of mine has just come out, published by the Sans-Pareil," he was explaining, " and there's a manuscript with Kra . . .yes. . . . No, not poems this time. . . ."

" A novel ? "

" No, no, the only thing I'm afraid of is that people may take it for a novel. . . . It's a sort of *promenade-réverie*, sort of stuff you can't put a label on, with digressions in all directions, slightly in a Rousseau style, slightly Sterne. . . . Oh, hell, it's idiotic to try explaining. Anyway, you don't care a hang ! "

" Oh, but I do care! I'm interested. I read, you know, I simply devour books. . . . A *promenade-réverie*—what does that mean ? "

" Shall we talk about something else ? What sort of books do you like ? First of all, what do you read ? "

" Oh, I'm sure you'll think me very stupid. *Le Grand Meaulnes*, and then Charles-Louis Philippe . . . Rimbaud, of course. . . ."

" Ah, Rimbaud ? "

He changed his tone. Now it was his turn to be interested.

" Wouldn't you like a sandwich ? Gin ? And do you like Apollinaire ? "

Aurelien realised that he wasn't talking to anyone, and that he was watching Berenice. Good heavens, was he going

to be caught in Mme de Perceval's toils, just like that ? Or was it Mme Morel who had wanted to meet him again ? It didn't look like it. Suddenly he became rebellious. For some mysterious reason, he was supposed to take an interest in this Berenice woman. Well, he wasn't going to ! He would attach himself to someone else instead, to—well, to whom ? Mile Agathopoulos, for instance. He would have to get her away from the colonel and Mme colonel. He went towards the three of them.

" Didn't I meet you at the Schoelzers¹, about three months ago ? "

" Yes, indeed—i>ut what a memory ! There was such a crowd there. I had just arrived in Paris. . . . "

She rolled her R's rather unpleasantly. The colonel said :

" Ah, Greece ! We must make you feel as if you had fallen from Olympus. . . . The Acropolis. . . . Renan. . . . "

From under the green turban, Mme David's deep voice, with the slightly Alsatian accent, crept out like a snail from its shell:

" Don't talk to Mile Agathopoulos about Greece, my dear, she knows it better than you do. . . . Were you ever in Greece, M. Leurtillois ? "

He spoke of Salonika. He was taking stock of the partner he had just chosen. It looked like being a poor evening. What an odd figure the girl had ! Though she did come from Greece, she looked as if she had been designed to join the figures on the Bayeux tapestries. All angles. But out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mme de Perseval watching him. After all, he said to himself, there's something rather stimulating about this big, ill-proportioned girl. . . . The colonel had buttonholed Barbentane. His wife wore an expression that went to Aurelien's heart. She felt herself odd-man-out between him and the Greek girl, and abandoned by her husband. . . . Above the sound of conversation,

the piano had raised its voice again, and Berenice's black-and-white form, like a chalice, was leaning over the music, while Paul Denis played, with little unconscious twitchings of his features that reflected the workings of his fingers. That movement of the shoulders, and of the whole body, as he waved his arms about, was like that of someone plaiting straw. He was playing a blues.

" M. Barbentane," the colonel was saying, " how is the Senator ? "

" Thank you, very well. My father is always the same. Very busy, always rushing about. I've heard a rumour that he's likely to come under consideration for a ministerial job. I must say it gives me the feeling of being the son of a conspirator/

" He would make an excellent Minister of Health."

Berenice was following the music in Paul Denis's ragamuffin face. That sulky, entertaining mouth. He had begun to play something gay and bizarre, and she was delighted to recognise the piece.

" Poulenc ! " she said.

The other, surprised, raised his head :

" You know it ? You like it ? "

She nodded, with her eyes wide, and added : " It makes one laugh. . . ." The pianist's lips tightened. He was wondering if he was going to come to the conclusion that this country girl was something out of the ordinary, or if he would have to snub her. He began to play something eccentric, rather discordant:

" And how about this ? Do you know this ? What do you think about it ? " No, Berenice didn't know it. " It's by Jean-Frederic Sicre—a young composer—a great musician."

From the way he said " young " it was clear that Poulenc, who at that time must have been about twenty-three, for him no longer counted as such.

All at once there was, as it were, a gale through the studio.

Berenice had seen from the look in Paul's eyes that something was happening.

The cyclone turned out to be a woman who had just come in. There was a man behind her, but it was the woman who had made the entrance, not so much a cyclone as something like a wind from the sea. It would have been hard to say what it was that made her so different from the other people in the room . . . but, good lord, how different she was ! She was still silent, wrapped in silence, not yet having shaken off the enfolding night from the street outside, and her shoulders were still raised from having just discarded her cloak (the weather was very cold); she was not trying to cause a sensation. Her short-sighted eyes, with long lashes, were the merest slits. Her head was thrown back, the chin jutting out, and the throat seemed to continue, down the low-cut opening of her dress, between the breasts, into the dip between the breasts.

" Isn't she beautiful," Berenice murmured. It was not quite the word, but language is so inadequate, and no other word occurred to her. A tall woman, slender and tall and fair, of an ashen fairness, and made up to appear very pale, the newcomer had passed her first youth, and if one wondered how old she was, it was to come to the inevitable conclusion : she had reached the ideal age for love.

" Stupid of me ! " Aurelien said to himself. " Of course it wasn't Berenice at all! "

He knew who she was, this woman in her dress of sea-green velvet, longer than was worn that year, a dress that would have turned any of the other women into a bundle, gathered in folds all round the waist and then loosening out, falling in waves to the ankles, like the stone robes of statuary. And the black ribbon bound round her short hair, the recklessly boyish-looking short hair that everyone remembered Because of d'Annunzio and the famous scene at the Ch[^]atelet, when the curtain had fallen on her first triumph, when with

her left hand she held up a quiff of hair on top of her head : everyone knew her, even Berenice, who didn't recognise her. Mme de Perseval was bearing down on her, and there was obviously, in the double movement of the two women, a rivalry, a battle, which summed up a friendship and a thousand jealousies. Aurelien thought that they were going to devour each other. They kissed.

" It's Rose Melrose," Paul whispered to Berenice. She said : " So that's why she's so beautiful ! " and she wondered : " And the man? Her husband. ..."

He looked as if he were apologising for being there at all; he was taller than she, but he contrived to make that not noticeable. No doubt he thought of himself as something in the nature of a typographical ornament rounding off the page. He would have carried her train, if she had worn a train. He came in as a make-weight, a subsidiary part of her entry. Perhaps he was going to bring up chairs, set the scene for her, and come back with a golden hoop, a bicycle, a red table, a handkerchief. . . .

"Rose, *darling!*" Mme de Perseval exclaimed. "Rose, darling ! What an incredible dress—incredible—the glory of Greece and the grandeur of Rome ! Vionnet, I suppose, as usual ? Yes, I thought as much. There's no one else. If / had a dress like that, I would look like an old woman selling vegetables at the market. . . . But Rose is a marvel ! She wears it as if it were the merest trifle ! "

Then Rose Melrose created the sensation that was all her own ; and not till then, when everyone thought they had recovered from their surprise. Her voice was her real entrance ; there is no other way of describing what happened. A voice that was at once warm and restrained, and somehow like a physical thrill.

" A drink ! " she said. " Give me something to drink, Mary, anything, a dash of spirits, it doesn't matter what. Horrible weather. . . . I was dying of cold outside. . . ."

All the men hastened to serve her. But her husband was ahead of them.

That unobtrusiveness, that high forehead, those agate eyes. . . . He was a rather thin man, probably younger than he looked, with a calm, lined brow, and a face that was a mere sophisticated mask ; the leisureliness of his movements contrasted with his alertness in anticipating his wife's needs. There was something pathetic about the carefulness apparent in everything about him. Of all the men present, he was the only one who quite clearly took pride in being well dressed. There was nothing very special about his dinner-jacket, unless it were the tightness of the sleeves ; nevertheless this jacket had the look of having been *thought out*. His face, but only his face, had a most unexpected tendency to plumpness. Not at all a handsome man. He looked as if he were somebody, but he might have been the theatre manager, whom it had amused Rose to bring along with her. He knew this, and he played up to it.

The bustle occasioned by Rose's first words did not die down : there was a coming and going, a manoeuvring for position, of men coming to greet the great actress, and also trying, with clumsy haste, to make the other women forget the instant when they had been neglected. And, above all the noise, Mme de Perceval's voice was heard, more piercing than ever, recommending the brandy and the caviare, although she personally preferred lettuce sandwiches (so she proclaimed) and Irish whisky. Paul Denis had left the piano and was playing the daughter of the house, balancing a dangerous number of plates between the fingers on one hand, and three glasses in the other. " Oh, my dress, take care!" Mile Agathopoulos cried, but it was a false alarm. She calmed down, and then saw that Aurelien, at her side, had no eyes for anyone but Rose. Twisting her large mouth into a bitterly comical expression, she said : " All right, I see how it is ! I have lost my chance this evening, that's

quite obvious ! " She had laid her fingers on Leurtillois' sleeve. He turned round, suddenly at a loss. She was plain, no doubt: but not stupid. Blushing slightly, he asked : " What do you mean ? " as if he had not understood. She shook her head : " But all the same, will you be kind enough to go and get me a glass of champagne ? " Overcome with confusion, he rushed away, passing between Blanchette and Rose's husband, who were talking at the door of the dining-room ; and, when he got to the table, he heard Barbentane explaining to the colonel: " She married her doctor . . . weary of strife. . . . Dr. Decoeur had been proposing to her for so many years. . . . He worships her. . . . He takes charge of everything about her : her body, her face, her fame, and her youth. . . . He makes up face-creams for her, complexion milk, and all that. I used to know him a bit in the old days. . . . "

And when he came back with the champagne, he was torn away from Mile Agathopoulos by Mary, who suddenly seemed to have lit up, to have awakened to the necessity of being attractive, of shining, now that she was threatened by the appearance of Rose. The Greek girl took the glass, on the wing, and grimaced like a melancholy clown, conveying to Aurelien : " You see ? " He tried to answer " No " with his eyes, but Mme de Perseval cut his denial short, dragging him away.

" My dear man, what possesses you, to waste your evening talking to that great horse of a girl ? Other people want to see something of you. You know what I mean. . . . "

" Really, you are too kind, I haven't been at all bored."

" Men are crazy. Here I've arranged a meeting—and then. . . ! "

" Women are strange. What did you do that for ? "

" Say thank you, and don't ask any more questions. But I'm fond of Zoe—Mile Agathopoulos. Only—you'll get the blues just from talking to her. . . . "

" I don't agree with you. There's something about her. . . . You know what they say about women with big noses. . . ."

" You shocking man ! That isn't the point at all. ..."

" And what is the point, my dear Mme de Perseval ? With me that is always the point. When I look at you, I say to myself. ..."

" For goodness' sake don't tell me ! Do get Mme Morel away from that little wretch Paul Denis—for my sake——"

" Jealous ? "

" What an idea ! But where was he brought up, the savage ? She is waiting for you."

" Who is ? Berenice ? "

He bit his lips : " I mean, Mme Lucien Morel ? You must be joking ! Do you think I haven't realised ? "

" Realised what ? "

" That it was for you, for you alone, that you made me come. . . ."

He had bent over her as he said this, as mechanically as a leading-man in a love scene. And over Mary's head he saw Rose seated on a pouffe, in a halo of half-light and shadow, chatting with Barbentane who stood beside her.

" You are quite ridiculously conceited !" Mary said, delighted. " You are the sort of man who believes all women are at his feet, and that he only has to choose. Very well, then, choose Zog ! "

" When there are too many women, I get lost, and I can be counted on to take the black one. That's easy enough to explain. ..."

" Now listen to me, my dear man, my house isn't a—what is the proper way to pronounce it ?—a lupanar——"

" I prefer being improper."

" There's no chance of that ! Now go along and find Mme Morel again ! "

" But what amazing persistence ! If you believe that it

took me long to realise how I was b
 nice to me. . . ."

Mme de Perseval misunderstood these last words, and she closed her eyes.

" Do be nice ! Did she ask you to arrange for us to meet ? "

" Mme Morel ? " (Her eyes had opened again.) " Good heavens, no i"

" Let's stop joking. . . . I don't mean Mme Morel. Mme Melrose ! "

" Rose ? That's the limit ! I forbid that ! Anyone you like, but not Rose ! I would take that badly."

" Now you're playing the innocent."

" I assure you ! It's absurd ! I adore the doctor, her husband. And as for her, well, I warn you, I am jealous ! "

The more she protested, the more Aurelien congratulated himself on his perspicacity. After all, it stood out a mile. It was for Rose that she had asked him here. First of all, he went in for actresses. And then Mme de Perseval was an old hand, pretended to be pushing him towards another, because she had discovered his tendency to be obstinate and contrary, which had almost been worked off on Berenice, for nothing at all, out of mistrust. . . . But for once he felt like letting himself be driven a bit. He was curious about this Rose."

" Not Rose, my dear boy, not Rose ! I should make myself ill over it. We're terribly fond of each other, you see. It's a long story. Even then with Perseval. . . . You see how little Perseval meant to me. She's an amazing woman. I oughtn't to tell you that, it's too silly of me. I'm incapable of being unjust. You see, every time I find a man attractive—there is some way of defending oneself against every woman—except. . . . She's a genius ! Simply a genius. It's a treacherous thing, genius in a woman. And she might leave me just. . . . She has her art, her triumphs, all that. . . . You won't do that to me ! I'm not difficult, you see : anyone"

you like, Blanchette, Zoe. How about Zoe, since she seems——"

Aurelien pretended not to have noticed that Mary was throwing herself at him, nor the suddenly altered tone of the conversation. Things had suddenly been admitted, as if their relationship were an established thing. She was flirting with him. One would have imagined that there had been weeks of explanations, appointments which one or the other had failed to keep, letters, quarrels, sulks, all leading up to their arrival at this point. But Leurtillois was quite aware that here was a matter of two opposite plans, two themes interwoven, as in a fugue. The cunning, cunning woman ! All this in order to throw him into the other woman's arms ! He asked :

" How old is she ? "

Mary, surprised, turned her head this way and that :
" Who ? Rose ? Oh, no, I don't mind admitting how old I am myself, but with my friends it's different. One can work it out, of course. Her success dates back to before the war. Her first successes."

" She must be very young. ..."

" Oh, yes, of course. We were all very young before the war, all of us, even Rose. She is hardly any older than me — hardly at all. . . . It's a rather delicate matter, this sort of reminiscence."

" Besides, to judge by her husband. ..."

" Oh, Dr. Decoeur is much younger than she is ! He must be thirty-three, at the most. I don't know what difference it makes. But ten years, quite ten years ! Not that Rose is forty—is one ever forty when one is Rose ? He adores her, you know. Sometimes it quite hurts me. Because she has her art, you see—all that realm of her own where he doesn't count. There must be days when he suffers. ..."

He let her talk. He began to feel her presence, even while thinking of Rose. He was beginning to realise what she must

be like in bed. That was what he had guessed at, faintly, from her letter. The exclamation marks. . . . lie caught himself up. How inconsistent! Like a sportsman who keeps changing his mind about what game he is after. He even thought rather caustically of his most striking changes of front: just now he had avoided Berenice because he thought he was being pushed on to her, and now, the more clearly he laid Mary's double game bare, the more his easy denials were fixing him on Rose, and the more he let himself drift, let the ground slide away under his feet. . . .

Paul Denis interrupted Mary, who was still talking about Rose and her husband. His face wore an expression of bad temper ; the mouth was that of a child about to cry, and his chestnut hair was no longer very tidy. He had drunk a little too much while serving the others.

" What does this mean ? You haven't said a word to me the whole evening. I arrive, I find you with Monsieur. . . ."

He was talking rather loudly and waving his arms about. Mary stopped him

" What's the matter, Paul ? Is this a scene ? We are not alone."

" I don't care a damn ! You're making a fool of me. You're dropping me. You spend all your time with Monsieur. . . ." As before, a wide gesture indicated Aurelien, who began to laugh.

" I might just as well say to you, Paul, that you haven't left Mme Morel all the evening.¹

" So you're jealous ? Don't try to pull any fast ones, Mary. I'm the one that's jealous, I'm the one who has the right——"

" You have the right to be quiet or to go to bed. Will you excuse me, M. Leurtillois ? " She dragged her poet away by the arm. Aurelien went in another direction, lit a cigarette, wondered which way to go—towards Rose or towards Berenice ? He inclined towards Berenice, because there

was no risk there, but he bumped into Barbentane who had left his wife with Rose, and Mme David with the doctor. The rules of general post ordained that Berenice, in her corner, should talk to the colonel.

" I say, Edmond, can you give me some line on Colonel David ? What is he ? What are these people doing here ? "

" They're at a party—like us. Apart from that, the colonel has played a certain part in politics—don't tell me you've never heard about it ? Actually, he was in the group round General Picard at the beginning of the century. As a result, he has had a few bad turns done him. He ought to have had a decoration or two, but they've put him on the shelf. However, there are people who tell the tale differently. He left the army, had an important job in the government in the war, or something like that, and he is supposed to have got his own back on his enemies pretty thoroughly. I don't know, I like him, he's a nice chap. He works with Briand. The funny thing about him, seeing he's a colonel, is that he's a fervent apostle of disarmament. A pacifist."

Aurelien scowled. " A pacifist colonel ? How grotesque!"

" Aha," said Barbentane, " there's the old soldier coming to the surface ! I haven't seen you with a face like that since Verdun."

" To hell with Verdun ! But disarmament ! The day we withdraw from the Rhine. ..."

" Oh, you know, seven years of it was enough for me. I was fed up with it. Let's forget about that. You give your attention to pretty women. If you felt like doing a good turn, you would tear my cousin away from the colonel—though I must say the funny girl seems to be enjoying herself, getting along fine with him . . ." (Malice broke out all over his regular, smooth features.) " . . . unless you'd like me to hand you back Mile Zoe Agathopoulos—you seemed to be getting down to things with that wench. . . ."

" That's enough 1 Where does the creature come from ? "

" From the estates of her papa, who provided a roof over Mary's head a couple of years ago, when she had been doing a cruise in the Cyclades. And guess where his estates are ? In Lesbos. That explains everything. . . ."

He gave Aurelien a push towards Berenice. Aurelien stepped aside, intending to turn back towards Rose. But at that moment, while Paul Denis, with a furious air, was pouring himself out a large whisky, Mme de Perseval advanced towards Rose with outstretched hands, saying at the top of her voice :

" Our great Rose won't refuse us—will you, Rose ? Since everyone—for instance, M. Leurtillois——"

He wondered why she pronounced his name. He had not heard the beginning of the sentence.

" And everyone, everyone—that unbearable poet boy, the colonel—I don't mention the women, Rose, I know you too well. You will speak something for us, won't you ? "

Paul Denis could be heard choking over his whisky, and a clamour of imploring exclamations arose: Oh, yes, oh, do ! Oh, please do ! Why not ? while Rose insisted that she had smoked too much, that she had no voice left, was tired. All at once, Aurelien felt a touch on his arm. He turned round and saw Berenice : in dumb-show, with great round eyes, she was trying to say something to him about the actress. Aurelien couldn't help thinking how this girl resembled some shy, wild animal of the woods. She seemed to rise up through leafy branches, with those deer's eyes of hers, those uncut black diamonds. He asked her what she meant. She whispered :

" Ask her ! You—she won't refuse *you*."

" What an idea ! "

" / couldn't," she said, and suddenly she slipped into the background again, frightened at having confessed too much.

From where she stood, Blanchette appealed to Dr. Decœur:

" Doctor ! Tell her—she will do what you say——"

" What a mistake, my dear lady ! I have no power over Rose Melrose."

Paul Denis, with his glass in his hand, glided up to Aurelien and murmured :

" Just think, here we are in 1921, after all, and Madame is going to recite—in a drawing-room. Pity there isn't a mantelpiece for her to lean an elbow on ! "

The great actress let herself be persuaded. She stood up, she held her throat in her hands, as if to warm it, with a lift of the shoulders that doubtless meant: I don't know how it'll turn out. She was beside a tall lamp standing on the floor; through its white-and-gold shade a filtered glow shone on her face. But her body, flooded by the unshaded light, draped in its rose-like folds, seemed to be the essential thing, the essentially unconscious element of the words uttered by the mouth.

There was a rustle of silk as Blanchette sat down, and some twisting and turning of the men trying to see better ; then a twilight settled on all these faces, the hush of complete attentiveness, waiting for her to begin.

Rose closed her eyes and took a deep breath like a sigh. Her breasts trembled, her arms fell slowly along her body and then she clasped her hands behind her. There was an acute tension in the atmosphere. The silence could be heard : the ticking of the clock, previously unheard, became noticeable. (Where was the clock ?) Then the whole statue came to life, with little tremors, the sea-green folds of the dress shifted a little, the arms were raised again and crossed as though they were trying to find an invisible scarf on the shoulders. The statue was holding itself in its own arms. Slowly the eyes opened; the mouth twisted slightly, assuming the empty shape of a kiss, and

was filled out by the voice, that shuddering and incomparable voice:

" I embraced the summer dawn. . . . Nothing was stirring yet before the palaces. The water was still as death. The patches of shadows clung to the road through the fores. It walked, wakening the moist and living breath of earth; and the stone creatures gazed ahead, and their wings rose soundlessly. . . ."

Aurelien could not take his eyes off Paul Denis's pale hands clenched round the stem of his glass—the nervous fingers shifting up and down, as if he might easily break it. The young man, desperately on edge and overcome by a kind of angry modesty, kept his head lowered and would not look at the actress. Aurelien, taken aback, thought he had never before seen a human face filled with such an intense expression of pure hatred. It was so entirely out of all proportion to what was going on, that he scarcely paid adequate attention to the poem. Afterwards, almost the only thing he could remember, without knowing why, was that silvery murmur it has near the middle, at the place where the word " wasserfall " wakes alien echoes.

" At the end of the road, near a laurel grove, I wrapped her in the veils that I had gathered, and then I dimly felt the immensity of her body. The angel and the child fell to the depths of the forest. . . . Awakening, to find it was noon."

The voice had swelled like a triumph, and that brief descending phrase at the end of the poem rang out like a bronze chime. It was astonishing not to hear the bell tolling twelve. Then the audience, released from the spell, burst out in a clamour of admiration and delight, in every tone of voice that can show appreciation. The horror of the compliments, the false notes struck by the adjectives ! Aurelien said in Paul Denis's ear :

" Control yourself! People will notice."

It was like touching a switch. The blood came back into the boy's face. His eyes brightened. His hands recollected that it was a glass they were holding. Paul sighed faintly and leaned towards his neighbour :

" The bitch ! I can't stand that sort of thing. With anything she likes, but not with that—not with that—not with Rimbaud. . . . "

" Oh, it was Rimbaud, was it ? " said Aurelien, who had not recognised it. He thought that Rose was splendid—and a shade grotesque, like everything that touches on the tragic. He could feel what it was that made the young man grind his teeth. But he had a feeling also for the woman standing before him, and for her extraordinary sense of immobility and of haunting unspoken shadows.

" Bitch ! " Paul repeated, and drank a great gulp of whisky. People were still crowding round Rose, pleading with her to recite something else, whatever she liked. Paul suggested to Aurelien : " The wolf and the lamb. . . . " And with a slight laugh : " She won't say her piece until she's been thoroughly asked ! " Aurelien felt rather shocked at being associated with this mockery. He turned away, and his eyes fell on Berenice. Big tears were trickling down her cheeks, without restraint. Her gaze was far away, like that of someone listening to a song.

At the doctor's request, or rather at his suggestion, the great actress began a poem of d'Annunzio's, that poem to France which she had recited all over the world.

CHAPTER VII

AURELIEN knew he had the fault, or at least the characteristic, of not finishing anything, whether it was a thought or an adventure. For him the world was full of digressions,

which constantly led him astray and caused the best of resolutions and decisions to collapse. It was not lack of decisiveness. But when everything drew him on, how was he to confine himself within limits ? He had no sooner, as it seemed to him, formulated a truth and begun to consider it a certainty, when its uncertainty became clear to him ; and then he was ready to turn it against himself, adopting the inverted certainty.

All that evening at Mme de Perseval's, consumed by irritation at tactics that he could not identify, although he was convinced that they existed, he had been divided between various currents. His usual impulse was to resist any course of action that others wanted to impose on him ; but that impulse had been very near yielding to mere curiosity, so that he toyed with the thought of abandoning himself to this game, whatever it was, in which he had not dealt the cards. But a stronger factor than all temptation was the diversity among the women themselves, which made him irresolute. Aurelien was swept from one to another by his very nature, quite as capable of losing his head over the bony, ungraceful Zoe as over Rose, who was so harmonious, so obviously wise in love. He could imagine himself in bed with Zoe, and the hasty gestures with which she would take off her dress and turn off the light. But his chief impression, when he left the rue des Belles-Feuilles, was that of Mary, simply because it seemed not only possible, but likely ; it was practically handed to him. A man never lets a woman get away from him without a wretched sensation of having wasted an opportunity, let something slip. He pictured Mary in his mind, her legs, her shoes from Helster's ; and he felt once more the pressure of those fingers loaded with rings.

And yet Rose. . . . Her calm, still features, ageless like love. That statuesque form mortified with creams and with thought. Mystery. . . . That she had been d'Annunzio's

mistress did not make him wildly enthusiastic; it even disturbed him somewhat. He would have preferred her to be more closely allied to the anonymous. But still there was that magnetism of the theatre, which is so strong for those who do not really know the theatre. An aroma of the legendary. . . .

In the midst of all this another mental picture asserted itself, and the more he tried to get rid of it, the more it came back, tending to obliterate the images of the other women. Scarcely a woman herself, scarcely an image. The power she exerted was based on so little, on her capacity for distracting. A fleeting expression that memory robbed of its context, fixing it. That mixture of childishness (Lotus !) and fire . . . that spontaneous quality : for of all the women present that evening she had been the only one who sat down or stood up for the sake of sitting or standing, the only one who breathed without an ulterior motive. . . . Or did she really ? He recalled the tears he had seen on her face and was even more deeply affected than he had been at the time, when they were really falling. . . . Rose must know how to weep wonderfully—but imagine *knowing how to* ! Well, why should he hide from himself how it was that Berenice was haunting him like this ? Aurelien knew his own vanity. What amazing pride one must have not to be eaten up with vanity ! A man who isn't affected by a woman's confession, but accepts it as a matter of course—no, there's no such man. Aurelien heard Berenice, quite distinctly, as if the words were being uttered at that very moment : " / couldn't. . . ." And that flight of hers, those hunted deer's eyes, as the words faded out.

" / couldn't. . . ." What had she meant, exactly ? He would have to go back over the incident and find the precise context. Of course, it was quite possible that she had meant that she wouldn't dare to tackle Mme Melrose. Just that. How was it he hadn't thought of that ? After all, it was the

obvious explanation. He was a little ashamed of its not occurring to him till then. Was he really even more vain than he believed himself to be ? All right, the matter is closed. . . . So much the worse. And yet. . . .

Yet at the time he had not hesitated about the possible interpretation. For the ambiguity not even to have struck him, there must have been yet another element, something already lost, a light of evidence that went with the words. He listened, in his memory, to the tone of Berenice's voice ; but it wasn't that. Definitely, he must be fooling himself. He was fooling himself. The deceptive echo was wantonly fading out. " / couldn't." It was his own voice, and not hers. More than anything else he now wanted to hear her say again what he had heard without thinking about it. What was it, then, that he had understood. " / couldn't . . ." yes, this time, he got it. More or less. Had she really meant—" / couldn't refuse you—if you were to ask me—something—whatever it might be—I, Berenice—you, Aurelien. . . ." He laughed at himself. This dismembering of a little phrase took him back to his schooldays : analyse—" could "—first person singular of the present conditional of the verb " to be able to. . . ." Oh, well, that's enough about that !

For it might equally well mean : " / couldn't refuse a man that—any man—in fact anyone—I'm not capable of saying * no'. . . ." But then, why that sudden retreat ? So she had perhaps realised after she had said it that there was another meaning, and that he might take it that way ? However it was, he was pursued by the phrase, in which he hadn't even been explicitly mentioned. " *I* couldn't. . . ."

Ah ! This time he had caught the transient emphasis ! It was no longer he who was thinking it, but Berenice. . . . He was surprised at himself. No doubt this tenderness was applied more to the Queen of Caesarea than to Mme Lucien Morel. It was not the first time that he caught himself up

like this and suddenly called her by her husband's name : as if he were checking himself for the familiarity or as if he were afraid of it, afraid of something behind the familiarity. Absurd! He repeated: Berenice ... to convince himself that he was perfectly cool. Berenice . . . Berenice, . . . And then he had the vision of her tears again. . . . Mme Lucien Morel. Right. What was the idea of all this masochism ? If the name Berenice appealed to him. . . . He wanted to try himself out completely, and said half-aloud, sure that he had now mastered the secret of the exact intonation : " / couldn't. . . ." But it was only Aurelien speaking, in his man's voice. Well, what are you going to think about next ? " Waiter, a side-car ! "

Aurelien was leaning on the bar in Lulli's, in Montmartre. He had dropped in there, automatically, after leaving the rue des Belles-Feuilles. Something had robbed him of the desire to sleep. All those women, perhaps. Or one of them. It was Aurelien's vice to stay up till all hours of the night. He liked wandering about in those brightly lighted places where life is never extinguished when other people are asleep. He felt at home there. There was no need to analyse the party at Mary's in search of reasons why he was on the loose now. He had come here the previous night, and it was quite possible that he would come again tomorrow.

" Are you all alone ? "

He turned round and smiled at Simone. She had had enough of dancing with the guests. She put her elbows on the bar beside him.

CHAPTER VIII

PARISIANS never get the same enjoyment out of their city as provincials do. First of all, for them Paris is measured only by the limits of their own habits and their own curiosity.

A Parisian reduces his city to several districts and ignores everything beyond that: for him, what lies beyond is simply not Paris. Then, too, a Parisian cannot experience that delightful sense of continually being on the point of getting lost in the city and the security of knowing nobody and being unable to run into anybody by chance. On the other hand, he enjoys this strange sensation in little towns he passes through, where he is the only one not known to all and sundry. But what a difference to revel in this incognito amidst that forest of stone buildings, those deserts of the asphalt.

Berenice was tasting her solitude with appreciation. For the first time in her life she was her own mistress. Neither Blanchette nor Edmond dreamed of interfering with her. She was not even expected to ring up and say that she would not be in to lunch, when she felt like continuing her exploration. Winter in Paris, what fun ! the mud, the dirt, and then suddenly the sunshine ! Even the thin, penetrating rain was something to be enjoyed. And when it rained too hard, then there were the big shops, the museums, the cafes, the underground. Everything is easy in Paris. And everything keeps changing all the time. There are streets and boulevards it is just as entertaining to walk down for the hundredth time as it was the first time. And then, not to be at the mercy of the bad weather. . . .

For instance, the *fitoile*. Walking round the *£toile*, turning at random down one of the avenues, and, without having made any real choice, finding oneself in a world utterly different from the world into which the next avenue leads. . . . These wanderings were really just like embroidery. Only, with embroidery one is following a design already made, something known—a flower, a bird. Here it was never possible to know in advance if it would turn out to be that dreaming paradise, the avenue Friedland, or that swarming, rackety avenue de Wagram, or the airy, lacy perspectives of the avenue du Bois. The *fitoile* looks

out upon as many various worlds as various human types, worlds into which it plunges its luminous arms. There is the provincial avenue Carnot, and there is the commercial majesty of the Champs-Élysées. There is the avenue Victor-Hugo. From one of these avenues, whose order she could never remember, Berenice loved to dip into a side-street and so cross into the next avenue, as she would have left a queen for some woman of the streets, or an old tale of chivalry for one of Maupassant's stories. These streets were alive, it seemed, leading her from one domain of fancy to another. What she liked about them was that they were fragments of an alien, surprising realm ; sometimes it was the empty alleys whose balconies seemed to have, in their wrought-iron, elaborate patterns symbolising the actions and responsibilities of those who lived within ; and sometimes it was that ambiguous conglomeration of hotels, blocks of flats, *bistros*, and those narrow streets, just round the corner from the fashionable quarters, where furtive women hung about: where sons of good family, the perverted riff-raff, the dregs of society, come to be rid of the shuddering lechery that consumes their nerves. Abruptly the city flung wide a panorama, and Berenice emerged from that universe that appalled her and yet continually drew her on, to see the Arc de Triomphe in the distance and, against it, the tracery of trees neatly surrounded by iron railings. Ah, how lovely Paris is ! Lovely whether the streets are straight and clear, or where they are crooked. . . . Nowhere in the countryside does the landscape change so swiftly ; nowhere, even in the Alps or along the coast, is there such stuff to feed the dreams of a young woman free to idle all day, intoxicated with her idleness, and free, free to think in her own fashion, without keeping an eye on herself, without the fear of her face betraying what lies in the depths of her heart or of letting slip some phrase that she would regret because someone might be hurt. . . .

Sometimes she was seized with the desire for a change of surroundings. Then she would jump on to a bus, any bus at all, and ride to the other side of Paris. She liked standing on the platform pushed and bumped by passengers getting in and out, and savouring the difference in the air, in the pressure of life, from one district to another. She never tired of observing the transformations round about her. How narrow the rue de Rivoli seemed, after the Champs-Élysées and Concorde. It was like a thought following the stages of its own reasoning until it reached the end : at first passing along beside gardens, as though the leafy fancy, free only a little while ago, were now confined behind those black railings ; then gradually the street was invaded by statues, preparing Berenice for the moment when it would glide along before a palace. And on the arcades built up this evolution in stone with their own strict grace that was like logic. Then, after the palace, the arcades very soon fell away, and it was as though the street were exchanging the processes of the imagination for those of reason, with houses everywhere, houses just as all houses are. Here was the pride of trade, with the Samaritaine for monument, the Samaritaine that takes the place of the Louvre. The traffickings of the Halles across the road. Again, a springing forth of trees where one passes the top of the CMtelet, and so on towards the Left Bank with all its dreams. And that is all. Once past the Hotel de Ville the road is stifled ; there it is replaced by the rue Saint-Antoine, heavy with memories, loaded with an atmosphere of menace—until at last the bus arrives at that enormous square, that replica of the litoile, where the July Column towers into the air.

Here the game could begin all over again. . . . Berenice strayed once more from the rue de la Roquette into the Boulevard Henri-Quatre, and from the faubourg Saint-Antoine down to the Saint-Martin canal.

Not to speak of the Latin Quarter. What immense mystery

it holds for a country girl who sees it through a novel reader's eyes, experiencing the full charm that tradition lends the place. And then there w^ere the big bookshops, full of new things worth all the fruit in Ediard's, in the place de la Madeleine. Cres', in the boulevard Saint-Germain, where one could loiter for hours, reading the books and the reviews between the uncut pages. A little grey shop in the rue de l'Odeon, kept by women she liked. One of them, the fair-haired one, told Berenice she came from Savoy, and sold her a first edition of Jules Romains. There too she bought young Paul Denis's book *No Admittance* ; it was brief and disconcerting. The books under the galleries of the Odeon held another sort of attraction. It was hard to be sure if it was right to look at them. Miraculous Paris ! No more thinking. No more need to feel oneself bowed under a load of kindness and proper sentiment; instead, to be once more like that little girl of long ago, who used to jump over her skipping-rope without wondering about anything. Now she was able to laugh, at nothing at all. No one would intrude upon her, asking quite innocently : " What are you laughing at ? "—" What's the joke ? " She could look at the people passing by, or ignore them. She was at liberty to forget Lucien without reproaching herself. There were the Grands Boulevards and there was the Luxembourg, there was the gare de l'Est and there was Montrouge. Changing from one district to another did not mean being unfaithful to anyone : the Invalides would not grumble at her for the time spent at the Buttes Chaumont.

She came back to the rue Raynouard, happy, relaxed, with rosy cheeks, as if she had been running about the fields all day.

" There's a letter for you," Blanchette called out to her.

She took off her hat, suddenly grave, and took the letter. She was going out to read it on the terrace, high above this Paris that some day or another she must lose again. To read

it slowly, weighing each word against her heart, this affectionate, friendly, kindly letter that made her want to bite something or burst into tears.

"What does Lucien say?" Blanchette asked at dinner.

"Oh, nothing, as usual. . . . He says I'm to have a good time. Love to you and Edmond. Mother has had an attack of rheumatism."

"By the way," Edmond broke in, A propos of nothing, "I met Leurtillois. . . ."

Blanchette frowned. She did not care for Aurelien at all, that was clear.

"Well?"

"Well—nothing. I met Leurtillois, I'm telling you I met Leurtillois. . . ."

All right. The incident was closed. There was a rattling of forks. Above it Edmond said, as if he were replying to a question:

"In the avenue du Bois. He was walking. I picked him up and gave him a lift home. His flat is really charming."

It was not that Berenice felt like making conversation, but she felt that something was amiss between her cousins. So she put a question, without being interested in the answer, merely to keep the conversation going and give Blanchette a chance to recover her good humour in peace.

"Where does he live?" she asked.

Edmond looked up, glanced at Blanchette, then turned to his cousin: "In the He Saint-Louis. Two rooms and a kitchen. But you can't imagine. . . ."

Blanchette suddenly remembered that she had forgotten to tell nannie something about the children. She got up, knocked her chair over—picked it up—went out.

"What's the matter with her?" Berenice asked. "I suppose you've been horrid to her, Edmond."

CHAPTER IX

WHAT a wonderful day ! It was years since there had been so fine a winter. When there was such a blend of dry earth underfoot and this sunshine pierced with frost, the outskirts of Paris, with their gardens now stripped, the grey walls suddenly flowering with light, the woods crossing every x and y of branching geometry, and the surprise, at some turning, of finding leaves still on the twigs, a barren greenery, the opposite of hothouse forcings—then how exquisite to bowl along in the little car, on a weekday when there was no risk of meeting all one's acquaintances in the streets or in the tiresome roadhouses ! Admittedly, w^rith a more powerful car, like Schoelzer's Bugatti, one could go farther, right into the depths of the country.

" Have you noticed, Mary, that the farther one goes away from Paris, the more one seems to go back in time ? Fifty kilometres out, and you're in the nineteenth century ; and at a hundred you're catching up on the eighteenth. There are zones of time. One might go on until one arrived in the Middle Ages. . . ."

He liked and knew all the little sidestreets behind the main thoroughfares used by the Parisians, who, being the most home-loving people in the world, consider the Quarante-Sous highway to be the last word, the very last word, where motoring is concerned. And then there are the people who must, at any price, have a place to go to ; they must drive out to visit something, and dedicate the rolling of their rubber wheels to some classified scenery.

Aurelien leaned slightly towards his companion, pointing out to her the plain that they were crossing, dotted with small woods, all bare and open, with nothing to catch the eye, none of what one has learned to look at, thanks to generations of

painters : merely the earth, pure and simple, ploughed up in one place, in another neglected, with slopes thick with weeds, little piles of dead wood—and all of it the colour of a hare's belly.

" You are a queer man/' Mary de Perseval murmured, not seeing what there was to see, but pressing up against him under the cover of red furs. He looked at her : she wore an amorous expression, her mouth was lifted up to him. Obviously she did not understand anything of what Aurelien was enjoying at the moment. But did he want her to ? No. A woman for watering-places and the Riviera. I bet she's crazy about palm trees. So much the worse—or the better.

She sighed. " Darling. . . ." It was like finding a hair in the soup, with that little biting chill in the nose.

Now they were travelling along a winding road, through a sort of brushwood, fenced off with wire, with boards warning you : Private Shoot.

" Darling," Mme de Perseval moaned reproachfully, " when I think that I am supposed to have the most beautiful legs in all France and Navarre, and that you haven't paid me even the teeniest compliment. . . ."

Aurelien swung the wheel round to avoid a cart which refused to pull in to the side, and straightened out again. He fumbled politely under the rugs, the usual thing, running his hand up the legs in question until he reached the top of the stockings ; then he looked at the setting sun.

" Why should I tell you what everybody tells you ? Especially when you know it quite well yourself. Anyway, it's nothing new : you've shown them to me already. Now, what about mine—you haven't said anything about *my* legs."

She had the sort of laugh that is heard in every Ritz bar in the world. She thought it over. Then she was shocked : " My dear man, it's really incredible the way you—men of your generation—so incredibly effeminate. No one would

ever think you had been through the war. So wrapped up in yourselves, and the way you treat women. . . ."

" Do you think being at the front teaches one how to treat women ? "

" How should I know ? But your elders had tradition, they had style. . . ."

He shrugged. He might easily have used romantic language, but he was afraid of making himself attractive to her. She went on :

" You men ill-treat us. . . ."

" First of all, these plurals appal me. I ill-treat you, singular. But you, plural, ill-treat *us* ! What *you*, what *us* ? Or is the idea to lump me together with that boy, Denis ? "

" How silly you are ! First of all, don't say anything against Paul, just because I've been unfaithful to him with you. He's very promising—and not merely promising, he has real talent. Of course you haven't read *No Admittance*. And then he really has a good heart. . . ."

Aurelien began to laugh uncontrollably ; one of those senseless, wild fits of laughter that can't be checked. He apologised. As usual, apologies made things worse. In the end he calmed down and said seriously :

" I am sorry, really I am sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. . . ."

" You haven't hurt me. But you're unjust towards the boy, and you might be more generous—after what has happened. . . ."

" What ? " he asked, in perfectly good faith. " What has happened ? "

Now it was her turn to get her own back by a fit of laughter, but it was laughter resembling a tune on a pianola.

The landscape was changing. A village. Hoardings advertising drinks and motor oils. They took a wider road. Cars. Mary was meditating, buried in the rugs. Aurélien

seized the opportunity for enjoying a few minutes of solitude. But after a while she began to think her thoughts aloud, as if a long detour had brought her back to the beginning of the afternoon again.

" That was a really marvellous little place you took me to. That hotel. Do you think a lot of people know it ? I rather thought not. Perhaps that was rather simple of me, or perhaps it was because I had you on my mind."

" Thanks/

" No, it's I who have to thank you for showing it to me."

" Yes, it might stand you in good stead on some other occasion."

What impudence ! She exclaimed : " What impudence ! But of course, why not ? We'll go there again. . . ."

" Oh," he said, " if that's all you need to enjoy yourself. . . ."

She was speechless for another moment, then she returned to the attack : " You brute ! You've been to that inn with hundreds and hundreds of women ! "

He pulled a face. He didn't particularly care for this sort of language. So he punished her : " No, not hundreds. A dozen, perhaps."

He had paid for his curiosity about the widow Perseval, as he called her to himself. The more he knew of her, the more she turned out to be the widow Perseval. For instance, that remark about the way men of his generation treated women. He had been to bed with an epoch, and not with a woman. A world already rather out of date, with its customs, its traditions. Even when it was a matter of. . . . Oh, lord, now he knew what was behind those exclamation marks ! Although, to be candid, he had been within an ace of not doing honour to that powdered lady who took great care of her bosom even in the moment of ecstasy, when she had the unlucky idea of moaning into his ear : " Anything, anything you like—only not a child ! " Roused to fury by

this disagreeable rtiemory, he stepped violently on to the accelerator. The car leaped ahead.

" What on earth are you doing ? " she cried.

" Revenge ! "

She did not ask what for. In the distance were the lights of Paris. They rushed along for a while without speaking. Then she could not restrain herself any longer :

" You're very detached, aren't you ? "

" More tradition, eh ? You like being lied to. . . . "

" You needn't lie."

" But I might."

" You *are* behaving strangely today ! "

" I'm just as I always am."

" That's what I'm complaining about, you horrid man ! Just as if nothing had happened."

" And what has happened ? "

" Again ! How coarse ! "

" Coarse, am I ? I thought I was being tactful in not remembering too obviously. . . . "

" Well ! That's the limit ! Do you know there have been men who have begged me for ten years for what I granted you straight away ? "

" Are you sorry now ? "

" You might make me sorry. . . . "

" About which ? The ten years or the straight away ? "

" You're unbearable ! Have I got to go mad about you ? Have I got to put up with your absurdities ? My God, I hope not ! " She waited for a remark that did not come. " Have I got to treat you as men treat us ? Am I expected to be always in fear and trembling of losing you ? And wait for you, and think out things that you'll like. . . . Buy ties for you. . . . "

" Oh, no ! No, no ! I keep on telling you, I'm not Paul Denis ! "

" Do you want me to give him up for your sake ? "

" God forbid ! Nothing of the sort! No sacrifices, please, my dear Iphigenia."

" Because if you asked me to, I would refuse point-blank. I wouldn't cause that boy any suffering, for a heartless brute like you. . . . To me, he's a child—as well as a man. I know very well what separates us; I know it won't last forever. And I shan't break my heart about it. But I'd like him to keep a memory of our times together . . . a memory. . . ."

Leurtillois stopped to have the tank filled up at the Paris tollgate. There was still a trace of daylight left along the skyline ; the houses were already bathed in an air like violets.

" Shall I put you down in the rue des Belles-Feuilles ? "

" Already ? " she said, taking his arm. " Already ? Listen—do be nice and show me your flat. I'd love to see it. And I've nothing more to be afraid of. . . ."

" If you like. Though there's the risk of meeting someone. . . ."

" Oh, let's risk it. We shall rush up the stairs ! "

They were rapidly entering the dusk. They reached the He Saint-Louis before the night, rising from the river. Mme de Perseval, who had just made up her face again, swathed herself in her big English woollen scarf until there was nothing more to be seen but her eyes.

" Now," she said, " no one could possibly guess. Fancy living in a block of flats in Paris, where one knows everybody. And which floor is it on ? "

" Right at the top."

" Right at the top ? But that's crazy ! A bachelor flat has to be on the ground floor—or, failing that, on the lower ground floor."

" It isn't a bachelor flat, it's a point of vantage."

The house formed the prow of the island, facing downstream, where the bank comes to an end in a clump of trees,

with a lonely, melancholy corner where lovers, and also those who contemplate suicide, come to lean on the stone wall and look down into the river.

They went up the stairs. Aurelien watched the legs hurrying up two steps at a time. Yes, not bad legs, but one mustn't exaggerate.

In the hall the concierge, recognising a tenant, had turned on the light on the stairs. Mary, who had not been expecting that, muffled herself up still more, and hurried on faster. On the fourth floor she stopped, with pounding heart: " Is this it ? " No. There was a small staircase at the end of the passage ; they climbed another floor and a half. . . . She rushed into the flat, almost before the door was well open.

" I was terrified we were going to run into the Prince de R. on the stairs ! Do you know him ? "

" We sometimes meet on the landing. '

She ran from one room to another, uttering girlish exclamations : " But how lovely ! Lovely ! A real dovecot ! Simply lovely ! "

As a matter of fact, she hardly looked at things. She seemed to have an idea at the back of her mind, and Leurtillois, standing in the half-light, guessed at it without enthusiasm. Oh, no, really one mustn't exaggerate. He opened the wide, low window, and said : " Look. . . . "

He had given her a little push out on to the balcony. It was not what she was expecting, and she said, with a glance towards the beige sofa : " When I think of all that must have happened here ! " But she had hardly finished the remark when she broke into a little cry of admiration.

The last flicker of daylight lent a fairylike air to the scene below, in which this building stood out like the prow of a ship. They were looking down on those big, solitary trees that decorate the extremity of the island, and on the street lamps already shining out in the Cite\ to their left, with the

river enfolding it, embracing it, joining up again beyond the trees, on the right, with the other arm that embraces the He Saint-Louis. There was Notre-Dame, so much more beautiful from the side than from the front, and the bridges, playing at a curious hopscotch from arch to arch between the islands and there, opposite, between the Cite and the Right Bank. And Paris, Paris lying open like a book, with its dip towards the left in the direction of Sainte-Genevieve and the Pantheon, and the other page, full of printed signs difficult to read at this time of the evening, as far as the white wing of the Sacre-Coeur. . . . Paris, immense, and not looked down upon as from the Barbentanes' terrace, but seen from its heart, at its most mysterious, with its nearby sounds blurred by the branching river where a barge was coming down, a long barge with its sides painted in red lead and washing drying on the ropes, and shadows that seemed to be playing at hide-and-seek on board. . . . Even the sky had a corner the colour of red lead.

And, quite suddenly, it all went out: the city became dense, beating like a heart in the night. From the barge came a long ragged siren wail. Motor-horns were blowing. Mary noticed the owl-like winking of the windows as more and more lights went up. She turned towards Aurelien and saw that he was far away, gazing down the river, as if he were trying to pick out the pont Alexandre III, at least.

"What a marvellous place!" she said, and her own voice seemed strange to her.

"Yes, isn't it? It'll soon be three years since I came here and I haven't got used to it yet. Barbentane brought me back here the other day and said something that explains the place for me just a bit—rather odd, actually."

"What was it?"

She was already jealous of Edmond.

"He said that I've been living here in the hollow of the river's elbow, in the blue M of the median vein."

" That's rather nice. . . . It might be Paul Morand."

" I don't think it's nice. It bothers me."

" Edmond is still a bit of a medico. In fact, it's queer that he gave it up. His father-in-law wanted him to, you know. He has relapses like that. . . ."

Aurelien interrupted sharply. " I tell you it bothers me—to think of being here in the river's elbow, where the vein is just under the skin. It upsets my way of looking at all this, and it never did become quite familiar to me, anyway : it changes so tremendously with the time of day and the time of year. And it always sings the same song. But to come back to the vein in the elbow. . . . I don't know if one can kill oneself by cutting into the hollow of the elbow as philosophers do when they open the vein in the wrist, when they're in the bath. . . ."

" Oh, don't! "

" The Seine talks all the time about suicide, all the time. . . . Rolling along like that . . . and the lighters with the sirens wailing. . . . What upsets me is to have to—I mean, to fit in with this conception of the vein in the elbow—to have to think constantly of the direction of the water flowing past, this bluish blood flowing past in front of me. I realise that it comes from up there, and here it is flowing away downstream, towards the sea. But the veins, Mary, the veins in the elbow come from the hand, going up towards the shoulder, towards the heart. I would have thought of it the other way round—the heart in the mountains. So now it means believing the heart is in the sea—what a swollen heart ! And the fingers like roots—with glaciers for nails. . . ."

He had drifted so far away from her, with the falling night now quite dark, that Mme de Perseval almost felt like crying. She thought him eccentric. She hadn't expected him ever to talk like this. For to her he was the cynical lover, so *matter-of-fact* ; and she framed the thought in English,

because unbearable things didn't seem so bad to her when she translated them into English.

" I'm cold/" she murmured.

He did not hear, or he did not want to hear. He was silent. He was filling his eyes with darkness, as if it were some magic element he was storing up. She realised that she would have to slip away in the end, but she wanted to have one more look round the rooms in which he lived. She went inside, into the room which was a combination of bedroom and study, beige and brown, with furniture of light oak. . . . Aurelien, outside, was in a dream beyond the limits of time and place, . . . She called him, not finding the switch for the light.

" I beg your pardon," he said, in a quite different tone.

" I don't feel very well."

" What's the matter, my dear ? "

He pressed the switch of a lamp on the big table. The light shone up into his face from below. She was horrified by the change in his appearance, and repeated : " What is the matter ? "

He looked very wretched. Suddenly he had aged, and in spite of the cold he was sweating profusely. His skin seemed to have darkened, and it was as if he had assumed, or rather let fall, a mask. There were little wrinkles round his eyes. His mouth slightly open, he was breathing hard. She had taken his hand : it was cold and damp. She felt him shudder. He said again : " I don't feel well." She was frightened.

" Now come along and lie down, there's a good boy. What is it ? You're trembling. What can I do for you ? Have you something to drink ? A hot whisky ? What a nuisance, I don't even know where the kitchen is."

" No," he said, " nothing, leave me alone, Mary."

He had stretched himself out, half-sitting, half-lying, on the sofa. She arranged cushions behind his head, already maternal, talking all the time.

" There, there—you must have got a chill—perhaps at the hotel—you were walking about in your bare feet. There's influenza about, people have been saying. . . ."

" No—no—it's nothing—Leave me, Mary, I know what it is. I need to be alone. It'll pass off."

His teeth were chattering. He was shaken with fever. He drew his shoulders together as if to ward off a storm passing over.

" You must go to bed. I'm not going to leave you like this. A doctor——"

" I tell you I know what it is. Fever. I picked it up in the East."

She pulled out the travelling rug that she had found on the sofa, and wrapped him up. He scarcely resisted, only repeating : " I want to be alone."

She took off his shoes. She put her hands round his feet.

" You're trembling with fever, and your feet are frozen. You must go to bed."

It was queer : suddenly she had realised something. The fact was that he did not dare to undress in front of her, to undress as a sick man. . . . She shrugged her shoulders at her own thoughts, and with every kind of helpful attention, rather clumsy and rather rough, and to the irritating sound of her heels on the floor, almost tripping over the absurd fringe of a rug, she managed to get him as far as undressing ; she took the cover from the sofa, found the sheets and blankets ; she broke her way through into the intimate secrets of his bachelor life. When he was tucked up, she saw the telephone on a small, low table beside the sofa. She asked for a number.

" Who are you ringing up ? " he asked feebly.

" Dr. Decœur. Yes, yes, don't be a baby."

" I don't need a doctor. I've got quinine."

" Stop talking ! . . . Wagram thirty-seven. . . . Oh, there you are, doctor ! I recognise your voice ! Yes, it's

Mary. No, not for Rose. . . . I have a patient. Of course. . . . Thanks ! "

" Look here, you mustn't bother him, I tell you ! "

". . . I'll wait for you. . . . It's in the He Saint-Louis."

The sick man was fidgeting, in a bad temper. She went to get whisky for him from the little cupboard which she made him point out to her. The doctor would be there in a quarter of an hour. Yes, she was going to wait for him. She had no secrets from Rose's husband. Anyway, *that* was scarcely the point. Where were the glasses ?

As she was pouring out the spirits, she raised her eyes and saw something on the wall that made her stop what she was doing. A plaster mask. The mask of a woman's face ; the sort of mask that is taken from the faces of the dead. This white thing with the closed eyes was fixed there, in a carefully chosen position. From his bed, she must be the first thing he saw when he woke in the mornings. Mary felt an abrupt pang of jealousy, the real thing this time. She wanted to cry out, and she bit her lips. What a revelation ! Only a man hopelessly in love could live like this, confronted all the time with this face that seemed to have ceased from suffering, this face with a smile that was beyond all grief. Who was this woman ? She took a step towards her, deliberately pouring out the whisky, which made a queer sound in the glass. She looked more closely at this face with the eyes closed. She recognised it. And then she really suffered.

She gave Aurelien the quinine and waited for the doctor. Outside, the city played its dark, nightly accompaniment to thoughts that had never before entered this frivolous head. Looking at the sick man swaddled in his blankets and shaken by the storm of the malaria, she said to herself: " How old I have grown ! How old ! "

At last there was a ring at the door.

CHAPTER X

THERE are all sorts of grey. There is the rosy grey that is a reflection of the two Trianons. There is the blue-grey that is a breath of melancholy from the sky. The brownish-grey, the colour of the earth where the harrow has passed. The grey, shading from black to white, which veins marble. But there is a dirty grey, a terrible grey, a yellow-grey almost tinged with green, a grey that is like the plague, coating the surface of things without letting any light through, stifling even when it is bright: a fatal grey, a grey without mercy, a grey that brings the sky right down on the earth, the grey that is winter's barricade, the muddy clouds before the snow comes, that grey which makes one cease to believe in fine weather: nowhere and never so full of despair as in Paris, over this scene of elegance that it treads underfoot, making it smaller and smaller, the enormous empty wall of an implacable firmament, a Sunday morning in December at the top of the avenue du Bois. . . .

This Sunday, at the hem of that apocalyptic curtain, the long, thin ribbon of the avenue with its naked trees, its dreary lawns, its white vaults built for troglodyte millionaires, bore along its wide pavements endlessly streaming, endlessly breaking waves of strollers; and under the cantering hooves of the horses, the loose sand and mud on the rider's track rose in clouds before Alphand's statue standing in its chalky amphitheatre, and spattered the shining boots of horsemen, each of whom bore the invisible load of a fortune or of ruin. Well-dressed society—it could not really be called smart—gathered here to show off its tailored clothes, its silver foxes, its pekinese or its setters, crowding most thickly beyond the avenue Malakoff. Since the war, that fragment of the avenue had replaced the path

of virtue for young girls, old ladies, and polished gentlemen taking their Sunday walk. Here was a mixture of real society and the imitation thing, the various imitations, with those who came to rub up against it. The smart hour, or what passed for smart, was noon : just as noon was striking. There were ladies who would have died of shame to be seen in the avenue du Bois at five to twelve. There were melancholy or greedy young men who had been drifting about there since ten o'clock in the morning, with nothing to do but look forward to noon's striking and to what it brought in the way of well-perfumed, expensively-dressed women, their cheeks whipped by the fresh air, women out of whom these poor addle-pated students or cadets built up, on the strength of a theoretical gaze, whole novels such as are to be found in the Select Collection and Baudelaire and *La Vie Parisienne* at its most Fabiano. And there were the people coming out of Saint-Honore d'Eylau after Mass.

It had rained earlier that morning, but, praise be, it had been almost fine from nine o'clock onwards ; that is to say, it was wretched weather but dry underfoot. Only the ground in the avenue still bore traces of the rain : not puddles, but the colour of cardboard. Strings of young people went along, laughing and yelling, some of them needing to lean across those in the middle in order to talk to others at the end of the line. On yellow collapsible chairs with little holes in them, old ladies were drying up like stale cakes. Everyone looked as if he or she were there for some reason, only without knowing for exactly what. It must have been their hurried manner that gave this impression : of course December is a chilly month, but it was not the weather that made them walk briskly. In any other month of the year they would have kept up the same pace, to suggest that they were people who were going somewhere, even though this was actually the place they had in mind. It was part of the rite: to give the idea that one had come rushing along,

merely passing by on the way somewhere else or coming back from somewhere, because one had, in one's kindly way, promised somebody to come this way. This rule of the Sunday walk had never been formulated, any more than the fact that it was absolutely out of the question to cross at the entry to the Bois and go over to the Dauphine pavilion, though it was quite permissible to meet at the beginning of the avenue, anywhere before the first turning. . . . It was the done thing, that¹ was all, and nobody seems ever to have felt the absurdity of those few fateful steps beyond the gate. It is true that even those few steps were not permissible after 1922 and by 1923 you would have been taken for a boor if you entered the Bois. By that time one stopped on reaching the terrace in front of the station. But only then. Of course there were other people in Paris, of the same kind as those who came to stroll in the avenue, who were never seen there, for they knew a bit better, not much, but still a little, and they would sooner have let themselves be cut into little pieces than have come here.

This was what Blanchette had explained to Berenice in other terms, just as she had initiated her into the terminology of dress materials that year. And she had added, without meaning any harm, that the avenue du Bois was rather provincial that year.

" But that's just it," Berenice said, with her lovable way of not being put out by the sort of things that put people out, " it's just because I am a provincial that Sunday morning in the avenue du Bois interests me. You have it all the year round, if you like, so you can despise it. But for me, well, you must try to think what my little town is like, it hasn't even a *sous-prefecture*, even though it has more inhabitants than the biggest *sous-prefecture* in the whole *departement*____"

" Oh, well, if you enjoy it. . . ."

They had left the big Wisner in the avenue Malakoff, in the care of Jean the chauffeur. The little girls were running

ahead, quite pink, beaming with joy at the games Marie-Rose was inventing in order to amaze and impress Marie-Victoire. Berenice was in heaven. She looked at everything hungrily, intensely. She saw so many beautiful women that Blanchette told her that if there were so many somebody else would have noticed it. The women's clothes threw her into ecstasies of curiosity ; she made Blanchette turn round and go back to get a better view of a " simply divine get-up, really quite divine ! " She repeated phrases she had caught as people parsed them, and tried to imagine what these people could be talking about, exerting her imagination rather like the experts who reconstruct a mammoth from a molar found in a piece of bread belonging to the epoch. Blanchette laughed at all this. She felt her own resistance gradually breaking down, and let herself go.

Two or three times Berenice's face lit up as if she had recognised somebody. It always turned out to be somebody else ; but in these fleeting moments her cousin saw how she could become suddenly beautiful, and realised what could be so attractive about her. " I see . . . " she thought to herself, at the same time losing a little of her easy-going mood. She had just imagined Berenice's charm getting to work on Edmond. It was perfectly absurd, but—how could she help it ? Everything that was charming in a woman—charming, that is, in a man's eyes—linked up in her mind with Edmond. Even though . . .

" I thought that was M. Leurtillois, too."

The words had escaped from Berenice, and she blushed. Blanchette turned pale. That was a blow to her. Just at that instant. A mere coincidence. But there it was. She had felt that shock in the liver that an alarm-clock causes, going off in the morning. Oh, nothing. It passes off. She asked quite calmly, even a shade sarcastically: " Oh, so that's it ? You were recognising someone every few yards, and it was. . . ."

" Oh, Blanchette, you know I can't hide anything. The other day Edmond said he had met M. Leurtillois in the Bois. So, of course, I thought—if it's the place where he usually goes for a walk—and then there are lots of young men who look like him, among all these people going past—tall, slim, with shoulders—you know what I mean—good-looking men."

Blanchette bit her lips. So that was why Berenice had been so keen to go for a walk in the Bois. . . . So that was why!

" If I understand rightly/" she said, " you rather like M. Leurtillois."

Laughing, pushing each other, the children were tearing back towards their mother. It was a whirlwind of gaiety that gave Berenice time to think.

" Yes," she said finally. " I like him. . . . He isn't like the others."

" Isn't he ? And what is different about him ? "

"* He doesn't talk for the sake of talking. He looks as if he had had an interesting life, a past, something people don't know about. . . ."

"Oh," Blanchette cried involuntarily, "'anyway, he isn't in love with anyone ! "

" Really ? " The word broke from Berenice's lips so quickly, in such a pleased tone, that Blanchette was quite astounded.

" Would you have been sorry to hear he was in love with someone ? "

" No. But it would have made him seem different, to me."

They walked along for a while in silence. Blanchette's face was clouded. Berenice began to talk about the passers-by again, and their clothes. Mme Barbentane interrupted her :

" Listen to me, Berenice, I want to talk to you seriously. Listen ! Listen ! "

" But I am listening ! You are funny ! "

" Berenice, you love your husband, don't you ? You love Lucien ? "

"Of course I do. But what . . .?"

" Sh ! Let me tell you. . . . You love your husband, Berenice, and you are here for a few weeks, a few days. Once these days are over, you'll go back to Lucien—to your love—to his love. No, don't interrupt me ! Don't smile like that ! Don't interrupt me S "

Near her a racing Bugatti, all blue, drew up with a great deal of back-firing in the midst of a swarm of girls who hurled themselves on the driver, dressed as if he were going to set out on a record-breaking trip from Paris to Pekin.

" Don't lose your head, Berenice, for these few days—the rashness of a few days like these can mean a whole life spoilt, tarnished. Don't smile like that ! I'm not preaching to you. I don't consider myself a mother-confessor. A bit of a fling doesn't count. At least, people think it doesn't. It gets forgotten—or at least people think so. It isn't the fling, you see, which spoils things and leaves dirty marks. All the same. . . . All the same, after a while you can't help remembering, thinking about it, and the rest, all the rest, the important things, the things that matter to you, that make up your life—the real love—well, it's only to be expected, you begin to have a grudge against it for going on when the other thing has vanished, even though the other thing wasn't anything of importance, a mere trifle. It's your real life that gets spoilt, that's where the dirty marks appear. . . ."

Berenice, struck dumb, let her talk. She thought she saw tears in her cousin's eyes. Perhaps it was the cold. For there didn't seem to be anything personal in all this : Blanchette lived only for Edmond, and the drama lay in the fact that Edmond. . . . Berenice had realised that.

" Anyway," she said, " as for M. Leurtillois, I've scarcely

how to behave. Otherwise. . . . You know, Lulli is keen about keeping things decent. If anyone starts those birds off, you'll just see. And you know Lulli's a handful. . . . Once you're outside, anything you like. But inside this place, no picking up. I got stood off for a fortnight a few months ago. Don't ask me if I want to have it all over again ! "

She was sipping an orangeade next to two men in lounge suits, who stood leaning on the bar. The whole bar was a tunnel panelled in mahogany, where the frieze of bottles mingled with tiny flags of all the nations. There were the two white-coated barmen coming and going, and, near the door opening on to the dance floor, Mme Lulli herself at the cash desk, a vast Venetian covered with rings, making up her accounts all night long, an adding machine. It might be midnight or half-past, but time was always the same under the pink lights concealed in the moulding, bathing the trophies nailed to the walls, dolls, badges of American clubs, university banners, advertisements for champagne, pictures a Uruguayan had left in payment of his bill, and two penny-in-the-slot machines that received a shaking now and again from some slightly lit-up customer. Half a dozen women, who were not dancing for the moment, were taking a glass or just gossiping with men who were having a change from watching the dancing, or who simply didn't go and sit down in there because they had not dressed ; and at the bar there is no obligation to buy a girl champagne. At the end of the bar, an Englishwoman, no longer quite sober, was perched on a stool, talking to an Argentine in evening dress ; their heads very close together. From time to time she dropped her bag or her powder compact, and the Argentine picked it up again almost without bending, with an amazingly facile movement. The whole picture was a blending of the men's sombre clothes with the rainbow colours of the evening dresses, salmon, pistachio, strawberry, sea-green, white dotted with spangles, and the metal

lames, the floating scarves like pink smoke or watery blue on bare shoulders, the milky or the peach-bloom flesh, the skin tanned to the colour of brown bread, or the pale golden skin, clear as champagne.

How comical the little trains attached to the evening dresses that scarcely fell past the knee ! They gave every movement an awkward twinkling effect, and lent a bizarre importance to the high-heeled slippers that seemed to be trying to catch in them and tear them.

The doctor surveyed these young bare backs that had so little of maidenly modesty. Then, turning to Leurtillois :

" Have another ? "

Aurclien, with a movement of his shoulders, indicated :
" Why not ? "

" Barman ! The same again ! Two." It was a sight worth watching, to see him pouring the ingredients into the cocktailshaker.

Simone said to Aurelien : " Going to have another ? Your friend can't half tip it down, I must say ! " These last words in a lower tone. And then again, coquettishly : " You haven't introduced me." Aurelien leaned back and waved his hand in a gesture of introduction between his neighbours right and left. " Doctor, Simone, a friend of mine. One of my friends, Simons. . . ."

" You're a doctor ? " she asked with interest.

" In business hours, mademoiselle, yes," he replied with that lightness of tone, a mixture of the jesting and the humble, that he assumed now and again with the most unexpected people.

Since Rose Melrose's husband had come to Leurtillois' flat, on account of that bout of malaria, a rather strange friendship had sprung up between the two men, the quick, almost conspiratorial friendship of those who feel they have some secret thing in common. They had seen a good deal of each other by chance, and chance had been slightly helped

along. At present Rose was acting in Brussels—Gioconda, d'Annunzio's Gioconda, a great part in which Duse had been incomparable, leaving dangerously much to live up to—and Pr, Decœur had not accompanied his wife. He felt very much alone ; so he let himself be drawn into Aurelien's orbit. It was true that he was a hard drinker. He consumed big glasses of gin, one after the other.

" Got a cigarette ? " Simone asked. Leurtillois brought out his gold case. And with a movement of his wrist, while Simone was tapping her cigarette on the bar, he offered his Lucky Strike to Decœur. They inhaled the first puffs in silence. Then Leurtillois said in explanation :

" Simone is an old friend of mine."

" Pal/" she corrected.

" . . . And when I come here at night, to finish off the evening, to get people out of my mind a bit, we always spend a while together. I buy her a drink/'

" Only one," Simone said seriously. " You see, doctor, all this stuff people swallow here is bad for the stomach. Oh, of course I don't mean . . . ! But me and the other girls, on the go from ten at night till five in the morning, we've got to take something now and then, and of course at the tables you don't drink a lot of champagne, but you've got to drink a bit, the customers expect you to. Well, an orangeade, you see. There it is, my pal's orangeade ! "

She laughed a slightly silly laugh, and whispered in Aurelien's ear. " Brother and sister," she added with a wink, then, seriously and confidentially : " It's the hell of a long time. . . . Aren't you coming home with me one of these evenings ? I still live in the same place."

The doctor looked at her curiously. She was so fully, so uniquely, all that she was supposed to be. On the tall side, fair, with well-kept short hair done up in sentimental curls round her kitten's face, she had a short turned-up nose that drew up the upper lip, revealing a glimmer of the

small, very white teeth. Her eyes, which were heavily made-up, with blue eyelids, had a perpetually questioning look, which was either a mannerism or sheer lack of intelligence. Her breast and back were not bad, and her arms rounded, but she had a bad habit of humping up her shoulders as if she were all the time clutching her dress about her, like sheets round someone taken unawares in bed : it gave her a rather hollow-chested look. And then the dress, expensive but without style, the kind one sees in the shop windows in the rue Pigalle or the rue Fontaine, pink, with rather darker dyed feathers round the low neckline, and a fresh daisy on her shoulder, with greenery of that airy sort florists have a mania for putting into buttonholes.

" Well, I must leave you for a bit. Excuse me." Another conspiratorial glance. " Business, you know. Excuse me, doctor/

"Ofcourse. . . ."

" The show's coming on. Special number, you know. Come and see it—it isn't bad."

With this advice she departed, still gathering up round her the chaste protection of her invisible sheets, mechanically. In the silence that her departure left between the two men, the tumult of the place became more audible, more distinct, that background of noise so favourable to solitude, with the double clamour from the conversations in the bar and from the band playing a tango in the next room, the noise from the dancers, the racket of gaiety, and Lulli's voice crying now and again from the door : " *Olle ! Olle !* " with an appropriate gesture, which was his way of building up the Spanish atmosphere. The two sailors, surrounded by a group of women, were paying for drinks hand-over-fist, and, deaf to everything going on around them, had put their heads together in order to sing the ballad of Frankie and Johnnie, to the delight of their audience.

" Well, whui do you expect ? " Aurelien said in answer to

an unspoken question. " I still have the company of these little tarts. It's a change. It's a way of relaxing. Oh, not to go to bed with. God, no ! That really does only happen to me very rarely. It's better not to see them by daylight, unless one is in the state of mind where one feels like bursting into tears, anyway. The sort of lies they tell aren't lies at all, but conventions that have to be respected, just poor little conventions. They have a sad life, fundamentally a very simple life. I come out of a world they haven't any idea of, a world I happen to live in, and I feel at home among them. No emotional complications. If one feels like it—and then afterwards, brother and sister, as Simone said just now. . . . I'm very fond of this ridiculous place. I'm pretty sure to be found here round about this time, because I am more afflicted than most with married ladies who leave me to my fate, as a poor wretch of a bachelor, to return to their hallmarked rightful owners. Or, of course. . . ."

" You're trying to make me quite sorry for the poor bachelor, is that the idea ? "

" Nobody can be sorry for anybody but himself, of course. I live; that is to say, I sleep every night and wake up every morning in the arms of the Seine. . . ."

" A great baby ! "

" All right, jeer at me ! In the arms of the Seine, like someone who has been drowned. . . . After a while it becomes an obsession. I've seen too many dead bodies in my time. . . . There's that idea of the river mingling with my dreams, as I suppose the idea of the mountains does in climbers' dreams, and has to be counter-balanced by something—a bank holiday atmosphere. Peasants dance so as not to be afraid of the forces of nature. . . ."

" And you have Lulli's ' *Olle, olle !* ' "

" That's it. Exactly. And I have tied up all my adventures with this place. I bring all my girl friends here. My little pal Simone knows them all by sight. And she says to me :

' You're not seeing the tall one with red hair any more—or the little dark one who can't stand champagne ! ' "

" It's just as well to know—when you're paying too much attention to Rose, I shall know where to look. . . . "

A roll of drums announced the special number.

" Shall we have a look at it, doctor ? No ? All right, I agree, we're better off here."

" You're a funny sort of chap, Leurtillois. The better I know you, the more I find you're different from what I thought. You have the reputation of being a Don Juan, but now I begin to wonder—why aren't you married, with children ?—children instead of the dance band ? I can picture you very well like that."

" Perhaps, doc, perhaps. But, talking of children . . . "

He was going to say something, and then stopped, perhaps from embarrassment. His eyes had a far-away look. As for Decoeur, he was laughing mockingly to himself at the idea of himself as the apostle of marriage. For a moment, in his own mind, everything took on a vague, harmonious shape, larger than life ; it was as if he were hearing a familiar voice, a deep and much-loved, heart-rending voice. . . . Abruptly, he was recalled to Lulli's by Aurelien, who was glad to see that his companion's thoughts had been straying, because that covered up his own momentary flight:

" There you are, thinking of Rose again ! "

The doctor shook himself, saying : " No. Well, yes, I was. One can't hide anything from you. I was wondering how things are going in Brussels. And you needn't think I didn't see that you were somewhere else ! "

Aurelien smiled and swallowed a great gulp of gin.

" Funny business, old man, these parties of ours. We get on well together just because we needn't talk to each other—or can talk without the other one having to listen. Think about Rose, my dear chap, think about Rose, don't let me disturb you."

" I am always thinking about Rose, even when I'm talking about other things, whatever they may be. She can't be stolen from me. I am in the habit of thinking about Rose in front of all sorts of people. But all the same, how about you, Leurtillois ? Where had you cleared off to ? *You* weren't thinking about Rose. ..."

" No, doc, I wasn't. I'd tell you what I was thinking about, only you would find it rather unpleasant. That's the way it was, I don't know why. I've lost the thread ; what I was thinking about took a wrong turning and threw me back into old stories out of the past. I say, what were we talking about ? "

" Marriage."

" Yes, that's it, marriage, children. Then all at once I was seeing a bit of Champagne, quite extraordinarily clearly, and the smell of the earth—everything very damp—and the light—in the barbed wire there was a corpse that no one had been able to get in for days and days. . . ." He fell silent again. Time passed. Then : " And I was wondering—you must have been in the war. Whereabouts ? "

Decœur's pale face flushed a little. He said, with that utter calmness which placed him, as it were, right in an American film : " Yes. ... I had one of the cushy jobs."

Applause broke out. The Russian dancers had just finished their show.

" You see," Aurelien said diffidently, feeling unsure of himself, " I haven't ever quite got over the war, I've never got rid of it properly. I wake up in the night in terror of the minnies, just like 1915. There's a lot of that in this ridiculous life. The war—that's what I'm still trying to get away from at Lulli's."

Abruptly he felt he had said enough about that, and he made a violent effort to change the conversation. But the change came quite simply from his companion.

" Yes," the doctor said, " we're all trying to get away

from something. From some idea, generally not even conscious, some obsession. I've never been able to go home when Rose is away. I drift about night after night. Gin's not a bad thing. . . . Rose, my dear fellow^r, Rose. . . . Oh, you can't understand that, you've never been in love. How on earth can I explain? Rose, for me—Rose is my war. That's it, my private war. Perhaps that'll tell you better than anything else, my own war, my Great War ! "

He laughed his sophisticated laugh and came down to earth, with the look of a man who has just said something a shade out of the common, a trifle cubist, don't you think

" Well, what do you expect," he went on, " people who are their own masters, people with incomes, they can keep up that high intellectual atmosphere quite easily—Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verhaeren—the atmosphere in which Rose is so much at home because of her genius. But poor bastards like me ! "

He had resumed his impudent tone of cultivated humility.

" I tell you, she's the war for me—the whole war. At school they taught us that war is the rule of life. Who said that? Heraclitus, my dear chap, Heraclitus. But when a man marries a rich woman, people forget in no time that there's any difference between his wife and him. Look at Barbentane ! I knew him at the School of Medicine, in the old days. Would anyone reproach him with his car? It's a different matter when the woman earns her living, and in such a visible manner—such a theatrical manner, if I can put it like that. You can work yourself to death, you can take refuge in poetry—you haven't even the right to talk about love—you're a mere common pimp."

" Oh, look here, doctor, you're exaggerating. You have your profession."

" Yes, let's talk about that. I could have been a doctor, a real doctor, with a career. Barbentane can tell you that. But I gave it aU up for her. Can't set up in practice with a

nomad like that, a wild bird, here today and gone tomorrow. I did at first, and it was too frightful. I gave it up."

" But you do practise, after all ! "

" Oh, I practise, I practise. In the summer I do a season in a watering place. They take me on because of her—I know that all right. Rose takes the cure to keep her figure—what an advertisement for the baths and the casino ! For the rest of the year it's impossible to have a consulting-room or anything settled. So I fit in. I've turned myself into Rose's doctor, that's the long and short of it—I have the sole care of her beauty, me—and no one else. Not that I could have endured anyone else looking after her. It's a queer thing, jealousy. If she has lovers, what the hell? But that—it makes my blood run cold even to think of it. What was I saying ? Oh, yes, then bit by bit I slipped into this not very reputable, not very scientific specialisation—beauty treatment, massage, diets for keeping young and beautiful—and of course with that wonderful advertisement beside me, that proof of my skill ! Always Rose. . . . You can see that even in my work I live on Rose. You think that the theatre, genius, all that is enough for someone like Rose. But in that high intellectual atmosphere you have to have money, just as much as the people who don't know what the word * art' means. So I think up little dodges. I've picked up with a Russian woman—oh, the highest nobility, exile, never eating off anything but imperial czarist plates. She manufactures beauty creams and so forth, and I recommend them. That keeps on going while I have to run after Rose in Brazil or the Balkans. Creams for keeping the skin supple ! There's one of them that looks and smells like shit: you put it on your face and it burns like the very devil, then it cools off, then you wash with another of my preparations, and for twelve hours you have a schoolgirl complexion. We even thought of putting Rose's photograph on the jar. So you see. . . ."

They had ordered another drink. Aurelien listened to his companion and thought of Rose. He saw her again as she had been at Mary's, in her dress the colour of clear green water. He saw her mouth again. Strange, being told the other side of that beauty ; stranger still that the doctor, by talking like this, roused one's curiosity and made her even more fascinating. Aurelien repelled the treacherous thought that entered his mind. Obviously, whenever the three of them had dined together, Rose had been singularly encouraging. But this man's love for his wife was so great, unique. . . .

" How much you love her !" Leurtillois murmured. " What a shattering thing love must be, the sort of love one reads about in books, and that lasts—weeks—months—years. Happiness ! "

Decoeur laughed bitterly. " Happiness ! Oh, yes, happy people haven't any story to tell. A fine swindle ! There's no such thing as happiness. There's war. Good old Heraclitus ! War ! "

Aurelien thought: " Ah, now we are coming to it. . . . " He looked at the long face, not as thin as the rest of the man, the wide dome of the forehead, the soft, almost blue hair, the black eyes, that restrained and bitter look. He could not make up his mind to think that Decoeur was an artificial being, but if all that was natural, how dreadful ! The curve of that bitter lip must be the result of years and years of suffering. The two men were almost of the same height. No, the doctor was just a little shorter.

" Rose, my dear fellow, is something that is always having to be conquered. There are reverses. One doesn't win every battle. There are moments when one has to lose in order to establish a better position—when one has to abandon some ground, feint, use tactics. The world isn't empty, either. There are other people—men, women—monsters ! Rose is free. Anyone as exceptional as that must be. What right have I to demand that she should refuse herself

anything that tempts her ? Genius has its own rights. It's just a matter of being stronger than what tempts her, holding out longer. She comes back to me. . . ."

How Aurelien hated himself. What dwelt within him, he reflected, was not good to look at. All his respect went out to this man, this new friend. But Rose's image filled the bar, with the twisting smoke of many cigarettes ; that shuddering of life awakening in her, always, when she was passing from silence to the spoken word. He saw her lean forward, pouting, to ask for bread. It was as if she had sought a kiss, but all she wanted was bread. Once more the doctor assumed that humble tone, so suggestive of ulterior motives, which was the only thing Aurelien did not like about him.

" Listen. The other evening I was watching Rose looking at you. Don't protest, I know her. For a minute she looked at you like something in a shop window. I know what that means. Oh, it passed off, of course. I don't know why I tell you this—because that's what my life is like. Happiness. . . . War. . . . You're another of those who can confine themselves to the high intellectual atmosphere. You don't mix up love with business—selling face cream—advice about how to keep the figure. You're one of the privileged."

Aurelien suddenly began to loathe the doctor, and he began to think about Rose with cruel precision. New people had come into the bar, where the sailors were now dancing a jig in the corner, bent double, to the applause of the dance-hostesses and the customers.

" There is also the fact," Decoeur said, " that you don't know what Rose is. But I'm talking like a fool. How do I know you haven't been to bed with her already ! "

He must be causing himself a good deal of pain in saying that. There was panic in his eye. But it wasn't very convincing ; he was waiting for a reply, and Aurelien read in his gaze how the silence was driving him mad. The doctor

must be thinking that his companion was trying to elude the indirect question. Must say something. Aurelien humped up his shoulders, conscious of his own strength and his own malice.

" Not yet. . . ." he said.

Simone came dashing in with her partner, who had the head of a cattle dealer and pearls stuck in his tie. Without letting him go, she said as they went past, very excitedly :

" There are some friends of yours in there, did you know?"

Aurelien frowned. Who could it be ?

" Three ladies and two gentlemen."

He had had enough of Rose's phantom, and Decoeur had really got beyond the amusing stage. He said to him :

" Shall we go and see who it is, doc ? You know, people are inclined to come here with the idea of running into me."

They went through into the dance hall.

CHAPTER XII

FROM the rose light, they passed into the blue. The band was playing an English waltz, and the women seated round the tables in the half-light were humming the tune, while on the floor the couples gyrated like the lovers on picture-postcards. ("If I held in my arms all your wonderful charms. . . .")

Lulli's glass swing-doors with the orange curtains opened on to a sort of hall; on the left was the bar, on the right the toilets, and straight ahead was the dance hall. This hall was the market-place where everything was on sale ; hearts, and cigarettes, and other things less clearly defined. Here one could always find people talking with their heads close

together ; people who had left their drinks for a moment; tarts gossiping together or rejoining young men who would no longer recognise them a few minutes later when dancing; pale, nervous people whose conversations ceased at the approach of a couple or a waiter. There too in the corner was the cloakroom with its sentimental guardian ; and next to the toilets, from which those women's laughter could be heard, the door to the kitchens, whence issued Welsh rarebits, plates of chicken, and the champagne buckets.

" You wish for a table ? "

M. Lulli in person, an Italian from America, pot-bellied but firm, his muscles showing through his evening clothes and what remained of his black hair curling round his bald patch, shook hands with M. Leurtillois, for Aurelien was a well-known and frequent guest.

" Thanks. . . . We're meeting friends."

The waltz was flooding the room. It was a waltz that Aurelien had danced in night club after night club in the London of 1919, with the girl he had had at the time ; she drowned herself in the Thames one night, after a senseless bet. *Whispennng*. . . . He shut his eyes. But he did not see London ; he was thinking of the Seine round the island. . . .

Lulli's dance floor was in a big square room with a balcony all round it, and behind the pillars there were four rows of tables. At the back, another room opened out like a semi-circular grotto, with the band and still more tables. There were usually only a few people at the discreet tables on the balcony, to which one mounted by two staircases on each side of the hall. It was all lit up in such a way that the shadows went upwards towards an invisible ceiling ornately decorated blue, red and gold, a pseudo-Moorish style that was continued in stucco twisted round the pillars of the balcony and in the big loggia at the end. The tables under the balcony were slightly raised, two steps high. And all this was criss-crossed with

paper streamers flung out by the supper guests two or three dances earlier, so that the room was like an enormous cake decorated with coloured icing. The waiters slid to and fro between the tables, trays dangerously balanced above their heads ; the place was full to the point of bursting, and the dancers circled between additional little round tables that had been set out some way on to the dance floor. The artificial moonlight went with the music about as much as the Moorish decor went with the tarts of Montmartre.

" Here are your friends," the doctor murmured. He was looking to the left, in the centre, on the edge of the dancers. Aurelien followed his glance. The first person he saw was Berenice in her lotus dress, the one she had worn at Mary's. With her were Paul Denis, Blanchette and Barbentane.

The doctor shook his head. Hadn't he been called to Aurelien's, when he was ill, by Mme de Perseval ? Simone knew Mary too, he thought. And he reflected, as they approached the table, that Leurtillois, otherwise so discreet, did not seem to consider that the rules of discretion applied to Simone.

" Ah, doctor ! Leurtillois ! "

Barbentane had got up to greet them, getting a little in the way of the dancers round about, skimming their heads with two chairs. They settled down.

" A grass widower this evening ? " Mary cried to the doctor, making the glasses tinkle. He was just kissing Blanchette's hand ; she was in black satin except for her bare arms and the six ropes of pearls she had inherited from her mother.

Berenice smiled at Leurtillois. " Mme de Perseval was quite right, she said we would find you here," she said and blushed. The last drops of champagne were being poured into glasses for the newcomers. Barbentane clapped his hands: " Two more bottles of this !" The waiters hurried off to execute orders. The music stopped, and the dancers

stopped too, with that air of disappointment which is meant both for the band and for one's partner. The musicians struck up *Whispering* again. Aurelien felt a hand on his arm: it was Blanchette. "Don't you want to dance the encore?" He glanced at Berenice in apology and followed Mme Barbantane on to the floor. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mary standing up with Decoeur. His lips tightened just a little.

"I danced this waltz for the first time in London, in 1919," he said to his partner.

"Oh."

It was obvious that her thoughts were elsewhere. He noticed that her expression was more severe than usual, and her lower lip trembled a little.

"Listen, Aurelien. I asked you for this waltz because there's something I want to talk to you about."

"My dear Blanchette, I'm quite at your disposal."

He was amused to see Mary watching them as they danced. Glancing towards the table, he saw that Paul Denis seemed to be talking to Berenice very eagerly, while Barbantane was buying cigarettes from the girl with the tray.

"Aurelien, I beg of you—while there is still time—leave Berenice alone."

He just managed to steer clear of a clumsy couple.

"What do you mean, Blanchette? Mme Morel. . . ."

"Don't lie!" she exclaimed furiously. "Do you think I don't know your little game? Do you think I can't see what you and Edmond are playing at?"

"But, my dear, what on earth sort of a joke is this?"

"We run into you everywhere, as if by chance. You're being thrown at her. And you pretend not to know anything about it!"

"I assure you. . . ."

"Aurelien, it's not right. It simply isn't right."

" My dear, Mme de Perseval is looking at us ! "

They turned. She went on :

" Believe me, Aurelien, it's not right—it simply isn't right."

" But. . . ."

" Be quiet, and listen to me. Oh, do listen to me ! Berenice is young—happy—yes, she doesn't realise she is, but she is happy. She has a husband who adores her. Of course her life is a bit—a bit flat—down in the country—naturally—but a husband who adores her. . . ."

" That's all to the good. Only I don't see. . . ."

" Be quiet ! Oh, if you have any trace of human feeling left, remember—remember what happened between us—the harm you did me. . . ."

" Well, really, Blanchette, nothing happened—or at least so little. . . ."

" Yes, so little for you ! But enough to destroy my peace of mind. Oh, yes, you know I love Edmond, I love him and I hate him. . . ."

" I assure you, my dear creature, Mme de Perseval has her eyes glued on us."

He was wondering what could be the matter with Blanchette. Jealousy ? But after all, she loved her husband ; and as for a few kisses one evening, no doubt on her side it had been more out of pique at Barbentane's carryings-on than anything else.

" Listen," she said again, " I know Berenice. You will simply destroy her, if you carry things any further."

" But I swear. . . ."

" Oh, you men, you don't know what fidelity is, the real, deep fidelity. Sometimes I wish I were dead, because of you, because of those few minutes, those trifling minutes. . . ."

He went back to the table with her. The strong lights went up again, and there was the tumult of laughter and talk. A fox-trot followed the waltz. Aurelien found himself

sitting next to Mary, a Mary in crystal beads, with her back bare below her brassiere.

" You waltz divinely, darling," she murmured to him.
" I was watching you."

" That was obvious."

She laughed her irritable laugh. " Oh, you've nothing to be afraid of ! "

Between these two women he felt revulsion, and as if in challenge to them he turned to Berenice, to ask her to dance. But she had just stood up with Paul Denis. Not quick enough off the mark, he thought sulkily.

" I don't mind telling you, old man," Barbentane said, " we came here mainly for you. We were at the ballet, and afterwards we went on to the Bceuf. It was dismal this evening, I don't know why. So when Mary suggested. . . ."

" Oh, Mary," Mme Barbentane exclaimed, " Mary has a broad back ! "

Mme de Perseval uttered her little nasal laugh. " Anyway," she said, " I make the most of the ambiguity. It's not very gallant of you, M. Leurtillois, not to dance with anyone but Mme Barbentane."

He rose, ceremoniously. Mary followed him and they danced.

" I don't like fox-trots," he said by way of excuse.

" Oh, don't bother. You needn't be afraid, I can see for myself that it's over, and I won't clutch."

He thought himself in duty bound to press her hand politely, in the impassioned style. She laughed again. She kept on laughing, this evening.

" Idiot! Don't pretend. You can see I brought her along for you."

" What are you talking about ? "

" Oh, the big, innocent boy ! You can hide it from anyone you like, but not from me. Anyway, since you're in love with her. . . ."

" In love with her ? But, God dammit. . . ."

" So it's come to swearing, has it ? My dear Aurelien, I know all about it. Besides, Edmond gave me to understand——"

" I assure you, Mary, there has never been anything between Blanchette and me."

" Blanchette ? Oh, come, that's too old a trick. I brought her along for you this evening—the Morel girl, I mean. She was really rather keen. You can count on me to help things along, since that's all you want from me."

The Morel girl! He came down to earth with a shock. So that was what they had all been getting at—Blanchette just a moment ago and now Mary ! It wouldn't make the slightest difference if he denied it, since apparently they had made up their minds.

" I've been at your flat," Mary de Perseval said, " I've been at your place, you see, and I've seen, . . ."

This last sentence struck him as completely crazy. He thought of it again suddenly when they were sitting down, but circumstances scarcely lent themselves to explanations. He swore to himself that he wouldn't dance with Berenice, to whom he could hear Paul Denis talking about painting. He shrugged his shoulders. Barbentane was dancing with one of the local ladies.

Blanchette fell back on Decœur :

" So Mme Melrose is in Brussels, doctor ? You didn't go with her ?"

Aurelien didn't catch all the doctor's reply. Decœur had lapsed again into his humble, jesting tone and was saying something about those elect beings whom one cannot hold fast.

" M. Leurtillois." It was Berenice speaking to him. " Have you seen the ballet this season, M. Leurtillois ? You must act as referee for us. M. Denis and I don't agree."

So he entered into the conversation under Blanchette's

eyes. It was a conversation that did not interest him at all, but Berenice was full of intense enthusiasm, as she was for everything in Paris ; it was all new to her, and everything had bright colours and the exotic atmosphere of a special occasion. And Paul Denis was her ally, because anything connected with art, the theatre, decors by Picasso and Derain, music, and so on, excited him beyond the bounds of what is generally regarded as reasonable. He had fallen for it, just like a betting man where gambling is concerned. Aurelien was amazed at his frantic emotion. He did not share it, but imperceptibly he fell under its spell. He recalled having thought this young woman plain ; he also remembered an expression Edmond had used in talking about her : a cat on hot bricks, a hell-cat. Yes, it was a fact, there was something fiery about her ; and this evening something seemed to be blowing on the fire, fanning it into life. Perhaps it was Paul Denis's vanity ; for the boy was flirting with her, quite regardless of Mine de Perseval. Aurelien reflected that it could not be very pleasant for Mary to be mixed up in this sort of thing, and he even felt inclined to intervene. But at the moment Mary was dancing with Barbantane. In other words, the moment had slipped by ; the conversation was already about trifling things, apparently with the object of covering up something else—but what ? Aurelien wondered. Hadn't Mary said that Mme Morel Hang it all, this was sheer imagination.

" Would you like to dance ? " he said.

Berenice looked at him, and replied, " I'd love to—but not the Java, I don't know it."

He bit his lip. He had decided not to dance with her, and here he was—oh, what an ass ! It had just slipped off his tongue. For a moment he had thought that Mme Morel had really come to Lulli's for the sake of meeting him. Paul Denis was talking enough for all three of them, enough for everyone ; it must be the champagne that had gone to his

head, making him talkative. Simone was going past, near the table. Aurelien glanced up at her. " All the best! " she called to him. He frowned. Berenice said, " Is that a friend of yours ? " He protested that he did not know the girl, although doubtless Mme Morel was the most indulgent of women and would have thought nothing of it. Paul Denis felt his companion's attention slipping between his fingers. If he was to be believed, he loathed Lulli's and Montmartre and everything to do with it, particularly the dance-hostesses.

"Well, I don't !" Mme Morel said, "I love it!" Aurelien felt rather let down. Did he want her to be jealous ? Jealous of whom, then ? Good heavens, it was all just imagination, nothing but the risky flirtatiousness of two other women. What had Blanchette meant by what she said about Edmond ?

There was a roll on the drum, and the dancers scattered, some to their tables, some to the vestibule, some to the bar. The sound of the drum predominated over the rest of the uproar, heralding another show number. Lulli, standing in front of the band as he did every evening, was clowning about with his arms flung out, waving his hands, conducting the introductory drum-roll for all he was worth, to a pitch of frenzy ; then, in that mongrel accent of his that was a mixture of Chicago and Florence, he announced Tommy, the one and only Tommy, " the world's greatest drummer."

Tommy was a small, wan, fat negro, with greying cropped, hair and astonished eyes. While he was taking up his position, with tenor drum and percussion instruments forming an angle as he bowed, in the cross-fire of the arc-lights, shadow descended on the tables and all the hands that would now go out to take hold of others, while this and that was murmured close to the women's bare shoulders. At the last moment, Barbentane had recognised someone he knew on the other side of the room, and, on the very edge of a gleam from the

lights, was waving a friendly gesture to them. Blanchette who had not seen whom he was greeting, muttered something at Aurelien's side. "What did you say?" "Nothing."

Suddenly he had the feeling that Berenice was quite close to him; he did not dare to turn his head. They were all pressed up against one another, in order to have a better view of Tommy, who was juggling with his sticks and his little metal blades in the most remarkable way, playing the drum, the cymbals, the bells, quite on his own, without accompaniment, a huge silent grin all over his face; and a quickening tempo was tightening the atmosphere, as hard drink does after a certain stage. Quite close to him, a mere breath, Aurelien heard Berenice's voice:

"Just my luck. I was so much looking forward to this dance with you." And immediately he felt a glow of warmth flooding his veins, an intoxication that might perhaps be the headiness emanating from the drummer, but was more likely something quite different. Any number of things began to assume a meaning. Without thinking, without looking, he put his hand on the table. Imprisoned under his palm and between his fingers he felt a little hand whose presence there he had only guessed at, a little hand that tried to pull away, while he held on firmly, very firmly. At the other end of the room the negro's white eyes rolled and the sticks whirled in the air, and, like a child letting off explosive caps for fun, the cymbals clashed and the muted band began to play a ragtime, an undercurrent of ragtime that Paul Denis recognised, much to his own satisfaction.

"He's marvellous," he whispered to Berenice.

She must be frightened; Aurelien could feel that she was frightened, and he would not let go of the hand he held captive. He heard her voice, aghast, speaking very low: "You mustn't do this."

And feeling how mad his behaviour was, he wanted to let

the hand go, and could not. It seemed to him that to do that would mean renouncing a whole world, everything that he could ever prize, everything that could make life worth living. The drum was thudding, the brasses clattering, a headlong rhythm reverberating in the midst of the room, while Tommy's hands and feet flew around the drum and caressed the percussion instruments, flapping like a chicken horrified at the noise it was making; and his head went rolling round on the fat creases of his dark neck with the immaculate white collar digging into it.

There came a moment when Aurelien realised that the hand he was holding had given up the struggle ; it had not yielded to him, but it had ceased struggling. Now he was ashamed of what he had done ; but it was too late to undo it. All right, then, he had flung himself into this adventure—how could he draw back ? Now he would have to make love to his neighbour. He tried to put some feeling into the pressure of his hand on the hand huddled beneath it. Pretending already ? She had been looking forward to the dance so much, that was what she said. The fantastic, maddening, swollen clamour went swirling around them, making them dizzy with contradictory sensations. On the one hand, there was Berenice, filled with inexplicable terror at any sudden move and afraid of making any gesture that would force him to move again. On the other, Aurelien, already determined not to endure any check, any refusal, any denial.

Then Blanchette said something from across the table. He bent his head and asked her what she had said, his face revealing how little he liked having his preoccupation interrupted. " My bag, please. There, on the table." Silently cursing her, he picked up the bag, almost knocked two glasses over, and passed it to Mme Barbentane.

He had not let go of Berenice's hand.

With two drumsticks in his hand, flourishing them like the

fluttering of a butterfly's wing, or rather, like a hairdresser twirling his scissors, Tommy was working up to the highest pitch of this romantic thunder he had let loose. He was playing with his whole body, with his feet, with his ears, with the twitching skin of his forehead ; he and his chair bounced up and down together in a delirium that spread to the audience. When at last silence fell and it appeared that the ceiling was not going to collapse after all, everyone stood up shouting encore, while Tommy bowed, the sweat pouring from him, and then sat puffing like a sea-lion in a toy motor car amidst the applause.

Behind the others, alone, as much alone as in the depths of a forest, they both sat still and trembling. He said, in the deep voice of a man shaken to the core of his being: " We'll dance the first dance, shall we ? " She shivered. He saw her black eyes, her hunted eyes, as she shook her head and her whole body said: " No." He could see that she was on the verge of tears. " We'll dance the first dance," he declared.

The lights went up again. Their hands separated.

A new band came in, Argentines this time. The room was threaded with a disorderly coming and going, people leaving, others being shown to their tables, preceded by Lulli declaring to each party that this was the best table, the very best. The first violin, swathed in a black sash, with white silk breeches widening up from the ankles and a purple shirt, raised his bow for the band to strike up a tango. It was a tango like every other tango, banal to the last degree, an utter prostitution of sound, with its cheap charm and its sordid, lecherous rhythm.

" You promised me this dance," Leurtillois said, standing up. But Berenice, leaning back in her chair, shook her head. No, no. He insisted. " Ask Blanchette," she whispered. He sat down again. Had he gone too quickly ? Had he dreamt it ? What on earth could it matter to him ? Silly

little thing ! he thought irritably—country wench ! He knew that it was not what he meant and that he was only trying to deceive himself ; he knew that he was really terribly disappointed. More than anything, he was annoyed with himself. But the atmosphere had vanished ; it was not the same place nor the same girl nor the same dream. Anyway, he had given up the idea of it. Just that.

It was then he heard Berenice saying, " I hope you aren't hurt, are you ? " He could not believe his ears. Had she really said that ? He looked at her and saw her black, slanting eyes, full and liquid like those of a deer. What strange eyes. . . . Only—was there anyone behind the eyes ? He wanted to say no, that she had not hurt him ; but he couldn't. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before ; he had never been so diffident towards a woman, one indeed who was hardly a woman at all, a mere girl. Neither of them said anything for a long time. The others were dancing ; without realising it, they had been left alone at the table. She noticed it suddenly and was embarrassed. " Let's dance, shall we ? " she proposed. He smiled, a little sadly, with an embarrassed movement of his shoulders.

They danced.

It wasn't the same any more. It was not the same thing at all. This dance, which both of them had for an instant feared, now separated them, its conventionality and false intimacy re-establishing the distance between them. They did not talk, for fear that words, even more than the movements of the tango, might separate them further. They smiled at Mary and Edmond dancing past, and became more and more embarrassed.

" My dear, if you only danced like M. Leurtillois ! " Mme de Perseval said. " The tango has never been your forte, has it ? " Annoyed, Edmond began to execute complicated steps such as he had been taught at Mitchine's, before the war. " Oh, don't, don't ! " Mary cried out. " What has

come over you ? You're putting years on my age ! Mme Morel looks as if she had spent her whole life in his arms, don't you think so ? "

It was quite true that Berenice seemed to float when dancing, light and yielding to the slightest pressure. She might have been the music itself, so intimately did she blend with it. Aurelien was afraid of not dancing well enough for her, and he said so. She shut her eyes. Then, bending over her, he saw her for the first time. Her face was veiled in a faint, cloudy smile, as though she were asleep or in some fairy-tale world of a dream. What had jarred on him, what had put him off by seeming not to match with the rest of her, was now dissolved in harmony and formed a whole. Borne along on the melody, leaving herself quite in her partner's hands, now she showed her real face, her childlike mouth, and her look of—what was it ?—some blissful sorrow. Aurelien told himself again that he had never yet seen this woman who had just revealed herself, and he realised that what had hidden her from him was her eyes ; when she had them shut there was nothing left to protect her, and she appeared as she was. Then her eyes opened again, darker than ever, more like an animal's than Aurelien had remembered.

When he said: " Thank you " after the dance, bowing to her as if at a family ball, Berenice laid her hand on her heart. She was quite pale. She sat down suddenly and became absorbed in a little mirror, making up her face. He perceived that she was anxious to hide some emotion. He wanted to talk to her. She said to him, in a low voice, very quickly, " Leave me alone. Do leave me alone ! Please ! " She was upset, that was obvious : her breast rose and fell too quickly and she was trying to hide her face. " What's the matter ? " Aurelien asked. She gave him a slight push with her elbow : " They're looking at us/ "

At the same moment Barbentane came back, through the throng of dancers with the man he had been waving to a

little while ago : Zamora, the painter Zamora, you know Paul Denis knew Zamora; they belonged to the same set, in spite of the difference in age. Zamora must be about fifty, a small man who looked as if his paunch were too much for him ; he had a witty face, dark, clean-shaven, and typically Spanish, with silver at the temples. He was as lively as if he had been slender, and his feet were incredibly small. He believed himself to be Picasso's rival, and the urge to outdo Picasso had thrown him into dadaism. He was malicious and amusing ; everything struck him as 'frightful/ but on the other hand he was capable of agreeing with an out-and-out philistine for the sake of a witticism. He painted metaphysical pictures in corset whalebones, and fundamentally cared about nothing except pretty women, La Gandara's pictures, little dogs, and doing himself very well indeed. He had been over the other side of the room with two princesses and an American woman, and he suggested that they should all go on somewhere together—he knew a night club.

Aurelien was thinking all the time about what Blanchette had said to him : " You will simply destroy her." He really didn't know anything about Berenice at all. What sort of man was this husband in the country ? And how had that come about, anyway ? Kept a chemist's shop—wasn't that what Edmond had said ? She, a shopkeeper's wife ! He tried to imagine her among the jars and bottles, adding up the bills, like Mme Lulli in the bar. What complications was he plunging into ? What unknown territory ? And what a flutter she got into about nothing. Oho, so that's how it is ! he said to himself, with a feeling that there was a trap here somewhere. For a man, a woman is first of all a mirror, then a trap. . . . A whole world of complications. A world. No. Very definitely, no. Back out of it before being caught up in the toils. Anyway, what a fool of a woman ! There she was questioning Paul Denis about Zamora; and Paul,

shocked, or afraid Zamora might hear, was throwing his weight about. As a finishing touch, Mary whispered in Aurelien's ear, " Be careful, my dear man. People will see." That was enough.

When they went to get their cloaks, in order to continue the party wherever Zamora was taking them, Aurelien made his excuses. " Fm staying, I'm waiting for somebody/" Berenice opened her mouth as if to say something, then stopped. " No, no, my dear doctor, go along, I don't need you. Goodnight. . . . Goodnight, madame. . . ." He had not even asked if he might see her again. Berenice was going, swept along with the others as if in the midst of a nightmare.

When they disappeared through the doors with the orange-striped curtains, Leurtillois was seized with the desire to rush after them. What a fool he was ! What a fool ! Letting her go like that—why, it wasn't even human—and rotten manners, anyway. Oh, yes, that was an old trick, telling oneself that sort of thing to pave the way for doing something stupid. Though after all what was he afraid of ? What had he to fear ?

In the bar he picked up Simone again : " Listen, darling, just now you were asking when I'd come home with you again. How about this evening ? " He jogged her elbow. She laughed : " Just too bad ! I've got someone." And after a glance round the bar, in a low voice, confidentially: " One of the American sailors, actually. Only don't tell anyone ! "

CHAPTER XIII

" WHAT a wind ! What a wind ! Oh, sir, you can't imagine ! If I've been across the Seine once, then I've been at least three hundred times, a thousand times, and never did I see such

weather. Such wind ! Enough to blow you back where you've come from. You simply can't imagine, sir. If it was anyone but you, sir. . . . It's all very well for you to laugh, but how would you get on without me ? I feel as if I'd come a hundred miles. It blows this way and that. . . . Well, of course—the Seine—I've never worked anywhere except on the Left Bank, Only for you, sir—and I really don't know, I'm sure, if you lived on the Right Bank, if—no, I don't think so. I wouldn't follow you to the Right Bank, seeing that it means one more bridge and crossing the river again. Oh, no, sir, I don't think so. If you was to go and live in America, now, would I go and set out every morning from the rue du Cardinal-Lemoine, just like this, with my old scarf on my head, and walk all the way to bring you your breakfast in bed ? No, sir. So you see. . . . Though I don't know how you'd manage without me. Just look at the mess—and the way you throw your trousers on the floor ! This time I'll press them, you can't keep on sending them to the cleaners. They do pretty well for themselves, those people, I must say ! They'd take your last penny. They've opened some more branches, too. In the old days there weren't any cleaners, you had to keep your things decent yourself. Where have you stuffed your socks away, sir ? I've brought back the washing. You can't imagine what the wind's like ! "

She laid her hand on her cheek and rocked her head to and fro, gazing at the ceiling. Mme Duvinge, Aurelien's charwoman, had reached the canonical age that permits a woman to wait on a man in bed without its giving rise to gossip. She was small and dark, with threads of silver in her hair, which was heaped up on top and kept in place by an assortment of combs sticking out in all directions. Her neck was skinny, with a suspicion of goitre, and she had protruding eyes in which the expression would change from the confidential to the profoundly serious and dramatic,

fluctuating from one extreme to the other without any intervening shades. Her chin seemed to be quite separate from the rest of her face, though such a thing sounds neither reasonable nor possible ; and her left cheek was much larger than the right. But that, she said, ran in the family. " My sister, and our poor father. . . . "

It was fatal to let her begin following up that line of talk, for she had a vast number of cousins and aunts ; and, as one thing would lead to another, first of all there was the cheek, then an uncle's emphysema, the misfortunes of her grandmother, and Germaine's husband who had bolted with the contents of the till. The whole family would pass in procession, including the late M. Duvigne, who had been an undertaker like his father before him, and his brother, Mme Duvigne's brother-in-law, who had got just what he deserved.

" Mme Duvigne, did anyone in your family ever keep a chemist's shop ? "

" A chemist's shop ? What an idea ! Oh, no, sir ! There's been pretty well a bit of everything—an adjutant in the colonial service, and grocers, and a cousin that—I mean she—well, the less said about it the better. But a chemist's shop, oh, no, sir, never. I could take my oath on that ! "

She had taken the tie-press out of the wardrobe and was arranging Aurelien's multi-coloured collection. She broke off to say, " But you're not eating your breakfast, sir ! It's not worth me crossing the river and coming out in this wind, if you don't eat it while it's hot. The egg's soft, sir. Just the way you like it. "

The tray on the low table beside the divan, with its array of toast, coffee, milk, eggs, one of which had already been topped, was in fact waiting for Aurelien to come out of a dream in which he had lost himself. He sat up among the pillows, pulled the sheet up, and looked round him ; it was quite true that the room was wildly untidy. He wondered what time it was. Eleven. He had hung about last night

when he came in, then read for a while, finding any number of reasons for not going to bed, and then suddenly sleep had descended on him and he had left everything just the way it was, pulling off his clothes and scattering them around him on the floor, on the tobacco-coloured carpet. The finishing touch was that he had forgotten to open the window. . . . He reached out for the tray.

" Well, I don't know what's the matter with me, I'm sure ! " Mme Duvigne exclaimed. " I seem to have come out without my head this morning. Excuse me, sir——"

" What is it, Mme Duvigne ? "

" The chemist you were asking me about, sir ! You remember, sir ! Oh, have you forgotten ? You must be asleep still, sir ! You were asking me if there had ever been a chemist in my family. What an old silly I am ! I said there never was one. I must be going daft ! "

" So there was a chemist in your family, Mme Duvigne ? "

" Oh, yes, sir. Well—I mean to say—not exactly a chemist. My cousin Camille—not now—it's ten years back—that's why I'd forgotten about it—that is to say, sir, Camille wasn't really my cousin, he was my cousin's husband. That's right. She took after me, did Cousin Lucie. Even though Cousin Camille—but he was a bad lot. Well—oh, yes, Lucie and me, we were very much alike. She didn't get married till she was forty, just fancy that. It made her queer in the head. One day I was at their place and someone said, ' There's no oil left, Lucie, you go down and fetch some oil.' She gets up—and do you think she went and fetched the oil ? Not a bit of it ! She took the watering-can she used for watering her plants on the balcony, and she filled it up with turpentine and poured it on the salad, and then she burnt the whole thing, because it was curly lettuce, she said. She didn't half give us a fright ! They shut her up. The doctor said, ' She must get married, it's the only thing to cure her. That will strengthen her blood.' "

Here came a furiously energetic wave of the fist, as though a key were being turned in a door.

" The terrible thing was trying to find her a husband—put yourself in her place, sir. There was the risk anyone would run—and if it didn't strengthen her blood ? So they couldn't pick and choose—and then of course, Lucie was forty. It was Grandmother that found Camille. From Alsace he was, and his name was Schuwer. Funny, it sounds like being something like a cobbler, but it's spelt—it's spelt quite different. He was quite willing, was Camille."

" And did it strengthen Lucie's blood ? "

" Yes, sir, it did and all! Talk about strength ! She wasn't crazy after that, at all. And she kept her house so you could eat your dinner off the floor. How the pots did shine ! I've never seen anything like it, even on the Grands Boulevards. The doctor was right. That's how it came about that Camille was a sort of cousin of mine."

" And he was a chemist ? "

" A chemist! You will have your joke, sir ! Camille a chemist, I like that! "

" But you said so yourself, Mme Duvigne."

" What was I talking about ? Oh, yes, sir, you're right. But really Camille wasn't what you'd call a chemist, though he was in that line of business."

" So he was a chemist, then ? "

" He was in the chemist line, without being a chemist. An errand boy, he was, in a big chemist's shop in the boulevard Sebastopol. With a tricycle. They couldn't afford to be too particular. It was really very nice him wanting to marry Lucie, after she'd set the salad on fire. Yes, he had a tricycle. That shop did a big trade, delivering stuff all over Paris. Camille was on his rounds all day. It gave Lucie time for her saucepans. But not a real chemist, sir, no, we never had such a thing in the family ! "

All the time she was talking, she was dusting the furniture,

moving the things on the mantelpiece, rearranging the curtains. She stopped and said thoughtfully: "Not even a scrap of a chemist! "

Aurelien wondered how things fitted together inside Mme Duvigne's head. Did she consider there was something shameful in having a chemist in the family, or what ? As if she had followed his thoughts along these lines, she explained: " We're plain people in my family, what they call small people. Why should a chemist have wanted to marry Lucie ? A chemist's a gentleman. . . . "

So that was it. A chemist's a gentleman.

" Are you going to have your shower, sir ? I've lit the stove for the hot water. It must be hot enough by now. "

This was said from the next room, where Mme Duvigne had plenty to keep her busy. Aurelien went into the bathroom. Ouf, what a good thing hot water is ! Behind the curtains round the shower the tall, stooping, naked body shook itself, with soap in its eyes.

Mme Duvigne was already forgotten, together with her stories. Once more Aurelien was in the grip of what had obsessed him the night before and been his first waking thought that morning. He knew nothing about Berenice—nothing about her life, except that she came from somewhere in the country and that her husband was a chemist. A cat on hot bricks, that was what Edmond said. He could not rid himself of that expression ; it came back again and again, and it was so immensely the opposite of all he had first thought about Mme Morel. He told himself that he was always the same; some absurd detail routed him entirely. There was, for instance, the case of the exclamation marks in Mary de Perseval's letter ; that phrase of Edmond's had done the same for Berenice. Once more, in his mind's eye, he saw how Berenice had looked with her eyes shut. The wife of a man who kept a chemist's shop. . . . Ultimately it was just as remote and surprising a thing for him

as it was for Mme Duvigne: there wasn't a chemist in the family.

He was quite pink from rubbing himself down with the loofah.

" And what happened then, Mme Duvigne ? " he asked, returning to the room, draped in his sandy-coloured bathrobe. " What happened to your cousin Lucie in the end ? "

Mme Duvigne clasped her hands. The broom fell to the floor. Hastily she picked it up and leaned it carefully against the wall; then, resuming her gesture where she had left it off, she clasped her hands again, and lifted her elbows horizontally to the level of her breast, casting a pitying glance heavenwards.

" Lucie ? Oh, dear, dear me ! Lucie ! Oh, sir, Lucie went mad again, but the next time she was a case for the strait-jacket."

" What ? But hadn't she had——"

" Her blood strengthened ? Oh, yes, sir, indeed she did, and that was just the trouble ! She got it double strong. Her husband, the chemist you know, that is to say, Camille, from being on his rounds all over Paris—all the houses he went to and women there, the customers, and then the servant girls—the servant girls are the worst of all—I should mention that this chemist's shop was—that is to say, it specialised—well, you know what I mean, sir—it specialised—well—diseases—boulevard Sebastopol, of course. So bit by bit Camille didn't come home so much. Poor Lucie, it didn't help, however much she polished her saucepans and the linoleum. It didn't make any difference. Then he left her for someone no better than she ought to be. It was a shame to see Lucie. Her blood became terribly strong, and she thought she was a little dog. She used to run after people—wuff ! wuff !—yes, sir, wuff ! wuff ! Oh, it was a shame. So they put her in a strait-jacket. *Oh, the Lord have mercy on us !* "

This last outcry arose because Aurelien, having opened the window, had let in a blast of wind that slammed the window back on his fingers with a fiendish blow. There was Leurtillois, shaking his hand and hopping from one foot to the other as children do when they hurt themselves. It must have jammed his fingers badly ; they were even bleeding. Mme Duvigne seized hold of the injured hand.

" Oh, sir ! Oh, sir ! Oh, poor thing, how dreadful ! This old barracks of a place ! You really did ought to live in a modern flat, sir ! Things like that only happen in old places. It's a good thing it's bleeding, it doesn't hurt so much then. It'll be all right in a moment. The left hand, that doesn't matter like the right. Better put some arnica on, or iodine would do."

He had neither arnica nor iodine. Mme Duvigne reproached her employer for his thoughtlessness : it was just like a young man, she said, to live like that without iodine in the house, and no arnica either.

" All right," Aurelien said, wrapping a handkerchief round his finger, " I'll go to the chemist and get some iodine."

CHAPTER XIV

PROBABLY every man knows what it is like when he goes to meet someone whom he loves passionately and who occupies all his thoughts, although as yet he hardly knows her,—and then finds himself confronted with an unknown woman. It only needs a slight alteration in the way of doing her hair, or a different dress, or merely the atmosphere of a public place, and the woman whose image seemed indelibly traced in the memory turns out to be unrecognisable. Anyone who has not felt this disappointment knows nothing of what it is to love.

Aurelien experienced it even in thinking about Berenice, without needing to see her. But as he had never loved, he did not know that the nervous distress caused by her image in his mind, the sense of unfulfilment it gave him to think about her, was anything but the result of only having looked at her through a cloud of emotion. He did not dream that it might be love.

He was annoyed with himself for having such a bad memory for a face, no matter whose face it was. He had suddenly elevated it into a dogma that this was a weakness of his. "That's what it is," he said to himself, "I'm no good at remembering faces." In reality he had a number of mental snapshots of Berenice, but each of them so different from the others that he could not form a total picture. It never seemed to be the same woman; for the glimpses he had of her were out of tune with each other, just as her features were in real life. But that was something he accepted when he saw her, because he had to believe the evidence of his eyes; only in his memory he rejected it, because memory has the reputation of being fickle and everyone knows that it touches things up or fails to reproduce the elusive element that lends a face its whole charm.

'> Then he took to building up, feature by feature, the indistinctly remembered face that meant so much to him without his knowing why. He recalled the chin, the cheek-bones, the forehead, the shining halo of the hair, the lip, the smile, a gesture—it was all there until he came to the eyes, and the eyes ruined the whole thing. They came to life in the face, lighting it up with their dark transparency, more than life-size, like polished coals, no, even more brilliant than that. They obliterated the rest of the face with their extraordinary light, and this light became the essential element, extinguishing the real character of the face. . . .

He told himself that he had never really seen her except in that moment when, as they danced, she had had her eyes

closed. The woman whose eyes were open continually came between him and the woman whose eyes were shut; this was she whose image seemed, for some vaguely troubling reason, to project itself away into his past and into what he dreamed at night, his heart and sense haunted by it in daylight. Whom or what was she like? Which of his lovers did she resemble? With what long past desires was she involved? What pleasures of some other time cast their reflection or stain upon her? There was no one, no one No silhouette, no shade. . . . Only the feeling as of something vanishing in the depths of a mirror, mere vapour. . . .

Anyone more on his guard, or less self-confident, would no doubt have driven this obsession out, for fear of succumbing to it. But Aurelien did not even think of that; it did not occur to him that there might be any danger in this mirage of a woman in his mind. Yet anyone could have told him, had he not been obsessed already.

For the moment it was nothing more serious than, say, a tune that a man cannot get out of his head, a tune he tries, by all sorts of devices, to be rid of and which still turns out to be the stronger. Then, when there appears to be no use humming another tune (which only fades into the first one) and telling himself a story (which comes to an abrupt end), he decides to Jet the mania have its fling and to think of nothing else. And then he cannot get rid of it any more, and the worst of it is that he can only remember one phrase of it and is at his wits' end, trying to remember, repeating it over and over again, trying to remember how it goes on.

He might meet her in the street without recognising her.

This notion assailed Aurelien, shocking and perturbing him, until then finally it became reassuring. He didn't know how serious it was to have reached that stage of reassuring himself. But it meant that for hours on end when he was doing nothing in particular, on days that seemed as empty

as any other day, he was thinking only of Berenice, and that he might not recognise her. Was he sure of that ? Was it possible ? He might not recognise her. Might he really pass her without recognising her ? Supposing he were to meet her in the street ? Actually he had never seen her in the street; he had not even seen her in a tailored costume. And he was haunted by an unreal picture of her wearing a tailored costume and walking along the street. Would he really not recognise her ?

For after all, in the street, wearing a tailored costume, she must be imagined quite differently ; not the face alone, dominated by those long, slanting, black-arched eyes, but her whole manner, her walk, in fact her body which he did not know. For what did he know about it ? What did he know about that body which was so light, a dancer's body, imponderable, unreal, and surely so different when walking along the street ? And not only the body, but the body in motion, its poise, that intangible thing, poise. . . . In the street, in a tailored costume.

And once more Aurelien imagined her face ; the lower lip that had the fullness of grief and yet seemed to be smiling, and the sheen of light on the cheekbones, the hair growing back from the forehead, the closed eyes. . , . But then the eyes would open and the whole picture became confused. In the street. . . . He looked at other women, at those of about her height. This one, he would tell himself, might be Berenice ; or that one. But it was none of them ; none of them could quite drive away her ghostly presence—not even the good-looking ones.

Could Berenice be called good-looking ? At first he had thought her plain. But he hadn't looked at her properly. It wasn't a question of whether she was good-looking ; she was something more than that, something different. She had a peculiar charm. Yes, that was it; he could recall what she looked like, but not the secret of her charm. It was like

not being able to think of a word. One knows how it goes, more or less, and if there's an R in it, and how many syllables it has ; one can even think of rhymes or equivalents for it. Ah, but the real word, the word that rings the bell and is a song !

That was the point: he could not remember what it was about her that was like a song, the singing quality in her.

For he was certain that there was some singing quality in her, if he could only remember what it was, something that sang like her name. He remembered how, in all innocence, he had built up castles in the air about that name. He had not looked at her properly then ; he had been conjuring up visions from her name without really thinking about her, for it was the sort of name to float in the mind and set one romancing. But she was beyond the limits of her name, although now the sound of her name evoked her in his imagination. She had effaced all other possibilities of a Berenice, there was no longer any question of another Berenice but herself, only the one Berenice, the only Berenice, herself. . . . He could not find the singing element, the heart of what sang in her.

With growing unrest he tried to find the heart of the song. He tried to remember. What was it that he must remember about her, above all, the essential thing ? Was it the imaginary passer-by, the woman in the tailored costume ? Or was it the woman he had danced with, holding her in his arms, that buoyant dancer ? His arms still kept the memory of how they had held her and yet they were in despair at not being able to remember. . . . For the first time he became aware of her absence and began to feel her absence from his arms.

But was that what sang in Berenice ? Must he, if he were to feel it, hold her in his arms like any other woman ? Or did not her charm lie elsewhere, in her gaiety, in her silence, in her closed eyes, in her open eyes ? All at once Aurélien

was revisited by the sensation of how her hand had lain in his, that imprisoned hand like a small, shuddering bird ; and it was not the bird that was a prisoner, but the bird-catcher.

He rubbed the palm of his hand, lost in amazement. It was like a burn. There was a presence, and there was an absence : both at the same time.

A song.

CHAPTER XV

" No, no, no ! No ! I'm not in love. All this is sheer nonsense. I don't give a damn. Of course, if you let yourself go. ... If I. ... But I don't care a damn, I'm not going to think about it. It's like fear—if you begin admitting that you're afraid, you're done for. The best thing I can do is to go out and get some fresh air."

The air was no longer as cold as it had been that morning, because it had rained and the wind had dropped. Leurtillois went out wearing a heavy tweed overcoat and, having shifted the tilt of his bowler hat, which was pressing rather too tightly on his forehead, he plunged his hands deep in his coat pockets. He had been to lunch with the Honfreys, who lived at the Palais-Royal in a flat overlooking the garden. Charles Honfrey had got married six months earlier, so interrupting a friendship which dated from the time when they had been at school together. Now they no longer belonged to the same world; Charles had gone into his father's wholesale silk business, Honfrey-Ldvy-Casenave and Company, and his marriage had set the seal on that. It became impossible to talk in front of young Mme Honfrey, for it would have been discourtesy to go over reminiscences to which she was a stranger—Do you remember the day. . . ?

What's become of that big fellow, what's his name, you know who I mean, the chap Who was always saying, " Lower decks stripped for action ! " And when from there they gradually approached subjects of more recent date, it was Aurelien who felt himself an outsider.

He had not taken his car out. The distance from the He Saint-Louis to the Palais-Royal was not worth it, and besides it did him good to walk from time to time. What a sad colour the winter days were. From three o'clock in the afternoon onwards there was a feeling of nightfall in the air, and of half-light. In Aurelien's thoughts, too, there was this wintry half-light. Then all at once the rain came, suddenly lashing down and making him run for shelter into the Rivoli arcades, where he began to take stock of the women around him and then found himself once more haunted, though at first only vaguely, by the phantom of Berenice. He tried to distract himself by observing the toy sellers, the vendors of knick-knacks and imitation jewellery : tiny, trifling objects in the shape of leering dogs, marquises, Napoleonic officers, and fields in Arcady. He passed in review the collections of scarlet spoons enamelled with pictures of Henri Quatre next to Mme Recamier, and Washington beside Joan of Arc. " Who on earth buys these things ? " he wondered ; or at least he forced himself to wonder about it. For the truth was that he was haunted, he had been taken possession of by a ghost, and if he had spoken honestly he would have asked the spoons : " Shall I see Berenice again ? " or " How am I to see Berenice again ? "

If he didn't say it, it was because he didn't care a damn, it was all nonsense, he only had to think about something else, and so forth. Then he became aware of a pain in his left hand, and that reminded him of what he ought to have remembered earlier—that idiotic slamming of the window. How about buying some iodine, just to please Mme Duvigne ?

By now it was not raining so hard. Leurtillois turned down the first street he came to and came out in the rue Saint-Honoré, which was chockablock with cars, errand boys on bicycles, delivery trucks, all creating a bewildering clamour. Pedestrians were vainly trying to get taxis. All engaged.

Aurelien went into the first chemist's shop he came to. It was a gloomy place, very quiet after the racket in the street. Surrounded by dark wainscoting and shelves loaded with antique china jars ornamented with Latin names, at first he could not see if there was anybody there. Then behind the tiered counters, upon which rose bronze lamps with big tarnished bulbs, engraved with stars, between the glass cases stuffed with patent medicines, he saw a small man in a white overall, with a black skull cap, glasses hanging from a chain, and a streaky beard that had lost its original colour and not yet turned white. When the chemist asked what he wanted, Aurelien suddenly felt quite at sea. He had forgotten what he was doing here and was convinced that he had only come in because of Berenice. He asked for gum drops and gazed around the scenery and hoardings of this minute theatre, looking for a woman who was not there. The chemist was talking to him severely, asking him what sort of gum drops he wanted and what quantity. In the end he went out with a little paper bag in his pocket. Evidently the chemist's wife did not serve in the shop ; that was clear. But on the door he noticed a bell push, with the words : Night Bell. Aha ! That was the clue. The chemist and his wife must live there, above the shop. He read the name in flat gilded letters on the window : Cotre, Dispensing Chemist, and underneath : Devambèze, successor. The old man must be Monsieur Devambeze. The rain was coming down harder; Aurelien took shelter in the door at the side. Suddenly, on a wild impulse, he pushed open the concierge's glass door, knocked, and holding his hat ahead of him, looked round the door. " Is anyone there ? " he

asked. A voice replied : " What is it ? " He was about to beat a retreat, overcome by a sense of his own foolishness, when there appeared a red-nosed woman, who might have been any age, wearing a black woollen shawl and a grey apron. " Are you looking for someone, sir ? " He murmured: " Mme Devambeze. . . ." The woman with the red nose replied curtly: " M. Devambeze is in the shop just now." " Yes, I know. But *Madame* Devambeze. ..."

Suddenly a strange thing happened. The red nose twitched, the shawl turned this way and that, two hands went up in a gesture straight out of classical tragedy, and from the midst of it all issued a sharp scream.

" What ? Don't you know ? But what a thing ! Oh, Fm sorry, sir ! "

Aurelien had only wanted confirmation of his idea that the chemist's wife did live in the building, that was all, and he was somewhat startled by the turn things had taken.

" So you didn't know ? Oh, I don't like telling people this sort of thing. You're not a relation, I hope ? No. Well, it's not so bad then, is it ? Mme Devambeze has been dead these six months. After a long illness. What she did go through! I used to put leeches on for her. M. Devambeze hasn't been the same since. I often hear him walking up and down at night. ..."

Aur&ien got outside as fast as he could. That was not what he had been looking for ! As he went down the street, past the door of the chemist's shop, he saw the dim outline of M. Devambeze inside, and a line of Lamartine came into his mind :

One sole being you lack, and all the world is bare.

It was Honfrey who used to quote that on every possible occasion. It was queer : he had begun thinking about Berenice again ; he had never stopped thinking about Berenice. But to think of her fate in those terms—when her widower, in his shop, would be pitied by the caretaker ! He shrugged.

Leurtillois was already finding it too much of an effort to keep up with his old friend Charles Honfrey and his wife, because their life, filled with preoccupations arising out of the wholesale silk business, was Greek to him. And he wanted to form a mental image of Berenice's life ; not in the rue Saint-Honore—oh, no—but in the country, in some provincial town he didn't know, and the people she saw every day, that husband of hers who couldn't very well be as old as M. Devambeze or have such a beard and spectacles.

It was now raining hard and steadily. Aurelien's fingers encountered a paper bag in his pocket. The gum drops ! Mechanically his fingers undid the bag and took one or two lozenges. Aurelien thought to himself, " But I haven't a cold!" That, however, did not stop him from sucking the sweets, which bulged out his cheek, like Mme Duvigne's.

Oh, good lord, yes ! It was iodine he had meant to buy ! He remembered now. Well, it was just too bad. A few steps farther on, he thought: " Why should it be just too bad ? " As if one couldn't buy iodine from anyone but M. Devambeze ! In a side street he looked round in the vague hope of finding a chemist's, and sure enough, there was one. Painted grey, it was by no means the same style of shop as the last. He went inside. Here there was a crowd of people, and in spite of the fact that there were three serving, and a man at the cash desk who of course could not be disturbed, Aurelien had to await his turn. Although it was still daylight, the lights had been switched on, and Leurtillois found himself looking at the reflector lamps lighting up the red and green jars in the window from behind, as if he had stumbled on one of the mysteries of science. The shop was large, with its cupboards open, and in one corner a whole array of perfumes, powders, creams, nail-varnish and so on, to suit every possible taste. There were display cards explaining treatments, cough mixtures, corn cures. Here in the shop was a cross-section of the life

of this district, the shoppers with their baskets of groceries on the way between one errand and another, a schoolgirl and her mother, an absent-minded-looking woman with a pinched face, the plumber from next door, a retired clerk—some of them standing, some sitting, all waiting for the moment when they would ask, in a discreet murmur, for some article with a shameful name which the chemist's assistants would then repeat at the top of their voices. As in the other shop, there was no woman behind the counter here. Aurelien's eyes met those of one of the assistants, a skinny young man who would have seemed tall to anybody but Aurelien, who was used to towering over other people. This young man might just as easily have been a hairdresser, except for that look of utter indifference and his forlorn eyes. He must be a student. He was fair, with wavy hair; his very youthful but worn and haggard face was almost handsome. Taking him all-in-all, he must be attractive to women, although he still had that insubstantial, half-grown air that made him not quite a man yet, so far as Aurelien was concerned. He did not so much as glance at the customers, and he had a little facial tic that made him bite his upper lip continually. How sick of it he must be, poor fellow !

A young girl came in. She was not beautiful, but at any rate she was a girl and as such worth looking at, and the young chemist's assistant turned away quite rudely from the elderly person he was serving and brought up a chair for the girl, smiling. To Aurelien this smile revealed a whole world of possibilities. In Morel's pharmacy, he thought, there must be a young assistant like this, who paid a lot of attention to his hair and despised the customers, but became radiant when Berenice entered the shop for a moment to speak to her husband. Perhaps he paid his addresses to her ? And supposing she was his mistress ? For she too must be bored to death in the flat above the shop (he supposed it was over the shop). Once more he had a glimpse of

her closed eyes, as she had looked while they were dancing. All that for a lad like this. There was no way of knowing whether even at Lulli's that time, in Aurelien's arms, she might not have been thinking of him. It was an unpleasant thought. This isn't jealousy, he told himself, it's just wounded vanity. I don't care a damn about the woman one way or another.

" A bottle of iodine, please."

This time he had remembered what he wanted.

CHAPTER XVI

THE rain had stopped. The wet asphalt shone with reflections from the shop windows, as the lights went up inside. People were walking fast, for it was chilly. Aurelien found himself standing on the pavement with the cough drops in one pocket and the bottle of iodine in the other. Without thinking about it, he turned homewards, as if there were no alternative, once he had supplied himself with cough drops and iodine, but to go home. Only when he came to the place du The[^]tre-Fran[^]ais did it strike him how absurdly mechanical his behaviour was. He caught himself putting another lozenge into his mouth, and that put all his nerves on edge. He felt even more than usual what a loafer he was ; and he was afraid of a renewed attack by Berenice. " Ready ! " he said to himself, in the tone of voice of somebody making a major decision.

This expression " Ready !" was the signal he always gave himself when he decided to play a game that populated his solitude in the streets. Every man knows the game ; you follow the first more or less likely woman you meet coming towards you, until, say, she turns to the left. Then as soon

as another woman comes along in the opposite direction, you leave the first one and you follow the second one back in the direction from which you came. Or the game can be played with right instead of left turnings, of course, and it can be elaborated with a mass of rules you invent for yourself and keep to for two or three months, until you change them for others. Aurelien, who had remained very adolescent about such things in spite of his thirty years, was capable of spending hours and hours in this way, retracing his steps all over Paris. At the moment he was following a big, rather gawky wench who was not particularly well-dressed but had something attractively brusque in her movements ; and this was how he proved to himself that he was not thinking about Berenice.

No woman can be described so precisely as an unknown woman you are following in the street. You have barely seen her face and so must try to form a complete picture of it from glimpses when she turns her head a little this way or that: then the line of the cheek is quite unspoilt, and few things about a woman can be as lovely as the way her neck turns where the jaw-line runs up to the ear. Seeing an unknown woman from behind, one really possesses her ; all that remains is the animal body, the animal to be tamed. There is a conquest in the mere fixing of attention on the nape of the neck, where the hair grows upwards. The woman's most intimate character is betrayed by her walk. Then there are the haunches and the legs. Aurelien took an infinite delight in imagining women's underclothes, and undressing them in his mind, completely downright and even cruel in his candour. There are some women, for instance, about whom one knows instantly that their underclothes are kept together by a safety-pin.

Oy ! This " oy ! " meant: right-about-turn, another woman to follow. The next one was a rather anaemic-looking little blonde, very young, wearing a permanently

astonished smile. She was simply dressed, her skirt a little too long to be fashionable and probably dating from last year. She was loaded with parcels, and every dozen steps or so she almost dropped her umbrella. From behind she wasn't very symmetrical; her right shoulder was a shade higher than the left.

This was not the only game Aurelien played in the streets. He also enjoyed classifying and counting the women he passed: those, of course, who were not completely impossible. He would say to himself: "Now^r let's see, from here to la Concorde, how many women shall I see who can be called women? I wonder!" There were several categories of what he admitted as the genuinely feminine. Going up the scale, first of all there were the provocative types; then those who were lovable; then the crazes. No word of this little private vocabulary had ever crossed Aurelien's lips, since he had made it up at the age of about fifteen. It ought to be obvious what he meant by "provocative": it was something less than "lovable" for which he also had another and more direct word, and which meant, for him, everything the word can mean. By the "crazes," he meant women for whose sake one would do crazy things; this was a fairly rare type. It was interesting to count the proportion of the provocative and the lovable; it wasn't always the same, and sometimes the proportion was reversed. Life even had its extraordinary mornings when, in the most unexpected districts, Aurelien had met so many "crazes" that he could hardly believe it. Perhaps his appreciation was lacking in objectivity; but at least Aurelien was quite sure he could check his margin of error.

He also liked dividing up the women he saw into two main groups; those who ought to be undressed and those better left with their clothes on. That was an excellent criterion, one that offered scope to the imagination. A young man can never be bored in a city when he has such a pastime.

Oy ! Here was a woman past her first youth, heavily powdered, dark, in a slightly shabby silk costume that fitted a little too closely, and a small felt hat over one eye ; she kept on looking back over her shoulder, to see whether the tall man who had turned on his heel, when he crossed her path, was still on her tracks. " I know this kind," Aurelien said to himself. " She takes off her skirt and folds it over the back of the chair and says, ' Mind my stockings.' "

He Suddenly felt tired of this feminine zoology, the monotonously endless variation of women, their false diversity, and the possibility of reducing all of them to a short list of types already encountered. He was aware that all this centred in one image, which fled him and yet at the same time haunted him. It was just a matter of shaking off the spell, an attempt to profane that image. Provocative ? Lovable ? He was even on the point of wondering if Berenice would not be most attractive when clothed. He had gone too far, and was ashamed of himself. He remembered how he had held her hand. Yes, by Jove, with this hand that he had caught in the window. That looked like a judgment on him, didn't it ? One thing he was sure of, anyway ; it was no use tracking these women, for however he chased after them the fact remained that he was still pursuing only Berenice. How was he to get this off his mind ?

Oy ! This time it was a pretty girl. She was frightfully smart, well turned-out, swaying on her high heels. The furs she wore were of the expensive kind. She was standing looking in at shop windows, just as if her foot were caught in-a grating ; so Aurelien had a chance to survey her from the side, while pretending to be absorbed in the study of handbags, cami-knickers, lace and so on. Another day he might have put her in the " craze " category ; after all, there must be men for whom she was something of a craze. She led him through the shops in the Louvre ; and that, it must be said, was something of a feat—that way of handling materials,

of chopping and changing from one thing to another, of retracing one's steps for nothing at all, of pouncing on something or other as if it were the promised land, only to look at something else, and elbowing through the crowds in the most natural way in the world. When she came out, on the Admiral de Coligny side, she took a taxi at the very moment when he least expected it.

"That's enough/" Aurelien said to himself, and walked home sucking cough drops. If anything at all were certain, it was that he had not made even the slightest plan, not a shadow of a plan, for seeing Berenice again. Well, that proved he didn't care a damn, didn't it? Nevertheless he remembered that Edmond had said: "Ring up and come to lunch sometime when you feel like it." That was all very well, of course it was none of *his* doing, that invitation, in fact he had even forgotten all about it. Well—should he ring up tomorrow? No. What a lack of dignity! If you want a woman, you must keep your distance a bit. Yes—if you want her. But if she doesn't matter to you at all? To hell with it!

It was already dark when he arrived at the place de rHotel-de-Ville. He fingered the iodine bottle in his pocket. Should he go home? Why should he, after all? The Q bus was just going through the square. Ah, an idea! He would go swimming. He caught up with the bus and jumped on to the platform as it gathered speed. There was nothing like swimming, that sovereign remedy, for getting rid of the idea of Berenice, and it was a long time since he had been at the Oberkampf baths. He had indeed thought of paying a little visit to Uncle Blaise, whom he had not seen for ages; but no, swimming was the thing. Oberkampf was the thing.

He bought an evening paper from a vendor in the bus, and plunged into the sports news. The bus was going up towards the outer boulevards. And in all this not a sign of Berenice.

No B6r&iice at all.

CHAPTER XVII

" YOUR father a cabinet minister ! What an idea ! Oh, heaven preserve us ! "

Mme Phillipe Barbentane, the senator's wife, pushed her plate back slightly, her thin hand rattling the dessert knife against her glass of Vichy water. Her face was twisted with distaste at her son's teasing, and she turned towards the guest who was sitting opposite her, by her look wordlessly expressing the difficulty of pursuing a conversation of this kind before a stranger ; having done that, with the irrelevant and violent air that she had acquired in thirty years of house-keeping and hatred, she followed up her thoughts aloud. This time she spoke to her daughter-in-law, on her right.

" Thank heaven the senator hasn't the slightest chance of entering the government! That would be the last straw ! He has done enough harm in his own family without doing any to the country ! "

" You're exaggerating, Mother," Edmond said, winking at Aurelien. " First of all, Father has been trimming his sails ever since the war. He has approached Poincare——•"

" Yes—just think of it! At the beginning of the year Briand gave him his marching orders, and now he's counting on Poincare. But it's all just his imagination : they don't need him in the government. Things would have to be topsy-turvy before he would have that luck, if it can be called luck. With the sort of government we have, it's nothing very much to boast of."

Aurelien regarded Edmond's mother with something like despair. Her southern accent had only been entertaining for a short time. None of Esther Barbentane's beauty remained; one could still see the resemblance between mother and son, but since the operation she had had, she

had dried up completely, and at scarcely more than fifty stoe "looked at least sixty, a shrivelled hag. Yet she was a *big* overpowering woman and her hair was still black. But there were the pockets under her eyes, and the sunken depths in which lay the blue eyes she had passed on to her eon, and all the wrinkles ; and above all the total absence of powder and lipstick, the provincial style of dressing, the eternal mourning she imposed on herself thanks to the vast number of cousins who were constantly dying—all this made her an old woman. The final touch was the small gold cross at her throat.

Leurtillois was quietly fuming. He was completely uninterested in Senator Barbentane's career. But he had taken Edmond at his word and invited himself to lunch, only to find that Mme Morel, who had gone out for a walk this morning with young Paul Denis, had rung up to say she would not be in and that they should have lunch without her. Delicious ! Where did that boy come in, anyway ? Where had they gone for their walk ? Why were they still out ? Apparently they were lunching together. Delightful ! How childishly I'm behaving, Aurclien thought to himself. In the meantime, here I am having to make conversation with this old frump and Edmond and Blanchette.

Blanchette, passing the olives, had murmured to him: " No luck, my poor dear Aurelien." And she had had that little pinched look about the lips. What did she mean ? He had his suspicions, but decided to ignore the remark.

" If there's no religion," Mme Barbentane went on, " it is sheer hell, nothing more or less, simply hell! Phillippe made all his family miserable by his way of bringing up his sons, always making fun of sacred things in front of them."

Blanchette shook her head. " You know quite well, Mother, that no one can do anything that makes any difference to the Truth."

" What a little Protestant you are ! " her mother-in-law said, helping herself to more salad.

All his life long it had been Dr. Phillippe Barbentane's dream to rid himself of this spectre, this incarnate reproach that was his wife. He had always imagined that when the day came for his constituents to send him to Paris, his wife Esther would stay in their house in Provence, giving herself up to her devotions, while he at last made acquaintance with the liberty of the capital. But life plays tricks with dreams. Once he was a senator, he very soon felt the need of having an establishment where he could entertain, if he wanted to rise as high as under-secretary of state. He needed a mistress for his house in the avenue de TObservatoire. And then wasn't Esther a Rinaldi, and wasn't her cousin Charles, who had become president of the Finance Commission in the Chamber, right in the swim ? Supposing, for the sake of argument, that one of those coalition governments were formed, such as periodically saved the Republic, Barbentane's relationship to Charles Rinaldi might be a hint for a premier with a portfolio to spare. In the end the senator had resigned himself to the need for Esther and had sent for her to join him in Paris. She lit candles to Our Lady of the Fields for the long life of cabinet ministers, and that was all.

Aurelien was champing on the bit. Hang it all, going out like that with Paul Denis, whom she had only just met—it was a bit steep ! This time he was well and truly cured. A little country girl wanting to do Paris, that was all. Really he had almost put his head into the noose. Well, now it was over and done with. The funny thing, he thought, was that this had never happened to him before; and it occurred to him that it was all pure disappointment on his part and that fundamentally he was jealous. Jealous, eh ? Me ! What a downfall !

He tried to be very nice to Blanchette. Then he

remembered that it wasn't wise to be too nice to her. At bottom he wasn't thinking about anything except how to get away; but, all the same, one couldn't get up and go away in the middle of dessert.

They went into the library for coffee. On the pretext of their cigars, Edmond took Leurtillois out on to the terrace, where they stood looking over the roofs, at the Eiffel Tower and the Invalides. It was rather cold, and the sky was one endless gray, without a ray of light.

"Who are those Leurtillois people?" Esther was asking Blanchette. "Only one lump, you know I only take one. The chicory family?"

"No, the chicory family are cousins, much richer. These are the Debrest Leurtillois. Textile people."

"Oh, I see. I thought they were the others. Textiles and chicory are both typically northern industries. There's something I want to say to you, my dear Blanchette: you look at this M. Leurtillois just a little too much. Now, now, it's no use protesting. I mean just what I say, nothing more or less."

"But I assure you, Mother, it's a quite amazing idea of yours."

"My dear girl, I am not saying anything beyond that. It does happen sometimes that we look at a man a little too much, without meaning anything by it. I merely tell you so that you may be on your guard."

"Really, Mother!"

"I wouldn't have said anything at all if you had a confessor, but since it's your misfortune to belong to the Reformed Church——"

"Misfortune, Mother? Misfortune!"

"Yes, misfortune, Blanchette. A confessor is a great support to a woman—to a nice woman. It means one has a man to talk to, a man who will open his heart to hear all those thoughts one has which are dangerous only because

one has to keep them to oneself. Someone to guide us, to help us to see into ourselves clearly. Oh, you may smile, my dear, you may smile, but do you know how many women owe the fact that they continue to do their duty only to that ? "

" It is not a duty for me," Blanchette said, and was astonished to hear how unconvincing the words sounded. She added : " I love Edmond."

" When one has children, it isn't absolutely necessary to love one's husband. But it must be a great happiness. With the love of God on both sides, of course. I often reproach myself with having given you a son of mine who doesn't believe in anything. I don't think very highly of your pastors, but you yourself ought to go to church more often."

" Mother, you know quite well that I am not demonstrative about my religion. Everyone has his own way of looking at these things. Some people like to make a show. In my case, some feelings are all the stronger for being kept to myself."

" That is a typically heretic way of talking. But it is just like you Protestants to spend all your time reading the Bible and not to know that one only honours the Lord truly in sacred precincts."

Madame Barbentane put down her cup and considered the effect of her words on Blanchette. She saw that Blanchette was looking out towards the terrace, and she raised her eyebrows. This although, after all, Edmond was on the terrace too.

" Your luck's out, old man," Edmond was just saying to Aurelien.

Leurtillois replied sharply :

" Why the devil are you all saying the same thing to me ? "

" All of us ? "

" Well, your wife. I don't know what it's all about."

" Oh, Blanchette, eh ? Don't play the fool. We know very well you came to see Berenice, and you see—Blanchette. . . ."

" But it's crazy ! I came here to see *you* ! Damn it all, I've come plenty of other times, long before I'd even seen your cousin ! "

" It's no use making excuses. You can't fool me. I'd rather that was what you came for than to see Blanchette, for instance ! " He chuckled. " Although, I must say, Blanchette is quite free."

" You *are* an ass ! Leave your wife out of it, and your cousin too."

" You put them both on the same plane, do you ? Now that only half reassures me."

" Edmond, have you gone out of your mind ? "

" I mean, you know very well that Blanchette has a weakness for you."

" You're mad ! She hardly looks at anyone but you. But look here, let's talk about something else."

" Oh, no, my dear chap, not at all. You seem to be defending yourself. That's quite a mistake : I'm absolutely calm. I know very well that Blanchette doesn't love anyone but me, but she has a little weakness where you are concerned. And why not ? There's no harm in it. But that doesn't alter the fact that you didn't come here to see her or to see me—not today—you came to see Berenice. And lo, no Berenice ! What I mean, bad luck ! "

" You're quite infuriating ! "

" You might as well confess that you find her attractive."

" Your wife ? Very much so."

" No, no, you idiot ! Berenice ! "

" I apologise, old man, for rushing off like this, without finishing my cigar, but I have to meet someone—someone I wouldn't like to keep waiting."

" Oh, all right, all right! Exit Don Juan. Anyway, Berenice will be sorry to have missed you."

" Don't be ridiculous. Mme Morel will have spent a delightful afternoon with Paul Denis."

" Jealous, eh ! Paul Denis—oh, if Paul Denis is all you have to worry about, my boy, you're all right."

They went back into the library.

The children had been brought in to see their grandmother. The two little girls, who were laughing and chattering, froze at the sight of Aurelien.

" Say how-do-you-do to M. Leurtillois."

Aurelien took his leave at once.

" Going already ? " Blanchette exclaimed. But she stopped short. She had met her mother-in-law's eyes.

" I'll come down with you," Edmond said. " I've got to drop in at the office."

On the stairs, in quite a different tone of voice, he continued their interrupted conversation :

" Listen, joking aside—if you are attracted to Berenice—supposing that it came to that—you can count on me."

Aurelien, who was going down the stairs ahead of him, turned round.

" You're quite incredible ! What are you up to ? Are you really trying to fling your cousin into my arms ? "

" I don't absolutely insist. But seeing that you've taken a fancy to her—well ! Now don't come the discreet over me, and don't try any tough stuff either ! I know you, my lad. You were just like that back in the trenches. Well, if you want to know, I'm rather fond of Berenice and I don't like her husband. I'll tell you about it. She has some claim to a bit of a good time. And with you it needn't come to anything, it never does."

The last sentence struck Aurelien most unpleasantly. He didn't say anything for a moment; then without looking at Edmond, he said :

" That's what you think."

" What ? Oh, I say, have I annoyed you ? I know the way you carry on with women. I rather appreciate it."

There was another silence. Edmond's thoughts went on revolving, and it was he who added :

" Unless I'm quite mistaken from A to Z——."

When they parted, Edmond driving off at the wheel of his huge car, and Aurelien in his little run-about, both were extremely thoughtful.

CHAPTER XVIII

M^{LLE} Suzanne flung back the carriage of the typewriter, raised her eyes, and sighed. She would never succeed in catching M. Arnaud's eye. The other typewriters were clicking away behind the counter. M. Simoneau, in his light grey suit, with his Bourbon nose, pointed beard, bald head and paunch, had just brought some papers to be typed for M. Le Beaudouin. In the room beyond, there were three or four people waiting. Lights had to be switched on early, for the air was dark with snow, and the rue Fillet-Will is narrow.

Adrien Arnaud asked Simoneau : " Is the chief in ? " He would not have dreamt of asking a typist. After all, Simoneau was the chief's secretary, and not only that, but also his confidential assistant, who signed cheques for him. He had been in the firm for thirty-five years, dating back to the days of the Morocco Estates Company, when he had been old M. Quesnel's secretary. He was quite an heirloom.

Simoneau regarded M. Arnaud with all the gravity that the situation demanded. If he had said yes, without knowing whether M. Barbentane did or did not wish to see M. Arnaud it might have—;—well, not cost him his job, doubtless, but all

the same, he had three daughters and a wife, especially the three daughters. Even though M. Arnaud was not only a member of the firm but a friend of the chief's, he said: " I'll go and see."

Adrien shrugged his shoulders rather impatiently, while the old man solemnly disappeared through the door to the director's room.

Adrien had sat behind that counter when he started work. In his three years at Taxis Limited he had done a bit of everything. And what else could he have done after the failure of his father's shops, his sole wealth once he was demobilised being his pips as a lieutenant in the reserve, with temporary rank at that, and his medal ribbons ? It was obvious that Edmond had wanted him to get to know the business from top to bottom. Not only the office, either ; for he had driven a taxi, had been in charge of one of the garages and worked in the repair shops. Then at the Morocco Estate that was until he had had this idea.

Simoneau beckoned him to go in. Mile Suzanne watched M. Arnaud disappear. What a handsome man ! He was well built, of middle height: the officer type. And with his curly brown hair, which he wore cut so short at the sides, he had a face that was not *anybody's* face, with its long nose, and the small, dark eyes, rather close together. The trace of childish acne on the cheekbones did not spoil him. People made fun of the way he swayed his hips when walking; still, it wasn't much, and he was an athlete. Mile Suzanne was prejudiced, for it was just that which she liked about him. M. Simoneau passed along between the typists.

" M. Simoneau ? "

" Yes, Mile Suzanne, what is it ? "

" Is M. Arnaud still at the office in the XVIIth arrondissement ? "

" No, no, Mile Suzanne, surely you know he is working on that petrol question ? "

Ah, Mile Suaanne was thinking about the thin pencil-line of moustache that always made her look at M. Arnaud's upper lip. He must know something about kissing. Never mind, she had been wrong about that. She took a new carbon.

Edmond had not changed anything in his father-in-law's office. There were the same dark mahogany, the same cupboard with the wire front, the green baize table, the lamps with bronze eagles. He had kept it thus, most particularly, as evidence of the continuity that reigned in the business and of how busy he was himself: although actually it was Simoneau who did everything, without appearing to be anything but part of the furniture. Edmond's attitude was part of the legend, which had it that Quesnel had put his son-in-law into this position in acknowledgment of his business acumen. The Morocco Estates Company had been successfully turned into Taxis Limited, and new branches continued to sprout from each new undertaking that opened offices in Paris as these gentlemen prospected ; and each new company, while consuming some of the old taxi company's capital, invested it to fresh advantage, increasing the profits of various enterprises in which a set of people reappeared who were all more or less bound up with Quesnel's, the Wisners, the Barbentanes and the Schoelzers. This vast financial network had its threads running as far afield as bus companies in Languedoc and Provence, Rumanian oilfields, land not far from the Invalides and the porte de Clignancourt, by the Trocadero and at Vincennes, stretching out to the rubber plantations of Malacca and Dutch tyre factories. And it was in all this that Adrien Arnaud was trying to cut out a niche for himself. He wanted to assure himself of the future position that the chief, an old friend of his childhood, allowed him to assume was his, exactly as he used to in the old days at S^{ur}ienne-le-Vieux, when he used to offer Adrien a return match at bowls, when he had hit the jack.

For the present, it looked as if the chief were doing very

nicely indeed, with his tanned, smooth face, from which the deep-set blue eyes looked out with a brilliance that passed for intellectual force. And Adrien envied Barbentane his suit. All the same, he's beginning to moult a bit, Adrien thought to himself, not without malice, as he noticed how Edmond's straight hair was carefully arranged over the place where he was going thin on top—not that that was by any means the same thing as being bald, of course.

The day's correspondence was piled up on the table, obviously untouched by Barbentane. Anyway, what did he know about it ! If he hadn't had Simoneau, a nice state he would have been in !

Barbentane shook hands with Adrien.

" Cigarette ? "

" No, thanks."

It was like Barbentane to be smoking, while Adrien went straight to the point. The other's thoughts were elsewhere. Annoying, people who don't listen to what you're saying.

" Listen, Edmond, this is serious."

Barbentane looked as if he were clearing his mind.

" What were you saying ? Sorry, I didn't quite follow."

" It worries me. If you can't be bothered to understand what I'm saying, the whole thing's up. You know quite well Wisner won't do anything unless you insist, and the syndicate are wrapped up in their own pet ideas. There's this *Palmede* lot——"

" Oh, what can *Palmede* do ? "

" There you are, as blind as the others. You know he's got his son-in-law into everything—the North-West Company, Provensal Transport, and so forth. But that isn't the problem. If the Board don't accept my scheme, it means drifting for a year. Simply throwing money away. It's enough to break anyone's heart."

" What a wonderful fellow you are. After all, it isn't your money."

" No, but it's yours, and it's the future I'm thinking about. We've done all that's necessary with the Taxi Company. The pumps are fixed up, and the petrol's paid for. But if the other companies won't accept the principle—we've *got* to get them to agree, once and for all, that their drivers must buy their petrol at their garages, the same as we do—it's the only way to make sure our show will work. If they think it out, they must see that it's to their advantage—all that petrol being used up in Paris, every day, in our cars. Why should they buy it from Tom, Dick, and Harry, when they can buy it from us ? It's money for jam, for them, right under their noses. And for us, too, of course. If the Board agrees, we'll provide them with the petrol. You get the point ? We win on all counts. Fundamentally, it's the same system as our tie-up with Wisner for the taxis—buying cars from him, we make on the deal because we hold stock in his company. Same with the petrol."

" You're making me quite giddy. But what has all this got to do with Palmede ? "

" That's what I'm trying to make you see all the time. I've found out from a very reliable man, a broker chap who'd do anything for me, that Palmede's been buying up petrol stations on the outskirts of Paris, through an agent. Avenue Malakoff, Avenue d'Orleans, and so on. Only last week. Now do you see what I mean ? We have to be on guard against him."

Edmorid was no longer listening. He was thinking about something else. What furious energy Adrien had ! What an extraordinary vocation ! He had been a mere kid when he had gone along to Barrel, the chocolate manufacturer, and organized a gymnastic club for his workers. He had flung himself into all sorts of peculiar enterprises for the sheer love of managing things. If Arnaud senior had not been run in for fiddling with the prices in his cut-price stores in Serianne-le-Vieux, during the war, Adrien would have inherited the

shops and the whole thing might have grown into something enormous. But, ruined by his father, and coming back to civilian life like a fish out of water (for soldiering had been his natural element), at thirty Arnaud was devoured with ambition. What a difference between the two of us ! thought Edmond, who had come to power and money along the road most natural to him, which meant through his relationships with women. Well, it was the quickest way. And once master of a fortune, he had only one wish left: that it would last as long as he did himself. It was not that his needs were extravagant: really the Barbentanes lived very quietly, even simply, in proportion to what they possessed. Their modest flat at Passy was worlds removed from Quesnel's luxurious house facing the Pare Monceau ; nor did they go in for footmen in livery. They kept only six servants. There were, of course, the estates. The country place near Liesse was only a holiday place, though it had plenty of ground and some shooting ; but that didn't count. The estates—that meant the house at Biarritz and the house they had had built on the bit of land at Antibes, where Carlotta was living now and which had cost more than it was worth. All that mattered was that this should last long enough : that was all. Edmond didn't want to go *on* working, in order to become richer. Damn it, money was merely the means to not having to think about money. When one has reached a certain elevation, the surrounding air is purer, and there's no sense in plunging back into the abysses, where money is made by the sordid labours of other people who have not succeeded in rising. On the heights, Edmond had acquired the right to have human feelings, the right to involve himself in the complexity of human relationships which are more bewildering and extraordinary than any financial intricacy. He let himself become absorbed in them, wandering in the maze and intoxicating himself with the study of emotion. He thought with horror of the past, of the time when he had been a

student and used to wonder how he could manage to arrive decent at parties in the evening, where a woman was waiting for him, a woman with diamonds—when he hadn't a copper for a taxi ! Now he owned all the taxis in Paris. Not that he ever went anywhere by taxi nowadays.

People in poor circumstances haven't the time to understand their emotions. They haven't even the desire. They are at the mercy of mean little calculations and sordid obsessions. Edmond wondered if Adrien was still at this stage; however, he was earning a good salary and he probably made a bit on the side, too. No, Adrien Arnaud would always be like that, even when he had arrived ; he took after his father, always wanting to have a bit more, and then a bit more. It was a queer sort of greed that would drive a man to reinvest his money instead of making a show with it. Not a bad-looking chap—probably he would make a good marriage.

" Why don't you get married, Adrien ? "

The other seemed to have reached the limits of exasperation, but he kept himself in check. " Listen, Edmond, do listen to me. I'm trying to tell you about Palm^ade, and you——"

Edmond laughed quietly. " All right, what about Palmede ? "

" For the third time, I'm explaining."

He began again from the beginning.

These are precisely the kind of people who carry out big business deals. It was a good idea getting him to come in with me, Edmond said to himself, he's only out for himself, but that means he's looking after my advantage as well, which is all that matters. In some people's hands, money evaporates ; in other people's it solidifies. I belong to the sort who let everything go up in smoke.

That was the way Edmond liked to think of himself. It was his justification ; for the cynicism of his youth had softened under the influence of the fortune he married.

He would have liked to take an interest in this business about the petrol stations, but his mind was concerned with something else. He was remembering old Quesnel, at the time when he had first got to know him. How strange he had found the old man, who not only lived in two worlds, those of his business and his private life, but who seemed at times to stray into a third realm, one to which Edmond had no access. That was the world of real wealth, a spiritual realm. Edmond often thought with horror of that story that comes somewhere in, I think, one of Charles-Louis Philippe's books, about a little urchin who is taken to the fair. The child of a very poor family, he is longing to ride one of the wooden horses on the merry-go-round : in his hand he has tuppence that his father gave him for that very purpose, but *inwardly* he is so poor that he can't. . . . A dreadful story. It's the same thing with wealth ; it doesn't matter how much money one has, what does matter is to be *inwardly* rich.

Now Edmond was inwardly rich. He could let himself go ; he could sit back and take a detached interest in other people's misfortunes. For he had overcome the divine curse : Thou shalt win thy bread by the sweat of thy brow. Anyone who has not experienced this pride in having defeated God, even though he may not believe in God, does not fully know what it is to be a man.

" Right you are, Adrien. Draft me out a little report about this business, will you, and give it to Simoneau. I'll say whatever's necessary to the Board. And don't lose any sleep over Palmede ! "

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Adrien had gone, Edmond made an attempt to go through the letters, but he could not give his mind to it. Three times he began again a letter from an insurance

company, with whom Taxis Limited were having a dispute about some land in the centre of Paris. His own life danced before his eyes. Perhaps the fact that this friend of his childhood had been in the office, together with what he had been thinking about during lunch, was the cause of a growing nostalgia, a vague longing for the past, which was incompatible with business. It is probably a disillusioning and abnormal thing for a man who is still young, energetic and alert in all his faculties, to have already achieved all that he desires, all that he is capable of desiring. He remembered the bitterness with which, in the old days, he had looked at other people's wealth, the elegance in which they lived, and their bejewelled women. Almost he would have liked to recapture that bitter rage. In those days indeed he had sometimes been surprised by the violence of his own feelings, which would carry him away so suddenly. He remembered it distinctly. And he remembered that woman who had come, one evening, to his room in the little hotel where he lodged, and who had been rash enough to come wearing her diamonds : and the impulse he had felt, the hot rage rising within him, the desire to strangle that woman. What is it that decides whether or not we shall plunge into crime ?

Now let's see, what's all this stuff about ? Difficulties with the Paris Municipality—" Simoneau ! " He rang the bell.

The secretary's little white beard, his Bourbonish nose, bald skull and paunch, appeared in the doorway.

" I say, Simoneau, what's all this about ? "

For a few minutes Barbentane forced himself to follow the explanation ; but then things took on a more general form in his mind. The Municipality was trying to put a spoke in their building plans, and there was a mass of red tape concealing rake-off and bribes, the battles of the various cliques, competition ; all this ran through Edmond's expanding day-dream like the water-mark of falsehood that

traces a faint line through all certainty. You come to believe that you have won, that you hold the fort. Everyone around you convinces you of it: you're master. Then, at first very dimly and secretly, but with growing uneasiness, you begin to feel that at bottom there is no such thing as victory, and no citadel to storm or hold. The enemy, the hostile element, is not merely that recognisable character, society with a house of its own ; it is a philosophic force which takes refuge in the very heart of your defeat. The enemy takes up new positions in the element of which you thought yourself the master. What an illusion it is ever to think one really possesses anything ! All property melts away in the hands that try to hold it fast. That is the mystery of gold, of land, of women : it's just when you think you really have it that it escapes you.

" All right, Simoneau. Draft out the answer along these lines, the way you've just put it to me. It strikes me as very neat and reasonable. You know, you really ought to have been a business man, you would have been rich by now. I'll sign it."

He pushed the letters away. Simoneau was still standing there, slightly bent, letting praise pass over his head, waiting for orders, while the silence lengthened.

Edmond was thinking rather irritably about Blanchette. With the passing of the years, he felt the enemy strengthening its position in her character. Most people would have laughed at the idea that this woman, who was so obviously in love with her husband and had overcome every obstacle in order to be there for him and for him only, could possibly——oh, well, of course. But the enemy was growing in her, all the same. There were the children, and there was life. There was even virtue, though that was a rather more doubtful quantity : it's a husband's business not to notice anything. I'm not much of a husband in that respect, Edmond thought to himself.

" Simoneau ! "

" Yes, sir ? "

" Would you do something for me, ring up my house-yes, please do. Don't say it's from me, just ask if Mine Barbentane is at home."

" But if anyone asks what——"

" Say I went out half an hour ago and that you want me/" Simoneau didn't try to understand, for it wasn't his business. Mme Barbentane was not at home. She had gone out straight after Monsieur had left the house.

Edmond dismissed his secretary.

What did that prove ? It wasn't even an attempt to prove anything. He began to think about other women, all the other women there had been ; for the afternoon hours passed heavily. If it had been spring, he would have gone out for a stroll along the boulevards. Vaguely he imagined the houses he knew, the warm air in the corridors, the women he would find there, and he let his mind rove, flickering between the Ternes and Montmartre, and from the Lorette district to the Palais-Royal. He was conscious of still being loved for his own sake. There was, for instance, a little place not far from the Madeleine that provided the proof very definitely, and the thing had, as he told himself, more *style*; for in a case where love is not in question, it had a surprising capacity for springing into new life. The only certain homage a man can receive comes from the prostitute who refuses money. That is axiomatic.

When he was in the car, and once he had completed the tricky manoeuvre of coming out of that confounded rue Pillet-Will, always so jammed with vehicles, he could not make up his mind where to go. It was cold and gloomy ; the street lamps were lighting up. He turned up the rue Lafayette, towards the Op[^]ra, drifting in a stream of thought which had been started as he passed a gallery window full of modern paintings: that had led him on to the subject of

Paul Denis. What the devil did that little fool Berenice want to go around with him for ? Of course, it was her affair, but—well, far too Bohemian. All those Bohemians love a scandal; it's an absolute windfall for them if they succeed in compromising a woman. Obviously Lucien wouldn't know anything about it; he was too far away for that. But all the same, especially when someone of the Paul Denis sort thinks he has discovered the great love, and all that. What fools !

He had let himself be guided mainly by a desire to avoid the traffic jams, turning down side-streets and not noticing much where he was going, until he found himself in the rue des Belles-Feuilles. He stopped the car outside Mary de Perseval's house, somewhat surprised by his own unconscious action. " I'll have to get myself psycho-analysed," he muttered to himself, ironically. He assured himself that there was no mistake and that it by no means meant he was falling back into an old habit. Right, Til go and tell her to keep an eye on her tame poet. It's an act of friendship, I can hardly do anything else. Our dear Mary isn't so young as she was.

CHAPTER XX

MARY DE PERSEVAL had people there. Edmond heard the piano as soon as he came in. Paul Denis was improvising variations on a theme of Manuel de Falla's and tunes from " Phi-Phi." The lamps had been lit, but something about the atmosphere suggested that these people had been there by daylight and had only just resigned themselves to switching on artificial light. The air was full of cigarette smoke, and there were glasses on the tables ; the whole thing seemed intimate in a way that made Barbentane feel, instantly and

acutely, that he was an intruder. He was not expected. He was landing into the midst of conversation that these people wanted to continue, with their half-finished stories, dropped in order to go off at one tangent and then at another, stories that would be picked up again easily because the speakers had spent several hours in a sort of social complicity together. All that was going to be spoilt by the sudden entry of a stranger.

But there weren't as many people as he had thought. Apart from the pianist, there were three, Mary, Berenice, and the painter, Zamora. They turned as Edmond came in : Zamora stopped in the middle of a sentence ; Paul Denis went on playing, only rising on the piano stool to see who it was ; and Berenice jumped up to kiss her cousin.

" Oh, Edmond, Edmond, what a lovely day I've had ! Just think—this morning M. Denis look me to see Picasso—yes, really, Picasso ! I've seen his pictures, and the funny flat he has. He's such a nice man ! And then Paul brought me back to lunch with Mme de Perseval."

" Do call me Mary," Mary said.

" With Mary"—this with Berenice's most delightful by-play, her hand on her cousin's shoulder, turning slightly to indicate the people of whom she was speaking, as if she were introducing them—" and Mary, who has been kind enough to put up with me, had M. Zamora here, who's been telling us stories, quite marvellous stories ! I've never heard anyone tell stories like that ! "

" Well, I see that we are having a good time," Edmond said, kissing his hostess's hand. And turning to Zamora, he asked : " How do you like my little cousin ? "

" Mme Morel and I are already a couple of friends, a three-cornered couple." The little pot-bellied man accompanied this gallantry by a bow towards Mme de Perseval and an extremely Spanish flash of his dark eyes. He had a way of waving his hand that belonged to some other century,

and a chuckling laugh that cast doubt on everything, aimed as it was against himself and what he was saying and his companion.

" Four-cornered ! " Paul Denis called out from the piano stool.

" Oh, so you're still there, are you ? " Mary said. " I thought you were wrapped up in your crotchets."

" And what do you do about jealousy, Mary ? "

" He's jealous ? " Zamora said. " Of whom ? "

" You know/" Berenice confided to her cousin, " M. Zamora wants to do my portrait."

" A portrait of you ? Got up as a carburettor ? In your place, I wouldn't be too happy about it! "

" How silly of you, Edmond," Mary protested. " I suppose you haven't seen the women's heads that Zamora does."

" Oh yes, I have. But I think only the Bretonnes."

" My dear sir, you don't know how right you are," Zamora said, half seriously, half ironically. " Mme Morel has a peculiarly shaped skull, quite sufficiently the Breton type for me. However, my Breton period is beginning to wear off. I am having a show quite soon, I hope you will come to the private view."

Berenice was certainly quite charmed at the prospect of having her portrait painted : and at the attention the painter was paying her. She could not know that what he wanted was to paint a portrait of a woman who had been at Picasso's that very morning, nor that if he had been so brilliant in conversation, it was merely to make her forget about Picasso. He had not quite succeeded.

" Oh, Edmond ; if you could see, if you could only see the things Picasso has ! "

" Yes," Zamora said, " a very nice Douanier Rousseau."

Berenice went on, without noticing this malicious thrust:

" Pictures in every corner. Harlequins, guitars—each one more marvellous than the last. And those extraordinary

huge women. He has an unfinished portrait there, I think it's his wife."

Talking of portraits, Zamora explained that he found Mme Morel very interesting because her eyes seemed to be stolen from some other and quite different face. So he was going to paint her twice in the portrait, once as the woman one could see and once as the woman one could not see : he was going to paint her both with her eyes open and with her eyes shut, to make it clear that there were two different beings struggling for supremacy in her face, like a fluttering of the eyelashes.

" Well, it sounds nice, I must say," Edmond murmured more or less audibly. He found Zamora entertaining, but he did not like his painting.

Paul Denis had become tired of playing Verdi's *Othello* to prove that he was jealousy incarnate and, what was more, jealous of Zamora, whom he knew fairly well.

" My dear fellow, tell us the story about how you met Cocteau." The two artists exchanged an understanding look. Zamora was on excellent terms with Cocteau ; Paul Denis was not. But nobody knew better how to tear him to pieces, doing imitations of him. Berenice was laughing like a child at a Punch-and-Judy show.

" You'll have something to drink, won't you, Edmond ? " Mary de Perseval drew him towards the dining-room. Edmond pretended to say good-evening to the wooden negro on guard at the door ; then, while she was pouring him out a whisky, he said, pointing at the collection of shirts decorating the walls :

" I've always meant to ask you, Mary darling—how do you manage ? When all these shirts get dirty, do you clean them with breadcrumbs ? "

" Idiot! They're simply taken down and sent to the laundry. I have two sets. My dining-room changes its shirts just as you do."

He helped himself to ice. " Listen, Mary—you must be on the look-out about Paul Denis and my cousin Berenice."

" What ? You must be crazy ! "

" Well, I mean, two young people like that, spending the Whole day together."

" At Picasso's, darling. And then, what he wanted most of all was to bring her along here to me—she was dying to meet Zamora after all the boy had told her about him/'

" Him and his Breton women. Why Bretonnes, anyway ? He's a Spaniard, isn't he ? "

" You don't wonder why Gauguin painted Tahitians, do you ? And Bretonnes, too, for that matter ! "

" Gauguin ! Gauguin ! If I were you, I wouldn't be so sure of myself."

" My dear, Paul Denis is quite contented with things the way they are. He isn't in love with me, but I flatter him. And then there's the house ; he comes to lunch almost every day. I take him to the theatre, and I don't contradict him when he says that Jean-Frederic Sicre is a genius. He hasn't a furious temperament—not like you." (Edmond bowed slightly.) " Now tell me, to what do I owe the honour of your visit ? "

" Mary, I wanted to talk to you—but how you do jump to conclusions ! "

" I know you, man with a mask ! Nothing seriously wrong, I hope ? "

" No, nothing much. Only——"

" You *are* queer lately. Do you mind my saying that I don't quite see what you are up to with your little cousin—• she's really charming, by the way. You look around for a lover for her, and then you play the watchdog. After all, arriving like this without warning—and your remarks about Paul Denis——"

" What I said was for purely your sake. Anyway, how could I know Berenice was here ? "

" Tch, tch ! Your solicitude is quite touching, darling, but I can't take it seriously. The thing that bothers me about you, Edmond, is that I keep on wondering what you've got into your head these days. Don't interrupt! I know you, I know you ! Always with some woman up your sleeve, slippery as an eel, and the way you pop up and vanish again, because you're having an affair ; when you are, you behave exactly like a man who's having an affair, and when you lie, it means you have something to lie about. But this is different, for some time you've been——"

" Well, what have I been ? "

" You've taken to lying for incomprehensible reasons. Oh yes, you have. You lie as easily as you breathe. And it isn't for the sake of some lady's honour, or to cover up the way you spend your time. Nobody sees you where you oughtn't to be. You've suddenly acquired the airs of a married man. Honestly, darling, it quite worries me."

" I don't mind your jokes, you spiteful creature. Of course I'm a married man."

" But a married man who doesn't deceive his wife ? "

" Precisely."

" You don't think you can tell *me* a story like that! How long have you been faithful to her ? A week ? A fortnight ? Longer ? Impossible ! But what has come over you ? Are you in love with your wife ? How smart! "

" No, Mary, I'm not in love with my wife. I'm jealous of her, which is much worse."

A thunderbolt striking the shirts on the dining-room walls could scarcely have created a greater effect. Mme de Perseval looked at Barbentane in amazement :

" But, my poor darling, you're crackers ! Jealous of Blanchette ? That saint ? That saint, moreover, who is quietly dying of love for you. You've taken leave of your senses. Be quiet, I know what I'm talking about. I don't answer for you or for me—but Blanchette ! What an idea !"

" Yes, I've told myself that it's madness. But that's how it is. I feel her slipping between my fingers. I don't know what is going on in her mind, what she thinks and feels. Do you see, it's as though I were attacked right at the heart of my peaceful life, which is based on things we've never questioned. My relationship with Blanchette——"

Mary was looking at him, thunderstruck. She put her hand on his forehead, as if to make the comic gesture of seeing whether he were feverish.

" Edmond, if you're in your right mind, it can only mean one thing : you're trying to hide something from me with this clumsy tale. Oh, and what has Mme Morel to do with all this ? You're not in love with her, are you ? No, you're playing a game for M. Leurtillois. You're becoming too complicated for me."

" Talking of Leurtillois, Mary, you're playing a double game with me. I ask you to help me, and what do you go and do ? You throw yourself at Aurelien's head. I'm not completely blind, either."

" And supposing I do rather like this Aurelien of yours ? Anyway, you can set your mind at rest, it's over already—on his side."

" Damn it, what do you all see in the fellow ? "

He burst out with the question so fiercely that suddenly everything became quite plain to Mme de Perseval.

" Oh, I see ! " she said. " It's Aurelien you're jealous of!"

He shrugged his shoulders. " What makes you say a silly thing like that ? You know quite well that men never can understand what women see in another man 1 "

Paul Denis appeared in the doorway, frowning.

" I say, you two, you're creating a bit of a scandal, holding a separate service like this. You forget you have a cousin, M. Barbentane. She would like you to take her home."

CHAPTER XXI

WET snow was falling on the dirty, slippery pavements. Aurelien stopped his car at the top of the rue Oberkampf, almost at the outer boulevards. That part of Paris, with its dilapidated offices, the shabby shop-windows, the leprous houses dishonoured by posters so old that nobody notices them any longer, constricts the heart of men accustomed to the west end, the elegant heart of the capital. This district has neither the romantic quality of the Marais, nor the historical memories of the quartier Saint-Honore, nor the poetic atmosphere of the Place des Victoires. There is no scope for any kind of dreams here. Nothing here is a monument to anything ; and yet all kinds of things must have taken place here, in the history of this city with all its paroxysms. But as no one remembers anything that happens to anyone but the great families, these common streets have kept nothing in the way of a legend ; or if they have a secret, it has been buried very deep and been lost. In fact, only a different sort of people feel any quickening of the pulse here.

The entrance to the municipal swimming-baths was at the end of a dark and narrow passage, where the dustbins stood half-asleep in the dusk. At that time there were very few swimming-baths in Paris. Les Tourelles had not yet been opened, and apart from the rue de Chazel and Claridge's, there were only some baths in the crowded districts where there was so little room for them. Aurelien preferred these to the smart people's swimming-pools, about the cleanliness of which he was always rather suspicious. Here there was a notice : *Please go through the shower before entering the water*, stating an implacable law that could not have been imposed on people who must be assumed to possess a bathroom at

home. The narrow balcony, surrounded by wooden cubicles with the paint scaling off, swarmed with men who came here only because they wanted to bathe and swim, and not for affairs that would be continued later in a bath-robe at the bar, with made-up women—ambiguous gentry, with their pearl necklaces and American swim-suits. This public, here, apart from one or two stout men w⁷ho had borrowed striped bathing-costumes from the cashier, went into the water garbed only in the little white drawers or simple loin-cloth that one was handed as one came in. It was a pool of green water, quite clean, well lit, making an L-turn at one end to join the shallow part where the children and non-swimmers went. The water was slightly warmed, which made the air faintly misty. The swimming coach, a snub-nosed, gingery man with cropped head, square shoulders, long, rippling muscles, and hair on his chest, slopped about in wooden sandals, watching the divers cleave the air. There were ten swimmers or more, apart from those who were resting in front of their cubicles, some standing, some sitting on the ground, their arms round their knees. The young men of the district had issued from the workshops and factories, solid lads, rowdy, hilarious, small, fat or tall, with damp hair falling into their eyes or with an elastic band to hold it back. The divers wore caps. Dark and fair, once in the water all were alike, only resuming their individualities as they mounted the iron ladder. What healthy faces they had, pleasantly coarse, not yet much marked by life, though many of them had bad or broken teeth and scars on their arms and hands, a finger missing or one joint short. The details revealed the wretchedness of their lives, but to a swift, general glance, what was noticeable was their strength and agility.

Aurelien undressed awkwardly in his narrow cubicle, where he had not enough room for his long arms and legs. As usual he did not know where to hang his things and was embarrassed by the little notice : *The management cannot be*

responsible for any valuables not deposited with the cashier. As if he were going to draw attention to himself by going along there ! Anyway, these people were honest. Or at least more honest than those at the——. Stupid to come here with a pearl in one's tiepin. He stuck it in the lapel of his jacket, underneath, stuffed his socks into his shoes so as to have them together when he got dressed again, instead of having to hunt all over the place for them. In the little drawers that kept on slipping down and wrinkling across his belly, Aurelien felt more naked than when he was quite undressed. When he pushed the door open and went out, the muscles standing out like cords on his bony frame, he squinted down disapprovingly at the hair on his legs, and took stock of his feet, which still bore a faint imprint of the shoes. Looking across the baths to the balcony and cubicles opposite, he came to the conclusion that most of these men were not as inhibited as he was : they undressed with the doors open, gossiping in their shirts, rubbing their feet with their thighs lifted, and so on. It made him feel a little ashamed of the hypocritical habits he brought along with him, from the other sphere in which he lived ; he was ashamed of not being more natural and spontaneous, and he compared himself, rather timidly, with the others. Apart from two stout men, already bald, he was among the eldest. It was not the first time he had come ; he had been here the day before yesterday ; but he always had this secret sensation of having escaped into a pleasantly anonymous exile, a social exile that awoke dormant emotions bound up with the war. And then too, at times, among these men he had felt the enjoyment and contentment that he was rediscovering now: the pleasure of having slipped in somewhere where he had no right to be and of mixing undetected in the crowd, among these people who were generally remote, mysterious, forbidden territory. Nakedness re-established the miracle of the uniform. He felt in reverse what a man of another class is supposed to

feel if suddenly transported into select society, where everything is suave, rich and dazzling. To think that that was what he had thought at Verdun ! It was merely a matter of the uniform : back there it had been the earth, here it was the water.

The water. . . . He went under the shower, his feet on the grill where a scrap of soap was floating about. It is never possible to fix these gadgets immediately the way one wants: first of all one is scalded, then frozen. The swimming coach was watching him out of the corner of his eye. Aurelien scrubbed himself conscientiously. Water. . . . Under the pattering rain that now had the right temperature, he heard the song of the water. Why was it that everything to do with water held such a fascination, such poetry, for him ? Water. . . .

He dived. He liked to open his eyes under the water and then, coming up to the surface, slice the water again like a dolphin. It seemed incredible that this caress and embrace of water should be possible in the midst of Paris. Water. . . . Water. . . . It had got into his ears ; he tipped it out. And the solitude, the wonderful solitude ! Here, in this frog-pool, with the shouts of two youths chasing each other, catching each other by the feet or by the head, he felt himself whole. Here he was completely alone : far more alone than in his rooms on the prow of the island, when he opened the window above the trees, the river, and the ghostly atmosphere of all those who had been drowned in the Seine flowing past below.

He went the length of the pool, guiding himself only by the motion of his legs and turning, with a twist of his hips, when he reached the end of this green garden of solitude. Shutting his eyes, he abandoned himself to the illusion of vast space.

The last time he had flung himself into this lukewarm water, it had been in order to flee the image of Berenice, but he had found her there, too, pervasive, clinging, something he could not shake off. He had abandoned himself to that image, he had let himself be defeated by Berenice, the sense of her

mingling with the caress of the water, mingling with the suppleness of his swimming and the intimate solitude of the naked body, that blend of indolence and effort, all that marvel of floating movement. This time he had come back to see the same thing, to find a Berenice more real than the woman who went out with Paul Denis: a Berenice with whom he had an appointment here. Very soon he felt her presence, all her presence in his dreaming mind. Swimming, he turned round, as though he were turning in bed, sleeping with a woman ; and in that rolling together of the man's body and the image, she followed him as a woman does when, in her sleep, she turns to follow the curve of the sleeper's body. As he imagined Berenice like this, it was not only her face, that face with the closed eyes which he loved so much and that was more real than the other, but all of her, the whole Berenice ; and that made him drunk with his strength, urging him on to expend all the power of his muscles. He swam the crawl violently, wildly, just avoiding his companions in the pool. What harm is there in a young man's imagining, while he thinks of a young woman, that she is completely there and naked as himself ? None at all. And yet Aurelien was overcome by it, and only the speed with which he swam prevented him from reproaching himself for having such thoughts at all.

In order to go faster still, he tried a stroke that he had been shown in Salonika.

Then, happily tired, suddenly he let himself go, stretched out flat and floated like a log, until he caught hold of the iron ladder by a rung. He had water in his eyes and nose. He snorted.

" What's that stroke you was doing, mate ?" a voice said above him. It was a young fellow of twenty-three or four, standing on the steps with his hands on his hips : a lusty fellow, not very tall, but strongly built, with a hairless chest, great shaggy paws, arms and shoulders that really belonged to someone a head taller than himself. The hands were those of a

boxer. He had a pleasant humorous face, a short nose, a lop-sided mouth, a tight-rope-walker's jaw, and tense muscles standing out on the cheeks. His fair hair still showed traces of brilliantine, and on his left hand there was a rather faded tattooed pattern, in blue and pink, of a mariner's card.

"I been watching you," he went on. "That's a rum trick. What's that flipping around you do with your feet? I didn't get it quite."

Aurelien panted for a moment and then explained :

"It's a Greek stroke. I learnt it at Salonika, during the war."

"Oh, so you was with the army in the East? I was class 18, just got up to the front and then goodnight. Three days after—shut up shop. We didn't wait for any more, I can tell you! Show us this Greek dodge, will you?"

"Right you are."

Aurelien demonstrated the stroke for him. He himself didn't exactly know what he did with his feet, and he tried to analyse the movement. Suddenly he became aware that the other was beside him in the water.

"Like this, eh? Wrong, is it? You put your arm over your head, and then—oh, I get it. Quick, ain't it?"

They were allies. They swam in convoy.

"Mind how you breathe," Aurelien said.

"What you mean?"

"You're not breathing in the right places."

"You can't come that over Riquet! My breathing! I like that! You should see me do the hundred yards."

They swam the length of the baths. Riquet's name was Henri. And his companion? Aurelien knew that his name was always the cause of comment, and so he called himself Roger, which was his second name. Roger, then. Riquet was certainly in better training than Roger, but he had never had a proper teacher, and so lacked style. It was a pity, for he had the makings of a real swimmer.

" It's not like that with me," Aurelien said. " I've let myself go. I only swim once in a blue moon."

" And not as young as you was," the other said without malice, thinking it a good joke.

Riquet was a fitter in a factory near the Buttes-Chaumont. " Do you live round here ? " he asked. Roger replied evasively. He couldn't very well say that he didn't do a stroke of work, and that he had a car standing outside : that would have ruined the whole thing. So he merely admitted :

" No, I live near the Hotel de Ville."

All the same, Riquet's breathing was still not right. " Look here, you ought to do what I tell you. Like this, watch."

" Go on ! You lay off, see. Think you're a blooming performing seal! I'll show you." And to show what he meant, he leapt out of the water like a seal: the dangerous backwards jump. " I bet you can't do that, you with all your breathing, Roger."

They had fallen at once into that comradeship that springs from sharing an effort and competing together. They sat down for a moment on the edge of the balcony, with their legs dangling, and Riquet began to tell the story of his life. He was from le Havre. He had started work when he was twelve, at the docks, and that was how he had begun to swim. He loved it. But in Paris it wasn't so good, and anyway he was done up when he left the factory in the evening. But still——. He had gone in for competitions.

" I'm not a champion. Not me. The champs have to be shoved along. Still, you don't have to be a champion, do you ? Racing for cups, there's lots go in for it that just make up the also-rans. You've got to have all them stringing along, to make it a proper race, that's what I say. I know I'll come in last with the rest of the crowd, but I don't mind that, I have my fun. And what I say is, if chaps like me didn't go in for the races, the champs would get soft, see ? " He guffawed, his short nose wrinkled up and his cheeks became hard as bullets*

" In the spring," he said, " there's the Seine. Port-d-l'Anglais. Never been to the Port-a-l'Anglais ? Up-river from Paris, that's why they say it's more clean. You take the tram——"

In the end, Riquet, in whose mind the idea had been working for some time, proposed that he and his new friend should do the hundred yards. " The pool's twelve yards. Seven times—eight times that—that makes ninety-six, that right ? That's as good as a hundred. Four times there and back. Are you on ? "

In spite of his style, Aurelien was beaten. Riquet was delighted. " It's not as easy as what you think. Well, my missus'll be waiting." So this lad had a wife ! " We're not spliced, twig ? But she's my missus all the same. Well, you go and get dressed and I'll stand you a drink over the road. The Pint of Moonlight."

Aurelien, in his cubicle, knotted his tie and reflected that the whole thing was artificial, a make-believe from beginning to end : his life, the swimming-baths, Riquet, the war, the Pint of Moonlight. (Funny name, that.) It was all just a matter of invented pretexts, obstacles that he put in his own path ; and the more he tried to avoid Berenice, the more insistently she returned to him, living and triumphant.

When Riquet beheld his newly-made friend dressed, he whistled. There he was in his old stained trousers, battered and creased, and a blue overall, and a cap. He was disillusioned.

" And me going to stand you a drink ! " he said. His tone altered as he spoke ; it was as though he were on the point of saying " sir." He could not get over his mistake. He was overwhelmed by the social error he had made, and nothing could make him forget it. Something was destroyed. In the end, because he did not know how to get out of the situation, he let Aurelien drag him along to the Pint of Moonlight, which was actually called the Pint of Moonlight Brasserie, and was a little *café* as wan as its name, and almost quite deserted.

They had a *byrrh a l'eau* at the bar, while Riquet cast sidelong glances at his companion's glad-rags.

" So you're a capitalist, that's what you are." Said like that, it didn't seem so serious. Aurelien confessed that he was. What, not really ? Yes, really. . . .

" And what do you work at ? "

That was difficult to explain. He couldn't very well say nothing at all, but he loathed the idea of lying. " I live on my dividends," he said.

The effect was totally unexpected. Riquet went into fits of laughter, laughing almost hysterically, with the tears running down his cheeks. A gentleman of leisure ! Cor strike a light, a gentleman of leisure ! Then he remembered that this gentleman of leisure was paying for his drink. He apologised, he became the very soul of politeness, drinking with an appreciative air to show Aurelien that he was conscious of the situation. Then he began to talk about swimming again, and the Turkish, no, Greek stroke—" what you showed me, sir."

" Damn it, Riquet, you can't go and ' sir' me just because I've got back into my duds."

But " duds " was obviously part of a vocabulary meant to put Riquet at his ease ; and Riquet felt it. He said it wasn't merely because Aurelien was *dressed*, and he emphasised the word, that he was calling Roger " sir." And the name Roger sounded like a friendly gesture, which made Aurelien all the more ashamed. If he called Roger "sir" it was because Roger was a gentleman, and that was all; a thing like that couldn't be helped, either you're a gentleman or you're not. Nevertheless, he was so interested in the subject that he relapsed into his earlier tone.

" See here, explain this a bit. You mean you don't do anything ? Not anything all day ? Honest ? So what do you do to pass the time ? I couldn't live like that, not me. I've been on the dole, and I know what I'm talking about, you need to be tough to be on the dole all your life."

In spite of the pleasure he had had at the baths, that sensation of pleasure that comes from having been in the water and swimming, after Aurelien had shaken hands with Riquet and was back in the car again, he suddenly felt very restless. He drove off into the night, and then he noticed that he was no longer thinking about Berenice. What was he thinking about, really ? Perhaps he was not really thinking of anything, and was only pursued by a vague whirl of memories and phantom associations, with something like remorse casting a glare over it all. Then gradually, as he was driving down towards the Seine, his imagination gained the upper hand, blotting out the world and Riquet and the reminiscences of his childhood days and everything but Berenice's voice, saying :

" When I was a little girl, I used to live in a big house full of ghosts. . . ."

CHAPTER XXII

" AH, there you are at last! I've been waiting for you for two hours. I came back three times, and then the caretaker took pity on me and let me come up."

Returning to his flat, Aurelien had found the lights on and his sister sitting there reading *Vogue*, as if she were at the dentist's. Armandine Debrest was always ready to scold her brother, as if he were still a harum-scarum lad who was late for dinner.

" So sorry you had to wait," he said rather coolly, throwing his hat and his fawn gloves on to the bed. Coming back into the sitting-room, he kissed his sister casually. " You didn't let me know you were coming."

" Of course I didn't. I only arrived in Paris this morning. There was no answer when I rang up, so I came here, and you weren't in, and so I came back——"

" Yes, so you told me. The caretaker let in you."

" No, not the second time, the third time. I wondered what you could be doing."

" I went swimming."

" In this weather ? Don't try being funny with me."

" I swear by all that you hold sacred that I'm not such a fool as to do that! It's the plain truth : I was swimming."

" You've always had a sense of humour nobody else could understand. You think it makes you interesting."

" Did you come here three times just to snub me ? Purely for the sake of bawling me out ? "

" Heavens, Aurelien, what an expression ! I don't know if you picked up these habits in the army——"

" What have I said ? " He was genuinely astonished to hear her suddenly finding fault with the army, and he added :

" It wasn't everybody who could spend the war in a government department." That was a smack on the jaw for his brother-in-law, with his cushy job.

Armandine shrugged her fine Flemish shoulders. My word, she had got heavier ! She didn't dress badly, though. . . .

" I suppose somebody had to be in the government departments."

He didn't carry the dispute any further, although he might well have said that somebody had to be in the army. But he refrained and bent down to take logs out of the box, as well as an old newspaper and some sticks; he set about lighting a fire.

" What, a fire ? " Armandine said. " Are you going to light a fire, when you've got central heating ? "

Without turning round, he answered :

" I like to have the place stifling hot. And a wood fire is rather gay."

" You do yourself well," she said.

He might have replied that it was quite true, that he did do himself well. But where would that lead ? He had sufficient

contempt for his sister not to play at that game. The best retort was the crackling of the twigs.

Armandine tightened her lips, which were untouched by lipstick, and her blue eyes assumed a look of resignation. Her round, full face had a slow, indolent expression that made her brother look surprisingly lively by contrast.

"I wasn't going to take my coat off," she said, "but as you're lighting a fire—I don't want to get a chill when I go out."

He helped her out of her black coat with the collar and cuffs of grey astrakhan and the pockets edged with the same stuff. She was wearing a drab tailor-made that was heart-breakingly correct, and her blouse was the essence of everything a blouse can be.

"If that's the way it is, I might as well take off my hat too."

Aurelien took the black felt basin that she had had concealing her glossy fair hair, drawn up from the nape of the neck into a plain bun, from which a few strands straggled. As he was bearing the things away into his bedroom, she raised her voice and said, in a tone suggesting that her bad temper had vanished in the course of the little wrangle :

"But this is really a very nice little place you have. The fire's lighting up well. You ought to put another log on at once. Not too big."

He knew these abrupt changes of mood and the sudden unaccountable calm that would set in after a bout of severity. It always took him a little longer to adjust himself, and it would be the second or third time of answering her before he could be rid of the sharp tone which she had been the first to introduce into the conversation.

"You haven't told me to what I owe the honour of your visit."

"I was in Paris, and so—there it is. Jacques has gone to Brussels on business, so I took the chance of coming up to town."

"Oh yes, how is Jacques ?"

" Thanks, he's very well. Rather overworked. He can do with the Christmas holidays. What was I saying ? Oh yes, I wanted to see my dressmaker and so on; it's impossible to buy a hat in Lille, as you can imagine. And with Christmas coming along, and the New Year, I wanted to do some shopping—presents for the children."

" And how are the children ? All right, I suppose ? "

" Pierre and Raymond are as fit as fiddles, but Baby has had a little cold."

" Nothing serious ? "

" Would I be here if it were ? I've been going from one shop to another until I'm worn out. It's so difficult to choose toys. There are such a lot of new ones that we never had when we were small, and I don't know if they'll like them. And toys are going off in quality. Everything's mere cardboard, and the colours are so ugly, one would think they were meant for adults. I couldn't make up my mind. I've been in the Galeries aux Trois Quartiers, at the Louvre, the Bon Marche, and the Blue Dwarf in the rue de Rivoli. I'll have to go back to the Trois Quartiers tomorrow."

" You'll be staying in Paris for a few days, I suppose ? "

" Oh no, I'm leaving tomorrow afternoon. But I wanted to go along to the cemetery in the morning. I should have liked to drop in on Uncle Blaise, but I'm afraid I won't have time. How is he ? "

" I think he's all right."

" You think ? Don't you go to see him any more ? "

" Of course I do, you know I'm very fond of him. But it's a fortnight or three weeks——"

"* I must say you're not bursting with family feeling. Though for once it isn't *really* the family. . . ."

She said that as if she really meant to quarrel. As she looked around her, her eye was caught by a rather vague picture on the wall. " Oh, so you've hung that old thing. I prefer Uncle to his painting. Still, it makes a splash of colour. Yes, it's

really very comfortable here, all things considered. Though there's something missing, some spark of life. Are you still satisfied with your charwoman ? "

" She's marvellous."

" Well, that's a good thing. But it doesn't take the place of a wife."

"I'm prepared to bet that you've come to tell me about another candidate."

" What expressions you use, Aurelien ! And are you never going to make up your mind ? As it happens, I haven't anyone up my sleeve at the moment. But I know quite well that as soon as I suggest a girl, her nose becomes too long, she turns her feet out, she looks silly. ..."

" Well, why do you choose so badly ? "

" No, my poor boy, I've resigned myself to the idea that you'll choose your own wife. That's the way it is with you. Jacques always says : ' Aurelien is so contrary, you've only to give him sugar and he'll put salt in his coffee.' "

" How well Jacques knows me ! Where did he pick up his knowledge of psychology ? At the Ministry ? "

" Now leave Jacques alone. You're always teasing me about him."

" But it's you who——"

" I was talking about your marriage."

" What, already ? "

" After all, you're over thirty."

"Only just."

" Don't argue. You may choose your own wife, but you mustn't wait too long. You'll only turn into an old bachelor, and then you'll become eccentric, you won't go anywhere any more. . . ."

" Perhaps it's too late already."

" How ridiculous you are, Aurelien, quite ridiculous. Why don't you want to marry ? "

" I'm not a one-woman man."

" What does that matter ? Do you think that married men don't have their little fancies from time to time ? "

" I say, no, really ? So Jacques——"

" Do leave Jacques out of it. Jacques is different. But really, marriage isn't the same for a man as for a woman. There are ways of adjusting things ; an intelligent wife turns the blind eye. It doesn't amount to anything."

" My dear Arma, Lille hats may be awful, but Lille morality is obviously superb. I congratulate you. Unfortunately, the fact of the matter is that I don't want to be unfaithful, I only want to be free."

" Free ! What do you mean by ' free ' ? So it's sheer virtue that prevents your marrying ? "

" Perhaps."

They were sitting by the fire. For all the joking tone in which Aurelien spoke, the fact remained that he had called her Arma, just as he used to when they were children. She took his hands in hers :

" You're hiding something from us, Reli. Don't pretend. It simply isn't natural for a man like you to remain single, after all the time you've had to enjoy yourself and gain experience. I expect you have all your meals at that grubby little restaurant."

" At the Mariniers ? The food isn't at all bad."

" But it's not the same as being at home. You must admit it's rather paradoxical that it should be I who urges you to put an end to it. . . ."

" What an expression !—as you might say yourself."

" Don't let's quibble. You ought to thank me for not trying to keep you single."

" Good heavens, why ? "

" Well, what is most advantageous to me ? There are the children. . . . Sooner or later the fatal day will come when Jacques and I will have become accustomed to your being unmarried. (Yes, I think fatal's the word.) Then if you

suddenly take it into your head to marry some young woman, well, my dear boy, we shall look askance. I haven't reached that stage yet, but it will be your fault if I do. Don't drive us to it. I have children."

Aurelien was mildly amused.

"It's no joke, my boy, no joke at all. That's the way that family quarrels arise. And we're the last two Leurtillois, and you bear Father's name."

"As far as that goes——"

"Don't interrupt. Now, Jacques and I know very well that you've given up your law, you don't go to Maitre Bergette's chambers any more. We've never reproached you, we leave you to lead your own life, although really we oughtn't to forget that money doesn't always go on being worth what it was. One has to think of illnesses, and war—not just yet, I dare say, but one never knows."

"And where is this leading?"

"I mean it's natural to want one's own family to do well. You'll admit that. You could have had a career, you could have increased your fortune. Even if you don't marry, you might think of your nephews. However, as I was saying, we're not the sort of family who try to run each other's lives. I only mean that it's abnormal for a strong, healthy man like you to live as you do—living alone and not doing anything but drift about. Everybody has a job. Supposing your brother-in-law were like you! Jacques says he doesn't understand you, and neither do I. How do you spend your time? One must work at *something*."

Aurelien, who had decided to let his sister talk to her heart's content, suddenly glanced up at her in surprise, and murmured:

"Funny—that's what Riquet said."

"Riquet? Who's this?"

"Oh, just a friend of mine."

"There you are, you see! Anybody will tell you the same."

Other people agree with us, everybody thinks the same. M. Riquet is quite right. It's the job of a real friend to tell you that sort of thing."

Aurelien seemed to be waving away a swarm of imaginary flies. It was all too complicated to explain, but in spite of that he said :

" You may be right in what you say about work, and M. Riquet, as you say, is certainly right. But what am I to work at ? If I had to earn my living, if I had nothing, absolutely nothing at all, to live on, I dare say I should look at the problem quite differently. There would be all sorts of jobs I should consider, perhaps without much pleasure, but as a job of work, anyway—a man's job. I ought to have been brought up to it; I ought to have been brought up to some work that deserves the name. If I had been, I should *do* something : one of those things that a man in our class and with our money wouldn't go in for, because it isn't amusing, unless he were very light-hearted. Well, I see this is all your idea, or rather, it's Jacques' finger in the pie. But what is there open to me ? Law, of course, the bar. That's absurd, and we might as well admit it; it was only keeping up a front, so as to seem to be doing something."

" You could have had a career, if you had wanted to. When you think of the connections we have. . . . You had a position to make a start from."

" Ah, there you are ! There it is in a nutshell—our connections, our position ! But you wouldn't understand that. Let's change the subject."

" If you weren't keen about the law, you could have gone into business, with Jacques. You could go into the factory, or something of that kind."

" Is that your idea of work ? I'd rather cut off my right hand."

" Really, you are an irritating boy. You seem to think you're something special. If it's good enough for Jacques——"

" Let's not bring Jacques into it, if you don't mind. I was

in the army for *Aght* years, you know; I've lived in a world that neither you nor Jacques has the faintest notion of. The war——"

" Oh, so now you're going to accuse my husband of having got out of the war ! That's the last straw ! "

"I'm not accusing him of anything. But look, Armandine, when I think of all those lads, the chaps at the front with me, how we roughed it together and got pushed around in all the mud and filth, then——hang it all, there are some things that are all right for Jacques, but that I can't do. I'm not saying anything against Jacques. And I may be wrong——"

" Ah, you see ! But I don't see that that prevents you from getting married/'

Suddenly, he lost his temper. This insistence of hers was like the perpetual dropping of water on a stone, and he had had enough of it. His head was buzzing with a whirl of incompletely formulated thoughts, things he wanted to say and couldn't quite get hold of, didn't even want to get hold of; the only way to do it would be to rip life open like the stuffed belly of a doll. And how was Armandine to understand ? Now he was overwhelmed by all the memories of these last years, all the outlines, odd phrases, the insincere caresses, the weariness, the occasional hours of negative happiness. He was trying to find the irrevocable words that would put an end to these everlastingly recurrent arguments once and for all. He took th[^] plunge.

" I'm not going to get married," he said, " because I'm in love."

Once it was said, he heard the pebble drop to the bottom of the well, straight down, a long, long way.

Now what did he care about Armandine ? He took no notice of her exclamation : " Oh, so *that's* it ! " He was alone, quite alone in the room and alone in the universe, no longer hearing anything but the echoes from that abyss within him ; all that he heard were the echoes of his own heart, the

all-important thing that had been uttered and was beyond repair. Now he had taken the turning along a road down which he would not return. He had decided : here was love, and this was what would be. It was love, it was a complete revolution, an upheaval of his being. Love—the strange newness of the word clawed at his heart.

He turned his head away and looked into the fire, watching the flames and inexplicably fascinated by the tiny, subtle changes in the glow of the log, with its fringe of white cinders on the side that was burning. And then gradually the name came back to him, and after that the face—the woman he loved.

All this time Armandine was talking, in full spate. She had already considered the situation from every angle and gone into all the possibilities. The first was that Aurelien would marry the woman with whom he was in love. But since he did not seem to be thinking of that, she must be the kind of woman one doesn't marry. Now, was Aurelien quite sure ? Armandine and Jacques were very broad-minded people; they would understand, they would accept the situation, they would make a great many allowances, if it was a matter of Aurelien's happiness. " Only do think it over, my dear boy. Haven't you anything to say ? Oh, then it's worse than I thought. What bad luck ! Really, you must think it over, you simply must think it over ! "

She had got up, and put her hands to her forehead, pacing up and down.

Aurelien poked the fire.

Suddenly Armandine remembered something that she had noticed during her long wait, something that had been put up on the wall since her last visit. She raised her head and took another look at the plaster mask. That woman.... It couldn't be anyone else.

" That's her portrait, I suppose ? " As he did not answer, she repeated : " That woman. . . . "

He didn't know what she was talking about. Then, turning his head and following her glance, he saw the mask. He said :

" What an idea ! " Then, as an afterthought, it occurred to him to cut the whole thing short, turning it into a farce for himself, with another confession :

" Yes, that's the one—if you like."

" Just what I thought/" his sister murmured, with a note of profound jealousy and hatred. " So that's it, is it ? " And she thought to herself: She isn't even good-looking.

Aurelien's first joking impulse had worn off. Filled with that mysterious song that welled up out of the depths of his being, he was only waiting for his sister to go ; he wanted to be rid of this stranger who intruded on his solitude, so that he might surrender himself to the novelty of his feelings and the revelation that had been torn from him. He was conscious of nothing but a passion that could not be curbed, and he looked at the white mask as if to ask Berenice's pardon for that false and blasphemous confession made at such a moment. And then he found himself looking at the mask as if he were seeing it for the first time. It made him uneasy, more and more uneasy. He could not believe what he was thinking, and yet there it was, this face. . . . He told himself that he must be so obsessed with the image of Berenice that he saw it everywhere. Yes, that was all there was to it. And yet, here at last was the source of the confusion in his thoughts, the haunting sensation he had had ever since he had watched Berenice's face with the closed eyes, that night at Lulli's. But it was more than that: something in the shape of the forehead, and an uncanny resemblance about the cheekbones.

" Won't you have dinner with me ? It's getting late."

Armandine's voice roused him from his dream of this startling resemblance which he had never observed before and which was, even, perhaps an illusion.

He ought to dine with her. She was alone in Paris, and tired. But he could not force himself to do his duty, with all that he had in his heart.

" No," he said, " I'm sorry. I have to meet someone."

After what she had heard, she had no difficulty in believing that. She put her hat and coat on. " Well, I must rush, it's past eight. I'm going to call in and see Pauline. I wonder could I ring up ? "

Pauline was in and was delighted to have Armandine to dinner. They would be looking out for her.

" How nice it is to have a woman friend ! " Armandine said, standing in the doorway, inclining her pallid cheek to her brother.

He did not react to her exclamation.

When she was gone he pushed a chair up to the wall, and standing on it, unhooked the mask. Then, holding it in both hands, he sat do\vn again in front of the fire, to gaze on and on at this plaster face with the firelight dancing on it, this face with the closed eyes and the mysterious smile that was beyond all grief.

" Berenice," he said. And he took the road back to Caesarea.

CHAPTER XXIII

HE was roused from his meditations by the ringing of the telephone. It was Barbentane, who wanted Aurelien to escort his women-folk to the Casino de Paris. He had taken a box, and then at the last moment he had to keep an appointment elsewhere. If Leurtillois were not free, Blanchette and Berenice wouldn't go, because two women alone. . . .

But Aurelien was free. Oh, yes, delighted. What time ? He would come at once, as soon as he had changed.

" Thanks, old man," Edmond said, " I'm most obliged to you. I should have hated to spoil their evening. Don't

bring your little bus, I'll leave you the big Wisner and the chauffeur. Hurry up, the show starts at half-past."

Aurelien hung up. He rushed to the wardrobe and undressed, in feverish haste. Did he need a shave? No, good. No time for that. No time for dinner, either. Oh well, can't be helped. While he was getting into his tails (that garb which was about as comfortable as sitting in the stocks) and cursing the invention of boiled shirts, he continued to look at the white mask he had placed on the sofa, leant against the brown cover. He was talking to himself, muttering. He was in a furious hurry, almost beside himself with haste.

Meanwhile however, in the rue Raynouard, a very different scene was taking place between Edmond and Blanchette.

"What's this I hear?" she was saying. "So you're going to leave us in the lurch, are you?"

"I'm not leaving you in the lurch at all, you'll have an escort."

"Aurelien, I suppose. You didn't ask us if we'd care to have him."

"Oh, I knew you would."

"But what has come over you? At lunch-time it was quite fixed. Aurelien was here, and you didn't say anything to him. I'm not asking you where you're going, but really——"

"But really you are asking me, all the same, isn't that it? I thought we had an understanding about such things. I'm free and you're free. At least, that's the theory, but when it comes to practise——"

"I'm not asking you anything. I don't want to go to the theatre without you."

"Oh, now you're making me feel a brute! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You're forgetting about Berenice, she's only in Paris for a short time and it's a treat for her to go to the Casino."

"I've a headache, I don't feel well. She can go without me."

" Now you know perfectly well she won't go without you. I don't like these headaches that come on to order."

" You're quite heartless."

" Whether I'm heartless or not has nothing to do with it. If it does your headache any good, I don't mind telling you I've got to do some work with Adrien—it's about petrol and filling stations, stuff I've got to do something about so that I know where I stand at the board-meeting."

" I don't believe you."

" I'm not asking you to believe me. And if you like to be obstinate and only hurt yourself, then you are at liberty to believe I'm going to see my latest love I'm so crazy about, and let's leave it at that. But so far as Berenice is concerned, you're only robbing her of some pleasure."

" Oh Berenice, always Berenice ! "

" That's not very Christian of you, darling. Well, if you insist, even though it isn't absolutely correct, I'll persuade her to go alone with Aurelien."

" No, no ! " Blanchette cried out, " I'll go, I'll go—since you insist."

He gave her an odd glance. " I wonder," he* said, with a deliberate drawl, " which of us is the worse liar."

" What do you mean ? "

" Oh, nothing."

Berenice, coming in at that moment, saw that there had been a quarrel. She was wearing the evening dress that Blanchette had not let her wear for the party at Mme de Perseval's: a sand-coloured tunic over a sheath of paler silk, leaving the arms bare, but high at the neck. It made her look girlish and countrified. Berenice had tried to improve it by pinning on to the shoulder a large golden flower, a rather ugly thing that somehow succeeded in suiting her, by its very absurdity. Blanchette didn't think Berenice was looking her best, and was afraid of showing that she was glad. She said :

" Now Edmond is to give us the slip."

" Oh, and what about the theatre ? " The exclamation came straight from the heart; she had clasped her hands.

Edmond burst out laughing.

" M. Leurtillois," Blanchette said, " is going to call for us instead."

" M. Leurtillois ? " Poor Berenice, she was no good at hiding her feelings. She had become radiant; something had lit up in her, like a flower unfolding, and the effect was so brilliant that Blanchette thought: Really, that dress isn't so bad at all.

Edmond watched the two women, trying to guess what was going on in their minds at that moment. He went into details :

" I won't be in till late. If you feel like it, Aurelien will take you on somewhere after the theatre. He's rather good at that, being a nightbird himself. Don't bother about me."

Berenice suddenly noticed what Blanchette was feeling. With a charming gesture, she took her cousin's hand and kissed it, before Blanchette could stop her. There was something child-like about her that was extremely winsome. But Blanchette pulled her hand away rather brusquely, saying to her husband:

" Since you're getting rid of us like this, we'll do our best to have a good time. But you needn't think that I shall hold out any longer than the show, feeling the way I do."

" Aren't you well, Blanchette ? " Berenice asked anxiously.

" She's all right," Edmond said, " it'll pass off. I'm going now."

Blanchette went with him when he went out to get his hat and coat.

" My dear Edmond," she said, " I should like to know all the same what your reasons are for choosing Aurelien to accompany us."

" Honestly ? Would you really like to know ? "

" WeVe never seen so much of him before. You take us to

Lulli's to meet him, two days later he's here to lunch, and the very same evening——"

" You know he has rather a fancy for Berenice/

" Berenice doesn't care about him."

" But does he care about Berenice ? Where are your eyes ? "

" It's all your doing, you keep on producing him, you throw them together——"

" Blanchette, what excitement! Really, what am I to think ? Do you mean you don't like it ? Then *why* ? "

" Oh, you're a monster ! "

" Of course, you're free to do as you like. No, don't tell me, don't lie. Goodnight."

The kiss he dropped on her forehead was ironical in a way no words can be. Blanchette felt quite ill, wondering what he had meant. Then she caught sight of herself in a mirror and thought she looked ghastly.

" Heavens ! " she sighed, " I look like nothing on earth."

The bell rang. It must be Aurelien. She retreated, as the footman went to the door. She had just time to change into another dress.

CHAPTER XXIV

BEHIND the two women, in the shadow of the box, Aurelien was finding himself incapable of really following what was going on upon the stage. The music, the songs, the dresses, the beams of coloured light, the chorus girls and the changing scenery, all had so little coherence. Leurtillois, unable to concentrate on the artificial meaning of the scenes, was like a man who feels sure he must have accidentally skipped a page in the novel he is reading. His mind and emotions were in wild confusion. The curtain, the footlights, the

thrills and the gales of vacant laughter from the auditorium ; everything that goes to make up the atmosphere of a theatre, was for him nothing more than the background to a picture of one woman.

There she was beside him, all the more enchanting for being badly dressed, with her charmingly imperfect arms, her shoulder nibbled by a golden flower that poised there like some outlandish insect, and the nape of her neck where the hair was trimmed short. That nape was so intimate a thing that he could not help feeling that he ought really not to look. And then, when she moved, he would catch brief glimpses of her face, transfigured by her enjoyment of what she was watching.

The black shadow of Blanchette, with her fair hair outlined against the light and faintly lit by reflections from the stage, was hardly more than a presence.

Aurelien, profoundly disturbed by Berenice's nearness to him, and timid as a green youth, was saying to himself: " She is here/" This little sentence meant a thousand incredible things ; it meant that it was she of whom he had been thinking a little while ago, while he had been gazing at the mask, and that it was she for whom he had always been waiting, without knowing it, the woman on whom all the thoughts of ten and twelve years gone by were focussed, leading up to her and concentrating on her. It meant she was the woman to whom he would say, for the first time in his life : I love you. She was the woman he loved. He said it to himself, repeating these words that meant everything, embraced everything, summed up everything. This was the woman he loved. Trembling, he wondered what was happening to him. After all, he was grown up, he was a man—! He felt there must be something that he ought to do, to prevent himself slipping down this slope ; there must be some way of putting a stop to all this before it had begun. It seemed easy enough ; it must be quite simple. He knew

he could still divert the stream of his thoughts ; he was still his own master. But if this went on, soon he would not be so any longer.

He followed the play of the light on Berenice's arms, as the lighting changed into a pallid, foolish imitation moonlight. Well, he could change the lighting, too, Aurelien told himself; he knew he could. Only he no longer wanted to. Everything was rushing to a climax. How far he had gone since that moment only a little while ago, as he was talking to Armandine, when the confession had burst from his lips before he knew what he was saying ! This motionless woman, this stranger, so near and yet so remote, this silhouette that had not yet grown familiar, this being who had not yet begun really to live, so far as he was concerned—here she was, and he no longer even recognised her. He did not even feel passionately about her ; the wild emotion lay elsewhere. If he had, nevertheless, a desire to put his arms round her and pull her towards himself, clasping her in his arms, it was not the same feeling that it had been with other women ; it was not a desire to have and to hold, not that savage urge that drives the lover on to bite or to suffocate. No, it was like hunger, an empty hunger, an appalling lack of something ; it was despair. Perhaps, if he took her in his arms—or so at least he thought—the fire would die down and the illusion, the uneasy sense of something not quite real, would fade away. He told himself that there was still time to keep himself in check ; and no sooner had he said that than he knew it was already too late. He was afraid. He felt himself falling* Sketchy ideas, vaguely muddled scraps of information about the physical laws of falling bodies, the coefficient of the acceleration of a falling body, entangled themselves in his brain like water-weeds around the eyes of one who has been drowned. He said to himself: " There it is again—people who've been drowned—I can't shake off this idea about drowning."

The sentimental music of romance mingled with the phantoms in his mind : the Seine, the white mask, the shadow of green waters on his face as he dived, and the sound of boats on the river, the sounds floating over the water.

He became aware that, unconsciously, imperceptibly, he had brought his chair nearer to Berenice's. He was leaning forward between the two women, to get a better view of the show he was not watching. Now there was a chorus, a collection of naked or almost naked women, long, beautiful legs kicking about in the white aureole of the spotlights, and black costumes sliding here and there. Aurelien's arm rested along the back of Berenice's chair, his hand on the balustrade of the box. He sensed the faint perfume of mown hay that came from hair very near him. Gradually the shadow whom he called his love was wakening into life ; she sighed, a long, deep breath ; and Aurelien held his breath, his heart thudding, his pulses quickening. Then, suddenly, he realised that he was not the only person who was not following the action on the stage. He turned his head, and saw Blanchette watching him.

CHAPTER XXV

BLANCHETTE had been watching Aurelien for some time. No matter how she had tried to deceive herself, from the moment Edmond told her she had known she was going to suffer torments from this evening *d trois*. But her husband's suspicions always succeeded in making her lose her head, and torn between opposing emotions, she had not been wise enough to hold aloof. In a lightning flash she had told herself that a refusal would only confirm his suspicions ; for every time there had been any question of meeting Aurelien

or spending an evening with him, her inexplicable uneasiness had been obvious to Edmond. Now she recognised, as if it were a sin, the pretext of this fear covering the unacknowledged desire to spend a few hours with Leurtillois, even though it made her wretched and even if he gave all his attention to someone else and did not seem to know she was there. If she still hesitated, the idea of Aurelien's spending an evening alone with Berenice had made up her mind for her at once. She knew her decision had nothing to do with the proprieties. How feverishly she had set about making herself beautiful, frantic at knowing that they were both in the library without her. She had put on her black dress, almost without jewels, sure that the difference in their style of dressing would make people take Berenice for a paid companion or something of that kind. She had undone the cartwheel plaits coiled over her ears, undone her bun, and rolled the plaits round her head. She was very proud of her long hair, and this way of doing her hair, as she occasionally did it, was one that did not suit most women. Berenice had never seen her wearing her hair like this, and when Blanchette came into the library, it was she and not Aurelien who exclaimed : " Oh, she's done her hair differently ! " with that child-like joy that gushes forth at the sight of a new dress, a restaurant one does not know, or a room where the furniture has been rearranged.

At the theatre how could she possibly have become absorbed in the play of light on moving bodies and the brainless music that only aggravated her sense of solitude ? In the dusk of their box Berenice had recovered all that grace of which she had been shorn by an ill-made dress, and it was impossible not to realise that Aurelien was deaf and blind to everything but Berenice. Until that moment, Blanchette had fought her profound uneasiness by pretending that Leurtillois' attraction to their young cousin existed only in Edmond's imagination ; she had told Edmond so

often enough to make herself believe it. This evening, however, she had known that she was going to suffer. She had only not known how great her suffering would be.

She tried to distract herself with another grief, by thinking of Edmond. She must drive off these bodiless dreams and monstrosities of the imagination by telling herself that she loved only Edmond. Dear God, how she had suffered in the days when she had been trying to take him away from Carlotta ! The past provided her with memories of such immense jealousy and despair that, in comparison, this evening became nothing but something she must sit through, waiting for it to end, waiting to leave it behind her and so to be cured of a mania, a nightmare. Now she was thinking of Edmond, her[^] Edmond, the difficult husband who was as hard to keep as he had been to gain. Where was Edmond spending the evening ? He had lied. Not for an instant had she believed the story about Adrien, which he had thrown to her as a sop to Cerberus. He had lied—and why ? She asked nothing from him.

So many times, with that terrible cruelty that lay in his way of saying such things, with a cruelty that both repelled and fascinated her, he had told her the truth. Without her having asked, any more than she had asked this evening, he would tell her the unbearable truth. Why then had he chosen not to tell the truth this evening, unless it were in order to torture her all the more by leaving her in uncertainty ? He was taking his revenge.

How penetratingly shrewd he was ! He had grasped the intangible thing that she had not even dared to admit to herself, and he was taking his revenge. Where was he ? What was he doing ? Could it be something so serious this time that he felt he must lie ? Could he be really slipping away from her ? She thought of her children and prayed : Dear Lord, make this evening be only a bad dream. I am going to wake up, and it will be as if this had never happened.

Things were going too far. The situation had passed beyond the limits of unhappiness ; this was worse than the unhappiness she was used to and which seemed to be necessary for Edmond's happiness. There were the children. And as she clutched at this thought of the children, she turned away from the flowery ballet on the stage, where the colours and delight and pirouetting of the dancers, the clashing of the brasses, were vivid beyond endurance ; and then she saw the expression on Aurelien's face.

She had an agonising pain in her heart. This was far, far worse than anything she had known. He loves her, she kept on saying to herself: he loves her, he loves her.

The two griefs rushed together, mingling in unbearable intensity. Now the woman who felt herself rejected could look at Aurelien without consciousness of sinning, for if she wept with dry eyes it was for Edmond's as well as for Aurelien's sake.

When Aurelien surprised Blanchette's look, she was afraid that he might read there what Edmond had read. But fortunately for her the darkness cast concealing shadows over the fire of her emotion. For this man she was nothing but a personification, the elegant spectre of society. She was merely a third person. For him she had neither heart nor body, she was merely the foreground of a picture that had Berenice for its central figure, and for background the music and the juggling comedians on the stage.

Blanchette averted her eyes, since they no longer counted here, though the first tears were rising now at last. Everything became misty.

Instantly Aurelien realised that here was a witness he need not fear at all. He knew that she would pretend to be watching the show. So she must have realised vaguely what Berenice was still unaware of. Or was Berenice unaware ? Nothing that had been said, even while they had been alone in the library a short time ago, had made any allusion to

those moments the other night, when he had held her hand in his. And thinking of how he had held her hand, and making sure that Blanchette was defeated, no longer looked his way, very gently he brought his hand nearer to Berenice's bare arm. All his senses were wide awake. He was acutely alive right down to his fingertips ; and now he was going to touch her arm. Knowing that he was going to take a risk and that his audacity might ruin everything, he almost withdrew his hand and then changed his mind and left it where it was. He told himself that cowardice was impossible. Here in a box, in a Paris theatre, where something that was after all quite commonplace was happening to a man and a woman, he recognised again a feeling that made his heart beat faster : he saw himself once more as he had been one night in Argonne, at his post behind the shattered trees. . . . The palm of his hand touched Berenice's arm and pressed it gently.

He felt her tremble slightly. She was surprised, and he knew that if he relaxed his pressure all would be lost, the arm would move away. He slid his hand along the bare flesh, caressingly, until he held her elbow. Then he waited. The slight trembling had ceased ; the arm remained quite still, so still that he did not know what to think. Berenice's hair was just touching his face, flickering on his cheek. At that moment she was his ; she was his as completely as a fascinated bird. Anything might break the spell. But it held.

It was then that he might have said : I love you. It was the moment to tell her ; but Aurelien could not say it. He was afraid of murmured words, and above all of those words that were still so new to him, so very hard to say.

The finale of the first part of the show was going up in fireworks on the stage. The stars were coming back to re-join the chorus girls, those dancers with their little short jackets and spangled skirts. The orchestra was wafting melting chords like kisses, urging the hectic performers to

repeat their parallel gestures faster and faster, linking their arms with one another and knocking their knees together to the rhythm of their music. In a moment the lights would go up, and he had not told her that he loved her. He had only said it in his thoughts.

Berenice gave a little movement of her shoulders that seemed to be an attempt at catching a scarf slipping down, and stealthily her hand took hold of Aurelien's hand, very lightly, slipping it away from her elbow as though it might have been a leaf, perhaps, that had drifted on to her arm as she walked through the woods.

Once the curtain had fallen, the audience rose to their feet and swept towards the foyer. From the stalls people were waving.

" Who is it ? " Berenice asked. " They seem to be waving to us."

Yes, Blanchette was smiling and waving back. It was Colonel and Mme David. They came up to the box, and their conversation relieved the tension of the interval, which Aurelien had been dreading. As he talked, he was idly watching the stream of people on the other side, passing out to hear the jazz in the foyer. Among all the moving figures suddenly he glimpsed one that seemed familiar. He checked his exclamation just in time. His companions had not noticed anything. There was no possible doubt: it was Barbentane. He had been looking in their direction, though not as if he wanted to be recognised ; it was certainly Barbentane. What could that mean ? Barbentane was supposed to be at a meeting. If he had got away early, surely he would have joined them ; yet there he was, strolling up the gangway. And if he was not spying on them, at least he looked as if he were.

Aurelien did his best to take his share in the conversation. The colonel thought the revue excellent, but Mme David was saying that really it couldn't be called a revue, it was

just a show for the benefit of foreign tourists—not a single witty line (did they remember Rip before the war?)—pantomime, that was all.

" Well, there's something to be said for pantomime," the colonel said.

" Oh, that's just like you, dear ! " Mme David was rather put out. She explained to Leurtillois : " The colonel enjoys anything with plenty of legs."

Aurelien smiled. Stealthily, he was trying to catch another glimpse of Barbentane. But the gangways were almost empty, he was not to be seen.

" Will you excuse me ? " he said. " I must go and get some cigarettes. No, thanks, colonel, I always smoke Gauloises. I'll just slip away while the ladies have you with them."

Neither in the gangways nor in the foyer nor on the other side of the glass doors, at the theatre entrance, among the people smoking and the buzz of conversation, nor at the tables where the South Americans, the English, the Scandinavians, the audience from the gallery, and the tarts were eating ices, was there any sign of Edmond. Aurelien went back towards the box, saying to himself that perhaps Barbentane had gone there. He was not there, either. Probably he had left. He hesitated, looking at Blanchette and wondering whether he ought to say anything. Probably better not, especially if he had been mistaken. When the Davids had gone back to their seats, Blanchette put her hand to her forehead, sighing, and seemed to be trying to make up her mind to say something. Finally she said :

" Forgive me if I go home, Aurelien, I don't feel well. No, don't come with me."

" You're going home, Blanchette ? " Berenice exclaimed.

" Please don't bother about me, you two. Berenice, I don't want to spoil your party. It doesn't make any difference. I oughtn't to have come."

" But of course I'll come with you," Aurelien said.

" Oh no, no, please don't ! Berenice can't stay here alone. I have the car and the chauffeur. I'll send them back for you. I told Edmond I wasn't well. I can't stay. I must go home. But really, it's all right."

There was nothing to be done. She wanted to go home by herself; she was forcing it on them. So they remained. Aurelien went a few steps with her, saying :

" I don't like letting you go like this. We could have——"

" Please, Aurelien, don't break up the party. I've such a headache. Take Berenice somewhere after the show, she'd like that. She'll be going back into the depths of the country——"

That last remark obliterated all the others for Aurelien. Berenice was going away ; she was going to go back home, she was going to leave Paris. . . .

When Blanchette lay back among the upholstery of the Wisner, she felt that she was going to weep at last. She put out the light which the chauffeur had switched on. " Home ! " she said, and the car bore her away, now that she had rendered up her sacrifice to heaven. She had been punished for not wanting to leave Berenice and Aurelien alone. Now she had been driven to it. She began to bargain with the God she prayed to, asking to have Edmond returned to her in exchange for what she was suffering ; but her prayers brought her neither peace nor hope. She knew Edmond too well ; and she knew too well the injustice of heaven.

CHAPTER XXVI

AFTER Blanchette's disappearance an unexpected embarrassment had become perceptible. The presence of a third person had emboldened Aurelien; and it had been sufficiently reassuring to Berenice for her to remain so still that it practically amounted to submission. But once the two of them were alone, side by side now in the front of the box, things acquired a significance full of such grave implications that for a long time they did not draw near to each other, in agonies of self-consciousness, their imagination on fire.

Berenice had never seen Mistinguett, and the realistic scenes—funny little face, red handkerchief, the Java, gasper, inveigling airs—the apache dagger under the lamp-post—• had for her a lyric quality scarcely to be imagined by anyone without either her naive freshness or her marvellous ignorance. She had not the slightest wish to be distracted from the show, and at the same time she was feverishly aware of the slow mounting of resolution that lay in wait for her in the darkness and of her neighbour's gradual drawing closer. He murmured something, and she turned with a finger on her lips to hush him ; and before Aurelien could move, her two hands seized his wrists and held them fast as in a garland of flowers. Still holding him, she turned away. The prisoner, caught in these small tingling shackles, was vainly trying to express the tenderness which suddenly welled up in him. She had evaded him very neatly, and he could feel how entirely she was absorbed in the show and the star's act on the stage.

" She's amazing, isn't she ? " Berenice said.

" Whom do you mean ? "

" Mistinguett."

He felt the irony of this twist in the conversation. He

wanted to tell her that he loved her, and she talked about Mistinguett. Just as she held his wrists still with her small hands, she quelled the words rising to Aurelien's lips with her trivial remark, these words that were friendly merely because it was her voice that uttered them. All the same, this defence was the acceptance of a fact: it was an acknowledgment that something had taken place between them, quite silently, but with overwhelming force. Aurelien was losing grip. Never had he felt himself so powerless against a woman, and above all a woman who herself was so slight and frail. Had she ever before held a man's hands fast like this, and as if he were her captive ? And what man ? He knew nothing about her ; she was an unknown woman—the unknown woman. There was nothing, nothing at all that he knew about her ; she was mysterious as innocence itself. But perhaps she had let hundreds of men do the same thing already, and this resistance had been invented for him alone. Or it might be the classic stage that had to be passed through before she let him go any further. He did not want to think that, and he hated himself for having thought it; he suffered a thousand different forms of jealousy and still he could not shake her off, for here she was beside him. He was infinitely sensitive to the possibility of being made ridiculous.

Time was passing ; time was slipping through his fingers. It was too late. Later, when he had freed himself from her hold, it would be too late to resume his clumsy attack. There was no more time, the show was almost over and they would have to get up, put on their cloaks, and go out. So he remained motionless, at her mercy, in the fragile grip of her hands. He saw Berenice's breasts rising and falling as she breathed, saw her cheeks coloured with the excitement of the theatre. He was like a lovelorn schoolboy. Never yet had he felt so remote from sensual fancies while close to a woman ; he could not have kissed her, he could not even

imagine what it would be like to hold her in his arms. Everything held him back—the flower on her shoulder, her dress, everything. His diffidence was hardly credible even to himself. And all the time there was this floating perfume of mown hay that came from Berenice, as it were the breath of her being, and it intoxicated him with the sense of her. Berenice. . . .

And what was she thinking, she, the unknown ? Who could even guess at her thoughts ? He flattered himself that she was disturbed, for he had felt her tremble slightly, he had felt her hands shivering against his own hands.

They left the box in a crush and scramble of people that left them no choice but to be silent or at least to utter none but brief, practical remarks. Or if what they said was not merely practical, at least it was brief. As the crowds streamed away, he began to recover some of his confidence, and he asked :

" Where would you like to go ? It's too early for Lulli's."

" Oh, no," she said. " I must go home. Blanchette——"

" Blanchette doesn't need you. She said so herself."

" Oh, but the chauffeur—I mean, it's getting late."

" It's his job, he's used to it. Anyway, if you like, I can send him away, we'll take a taxi."

" No, no, what would he think ? I'm going home."

" Please. . . . Do give me a few more moments."

" But it's better that way, really."

" Do you know that I haven't had any dinner and I'm as hungry as a wolf ? You will keep me company, won't you ? You won't let me have to go and eat by myself ? "

She was weakening. Very well then, just as long as he was having supper ; but then she would go home. Where should they go ? Aurelien knew a place not far away. He asked her whether she preferred a noisy or a quiet place. Quiet—in this case. Quiet—all right, then he knew just the place.

A surprise awaited them outside : snow was falling, and the ground was already white. The streets leading up to Montmartre are steep, and snow lends them a silence and an artificial radiance into which the crowds pouring out of the theatres plunge like a whirl of fairies in a nightmare. Cars and taxis were lining up. A crowd surrounded the car into which Mistinguett stepped like a queen, laughing aloud and escorted by a young man with dark hair. They had some difficulty in finding the chauffeur. Aurelien told him the address ; it was only a short distance, but they had to turn up the rue Blanche, following the stream of cars, in order to come back into the place Pigalle and on down to near the Casino, at the bottom of the rue Pigalle, to that little oasis of light in two almost empty rooms with a step leading down from one to the other. It was neither a cafe nor a night-club, but a sort of shelter on the fringe of the dance-halls and the bars, where a few professionals dropped in for a snack between the numbers they were performing elsewhere, and lovers talking in low voices, holding hands, while an English pianist played tunes all strung together one after the other, like the hours of the night. The place had seats covered in worn leather and cheap vases devoid of flowers. It might have been London.

" You'll have something with me, won't you ? "

Berenice looked at the menu, undecided. She saw that what struck her as so surprising and unusual must be quite the normal thing in the world that surrounded her here. She did not dare to ask for " B.B.B. and B.B.B." Poached eggs on toast seemed to present less danger. As for Aurelien, he ordered roast beef and stout. She had never drunk stout and when it came she put her nose down into the glass, wetting her lips with the frothy drink. She found it queer and very bad, but she ordered some too.

He really must be as hungry as a wolf; he fell upon the food and devoured it. Berenice had refused to sit beside

him, and she looked at him across the table, with that smile that was now more like the mask's smile than ever before: the smile that seemed to mark the end of a long story. He asked for ketchup. She had never heard tomato sauce called that before. Both of them, as if by agreement, were avoiding the expected words, the usual and useless words. Both of them knew what was being fought out between them, without any need for anything being said. Nothing had been said, and everything had been said. The situation was accepted ; it was established.

He was eating and looking at the meat as he sliced it, and it was to his plate he spoke at last, saying :

" And when you go, what is to become of me ? "

She understood him perfectly. But she shut her eyes ; and then, for she had grown pale, the resemblance was complete. The silence could not last. The atmosphere was racked with distress. Her eyes opened again like windows opening on to a deep night, and her voice was gloriously warm, a shade unsteady, as she murmured, with an attempt at light-heartedness :

" Well, I suppose you'll go home and go to bed, like a good boy."

" No," he said, " when you go away for good. Not to-night, but when you leave Paris. Soon, I gather."

" Don't let's talk about that," she answered. " It would only make me very sad. And I'm so happy this evening."

" Is that really true ? "

She nodded her head, her eyes very wide. He wanted to ask her if he counted for anything in this happiness, but he could not do it. His own happiness was too fragile, and he was ready to protect it with ambiguity.

" But all the same, I need to know. You *are* going away ? "

" In a week—ten days."

He took a great gulp of stout and wiped his lips with a paper napkin.

" Ten days. That's no more than a minute. And think of all the lost time—why did we lose so much time ? "

She hesitated before replying. She felt that if she accepted the need to answer, she would be accepting everything and it would be irrevocable. She lifted the black diamonds to him :

" We haven't lost it," she said, and on the table her right hand was laid on Aurelien's left hand. He shuddered, and they were silent. They savoured this banal moment like few things in their lives. At last Aurelien broke the silence :

" I didn't know, Berenice. It's taken me a long time to find out."

It was an excuse. She did not ask what it was that it had taken him so long to find out. She knew. And she had just given him the right to call her Berenice.

He went on :

" For the first time in my life. ..."

Those words were too much for her. Her lips trembled, so that tiny, faint lines appeared in them and he thought she was going to pull away her hand, which lay on his as lightly as a leaf.

" I don't believe you," she said. He did not feel any need to say that she must believe him, for he realised that what she meant was that she did believe him. He turned his wrist and slipped his big hand under her fragile one, hollowing his palm so as to hold it like a drop of water. His long fingers extended beyond her hand and touched the ligaments emphasising the delicacy of the veins in her arm. He rested his fingertips there, feeling the blood beating under the skin and thinking that he was touching the place consecrated by suicides, blue as the sky, blue as liberty itself.

" I didn't want to believe it," he said. " It was so new to me. It must be terrible for a blind man, the first time that he sees the daylight."

" And what will you have to follow, sir ? " the waiter asked.

" Some Chester. And a fine. And you, Berenice ? "

" Me ? Oh, nothing/

"Please do. Do you like Chester ? Well then !"

" But without a *fine*."

" You can have a little of mine."

The waiter departed.

¹¹ You must promise me something, Berenice." He was abusing this new privilege, pronouncing that exquisite name as often as he could. He repeated : " You must promise me, Berenice, to give me all your time in these poor ten days, these marvellous ten days."

" We mustn't look ahead any further," she said.

" You promise me ? "

She hesitated, thinking : This is madness. And she said :

" I promise you, Aurelien."

He had never thought his name so beautiful, so pure, so sombre.

Then she corrected herself, remembering something.

" Only I've promised Zamora to let him paint my portrait. I have to go there tomorrow."

" Already ! You see—you're going back on your word, you're robbing me of these minutes, my life."

" Oh, your life——"

" My life ! "

" Oh, but please ! I promised, and I like the idea of having my portrait painted. You can come and call for me afterwards."

" I can come ? You'll let me do that ? "

" I'm asking you to. Look, I've got his address. In my bag. Give me my bag."

She fumbled in it, and brought out a notebook.

" Here it is, rue C sar-Franck."

⁴⁴ You're going to his place ? "

His reproachful tone made her laugh. " How silly of you ! A painter——"

" A painter is a man. Would you come to my place ? "

" You're not a painter. It's different. And then, why not ? "

" You would come ! "

Suddenly she grew pale with emotion, as if she had remembered something that she had completely forgotten for a while.

" Oh, no, no ! "

" Why not ? "

" Because it's you. I would go to anyone's house, but not to yours."

He drank the bitter milk of this victory. For her the world was divided into Aurelien and everyone else.

" You will come to my place," he said.

" Perhaps. Yes—some day."

" This evening."

She shook her head, and he saw that he had been on the point of spoiling everything. He tightened his grasp of the little hand, asking her forgiveness.

" First of all," Berenice continued, " the house in the rue Cesar-Franck isn't Zamora's, it belongs to the woman he lives with."

" Mrs. Goodman ? I know her. A very good-looking woman."

" You can call for me about five o'clock."

" Not till five ? "

" All right, you can come a little bit early ! He w^rants to try and put my portrait into his exhibition, and the pre-view has been announced—you know—not any ordinary show at all—at midnight."

" I hate that man. I don't like his painting. He'll turn you into something horrible. What right——"

" Don't start being like everyone else ! "

Like everyone else ? What did she mean ? This was enough to leave him quite aghast. He looked very hard at

this slight girl opposite him, seeing her with new eyes. What did she mean : like everyone else ? After all, *she* had not said it was the first time in her life. . . . She hadn't told him anything at all. And as far as he was concerned, he had known other women, he had known a whole world. . . . And what then ? Like everyone else. . . . Without realising it, he had built up a Berenice who did not correspond in the least to these three little words that pierced him like an arrow. He was shaken by a throb of jealousy.

" I should like to kill your past," he said.

" Oh, but why ? Then I wouldn't have anything left to tell you about—to sacrifice to you."

Ah, what wouldn't he have paid, what wouldn't he have suffered, for the sake of that word ! He let go Berenice's hand, and raised both his own hands to his face, covering his eyes with his palms. It was impossible to endure that word and the light at the same time. He heard Berenice saying :

" You'll come, won't you, you'll come to Zamora's for me?"

Did she doubt it ? He laughed, and she was amazed. He said :

" I was going to ask you something. You said just now that you're happy this evening. Is it—can I—can I think that I count for something in that ? Forgive me—will you allow me to think that ? "

This time it was she who laughed. Then he raised his eyes, seeking hers, and said :

" I love you."

She received the double shock of the words and the look. She leaned back in her chair, with that chilly movement of the shoulders that he had often noticed. Without speaking, she played with her blue and gold handbag embroidered with big pink flowers. Her hands met on the table, in a gesture that wrung Aurelien's heart: he saw that she was twisting her wedding ring on her finger, and he guessed

something of what she must be thinking. . . . He could no longer trust in anything but these three words that he had never spoken before, these words that he had just uttered, and that name, wrapped in mystery, that was the first thing he had loved about her. He repeated :

" I love you, Berenice."

She let the words go on echoing. Her right hand hid the left. Aurelien watched the rapid movement of her small, lovely, startled breast. A quite different voice broke the silence :

" Now I must go. It's late. I must go."

" Berenice ! "

" You must be sensible, Aurelien. It's better, believe me—it's better."

" Not like that! "

" Why not ? What could we say now, my darling, what could we say after what you have just said to me ? Everything would be weak. *Please*. . . . Spare me."

" Don't you believe me ? I've never said that to anyone."

" Let me go. Let me ! I need to be alone and think about it. I need to think about it for a long time. Let me go away with all these riches. ..."

" Berenice ! "

" No, don't say anything more."

" You haven't answered me."

" There's nothing to answer."

" Do you love me ? "

She had risen to her feet.

" I'll take the car. No, don't come with me. We can't go in the car together—not now. Do be sensible. We mustn't spoil our evening. I shall never forget—never. I'm sorry for making you have to take a taxi, in this snow. I'm sorry. . . ."

She would not wait while he paid. Bareheaded, he went

out after her. People watched them cross the room towards the door, and when the door had closed behind them and they found themselves out in the snow again, a door-man with a red umbrella between them and the silence and their love, they realised for the first time that the whole of this scene had taken place against a background of music, like a slight headiness that evaporates and then becomes conscious. Behind the words still lingered the melancholy song of a piano churning out romances with foreign words they did not know, though the rise and fall of it echoed in their very hearts.

She got into the car, where the chauffeur had gone to sleep. At the last moment she leaned towards Aurelien and murmured :

" Thank you. , . . "

CHAPTER XXVII

SNOW in the night time. Snow in the night-time. With his overcoat collar turned up, his hands deep in his pockets, stooping slightly in meditation, Aurelien walked up the rue Pigalle with long, slow strides, as if he enjoyed watching his patent-leather shoes sinking into the whiteness of the snow. The street was gloomy and deserted ; it only came to life higher up, where the neon signs stabbed the darkness.

Nothing on earth would have made him go home to bed. He had turned his back on the lie Saint-Louis, setting his course in the direction of yesterday's habits, towards those last embers of the city, where he warmed his secret as yesterday he had warmed his solitude. He was not thinking of the future, unless it were of his engagement at five o'clock in the rue Cesar-Franck, for this evening had obliterated

the past at a single stroke. What had it brought him instead ? Nothing as yet; but it was a great thing that there had been any such thing as this evening.

Anyone who has not been very much in love will not be able to understand Aurelien and how he had begun all over again, as it were a new life. There is probably no emotion in the world so sharp, like a wind blowing on one's face, as this feeling of re-birth that comes from having told a woman that one loves her. At the same time Aurelien had re-discovered his self-respect. Now he had something more than a pretext for his life ; he had legitimised it. Now his drifting, his lack of resolution, was explained : he had been waiting for this moment. Until now he had lacked a reason for being alive at all; but he must have known, with some deep intuition, that some day Berenice would come and until then he could not take the risk of giving his life a direction, lest he might involve himself in some other sphere where Berenice would never enter. Fundamentally, Aurelien's epoch was summed up in two simple events : there had been the war, and now there was Berenice. For she had come, and the three years between did not count at all. Now he was a man, with a goal, the highest goal of all: love. How strangely this new word rang out across the snow ! He said it aloud : Love. . . .

By a twist of fate, a single day had confronted Aurelien with both the accusation and the triumphal answer to the accusation. Now he could reply to his own scruples, his doubts, and to the chance forms lent them by such as Riquet or Armandine. Love ! Is it given to every man ? Don't the majority of people exist as Aurelien had existed until that evening ? The man to whom such love comes—the great, all-pervading, devouring love—owes it to himself to clear out everything that is not part of this cyclone, this tyranny. So Aurelien said to himself: I was keeping myself for Eunice; without understanding what it was all

about, I was keeping myself for her. Walking through the night, he came to the conclusion that he had done the right thing. Everything appeared logical and imprinted with the seal of his love ; everything, even the snow that clung to his eyelashes.

He did not want to leave the snow and quit its whiteness. Yet on the threshold of Lulli's he snorted with disgust : here he was going to find all the wasted nights once more. Must he re-invent these places and begin to look at them with new eyes ? Hadn't he recoiled from the thought of sleep because he was afraid of the old mechanism of his dreams, because he could not yet bring his love and his dreams into harmony ? Here there was a crowd, lights, air full of smoke-dense heat emanating from the dance and the drink, every, thing assailing him like an act of treachery. But wasn't it here that he had first held Berenice's hand ? And so Berenice took possession of Lulli's, her spirit pervading it and transforming it, so that there was nothing else here but herself, and it was she whom he found in this furnace, this inferno.

A whirl of mad excitement billowed out from the dance-hall : musical submarines, paper streamers, the sort of cardboard trumpets that blow out to a fantastic length, the orchestra romping through a popular fox-trot, people clapping their hands in time to the music, around a large man and a small woman who were executing absurd impromptu steps in the midst of the dancers ; and Lulli himself, shouting " Olle ! " as *la/ge* as life and twice as natural, here, there, and everywhere, one moment doubling himself up before a table, the next moment hustling the waiters. The whole scene was streaked with arc-lamps and the hot breath of all these people, the laughter of half-naked women, the coming and going between the tables and the cloakrooms, the girls selling flowers, champagne being called for at the top of the voice, and the aroma of grilled steak issuing from the kitchens as the doors swung on their hinges.

" I don't know what's got into them this evening," said the woman in the cloakroom, as she took Aurdlien's overcoat. " It's been like this since eleven o'clock. You can't hear yourself speak. I don't get a minute to read." She had taken up her novel again after a smile for Leurtillois. He was an old customer, and she liked him. He was a real gentleman.

The bar was full of people standing, and there was not even room to put one's elbows anywhere. What a clamour! Everyone was laughing and talking, mostly in English. It was so hot that it was like the Metro, only noisier. " Sorry ! " An American, an Apollo of the Western plains, his hands loaded with rings and full of glasses, apologised for almost having butted Aurelien in the stomach with his elbow. Someone tipped a brandy down the bare back of one of the tarts, who began to squeal. She was asked to have a drink, and all was well.

" Roger ! "

Aurelien turned round. It was Simone ; for her, as for Riquet, his name was Roger. Good lord, she had a new dress on. Fashionable colour—Patou blue—and imitation pearls. (The American sailor of the other night, no doubt.) She had managed to wriggle on to a stool, and dislodged her neighbour, a bald man with hair in his ears (badly distributed, Aurelien thought), in order to make room for her *friend*, as she called Aurelien with great emphasis.

" What are you having ? For once, I'm treating ! "

He whistled with admiration. " So you're flush, are you ? What a dress, darling ! "

She was delighted that he had noticed it. " Not bad, eh ? A model from one of the best places—that's all I know about it. It's in the rue de Clichy, you know, that shop where they have mannequins showing off the models. Well, you see, I'm stock size. And what do you think of my pearls, eh ? It's all the rage this season, even the people that

have real ones, they're wearing artificial ones instead. I say, Freddie, are we waiting all night ? " (This to the barman.) " Well, what are you having ? A side-car, as usual ? A side-car and a glass of champagne. This is on me."

How easily Aurelien slipped back into the old habits he had left off. Only he, and he alone, knew that he was no longer the same man ; only he, letting himself get drunk on the lack of relation between this background and his secret. He let himself be carried along, floating into the night on this wretched alcohol, this worn-out mechanical delirium. . . . Simone's parrot chatter, her joy in telling him all about the evening before, how she had gone out with such a nice chap, really nice, not the sort to bother a girl. . . . She talked, and he was glad that she should talk, leaving him in real solitude, where the inaudible song of Berenice arose, the ancient lovely legend. . . . Beside him some ladies from Massachusetts, wearing pince-nez and bare almost down to the navel, were standing up eating mutton chops and chips. And like that statue of Condillac that had no sense of smell except for the perfume of roses, he was not aware of the chips at all, only scenting a trace of mown hay, a mere breath, and nothing else. He had never had an hallucination of this kind before. Here, in the crowd, it was perfume like the clear water of a Jirage. It was this haunting perfume that made Berenice reign everywhere in his imagination, even here.

" Coming home with me this evening ? "

He looked at Simone in surprise.

" The other evening," she explained, " I had Bob. The Yank sailor, you know. Afterwards, I wasn't very pleased about having put you off. I mean, we're old pals, aren't we, and we ought to be decent to each other. But I'm free this evening, and of course after the luck I had yesterday, well, I can have a bit of what I fancy and see an old pal, can't

I ? You can buy me a wing of chicken—oh, not here, it's too dear and no better than anywhere else—I hope Freddie didn't hear me ? No, over the road, at the cafe. You know. How about it ? "

Aurelien shrank slightly. He gazed at Simone, embarrassed at not being more enthusiastic about her offer.

" The chicken—right you are. But I'm sorry about the rest. You must let me off, I'm going to bed."

" All by yourself ? Oh, that's too bad ! "

He kissed her hand. " Can't be done, old thing. I'll tell you about it."

" You've got someone else ? "

"No. I'm in love."

She turned towards him, opening her eyes as wide as saucers :

" Strike me pink ! You could knock me down with a feather ! In love, are you ? When did this happen ? "

" I don't know. About eight o'clock this evening."

" Oh, I see. All right. I see. Well, that's news, I must say." She could not get over it. She was quite upset. " So it's quite new. But you're sure, are you ? Sometimes you think to yourself, and then—I mean, next day, ..."

He made a gesture, waving away that possibility.

" So it's the real thing ? Going to set up house ? No ? So it's not like that ? Doesn't she want to ? Who is it ? Oh, all right, all right, you don't have to tell me anything. Roger in love ! Who'd have thought it ! Of course, you're quite right. Oh, if I was to fall in love again. . . . But it's all over with me. Two years ago. I mean, two years is no joke. It's all over now."

He was thinking about Berenice. What was he entangling her with ? These were not associations that should come near the thought of her. Yet the thought of her remained clear ; it did not become entangled ; and he could not help thinking of her. Nor had he any feeling of contempt for the

girl beside him. After all, she was a human being too, and very likely she really knew what it meant to love.

Simone was shaking her head :

" So you've got it bad, Roger ? And he's going home to sleep all by himself, is he ? You know, actually there isn't any connection. When I was in love I used to go to bed with a pal of mine just so as to talk about the other one. That doesn't count, does it ? But—well, perhaps it's different with men. Are you happy ? Or miserable ? "

He waved his hand vaguely.

" Yes, I suppose so," she agreed. " You never can tell. Oh, I say, look who's behind you ! "

He turned round. Barbentane was standing there, smiling.

" Sorry to butt in, old man. Excuse me, madame. What have you done with my womenfolk, eh ? I thought I'd find them here with you."

" Your wife wasn't feeling well, she went home."

" Oh, I see. Well, if you feel like it, come and join us. I've got the doctor and Rose with me. I got off earlier than I thought and I thought I'd catch them coming out of the Opera des Champs Elysees ; Rose was doing a charity act there. We're celebrating our partnership—I'll tell you all about it. *Madame*" He bowed.

" All right, I'll come along in a moment."

When Edmond had gone, Simone looked thoughtful.

" So that's the husband, is it ? Then you'd better go along and join him. You don't want him to start thinking things."

There was no use arguing about it. Aurelien went and joined Barbentane and his guests.

" Ah, my dear man, still faithful to duty ? " Rose, exclaimed, holding out her hand to be kissed. She had her head thrown back, as usual, and looked at him with her probing, shortsighted eyes, her chin high, her teeth gleaming. " But what a pity Mme Barbentane left you. I was

looking forward to seeing her and telling her how nice we thought it of M. Barbentane—or of Edmond, since you insist on it, my friend—how awfully decent of him——"

" Rose," the doctor broke in, " Leurtillois doesn't know what you're talking about."

" We'll put him wise," Edmond said. " But he must have something to drink first."

When the Ayala was poured out, Aurelien asked, turning to Mme Melrose:

" What was Brussels like ? "

" Oh yes, we haven't met since then, have we ? Jicky was telling me that you were very nice to him when he was on his own. I was so glad. I always feel so guilty when I leave him by himself."

Jicky (as she called the doctor) took the little stick for stirring up the champagne out of his wife's glass and fiddled with it nervously.

" Yes," Edmond said, " this is a business supper. Rose Melrose and Company."

She laughed, very loudly but with terrifying good style. Aurelien watched her, thinking how strange it was that the other evening at Mary's he had thought her beautiful, desirable, fascinating. Beautiful, yes. But even to think of being in love with her instead of with. . . . Though actually there would have been nothing odd about it, for she was much more his type than. . . . He avoided thinking the beloved name.

" Oh," she sighed, " a blues."

" Would you like to dance ? " Edmond asked.

As she stood up she ran her hand through her husband's hair. He gave a little wan laugh and watched the two of them dance away, as he tidied his hair with a pocket-comb.

" What's all this about a company ? " Leurtillois asked.

" It's an idea of Barbentane's. Beauty products, creams and lotions, anti-wrinkle stuff. With small resources like

ours, you see, my dear chap, it's not much more than manual labour. I had a Russian princess and an Armenian chemist, and I used to make all the stuff up in the princess's drawing-room, among the Tsar's silver—genuine !—and imitation Gobelins, with the mortars and test-tubes on the mantelpiece and an ikon in the corner."

"Yes? And what next ? "

" Well, Barbentane has suggested to Rose that she ought to go into business. He's putting up money. We shall have a laboratory and all the boxes and labels will have a portrait of Rose Melrose on them. The grand style. It makes a big difference, doesn't it ? We're going up another rung of the ladder."

What grace and majesty Mme Melrose had ! People recognised her and clapped her discreetly. With her partner's arm round her and one hand at her side, in her long grey dress (no one could wear grey as well as she could), she looked the part she had taken in that Spanish film, where she had played an American—oh, everyone knew and remembered. They made a fine couple. And who was her partner ? people wondered. Who was the man with the tanned complexion and clear blue eyes, who looked like a sports champion ? A bit young for her, perhaps, but with her gifts, with all that charm. . . .

" I haven't thanked you properly yet, Edmond. No, don't protest. It's really frightfully decent of you, marvellous of you. Just the very thing, all of a sudden. And you didn't even wait for Christmas ! "

" If you're pleased, Rose, that's all the reward I need."

" Of course I'm pleased ! I'm delighted. But especially for Jicky. I'm so glad for his sake. He's so difficult, you know, he won't take anything from me. And then he eats his heart out, because he can't give me everything. He feels a bit of inferiority, you know, beside me. Crazy, of course."

" Beside you, who wouldn't feel—— "

" Don't talk nonsense ! You do dance divinely. It's so clever of you to have been so tactful and sized up the situation like that, right away."

" He'll have a social facade, and one that he deserves, what's more. The products are first-rate—oh, I've gone into that. I have women friends. ..."

" That's obvious, you lady-killer ! "

" It's a stroke of good business for me, I assure you. There's no need to thank me. Oh, you spoke too soon, I've stepped on your toes ! "

" I ought to say, thank heaven ! You're flesh and blood, even if you do dance divinely. You're holding me too tight. People are looking at us."

They went back to the table. " Look at her, my dear chap. Isn't it enough to drive one to suicide ? " Leurtillois, at this remark of Decoeur's, roused himself from his thoughts, and for a moment he took leave of Berenice. He was struck by Edmond's smile, and he remembered how he had caught sight of him, just a short while ago, in the stalls at the Casino. How complicated people are !

When she came back, Rose bent over her husband :

" Well, *monsieur le Directeur*, did you see how beautifully your sleeping partner dances ? He's had lessons from Mitchine, which explains everything." And to Barbentane she said : " Not to speak of the lesson I have just had."

Then Leurtillois had to dance with Mme Melrose. It was amazing how light she was, extraordinarily light for so tall a woman. She moved with a physical intuition that was startling and which outpaced her partner, while making him believe that he was guiding her; and yet it was she who guided him, while seeming to follow. Aurelien thought that it must be the same in her life. She had that rare gift, hardly ever found in a dancer, of holding herself aloof from the man while she was close to him as his partner, so that

she seemed little more than a stirring of the air. It was a sort of restraint, of young girl's modesty, and the worst form of provocation, the kind that a man thinks he must be imagining : a caressive quality, instantly denied, that makes a man afraid all the time that he may have overstepped the limits of deliberate audacity. Suddenly, as they circled among the tables, Aurelien caught sight of Simone watching them. He blushed. For a moment he had forgotten Berenice.

" You're the most silent dancer I ever met."

" I'm sorry."

" Why ? If you don't feel like talking. . . . There's nothing more awful than men who think they're obliged to do something."

She did not want to sit down, and so Edmond took her from Aurelien, without stopping. They danced again.

" Fascinating chap, eh ? Leurtillois," he said.

" Not bad."

" Oh, I say, he's more than not bad ! Women go mad about him."

" Well, I'm not mad about him. I don't know what women you mean. His features are too big for my liking, too—well, rather ordinary."

" You're hard to please."

" Yes, I am hard to please. I prefer men who are—I don't know what to call it—a bit better covered. You know, the sort of men you can't pinch anywhere, they're so tough—all muscle."

" Aurelien's solid enough. Well-groomed chap, too."

" Oh, he carries his clothes all right. But what I like is the sort of man who's handsome without his clothes. I'm really the sort of woman who likes fancy men."

" That's too bad for the others ! " He was suddenly acutely aware of her presence.

With that actress's genius that would not let her leave off

playing a part, Rose had lost her good style, involuntarily; she had turned into a tart. She murmured :

" Do you happen to think you're one of the mugs who have to pay ? "

CHAPTER XXVIII

" NOT for anyone else I wouldn't do it," Mme Duvigne grumbled. It was dreadful weather. Snow never lasts long in Paris, and now the thaw had set in. As she paddled through the dirty mush of melting snow, casting a superstitious glance at the Morgue, which at that time was still housed on the prow of the Cite, Aurelien's charwoman was thinking that it was funny how it was always colder when the thaw came than when it was freezing. The damp was awful ! She tightened her black woollen shawl round her throat and quickened her pace. She had got a little behind her time at the other job she did on the Left Bank before going to M. Leurtillois on the He Saint-Louis.

One of the greatest charms of Paris lies in those districts that have fallen into decay. There are a great many of them, places which have fallen from the glories of aristocracy into the depths of trade and working-class tenements, while preserving their facades, their doorways, courtyards and staircases, with a faint nimbus of lost grandeur. And every trace of that splendour which was once a commonplace, now, by the very fact of being scrawled with shop signs that are a mutilation and a humiliation, gains in meaning and value, acquiring something that mere beauty or the passing of the years could never have lent it. In the island itself, where few houses have been built since the days of its greatness, the river, merely by cutting it off from the banks

of the city, has to a great extent preserved the stone ship from commercial degradation. The trade of the capital has not touched it at all; and the village life, as one might call it, of the island, those little shops that provide the necessities of life, have confined themselves to the main street, the rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Île, which is narrow and secret, with the shamed air of an intestine running through a noble body. That is where the shopkeepers dwell, the tradespeople, the common people. And from here short streets leading down to the quays, and the quays themselves, are almost entirely made up of old mansions still inhabited by families that have come down in the world and yet preserve traces of former high living. Here is a middle-class that is a ghostly mirror of an aristocracy; and besides, the artists, the men of the law, and the Americans attracted by a favourable rate of exchange. And among these noble buildings apportioned between the most unlikely lodgers, the joy of the interior decorator and all poverty looking for a windfall, the nineteenth century saw the springing up of blocks such as that where Aurelien had his flat, together with Prince R., the poetess Marie de Breuil, the ex-minister Thibault de Lacour, and a dozen other people of *the right sort*.

Before she came in, Mme Duvigne went down the rue Saint-Louis. It was Sunday, and the shops were crowded. She bought eggs at the dairy, taking the opportunity of paying for the milk at the same time. Everyone was talking about a sensation which did not capture her interest until she was at the ironmonger's buying another pot-scraper (the old one really wouldn't do any longer). The gist of it was that some bargemen had pulled out of the water the body of a woman in evening dress—poor girl, just think—she couldn't have been in the water long—here followed technical details that gradually altered as they were passed from one to another—and one of her fingers was cut off, probably for

the sake of getting a ring. So it was a crime, was it ? Unfortunately Mme Duvigne hadn't time to wait and hear more.

What a gale ! What awful weather ! She stopped at the caretaker's office, and greeted M. Michu, who was washing the tiles under the archway. He was a man of fifty odd, young for his age, extremely hairy, of middle height, with a chapped nose and a drooping grey moustache ; on his right cheek he had a purple birthmark about the size of a penny. Since he had given up his job as an inspector on the trams, he lent a hand to Mme Michu. He would have liked to work for M. Leurtillois, but his tenant already had a char-woman. So M. Michu loathed Mme Duvigne. He grunted as he touched his cap, which was his only way of making himself agreeable to her. All the same, he could not help saying :

" Another woman fished out of the river, Mme Duvigne ! "

" So I heard at the ironmonger's." Mme Duvigne was on her dignity.

M. Michu shouted after her :

" I've taken up the papers. Wasn't any post." He liked to get credit for doing his job.

The kitchen in Aurelien's flat opened off the same landing as the front door ; there was no back staircase on that floor. Mme Duvigne took the back staircase as far as the landing below, where she went through a small door on to the stairs used by " the gentry." She took the newspapers that were balanced on the brass door-handle, took the bread and the milk from the mat, and entered the kitchen, frowning as usual. She was wondering what she would find on the table.

It was understood that Aurelien would always leave a note on the kitchen table when he wanted anything, especially if he didn't wish to be disturbed: whether it was that he was stepping or that he *had someone*. Sometimes he wrote :

" Mme Duvigne, please make breakfast for two in the sitting-room." When he had left no message, Mme Duvigne went into his room, opened the shutters, and brought him breakfast in bed. Mme Duvigne was always afraid of M. Leurtillois *having someone*. Not that she was shocked : when one works for a bachelor, one knows what to expect. Besides, at his age. . . . But nevertheless, on those mornings she felt herself pushed to one side ; there was no chance of talking, and, in fact, she felt embarrassed and even a shade jealous. So she looked at the table as she came in : nothing. She sighed, took off her shawl, lit the gas, put on a kettle, cut the bread into thin slices for toast, and got out the coffee-mill. Lucky there was enough coffee to last for today. (Fancy forgetting to buy any ! Lord bless us, I've a head like a sieve !)

When she drew back the curtains, Aurelien was still asleep, with his face in the pillow. He turned over in bed, and then, stretching out his long arms, looked stupidly at the dull daylight. The little red leather clock struck eleven. " How late it is ! Good morning, Mme Duvigne." He ran his fingers through his hair, by way of combing it.

" Good morning, sir. You were so sound asleep, sir, I really didn't like to wake you."

" Must get up, Mme Duvigne."

" People who have something to do, they've got to. But what do you want to get up for, sir ? On a Sunday, too!"

She put the tray on the table : poached eggs, coffee, milk. Aurelien looked at all these things as if he couldn't understand what they were for. Still half asleep, he was coming back to life with the feeling that all this was rather like an untidy drawer, where everything must be sorted out before one can decide what must go back into it. Mme Duvigne, poached eggs. . . . Suddenly he remembered the previous day. It flooded his mind with light. The smallest details

sprang into relief, backed by the still chaotic awareness of how significant it had all been. Something had happened "which had changed his life fundamentally. He heard his own voice saying to his sister : I'm in love. In love. . . . He had said that. Was he really ? Was it credible ? That meant, then, that nothing was any longer the way it had been; the whole order of things was turned topsy-turvy. He was in the power of what he had said and what he had thought. It was a little while before the thought of Berenice rose completely to the surface of his consciousness, taking shape, emerging from the undergrowth, the maze of last night's dreams. Not that she had been absent from his vague, rambling memories of the previous day, his first thoughts on waking. It was only that she had not come into proper focus at once ; the name Berenice had not yet linked up with the idea of the woman herself. Now there was a trace of melancholy in his growing lucidity. He saw her in the clear light of day, and caught himself wondering : Do I really love her ? Have I taken leave of my senses ? What has come over me ? There was still time to break off the whole thing ; but then he imagined what his life would be like if he went back to the point just before he had met Berenice, and he felt the emptiness of heart that he had known in the past, and the sense of time going to waste. The charwoman's expression came back to his mind : " People who've got something to do. ..." and this time it sounded KEE a reproach. It seemed to him that his life was utterly futile and pointless, and he wondered why he went to the trouble of getting up every day.

As he lowered his eyes, his glance fell on the open door and, in the room beyond, the mask hanging on the wall. He could not understand how he had been able to find any resemblance to Berenice. But although he could no longer see any likeness, everything, even the very lack of resemblance, brought his thoughts back to Berenice. He was clutching

at this love, clutching at love as a drowning man might reach out for some support or fingerhold.

What was Mme Duvigne talking about ?

" Just fancy, sir, in evening dress she was. And cut that low, she *must* have been cold ! A lady, too—not what you might think, sir, oh no, a real lady, and jewellery. That's what they'd cut her finger off for."

He had not heard the beginning, but he asked no questions about the brutal story. Suddenly he had remembered his appointment in the rue Cesar-Franck—today, at five o'clock ! That made all the difference. He sat up in bed and asked for the tray.

" Mme Duvigne, will you go down and buy me some ham, please ? Is there any jam left ? I shall be having lunch at home."

" Is that everything, sir ? I could make you some mashed potatoes. Or a salad."

" That would be very nice, yes, thanks. It's Sunday, isn't it ? The Mariniers will be shut today, and I don't want to go rushing round town in this weather. I won't be going out till the afternoon."

" That's quite right, sir. The slush in the streets is terrible. Do you want me to stay and serve lunch, sir ? "

No, Aurelien preferred that Mme Duvigne should leave everything ready in the kitchen, for he wanted to take his time about dressing and to have his meal as he felt inclined, on a corner of the table, at any old time, as it was already so late. And he told Mme Duvigne to leave the flat as it was, and do a thorough clean up tomorrow. He would make the bed himself. She didn't seem to want to go ; he could hear her pottering about in the sitting-room, tidying up, clearing away yesterday's newspapers, and setting the fire, so that he wouldn't have anything more to do than set a match to it.

" I'm going out now, sir. I'll leave everything in the kitchen."

" Yes, thanks. Don't bother to let me know, just leave the things."

Mme Duvigne's lips tightened. "You don't need to worry, sir." So she was annoyed, was she ! But the main thing was that now he was left in silence and solitude. He leapt out of bed, almost knocking the tray on to the floor, with the remains of the coffee. He caught sight of himself in the long mirror : how tall he was, in his grey pyjamas with the darker grey stripes, all crumpled, his face still swollen with sleep, unshaven, and his hair tousled. He looked disapprovingly at his nails, which were not beyond reproach. Water, water !

The bathroom was not of the most modern design. Aurelien had taken over the bath as it was, and it remained a source of irritation to him. It took an incredible length of time to fill up, and the gas geyser which supplied the hot water was liable to sudden alterations in pressure, so that it was impossible to let cold water run in at the same time, unless one stood there all the time and kept an eye on it. Aurelien followed his old routine, brushing his teeth furiously, beginning with the upper ones. Then, with more tooth-paste balanced on the brush, he went to see how the bath-water was getting on.

All the time his mind was concentrated on the one problem. Now, he thought, he had discovered the secret of his madness. He no longer had any doubt that he was in love, in love with Berenice, with this Berenice who was so utterly an unknown quantity.

He got out fresh underclothes, making his choice with extreme care—not that shirt, how about this one ? Hell, now the bath was too hot. He left his underpants on a chair, and took off his pyjamas. Now there was no soap. He cursed Mme Duvigne for her carelessness. He had to run into the bedroom, naked, and look in the cupboard until he found one of those large, round pieces of his favourite

black soap, which he got specially from London. As he came back, he stopped again in front of the mirror, the soap in his hand, and looked hard at his reflection as if he were looking at a stranger. He shook his head and went back to the bathroom, very thoughtful. Still, there was no way of knowing; women see men with quite different eyes. And with the most scrupulous, almost angry intensity, he began scrubbing this body that was none of his own choosing.

Aurelien was capable of spending hours in this way, for he was never completely satisfied. Then the world would gradually contract, as his field of vision was narrowed to a small area of skin, which must be washed as if everything depended on its being immaculate. The loofah merely served for the preliminaries, preparing the way for rubbing himself with lather until there seemed no reason why he should ever leave off, rubbing away dead skin with the pumice stone, wielding with impassioned attention a brush that went deeper into the pores, treating himself as if he were a floor or a shoe, one of those objects that some lunatics will go on and on polishing in the attempt to satisfy a pathetic vanity. No sooner had he finished one bit than he wondered if he had spent enough care on some other part of himself, and then he would go back over something he had already washed, until his second thoughts had prolonged his labours beyond the limits of what was reasonable and his skin was red from rubbing.

"Are you there, sir?"

Damn, there was Mme Duvigne knocking at the door. He had told her not to disturb him again.

"Well, what is it?"

"I've left everything ready in the kitchen, sir. You've only got to drain the potatoes, they're simmering on the gas. And put a bit of butter in. The salad's made, you've only got to turn it out."

" Right, thanks. That's all."

He plunged his head into the water, with his fingers in his ears, and came up panting. Confound Mme Duvigne, what a bore she was ! He would have liked to have a man instead ; it would be more convenient in all sorts of ways, and a man would manage the place better. For instance, the other day she had pressed his evening-dress trousers for him and made the most awful hash of the crease. The only difficulty was to get a man who would live out. There was the caretaker, of course, who had volunteered for the job, but Aurelien didn't like the man's face, with that birthmark on the cheek, and he wasn't clean, and probably he worked for the police, too. No, not exactly the thing.

If I put on this shirt, he thought, I'll wear the grey-blue suit and the new tie from Pile's. No, I haven't any socks that go with it. Well, supposing I wear the dark one from Hilditch and Key's. Anyway, who am I dressing for, for myself or for her ? What does *she* like ? I don't know anything about Berenice's tastes, I don't know anything about her at all. She'll probably think the tartan socks are queer. Better wear something rather more sober, and a dark tie.

He got out of the bath and dried himself, telling himself that he was a complete egoist. Berenice was a mere pretext that always brought him back to that mirror in the imagination where he saw nothing but Aurelien, Aurelien every time and over and over again. Yet he was in love with Berenice. Ironically he repeated Mme Duvigne's expression: " People who've got something to do. ..." Well, today he had something to do. He was as busy as anyone could be, engaged with his own heart; everything assumed gigantic significance, everything centred on that appointment at five o'clock and led up to five o'clock. He hadn't much time, either ; no time to waste. A man in love is a very busy man. Terribly busy.

Sitting on a towel in the still steamy bathroom, he began

to cut his toenails, with his tongue protruding in the effort of concentration. Once that was done, he began to have fresh doubts about his choice of a shirt, and, forgetting that he had brushed his teeth, began all over again, until he suddenly realised what he was doing and began to laugh at himself. He wiped the steamy mirror clear with a towel. Now for a shave.

Berenice. . . . Everything revolved round the thought of her, the memory of her that he guarded with the scrupulous tact and caution that some men reserve for women. He even sheered off the thought of her, for fear of spoiling something. He was following a vast ring of all sorts of thoughts that circled around the thought of her and were yet apparently without relation to her, yet always keeping within sight of the figure at the centre, the image of Berenice, and preparing him for the sight of her. What a very strange thing men's love is : so childishly, pitifully like the love of birds and bears, insects and wolves. Even when they are concerned with something quite different, they cannot ever succeed in thinking of it as anything but a preparation for the act itself; so all their thoughts are like spring-time in the woods, a matter of choosing bright colours for their plumage, straining their throats with songs that arise from nothing but instinct, building the nest, the bed or the lair to which they will lure her of whom they have Sworn, by all their gods, that they never dreamt of so much as laying a finger on her. Contradiction and hypocrisy are the elements that constitute all real love; if they were rooted out, love itself would die.

Aurelien, half dressed, was hunting for the shoes he had decided to wear. Where the devil had that woman gone and hidden them ? She might as well have stuffed them away deliberately, for all the others were there. That was the worst of old Duvigne, after two years she would take it into her head one day to change things round, just as if she

had guessed that it was the day he would need them. Oh, there they were, she had put them at the bottom of the cupboard. Now why on earth had she done that ? Of course, so that he wouldn't notice she hadn't cleaned them. Now he had to set to and polish the accursed things and get himself dirty. Oh no, this couldn't go on, he would have to get a man.

He went into the kitchen and saw the meal she had left ready. He softened. She had laid the cloth and put some flowers in a little porcelain vase beside the salad, salt, pepper, and the celery-salt too. His napkin was folded like a dunce's cap. Good old Duvigne ! He burst out laughing and began to clean his shoes enthusiastically.

, When he had finished dressing, in the sitting-room, his gaze fell once more on the mask. This time it was really Berenice. Just for a moment it was Berenice when emotion had drained the colour from her cheeks. What marvellous skin she had ! So transparent and alive, so much alive that it made one think of death. . . .

What was that story Mme Duvigne had been telling about a drowned woman ? Evening dress, a ring, a finger cut off. Recalling various details which he had not been aware of noticing at the time, he went over to the window.

There he stood for a long time, looking down at the Seine, watching the yellow water flowing past, muddy, cold, ambiguous. Why had she worn evening dress, that girl ? What shadowy tragedy had taken place, with a flash of gems, in the stream flowing past below, and what mystery lay there, so commonplace and yet profound ? What need of a dress for those who are drowned ? Are not all naked 'as soon as the water laps them round, as naked in death as all are naked in love ? The sheets are cold too, when a man and a woman lie down.

Suddenly he thought with annoyance that he should not have sent Mme Duvigne away before she had done her work

and tidied up the flat. If, by any wild chance—oh, it was the faintest of possibilities, and yet—and yet——

He put clean sheets on the bed and swept the room, averting his eyes from the wall where the mask hung, white and pure and remote.

CHAPTER XXIX

MRS. GOODMAN'S flat in the rue Cesar-Franck was very far removed from what Berenice Morel imagined a painter's studio to be like, or any place where an artist might be expected to live. It was the sort of flat that one found in all the new buildings of the time, and "new" meant anything built since 1900. It had three bedrooms, a drawing-room and a dining-room, small rooms with light walls, Louis Seize mouldings and mirrors over the mantelpieces. What was called the drawing-room, which was where Zamora worked, was a rather narrow room, where too much space was taken up by an easel with a large canvas on it. This was a very shiny painting, in Zamora's Dada manner, of a complicated machine with a great many wheels that certainly could not go round, steel-grey, with black here and there. It formed a screen dividing the room into two, and made everything else seem tiny by contrast, and eccentrically old-fashioned: the cane-bottomed chairs that might have belonged to Versailles, the armchairs covered in white-and-green striped silk, the period console, the marble table.

Zamora had installed himself here, along with his canvases, which were piled up on the floor in one corner, and his easel, brushes, sketch-books, chinks and paint-pots, without making any difference to the way life went on in the flat. The beautiful Betty Goodman—a tall, fair woman with the

face of a pre-Raphaelite madonna, an utterly calm face with full eyelids and eyebrows so pale that her forehead seemed larger than it was—had accepted his entry into her life as she accepted everything, and she seemed to take Zamora and his pictures as a matter of course, together with the transformation of her drawing-room into a studio. It was also used as a playroom by her two children, a boy and a girl, aged five and six, delightful, irresistible little creatures, golden-haired as angels. There too an enormous negress, with a green-and-red spotted handkerchief tied over her hair, would sit sewing, mending the linen or her mistress's underclothing, while watching over the children. And above all, Zamora's friends passed in and out—his odd assortment of acquaintances, famous jockeys, duchesses, writers and journalists, rich men with nothing to do, pretty women of every kind, chess players, people he had picked up in transatlantic liners or in hotels, as well as friends of the Zamora family, which was established of old in the international ramifications of a corn-factor's business and had connections in high places within the Spanish church.

When Berenice, accompanied by Paul Denis, who had called for her at the rue Raynouard, arrived in this glory-hole, to which the finishing touch was given by a child's head of Houdon's on the mantelpiece, she found, besides the negress, the children, Mrs. Goodman and Zamora himself, another visitor, no less than the great Charles Roussel, the dress-designer. He was a tall man of sixty, with white, soft hair and a round beard. He still carried himself with the awareness of having been handsome; he was as well-cared for as a lap-dog and well-dressed to such a degree that it bordered on ostentation.

He had dropped in, in the most casual way in the world, round about tea-time. It was a young writer, a friend of Paul Denis's and Roussel's adviser in matters of art, who had suggested that he ought to see Zamora's work. For

Charles Roussel's reputation was doubly glorious : he not only owned that celebrated shop in the rue de la Paix, but he was the possessor of a collection of modern paintings and ancient Chinese statuary, destined for the Louvre after his death.

He was going into ecstasies before a series of water-colours, more or less abstract in style, in which machine-like forms, washed over with one or two colours, mingled with phrases typical of the oracular poetry then in fashion. His laudatory remarks were framed in the enigmatic jargon of art criticism, for he wanted to avoid looking as though he did not know what the pictures were about; at the same time, he did not want to make a fool of himself. With Zamora he had adopted the free and easy tone of a man of the world, who understands that there are many different ways of living, even if he himself does not go in for them; and he combined his comments with compliments to Mrs. Goodman, whom he thought charming though not at all well-dressed.

" It's most unusual—most unusual," he was saying. " It has a sort of charm—a sort of simplicity. It reminds me of things I've seen in Italy, you know the sort of thing I mean especially this one with the red—this one. You know, Zamora, there are walls in Italy where there's hardly a trace left, a mere trace of colour, a curve. Fascinating. One begins to wonder about it. . . ."

Zamora was pouting his lips, obviously amused and at the same time taking the compliment for what it was worth.

" Chuff-chuff-chuff ! Oo ! Oo ! " The little boy, in his blue play-suit, scrambling about under everyone's feet with a toy engine the colour of a sardine tin, was squeaking so loudly that Berenice turned to look at him. He was a plump little fellow, very fair, with a round face, a mere pudge of a nose, and his mother's eyelids. The long-legged little girl, exquisitely pretty in her pink pinafore, skipped and bustled about with all the bullying tricks of an elder sister

keeping a brother in order. Now she flung herself on him and tried to take the engine away.

" Oh, Washington, Washington ! Don't be silly, Washington ! "

Mrs. Goodman saw Berenice's astonishment and explained :

" She insists on calling her brother by his second name, but I call him Georgie. Georgie, look, Georgie ! "

M. Roussel was turning over the pages of a large sketch-book and saying :

" This reminds me of the trip I did in 1890—was it '90 ? I happened to meet Anatole France. He seemed embarrassed. He was looking at Geeottos with me, and someone called out ' Monsieur France ! Monsieur France ! ' I turned round, and there was a most frightful old frump ! A virago, so to speak. I looked at Anatole. He looked at me. He shook his head and he said to me : * Well, my dear chap/ he said, * that's the way it is, you see.' She was waving an umbrella. Caillavet's mother. . . . "

" Very nice ! " Zamora said politely, not caring a damn. Mrs. Goodman laughed her astonished laugh, which stood her in such good stead with her painter.

" Ch-ch-chuff ch-chuff ! " went the little boy over the art-lover's buckskin shoes. A pink bundle descended upon him, crying : " Washington ! " And the negress's red-and-green head came diving down as she bent to fish the children out.

M. Roussel lifted one foot and then the other, as if he had been walking on Zamoras. " Enchanting children. A—so to speak, a freshness. . . . My dear Zamora, about your water-colours, I may perhaps surprise you——"

" Oh, no, do go on ! "

" . . . Two names come to my mind—two names—Geeotto, Chimaboo. . . . "

Paul Denis whispered to Berenice :

" He means Giotto and Cimabue."

Mrs. Goodman was quietly apologising to Mme Morel. Such a thing hadn't happened for a long time, of course. She was sure that Mme Morel would understand.

Mme Morel quite understood. Paul Denis had explained the situation to her on their way there. Mrs. Goodman had a husband, a diplomat who, after she had left him, had been seen about at Cannes and Biarritz for a while, brandishing a revolver, until his government had recalled him to the United States. On the whole he had been relieved to find himself at liberty. He had let the mother have the custody of the children, but he had stopped sending any money, which was inconvenient. True, Zamora had some, but he spent even more than he had. Painting is an expensive occupation.

For the moment Charles Roussel was occupied in trying to find a way of escaping without buying a picture. Zamora, who had sized up the situation, brought him back to the big canvases, confronted him with the picture on the easel and others heaped against the wall. One couldn't offer a mere handful of small change for things of that size, after all.

" Well, you must forgive me," the collector said. " I must slip away. An appointment, so to speak. ... A long story, you know."

Berenice saw Mrs. Goodman's eyes cloud over with disappointment, but she didn't hear the story because now it was her turn to go through the water-colours, with Paul Denis at her side.

Just as he was going out of the door, however, the dress-designer apparently felt that he must make a gesture in keeping with his position as a patron of the arts, and he said :

" Well, send me along that little thing—the bicycle, that's what it is, isn't it ?—with the red. . . ."

" You mean, ' The Approximate Reckoning ' ? "

" Oh, that's what it's called ? Yes, the bicycle. And put in two others, choose them yourself—or perhaps Mrs. Goodman will choose them for me ? " He bowed and waved his hand in her direction. " Women always have the feeling, so to speak, a. . . . They know the kind of thing you can hang on your walls without having a lot of fuss/ "

He cast a last glance at the huge canvas of machinery that obstructed the passage through the drawing-room. Zamora saw him out.

" Ouf ! " Mrs. Goodman sighed with relief. " Heaven defend us ! Well, if he takes three, that'll be five hundred francs, anyway. I'll put in ' The Hermaphrodite Pander ' to amuse Mme Roussel."

" The Hermaphrodite Pander " was a very chaste piece of work, to the lay eye almost indistinguishable from a clock, but with black hands pointing to ten past twelve, while other clocks, green ones, said the time was twenty-five to nine.

Zamora came back, his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter, and waving his hands about in imitation of Roussel: " Chimaboo ! Gee-otto ! Chimaboo ! " Then he took Berenice by the wrists and looked at her.

" Well/ " he said, " we must get down to work. Sit down over there/ " And turning to Mrs. Goodman: " Interesting head, isn't it ? "

She flickered her great shady eyelids. " Yes, enchanting. She looks like a big fish."

Zamora clucked his tongue and said to Berenice :

" There you are. That's what she's like. She thinks you look like a big fish."

Berenice, rather surprised, was laughing. Paul Denis, in an attempt to smooth things out, said :

" There are some very lovely ones. The goldfish——"

" No," Mrs. Goodman interrupted, in a categorical tone, " not a goldfish. She looks more like a catfish."

" One never knows what other people see one as," Denis remarked. " Some people——"

" It would make quite a good parlour game/" Zamora interrupted. " What do you think I look like ? What does Paul see Betty as ? As for him, I think he looks like an errand boy gone to the bad."

He burst out laughing. Paul Denis frowned slightly.

Zamora, settling down with a large block of Wattman paper, pencils, Chinese ink, little paint-pots and some water, went on :

" It's all very well to laugh at old Daddy Roussel. He's quite ridiculous, of course. But what would we do without him ? I mean Picasso, Derain, myself."

He always set himself on the rungs of the ladder, listing himself with the others. He had never brought himself to admit that he did not quite count. For he knew he was more intelligent than most painters, and he had come to the conclusion, once and for all, that talent is a matter of intelligence.

" What eyes she has ! " he said, measuring up the proportions. " If I draw them the way they are, I shall be told again that it's bad drawing. Or they will say it's a ' distortion '—that's the great word nowadays. They see everything as a distortion. They've chewed over the cud of Manet—they're blown out with * Olympia.' But if I put my tongue in my cheek, like this, it isn't a distortion at all, it's a gesture. But you know, when you paint somebody's portrait, he has no right to sneeze—it simply isn't done."

Paul Denis had come to stand behind the painter :

" Do you mind ? "

" Not at all. I'm not prudish. Real painters, apparently, dislike being watched at work. Fine lovers they must make !"

Mrs. Goodman was still thinking about the sale :

" You'll send him the * Hermaphrodite Pander,' will you,

my dear, and the other one, the one I don't like—what's it called ?—' Sixty-Nine.' "

" No, * Six hundred and Six.' " He clucked again, and Berenice thought that *he* was like a hen. " What I would have liked would be to get rid of some of the big stuff. A canvas. Even though I'm not ever going to paint on canvas again, it's rather tiresome. Of course, it's idiotic to bring in Giotto, talking about little bits of wash like that. It'd be a different matter with the big jobs. They painted religious themes then because it was new—just as people go in for lighthouses and cars now. People don't understand why I paint lovely new machines. They want machines, but they want them to be *going*, with flames and smoke pouring out of funnels and all that Verhaeren kind of Titanism. But show them clean, shiny nickel, and they hold up their hands in horror."

" What did you use in that one ? " Paul Denis asked, indicating the big canvas. " It looks like varnish."

" That ? Coach varnish. The whole question of painting is simply one of the medium. When oil was discovered, it was the end of frescoes. Painters began to grind their own colours, and that was their secret. Nowadays paint itself is despised. Picasso used to boast that he used Felix Potin paints. But you'll see, they won't last. But this stuff will last a lifetime—centuries ! In future we shall paint our pictures, our cars, and our women all with the same stuff."

Berenice was looking at the wall opposite, at one of the famous heads of Breton women that had been Zamora's last manner. Nothing could possibly be more correct; the style was pretty much what one sees on the cover of expensive illustrated magazines. It was drawn in Chinese black, with a rather thick, long line that looked as if it had been blotted, and the colour was concentrated in the peasant headdress, with a dab of pink on the cheeks, the lips very red, with two depths of colour to mark the shadow, and another dab to

suggest the dress at the neck. Berenice wondered if he was going to paint her like that or like the "Hermaphrodite," and she laughed a little.

Zamora stopped and looked at her.

Scared, she asked :

"Shouldn't I laugh ?"

"On the contrary, it's rather a good idea. I hadn't thought of it. The portrait suddenly begins to laugh, you can see that from here."

Berenice couldn't be sure whether he was joking or annoyed. He continued his monologue as much for Paul as for her :

"People don't know what they want. They've come to the conclusion that it doesn't matter what you paint, only the way in which you paint it. That might have taken them a long way, but in fact it only took them to the point where they painted apples and still more apples, nothing but apples. Now when I paint machines, people tell me : You ought to do what Cezanne did."

Georgie-Washington Goodman recalled himself to the general attention by calling out, in his little high voice :

"Cizanne ! Dirty old man !"

"Oh, oh !" his mother exclaimed. "What a boy !"

"He wants to be given an apple," Zamora explained, clucking more than ever.

In his enthusiasm Washington had clutched hold of Berenice's dress and kept on repeating: "Dirty old Cizanne !" while his prim sister threatened him with punishment. Berenice lifted him on to her lap and smiled at him.

"He'll be a painter," she said. Then, turning to the little girl, she asked :

"And what do you want to be when you grow up ?"

The child's madomja-like face turned towards the guest. Nothing could possibly have been more pure. And in that

ecstatic tone that is the result of prolonged reflection, she said:

" When I'm grown up I'm going to be a tart."

Paul Denis's laughter was louder even than Zamora's, louder than the conventionally shocked outcry of the mother, while the impassive negress beamed uncomprehendingly upon the scene.

" You mustn't take any notice of her," Mrs. Goodman said. " She repeats everything she hears."

" Does she really ? " Paul Denis asked, laughing until the tears ran down his cheeks.

" You're making things worse, Betty," the painter observed.

Mrs. Goodman blushed slightly, and turned to Mme Morel, who was running her fingers through the little boy's hair :

" Are you fond of children ? "

" Oh yes ! " Then, feeling that she had laid her heart bare more than was called for, Berenice qualified that: " Not all, of course. It depends on the children. When they're nice, they can be so sweet."

" You're fond of children, are you ? " Paul Denis exclaimed with great severity. " Well, I'm not! " It was obvious that what Berenice had just said was, to his way of thinking, not at all the thing. She raised her eyes to him and said slowly :

" Ah, I see, my boy, it's not the done thing in your circle to be fond of children."

Paul bit his lip, and Mrs. Goodman brightened, with a sudden gush of liking for Mme Morel:

" You've guessed ! It's not at all the thing. One is supposed to hide one's feelings."

" One is at liberty," Paul announced with disconcerting gravity, " to like brats, or garbage, or anything that occurs to one."

It was becoming difficult. Zamora put an end to the conversation effectively by saying :

" Well, I like children, when they're mine. What I like best of all is making them."

" Really, darling ! " Mrs. Goodman protested.

Berenice's thoughts had drifted from what Paul Denis had said to what she imagined his world to be like, that world of young artists and writers who were in love with excess. The ideas that reigned there were ready-made ; they might be different from other people's ideas, but they were like other people's ideas in being ready-made, and they were just as tyrannical. It was a pity about Paul Denis, for he was a nice boy. He was quite promising as a poet, but he had this fear of what people would say, which was quite ridiculous, especially in such a small circle. That was what made him rather dry, so that his poetry was brilliant without being really moving; it did not touch the heart. She was sorry for him, just as she was sorry for these precocious children who had heard about Cezanne before they had been taught to blow their noses. She took out her handkerchief and blew Washington's nose for him.

The winter afternoon was beginning to cast its twilight over the conversation. Nor was the conversation going on very well between Paul Denis and Zamora. They were talking about the cinema, and the painter was saying :

" So you haven't seen the latest Harold Lloyd ? You must go to see it, Madame. It's miles better than Charlie." That began an argument, for in Paul's opinion nothing could compare with Charlie Chaplin, either in films or in anything else. For Zamora, on the other hand, any established glory was irritating and he felt compelled to support the claims of a rival. He always had some substitute hero up his sleeve, whether in music, poetry, boxing, medicine or whatever it might be, someone that no one but himself had ever heard of but whose name, when dexterously thrown

into the conversation, put a stop to argument and even created its own myth. These names were generally those of vague friends of his in New York or Seville, Mexico or Havana ; and they certainly never suspected the high reputation being created for them in Paris by this man who might just as easily have forgotten all about them.

But with Zamora one could never get away for long from the subject of his painting. The picture on the easel provided the main material of the conversation. Zamora had torn up a couple of sheets of Wattman paper, and at the moment he was transferring a sketch onto a third sheet in order to transfer it to a fourth, where Berenice saw that he had already drawn something. Paul Denis was uttering little exclamations of interest and shaking his head. Berenice looked at him questioningly, but he replied only with evasive gestures and smiles, occasionally biting his nails. Zamora was still talking about the picture that Charles Roussel had not bought from him :

" When I think of the Matisse that he has at home ! Nearly twice as big ! A bowl with red fish in it. What an idea ! Red fishes two feet long—there's no sense in it ! But apparently there's nothing shocking about that, whereas a machine—that's different. Now, look at this one—do you know what they all have against it ? "

" No."

" That the cogs are blocked up and can't turn ! As if, supposing they weren't blocked up, painted wheels *could* go round ! Comic, isn't it ? Anyone would think that they buy a picture so as to get a copy of it done and have an engine made, or a carburettor. The next thing will be the collector who buys a Renoir and wants the bathing girl to—well ! Or a Poussin, so as to have it reproduced in his garden."

" As if," Paul improved on this, " the beauty of the machine did not lie precisely in the fact that it's useless."

" Absolutely. That's it—sheer luxury ! "

" People don't deserve the luxury around them."

Here once more disagreement arose between the two men. Luxury, for Paul Denis, meant something like what Andre Gide called the *acte gratuit* the act for its own sake, which produced no advantage and no pleasure but was merely a logical conclusion drawn from a grotesque moral outlook, at that time all the rage among young people. But Zamora did not appreciate Gide and didn't want to hear anything about any act for its own sake.

" You know," he said, " fundamentally I'm rather glad Roussel didn't buy that picture. It will be useful in helping me to unmask imbeciles. When an imbecile comes in here, the moment he looks at that picture he says : ' But the wheels can't go round ! ' It's a dead certainty."

Berenice slipped quietly into the conversation :

" There's no need for the *acte gratuit* to explain what you mean. The idea has been expressed already : ' The ever-fresh and exquisite pleasure of a useless occupation.' "

They all looked at her, open-mouthed, as if she had said something quite out of place. According to the scheme of things that prevailed in those circles, women ought not to know anything worth mentioning, much less mention it. Above all, quotations were not at all the thing. Berenice cleared her throat and said in excuse :

" It's Henri de Regnier."

" Regnier ? " Paul Denis jeered. " You know stuff of Regnier's off by heart, do you ? "

" Oh, just a little bit, by chance, from music."

" What music ? "

" It's quoted by Maurice Ravel as a motto to the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*."

" Oh, I see."

This started Zamora off on something else. On the one hand, he did not particularly care to hear that his ideas found

an echo in Henri de Regnier ; on the other, what stuck in his mind was the name of Ravel. His mind worked by processes of association.

" Ravel ? " he said. " Do you know what Erik Satie says about him ? "

" No," Denis said.

" ' Ravel refused the Legion of Honour, but all his music accepts it.' "

" Oh, oh ! " Mrs. Goodman said, with her astonished smile.

" Very nice," Paul Denis said appreciatively. " And true."

Zamora looked as if he had made the epigram himself. Denis turned to Berenice, asking :

" Don't you think that's amusing ? "

" I suppose it is," she said. " But you'll probably think me very stupid. Which is right, Ravel or his music ? "

" Good lord ! "

" We wouldn't know anything about him if it weren't for the music," she went on.

Zamora remarked : " It all depends on what one thinks of the Legion of Honour "

Thereupon Denis and he exchanged a wink—one more idea in common. Zamora stepped back to get the effect of his drawing, and at that moment there was a ring at the door. The children rushed to see who it was. Mrs. Goodman switched on the electric light. The whole room came alive.

It was M. Leurtillois, apologising for dropping in uninvited, but Mme Morel had said that he might call for her. There was a clamour of voices, Paul Denis, Mrs. Goodman, and Berenice all talking at once, and the painter already on tiptoe for compliments from the new arrival.

Leurtillois was looking at the picture on the easel. He shook his head, murmuring something polite. Then suddenly he said:

" But, if I may say so, these wheels can't go round."

CHAPTER XXX

" How did you like my portrait ? "

They were sitting in the Bar de de la Paix, in the place de l'Opera. It was then the quietest place in Paris, especially towards six o'clock on Sunday evening. The room was divided into two, panelled in yellow wood with Louis Seize moulding, padded with carpets and all the calm of pre-war times, that traditional atmosphere of Parisian love affairs. The waiters were the merest shadows. Three or four scattered couples were talking in low voices. An old gentleman was holding a girl's hand. A solitary aviator, sitting on a stool at the bar, constantly looked at his watch.

Berenice had not wanted to go to the He Saint-Louis, and because they could not drift about in the two-seater for long, with such heavy rain beating on the hood, Aurelien had brought her here.

(" Not this evening," she had said, " let's keep something for later on. You don't know me yet, Aurelien." And he smiled when she uttered his name.)

" Good heavens, which of your portraits ? There are three of them, and each one isn't bad, but as they're all superimposed on each other, on the same paper, all one sees is a chaos of lines."

" That isn't quite fair, my dear. Zamora wanted to show the movement of the eyes and mouth—like photographs when the camera has shifted, you know. It's queer. I wonder if it's like me."

Aurelien was eating chips, which crackled as he bit them. He said very seriously :

" Zamora wanted to rob you of your secret. He wanted to get hold of the thing that makes you so different according

to whether your eyes are open or shut. But he won't get it. That secret isn't for him."

"Who is it for?"

"That's what I should like to know."

She did not answer; she only closed her eyes. He watched her, murmuring :

"There it is ! Oh, there it is. The mystery is working, Berenice. Everybody in the world can see you like this, except you. Everyone except you. Then you're quite defenceless, you're admitting something that you've been keeping hidden. It's the Berenice secret. No, don't open your beautiful dark eyes, stay like that—abandoned. You told me, on the way, that I don't know you. I don't know the other one, the one with her eyes open ; but this Berenice with her eyes shut, oh, how well I know her ! I've known her for a long, long time. Don't smile—it's the other one who smiles like that, not my one, my Berenice. Because her smile—don't you believe me ? You must come to the flat, and I'll show you her smile."

"I don't quite know what you're talking about, Aurclien, but I like it," she said, opening her eyes, very conscious that she was opening them. "How many women have you talked to like this ?"

He was aghast at this quite simple remark, which was, after all, not unexpected, since no man ever crosses the threshold of intimacy with any woman in the world without hearing it or without swearing that he has never. . . .

She told him that, seeing that he was upset, and so trying to excuse herself for having said something so commonplace. But for him it was not commonplace at all. He had never told any other woman the things he was saying to her ; he had never loved any other woman in such a way or even pretended to. When he said so, however, it didn't seem likely ; that was the trouble.

"It doesn't strike me as being very awful if you use words

you've used before, Aurelien, if the words are lovely." She spoke his name as often as possible, just as he liked to call her Berenice over and over again. " But I wouldn't want you to lie to me, when we have so little time. A lie takes up an awful lot of room between two people. After a while, there isn't anything there except the lie."

" Why should I lie to you ? " he exclaimed.

She shook her head. " Yes, why, after all ? Why ? But last night you had only just said—only just told me—what you told me——" The memory of it seemed to move her greatly. He took her hand, which she withdrew again gently.

To let her know that he understood, he repeated in a whisper:

" I love you, Berenice."

She bowed her head in token of accepting that, and went on, with a little shivering movement of her shoulders :

" You'd only just told me that—something so—oh, I can't tell you what it meant to me ! And then you went to meet your girl at Lulli's."

" My girl ! I haven't any girl ! "

" Don't lie ! Oh, please don't lie ! Edmond told me, she's called Simone."

" But Berenice ! Edmond's crazy ! Oh well, thanks to him—Simone is simply one of the dancing partners at Lulli's, and I talk to her sometimes, she's just an old drinking crony of mine."

" I'm not reproaching you, Aurelien. Supposing she were your girl ? You don't know me. I haven't asked anything of you, and you haven't promised me anything."

" I've promised everything in the world ! "

" Hush, hush, don't interrupt. Only, last night there were those three little words that passed between us, and after that even the light was too bright for me. I wanted so terribly much to believe you, and then Edmond—•——"

" Why doesn't he mind his own business ? I just couldn't go straight home to bed, that's all. I had to have noise, lots of people, lights, music round me. Where can one go at that time ? I'm used to going to Lulli's. I was afraid to sleep, I was afraid of going to sleep and losing you. There are dreadful, strange places in dreams."

There was a long silence between them, until at length Aurelien said, with all the profound force of his youth :

" Berenice, never in my life did I tell a woman that I loved her."

The words entered into her, strong, warm, singing words. She sighed :

" How is it possible ? " And immediately she believed it. She went on : " I don't know anything about you either—except that you're a big, dark man and—one oughtn't to say such things, but I can't help it—I felt drawn towards you from the first day, and particularly at Mme de Perseval's that evening."

He knew that she was speaking the truth. He remembered her move towards him, just before Rose Melrose had said the Rimbaud poem. They were quite close to each other now, and he tried to take hold of her arm.

" Sit still, Aurelien, Don't touch me when I confess how weak I am. It isn't quite fair. There, be good. I don't want to have to defend myself against you. Can't I bfe just your—crony, like Simone ? "

" No," he said. " Honestly, you can't."

She put her hands over her eyes, and murmured :

" How terrible this is ! "

" Haven't you understood ? I've told you that I never told any woman. ..."

" Aurelien, say it again."

" I love you."

She took her hands away from her eyes and held her temples. The slant of her eyes became exaggerated now,

and two small fingers, joining across her forehead, separated her fair hair from her face, as a turban might have done. Ah, now she was the Berenice of Caesarea : *In the deserts of the East*. . . .

" You change, Berenice, like a landscape in the wind. You're not a woman. You're a crowd, you're all the women there are."

" I hope you don't get lost in the crowd."

" Don't make fun of me. I tell you, never. . . ."

" Never ? "

She believed him. She believed him. She believed him. And yet she said :

" It's almost incredible. How did you manage all your life ? Not even by mistake ? Not once ? "

" Never."

" Oh, it's too lovely, it makes me quite drunk. Say it again."

" I love you."

" Oh God! I wonder if it's as serious for you as it is for me."

He was about to say something, but she stopped him :

^{4<} Perhaps you haven't said it—but hasn't there been any woman in your life who mattered, all these years ? "

He shook his head and laughed.

" I only had one, a long and terrible cohabitation."

" What ? " The word had shocked her.

He explained :

" The war."

She smiled, this time with the mask's smile.

" There," he said. " Oh, it's vanished again."

" What ? "

" Nothing—my own secret ! Yes, there wasn't anything except childhood and then the war, and then several women, but no one woman."

" I'm anxious about those ' several,' my dear. Supposing I were to be among them some day."

Aurelien moved suddenly, and on her hand she felt the man's lips : humble, passionate, young. She let her hand lie there. At that moment she knew that he belonged to her.

" The war," she said. " It terrifies me to think that you were in it, one man among all the others, with the dangers, and the seasons, the rain. You'll talk to me about how it was, won't you ? Otherwise too much of you will stay quite unknown to me."

" I don't like talking about it. It takes any chance it can of coming back to haunt me, and I don't want to give that old cast-off lover any chances of pursuing me. It horrifies me. I even horrify myself sometimes. When I look at my hands and think of the things they did—these hands."

He held them out to her as tragic witnesses. Tenderly the girl caressed them, stroking them with her own slight, velvety hands that were so well-kept.

He noticed the wedding ring on her finger, and trembled.

" But you, Berenice. . . . ? "

She had caught his glance. Now she took her hands away. " Don't let's ever talk about that," she said.

" But we must."

" No, please, *please*"

He bowed his head.

She looked at him as he sat like this. She knew that he must be unhappy, and that brought him very close to her. She remembered how he had arrived at Mrs. Goodman's only a short time ago and fallen unsuspectingly into the trap Zamora had invented, how he had been brought low by that arbitrary and unjust public opinion. It might well be asked : How do others see us ? Horrors ! But she had sided with Aurelien, knowing that she could defend him. Now she loathed the painter and the boy Denis and all these artist people, imprisoned in their own tastes and their own style of living. How big he was beside them, how big

and defenceless ! The thought aroused every maternal impulse she possessed, and even the thought of motherhood itself sprang to life and filled her. She shut her eyes. Fighting against grief, she smiled. . . .

" Berenice ! This time. . . . "

She started, and saw him, half-risen from his chair, close to her.

" What were you thinking about ? Quick, tell me ! "

She hesitated, and then said: " Perhaps that's my secret."

He was annoyed. She was doing what all women do, slipping away, reserving shadowy realms for herself alone, the trappings of bogus mystery. Immediately he reproached himself for having thought such a thing ; and he watched the light moving across her face, the yellow light, like weak tea, that was shed from frosted glass flowers.

In the meantime she was slipping between his fingers like an eel. The minutes were passing, and he couldn't find out anything about her. Could she feel this irritation in him ? Did she think she kept her ascendancy over him better in such a way ? Women have a raging desire to dominate men, to have them under control. If she had wanted to remain a mere ghost for him, then she would not have acted differently ; yet she was marvellously human. He thought to himself: I must take the bull by the horns.

" Berenice. . . . "

" My dear. . . . "

" Your cousin told me—why did you come to Paris, and why aren't you staying longer ? "

" Because—" she blushed violently and broke off. " Oh, I almost told you a lie. Don't try to make me say something that would only put a distance between us."

" A distance ? Between us ? "

" Yes, the truth would put a distance between me and you. And I don't want to lose you, oh, I don't want to lose you now ! "

This " now " quickened Aurelien's heart. He was afraid that he might have been deceived by the tone in which it was said, and to make absolutely sure, he* asked :

" What do you mean by ' now ' ? "

This question disturbed Berenice. She sipped her orangeade for a moment, then passed her fingers over her lips. Her cheek trembled.

" I mean—I mean—oh, don't ask me too much ! You see, I almost lied to you, and I'm still upset about it. I don't want to have to lie to you, any more than I could bear your lying to me. Oh, Aurelien ! Let there be at least one thing in life that's big and clean and right. One thing ! I want to believe in you, Aurelien."

She was avoiding the question. He was afraid of the expression on her face and said to himself: " She's tricking me." But he couldn't quite bring himself to admit it. And what if he had touched on some wound, some hidden drama ? Without saying anything, she was driving him to think something of the kind. Does anyone ever know where lying begins ?

" You must take me back to the rue Raynouard."

" What ? Already ? Aren't we going to have dinner together ? "

" My cousins are having a party this evening. No, I can't. It's enough for one day, I couldn't bear any more. You have given me so much, by telling me. . . . I've got to be alone to think about it. Don't be cross, my dear. Don't ask me anything. Just think, I'm accepting what you give me—isn't that something to begin with ? Perhaps I oughtn't to—but what else could I do, how could I refuse it ? And anyw^ray, perhaps I'm mistaken, Aurelien. I've always dreamt that one day someone would sacrifice everything for me and give me everything he had in his heart, just like that, without any reason, without asking anything, without anything. . . . You can see for yourself, I'm crazy, and that's all there is to it."

" Berenice ! "

" Our dreams, our dreams ! You must think I'm absurd. This country girl, you must be saying to yourself. . . ."

" Berenice ! "

" The way it is in books, isn't it ? Well, it isn't. It's precisely what never is in books. I've had dreams, I've seen you. And you've said the words that I wasn't expecting—terrible words. . . ."

" Berenice, I love you, my darling."

The endearment pierced her to the heart. She raised one hand to preserve the silence, which lasted a long time.

At the bar the airman, whose girl had not turned up, was paying for his drinks, raced with the dreary prospect of an empty evening.

" Take me back to the rue Raynouard."

" I can't."

" Do be sensible. Tamorrow I'll give you the whole day. You can come for me at ten o'clock. We'll have lunch together."

" What am I going to do this evening ? "

He watched the airman going out. A damp, dark draught came from the lobby as the door swung.

" You'll think about us, Aurelien. Go to Lulli's if you want to, and I'll allow *you* to have a moment with Simone. You see, I trust you."

He noticed only then that she was wearing the dress she had worn the first time they met, the dress which he had thought so ugly. What could have been the matter with him that day ?

The journey from the Opera to Passy, with the pre-occupation of driving, ice on the road, and all the other traffic, seemed both very long and very short. Aurelien felt the way he had done as a child, when he had come back from the theatre with the family : a pain in the heart, a fear of spoiling it all. At one place in the Avenue du Trocadero

it was so dark that he moved over to her in the car. She repulsed him.

" No, no, I don't want to, I don't want to ! "

She was beating him with her little fists.

" Stop, or I won't see you tomorrow ! "

He was ashamed of himself, stammered some apology, took the wheel again, and they went on.

" Will you forgive me ? "

In the darkness, without saying anything, she laid her cheek on the man's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXXI

NEVERTHELESS, Berenice had not told Aurelienthe truth. It was a mere trifle : there was nobody coming to dinner at the Barbentanes' that Sunday evening, and the servants were all out. The two women sat down together to a cold meal. Something must have happened, for Blanchette had red eyes and said : " Edmond won't be in." It was obvious that she was not only upset, she was also observing Berenice and drawing her own conclusions.

Berenice, absorbed in what was singing in her mind, pretended to love playing at house, with sudden little bits of awkwardness. A glass and a plate were missing.

" What am I thinking of ! " she said carelessly.

" That's what I was wondering," Blanchette replied drily. And Berenice saw to her embarrassment that Blanchette was really wondering.

" I've just been to kiss the children goodnight. They hadn't gone to sleep. They didn't want me to go."

" They adore you, that's quite obvious," the mother said, thin-lipped. " Nannie tells me that in the morning Victoire asks for Nice, then for breakfast, then for Mummy."

" You're not jealous, I hope ? "

" Jealous of you ? What an idea ! "

It was difficult to understand why Blanchette laughed so affectedly. She must have felt that herself, for she looked dismayed and then said the very last thing that she ought to have said :

" Oh, with Victoire, you mean."

" Who on earth do you think ? "

They both stopped talking, crumbling bread, offering each other the pprt, the ham.

" Not with Edmond, anyway!" Berenice exclaimed rather too late.

The other shrugged her shoulders. " We're talking utter rubbish."

This time it was Berenice whose laugh was not quite successful. What could there possibly be between Blanchette and. . . ? She did not utter his name even to herself.

Time passed slowly in the empty dining-room, with its table for any number of people, its electric candles of imitation wax in one corner by the fruit and nuts and finger bowls, and the two places set for the two women, and the half-bottle of Perrier. It was a long room, red and gold, with stalkless flowers floating in bowls, and Chinese lacquer chairs from Martinets. Beside Blanchette stood a little gong, which she would not strike, because there was no one on the other side of the service-hatch.

Berenice thought she must make some sort of excuse and said :

" You know, I am so fond of the children, and they realise it."

Blanchette felt this to be an indirect reproach to her for her way of treating the little girls. She said :

" It's only natural—after what happened to you."

She saw with satisfaction that this shaft had gone home, and at once she took herself to task for feeling such

satisfaction. " Oh, I'm sorry, I oughtn't to have said that."

" Oh, it doesn't matter, you're quite right. My feeling about the children has a lot of that disappointment in it. For you, the little girls are something quite normal, that you can take for granted. For me——"

Blanchette, in her desire to punish herself for what she had thought, came back to what was causing her suffering.

" You oughtn't to be sad about it. You're young, and attractive."

" Do you think so ? "

Berenice said that too quickly. Blanchette smiled. In this smile there was a ghost, something that was hovering between the two of them, not yet sure whether to settle on this woman's lips or on the other's. How long the room was, how empty, and in what good taste ! What a Sunday evening ! The will-o'-the-wisp lighted on Blanchette's tongue, making her say :

" Well—did you see Aurelien today ? "

Berenice's heart was thumping. So there was something between Aurelien and Blanchette ! She had difficulty in loosening her throat enough to say, in as detached a way as she could :

" Aurelien ? I don't remember having mentioned it this morning. Yes, I met him—how did you know ? "

There was really no point in pretending, for there was no one there ; only the little dessert-knives twinkled at the end of the table. Blanchette got up and went over to the dessert.

" Do you want a pear, Nice ? "

She used the pet name that the children had settled on for their grown-up friend. She was not jealous : she was sad. Turning round without waiting for an answer, she asked :

" Shall we open a bottle of champagne ? What do you think ? This room is very depressing. Let's do something crazy, both of us."

Berenice could hardly refuse. Neither of them wanted any of the champagne, which had not been long enough on the ice, but they took the fluted glasses and the bottle up to the library with them. They were playing at being two little girls doing something naughty. They played up to each other, laughing not too loudly, as if they were afraid of being heard by their parents who had gone to bed or were playing bridge in another room ; each of them wondered whether the other was deceived.

" Would you like to go to the cinema ? " Blanchette asked.

" Oh, no, it's dreadful weather, and I've been out every evening."

" Because, you know, if you want to go——"

" Would *you* like to ? "

" No, I don't feel particularly like it. I was thinking of you. Because if you do want to go to the cinema——•"

" Oh well, if you don't specially want to. There's supposed to be a very good Harold Lloyd——"

" You see, you want to go."

" Oh no, not a bit. But if you do—I was only saying that because this afternoon someone——"

" Someone told you. If it's Aurelien, he doesn't know anything about films."

" Why should it be Aurelien ? No, it wasn't Aurelien. But it doesn't make any difference."

" Because if you want to go to the cinema——•"

The library was just as uninviting as the dining-room, with all its books staring down on the two women, and the tall oak ladder still leaning where someone had left it after getting a book down from the top, up there where the big Maupassant volumes were. Blanchette's voice repeated, like a clock that can't stop striking :

" Because if you want to go to the cinema——"

It was extraordinary the effect a drop of champagne had on her. Berenice became slightly impatient and said:

" No, I don't want to in the least. As a matter of fact, I've rather a headache. I'm sorry, I'm going to my room to lie down for a while."

Blanchette watched her go, and shook her head. Then she poured herself another bumper, and said aloud, now that she was alone among the books : " Because if you want to go to the cinema, you can go by yourself, my girl, I loathe the cinema."

Things were becoming a little misty. Was it the champagne, or tears ? Both, probably. So Berenice had seen Aurelien again, they had said goodnight sometime after midnight, only to meet again the next day. That was the way the world went. You say goodbye at night, you meet again the next day. What was it that they enjoyed about being together ? For, after all, there wasn't anything between them yet—or was there ? Supposing there were ? It was silly to think like that, there couldn't be anything between them yet.

Edmond had a mistress. That was one thing that was quite clear. And this time it was serious ; it must be, because it was making him spiteful, quite devilish. What had he been thinking of ? He knew what he was doing, he knew his wife. She was his wife. She couldn't help it. She was his wife. He knew her pretty well. . . . Devilish.

He knew her pretty well.

She put out all the lights except one, a little bronze lamp, and sat down on the sofa with the champagne beside her, drinking a little. She meditated. She was sad, and the champagne wasn't helping. How well this devilish Edmond knew her ! He knew how to get the better of her, he always went one better when it was a matter of scoring something up. How had he discovered Aurelien in her heart ? She couldn't imagine. But he had found it out, and now he was tormenting her. That was one advantage he had over her. She said to herself: " It's stupid of me to let him getaway

with it." But she let him get away with it, oh yes, she let anyone get away with anything.

With her and Edmond it was like children playing a game : the first one to say " snap !" wins. Edmond was always the first to say " snap ! "

Where was he this evening ? With that woman. Who was it this time ? She was tortured by not knowing, while previously she had been tortured by her knowledge. Well, this time she was tortured by not knowing. That was his invention for tormenting her : not to tell her. After all that—after having tormented her by telling her everything, now. . . .

What was the meaning of his not telling her ? What was special this time ? What difference was there between this time and all the other times ? How very malicious he was.

As if he were punishing her for Aurelien. . . .

But, after all, Aurelien—after all, it had been Edmond who had pushed her towards Aurelien. And then, there had been nothing between them, nothing at all. She drew her fingers across her lips as if to crush them.

Nothing ? You call that nothing, do you, my girl ? She heard herself laughing idiotically. He had kissed her that evening—and then, afterwards ? She closed her eyes. Oh, he was still holding her in his arms.

She remembered that there was such a person as Berenice. Then she wept. For a long time, for a very long time, she wept, lying on the sofa, all alone, with her glass of champagne beside her, and all around was the silence of the house where the golden heart of a clock was beating, tick, tack, tick, tack. . . . As if Edmond had the right to torment her on account of a single kiss one evening—and to base his treachery on that imaginary infidelity, that lie that had never been uttered and which he nevertheless cast in her teeth. Oh, how well he knew her, the beast ! How well he knew her scruples, her almost pathological scruples, her appalling sense of sin !

The thought of sin brought her back suddenly to God. She thought of God with terror. She was a lost woman.

She poured out a little more champagne.

CHAFFER XXXII

IN her room, Berenice felt her heart was bursting. This joy was too great, this man too much for her. The whole thing wasn't possible. Could such things really happen ? Could one bear such delight for long ? Leaving the loved one for a moment, only for a moment, one was back in the world again, with the weather, the cold, the inexplicable difference that existed between people and things, this house of desolation, and Blanchette, that image of what may become of love. She had been drunk, that woman.

Berenice knew quite well that if she was suddenly thinking of her cousin as " that woman," with such violence and bitterness, it wasn't because Blanchette had been drunk, but because of a phantom behind her. Or had it been there at all ? Now she was no longer sure. A little while ago she had been quite sure : everything about Blanchette's attitude last night at the theatre, that abrupt departure. . . . Aurelien hadn't loved her, so what difference could it make ? There had been women in his life, of course, but she did not know them, whereas Blanchette—here she was, confronted with Blanchette. And Blanchette still loved him. " To think that I've been criticising Edmond ! " she thought. No, one couldn't judge anyone. Blanchette was so unhappy. . . .

And there was Berenice who had lied to Aurelien, quite a trivial lie, but still, a lie all the same. How horrible that " mere triviality " was ! If she had lied, mightn't he lie too, mightn't he be lying ? One couldn't believe anything any

more than one could judge. How stupid to abandon oneself to happiness. She would not see him tomorrow. This must end before she came to a point where she could no longer stop. She would not see him tomorrow. But he was going to call for her—what should she do ? She would ring up in the morning. No, if she heard his voice, she would be lost. Ah, she knew—she would get someone to ring him up for her. How cruel ! She must see him once more, just once more, only to tell him, to put things right, to explain. She could not have so little courage as to run away from him just like that, without the few words of explanation to which he had a right. For, after all, he hadn't done any harm. What harm had he done ? She didn't want to do him any harm, either.

She would go away. One must know the moment to get up and go. One must be able to make a clean break. However she went, she was going, she was leaving. But there are different ways of going away : one can really go away, burning all that is left behind—of oneself. It's easier when it's a matter of old letters and souvenirs. But what good would it be if it were easy ?

" I don't want to be good, I want to be happy "

She heard herself saying that aloud, in the solitude of her room, and her voice surprised her, for it was a stranger's voice. She did not recognise her voice any more, she did not recognise herself, she could not get back on to the beaten track of her thoughts. The thought of Aurelien had taken possession of her : his face, his manner, his body. Whenever she looked in the shadows, it was always he who surrounded her and pursued her. It was all very well saying that she would go away, but what if she were only going away in order to take with her the very thing she was leaving ? Aurelien, Aurelien ! Oh, it was unbearable ! How was she never to see him again, how could she renounce him ?

She had tasted of that deep and purple wine, and she was

still drunk with it; she could not imagine how to renounce this infatuation, even if it were nothing but a passing frenzy. She was stretched out on her bed, the only light coming from the small lamp on the bedside table, and the shadows were full of Aurelien's presence. All the shadows were closing in on her. Aurelien. . . . Aurelien ! The shadows were to blame, she must drive away the shadows in order to drive Aurelien away. She hesitated. How could she drive him away ? She reproached herself with having neither dignity nor courage, and she got up and walked over to the brass switches. There were three of them. One, two, three ! The ceiling lights, along the cornice of the ceiling, the bracket-lights over the mirror, and the dressing-room with the door open and dazzling white light streaming from it. She went to the writing-table and lit the lamp on it; and the rays fell on the open blotting-pad where there lay a letter for Lucien, begun and not yet finished.

All that light. . . . There was no phantom any longer. Now there was nothing but Aurelien.

On a chair, Berenice saw the dress that she had just taken off and not put away, and her hat and gloves on the table, the disarray characteristic of Sunday evenings. The maid hadn't been in, and since morning, or at least since lunch, chairs had been moved from their places, a petticoat spread out on one, and stockings with a ladder in them, the tan shoes. . . .

She began to tidy up. The mechanical gestures of tidying up were like those of packing to go away. She had gone to the big cupboard and touched one of her suitcases, thinking that she must buy some perfume before leaving ; she had quite a lot left, but since she was leaving Paris. . . . It was a nuisance travelling in her new coat—supposing she carried it over her arm ? No, that was absurd, for a few hours¹ journey. Not that those few hours wouldn't put an insuperable distance between herself and. . . . He would

write to her. She knew that he would write to her. Supposing he came to see her ? No, some things were impossible. She was leaving Paris, and with Paris she was leaving behind that infatuation, that warmth. . . . Down there in the country there was no room for such a flood of life.

She was leaving Paris. At the thought of abandoning Aurelien, all that she felt was a raging desire to hurt herself, to tear her heart out. She was leaving Paris, and she felt tears in her eyes. She pictured the streets, the quays, the gardens—Paris. The country was inconceivably tedious, always the same people and the endless days, the same day after day, and what so-and-so had said, and what somebody else would think, and the doctors' wives and Lucien's friends, and his mother. In her thoughts she went back to Montrouge and Passy, to the Batignolles, the Latin Quarter. It was all over. And the Tuileries were over, too, that were like a cheek one has stroked. Little by little, in the insidious depths of this nostalgia for Paris, the thought of Aurelien began to shine out clearer. She would meet Aurelien in the places where she had been alone, where she had not seen him, where she had not expected to discover him ; Paris was turning traitor, imperceptibly merging its identity with that of the man she was leaving. She dried her tears and looked at herself in the mirror ; seeing how dishevelled her hair was, she took up her comb and combed it.

To what extent was her love for Aurelien quite free from alloy ? Was it really the overwhelming, absolute and incurable thing she had believed it was ? She had thought that she loved him alone, and for his own sake, loving nothing about him except himself—but wasn't there some other element in it, wasn't it all part of Paris, its illusions, its lights, its endlessly changing life, that swarming of the famous and the unknown, the great and the passers-by, clothes, shop-windows, concerts, theatres, and the empty squares where one met nothing but the wind ? Wasn't all this—everything

that Paris meant—trying to cling to some human form and embody its nostalgia in a person, linking up with a glance, a voice, the living pressure of a hand ? Wasn't it regret for all this which made her think she loved Aurelien ?

Did she love him ? She asked herself that question for the first time ; and then, as she realised that it was the first time, she felt a shock of dismay.

And yet the thought that he might not love her as she had believed he did, as she had been childishly simple enough to believe—that appalled her, that was unbearable, quite unbearable. She could not imagine how her life would go on, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, if she no longer believed in that, if she had been deceived, if he had deceived her. " I've managed to live without it till now, so what's the difference ? " she wondered. The tone in which she said that was artificially calm ; she had spoken in the voice one uses when one is afraid. Berenice was even more afraid of herself than of Aurelien ; she was afraid of the terrible wound that disillusionment can cause, for she knew the black depths that open up when an illusion is destroyed. She knew enough about these things to be able to guess how it is that some people never return from the abyss.

She was still sitting in front of the mirror, combing her hair over and over again. It must be about eleven o'clock. Outside the wind was blowing. Aurelien, Aurelien ! her thoughts cried, and the wind cried : Aurelien ! She was combing her hair in front of the mirror with unconscious, conscientious movements of hand and wrist. She arranged her hair another way and then became impatient with the result, undid it all and put it back the way it usually was, still combing it, combing it. Until a moment came when the comb no longer caught in the ceaselessly disentangled hair. Aurelien. . . .

But supposing all that were nothing more than an illusion, born of having too much time on her hands, both of them

with too much time to spare, and of Paris, this Paris that was so well-combed, so tidy, where nothing caught in the idleness of their two hearts, the huge emptiness of their hearts ? Supposing all this were merely one more illusion in life, life that was always trying to catch itself up, life that stretched away into the distance where childhood had sunk out of sight, where youth was slowly smouldering away, and that later on would leave nothing but those traces of bitterness which form little lines in the heart and on the face, lines that she thought she could see beginning to show in the depths of the mirror ?

Aurelien. . . .

CHAPTER XXXIII

" HAVE you had a nice Sunday ? "

Rose did not answer. She was looking back over her Sunday.

At lunch-time she had gone into the Ritz, through the door in the rue Cambon, and found Edmond waiting for her in the bar. They strolled through the lounges into the restaurant, and then changed their minds, deciding to have lunch out of doors ; it was very pleasant to be able to do this at this time of the year. Edmond was dressed as smartly as one could possibly imagine, and women looked at him at least as much as they looked at Rose.

" I say, that's Rose Melrose, isn't it ? Who's the handsome fellow with her ? "

She smiled. None of the tables was quite as she wanted their table to be, and Edmond, leaning over closer to her, said :

" If you're not afraid the weather will change, I've left the car in the place Vendome, I know a very nice little restaurant. . . ."

They had gone out on the place Vendome side, where Edmond's car, long, high, green, upholstered in red, eclipsed all the other cars coming that way and started off with velvet smoothness at a speed that was quite startling. It was scarcely believable, to think that one was driving through a city. Rose curled up under the ermine rug.

" But where are you taking me, Wide Boy ? I say, this is a whale of a car, isn't it ? Cross my heart."

They were bowling along through the Bois. She closed her eyes.

" You drive as beautifully as you dance, Rose's big teddy-bear. And you dance as beautifully as you——"

He stopped her mouth with a kiss. As he sat at the wheel, no one could have told for certain whether this man was the taxi-magnate or a highwayman ; he loped through life with all the suppleness of a panther.

He was taking Rose to Versailles—not for the first time.

The palace looks out over the park, and is almost in the park. Nowadays kings of another kind came to spend the week-end where the Roi Soleil used to live ; here they were swathed in the last refinements of sumptuous modern comfort—and discretion. People of Edmond's sort were known there without being too well known. And how good the service was ! The car swept into the courtyard, and with a touch of his hand Edmond stopped it in front of the steps.

" Is my suite ready ? "

The receptionist, the porter and footmen rushed forward : " Suite 15 ! " The groom took the fur rug, and Monsieur and Madame crossed the hall to the lift.

" You'd rung up and fixed it," Rose whispered, " and you were pretending. ..."

She was thinking that he must have prepared some surprise for her, and when the doors of the three-roomed suite were opened before them, the first thing she saw was

an orgy of white and pale pink roses, which must have cost. . . . She worked out the price. The furniture was sinking under the weight of roses. It was fabulous. And all this just before Christmas !

She turned round and said in her most glorious voice, the voice that she used in the theatre :

" My dear, you're really too, too extravagant! "

The maitre d'hotel, who had come up with them, bowed and said :

" Luncheon is ready to be served in the dining-room, as you ordered it, sir. If Madame wishes. . . . "

" Thanks, Marcel, I'll ring."

How mild and warm the air was in these rooms, and everywhere the perfume of these roses ! Rose took some of them and shook out the petals, letting them fall like snow on to the carpet.

" Heavens, Edmond, you're impossible ! You spend a fortune on things like this when there are people starving to death, dying of hunger and cold. A fortune on flowers ! "

" All the roses in the world for my Rose. . . . "

He helped her out of her coat. How young he was, how strong and handsome. The monster ! How rich he was !

" What I like about this affair of ours," Mme Melrose said, " is that it's in such utterly bad taste."

Edmond was delighted with Rose because she was so completely a woman, without qualms, knowing just what she wanted and what it meant. Since Carlotta, he had never found a mistress who had been so much just what he needed. If the miracle of her perpetual youthfulness was a fairly obvious miracle, that was just another reason for him to take up with this woman, who had knocked around in the world and who knew what was what where men were concerned. He revelled in the compliments that she paid him.

" I've never seen anyone with linen like yours," she said.

" You must spend all your time choosing your underclothes, you wretch."

" How would you like me to spend it ? "

" As if you had the time, with all your business, board-meetings, all that sort of thing ! "

It was another thing agreed between them that he was worked to death with his taxis, his house-property, the stock exchange, rubber, petrol, in fact everything. Rose had been quick to notice that he had not her dislike of being regarded as a prominent person : a thorough-going business-man, that was it ! She reminded him of it from time to time. But it was a fact that he had the most beautiful underclothes anyone could hope to have, not to mention his shirts and socks ; and, besides that, he was as well cared for as a courtesan, with muscles like a navvy.

" I wonder what time you get up, Wide Boy. Because with all the work you do to keep yourself in trim, your way of getting yourself right for being looked at from every angle, you're solid muscle, like the thighs on a racing cyclist, all over ! The morning can't be long enough. Oh, beast, you're hurting me ! "

There was no doubt about it, it was pleasant having a millionaire for a fancy man, especially an intelligent chap like Wide Boy. With him there was no need to pretend to be any younger than she was, for that was what he liked. And she was subtle enough to feel that and to speak of her age, in just the right tone of depreciation and melancholy, never letting this handsome fellow feel that she was holding on to him or that he belonged to her. On the contrary, she pretended afresh each time to believe that this was his last folly for her sake, his last and incomprehensible folly; at the same time, she would not hold him back, either, she had far too much understanding.

" My great brute," she murmured, " oh, you brigand ! But you're going to bed with your mother, don't you know !

He doesn't know what he's doing, and he's as beautiful as sin. Don't you get tired of being as handsome as that all the time ? "

He did not look as if he were tired of it.

They had devastated the roses and devoured *thefoie gras*, for which Rose had a passion. Now, sitting up in the big bed with the fine sheets, she watched Edmond coming and going, quite naked, between the bedroom and the bathroom. The water was singing. He was playing at rehearsing his morning toilet in front of her.

" How splendidly exhibitionist, darling ! Come here, let me have a little bit of you. Your legs aren't made just to be looked at, dear boy."

He was triumphant. With other women, there was always some element of doubt; there were the doubts of a man who knew too well that with him women never went to bed without the thought of money at the back of their minds. But with this woman he felt that he was the man she would have paid for, if she had been able to afford him. And she was Rose Melrose, the great Rose. He would make her cry out again.

" It's incredible, you're still tanned from the August sun—at this time of the year ! How do you do it ? You look as if you'd been turned out by Hermes. And such a silky skin, it's almost indecent. I've never seen a man with skin like that. I look like a turnip by comparison."

She knew quite well that her skin was wonderfully white ; and she knew, too, that nothing fitted the hollowed hand better than her breasts, which looked so small without actually being so and seemed too firm to move for anything but a man's touch.

" When I think that you've got an enchanting young wife," she murmured. " And that you're here in my arms. Oh, liar, liar ! How do you expect me to believe you ? "

" You know quite well that I never loved her."

" But you married her."

" I'm fond of nice underclothes, that's the long and th'e short of it, and I couldn't afford them."

She thought his cynicism quite delicious. " Oh, what a scoundrel you are ! " Suddenly she began to think about this woman Blanchette, of whom she always spoke kindly but whose face was rather long and her hands not particularly beautiful.

" I say, tell me something, pig, about your wife."

" What about my wife, Rosette ? "

" At first you used to hide things from her. You didn't even want our dear Mary to know, because of her. Then you changed your mind."

" No, it was the situation that changed."

" What do you mean ? "

He sat up in bed, with his arms round his knees, his shoulders rounded like a formidable arch from which his head stuck out, rather small, the hair growing thin, the eyes deep set. Like this, and with his strong, white teeth, he looked like an animal hovering over its prey.

" It's like this," he said.

She listened without really paying attention. Or rather, she followed the gist of what he was saying, for he had fallen into the tone of voice that he always adopted when he was going in for psychology. He was keen about psychology—a little weakness that could be overlooked in a man as successful as he was, though it was a subject that got on Rose's nerves. On such occasions she assumed the look of profound attentiveness that she had worked at so hard when she was playing Racine and had to stand by, listening to a hundred lines on end, without letting the audience forget her.

She got a rough idea of what he was talking about. What it came to was that in the first years of their marriage Blanchette's subjection to her husband had been such that Edmond had not needed to bother about the consequences of his

actions. Blanchette, having robbed Carlotta of this live prey, had been too happy in knowing that her husband had not gone back to Carlotta to worry about anything else ; for that was her great fear, even after old Quesnel had married Carlotta. There was a great deal of resemblance between Quesnel and his daughter. Knowing that he could not keep Carlotta to himself, the old man had long accepted the fact that he must share her with the man who was to become his son-in-law. With the same kind of humility, Blanchette had accepted the fact, as if it were her fate, that her husband did not belong to her alone. The war, and the enforced separations that came with it, had established the situation more definitely even than Edmond's candour had done previously ; and he was always quite frank about his affairs, inflicting them on his wife ; partly out of trickiness and casualness, and partly because he enjoyed tormenting her and she could not reproach him with things he did not conceal from her.

But as the years passed by, he had begun to feel an indistinct, muffled resistance growing up in her. She still accepted the fact that Edmond had his liberty ; she still continued to suffer from it, as she had always suffered. Only, in that solitude of hers where he could always find her, if he wanted her, Blanchette was gradually changing. Very slowly she was becoming used to having thoughts of her own. Edmond suddenly realised that she was going to slip between his fingers ; he realised it long before she did, for she was still in love with him and too religious to be unfaithful to him. If she had had a little affair, things would have been less difficult to manage. He had even thought of arranging something of the kind for her ; he was quite satisfied that she should regard a lover as second-best, for all that he wanted was that she shouldn't leave him, or put him out in the street. How was he ever going to get hold of so much money again ! There were the children, of course ;

that was some guarantee, for he was their father. But all those years and years—a woman, or a man, couldn't help changing.

" You didn't know me when I was twenty, Rose. I wasn't afraid of anyone then. Oh, keep your flattery. If a man begins to let himself go, by the time he's thirty—naturally, I keep an eye on myself, punch-ball in the morning, fencing twice a week——"

" It's quite true, you wear very well. You mustn't get fat."

" Thanks—that would be the last straw. I haven't reached that point yet, but every day that passes makes me less sure of how long I can keep it up, always being on show. A moment will come when the fear of getting old without having been loved will get more hold over Blanchette than the power I still have over her."

With her eyelids half-closed over her beautiful, short-sighted eyes, Rose was watching her lover's lips moving. He was mourning the first signs of decay. And then the war had wrecked him, he said, his stomach. . . . What vanity !

" If you think it does your looks any good, being in the trenches and all that, you're quite wrong. Two winters in the mud and water ! "

" Some people spend a lot of money on mud-baths for their rheumatism."

" Well, the mud gave me rheumatism. Look at my ankles, you can see a bit. ..."

" What a good thing there was a war," she sighed, " otherwise you'd be the very devil."

How he could talk about himself, this fellow !

" Blanchette's twenty-eight," he said. " She's just beginning to feel, though she doesn't realise' it consciously, that she's getting older. She isn't the little girl I used to have such a hold over, any more. If I want to keep her on the right lines, I'll have to do something about it, and I've got something else to think about—eh ?—besides bothering

about Blanchette. Giving up my freedom in order to keep an eye on the money—no thanks. I told you, I thought that if she had a little affair. . . ."

That was how he had thrown her into Aurelien's arms. He knew Aurelien very well, and that he never carried an affair to extremes. Aurelien wouldn't try to go off with his wife ; that sort of thing wasn't his line of country, and besides, they had their memories of the war in common.

" So your wife went to bed with Leurtillois, did she ? "

For the moment, she was interested.

" Good lord, no ! What a joke ! They just went in for a bit of necking. Oh, I know what I'm doing. Fd fixed it like that. Blanchette didn't know, of course. She's still got me under her skin, and then, being a mother, well ! Not to speak of being a Protestant, which has a good deal to do with it."

Rose lost interest again. Women who didn't go the whole way were disgusting. No temperament, perhaps.

Yes, but Edmond was no fool and he kept his eyes open. There was something else that he knew : his wife, who would not sleep with Aurelien, could not stop thinking about him, thought of no one else, was more obsessed with this man than if he had been her lover. She was in love with him, and she tortured herself with being in love with him. She reproached herself with it, and that was precisely the dangerous thing about it.

" Oh, if she doesn't sleep with him, there's nothing to it ! " Rose said. " You're too complicated in your generation, baby darling." And she slid out of the sheets in order to show off her breasts, very well pleased with herself.

Edmond went on, saying that a day would come when Blanchette would leave him, just like that. It might be ten years from now, but. . . .

" I shall be in a nice mess, over forty. And then, to keep up the things I'm used to, lots of new ties, the car, and so

forth, I shall have to look around for another Blanchette, and at forty I shall be forced to take some old lady."

"Someone like me, my pet," Rose interrupted him, her thumbs on the tips of her breasts.

"When I say old, I mean old." In the meantime, the Aurelien affair needn't turn out badly. . . .

Rose was thinking about something else. She began to coax, rubbing herself up against Edmond.

"Do stop," he said, "you're too greedy. So then I had the idea of fixing Aurelien on my young cousin."

"Little Berenice? She's plain, but I like her."

"Do leave me alone. Blanchette was so upset that she couldn't keep on pretending to me. We had a scene this morning, and she confessed the whole thing. She's beside herself. She had the most frightful sense of guilt. I turned on a noble and forgiving act—nothing more between us, of course, if that's the way it is. I'm not in favour of sharing!"

"Wretch!"

¹¹ You won't get anything by trying to rush me, I'm played out. So under these circumstances I have the right to have someone for myself, haven't I? Blanchette knows what I'm like—a temperament like mine. . . ."

"What boasting! You talk of temperament, and. . . ."

"I'll slap you if you don't stay quiet!"

"Well, don't talk about temperament then!"

"I've something to tell you—if you'll just listen to what I have to say."

"I'm listening."

"Right-oh, my girl, I'll come clean. It's like this, if you can fix it, I mean with Jacques——"

"You're not afraid that Blanchette——"

"Oh no, after all, it's her fault, she started it!"

"I say, that's a bit thick! Her fault?"

"It's her fault, of course it is. If in future I support you. . . ."

" Support me ? " Instantly she became serious, gazing at him. " You're not having me on ? "

"No. You can imagine, I'll splash the money round quite a bit."

" Oh, there'll be the Melrose products."

" That's only the start. You shall have your own theatre. ..."

She flung herself on him, biting him, rolling him about in the pillows.

" That's enough, you great bully. You're tumbling me about too much. It doesn't come so cheap—don't forget—you'll need it yet."

They were both panting.

" Now listen to me," he said, " I shall have to think about the future. There'll be one or two rather noticeable things, like the company for the Melrose products, and the theatre, and we mustn't provide a lot of evidence that might lead up to a divorce one fine day."

" How shall we manage it ? "

" Well, if possible we must find some other stockholders, so that the thing looks respectable. A real business, sleeping-partners, if necessary. You must think about this seriously."

" Stockholders ? But, Wide Boy darling, stockholders only turn up in bed."

" No nonsense, madame, we are of a jealous disposition."

She clasped her forehead :

" I know ! "

" Well, trot it out."

" Mary ! Isn't that a stroke of genius ? Mary. The Lady Perseval on the board of directors ! And she owes it to me, anyway, because of her old man. You don't think she'll refuse to help us, do you ? "

" Oh no, Mary wouldn't dream of refusing, if I—if you ask her."

" No nonsense from you either, ducky. I'm the jealous sort, too."

She was showing her claws. He caught hold of her round the throat, and, lying under him, she gasped :

" Ah—ah, I told you you'd come to it! "



When Dr. Decoeur, gazing at his wife with the long, wistful gaze that he had, asked her :

" Did you have a nice Sunday ? " she did not answer ; she was looking back over her Sunday.

Around them, in their rather ordinary semi-basement flat, with its bohemian confusion of medical things mixed up with the disarray of a green-room, a few lights burnt in the silence of two o'clock in the morning. She was looking back over her Sunday. She could hear how Jacques* heart was beating. Poor fellow, he was a nice chap and he did what he could ; he hardly got in her way at all. He must have been at the window all the evening, listening to every car that went past, wondering if it would stop. What was to be done about it ? She couldn't help being the way she was. Turning to him, she asked :

" Jicky, would you like me to have my own theatre ? "

CHAPTER XXXIV

AURELIEN got up at eight o'clock in the morning. It was dawn. What a rush and stir ! Mme Duvigne couldn't believe her eyes when she found the flat empty and a long, long shopping-list on the kitchen table : the flat must be done, and as fast as possible, and no more sign of Mme Duvigne on the horizon by eleven o'clock, and a snack ready on the sideboard. She wagged her head ; the master was in

a rare old state, wanting all sorts of delicacies, and afterwards he wouldn't have touched them.

"What lovely weather," Berenice said. She had kept him waiting in the library for a quarter of an hour—what a lunatic, arriving at her cousin's house before nine o'clock ! She was wearing a navy-blue tailor-made, with a felt hat on her fair hair, turned up on one side, almost like a man's hat. Aurelien thought that she was wonderfully badly dressed. She must have slept very little, for she had dark rings under her eyes.

"Yes, isn't it ? Last night the snow, and this morning——"

They both stood at the window looking out at the pale blue sky over Paris, and the sun shining. She laughed :

"I was thinking it must be specially for us—and then I remembered, it's for the Virgin Mary."

"The Virgin Mary ?"

"Yes, you know, the halcyon days—when the sea is so calm that the halcyon can make its nest in the hollow of the waves, the days before Christmas—because God didn't want his mother to suffer in the winter-time."

He shook his head, saying :

"These are our halcyon days, because love. . ."

« Hush—not here !"

He had laid her fingers on his lips. He held them fast, kissing them, and at that moment the door opened.

Blanchette came in. Had she seen ?

"You'll excuse me, won't you ?" Berenice said. "I won't be back to lunch."

"You know you're quite free to do as you like——" Blanchette said, holding out her hand to Aurelien. She was wearing a housecoat modelled after the fashion of by-gone centuries, a beautiful thing with lace on it.

They walked through the two reception rooms, into the hall, where Aurelien stopped to look at the big Picasso of the

blue period, which had come from old Quesnel's house, a juggler with a ball and a Harlequin.

"Do you like it?" Berenice asked rather anxiously. She wanted him to have good taste.

"Yes," he answered, "I do rather. Better than his cubism, anyway. Oh no, don't put on a fur coat, it's quite warm out."

However, she wanted to take the coat, in case she felt cold in the car. He had the car? The little two-seater was outside at the edge of the pavement.

Aurelien didn't know what he wanted. Of course he wanted to take her home, but he was afraid that if he took her there at once it would strike a slightly wrong note; it would look precipitate. Then suddenly he felt himself overcome by this spring-time weather at Christmas and thought of going into the country. But that was too much like what he had suggested to Mary de Perseval. Berenice would have liked to go to the Louvre to see the Ingres and the Manets, but the museums are shut on Mondays, so that was no good either. Each of them had made so many plans for this morning, separately, that now they were together they didn't know what to do. They felt awkward and as if they had lost their way, as if they had got lost somewhere on the edge of their happiness. Left to himself, Aurelien would have stayed sitting in the car, there in the street outside Barbentanes', holding her little hand in his.

Berenice looked at him. How big he was and how unfamiliar his body was to her. She realised for the first time that there was something sophisticated about him, which worried her. She thought: most men are clumsy—and she didn't dare not to generalise, because she didn't want to hurt Lucien, she didn't even want to think of Lucien.

"We must make up our minds," Aurelien said. "Come to my flat."

The moment he had said that the blood came into his

face, as he wondered what time Mme Duvigne had come. She didn't always come at the same time, by any means. And if the flat wasn't tidied up ? She saw the colour in his face and interpreted it differently :

" No," she said, " you know it shouldn't be like that—not like that."

It wasn't what she had meant to say, and this time it was she who was confused. She went on :

" Let's go anywhere at all. Somewhere in Paris where we won't see anyone we know. Let's go to a low cafe, I love cafes ! "

He suggested the Bois, Armenonville. But they would meet everyone they know ! That wouldn't do. The boulevards, then ? There was no risk in the morning. . . . The gear-box needed oil. They floated along through this airy Paris, this half-time pause in mid-winter. On the Grands Boulevards, Aurelien hesitated : every cafe had associations with other meetings that had taken place there, whether by chance or appointment, and he wanted something quite new, some place where he wouldn't meet even a memory. Pousset wouldn't do, nor the cafe d'Italie nor the cafe d'Angleterre. She wanted to go to a cheap place, where it was really unlikely that they would meet anyone they knew. In the end, they found a cafe that opened off an alley and that had so many mirrors and glazed doors, throwing so many reflections, that it was like being in a theatre. It was an old-fashioned cafe with gilding all over the place and little brown pillars with complicated capitals, red seats and renaissance coat-racks. There were writing pads with silvered headings lying about on the tables, and odd volumes of Bottin's year-book. Behind the mahogany bar inlaid with brass was a percolator, and there the cashier sat, all powdered and curled, lost in day-dreams. Stairs went up to the first floor where the billiard tables were ; the banisters ended at the bottom in a statue that formed a

lampstand. The marble tables were veined like old men's hands. The only modern thing was the room downstairs, a horrible compound of every known colour, grotesquely mixed like confetti. The place was empty, except for a young man in a corner, who was writing letters and then tearing them up again. And after some time two dark women, no longer young, came in and sat down on the other side of the room, called for brandy, and began to show each other photographs.

How absurd it was to be here, in a frame so out of all relation to their feelings. But when Aurelien tried to speak of that, Berenice slopped him.

"I like it," she said. "I like this cafe and the advertisements for aperitifs and the blue syphons, all the things you don't get any more. I feel all right here, I shall be able to listen to you better. And one setting is as good as another."

"That's just what bothers me," he said. "It's a setting. We aren't on the stage."

She wished he could have shared her pleasure in it. The setting delighted her, as any setting did. She liked to be able to look through the windows and see the boulevard and the passers-by, the arcade alongside with its shops, and the pale December sunlight filtering through the glass, like underwater light in an aquarium.

Aurelien jibbed slightly at the expression "setting." It wasn't the first time he had felt a slight embarrassment with her, at a trace of affectation in her, which might be nothing more than shyness, perhaps, and yet. . . . She had a taste for modern things, a certain amount of snobbery about what was going on in the most advanced circles. He recalled her expeditions with Paul Denis, and he felt depressed. He wanted to give this girl a lesson, but after all, what right had he to do anything of the kind? Anyway, he hadn't chosen her, she had imposed herself on him, without his knowing

how it had happened, in all sorts of little ways he could not name. Oh, but it would be enough to take her in his arms and hug her, and all that would vanish. . . .

She had taken off her velours and put it on the table, shaking out her fair hair, where the artificial light made green reflections among the stiff curls. The waiter set two glasses of coffee before them. Berenice was playing with the sugar, not touching her coffee. He wished that she would drink it: he wished dreadfully that she would drink it, but he would not have said so for anything. He was no longer sure that he loved her. He was no longer sure of anything. Had the whole thing been a misdeal? It was too ghastly to think of. So he told himself that he loved her, yes, that was it, he loved her, and it was only that he hadn't got used to the idea of it yet. No, he didn't love her; he had been making it all up, and now he must get out of it. But how? He felt caught in a trap that he had invented himself. He scarcely recognised her any more; he had thought her thinner and less feminine. Uneasily, he shifted on the seat. They were sitting side by side, and he bumped Berenice's leg under the table. Both of them moved away a little. Aurelien's thoughts were in a whirl. What—just because he'd bumped into her leg—such a fuss? Yes. Physical presence is an extraordinary thing. What were her legs like? He had never seen them properly. Slim, he thought, very slim—perhaps too thin.

He was talking, talking all the time, so that she should not suspect what was going on in his mind, his disappointment, his secret changes of feeling, this sudden heat. What was he talking about? He hardly knew: he was playing at hide-and-seek with his own thoughts, afraid of loving her and afraid of not loving her. There they were, quite absurdly, in this cafe. They had so little time. Suddenly he remembered that he was going to love her, and he no longer doubted that he loved her, his heart thudded, and he heard his own

voice uttering stupid words. What ought he to talk about, then ? Something else, something else ! What a bad joke everything was ! She didn't really know him. And if she did know him, would she love him ? It was so hard to know what to do in order to be loved—whether to show oneself as one was, or to keep up some pretence. Everyone balances between the two, and in any case one does both, more or less at random. One tries to make the impression of being what one would like to be, the impression one thinks is the right one, and then one realises: This isn't me. So one tries to appear as one really is, at one's worst, and make a bad impression. And perhaps after all that's the best way to make a good one ? Aurelien was in anguish ; the time would not pass and yet it was flying away. What was he talking about ? He had plunged into talking about his childhood, and then she asked a question, she wanted to know what his mother had been like. He told her that his mother had been beautiful. Berenice meditated. Very beautiful. . . . Oh, to think of being very beautiful ! He did not pursue the subject. He could not tell her that she was beautiful, as his mother had been—his mother had been very beautiful, but it was something else with Berenice—something more mysterious, something stronger.

" I wonder," she said, " how you see me."

He began to talk to her about herself. He did not mean what he said, but the words he was thinking would have been unbearable ; so he spoke of her as he would have spoken of her to any woman, using big, empty words. If he had told her the cruel, true things that he was thinking, about her hair, her arms, her hands, the tilt of her chin, certain bewildered looks she had at times, mannerisms of hers that were almost tics, then probably she would have wept. And while he was saying the things he did not mean, the banal ready-made things that would have done for anybody, he became more and more irritated with himself, and hence

with her. He was discovering what everyone becomes aware of sooner or later, the impossibility of saying what one really means, of communicating to anyone else the delight one can have in an imperfection or an unsuccessful feature or something half-finished and awkward about a person. He was lying, and yet not lying at all ; what he was doing was a translation. He was translating the violence of his feelings into the cheap language of compliments, translating the crudity of the pleasure he felt in watching her and the pitiless, critical energy that had something of the possessiveness of a lover. Yes, he did love her, he loved this living woman, and not a statue, an image : this breathing flesh, this body, this face that would twist into a grimace as well as into a smile, and these features formed as much for suffering as for. . . . Suddenly he imagined how she would be in the act of love, and imagined it with such merciless precision that he stopped talking and shivered.

" That's fine," she said, " now you're off again."

" I'm sorry," he stammered. " What was I saying ? I suddenly got an idea. . . ."

She burst out laughing. It wasn't the first time it had happened to him, she said :

" You're a queer man. You talk and talk, and I'm listening, thinking that you're thinking about what you're saying, and suddenly there's no one there. You were thinking about something else. Some people would be quite annoyed."

He knew that what she said was true. He struggled valiantly, but whatever he tried to think of slipped away like sand. He must say something conclusive. The most likely thing was a lie :

" You see, I want you."

His voice was very low, in the attempt to make it more effective. Berenice threw her head back a little ; she was convinced. But the moment he had uttered the lie, it ceased to be one. Watching her, Aurelien was so obsessed with her,

so deeply moved by her, borne away on a wave that he had not felt approaching, that his whole body shook. She had shut her eyes, but now she opened them and said :

" You're trembling, oh, you're trembling."

He was indeed trembling.

CHAPTER XXXV

SHE had said : " No, don't let's go to a big restaurant, I want to have lunch the way you do every day. It will make me feel I know you better." So he had taken her to the Mariniers. At the same time, from the Mariniers to where he lived was only a short way, and it would be natural to go home afterwards. So he had left the two-seater at the garage and come back *o the island on foot.

The weather had changed since morning ; it was neither so fine nor so warm. The sky was grey and the wind was rising. The north quay of the island was frozen, empty, as uninviting as could be imagined. Berenice looked at the naked trees topping the parapets, as if they were the tragic witnesses of some disaster, looking out over a cliff. She thought of that legendary town of Ys, which was sunk to the bottom of the sea. The whole island looked as if it were the last high ground that the flood had not reached. She pulled her fur coat closer round her, the Siberian squirrel that Lucien had so much wanted her to have. She ought to have had it remade ; it was badly cut.

Berenice was full of curiosity as they entered the restaurant, which was rather like a shop. It was on the ground floor, set in the thick walls of an old house ; once it had been painted white, but now there was nothing remarkable about it, with its tables, cash-desk, and a door at the back, unless it were

the motley gathering of the public. Some of those who came to have a meal there were people who worked nearby ; some were men in caps, others were English artists of the Oxford type ; a few couples better dressed than was quite suitable against the background ; some bachelors with nothing to do ; and people from offices. It was warm and pleasant.

Aurelien was greeted as a regular customer. He had his own napkin here, but today, as it was Monday, he was given a clean one. A woman was just leaving the table by the window, and when the waitress drew Aurelien's attention to it, they moved over. " Well, what have you got for us to-day ? " he asked. He began to help Berenice out of her tight-sleeved coat, but she looked over her shoulder at him, saying :

" No, I want to keep it. Put it round my shoulders for me."

It was the beginning of intimacy between them.

While they were waiting for the hors d'œuvres, she began at last to talk about herself. It had come slowly, as confidence does, by unknown paths ; and that whole morning spent together had had to come first, before she could talk. What had they been talking about ? But now she was telling him about herself, and it was like a reply to what he had been telling her earlier, though his talk had been nothing but a kind of bait, a mere query.

" Aurelien, I should like you to see the big house where I lived when I was little. Nobody can know me properly without knowing the big house. I was alone with my father and the servants and the wind. It was a big yellow house, a sad house, lost in the hills, with the sun and the wind."

He had taken her hand in his, trying as hard as he could to picture that house in Provence, and the solitary child, and that deserted father. For Berenice's mother had gone away one day, never to come back.

" I've always told myself," she said, " that some day I would go back there with someone I—someone I. . . ."

He crushed her little fingers in his hand. Did she love him, then ? He didn't think of how he was going to take her in his arms, but rather of how he would take her away, a long way off, to her father's house. He too had a thousand things to tell her that he had never said to anyone.

He would have taken some more anchovies, but at that moment the fried fish came. Two men entered the restaurant. Aurelien wrinkled his nose and interrupted Berenice, saying :

" What a bore ! "

" What's the matter ? "

" Oh, some people I know. Damn, they've seen me."

From the other side of the room one of the new arrivals, in the act of sitting down, was showing signs of delighted surprise, waving his hand and wriggling his shoulders. He was a little man with red hair, a short moustache, a collar that was far too high, and a butterfly tie ; his jacket was tightly waisted and the cuffs and lapels too wide. The other, a big, rather fat man, was already sitting down. He was commonplace in appearance, with his hair standing up, a little stiff moustache, a big jutting chin, and a turned-up nose ; his salutation was a combination of the ceremonious and the reserved. Berenice watched Aurelien with amusement, observing his way of returning their greeting without letting go of his fork, smiling with some constraint, his teeth clenched. He explained :

" They were in my regiment. The little one, Fuchs, edited a paper at the front. He's kept it going—you know, *The Dug-Out*.

" Lucien buys it."

She was embarrassed at having said that and glanced at Fuchs, who was still raising his eyebrows at Aurelien, indicating his companion with his thumb, nodding his head, Aurelien was frantic.

" I think he wants to speak to you," Berenice said. And indeed he had got up and was coming towards them.

" 'Morning, Leurtillois. 'Scuse me butting in." He bowed to Berenice. " Are you coming to our dinner on Thursday ? I'm behaving like a lout."

He was twisting his shoulder in Berenice's direction. With a bad grace, Aurelien introduced them :

" My friend Fuchs. We were together in '17, with Edmond. Madame Morel."

Fuchs made three little curvetting bows, and fingered his moustache :

" Edmond ? Does Madame know the little doctor ? "

It was funny to hear her cousin referred to in such a way. She had forgotten that he had gone through the war as a doctor. She smiled.

" He's my cousin," she said.

Oh, in that case. . . ! He took the relationship as an invitation to join them, and he sat down in front of them, excusing himself in a kind of yelp.

" I've dug up a little pub, boy ! what a pub, you never saw anything like it. Gosh, what a place ! You'll be surprised. At la Villette. What a cellar ! Gorton by the jugful. Well, you can imagine ! But that's not where we're having our blow-out on Thursday, the invites for Thursday have gone out (it's going to be a slap-up do, by the way), too late to switch over to this find of mine. Weddings and banquets always alongside the Sacre-Coeur. I'm not inviting you to join us, Madame, it's a stag party, some of the chaps would feel a bit awkward. But we're going to fix something up at la Villette, and if you feel like it—oh, it'll be quite respectable, absolutely ! Excuse me, I come along and butt in, interrupting you ! Of course I knew Leurtillois in the old days, Madame, and was he stuck up ! Strike a light ! It was a knock out ! You remember that dump at la Bectance ? They spilt the soup every day ; we've got a

bit more particular about food since then. Whew ! Damn good little spot, take it from me, and all the pot-holes—this time in the shape of flesh pots, ha-ha ! not the sort the shells make ! "

Aurelien was raging. Gently Berenice laid her hand on on his, to keep him quiet; she did not want to have an outburst. He understood, and they exchanged eloquent looks that spoke volumes.

A curious thought crossed Aurelien's mind, which softened his feelings : here they were, both of them behaving like people who knew each other very well indeed, who had been living together for a long time. That helped him to put up with the intruder.

" Know who that is, with me ? " Fuchs said. " You recognised him, eh ? Lemoutard ! Good old Mustard ! Yes, Madame, that's really his name ! Lemoutard, the R.S.M. Funny, the way I ran into him. It was on account of Gonfalon—you remember Gonfalon, the lieutenant, that horsey bloke with his moustache growing out of his nose ? Right. Well, Gonfalon was always one for a skirt, and he got into a spot of trouble, a bit of homework that was trying to put something across him. So I remembered about Lemoutard, and we both went along to pick him up at the police."

He winked, and turned round towards his companion, who realised that he was being discussed and waved again from his table. Then, confidentially :

" Not to make a song about it, Madame, Lemoutard's in the Vice Squad. It's a scream, isn't it ? With a name like that ! A great chap like him, you wouldn't think it, but he's too soft for his job. You ought to hear him—I can't help it/ he says, ' I can't blame the girls, I can't be hard on them, I let them off.' The dog ! "

He was chortling with delight, and his many winks were aimed at Berenice.

" Religious bloke, too. At the front, he was always in a

huddle with the chaplain. He used to confess and then confess all over again. He used to go rushing into churches, going to communion every chance he could get. But he was too fond of women to be any good at his job. He used to let them have it their own way. So after the armistice he left the Public Morals Department, and when we went along to the police station, Gonfalon and me, not a sign of old Mustard. Damn it all ! So off we go to knock back a few drinks at Gypsie's. Gonfalon was in the devil of a state. And who was sitting next to us, with one of those crumpets, know what I mean, a real crumpet—Lemoutard, good old Lemoutard, retired and selling champagne. Shall I call him over ? He's popping with impatience to shake you by the hand, old boy. You don't mind, Madame ? Anyway, he's not in the Public Morals now."

He was on his feet already. Before they could do anything, he was at the other table.

"Excuse me, I'm going to liquidate them," Aurelien murmured.

"No," she said, "don't do anything. He amuses me. And besides, I can't help feeling that this is a piece of luck for me. I'm finding out things about you, through other people. Play fair, Aurelien ! Don't hide these people from me."

He made a helpless gesture. The two men were there.

"Well, here's Lemoutard," Fuchs was saying. "Madame, let me present Lemoutard. Madame is the cousin of little doctor Barbentane."

The ex-R.S.M. bowed, not knowing what to do with his big red hands. He must have been about forty, and his figure had already suffered badly from too much indulgence in eating and drinking ; he was solid and lumpy, his collar had made a red mark at the back of his short neck, and his hair needed cutting. His forehead was low and his nose choked with adenoids, with the result that he had a queer

voice and often stopped to regain his breath, generally at the wrong moment.

" Madame—ah, a cousin of——? Ah—Lieutenant Leurtillois. Very happy to see you again, sir."

His paunch prevented his bowing adequately as he greeted them.

" Sit down, you old cart horse ! " Fuchs said agreeably, setting the example. " Madeleine, set places for us here ! "

Aurelien started, like a horse that is about to rear. Berenice merely laid her hand on his fingers, and he bent his head over his plate.

" What have you got ? Fish ? " Fuchs asked. " White-bait, eh ? Recommend it ? H'm. I think we'll do best to concentrate on the oysters and the side-cut. Red wine, eh, Lemoutard ? "

Berenice was enjoying Aurclien's look of exasperation. She felt enough affection for him to know the limits of his patience.

" So you were at the front with my cousin Barbentane, too, M. Lemoutard ? " she said. " And with M. Leurtillois, of course ? "

He wriggled from the abdomen upwards, looking like a huge coleopter trying to work its way out of its wing case. He had a kindly, idiotic face, on top of a body such as one might have expected to find on a slaughter-house labourer. He always opened his mouth a little before he began to speak, and his lower jaw stuck out even farther when he spoke :

" Yes, I was at the front with the lieutenant, Madame, and the major, that is to say, first aid officer Barbentane, yes, Madame."

" And me," Fuchs said, feeling himself neglected. " You ought to have seen Leurtillois at les Sparges ! "

Aurelien lifted a forefinger in horrified warning. He loathed this kind of low flattery, war memories that consisted

of singing the praises of the next man until he did as much for oneself.

" Righty-oh, you do the modest stuff. All the same——"

Fortunately Lemoutard was launched on his story. He ignored Fuchs, whose efforts petered out like a damp squib. Lemoutard was oscillating on his base, his vast mouth open, rubbing his moustache up the wrong way, and his eyes staring into the distance, in a sort of trance.

" I remember as if it was yesterday. It was on the Chemin des Dames. I didn't know the doctor, he'd only just arrived in the battlion. I was sergeant then, with a section. It was a bit west of Sancy. We were holding the railway line, we'd advanced a bit after a shelling we'd had, blimey, it was a shelling, too. Everything in front of us was mucked up. No more trenches, nothing but shell holes, blooming great holes. We'd advanced any way we could on the slope and a bit along the flat, and fallen back again here and there, no one knew where anyone else was. But perhaps you don't want to hear about it ? "

" Oh yes," said Berenice, " do go on."

" The Boche was in front and behind us and on both sides. The artillery was pounding away. There was some barbed wire, or it had been barbed wire, where one chap hadn't been able to get himself out of it again. Nobody was thinking of going to fish him out, I can tell you. A cat wouldn't have known her own kittens any more. Where my section was, things still looked a bit human, because we'd hung on to a dug-out where there'd been some fighting and barricaded it up with sandbags. Only there'd been two wounded Fritzes coming along when we piled up the sandbags, and they fell down on their silly mugs, with their feet on their own side and their heads sticking out where we were. In between the sandbags, proper sandwiches they were. No chance of getting them out, of course. The chaps on the other side were just as scared as we were.

Only it was getting dark, and they wouldn't make up their minds to kick the bucket, they kept on bawling. Something hurting them somewhere, something'd smashed up their pins, probably. Well, we couldn't do anything. And they kept on bawling. Everything as quiet as a mouse in the sector, everyone with his finger on the trigger, waiting for something to happen. Then when they started off bawling again, the machine guns went off, shooting at any old thing. Tack-tack-tack-tack, just like that, and the bullets bouncing about all over the shop. We didn't know where to get, for cover. Then some more machine guns started up. We didn't know and the Boches didn't know who was firing at \\io. In the dark, it was blooming awful. And then the lieutenant comes along. You remember, sir ? "

Aurelien made a vague movement with one hand.

" Oh, yes, sir, with the new M.O.—your cousin, Madame. I didn't know him. He'd come along, we were in the line, and you know, usually the M.O.'s didn't show up much. He was still all smart. It was in the summer, and there wasn't any mud. I was done up. I was just about all in. No sleep for three nights. The attack that morning, and that day. . . . Well, I went up to the lieutenant and I says to him : ' You know me, sir. You know I'm a quiet man, that wouldn't hurt a fly.' "

" Oh, that old story," Fuchs said.

Lemoutard looked embarrassed, straightened his shoulders and turned to his neighbour, to excuse himself:

" Madame hasn't heard it. Yes, I was telling M. Fuchs only yesterday, that's why. Well, the little M.O. didn't know me, see, and he might think I was like that. I says to him, ' The doctor's turned up in the nick of time, I can't help it, if I could help it I would, but there's nothing else to be done.' I wasn't in my right mind, that's a fact. ' What's the matter, sergeant ? ' the lieutenant says to me. So I tell him, * If you don't mind, I'd like you both to come along

and witness what I'm going to do. You'll stand witness, won't you ? You know I'm a quiet man, too easy-going, perhaps, sir, and it's only because they'll get the whole section massacred. . . ' The lieutenant says to me, ' Keep calm, sergeant, it's all right, I know you, it's all right, I know you wouldn't do anyone any harm.' You remember, sir ? "

Aurelien apparently did remember. He did not enjoy the memory.

" Well, I took the two of them into the dug-out, getting down very small, of course we couldn't let our heads show over the top. Tack-tack-tack-tack. And those blokes yelling away under the sandbags. One of them must have been off his chump. I take out my jack-knife, and I open it, I says to them, ' Lieutenant, doctor, wait for me, there's nothing else to be done, they're going to get us done for, that's a fact.' So when I'd got quite near, with the bit of light there was left, so that these blokes could see me—cross my heart, if I live to be a hundred I shan't forget that. The one on top got the idea right away, he must have seen it written on my face. I came on. He began to yell out in his lingo. I didn't understand it, but you didn't need to understand it to know what he meant, he was saying ' Don't kill me.' And I recognised some of the words, because I'd had sonfe Alsations in my lot, he was calling for his ma. I'm as gentle as a lamb, but if I'd left him there we'd all have been done for. He was yelling. And his face, I can still see it as if I was there now. He couldn't budge, his arms were caught under the sandbags. So with my knife—I didn't think I could've done it—I cut on both sides—what do you call that artery ? "

" The carotid," Fuchs said.

" You can't think how those bastards could bleed. It poured out all over me. And the yells—I can still hear them yelling. When you cut a pig's throat, it's only a pig, but a man—a man! The worst thing was the second one. He didn't realise it at first, but when the other one's blood began coming

down in his face, he might have been off his chump, but he knew, he knew what was coming to him. He knew a bit of French, that one did. He yelled ' Mercy, mercy, not me ! ' Then I got wild with the whole thing, I was wild at myself and him and the whole lousy business, and I went down on my knees and I hit him and hit him, until I couldn't do any more, I was afraid of leaving off before he was dead. Well, sir, I looked a sight when I came back after that, didn't I, a quiet man like me. . . . "

" Here, you eat your oysters/" Fuchs said, " seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, one more for me."

Aurelien was no longer clenching his teeth ; he was sunk in gloomy reflections. Berenice looked at the three men, wondering at the mysterious bond such a past had formed between three such different beings. Or was there really any bond at all between Aurelien Leurtillois and ex-Regimental Sergeant-Major Lemoutard, late of the Public Morals Department ? He was pouring scallop sauce on to his oysters, and complaining that the times were bad for business. Champagne—anyone would think that'd be easy to sell, but what a lot you had to sell before you could buy yourself a bottle of red wine.

" Ah," he said, " we were heroes, three years ago. The fighting men—they've a right to the best—fit for heroes—huh! "

Fuchs was telling stones about their old comrades. There was, for instance, the gunnery captain Wattele : Emile, that was his name, well, he died at Saint-Denis, tuberculosis. . . .

" What do you mean, tuberculosis ? " Aurelien said. " That blackguard went a-whoring wherever he went."

" That's right, tuberculosis, and Pott's disease. And Migne, and Chapelain, Dupuy, Sequin, Ballante. . . . "

Now Aurelien was drawn into the conversation, a prey to these phantoms. Their banal and dreary fate began to affect him, and he felt himself poorer, more of an outcast from all

that was seedy and joyless in the dregs of their former days. This man and his wife. . . . Another and his kid. . . . In amazement, Berenice watched his emotion mirrored in his face, and loved him all the more because of it. She realised a great deal of what was generally hidden, because he felt it was not quite decent, and she believed more than ever in his love, all the more because he seemed to have forgotten her, and had been caught in this trap memory had set for him, this talk of two intruders who had come and established themselves at their table. She gazed into the depths of his life, Aurelien's life.

" And corporal—what was his name ? The big fellow, decent chap, you remember, Fuchs, at Vauquois. . . ."

" Oh, you mean Blanchard ? I don't know."

" He came to a bad end," Lemoutard said. " I met him at the races. He's gone in for that Barbusse stuff—you know—pacifist."

Lcortillois shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't interested in that sort of thing.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SHE was there, at home, in his flat. Just as he had worked it out beforehand, it had been an imperceptibly easy move from the Mariniers to where he lived. They were both still stunned by the clamour of Fuchs and his companion, and there was the sort of wind blowing along the quays and streets that made it anything but pleasant out-of-doors. Aurelien had expected her to resist, and he had been ready with speeches, anger, accusations. But it was all wasted. Berenice had said : " Oh, is this it ? " and had come in the door. *She* wasn't afraid of meeting anyone, she didn't

know Prince R. The endless staircase, the heart beating. . . . Suddenly this little country girl, with her hat in her hand, her short hair shaken out all over her head, the squirrel coat over her arm, and her ill-made costume, was inexpressibly dear to him, as he saw her like this at home, in his own place. At home. Without any fuss, without the expected objections. He w^ras afraid that she wouldn't like his two rooms, as afraid of it as if they had been an extension of his body. Supposing the place hadn't been tidied up ? One never knew with Mme Duvigne.

This strange feeling, this nameless emotion, had begun as soon as the door was open and Berenice had slipped into the little crooked hall, touching the light raincoat hanging on the peg, as she went past; and then she stood on the threshold of the sitting-room, as he called it because Mme Duvigne did. She was at home, in his home. Aurelien stopped behind her and tried to see this familiar realm as she must be seeing it, with new eyes.

Have you ever seen a cat entering a strange room for the first time ? Have you noticed that hesitance, and then that swift, feline lunge forward, that lengthening of the tread, as it takes possession of the furniture and the carpets and the air among the Curtains, as if this were the jungle undergrowth ? Have you seen its golden eyes trying to seem to be no more than a reflection of the lights, its coat immediately merging with anything that at all resembles itself, and how there is always something that resembles it ? Berenice didn't go into the middle of the room, and yet she was already on the other side and had thrown her hat, bag and coat on three different chairs ; she was playing with the radiance coming from every quarter of the room. It was a small room, but at this time of day the light came in at all sides, with the three windows looking out over the two arms of the Seine and the prow of the island, and still more light coming through the open door of the bedroom. Berenice, when she fingered

the big net curtains at the window looking over the West bank, reminded Aurelien more than ever of a cat; or rather, of some nobler member of the cat tribe, some more powerful animal. Watching the movement of her shoulder and back, he became aware that this slight girl possessed sources of energy which he had never suspected.

He pulled back the curtains and opened the window. They went out on to the balcony, and looked down on Paris, already darkening in the blue dusk.

" It's beautiful," she murmured.

She was leaning against him, perfectly naturally, making no attempt to avoid him, and he put his arms round her as if he were afraid that she might become dizzy. He himself certainly felt dizzy. . . . The minutes dragged, leaden, void, silent, and the Seine flowed yellow, muddy, heavy with snow and mud from further upstream, under the dishevelled sky with wisps of white cloud, where through the rifts came brief glimpses of that wan blue sky, the threadbare sky of Paris in the winter. There was Berenice's weight against him and the weight of the sky over them.

He had known such physical and nervous tension before, times when he had been afraid to move, times when he had held his breath in terror of something happening. Then he had been afraid for a very different reason. Now it was fear lest any movement might destroy the magic of the instant. But nothing so much resembles death as love.

The thought made him shudder : it was over-lifesize and grandiloquent.

" What were you thinking about ? " Berenice asked.

" Tell me at once. Quick, don't stop to work it out ! "

He replied :

" I would rather die than tell you."

And that made him shudder again, because it was out of all proportion ; it was beyond the limits of decency. He felt he was a prey to a happiness so astonishing that everything,

anything, might put an end to it. God knows, was it right to hold Berenice like this ? Was not the mere happiness of her presence here enough ? So many women had stood here beside him, gazing out at the sloping roofs of the Pantheon and all the heights, near and far, of the city spread out below. . . . But this happiness was different. He was afraid that Berenice might realise what he was feeling, and at the same time he was afraid that she might now share his awareness of it. He couldn't find anything to say: he sheered off words, which would only vulgarise his lofty and indefinable emotion. It was as though they were drugged, some influence wrapping them in torpor like an anaesthetic. They were outside time : her hair loose on the shoulder of his jacket, the awkward way he held his arms round her waist, and Berenice's hand on his hands, as if she had laid it there in order to loosen his hold, and then forgotten what she had been going to do and let it stay ; and the stillness in the sky. To him this love felt like that sensation in dreams when it becomes impossible to move. He imagined legendary accounts of such a scene : he was a stone statue against which, carelessly, a woman leaned. Then he hoped for some movement from her ; at the same time he was afraid of it, lest she should sketch some light caress and so shift out of his reach. She lifted her other hand and laid it on his hair, with a gentleness that was the most natural thing in the world. He saw the nape of her neck close, too close beside him, troubling his gaze, and the fair, living velvet. . . . He scarcely dared to breathe. How little it may take, after all, to turn a statue's head !

" Let's go inside," she said, " I'm getting cold."

He did not follow her at once. He was wondering what on earth the look must be like that he had in his eyes. He was aghast; after all, he told himself, he was no longer a schoolboy. Perhaps, he thought, he had held her too closely ; for she must have caught something of what he was

feeling and at the same time been far away, so far away from all that. . . . He was rather ashamed of himself, and yet he was amazed.

Quietly he spun round on his heel; Paris and the sky withdrew, and he dived into the room.

Berenice was already playing at discovering all kinds of little things : a Persian box ; an ashtray with an advertisement on it, stolen at Biarritz, as was then the fashionable sport; the blue glass bird on the mantelpiece, a souvenir of the Caledonian Market from a visit to London. Her presence pervaded the place already, as a perfume might have done ; but when he tried to translate what was happening into simpler, even into more brutal terms, he failed. Yet he felt that he must travesty it all, he must deck it out with words and comparisons, for that was the way he expressed his scruples about Berenice. Scruples ? He shrugged his shoulders. Whether she wished it or not, she belonged to him.

Now ? No, not now. But it would come to the same thing in the end.

He went into his bedroom. It seemed quite natural to leave her alone like this, for a while. From the dressing-room, where he was running the metal comb through his damped hair, he heard her laughing, and wondered what she was looking at.

He came back into the room without any apology.

" What were you laughing at ? "

In faint confusion, she pointed to a picture on the wall. Immediately he felt a perverse desire to defend the things that belonged to him ; like everyone else, he had things in his house that he knew weren't really worth defending, and he was afraid of what her comments might be. After all, they were his things. This picture, for instance—anyway, he insisted, it wasn't so bad.

" You haven't looked at it properly, it's not so dusty."

Oh, of course, I know *it* isn't Rembrandt, but it's very conscientious and sincere." -

" I didn't say I thought it was bad. Who did it ? "

" A man I'm very fond of, Amberieux. We call him Uncle Amberkux, my sister and I, though he's not a relation of ours." ,

" H'm. It's rather hard to see it where it is. Could you——?"

Aurelieji had not his equal for taking pictures down from the wall. He brought it to the light, balancing it on his knee, turning it this w^ay and that so that the light should not reflect from the varnish. He had the unpleasant sensation that he must look like a dealer.

Berenice had not paid much attention to the picture, but now she began to study it : not that there was anything puzzling about it, as there was in cubist painting; it was a quite traditional piece of painting, in a manner not far removed from anything one may see at the Academy, only with rather more minuteness and an attention to detail that belonged to another epoch. Obviously a lot of hard work had gone into it. The odd thing was the composition ; a great many things had been crowded into a not very large canvas. It showed an open window, not as Matisse or Picasso might have done it, but rather in the Dutch manner. All that there was to be seen of the room in which the painter must be standing was some still-life on the window sill, a few little bottles, a small pair of scissors, pots of face cream scattered about, an open box of powder and some blue material, the whole thing betraying the existence of some unseen woman. One was looking out from the third storey, and the essential thing was the view of the town, bathed in clear morning light. On the pavement down below two men were shaking hands ; and there was a little girl carrying a long loaf of bread ; a blind beggar ; a hawker perched behind his stall, with a small crowd around him ; a newspaper kiosk with a

woman sitting inside. In the middle of the road people were standing on an island waiting for a bus or tram: people on their way to work, workmen with their toolbags slung over their shoulders, bare-headed women, and a musician carrying a violin case. On the right, the pavement was being torn up, and one could see the navvies wielding their drills. On the left there was a dramatic passage. A delivery van had knocked a child down, and the horses were rearing; no one had noticed anything yet except the last people in the group waiting for the tram, and they were turning round, apparently calling out, pulling one of the others by the sleeve. Somehow the picture had the peculiarly luminous quality of mediaeval things.

"Isn't it queer!" Berenice said. "I can't say that I really like it. It's so different from the sort of painting——"

"It's as good as your Zamora, anyway."

"Oh, my Zamora! Amberieux, did you say? It's funny that he isn't better known. What a lot of trouble he has gone to."

Aurelien was hanging the picture on its hook again.

"He's a man I'm very fond of," he repeated, "his wife and he are almost my only friends, in spite of the difference in age—he's about seventy."

As if she were talking to herself and to herself alone, Berenice said:

"I should like to know him."

"If you like, we'll go and see him. He'll show you his pictures. He doesn't get a lot of visitors, you know, and he's pleased when someone comes."

He was glad. He would have hated it if she had damned Uncle Amberieux's painting, and already he was looking forward to taking her to see old Blaise. She mustn't expect the kind of enjoyment she had got from her visit to Picasso, with Paul Denis. All the same, he was getting his own back on Paul Denis.

Berenice went on rummaging among his things, until she came upon the ashtray. She held it up, saying :

" I've got a bigger one than thjat! Blue and gold, Abdullahs. Do you like Abdullahs ? I'm not supposed to smoke them, I've been told only tarts do."

He came towards her, holding out his arms.

" Oh no," she said, " don't make me have to say that sort of thing. I came here without making you promise to be good, didn't I ? Well, then. . . ."

She was half-laughing and yet serious. He let his arms drop. Now he watched her moving to and fro, coming nearer and then disappearing into the distance, as the focus of his sight varied. Pie watched her come closer and then diminish once again, and how she tried to divert her attention from him by touching the stuff on a chair, then playing with a tiresome statue at the end of the mantelpiece, an idiotic thing that had only remained there because he had never got as far as throwing it into the wastepaper basket—a black bronze Tanagra, what an idea ! Just the thing for a paper-weight. What would Berenice think of it, with her modern taste ? The only thing to do was to give it to Mme Duvigne. He watched Berenice come back, stealthily, playing with fire, sure of herself, sure of him.

It was then that he reached out to the wall and took down the mask.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THERE is one passion so all-consuming that it cannot be described. Whoever contemplates it is devoured by it. All those who catch it are caught by it, for once it has been tasted, there is no chance of ever being able to give it up. It is frightening even to name it: it is the passion for the absolute.

This passion is often thought to be a rare thing, and those who are fanatically enthusiastic about human greatness will even go so far as to add : unfortunately. But let there be no mistake about it: it is more widespread than the common cold, and though it is more easily recognisable when it is preying on exalted minds, it also assumes shabby forms in which it penetrates and ravages the lives of very ordinary people, the sober and the dull, the poor in spirit. Once the door is open, it will enter and take possession ; little does it care where it reigns, however plain the dwelling. It is the absence, the very reverse of resignation. Some may like to congratulate themselves that such a thing exists, for the sake of what it has made men do, and for the sublime achievements to which its unrest has given rise. But that means ignoring the exception, the monstrous flower it bears ; and even if one looks into the depths of those hearts which it has swept up into the remotest latitudes of genius, one will find such secret blight, such stigmata of devastation, as are all the traces it leaves where it has passed, in beings less favoured of heaven.

Everyone who has this sense of the absolute inevitably renounces all chance of happiness. What happiness could resist that frenzy and that continually renewed demand ? This critical machinery of the emotions, this *vis a tergo* of doubt, attacks everything that makes life seem tolerable. It destroys the natural climate of the heart. In order to show how widespread and how terrible this passion is, we must have examples : and they must be chosen precisely for their meanness, they must be those vulgar forms of this disease that, by analogy, may help the reader to recognise the heroic disasters that this terrible passion brings to pass.

It is well known that tabes is a disease which, in men of high intelligence, rapidly reaches the higher nervous centres, whereas in the low, lethargic, primitive type it develops more slowly and is more inclined to attack the motor reflex

centre. The spiritual variety, this moral tabes of which I am speaking here, also has its special preferences : it attacks the the skill, mania and pride of the wretch who is afflicted with it. It will break the singer's voice ; it will send the jockey to hospital because he is continually losing weight; it will burn up the runner's lungs or burst his heart. Its strange inner voice will bring the housewife to the mad-house, overwhelming her with the force of her own neatness and an obstinate insistence on scrubbing and polishing a square yard of her kitchen, never perfect, while the milk boils over, the house is on fire, and her children are drowning. It is also, though this is not often recognised, the disease of those who do not care about anything ; I mean those negative, inhuman creatures who don't love anything and cannot help saying *no* to every manifestation of beauty and fantasy, not knowing that this refusal of theirs is only another form of the passion for the absolute. It all depends on where one chooses to find the absolute. It may be in love, or in dress, or in power ; and accordingly you will have Don Juan, Beau Brummel, Napoleon. Even that man is one of them, that man you pass in the street, walking along with his eyes shut, who never speaks to anyone. But even the strange tramp whom you see on the benches near the Observatory in the evenings, arranging incredible rags ; and the wretched sectarian, letting his life wither away for lack of water ; and he who dies from excessive sensibility ; and the other who makes himself unbearable in his grossness—for everyone of them there is *something* that is never enough, however far they go.

The passion for the absolute. . . .

The clinical forms of this disease are innumerable, or at least so numerous that one cannot set about listing them. Here there is one special case under consideration. But it must not be forgotten how this case is related to thousands of others, sicknesses apparently so different that it is difficult

to believe they are connected with each other. For there is no microscope for examining the microbe and no one knows how to isolate this virus which, for the sake of a better name, we call the passion for the absolute.

Nevertheless, under whatever widely differing disguises this disease may appear, it is possible to trace a symptom common to all its forms, even the most extremely divergent. This symptom is the subject's incapacity for happiness. Anyone who has the passion for the absolute, whether he knows it or not, whether it carries him along at the head of nations or at the vanguard of armies or paralysed in the monotony of daily life, reduced to a quiet desperation in some narrow street of slum or suburb—and whether he be a simpleton, a madman, a careerist or a pedant—he will not be happy. However much he may attain of whatever constitutes his idea of happiness, he will demand still more. With a *fuij* that turns against itself, he will destroy what might have been contentment. He is devoid of even the very slightest aptitude for happiness. "Nay more, he takes a delight in what consumes him, confusing his misery with heaven knows what idea of dignity or moral grandeur, according to his cast of mind, his education and his background. In other words, there is no passion for the absolute without the accompanying frenzy of the absolute. It is always accompanied by a certain exaltation, by which it may first be recognised and which is always working on the growing point, the focal point of destruction, at the risk of making it appear, to such as have not been warned, that the passion for the absolute is the same as a passion for unhappiness. The two do coincide, but the passion for unhappiness is only a result; it is only the passion for a certain kind of unhappiness, while the absolute preserves its absolute character, even in the smallest things.

Doctors can trace the beginnings of almost all physical ailments ; they know what introduces a disease into the

organisms, and how long the incubatory period is, and all the hidden labour that precedes its manifestation. But where the emotions are concerned, we are still at the alchemy stage: we know almost nothing of these unidentified fantasies and manias that a normal man bears within himself. In describing the slow growth of the seeds of character, novelists usually neglect to explain how they came to be there, except by tracing them back to childhood surroundings, referring to heredity, society, and scores of other different principles. It cannot be denied that these writers are rarely convincing ; or, if they are, it is only the result of lucky guesses, which are of no more real value than the happiness they describe. All we can say with certainty is that there are jealous women, murderers, misers, cowards, and so forth. We have to accept them ready made, as they are set before us, when jealousy, the murderer's rage, cowardice, and avarice, confront us with striking portraits and their many subtle faces.

It is a mystery where this passion for the absolute came from. But one thing is certain : Berenice was consumed by the passion for the absolute.

That must have been what Edmond Barbentane vaguely-felt when he spoke of his cousin as being " a cat on hot bricks." He didn't really know anything much about her at all, but men are often able to sum women up by some animal instinct they have, some purely male sense that is at least as remarkable as that feminine intuition we are always hearing about. At the time, Aurelien had been disturbed by that surprising expression, which didn't seem to fit the woman as he saw her ; and then he had forgotten about it, when the relationship between Berenice and himself developed a greater significance than any third person's judgment could have in his eyes. And so he was approaching the abyss, having forgotten that there was one, although it was the sense of the abyss that had first drawn him on. And their

romance was dominated by the contradiction which had marked their first meeting: the disparity between the Berenice he saw and the Berenice that others could see, the contrast between this spontaneous, gay and innocent girl and the hell she carried about with her, the dissonance between Berenice and her ghostly shade. Perhaps that was what explained her two faces, the night and the day that alternated in her face, making two different women of her : the little girl so easily amused by a mere trifle, and the woman whom nothing could satisfy.

For Berenice had the passion for the absolute.

She had reached that stage in her life when it was utterly necessary that this search of hers should be embodied in a living being. Now the time had come when the bitter disappointments of her youth, which had perhaps had no other origin than this urge for the unattainable absolute, must be counter-balanced. If the Berenice who was always on the brink of despair, she whose face was that of the unknown mask, had her doubts of this Aurelien, who had arrived in the nick of time, the other, the little girl who had had no dolls to play with, was determined that here at last and at all costs she would find the incarnation of her dreams, the living proof of all greatness, nobility and the infinite. What she wanted was the infinite contained in the finite she must have perfection. So her attraction toward this man was mingled with the demands she made on the world.

This passion for the absolute must not be confused with scepticism ; for though it sometimes speaks in the language of scepticism, and even in the language of despair, that is only because it posits their very contrary : a deep and all-embracing faith in beauty, goodness and genius. A very great deal of scepticism is necessary before it is possible to be satisfied with life as it is. Lovers of the absolute only reject life as it is through their unfounded belief in life as, perhaps, it can never be.

While for Aurelien Berenice was the trap in which it was his destiny to be caught, he himself was for her the gaping abyss : and she knew it, and she was too much in love with the abyss not to stand at the edge, looking down and preparing to plunge into the depths. When he had assured her, in tones that made it impossible not to believe him, that he had never before in his life told a woman that he loved her, how could he suspect what he was doing ? Could he guess how he was feeding her sense of the irreparable, stoking the fire of a passion that would burn for the rest of her life ? If he had been telling the truth—and with all her strength and all her ghostliness she willed that it should be the truth—then wasn't it the absolute that loomed before her, the only glimpse of the absolute that she had ever known ? He *must* love her ; it was more indispensable to her than air to breathe, essential as life itself was not. At last, in this man who was at once so straightforward and so obscure, this passer-by in Paris, she was going to surpass herself, reaching out beyond herself to that existence which bears the same relation to ordinary existence as the sun does to light. He *must* love her. Was not Aurelien's love the justification of Berenice's living at all ? She could no more be expected to renounce him than to renounce thinking, breathing, living ; and indeed it may well be easier to put a final end to life than voluntarily to put an end to love.

She did not wonder what it was that made him love her. She did not think about the moment there must have been when a single word spoken, or a single word left unsaid, might have warded off this love. But she had not been capable of letting it pass her by ; nor did she ever ask herself whether she had any right to encourage it and accept it, endowing it with this terrifying force. For love, like a human being, dies from grief, gasping and sweating and convulsed with agony, and whoever robs it of the strength to bear its suffering is worse than a murderer.

She did not wonder what it was that made him love her, because she had the passion for the absolute ; and, rightly or wrongly, in her eyes Aurelien's love bore the strangely wonderful and gloomy marks of the absolute. And because it was the absolute, it fed on itself, so that there was, as it seemed to her, no need at all for her to think about whether she was to satisfy it or to quench it. It hardly mattered that love, once it is confessed and given a name, gives birth to great suffering. For was not love an end in itself ? Even the obstacles in its way, those obstacles that could not be overcome, were they not an essential part of its grandeur ? Berenice was not far from believing that love perishes and dies when it is happy. Here was the passion for the absolute breaking through once more, utterly incompatible with happiness. Indeed, happiness and unhappiness were not the standard by which Berenice generally measured her actions. In sober fact, she was worse than a murderer.

In Aurelien's destiny there were elements that gave off strange echoes to these inhuman notes in Berenice. In order to understand him, it would be necessary to survey again everything that is known about him. But Berenice did not need to do that; for she was not merely inhuman, she was also a woman, and when through half-closed eyes she watched Aurelien, she was afraid of the delight she felt.

Berenice had two faces, one of the night, and one of the day.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

" You weren't telling me the truth," she said. " This woman——"

He laughed.

" This woman ? Did you think I was in love with this woman ? Berenice—you were quite right ! "

She had got up, wild-eyed, on the point of bursting into tears. He caught her by the wrist, hurting her, and she fell back into the chair with a little cry, holding the bruised wrist with the other hand.

" You're quite right, Berenice. I love her. My sister—a queer person, my sister—she guessed it too, and that was how I realised. . . . "

She had fallen so far that she could not weep ; she sat still, with her head thrown back, her hands laid on her cheeks, and her eyes closed.

" That's it ! " he exclaimed, so abruptly that she opened her eyes. " Oh, at that moment you were yourself, Berenice. YouVe never seen yourself with your eyes shut, of course, otherwise you would have cried out at the sight of this woman. Look at yourself, Berenice, look at yourself, it's you ! Can't you see that it's you ? "

She shook her head, thinking that this was just another of the things men say. He was holding the mask in both hands ; he put it down in front of her.

" Look at it, it's you. You, Berenice, the woman I love."

" What's the good of lying, Aurelien ? It's someone else. Someone a bit like me, that's all. We're both your type, I suppose. . . . "

" Oh, you silly girl ! " he cried. " There are copies of this mask all over the place, in all the shops where they sell plaster masks and statuettes. It always turns up alongside the ' Boy with the Thorn ' and Beethoven's death-mask. It's the face of a woman who drowned herself—the cast was taken at the morgue and it's called ' The Unknown of the Seine.' I swear to you. . . . "

Slowly his words reached her brain. The colour began to come back to her cheeks and she turned round in her chair to look at the plaster face. Incredulously she looked from the mask to Aurelien. He had been damping his hair and

combing it—why had he done that ? *L'Inconnue de la Seine*. . . . Well, perhaps. If it wasn't some woman whom he had known, then it was a mask that had appealed to him, before he . . . And then he had thought that Berenice looked like her, like this plaster cast. . . . She was ravaged by a wild, senseless jealousy. She was jealous of a dead woman, of some drowned girl that he had never seen. She took the mask, tearing it out of his hands, and when she held it she realised how fragile it was. She was seized with a frantic desire to smash it. But what would be the good of that ? He could go out and buy another. For a long time she sat staring at this pallid image of herself, this reflection that no mirror had ever shown her.

Aurelien was talking :

" At first it was just a mysterious face. I saw it in a little shop in the rue Racine, and while I was looking at it, I heard the story from the Italian moulder who does plaster casts. Well, it isn't a story at all, because no one knows anything about her. Just an unknown woman who drowned herself in the Seine, a girl who closed her eyes on her secret. Why did she do it ? Hunger, perhaps, or love. . . . You can make up any story you like, all sorts of stones. What was it that drove the medical student on duty there at the Morgue to take a cast from that body instead of from any other ? He must have seen how beautiful she was. He must have felt that it was impossible to let her go like that, from the slab in the Morgue into the dissecting rooms of the Medical School, to be cut up by callous young men studying anatomy, lie wanted to keep something . . . and so . . . "

At last she spoke, confessing :

" I'm horribly jealous."

Jealous ? A tremor shook him. She loved him, she did love him after all !

" Berenice ! "

He had taken her in his arms. The brittle sound of the

plaster smashing made him let her go. Both of them stood staring in dismay at the fragments of whiteness on the floor, the powder on the carpet, the bright chips, and worst of all, the broken pieces of the nose, the mouth. . . . Each felt a little as if they had committed a murder.

" You can go to the rue Racine and get another one," she said.

He shook his head.

" Oh yes, you must," she said, " you must get another one. I'll give it to you. Yes, yes, really. It would be worse to leave it like this. That woman—her power consists in being dead."

She shivered.

He remembered that she had said " horribly jealous." Grasping her hands, he murmured :

" You are alive, your power consists in being alive."

She looked at him, wondering whether he was acting. She had scarcely learnt to doubt him.

" What do you mean, Aurelien, by saying my power consists in being alive ? All women are alive, powerless against a dead woman. And if I were suddenly to die—then—would any woman, any woman at all, have that advantage over me, that power, with you ? "

He was picking up the fragments of the face with the closed eyes. Almost furtively he was watching the other, the face with the eyes open. He wondered, as she had done a moment earlier about him : Is she acting ? But he thought it with a shade of irritation, rather than with despair. He had taken the little hearthbrush with the black handle and the blue bristles from a corner of the hearth, for he had to sweep up the bits : if they were trodden into the carpet, the plaster would harden there and leave a white mark. He thought: She didn't like that photograph.

" You didn't like that photograph," he said, with a hint of reproach in his voice.

" No, no," Berenice defended herself, " I didn't do it on purpose ! Don't go and think I did it on purpose. It was an accident. I'd give anything not to have broken that mask. I don't know. . . . I'm frightfully sorry about it. Are you angry with me ? "

He shook his head, sweeping the pieces into an old newspaper and putting the whole thing into the waste-paper basket. Trying to make a joke of it, he said :

" Oh, I'm very angry with you."

But then he stopped, seeing that her eyes were misted with tears.

" Oh, my darling,"

He said that without thinking, and they looked at each other, aghast. In the silence that followed she stretched out one hand, palm upwards, pleadingly, and shook her head, without a word. What in the world was she saying *no to* ?

Between them still hovered the spectral presence of the dead girl, and shadows were gathering in the room. Aurelien felt a chill on his shoulders—a draught from the window, which he hadn't shut properly. In order to change the whole atmosphere, he stood up and switched on the lights and drew the curtains.

Now it was all quite different and they looked at each other without recognition. What were they doing together in this setting ? The room was filled with embarrassed silence.

" I'll light the fire," he said, kneeling down in front of the hearth.

" If it's for me, don't bother. I'm going in a moment. Oh, how silly of me, perhaps you're cold. And after I've gone . . . "

" Don't go, Berenice, please don't go. You promised me your whole day."

" I know. But it's better if I do. I don't know. . . . "

" Do you know, or don't you ? I'm lighting the fire for you, too."

The paper flared up under the logs. Aurelien pulled down the flap from the chimney.

" Do you think it's going to take ? " Berenice said that in her little girl's voice. The fact was that she couldn't watch anyone lighting a fire without joining in; and she knelt down on the hearthrug beside Aurelien. After that they only said the most ordinary things imaginable, as ordinary as the fire, and as wonderful. The mystery of the fire drew them together. The chimney smoked, and they had to open the window again, to make a better draught; then the windows had to be shut again, and they put another log on the fire, and some sticks. They sat on the floor, on cushions, leaning their heads against a chair ; and the flames began to mount, and they watched the flames. Gazing into the sorcery of the flames, which could be watched for ever, vanishing only to flare up again, dancing, crossing, turning blue, leaping away from the wood only to fall back on it, licking it like the tongues of Pentecostal fire—gazing into the sorcery of the flames, they found their way back to the secret, sunken paths of their separate thoughts and the burning crossroads where those paths met. Berenice's head dropped on to the man's shoulder.

" In the big house . . ." she said, drifting through the landscape of her day dream. A great many words, gestures and happenings had vanished in the radiance of the fire, and Berenice was continuing that conversation interrupted by the arrival of Fuchs and Lemoutard at the Mariniers, as if everything between then and now had never happened.

Everything except the murder of the Unknown Woman, of which neither spoke.

" I was eight. There was always someone shouting in the house. My father was . . . I didn't love my father. He used to shout at Mother. I had a dog and three dolls. I never used to play with other children. . . ."

She paused, with something on her mind :

" Aurelien ? "

" Berenice ? "

" Aurelien, swear to me that I'm what you loved in her."

She tried to point at this nameless other woman ; she turned her head towards the wall now stripped of its mask, and her hand wavered in the direction of the carpet, where there was still a trace of dust, and then towards the waste-paper basket.

He said, very gravely :

" I swear it."

It was no light matter for Berenice. " I should like to believe you," she murmured. " If I thought I were going to lose you too . . . "

Then, ashamed of having revealed so much, she plunged back into the story :

" That day when Mother came down to the bottom of the garden, where there was a water-wheel, and I was making mud pies—I loved making mud pies, with water and a stick—she said : ' Nicette . . . ' Mother used to call me Nicette. And she looked very serious, I'd never seen her look so serious before. Do you know what my mother looked like ? She had my face, but different eyes, very, very blue eyes. You know, I can hardly remember her, because I was quite small. Only eight. She must have looked like—" with a movement of her head she indicated the waste-paper basket. " So why should I have wanted to smash that mask ? Do you believe me now ? " As she said that, it flashed upon her that she *had* wanted to break it, and she almost choked over the lie. Yet it was not altogether a lie. She went on :

" ' Nicette '—that's what Mother said to me—' Nicette, it can't go on like this. You can see how it is, with your father. . . . You hear it every day, how he shouts. I was so young when I was married, and I didn't know. . . . And to spend my whole life like this—my whole life, my whole life ! What do you think I should do, Nicette ! ' Of course

I didn't understand. I kept my dirty hands behind my back. Aurelien, your mother was beautiful, wasn't she ? Was she happy ? "

He started. In his mind the whole drama of his childhood sprang to life, and his mother's story, and the story of that man whom he probably resembled.

" Then Mother told me she was going away, at once, and she couldn't take me with her, but later on it would be too late, and she was still young. There was a man who loved her and didn't shout at her, and he hadn't got dreadful eyes like my father's." She turned to Aurelien, adding, with a wild gesture of her fingers, as if to tear out her eyes : " The same eyes that I have." Aurelien caught the fingers spread out like a fork, and bent down to kiss them. She had shut her eyes in order to look like her mother.

" If I had said * Don't go away,' she would have stayed. I'm sure that she would have stayed. But I didn't want her to be unhappy, she was my mother and I didn't want her to be unhappy in the big house, with all the shouting, and our dark eyes looking at her. So I said, * Go away, Mummy, go away.' I was eight, making mud pies by the water-wheel. My father nearly died. The two of us stayed there alone, with the servants. ..."

Aurelien was thinking of his own mother, who had not gone away. His pretty mother, who had seemed so happy and had never talked to her little son, never asked him. . . . Then he saw the mask again in his mind's eye, that mask which was like the woman who had run away. A fantastic idea occurred to him, and he asked :

" What happened to your mother, Berenice—did she die ? "

When had that cast been taken, he wondered ? Perhaps it would be possible to find out. Down below, the Seine flowing past, with all its secrets. . . .

" What an idea ! " Berenice said. " Mother's still young. She's alive. But I've never seen her again."

" How is that possible ? "

" Her—new husband took her away with him, a long way. They went to Africa. At first they wrote, but my father never showed me the letters, and then as the years went by . . . "

Life is still more fantastic than the imagination. It would have simplified things so much, it would have been a quite futile simplification, if the Unknown Woman of the Seine had been . . .

" Shut your eyes," he pleaded.

She obeyed, and out of the night that had fallen at his behest, she asked :

" Which do you like best, Aurelien ? Me or—my mother ? "

There was only one possible answer. But she struggled in the most unexpected fashion, like a wild cat, and they both rolled on the floor, Aurelien seized with fury at how her lips escaped him, maddened by the haunting sense of how he had just brushed her mouth with his. But she escaped from him and stood up, while he was still on the floor.

" You see," she said, " it's better for me to go away."

" Are you cross ? "

" No, no, it was my fault. But I must go home."

" Oh, please, Berenice. . . ."

" It's much better like that. I'm not cross, really I'm not. Give me my coat. Thank you."

She was putting on her hat in front of the mirror, then fumbling in her bag for lipstick.

He said the first words that came into his head, trying to apologise, but also with the feeling that he must find something to say, to keep her there. He could see that it was useless. Now she had that wretched velours on again—yes, it didn't suit her at all—and her mouth was reddened again as if with blood. She smiled very sweetly.

" Listen, Aurelien, tomorrow morning I'm engaged.

Don't argue ! I promised Zamora I would sit for an hour. But afterwards . . ."

" That fellow again ! "

" Don't be annoyed. He only needs one more sitting, and he will have gone on with the picture without having me there. He just wants to go over it with me there, that's all. Of course, if I were having my portrait done by a real portrait painter . . ."

" You'd better not let him hear you say that."

" Oh, it's only a water-colour that I've given him the idea for."

Aurelien shrugged. He didn't know which he loathed more, Zamora or his painting.

" No, don't call for me. But if you like, I'll be down there at one o'clock, at the Mariniers. Just like today. Perhaps some more friends of yours will turn up. ..." She laughed.

He assured her that Fuchs wasn't there every day, thank heaven. Very well then, that was fixed—the Mariniers.

Perhaps it seemed impossible that he should let her go like that ? That's the sort of thing one thinks, but it turns out differently. He let her go, just like that. And when the door was shut again, he walked about the room, threw wood on the fire, and accidentally stumbled over the waste-paper basket. He shuddered as though he had touched a coffin. Fresh air ! He went to the window and opened it.

The night was starless, and the wind whistled round the house. He went out on to the balcony and looked at the lights of Paris, so close and so far away. Then his gaze, circling the view, came back to that great black moat down below, the Seine, bearing along its flotsam of frozen mud and the bodies of the drowned.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SUDDENLY a room lit up in the big house. He could see the design on the wallpaper and the pattern on the covered chairs. The maids were gliding through the shaded light in the bedrooms, and someone was doing washing in the back kitchen. Then again, there was the mysterious garden, the phlox and the rhododendrons. In the midst of it all, a little girl, making up stories to tell herself and burdened with the load of a story that she had not completely understood and was telling herself for the hundredth time : " I was so young when I was married.. . ." There, too, was the shadow of the man with the dark eyes, the man whose wife had gone away. He was shouting. He was the opposite of everything the little girl loved ; he was all that one must go away from in order to be happy. But he was unhappy.

Aurelien would never know how the days passed, those long days that vanished so swiftly. His memories of that time would always be bewildering, a confusion of the scattering minutes and the hours wasting away. And in his mind the pictures would become entangled, one with another, because of that little girl with the dark eyes who wandered through those memories. Sometimes there would be a face with closed eyes, and sometimes the eyes were open. And then he would see those tiny vertical lines on Berenice's lower lip, those tremulous threads like grief itself, that made his own lips tremble as he gazed. Later he would never be able to say what had happened on this day or that, to distinguish the days from each other. Yet these were the decisive days of his life, the most vital days he had ever known. Perhaps, indeed, that was the reason why they ran together in his memory.

Later he would reconstruct them, patiently, one by one, comparing one with another, revising them and bringing them into the light. Then they would take on a radiance that they

had never had in reality, and so become transfigured. Anything that had been merely automatic or incidental would assume a meaning and seem marked with purpose. In memory nothing would be left to chance, but it would be like some great operatic duet, a ringing out of pre-destined harmonies, ranging beyond the sane mind's limits. And yet what had the reality been ? They had strolled along the quays ; taken a trip in the car out Meaux way, and to Senlis ; spent a morning, since Berenice insisted, at the Louvre, and argued about Courbet. There had been the times when she had had to go home, and the times when he had waited for her to come, the empty spaces in the filigree, the empty hours, the hours without Berenice.

She talked to him about her father. Had she disliked him so much ? She had had some idea of her own about having to make it up to her father for what he had suffered ; and she had been afraid of him and his shouting. He was a stormy man ; sometimes, too, he had introduced women into the big house. Berenice had not gone to school until very late.

What characterised those days was a kind of stupor, an unconsciousness of anything beyond the actual moment. Time passed as if they had had eternity before them, or as if what made the time precious was the very fact that they frittered it away. Nevertheless, there was a worm in the fruit: those days were eaten away from within by the unforgettable certainty that they must come to an end—the haunting torment of how short time was, and the knowledge in advance of the coming separation, branded with the mark of doom. How those rare days nestled at the heart of winter ! Days of sharp contrasts such as never occur at any other time, unless it be in the full heat of summer, in the mountains, when the shadows chill the climber to the bone, so that he forgets that he has sought their coolness in order to escape the beating sunshine.

Every time she left him alone, Aurelien wondered what was happening to him and how it was possible that he should behave so naively. Every time she left him, he felt humbled in his obstinate masculine pride, because he had not made this woman his own. She slipped between his fingers. She left him standing. All his previous experience was useless to him ; the free-and-easiness he had learnt; the conventional situations he knew, when the conversation glides over into violence and the skirmishes develop into battle. There were moments when he thought he had her in his arms, feeling her quite helpless and subject to him ; and moments when he had no doubt that she did not love him and that it was all beyond words and worse than kisses. Yet afterwards, when these moments had passed, he realised that it was not even a ghost he had held in his arms, and that both of them were still here on the brink of that abyss, awkward and out of countenance, strangers to each other, the most threadbare words masking a discomfiture, and fury, and fear.

Aurelien was not one of these men who believe in an ideal love. Whenever he was waiting for Berenice, or listening to her talking about her childhood, his mind was full of precise images and thoughts that revolved around the snare set by the hunter. Everything he said and did was as it were an incantation to draw the woman into the trap of sexual pleasure, which was the natural goal for him, since he was a man. She was so wonderfully defenceless. How was it, then, that she always eluded his grasp ?—this hunted creature with the sombre eyes, this tremulous Berenice whom he loved—for he could swear that he loved her. How many times had he felt that she was at his mercy and seen in her eyes the widening terror of exhaustion ? Although he was a man whom many women had loved, he did not dare to take advantage of that faltering. What was it that stopped him ? It was something more than the fear of bringing about a catastrophe, only he did not know what the frustrating element was; he

brooded over the question until he no longer recognised himself. He cursed his own clumsiness and jeered at himself.

Gradually he began to understand what it was in her that stopped him : she loved him, but she did not want to belong to him. After a time he became sure that this was the answer. Not that she had said anything, and in any case, what a woman says in such a situation doesn't count for much : words only serve to hide the feelings, and not to express them. The long and the short of it, he realised now, was that she did not want to belong to him. Why ? He only knew that it was so.

That was not the sort of thing she talked to him about. She told him about the big house, the insects jumping into her darkened bedroom at night through the open window, and a country lad who had been her Prince Charming when she was ten, and gathering the olives. Behind what she was saying he could hear the ceaseless pleading, and he listened, as though lying in ambush, for the resolution of a chord between their two hearts ; but he knew, as well as she did, that if the sound of their love were to ring out loud and true, then the glass that picked up the note and echoed it would be shattered into fragments. Two or three times, almost as if by common consent, they had fled from their fate and so escaped it. He could no longer understand how it had come about or how he had allowed it to happen. Was it perhaps that he was not possessed by the thought of her and a real desire for her ? Love, love—was this continually renewed refusal *love* ? If he loved her, why should he be afraid of his love ? Could it be love at all, if it were in danger of vanishing the moment it assumed a body ? And behind it all there was that haunting shadow, his knowledge that Berenice was going away ; she was going to leave him, returning to a life in which he had no share, her own life, as it seemed, her own life. . . He knew nothing, less than nothing, of this other life of hers. There was her husband, who kept a chemist's shop. That would be ludicrous if it were not so horrible. A little country town—

and what else? The idea of duty? Religion, perhaps? If not that, then what? Possibly the wish not to hurt that other man (with his chemist's shop). Any of the reasons he could think of were too petty for this face with its sharp angles, this hair the colour of straw, and the tortured expression, the unutterable thirst and passion there. . . Oh, if he really didn't love her, if he had lied to Berenice, then what was to become of her? For he knew that she clutched at his love as someone who is drowning clutches at a floating spar; and he knew beyond the possibility of doubt that she was capable of dying for want of love.

How did he know that? She had not told him anything about it. And if he had lied, if he did not love her.. . For an instant he took a stand against his love, looking at it sceptically, defying it. But the next moment everything in him clamoured that it was unendurable, and he was seized with despair. It was no use pretending, no use denying it; he bent his head under the storm, letting the rain soak him to the bone, and he was swept away on the winds of his destiny.

She spoke of her father, that man who had been a stranger to her and never found the way to her heart. She had hated him, for the sake of the woman who had gone away. She talked about how frightening he had been, a scourge to the whole household, and how he had taught her, when she was still a child, what it is to be unhappy. She had hated him for that; perhaps, without his ever knowing it, she had loved him for it too, as she had grown up in that solitude, like any wild plant in the garden. If he had known, what would he have done? He would have been angrier than ever; he would have shouted even more. He was not born to be loved. And no one loved him.

Once she uttered Lucien's name. She did not know how it slipped out; and it was no use pretending that it didn't matter, because it did matter a great deal. But it had happened as a result of one of those twists in talk that can never be retraced

later. Lucien's name had escaped her ; there was no getting over that fact. It had been in reference to something else, and not as a direct allusion to Lucien. But Aurelien shuddered. The sound of the name had gone through him like pain ; he wished that she had not uttered it, and at the same time he wished that she would say it again, in order to drive away this phantom, this threat lingering between them. The name pursued him in his thoughts when she had already begun to talk of something else ; it pursued him when she had stopped talking. It pursued him when he remained alone, after she had gone. It obsessed him at odd moments, when he was not thinking of anything in particular, and in the midst of conversations, and in the depths of his dreams. Aurelien would wake sweating, to hear himself repeating Lucien's name : he was coming to the surface again out of a nightmare, already half forgotten, in which a dozen men he knew had appeared fleetingly with this name that sometimes belonged to one, sometimes to the other. Lucien . . .

Aurelien was beginning to go to school with jealousy.

One idea stuck fast in his mind, working deeper and deeper down. It first occurred to him after he had reflected that Berenice was like someone drowning, and that she was clinging to his love. Perhaps, he thought, she did not love him at all ; it was not Aurelien she loved, but his love for her. Once such a thought has taken shape, everything becomes clear : or rather everything becomes dark. It is a creeping poison. First of all Aurelien considered the various elements of the metaphor : the drowning woman, the floating spar, the sea, the storm. What did it all mean ? He tried to find his way through these incidentals, so to explore the hidden meaning of the image, the essentials of a struggle at which he could only guess. Doubtless if she talked about the past, it was merely in order to avoid talking about the present. There could be no doubt at all about that. She avoided talking about Lucien, whom she had mentioned only by chance, a slip of

the tongue. Or had it been that at all ? Perhaps she was trying to prepare Aurelien for the unhappiness in store for him. But wasn't it she who was unhappy ? The drowning woman, the spar, the sea ... What secret grief did she carry about with her, in the depths of those shadowy eyes ? Had Lucien been the origin of this disillusion, which was so great that now she needed to be loved and loved desperately, in order to believe in anything—in order to believe in life itself, and fine weather ? (To hell with it ! he thought, this is crazy !)

Every time she had mentioned her husband indirectly, or spoken of the chemist's shop, or the town, how calm she had instantly become, even reposeful. Her life in the country, which included her life with Lucien, was much more a thing of dullness and monotony than of struggle. If there had been anything dramatic in her relations with Lucien, if for instance there had been any struggle on Lucien's side, then it was obvious that she must love him. The drowning woman, the spar, the sea . . .

It was only then that it struck him how persistently these images of drowning recurred to him. He thought of the broken mask and that smile lying shattered upon the ground. And he shuddered, as at a presentiment.

Supposing, then, that while he was believing that she loved him, she was in love only with his love ? Then the whole thing would be explained. Hence the refusal, the shadow in which she wrapped herself, this ghastly situation with nothing for its object but the hope of gaining time, in order to leave him caught as he was in the meshes of unsatisfied passion ? Oh, it was obvious, quite obvious. The more he thought of it, the clearer it became that she wanted to keep this love and was afraid of what might happen to it in the fire of sexual pleasure and subjection. She didn't want to give anything, she wanted only to take. Down there in the misty monotony of her life in the country, she wanted to be able to see this love in the distance, like the sun glowing through the mist,

a light against which she could proudly measure up every little pettiness of that other life. When he thought that, Aurelien felt himself seized with black rage. He began to work out schemes of vengeance, stratagems, merciless tricks that he would play on her. He reasoned with all the cruelty and lucidity of a man thinking of nothing else but of how to gain the upper hand over a woman. He laughed at his own love. Who was it who said that if there hadn't been so much talk about love, no one would have thought of it ? That was all very well, but someone must have thought about it for there to be so much talk about it.

And a little while later, when Berenice arrived slightly late, all his resolutions melted like snow in the sun. She came in a new dress, which was just as pathetic as all the others, and said in a deep, rather husky voice :

" I've kept you waiting. . . . "

He wanted to ask her a great many questions, but he did not dare. He was afraid of breaking the spell. A pretty figure he was cutting ! A phoney Don Juan ! At first he laughed at himself, and then he remembered, with a shock, what he had been letting himself think while Berenice w⁷as not there ; he was ashamed of himself. If Berenice ever found out . . . How could she find out ? He hadn't told anyone. That was precisely the appalling thing about it, that it could not be confessed : that their happiness, if ever they should achieve any happiness, should be that much poorer from the start. Who would tell Berenice ? Well, he would tell her himself.

" Berenice ? "

She lifted her eyes to him, that deep gloom of their darkness confronting him with a question.

No, he would not tell her. It was impossible.

" I was fifteen, " she said, " I was fifteen when I realised that my father had loved his wife—Mother—and how much he must have suffered. Then I understood what those black moods of his meant, and why he was so impatient, and why

he would get so angry. Then I realised how unjust we had been to him, Mother and I."

Now, when she had begun to talk about the big house again, Aurelien only half listened. The stories she was telling formed an accompaniment to his thoughts—the music of the cypresses in the garden, and the water-wheel, and the olives—while he pursued the thousand variations of this theme that obsessed him. He was trying to find some explanation of himself, rather than of Berenice. Why should he accept the rules of a game that he didn't want to play ? Why should he not simply revolt ? He asked himself the main thing : whether he could live without her now. It was unthinkable, dreadful !

" Berenice _____ "

Once more she lifted the double interrogation of those dark eyes to him.

" Berenice, I couldn't live without you any more."

Slowly she shook her head. She took his hands in hers, and when he tried to pull them away, he saw that she had big tears in her eyes. He was taken aback. Now he didn't know what to do or say, except that now he was consoling her. In a minute or two he would be cursing himself for this. " What a fool I am ! " he said to himself. " She's fooled me, she's fooled me again." And he attributed to her the lowest thoughts and crudest feelings, in order to avenge himself for his own submission and the power that Berenice had over him. He did not know that no one ever attributes such meanness and pettiness to a person he doesn't care about; he didn't know that it is only when one loves, and because one loves, that one attributes all those qualities to the beloved which would disfigure anyone else, and that the only result is to torture oneself. Ah, the more one loves, the more one blasphemes. Aurelien was learning this slowly.

" There was a little grey cat in the big house. His name was Pitoulet. ..."

CHAPTER XL

SHE was a big, rather mannish woman, carrying her sixty odd years with vigour. It could scarcely be her fault that her hair, which had been fair, had hardly turned grey at all; for she tugged it unmercifully, piling it up on top and pinning it down so tightly that she hardly seemed to have any hair. Her big features, thickened with age, were not softened by any artificial aid ; neither cream nor powder masked the decay of that fair skin. The only colour left was in her huge blue eyes, with their lashes now grown pale. There was only one concession that Mme Amberieux made to her face : she had dashed a clumsy dab of red across her mouth, slightly over-running the outline of the lips. With her chestnut brown cardigan drooping all round, and her black dress, longer than was fashionable but still showing mousey cotton stockings and what her husband called clergyman's shoes, she looked like nothing on earth. In the lobe of each ear was a tiny pearl.

" You'd never think, my dear girl, that I was a dancer in my young days." She winked at Berenice. She was doubly proud of the fact that no one would dream she had once been a dancer and that she *had* once been a dancer. And what a hoarse voice she had.

" Now, now, no boasting, Aunt Martha," Aurelien protested. " You've been terrifying people with your tempestuous youth quite long enough."

Aunt Martha's boudoir, which Amberieux called her glory-hole, swarmed with Moorish objects brought back from a trip both of them had made to North Africa. There were rugs bought over the road, in the place Clichy, and red-and-blue woollen curtains that had the Delacroix touch, if the master of the house were to be believed. On a piece of furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl, with little balustrades all round it and a great many complicated storeys and drawers, stood

arrayed, as if it had come on a visit, a delegation of Chinese figures : little enamelled men, clay horses, a porcelain Buddha, dragons, and ivories. It was an heirloom from her mother-in-law, whom Aunt Martha had never known and who had never wanted to know Aunt Martha, but who, when she died, had sent her an apology in the shape of this little Asiatic gathering, her disapproving companions. Aunt Martha had added to that, working the place up into a kingdom of her own, with sky-blue silk cushions that had birds and flowers painted on them, and butterflies' wings on the mantelpiece, in Moroccan silver boxes, and in front of the window a sewing machine, the sort with a treadle. In one corner, a mahogany workbox. On the mantelpiece, furthermore, there were some photographs in hand-painted frames—a Zouave, a very yellowed portrait of Blaise at the age of twenty, and a group that was a souvenir of the great Exhibition. On the wall there was only one picture, and it was not by Blaise. It was a gouache by Degas, one of the series of ballet-dancers doing exercises at the horizontal bar.

" Yes, my child," Aunt Martha went on. " That's me in the picture you're looking at. A sketch he gave me. Quite. Degas did a portrait of my bottom, with my feet up on the bar. H'm, yes. And it sold for thirty thousand francs. To think of doing it for nothing, and today they'd give a hundred thousand francs for me as soon as look at it ! "

" For you ! " Amberieux said. " My foot ! "

" As polite as a lamb, ain't he ? " the aunt remarked in her husky voice. " To think that I knew him before he even learnt to kick his legs about ! A nice thing, I must say ! To think what I've come to ! "

Amberieux shrugged his shoulders. His hair was quite white, and he had a big walrus moustache, stained with nicotine. He was thin and red-faced, with his shoulders hunched up, stooping slightly, a big man shaken by the stiffness of his arteries, the veins standing out on his forehead like cords, and

a great many wrinkles, his nose too short—a joker's face. His pale glance came out from under bushy eyebrows, with an expression that might have been either weakness or kindness.

" Let's see, how many years is it the two of you have been arguing ? " Aurelien asked. " Forty ? "

" Forty if it's a day, my lad !" Aunt Martha proclaimed triumphantly. " Since '75—seventy-five and twenty-five and twenty-one . . . "

" Let's call it forty-six and leave it at that," the painter grunted. " If you think that sort of thing interests Mme Morel. . . "

Berenice murmured something polite, which she hoped was convincing. Martha turned to her.

" Of course, I haven't any illusions. You didn't come to see me, but Amberieux' painting. Well, what's this ? Protests? What do you take me for, my child ? If he'd had the time to paint a portrait of me, just once in forty-six years ..."

" It wouldn't sell for a hundred thousand," her husband interrupted.

" That's one thing we don't know. Because of course with Degas, between you and me, if it wasn't the ballet-dancers..."

" Martha, don't be silly ! "

" Blaise, I know what I'm talking about. Well, run along and look at his stuff. If you think I want people to come here to see *me*, you're mistaken. I'm proud of my painter, even if he doesn't fetch the prices. And you see how things turn upside down. When he was twenty, he was at my feet—and I didn't half show him ! And now, well, he deceives me, as pretty as kiss-my-hand."

" Martha ! "

" Aren't I right, Aurelien, love ? You can't say it's not true, can you ? Aha, you see, my fine fellow, the lad doesn't say anything. This way, Mme Morel. I won't come with you. It gives me the creeps to watch people looking at his pictures."

As Aurelien was about to follow Berenice, the old woman called him back :

" These modern young men ! And how about me, eh ? Going to leave me in the lurch ? I'm not letting you go, Aurelien. Sit down there and hold my wool for me while I wind it."

The regretful glance with which Aurelien saw Berenice go out of the door made Amberieux laugh, and he dug Aurelien in the ribs as he went. Aunt Martha, when she was alone with him, wrinkled up her nose, shrugged her shoulders, got up, tapped Aurelien lightly on the cheek, got her spectacles out of a case lying about on the mantelpiece, and, after some fumbling in the mahogany work-table, in a drawer the shape of a well, brought out the skeins of spinach-coloured wool.

" There," she said, " you won't die of leaving her alone with Blaise for a bit. Hold out your paws, silly-billy. What a face ! You don't look at all nice like that."

" No, really, Aunt Martha ..."

" Teh, tch, tch ! You're not good at lying. Hold out your hands. There, sit down on the pouffe. And this great love has been going on for a week already, has it ? "

" But, Aunt Martha ..."

" You're not going to tell me you're not in love with her ? There you are, you see. Saints and little fish ! you must move it about as I do, it keeps on catching. She's a nice girl, and you like her. ..."

" Do you like her, Aunt Martha ? "

" Funny eyes she has—not at all bad. How serious is it ? "

He nodded his head so emphatically that he nearly let go of the wool.

" Good gracious, why am I blessed with a clumsy creature like you ! Hold your hands further apart. So it's really serious, eh ? Got it bad, eh ? Really bad ? I like to see it when they've got it bad."

" I love her, Aunt Martha."

" There you go, talking like a book. Now look at me, my boy, and let me have a look at you. When you said that—well—it brings back a thing or two. So it's really serious..."

She was thoughtful for a while, winding the wool more tightly. Then she began again :

" All the same, the last time you were here—you haven't been coming so often—it must have been a fortnight or three weeks ago. . . . ? "

" About that."

" This wasn't the girl you were telling us all about."

" I don't remember."

" Well, I do. I've a very good memory."

" But there wasn't anyone that I was..."

" Did I say there was ? Anyway, it's quite recent, the two of you."

" My dear aunt, I love her. But there's no question of ' the two of us'."

" Oh, isn't there ? Pity. Well, I don't want to know your private affairs. I was only saying. .. Still, when I was her age, if I liked a man . . . "

He sighed. The sigh might have meant anything : that he wasn't sure that she did like him, or that there were other factors, or that she was married.

" Of course, nobody ever understands other people's affairs properly. A fine young chap like you . . . Well, it's none of my business. But there's something else I wanted to talk to you about."

" What is it, Auntie ? "

" About your last visit, actually. What you told us about—you know what I mean. You remember. Oh, so you don't remember ! "

The winding of the wool stopped. Mme Amberieux put the ball down on her knees, took off her glasses and looked at Aurelien, with her hands in the air. Her voice changed, becoming almost gentle:

" My dear, sometimes it's quite frightening how two people can talk at cross-purposes, without knowing it. Oh, I'm not reproaching you, you couldn't help it."

" But what did I say ? "

" Listen. You remember, you were full of it that day, you'd been to a party at somebody's house, and there was a woman there who said a poem."

" Oh, that day ! Berenice was at that party."

"Berenice ? Who's talking about Berenice ? You didn't say anything about Berenice that day. Not a squeak You went on stuffing us up for more than an hour—you needn't be cross, but you were stuffing us up with her—all about that woman and her dress and her eyes and her poem."

" Rose Melrose ? Oh yes, she did make an impression on me, but it was just the same sort of thing as if I'd met a tennis champion."

" No excuses ! She's old enough to be your mother."

" That's rather an exaggeration."

" Anyway, I'm not talking about you. Only . . ."

She meditated for a while, taking up her ball and winding the wool furiously. When Aurelien's hands were free, she took them in hers, saying :

" Listen, my dear, you must promise me something."

" Of course, Aunt Martha, anything you like."

" You must promise me that you'll never—understand, never—in this house—in front of your uncle—never talk of this Mme Melrose. Never. Promise ? "

" I promise, Auntie, but ..."

" There isn't any ' but'. Oh, now, don't go and pull a face like that. I'll explain the whole thing."

" I don't want to know about it, if. . ."

" It's an old story, duckie. An old story. Your fathead of an uncle—the silly fool's still in love with her ! "

" Uncle ? With Mme Melrose ? "

" What a thing. It dates back from I don't know when—

twenty years ago. It doesn't say much for her age, anyway. Blaise was over forty-five. You can imagine. Up till then, women didn't—well, I was good enough for him. Of course I was getting older/

" Aunt darling."

" Haven't you ever been jealous ? Oh well, you will be. Jealousy's like pricking your finger with a needle, till it bleeds—over and over again, all the time. Oh, I got over it."

"I'm terribly sorry, Aunt. If I'd known ..."

" I tell you I got over it. It's him, the great booby. When she's acting anywhere in Paris, he says he's going out to play chess. I pretend not to notice anything. It's a good thing she doesn't have a lot of engagements. That creature ! You should see what he's like next day."

" If I'd had the slightest idea . . ."

" It's no good apologising, you put your foot in it, and there it is. I just wanted to tell you, so that you won't do it again. All the same, I think he was in love with me, when he was twenty. But in the meantime... He didn't guess. You know I would have turned a blind eye if it had been some decent girl. But that bitch ! She was too young for him, anyway. And then of course it's quite obvious, she's only interested in men for what she can get out of them. Blaise corrected her accent for her."

" Her accent ? "

" Oh yes, now she has that artificial voice and that type-writer elocution ! But cross my heart ! what a backstreet accent she did have ! Her name was Amelie Rosier. He called her Melie, the silly sheep ! That's where she gets Rose Melrose from."

" Well I'm damned ! "

" Now you won't give me away, will you, there's a good boy. Oh, you needn't think I'm jealous now. You can't be jealous without. . . They used to say she had brains. They used to say that about me, too, before I got varicose veins."

Berenice was very disappointed by Amberieux' painting. She had thought that she was going to make a discovery, but he was just a painter like any other, in an academic way. All the things he showed her were less pictures than studies for one, two, or three pictures. Some of it was quite good, a figure here, some still-life there. Then the same again, differently grouped. Evidently the problem with which Amberieux was concerned was how, after a dozen experiments, to fit ten scenes and three settings into the moderate scope of one canvas, with a bizarre assortment of insignificant events, fruit, furniture, and streets. He was an urban painter. But the bizarre quality didn't become apparent until one studied the composition. The elements were as dully correct as anything learnt at drawing-classes. Uncle Blaise's intentions, which had been lost in the painting, came to light again in his commentaries ("You see this man here ? He's just been frightened and he's getting his face right again "); it was rather more a sculptor's problem than a painter's, with its attempt to suggest a movement that had just stopped or was just going to begin.

" Look at this shell," he said. " You recognise it, I suppose ? "

She didn't recognise it, and she looked at Amberieux in surprise.

" In the picture Aurelien has—this is a study for the shell on the window-sill."

She didn't remember that there was a shell.

" Oh yes, surely, beside the powderbox. Didn't Aurelien tell you ? Because one really can't begin to understand that picture if one hasn't grasped the significance of the shell."

" I'm sorry," she said, " Aurelien. . .

" I'm a stupid old man. Of course Aurelien has other things to talk to you about. But it was on account of this shell that I gave him the picture. It belonged to his mother, you see. Aurelien's mother was very beautiful."

"Yes, he told me that."

"And she had this brown and pink shell on her dressing-table, all among the pots of cream. I always thought it odd. She liked to listen to the sound of the sea, sitting there in front of the mirror."

If painters would only always paint as they talk ! Berenice looked at Blaise with curiosity, and he explained :

"You see, that picture, the one Aurelien has—I call it Pierrette's Window. To cover up the tracks, you understand. But Pierrette, or whatever she's called, is simply the woman one doesn't see, but who is there. And what I wanted to paint is the relation between her and the world in which she lives. The middle-class interior, a busy town, the chance happenings in her field of vision—and then that nostalgia, that sense of the sea in the distance, the shell. Perhaps she's rather a superficial woman, but with gaps in her, suddenly something lacking, times when she forgets her role and falls into a dream. Then she picks up the shell..."

He cut short what he was about to say and showed Berenice some studies of the nude.

⁴⁴ I'm preparing a big thing, a building going up, lots of scaffolding, workmen all over the place, a great shindy, idlers standing about looking up and gaping. And the people for whom the same thing is something to look at or a job of work. That geometrical area will be a house, other people in their home-life. Do you like David ? Ah, what a painter ! "

Berenice didn't know why she felt it, but it seemed to her that the last remark was by way of being an improvisation. Now the painter was saying dreamily:

"Nobody has ever succeeded in painting someone *really* doing nothing." He put extraordinary emphasis on the adverb.

Berenice tried to say something pleasant. It is an extremely embarrassing situation, to have to look at a painter's work in front of the painter himself, when one doesn't find it interesting. But Berenice remembered how Aurelien had said

about Uncle Blaise, " He's almost my only friend." She could understand that, in spite of the disparity in age. Without wishing to formulate it, she could see what drew these two men together, and she couldn't help feeling a warm liking for this stooping, good-natured man with the worn face, who probably had a great many fads and hobby-horses and who was ashamed of his own goodness of heart. She felt that through him she was discovering more about Aurelien. While they talked she was absorbed in her own thoughts, the unquiet stirrings of all sorts of scruples, and the greedy yearning of her heart. An inspiration came to her, as if by instinct, and she took the painter's arm, interrupting him in the midst of what he was saying.

" Forgive me," she murmured.

He stopped and looked at her, blowing out his moustache a little.

" You want to tell me something ? "

She nodded, shaking her fair hair.

" Here I am like a fool, drivelling on about my pictures, not seeing. . ." He stopped scolding himself and asked :

" Do you want to talk to me about Aurelien ? "

" Yes, but . . . "

He shrugged his old shoulders. What an ass one is sometimes, not seeing that people there beside one are bursting to talk. This little lass here was all agog with her story. Weren't they in love with each other ? He signed to her to sit down on a stool. The only thing about the room that made it like a studio was the light coming in through a window in the roof ; otherwise it was more like a big boxroom. Berenice had the feeling that she had been put there as the painter wanted her, with the light falling on her picturesquely.

" No," she said, " not here, not now. Couldn't I see you some time, without . . . without. . ? "

He followed her glance towards the door of Martha's boudoir, and smiled. Why not ?

" How about tomorrow ? "

They arranged to meet at the Palais-Royal. There was a big glass-fronted cafe there where people sat playing chess.

CHAPTER XLI

THE private show at midnight was an event. It was also a startling novelty. Only Zamora could think of things like that, things that had never been done before. After all, an exhibition at midnight, after the theatre, showing the pictures by artificial light ! But that was just the point. Painters are so stupid with their ideas about light: a picture has to be looked at anyhow, right way up, upside down, in the open air, by day and by night. Someone ought to paint phosphorescent pictures that could be seen in the dark. In fact, Zamora had an answer to everything.

He knew quite well what he was doing, and that people don't want to go to bed after the theatre ; Montmartre opens late ; one can't go to the Boeuf every night; and besides, a private show is free entertainment. Everything, in fact, to attract the smart and wealthy, the sort of people who despise an ordinary respectable picture-exhibition. It was said that the Shah of Persia, who had just arrived in Paris, would be there. That combined the smart and the sensational. It was also said that those young revolutionaries, the Dadaists, were furious because there was going to be whisky and champagne, and that they would come along with penknives to slash the women's dresses. That introduced a slightly risky element, for those ruffians were, of course, capable of anything. " But of course, my dear chap, you're not going to show *them* the white feather, what ? "

Aurelien had come much too early. He couldn't stay at

home any longer; Berenice was coming with her cousins in a separate party. The four rooms at the Marco-Polo Galleries, a rotunda with two rooms opening off each other on the left and on the right a square hall where the buffet had been installed, were still empty. So the place looked very large, although Aurelien could see that it was really quite small, and he wondered how everyone was going to fit in, any moment now, when the crowd began to arrive. The police had closed the street except to one-way traffic for tonight, and cars would park in the little side-street round the corner.

The lighting everywhere was very harsh. Zamora had changed all the lights in order to achieve a dazzling effect. It was one of the first experiments made with indirect lighting, and people weren't yet used to it. In New York, apparently... Anyway, not a single colour held fast: they had all decayed, the reds turning into orange, the purples into chocolate. Zamora didn't care a damn. Colour was a mere superstition. There he was, with Mrs. Goodman and friends of theirs : a seedy fellow who breathed in an adenoidal fashion, and his wife, very Montparnasse style, in a turquoise silk turban and a dress like a monk's robe, carrying an indescribable little yellow dog in her thin arms. Zamora himself was wearing a double-breasted white suit—to give the Buenos Aires touch, as he said. The manager of the gallery, a plump person with an air of great responsibility, was a Portuguese business-man whose name was no more Marco Polo than yours is ; heavily be-ringed, with a tooth-brush moustache right up to his nostrils, he bustled about in the midst of all this, shouting because the sandwiches had not yet come. Two or three couples were drifting through the rooms, talking in low voices, as if they had slipped into a party where they had not been invited.

Aurelien paid his respects to Mrs. Goodman, who was dressed in pale blue, showing a great deal of shoulder and even more of her bare back. After that he had to make a show

of looking at the pictures, although there was nothing to look at, because it had all been seen before : the manifesto-paintings that had been hung at the Independents, the big one that looked like something out of a histological test-tube and which had been turned down because of a certain word written in the middle of it; all those exasperated and exasperating inventions, jumbled up with rather pretentious little drawings that might have been meant to be anything, all big blurred lines. That was how it was, at any rate, in the buffet room and in the hall. The two other rooms, which opened off each other, were exclusively populated with portraits and heads of Breton peasant women. It was all somewhat in the style of magazine sketches, roughs done in the studio, and the demonstrations a teacher does for his pupils. There were water-colours, too, and pen-and-ink drawings with a colour wash. The Breton girls had a certain charm, reminding one strongly of the work of pavement artists, with their unequal, rather squinting eyes, and mouths destined to fulfil a good many purposes. Zamora had cribbed that method of painting lace, or rather, of suggesting it, from someone else. It was all the rage at the moment, though doubtless it would not last long. It was remarkable that Zamora would double up with laughter if anyone talked about Rodin's drawing—rather like a card-sharper when a professional bridge-player is mentioned.

Aurelien was looking for something, without wishing it to be noticed that he had anything special in mind ; for people were beginning to arrive. It was in the last room, where the light was positively blinding. He saw it from some way off, and as a penance he didn't go straight up to it. He clenched his teeth, for he knew he was going to loathe the picture ; at the same time he was morbidly curious to see it. He had got some idea of it already from the sketch that he had seen in the studio when he called there for Berenice, and he gathered that the picture hadn't been very greatly changed. He was just

drawing near to it when voices broke in upon his thoughts :—

" Ah, my dear Leurtillois ! You here ? Are we in a loony-bin here, or what ? Eh ? "

It was Colonel David—and Madame David, of course. Aurelien had to stop and chat with them. So the colonel and his wife didn't know Zamora ? It must have been Mme de Perseval who had got them invited. Instinctively Aurelien lowered his voice, embarrassed by their loud cries and afraid that Mrs. Goodman might hear. He squinted slightly towards Berenice at the same time—a bit like the Bretonnes. The colonel offered him a cigarette. Well, as a matter of fact one oughtn't to smoke; the place was stiflingly hot already and people were still arriving in shoals. What on earth would it be like in another half-hour ? It was true. Aurelien hadn't noticed, but now, as he turned round, he noticed that the gallery had suddenly filled up. Perhaps Berenice was there by now. Mme David asked him if he had seen the catalogue ; she wouldn't spare him any detail, and there were, she said, positively obscene things.... She was quite aware that he was only half listening, but that didn't stop her ; she was used to it, for everyone was like that with her, thinking of something else while she was talking. She sighed.

Aurelien was torn between the desire to see whether Berenice had come yet and going to see the picture of Berenice. But without the Davids, for he knew he wouldn't be able to stand their comments. Fortunately someone swept him away from them ; it was Mme Schœlzer, Jacques' wife. No, Jacques hadn't come yet, but he would be along later. Didn't Aurelien know Valmondois ? Guy, M. Leurtillois. Aurelien had known vaguely that Jacques' wife was having an affair with a duke, and this must be the duke. He was a rather fat man, not tall, with too much cuff showing, and a bewildered, fair face. Caught in the whirlpool, suddenly Aurelien found himself in front of the portrait of Berenice.

A muffled anger seized him. There it was. Zamora had

got that idea into his head, and, by heaven, he had carried it out: there were two pictures overlapping each other, two portraits, as he had said, the eyes shut and the eyes open, the mouth laughing and the mouth weeping. It was quite like her, if such a thing could be said at all, and yet without being like enough. Also, when one looked at it hard one got a feeling of cramp in the jaws. It was impossible to distinguish for long what belonged to which portrait and what to the other ; one could not go on deciphering one face without its becoming confused with the other, and a monster was born, two monsters, three, according to how one associated those eyes and those lips that did not match, that forehead and nose, those inordinate spaces, that almost pathological chin.

Fury was gradually increasing its hold on Aurelien. Damn it, Berenice didn't belong to this fellow Zamora, and what right had he . . . ? Then suddenly he glimpsed something that struck him, a trace of profound likeness, and wondered whether after all this crook of a painter really might have some ability. It was, after all, Berenice ; it was terribly like her. Aurelien was eager to hear what people would say about it, and at the same time he was afraid of what they would say. In fact, he was jealous.

" So you're looking at the portrait of Mme Morel ? " a voice said behind him. " It's queer, isn't it ? It's very like."

He turned round to find Mary de Perseval, a Mary in pink satin with orchids all over her, and Paul Denis, Dr. Decoeur, and a lady whom Aurelien didn't know, who had very beautiful misty eyes.

" Oh, it's Mme Morel, is it ? I didn't recognise it," he said abruptly. Then he realised that this was scarcely civil, and kissed Mary's hand.

" Of course," she said. " Do you know Yvonne Georges ? Oh well, you must get to know her."

So this woman with the large eyes was the singer who had

just come back from America, bringing back with her the aura of a personal legend. She was certainly beautiful, he thought, and tragic ; exactly what Zamora's pictures were trying to be and weren't.

The clamour and confusion was increasing every moment; people were packed together like sardines, so that there was less and less chance of looking at the pictures. Anyway, that wasn't what people had come for. Oh, Paul Denis wasn't wearing a tie. Apparently that was the Dada slogan for to-night : No Tie. The little fat man over there, too, with the goggling eyes. There were quite half a dozen of them, all to be recognised by this distinguishing mark : not very well-dressed young men, accompanied by unlikely-looking women. Apparently General Mangin was there. How about having a drink at the buffet ? They lost each other in the throng, where people were pressing in all directions. There was the very devil of a noise, the scream of talk and laughter.

" Enjoying yourself ? " Zamora puffed in Mary's ear as she went past. His head looked blacker than ever above the white suit,

Mary took Aurelien's arm.

" You're very elusive these days," she said. " The great love, I suppose ? Oh, all right, don't tell me anything ! It's quite frightful how out of date you are, darling."

She let him go to throw herself into the arms of Zoe Agathopulos, who was so fantastically thin that she ought to have folded up, like a yard-stick, to prevent people from scratching themselves on her. She was with a person in a man's jacket, quite in the classical style, with a barman's hair-cut, and her tight skirt making the effect of trousers. The funny thing was her enormous bosom. Zoe pulled a face at Aurelien. She looked hideous in that light, and she was doing a little girl act, oscillating between her companion and Aurelien, as if she were trying to steal sweets from her mother.

Fancy imagining for a moment. . . ! he thought, and fled away in a favourable eddy of the crowd.

" You haven't seen Rose Melrose, have you ? "

It was Dr. Decoeur asking him that, in a very low voice, with such a sharp edge on the anguished tone that it hurt. Rose ? Oh, her . . . He recalled Aunt Martha's confidences and turned to the pathetic husband. No, he hadn't seen her here ; perhaps she had come and was in the next room ; with such a crowd one couldn't.. . The doctor wiped his forehead. It was, indeed, very hot. That was how everyone in this crush endured his own drama and his love. He pulled Decoeur away, thinking that under the pretext of finding Rose he might be able to find Berenice.

" You know," the husband said, " Rose is going to have her own theatre. Yes. And the perfumes are taking shape. Mme. de Perseval has been good enough to ..."

" Oh, while I think of it," Aurelien interrupted, " did you see Barbentane and his wife as you came in ? "

" Why do you ask me that ? "

" Oh well, I..." He didn't want to mention Mme Morel, and so he came to an end, stammering: " Oh, I just thought.. . you know ..."

By now they were in the main room, the circular hall which one entered directly from the street. The din was ear-splitting. Arms stretched over the heads of the crowd were passing plates of sandwiches, and every now and then a glass was spilt on some woman's dress. " Have you seen the *cars* ! " somebody said next to them. There was a stir at the door, and the manager rushed in that direction, his rings flashing, his trousers wrinkling over his hips, and all his Portuguese tact switched on.

The bearded man who had just come in was Poirot. He had got fatter and was wearing light tweeds as if he were going golfing, with a sugar-pink woollen scarf round his neck. His companion was a plump girl whose eyes were made up

to monstrous effect with three circles of dark-blue ; she was bare-legged and wore a straw hat that looked queer, just before Christmas.

" I wonder where on earth Rose can be," Decoeur couldn't help saying. Then it seemed to strike him that there was something out of place in the remark, and he added, with a pale smile for Aurelien's benefit: " There you are, you see, I'm like an old hen, I keep on thinking something must have happened to her, as if she weren't grown up and capable of taking care of herself."

Through all the hubbub someone was playing a big drum perched on a platform at the other end of the hall. A tremulous and evidently Russian lady was singing something for the general entertainment, which could not be heard. She sang with a despair that might have caused her audience to laugh or to weep, if they had been paying the slightest attention. She issued from her silver lame dress like a despised flower, twisting her white arms, her breast swelling ; and in one of those chance hushes that occur in the noisiest crowd, people realised with stupefaction that it was Duparc's *Chanson Triste* that she was singing, with all Dostoievsky in her throat.

Decoeur and Aurelien had thrown off the others ; only Paul Denis, bouncing like a rubber-ball from group to group, came back to them, highly excited and full of jokes, his cheek bulged out with sandwiches. He was brimming over with anecdotes and malicious remarks that he had picked up and kept on forgetting, mixing them up and making enough noise for ten. He was in the midst of some confused tale—against Cocteau, as usual—see him over there, that's him with his hair all on end—about some musician or other, a princess, and a reception that was not going to take place.

"I admire you, Denis, my boy," the doctor said in his faintly bitter, hypocritical tone, " I admire the easy way you get along in this sort of thing. Ah, people like you are the

lucky ones in this world. How free-and-easy, how light-hearted and unattached you are."

The struggle to reach the buffet was frantic : women, and men, all perfumed and sweating. It is staggering how a gathering of that kind flings itself on food and drink. That tall, suave fellow with the dark face and white hair, to whom M. Marco Polo was being so attentive, was Wisner, the great car-manufacturer. And there was Zamora again, with his gift for being everywhere at once, looking more tropical than ever, his face lit up with what could only be genius, and a lock of hair falling into his eyes ; he seemed to move about on ball-bearings, he was like quicksilver. There was Picasso, listening to a very fat man in evening dress, buried up to his chin in his white tie : that was the great man of the Russian ballet, Serge de Diaghilev. As soon as Paul Denis boticed them, all his confidence fled, nothing could hold him back, he must find out what they were saying, and he began pushing his way through the crowd, apologising to the bosom of a little woman in green, and finally arriving in the midst of the group which for him was the Pole Star. The little fat man with the pedunculous eyes made a somewhat sarcastic remark about it, but Paul shrugged his shoulders.

" Oof ! " the doctor said, as they reached the buffet. " A drink wouldn't be a bad thing. Whisky, Leurtillois ? "

" No thanks, orangeade. Don't you remember what you told me about my liver ? "

" Rubbish, old man, your liver'll last as long as you, anyway/ "

It was at that moment, just as he was going to take the glass from Decoeur's hand, that Aurelien saw Diane. It must have been six months or more since he had seen Mme de Nettencourt. There she was, more beautiful than ever, flashing a brilliant smile at him. As usual, she was the most beautifully dressed woman there, extinguishing everyone else and with all the accumulated maturity and sophistication of thirty-five, eclipsing the woman she had been at twenty.

She was in white, with crimson jewels bleeding at her wrists and neck and over her heart, and with a vast armful of roses : for wherever she went, somebody was sure to give her roses. She was the most expensive thing in Paris, and utterly reckless about what she said. Even Wisner, meeting her in the throng, had just been thinking regretfully of the three years, round about 1910, when this woman had been his. There was no pushing around her. She walked towards Aurelien as if they had both been alone on a path in the Bois de Boulogne. She remembered that path, near the Pre Catalan, and so did he, at the same moment. My God, if Berenice were to arrive now ! But, damn it all, he could say hello to his *old* friend Mme de Nettencourt, surely. . . ?

" Hello, Aurelien," she said. But it was to Decoeur that she gave her hand to kiss. The doctor knew everyone.

" Isn't Rose coming, doctor ? "

She didn't listen to his answer, for she was leaning over Aurelien's glass without asking permission, and drinking. What an incredible neck ! What a rare thing, a woman who was simply perfection. Oh God ! Clumsy fellow, spilling the whisky over the white dress and drenching the roses. People rushed to mop it off. The clumsy person was Paul Denis, as usual. He apologised, and Diane laughed. Paul was in the seventh heaven, dying to be introduced. Aurelien felt her leaning against him, closer than was discreet. Whom was she with tonight ? For she hadn't come alone, of course. Suddenly there was Jacques Schoelzer smiling over her shoulder, a big fair man with glasses and a small, pale moustache. Oho, so she was with *him*, was she ? Paris is a queer place.

" Hello, Jacques."

Conversation was rather difficult, so near to the buffet. But Paul Denis was sticking fast. Having spoilt Mme de Nettencourt's dress obviously gave him the right to talk to her. Diane was amused.

" Where did you leave your tie ? " she asked him.

She didn't know ! He began to put on airs, explaining about the Dada campaign. Diane had only the vaguest idea about Dadaism, but she was amused at the ease with which she had picked up this boy. " Here, *" she said, handing him the little red silk handkerchief that she wore tied in her bracelet. Now he could fix himself something by way of a tie. Paul was beside himself, between his fear of what the others would say (since they had decided not to wear ties that evening), and the glory of adopting a lovely woman's favour. Finally he pulled the handkerchief through the button-hole at his collar, and no sooner had he done that than everyone in the room was staring at this scrap of toreador's red. He could look forward to the scene Mary would make later. Oh well, she was getting on his nerves, anyway.

To begin with, as Diane turned back to Jacques Schoelzer, with all her roses, Paul Denis attracted the attention of Roussel, the dress-designer. He had said that he wasn't coming to the show, but he had changed his mind because, after all, he had lent Zamora two pictures for the exhibition. " Have you seen them, Denis, my boy ? Two pictures that are, so to speak ... They're labelled ' From the collection of M. Ch——R——' Everyone'll know who that is, won't they ? Clear as daylight."

The fact was that he had seen the little incident with Mme de Nettencourt and was bursting with curiosity.

" Take care, my dear boy," he said, " she's a fine woman, but they say she has the evil eye. There's a—so to speak a ... Let us be gallant and only say, a young officer who was paying his addresses, so to speak ... found dead at her house in a way that was. . . Well, well, I've warned you."

The old boy had button-holed Paul Denis while Diane was moving away. If it hadn't been for the hope he always had of selling the old chap a manuscript, wouldn't he just have sent him flying, in a way that was... well! damn it! Instead of which, he muttered something between his teeth and

slipped away quickly between a man in a Greek peplum, his grey hair bound in a circlet, whom he had at first taken to be an old lady and was none other than Raymond Duncan, and his friend Tristan Tzara, a funny little man, extremely gay, wearing a monocle on a wide black ribbon, in fits of laughter at Denis's red tie.

" Red ! " he said, " why red ? " He rolled the R tremendously and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. There must be something funny about it that no one else had seen. But Paul Denis made his way through the hall, almost bumping into Jean Cocteau, which was as unpleasant for him as it was important; and in the racket pouring forth from a miniature jazz band on the platform he caught up with Diane de Nettencourt, who was talking to Aurelien.

" Your attendant knight, madame. You have made me your squire."

All at once Aurelien's glance fell on Barbentane, who had just come. Edmond was in evening dress, with Rose Melrose in black, wrapped in a big ermine cape. She was so majestic that everyone turned to look at her, as she advanced, smiling, with at least a score of people circling about her. Edmond with Rose ? Aurelien couldn't see either Blanchette or Berenice. What did this mean ? As he turned his head, he caught sight of Decœur's expression. It was simply terrifying, a mixture of adoration, fury, and fear. His features were convulsed. Aurelien thought: A man who loves like that can't go on living.

Diane de Nettencourt said very generously : " Oh well, Rose is going to be the beauty tonight, as she always is."

Decœur hadn't moved. He was waiting for her. She would come towards him ; he knew that she would come up to him, for though that was all that she did for him now, at least she still did that. So that people would say : " That's her husband, you know. . . " He was waiting. She couldn't have failed to see him. His hands were shaking.

No, this evening she was not going to make the ritual gesture, she was not coming towards him with her head thrown back. . . . She had no eyes for anyone but her companion; she was laughing, leaning on his arm. Ah, how well he knew that laugh, just that laugh—that laugh. He didn't move. He stood there, while Aurelien approached her.

" Aren't the ladies with you ? "

Aurelien hadn't even said good-evening to Barbentane. To each one his own heartache and his own love. Edmond shrugged. No. But how was that possible ? Berenice. . . .

" Oh, I know/" Barbentane said. " But at the last minute . . . you know what women are like, all nerves."

It was no explanation, and Aurelien insisted on having one.

" We've come to look at the pictures, haven't we ? " Rose said. " Isn't that what we came for, Edmond ? "

It was not a particularly convincing excuse. Edmond murmured something that was lost in the clamour of the jazz. An influx of newcomers was pressing them farther down the room. Then Rose noticed her husband, and waved to him, with a little smile.

Decoeur drank that smile. There was no other word for it. It hadn't been the gesture for which he was waiting, but perhaps allowances had to be made for Rose, in such a crowd, such a jam. It was always like that. He tried not to see the people swarming round her ; he tried to get to her. She would be too hot in her ermine.

" Aren't you going to take off your cloak ? " he asked, offering to carry it for her. She didn't hear what he said the first time and made him repeat the question. " The ermine ? No, Jicky, I'd rather keep it on." He stuck to the point, until she asked him what the matter was. " Edmond, do get me a drink."

Edmond moved away, followed by Aurelien.

" Now, listen, Edmond, you must explain this a bit more. . . . "

" Well, you know what Blanchette's like these days. I don't have to tell you. She made a scene when I said we were going to call in for Rose on the way, and I'm really not in the mood to be bullied around like that, so there were tears and so forth—red eyes, couldn't go out. Berenice wouldn't leave her by herself."

" Didn't she give you any message for me ? "

" No, I don't think so. No, definitely not."

Aurelien's heart seemed to stop beating. He no longer felt the heat. Everything had become dark, and the party, all the excitement going on, seemed to presage misfortune. What were they playing ? It was enough to deafen you. He began to notice the grotesqueness of the people and the carnival in full swing round about. Not a word for him ! And yet it was so easy. . . .

" I say, Edmond, it isn't possible. She must have said . . . "

" No, I tell you she didn't ! "

And Aurelien hid his disappointment under a sudden pretence of unaccustomed conventionality :

" Damn it, it isn't very polite to Zamora, after he's done her portrait,"

That made Edmond laugh. Aurelien couldn't see why, and repeated obstinately that it was rude of her. Edmond suddenly seized his arm, and whispered :

" Look ! Do you see who that is ? "

Aurelien looked. In spite of what he had on his mind at the moment (Decoeur wasn't the only man with something on his mind), he couldn't help finding it funny. He had heard someone saying something about it, only a few minutes ago, but he hadn't believed in it any more than in the arrival of the Shah of Persia, which had been generally expected. It wasn't the Shah ; indeed it was even more surprising than

the Shah's arrival would have been, although the people uttering exclamations all round him didn't seem to notice that fact.

This man with the grizzled black hair, his hunched-up shoulders giving him a queerly sidelong appearance, and his yellow leathery skin, the hair growing thickly from a low forehead, and a chin that spoke of authority—it was a waste of effort his coming in civilian clothes, for there could be no doubt as to who it was. It was Mangin. He had a woman with him, a woman who had a strange look of having been cast from the same material, hewn out of the same wood, as himself. Aurelien recognised the Countess de Noailles ; she was playing with the dark scarves round her neck. The general was trying to find a way through the crowd. She looked tired, and Aurelien heard her say: " Oh, that jazz ! " He looked at Edmond. They both had the same thought at the same moment. Odd that he should be here ; for they had both been together in General Mangin's army. It had been tough going.

Edmond said in a low voice :

" When you'd left the battalion, right at the end, I saw him one day—it was on the road to Maubeuge, just before we took Laon. In his car. He was bawling out some pioneers because they weren't filling in the holes fast enough. Just the same face, stiff as a poker. The lads were furious—they chucked stones at his car. He didn't bat an eyelid."

Aurelien shrugged. Funny place for reminiscences of that kind. Mangin—he'd been hated, but respected too. Aurelien remarked : " Fundamentally, Mangin had more to do with our victory than anyone else."

Edmond laughed scornfully. " Our victory ! My poor, dear chap ! "

The general and the poetess had already gone.

Aurelien had no one more to wait for ; there was no longer

any reason for his being there at all. She wasn't coming. God, weren't the people hideous ! Their very diversity was repellent. He felt a surge of loathing for these depressingly crazy pictures, the chattering voices wheeling about the room, the idiotic party and its damned conventionality, the paper-thin sophistication of all these marionettes.

" Isn't it enchanting ! " a little curly-haired goose was exclaiming, trying to attract Zamora's attention.

Zamora, however, was completely occupied in making himself agreeable to Prince R., Aurelien's neighbour in the lie Saint-Louis, the same man whom Mary had been afraid of meeting on the stairs.

The jazz band was now at the buffet, but people were not to get off so lightly. Jean-Frederic Sicre, the little dumpling of a man with the big eyes, was at the piano playing his own works.

Aurelien fought his way to the door. When he was nearly there, M. Marco Polo bowed to him, as though he were one of the family. . . . He had parked the two-seater round the corner, and left his overcoat in it. It was very cold, and soft, wet snow was falling. He hesitated in the street-should he go up towards the boulevard Saint-Germain, or down towards the quay ? Turning up his collar, he set off towards the Seine, because he had seen the lights still on in a bar not very far away.

A gust of wind entered with him.

There was steam on the windows, and a wan light shining on a few customers finishing their drinks, and a couple in the corner, their heads leaned together. He asked for the telephone.

The bell rang for a long time at the other end ; apparently everyone at Barbentane's had gone to bed. He began to think he had better hang up, for perhaps it was really too late to telephone. But he stood there waiting and listening to the bell ringing at the other end. No one was coming.

Still he waited. At last somebody lifted the receiver and a voice said :

" Hello? Who's speaking ? What is it ? "

It was Blanchette.

He said : " Blanchette ? "

She must have just waked up, for she mistook his voice and said :

" It's you, Edmond ! "

There was such joy and hope in her voice that Aurelien hadn't the heart to continue the conversation. Without reflecting on what he was doing, he rang off.

He stood there in front of the silent telephone, wondering what Blanchette would think now. Anyway, Berenice was asleep. Oh, well. . .

He paid for the call, and escaped. Then he walked through the rain, to look for his car.

CHAPTER XLII

HE had hung about Montmartre until he couldn't keep on his feet any longer. Absurd phantoms floated through his memory, mingling with the atmosphere of Lulli's, the dazzling El Garron bar where he had run into Simone with an Argentine, Negros at the *tabac-bar* at the Pigalle-Fontaine crossing and, as it was getting light, the chicken sandwich he had bought in the patisserie where the tarts were standing about and the flower-seller was asleep with her head on the table; the man opening the shutters at the Chateau Caucasién and absent-mindedly slipping the last violets into his basket.

Yet when he woke with a start, sweating, with the sheets crumpled up round him and a dreadful sensation of anxiety

and helplessness, it was only half-past eight. Remembering his dreams, he would have sworn that he had slept all through an interminable night. He couldn't ring up the rue Raynouard for several hours yet. He opened the shutters, looked at the confusion in the room, shoes lying where he had kicked them off, familiar objects charged with new meaning, the Tanagra that Berenice had touched, Uncle Blaise's picture, the Abdullah ashtray. Then he dashed into the bathroom and under the shower.

That was fine, to be able to turn on that hot and cold rain and have that spring-tide sensation behind the rubber curtains. What a relief after having slept! At last he began to re-discover the suppleness and youth of his own body. He prolonged the pleasure, knowing only too well that in the end he would only be confronted with irritating problems.

A letter slid under the door. From Armandine—what volumes she wrote! What the devil did she want? It wasn't so long since she'd seen him. The letter began:

"Dear little old Reli"—the name their mother had called him by when he was a baby. There was something fishy about that. And then all sorts of stuff about how Armandine was worried about her brother since their last conversation and how she couldn't believe (though of course it was nobody's business but his) that it did, but if his happiness *did* depend on it, only both Jacques and she felt . . . though of course nobody could really say what was the best for somebody else, could they? Only, had Aurelien thought it over thoroughly? A married woman—that meant all sorts of complications. There was divorce, of course. But the terrible responsibility . . . And so on and so forth. At last Armandine seemed to be coming to the point:

"I want to tell you, Reli, that for a long time Jacques and I have been nursing a dream, a fancy that perhaps some day . . ."

Aurelien shrugged. He knew that style of his sister's, that way she had of piling up a number of nouns in order to say one thing, when she was embarrassed about saying it at all.

" . . . We must think of the children's future, mustn't we ? We do want to leave them a place of their own later on, a family home, which will enable the family ties to be kept. . . . "

He skipped several lines. He knew that his sister's prose was the sort where one could take a running jump over a paragraph and then come down on what she was getting at.

" The difficulty, my dear . . . "

Aha, now it must be coming ! The endearment was the danger sign.

" ... is how to raise the necessary money to buy the land. Jacques says he would do it, if it weren't that just at the present, because of the reconstruction of the devastated areas, capital must be called on to develop enterprise and get the factory working at full pressure. ... "

In short, what it came to was that the Debrests, husband and wife, had thought of Saint-Genest, the estate which Aurelien had inherited and which provided him with an income, although he did nothing to it and never went there. There was a lodge there that could be built on to, after the necessary repairs were done, for it had been damaged in the war ; and if everyone lent a hand, the repairs... In fact, if Saint-Genest had belonged to them, the Debrests would have built there. And surely it couldn't make any difference to Aurelien to let them do that ? His brother-in-law would pay him the same sum as the farmer, and even—of course it would depend on how things went and one couldn't promise anything—perhaps just a little more. Aurelien would be better off in so far as he wouldn't have to think of the farmer and bad harvests and all the risks attached to an agricultural property, while the Debrests would have the land that they

would otherwise buy elsewhere, but in this case without spending capital. There seemed to be nothing but advantages in this system, especially as, when anyone was as casual as Aurelien, and the future was so uncertain, who knows but some day he might have to take out a mortgage, or even two or three, and one fine day, Saint-Genest, which had belonged to his mother, would pass into the hands of strangers. . . .

At this point Armandine dropped the subject and went on to write of the children, at extraordinary length and in great detail. She was getting the uncle interested in his nephews : in what they said, in their intelligence, in what nice children they were. The long and the short of it was that in this way it would be just as if Aurelien, who had, perhaps rather unfairly, not been left a share in their father's factory, were coming back to it, without changing his manner of living in the least, since Jacques was there to see to the work. In a word, he would be a stock-holder, in a manner of speaking. The family would be more united than ever.

Wearily, Aurelien threw the letter on the bed. Mme Duvigne had just arrived ; he could hear her moving about in the kitchen. Breakfast. . . . He looked at the clock : it was still too early to ring up.

Mme Duvigne's gossiping dragged on through the morning. What Aurelien wanted most of all to avoid was to start asking himself questions : why hadn't Berenice come ? Why hadn't she rung him up first ? No, he wouldn't wonder about it. He did want, though, to leave her time, so that she could be the first to ring up. Ten times he stopped himself as he was going to the telephone, even as he was taking off the receiver. He was tormenting himself, but he wouldn't give in. He had sworn to wait till the stroke of twelve. Then, to try to measure time passing, he counted up to a thousand ; then to two thousand. Those were supposed to be seconds.

At a quarter to twelve he couldn't stand it any longer.

Number engaged. Number engaged. Number engaged.

The telephone was an invention of the devil. That buzzing was appalling. Number engaged ! Ah, this time someone was answering !

It was a servant at the other end, with a faltering voice, asking him to repeat his name. ' Mme Morel ? I don't know if Mme Morel . . . but if you'll hang on a moment, sir. . . . ' He had a peculiar impression of disarray and chaos at the other end. There was something unsteady in that voice.

At last he heard Berenice.

She seemed very ill at ease. She too ? What on earth was going on there ? She replied very evasively, making her apologies for not coming to the exhibition the night before—she hadn't been able to, she simply hadn't been able to. She had meant to ring up that morning, but. . . . She would explain. At this point she turned away from the telephone ; he thought he heard her talking to somebody, and that she was saying something like : " So there isn't any danger, doctor ? "

"Hello? Hello? Berenice?"

" Yes, just a moment. Aurelien, I must just talk to someone for a moment."

Silence. Then Berenice's voice :

"I'm sorry, I had to talk to someone for a moment."

" I thought I heard. . . . What's happened ? You're not ill, are you ? "

" Oh, no, no ! It isn't serious. I mean. . . ."

" Hello ? I can't hear you properly. Did you say *doctor?*"

" Yes, as a matter of fact. It's Blanchette, you see. I can't explain on the telephone."

" Blanchette ? What on earth . . . ? "

" She'll be all right. The doctor was just telling me."

" Good God ! Berenice ! Blanchette ? Shall I come round ? "

" Oh no, oh heavens, no ! "

" Well, when will you come ? "

" I don't know. It's very difficult. I can't very well leave her. Tomorrow."

" Then I'm coming round there. I can't wait like this."

" Please, Aurelien, oh please! Don't come ! Oh, all right, I'll manage it somehow. I oughtn't to, but that's a promise. I'll try. Some time this afternoon."

" That really is a promise ? "

" Yes. I'll come round to your place. About five. I must go now, I'm being called."

At first he racked his brains trying to think what could possibly have happened. Blanchette—she would be all right. He remembered that wan voice at the telephone, in the middle of the night. But gradually his thoughts wandered and one mental image chased away the others. Berenice. . . . How cold she had sounded just now, how remote. And she hadn't come last night. When he thought of all that wasted time, perhaps the only time they would ever have together in their lives. . . . For she was going away, wasn't she ? If he let her slip away like this, without . . . without. . . . Oh, perhaps he had lost their only chance and lost Berenice for ever. But it couldn't happen like this.

He went down to the Mariniers for lunch.

The time stretching out between midday and five o'clock seemed as long as a night passed in a train. He must have something to do ; he must get something to take his mind off it. Very deliberately Aurelien set about thinking of one fixed idea : he would not let Berenice go away *like that*. She must belong to him. And not just some time, one day or another. Today. In a short time from now. When she came, at five o'clock. He went as far as Saint-Michel, to a florist's, and brought back some December flowers, which only annoyed him when they opened out, thin and sparse as they were, in the glazed stoneware vase, which he didn't

like. He walked about the flat, making his home ready for Berenice. He began to endow trifling objects with significance, moving things from place to place. Then he went to the window and stood leaning his forehead against the pane. He was trying to think of Berenice in a new way, with a precision he had not felt before and the depths of desire. Her eyes. . . . He imagined her eyes open, and he murmured :

" Don't shut your eyes."

It was a quarter past five when she rang. The last quarter of an hour had been agony. Only when the doorbell rang, and he switched on the lights, Aurelien saw that everything was untidy ; and looking at himself in the mirror, he saw that his hair was so rumpled that he hesitated before opening the door.

At last, there she was. She was wearing the same costume as the previous day, the beige one, made of a material he disliked. And that everlasting velours.

Before he could shut the door again, she said :

" I've only come for a moment, I can't stay."

" Oh, I say ! "

" I can't, because of Blanchette."

He had forgotten Blanchette. Well, what was it all about, then ? He dragged his visitor in, taking off her hat for her at the same time. She collapsed on to a pouffe and sat there at his feet. Only then he noticed that she looked tired and worried.

" What's happened, Berenice ? "

She looked at him as if he were mad, until she realised that he didn't know.

" I couldn't tell you on the telephone. The doctor was there, and then the maids kept on coming in and out."

It appeared that Blanchette had tried to kill herself. She had taken veronal in the night. At first, in the morning, no one had realised that anything was wrong. But she was to

have had a fitting; the dressmaker had come about a little alteration. When they had tried to wake her, they had seen the empty bottles and the note she had left. The doctor said that luckily she had taken too much. It was often the case with veronal. She would be sick as a cat, and that would be all. The terrible thing was that they had to keep her awake and stop her from going to sleep again. She had vomited—fortunately.

" And all that because of Rose ? " Aurelien burst out.
" Yes, Edmond was telling me last night. . . . "

Berenice shook her head. Rose ! Good heavens, no. But Edmond must go on thinking that that was the reason ; she had sworn to Blanchette that she would do that—and she could count on Aurelien keeping the secret, too, couldn't she?

" It wasn't because of Mme Melrose ? Well, what else then, for God's sake ? And how about the children ? Blanchette's so religious, too."

The truth of the matter was that the scene Blanchette had made with Edmond was a trumped-up affair to hide her real reasons for not wanting to go to the Zamora exhibition. Before Edmond came back she had had a violent altercation with Berenice, who was still shaken by the memory of it. Blanchette had been beside herself with jealousy.

" Jealous of you ? Blanchette ? "

Berenice showed signs of impatience. Surely Aurelien must realise that Blanchette was in love with him, with him, Aurelien. At their constant meetings. . . .

" Me ? Blanchette ? But, in heaven's name, that's raving madness ! "

Berenice took no notice of the interruption. The scene that she had had with her cousin had been a terrible one. Blanchette insisted on thinking that Zamora's show was specially arranged to exhibit Berenice's portrait, as a personal triumph for Berenice. She wouldn't enter the place for

anything in the world. She had broken out into unjust reproaches and unfounded accusations; she had wept. Berenice, not dreaming that things could go as far as that, had decided to go to the party with Edmond, leaving Blanchette at home ; but Edmond had provided his wife with an excuse in the shape of Rose Melrose, and Berenice couldn't very well accompany Edmond and his mistress while Blanchette remained alone at home. Nor could she explain the situation in front of her cousin, without betraying Blanchette and Blanchette's secret.

" But this is all absolutely crazy ! "

Crazy or not, the two of them had stayed alone together for hours, and Blanchette's wild grief had reached incredible proportions : so much so that Berenice had been overcome with pity for her. Blanchette's object was to separate her from Aurelien. She humbled herself, sobbed and raged and threatened. In those hours she had gone through all the stages of delirium ; there had been a moment when she had thrown herself down at Berenice's feet, asking her to look after the children if anything should happen to her, Blanchette. Berenice, not realising what she really meant, had at first felt nothing but revulsion and reproached Blanchette for talking in such a way. She didn't remember very clearly what had happened, except that it was then that Blanchette had implored her never to tell anyone about her love for Aurelien, never to let Edmond guess that she was upset about anything but Rose, of whom he believed her jealous.

" Oh," Berenice said, " I think she was lying on that score and that she cared about that, too, more than she would admit. But the two things were all mixed up in her mind, about you and about Edmond. Anyway, it became obvious enough after a while. She began to listen for him coming in, and he didn't come. There was a telephone call in the night that upset her dreadfully. She thought it was Edmond, but it

must have been a wrong number, because she was cut off again. Then she went quite mad. I didn't dare to leave her any more. I didn't have any more angry feelings about her : she was so unhappy. Then she lay down on her bed, I thought she'd gone to sleep, and I went out of the room. And then, in the morning, the veronaL . . ."

Edmond seemed very bothered, but he was furious too ; as soon as he found out that she wasn't going to die, he wasn't worried any more, he was just furious. But someone had to be with her and watch her and shake her.

" No, no, I can't stay. I must go back to Blanchette. I'm sorry, Aurelien, you must let me go now⁷."

He couldn't keep her. The whole thing had turned out utterly differently. But he urged her :

" When are we going to meet ? "

" Tomorrow. Tomorrow. I'll ring you up."

He tried to take her in his arms, but she dodged him, and he realised that a change had taken place in her. How remote she was.

" I'll ring up," she said again, as she went out the door.

CHAPTER XLIII

IT was a narrow little restaurant near the Halles, in a crowded, narrow street, with houses that had seen better days and walls that were bulging out. One made one's way there through swarms of handcarts and errand-boys on bicycles; to railings painted the same colour as the front of an oil firm; there the door stood open, between two trestles with baskets of oysters lying amidst fir twigs, and a ogival niche that had once held the figure of the Virgin. Then one stumbled down

an alley, past a cheap drink-shop where loafers in their overalls were drinking swipes. And one entered the lower part of the restaurant, slightly screened off from the wine-shop by one of those screens of waxed, pliable wood that had just begun to appear on the market.

Rose had not wanted to stay there, for the ground floor was always crowded at midday. A woman like herself was never safe from curiosity, and here were hordes of journalists and all sorts of people she knew by sight. But there was less chance of being seen on the first floor. They went up the spiral staircase, which had rusty plush material twisted in and out of the wrought iron bannisters, and arrived on the next floor, where the lavatory, cloakroom and three small separate rooms were, with only a few tables, and hardly anyone ever came up for lunch. The smallest room was occupied by a party holding a celebration with a great deal of noise and laughter ; the larger one contained, at the other end, a quiet couple, two old men, and a murderous-looking Algerian (or something of the kind), oddly assorted with an over-dressed gentleman surrounded by a great pile of those specially choice oysters that came from the little river Belon. After one glance of appraisal, Rose chose a table near the window, with nobody in earshot. And Blaise sat down opposite her, as nervous as a schoolboy.

How his heart had leapt when she rang him up that morning ! She wanted to have lunch with him. It was more than a year since she had got in touch with him like this, and he had made the first excuse that came into his head, to account to Martha for his abrupt departure. Dear God, how much youth can linger in an old heart !

" Well, what shall we have ? "

Rose was reading the menu with great interest : this wasn't at all a bad dump. She was wearing a grey tailored costume, an exaggerated hat, and long gloves which she slipped her hands out of at the wrists, since the gauntlets

extended up over her sleeves. Her face was a miracle of youthfulness, so marvellously was it kneaded with creams and powders. And then, that perfume which was her signature through all the years. How greedy she looked ! What child-like interest she took in food ! Her eyes tightened up in the effort of deciding what to have.

" The hors d'oeuvres aren't bad here. But did you see the Belons ? I don't think I can resist the venison with chest-nut puree."

The *patron* was bowing almost to the ground in front of them ; he was a sturdy dark man with a red mark across the back of his neck. He was sorry, but there was no venison left. Now, if Madame would permit him, he would recommend. . . .

" I should like some game, wouldn't you ? I'm simply dying for some game."

" If that is what Madame would like, I have a pheasant which is not marked on the menu."

Pheasant, that was the thing ! Pheasant it should be.

" Look," Rose said, " I'm going to ruin you this morning. Before the pheasant, I want to have some/o/£ *gras*"

The/ozV *gras* was magnificently pink, with a leaf of lettuce beside it, crisp and tender. The painter watched that beautifully manicured hand take hold of it, while he himself was chewing radishes.

" Ah, I'm enjoying this," she sighed. " It's lovely being with you like this, just like the old days. Anyone would think we'd been married for years and years."

He looked at her. Wasn't she the unattainable, wasn't she what neither the man nor the painter could ever grasp ? Rose Melrose, the great Rose. He remembered the day when she had played Phedre at the Odeon, with all that profound sense of passion—and of the passions. She was just a woman, and yet was ever any other woman like her ? Was anyone as much of a woman as she was ? She was happiness,

everything that can fill a man's being without his ever being able to possess it.

" I don't know, Melie," he said, " I've never seen anyone go for the grub like you. It bowls me over just the same every time. When I think how all those affected little creatures peck at their food. ..."

She laughed aloud, throwing her head back in that characteristic manner, revealing her magnificent throat:

" They've got to keep an eye on their figures, after all, Baby ! It's funny with me, only going without food makes me lose my looks."

Just as he called her by the pet name he had used in the old days, so she used that ridiculous nickname which she claimed was a diminutive of Amberieux. He took her hand, saying :

" You'll always be young and glorious. Go along, eat up. What a smooth, fine skin you have, Melie."

" I should just think so ! Quite a bit of massage and trouble has gone into that—but not as much as some people think, the women who want to stay young ! Well, I *like* being massaged. But it's rather embarrassing sometimes."

" That's why people have blind masseurs."

" II'm, well, if a blind man touches my breasts, he doesn't need to see ! But after all, making love is worth all the massage in the world. Most women get old because they don't do it enough."

He could hear her say that without feeling any jealousy ; he loved the health of her body and that little trace of colour on the cheeks that wasn't due to make-up. Sliding imperceptibly towards her object, she began to lead up to her reason for ringing Blaise up that morning.

" Yes. . . . Well, so as not to have any trouble with my masseurs—because, you know, I've been had that way a few times and it becomes a bit of a bore. . . . There was one who was in love with me. . . . What was I saying ? Oh

yes, so I got a masseur who doesn't go in for girls—yes, he even loathes us—it's rather funny. He's a Circassian, very handsome. He massages me with his feet. Quite savagely. He stands on my stomach. If he hurts me, he just grits his teeth with contempt. He has me at his feet, literally ! "

She burst out laughing. Then the waiter brought the pheasant, and that changed the conversation. Blaise was unequalled for choosing wines ; that must be granted him.

" What was I saying, Baby, when the pheasant came on ? "

" You were talking about your Circassian/ "

" Oh, yes, my Circassian. You know, I decided to engage him because smart women are all like me—blind men—usually blinded in the war, nowadays—it's very proper, but it's not much fun. But this acrobat who grabs your neck between his heels ! He used to be in London, but he isn't known in Paris. I'm going to make a splash with him."

" Splash ? This is Greek to me, Melie."

" Oh, of course I haven't told you about it. He doesn't know a thing about it ! What can I be thinking of ? "

" The pheasant, I don't mind betting."

" What a pet you are ! Now listen. ... "

" My ears are flapping."

Rose, suddenly full of excitement, began to explain to Blaise all about the company for Melrose beauty products. Everything for Beauty. The doctor's inventions and a whole lot of other little secrets ; she had had the idea of completing the laboratory with a home service providing Rose Melrose manicure, Rose Melrose Chinese pedicure, and of course her Circassian masseur. Using nothing but Melrose products, they were even thinking of getting out perfumes—yes—perfumes !

" What do you think of the name I've chosen for the perfumes ? *Lejardin de Saadi*. I thought Saadi's garden because of the roses, you see. And then, we're even thinking—well, Edraond's thinking, because you know everything depends

on Edmond—that we could add a department for cheap perfumes, sell them by weight, you know, like. . . . Of course with a different name. I thought of Marie-Rose, to bring Mary de Perseval into it, because she's putting up some money ; but mainly because she's trying to distract herself a bit, she wants something to do, she's getting on, you know."

Blaise couldn't get over it. What was this new part she was playing ? Melie a business woman ! There was only one thing she'd forgotten, and that was to tell him who this Edmond was.

" Oh, how silly of me ! But of course you know him, my new friend, Barbentane with all the taxis, Edmond Barbentane."

Blaise had heard of him. He had a young friend who knew him.

" The tiresome thing's his wife," Rose said. " It's her money, you see. And she's jealous. Just fancy, only yesterday she put on a suicide act. Tableau ! A nice fix we would have been in. Poor old Edmond was in a state ! An act like that, too—pretty feeble, come to think of it. Veronal, don't you know. We know *that* trick, I should say ! "

Edmond had been so scared by this incident that he had rushed along to Rose the same day to tell her to hurry up with all the preparations, drawing up the constitution of the company, seeing about the equipment of the building, because there was no knowing what his wife would be up to next. He had almost prevailed on his father, the senator, to be chairman of the board of directors, because then that would explain Edmond's interest in the business. Such a good son !

" And after all, a Legion of Honour buttonhole's better than a smack in the eye with a wet fish, isn't it, Baby ? "

They decided to drink something with their coffee.

" They've got some of those little shots of brandy. Just

wait till you try it ! " Blaise said, and when Rose had taken a few sips of the brandy, he asked in the most serious tone imaginable : " And where do I come in in all this ? " For he knew quite well that she hadn't brought him here for nothing ; there was no lack of people who would take her out to lunch, and if she talked at such length about her creams and perfumes, it must be because that was the core of the mystery.

" Now, Baby," Rose said, " Now listen, I'm going to ask you to make a great sacrifice for me. Promise."

" You know. . . ."

" Don't say no. Do you still love me ? Right. You've often told me that love for you means a sort of sacrifice."

" Don't, Melie."

She looked at him hard. He was afraid that she was going to ask him something he couldn't do, that was all. She smiled and lowered her eyes.

" Oh, it isn't as much of a sacrifice as all that. I want—I want you to put some cash into this business of mine."

" You know I'm not very well off."

" That's not the point. You've only got to put three-halfpence into Melrose products—just so as to have your name on the list—and then, when we come round the second time and float the *Jardin de Saadi*, you'll appear again, people will recognise your name, and then you put a hell of a lot of money into it, to swell the capital."

" But how on earth can I ? "

" Don't be silly ! You'll only be covering someone else. Edmond's got to have someone he can rely on—and so have I. Got it ? Well, it's a good investment for your savings to start with. They couldn't be in prettier hands, could they ? "

He held her hands to his lips and there was a long pause. She stroked his moustache.

" How about your husband ? " he asked.

She shrugged.

" He's a good sort, you know, he goes through it a bit. Ask for the bill, I've got to go to Mary's fairly early. I'm going the rounds, you see. Everything must be ready for the day after New Year. Especially as I'm playing Gioconda in Geneva. Oh, you ought to meet Adrien Arnaud. He's Edmond's private secretary. He'll be the man you'll have to deal with when it comes off. Help me into my coat. How's Martha ? I wasn't going to ask you. Ah, poor darling, marriage is one thing and love's another."

Blaise had got up. He had been thinking about something for a while. Standing behind Rose, so that she couldn't see his face, he asked :

" And—Edmond—are you in love with him ? "

She didn't answer at once ; she was slipping on her gloves again. Then she turned round and said in that ringing voice that was the voice of Phfedre :

" Yes, this time—I think it's the real thing this time."

Blaise Amberieux picked up his muffler, which had fallen on to the floor, among the sawdust.

When he had left Rose in the rue des Belles-Feuilles, Blaise paid off the taxi and walked towards the porte Dauphine. It was a harsh, grey day with a biting North wind ; but Blaise did not notice the weather. He was going slowly along the boulevard Gouvion-Saint-Cyr, along the outer circle railway, absorbed in the thought of Rose. He was, indeed, n*lher unhappier than he had been before, but he was glad to be unhappy for her sake. (Odd sort of chap I am, and no mistake ! he thought to himself.) He sauntered along, not wanting to take the Metro and go straight home to Montmartre. His lunch weighed heavy on him, but gradually the wind began to whip more life into him. He walked about until nightfall; it had just become quite dark when he reached the pare Monceau and that imitation Greek setting where years ago he had often waited for Rose, for hours. . . .

There was someone in the boudoir with Martha, when he came into the house. The two women rose, and he saw it was Berenice.

" Madame Morel ! " he exclaimed in astonishment, " what good wind brings you here ? "

She came towards him with a grave look, saying :

¹¹ " I have something to tell you. My cousin Mme Barfa entane tried to kill herself. "

He only just stopped himself saying " I know " and exclaimed :

" Good God ! But—sit down. "

All three sat down. Martha was looking at him.

CHAPTER XLIV

" I SAID I wasn't to be disturbed on any account. What is it ? "

Simoneau stood in the door, hesitating. He glanced at Adrien Arnaud sunk in the depths of the brown leather armchair, then turning his bald head and his exquisite white beard, as trim as honesty itself, towards his chief, said in apology :

" It's the rubber gentlemen, sir. They've been waiting a long time. "

Edmond threw himself back in his chair and tapped the desk with his fingers.

" Well, let them wait ! I tell you I'm busy ! "

Adrien caught Simoneau's look as he slipped out again. He chuckled softly :

" You've shocked him. He doesn't see how talking to a bloke like me can be called being *busy*. Not with the rubber gentlemen, anyway ! "

Edmond shrugged, wiping out Simoneau and the Rubber Company and the rest of it with a vague wave of his hand.

"Now," he said, "will you or won't you agree to take on this job for me?"

Adrien twirled his moustache.

"Of course, of course. Anyway, I owe you too much already—not that that's the point."

"What is the point, then?"

"I don't know if I can. I mean I don't know if I'm the man for the job. I haven't studied law, and all this brings up a lot of rather sticky questions,—deeds of gift and all that—I'm only repeating what I've picked up, it doesn't make sense to me."

"Lawyers don't exist purely for ornamental purposes. You can get advice."

"Someone more in the swim. . . ."

"Dammit, you've only got to put the questions in a general way, quite theoretically. There's no need to go into details. You might be doing it for yourself, for instance. All I want is not to be mixed up in it."

"Quite, quite."

The telephone rang. Edmond picked up the receiver :

"Hello? Yes, speaking. Oh, it's you, Berenice. Well? How is she? Better, yes, I knew she would be, I told you she'd be all right. Yes, of course, there's a great fuss at first, and then. . . . Very nice of you to ring up. Is the doctor coming in tomorrow morning? I'll try to be there. Yes. . . . Yes. . . . No, I won't be in to dinner. Tonight, then—or tomorrow morning. Go to bed early, you must be tired. Yes, either tonight or tomorrow morning anyway."

He was just going to ring off, when something struck him :

"Hello? Hello?"

Too late. Berenice had hung up the receiver. He made a gesture that meant: Oh well, it doesn't matter.

" Is your wife better ? " Adrien asked. " What's the matter with her, actually ? "

Edmond didn't answer at once. He saw Adrien's little black eyes fixed on him. He was taking Adrien into his confidence in letting him into the secret of the Melrose business, but even such a confidence had its limits ; there was no need to tell him anything about the psychological aspect of the situation—anyway, not yet.

" Oh, nothing much," he said. " One of these things women get—internal trouble ! " Swiftly he picked up the thread again :

" What were you saying about deeds of gift ? "

" I was telling you I'm not up in these things. But the way I see it, if things got to a pitch where someone started looking into your affairs. . . ."

" Who ? My wife ? "

" Either your wife or her lawyer. We've got to be prepared for anything. It's easy enough to prove—for instance, everyone knows I haven't a bean. My father went bankrupt."

" First of all, there's always something more than meets the eye in a bankruptcy. As it isn't a very big sum, everyone'll take it as a matter of course."

" Well, perhaps it's all right where I'm concerned. But how about your father ? I don't think it's very wise to get him mixed up with it."

" Oh, that's all right. On the contrary, it's precisely because my father's in it that I'm taking an interest."

" Tell that to the Marines ! That story will do all right for some people, but it won't take in the sort of people who'll come sticking their noses in."

" What could be more respectable ? A senator, with the Legion of Honour. . . ."

" I know, but he's your father."

" Now look here, the amount that will go in under my

name won't be large enough for anyone to ask questions about it."

" Yes, I realise that."

" And, supposing, just for the sake of argument, I made my nominal shares over to my wife, it wouldn't make any difference to the business. What difference could it make ? Everyone knows my reputation is beyond reproach."

" Edmond, are you never going to develop any business sense ? You know quite well nobody's interested in your reputation. It's the other people. You can't pick up three millions in the street."

" A man in my position——"

" But it isn't your position, it's mine. It's me, Adrien Arnaud, unless you guarantee me with the money-lenders. And then——"

Barbentane shrugged. Arnaud seemed to be taking a malicious delight in raising difficulties. The whole thing would pan out very nicely. The business was quite above-board. First of all there was Mme de Perseval, whose contribution no one could suspect. He was quite sure of her ; she was only too pleased to be able to do Blanchette a bad turn, because of her old affection for him. Then Mme Melrose was doing her share in bringing in an old flame of hers, an absolutely safe chap, whom nobody could suspect of being in any way connected with Edmond.

" You trust Rose, do you ? " Adrien asked slowly. He watched the man whom he had known since they were children, and waited for the gesture he knew so well, which meant *no*. In a moment Edmond would give that fatuous little laugh.

" I'm not talking about now," he added, " but in ten years, or even five. I mean, when you're tired of her."

" In ten years, my boy, Rose will be an old woman. And if I'm no longer a young man then for Blanchette, at any rate I shall be young for Rose."

He plunged into psychological subtleties that he himself believed in. In short, if he had to have a divorce some day, he didn't mean to be at his wife's mercy.

" If I make a slip," he said, " there'll be the devil to pay ! "

He couldn't find his lighter. Adrien held out his cigarette.

" The point is, if Blanchette were to insist on knowing where the capital comes from, she would have to make some things public that ... I mean, if the Estates accounts were looked into ! If we hadn't thought of the dodge of floating subsidiary companies, we should have had to cut our dividends again and again. So that Blanchette has a prime interest in —— "

The long and the short of it was that Melrose Products, the perfumes and the rest of it, were being floated according to the same process as the various building societies and Provensal Transport Limited.

" All the same," Adrien protested, " the perfumes can't be regarded as a subsidiary company of Taxis Limited. I don't see anything in the constitution that allows for that sort of procedure."

A little whistle interrupted him.

" You ought to read the terms of the constitution, Adrien. You'll see there's a very smart little clause that's quite vague and will cover anything."

Finally Adrien objected that Edmond w^ras making a mistake in having his father as chairman of the board and in appearing on it himself.

" It's too obvious. You haven't got anyone connected with your wife on it, have you, to prove your good faith ? Well, there you are."

There was something in that. Edmond began to think it over, only half listening to what his companion was saying. Everything depended on the circumstances in which he

would separate from Blanchette some day, if indeed it came to that. If everything were done in a friendly way. . . . Nonsense ! Was anything ever done in a friendly way when it was a matter of several millions ? Of course Blanchette would always make something over to him to live on, enough to keep body and soul together. But twice one are two. . . . It wouldn't do to let Blanchette have the divorce in her favour, while she appeared as the injured wife and mother. Oh no ! It went without saying that he would take the blame, legally speaking; it would be bad form not to. But if he could let Blanchette divorce him when she herself had a lover, then everything would play into his hands. Under those circumstances, she wouldn't look into things too closely.

" Well, I don't know," Adrien was saying. " You could bring in someone like Jacques Schoelzer, who's both related to the Quesnels and——"

Schcelzer ? No, thanks. Edmond didn't want Schcelzer putting his nose into things that weren't any of his business. Then he began to think about his wife's lover, and let himself grow sentimental. Yes, but who was it to be ? It wouldn't do to have some adventurer, some business man out for himself who knew what was what. That *would* be a nice thing. Really, come to think of it, someone like Leurtillois would do very nicely. Funny, though, how jealous he was of him.

" I say, here's an idea. What would you think of having my wife's lover on the board ? "

Adrien stared at him in amazement.

" Your wife's lover ? What on earth are you talking about ? "

Edmond gave his fatuous little laugh :

" Her lover. Well, she'll have a lover some day, I hope, sooner or later. What I mean is, supposing we had some respectable fellow among the directors of Melrose Products,

someone who wouldn't be a nuisance, the right sort of chap. All sorts of things can happen. In another—well, say five or six years, my wife and he. . . . You see what I mean ? Then I notice it, but I don't make a fuss, I just fade out. I give Blanchette her liberty. Always seeing that my children's interests are provided for, naturally. I don't ask anything for myself, I manage with what I've managed to put aside. You get the idea ? "

Adrien was still twirling his moustache. It was becoming a habit with him. Whom was Edmond thinking of ? Some decent sort of chap—Edmond didn't mean him, by any chance ? Oh, Barbentane was quite capable of it, after the Carlotta affair. Adrien felt himself reddening, as he thought of Blanchette. That would be a queer job to give him, certainly ; always supposing that he agreed to it. A nice bit of money to come into—there was that, of course, but it would make a bit of difference. . . .

" Listen," Edmond said, " can you come along tomorrow morning ? Right ? I want you to meet someone." He was already getting a number on the telephone. There was no answer ; evidently no one at home. Edmond went on :

" Listen. I'll get hold of him presently. I'll send him a wire. I want you to meet this chap tomorrow morning. You know him, actually, he was there at lunch one day when you were. Leurtillois. Very straight chap. And besides, we were at the front together. That's the dodge, eh ? "

Adrien didn't answer. He was wondering if he was disappointed. One way or another he would manage.

Simoneau reappeared at the door. He treated the chief as no one else would have dared to ; it went back to the days before the telephone, when the old clerk had had to appear in person with his messages.

Edmond frowned.

" Now what is it, Simoneau ? "

" The gentlemen from the Rubber Company are becoming impatient, sir. And M. Leurtillois wants to know if he can see you."

" Leurtillois ! The very man ! " Barbentane turned to Adrien, saying :

" Do you mind slipping out for a moment ? Here's the very man I was talking about. Don't go away, I'll send for you."

" The gentlemen from the Rubber Company, sir. ..."

" Chuck it, Simoneau. Show M. Leurtillois in and tell the gentlemen—no, don't tell them—oh, find out yourself what they want. I'd only have to keep them waiting a long time, tell them I'm sorry. Damn it, say whatever you think necessary."

Simoneau bowed and withdrew disapprovingly.

" Go into the small office, I won't be long. It'll save your having to come tomorrow morning. Oh, if you want a book to look at while you're waiting, there's the latest Proust."

Adrien took the big book as if he had been handed the telephone directory. He didn't seem altogether enthusiastic about Proust. At the hairdresser's, they gave you *La Vic Parisienne*.

He had just gone out when Simoneau announced Aurelien. M. Leurtillois was very spick-and-span. Edmond wondered who his tailor was : his suits were always made of very good stuff. But it would have been an improvement if he had worn rather brighter ties. Edmond decided that he must mention it to Berenice, and the thought made him smile. He felt power in his hands ; he held all the strings.

" I was just passing," Leurtillois began, " and I thought I might as well drop in."

" A very lucky idea of yours, too. Sit down—there, no, in the armchair. Cigarette ? I don't know what I've done with my lighter. Believe it or not, I've just been trying to

get you on the 'phone—and then you walk in. Just like a play."

Aurelien crossed his long legs, uncrossed them again, and then crossed them the other way. He thought that if Barbentane were in such a good humour, Blanchette could hardly be at death's door. Not that he had any illusions about Barbentane's feelings for his wife ; but Edmond had a good deal of respect for the conventions.

" Blanchette's better, I hope ? " he said. " I couldn't get Mme Morel on the telephone, and the servants wouldn't tell me anything. She's out of danger ? "

" Oh, it wasn't anything much. There wasn't any real danger. You know what women are like—any little thing wrong inside. ... "

He noticed the surprise in Aurelien's eyes and realised that he was wasting his time in keeping up any pretence.

" Oh, I see," he went on. " Berenice told you, did she ? Anyway, it's not all that important, actually."

" Mme Morel did say something, she didn't really explain. I only meant to ask how Blanchette is getting on."

Edmond uttered a little laugh, with a trace of embarrassment.

" Well, you're different. I've nothing to hide from you—• after all we've been through together." His tone was a substitute for putting an arm round Aurelien's shoulder. It said : We're all friends here, aren't we ? And he waved his arm to evoke a picture of the front, the trenches, the shells, the dug-outs and the rest of it.

There was silence. Aurelien said nothing.

" Yes," Edmond continued, " that's how it is. It's rather a relief to have someone to talk to—an old messmate who'll listen to a bit of a soliloquy from me. Not a very amusing business, by and large. Two people living together, seeing each other every day, and neither knows anything about the other. One fine day—or night, rather—you can imagine

for yourself. You'd think she was happy, you'd think she had everything she wanted. A fairly energetic sort of woman, like her, rather reserved—and then this ! The mother of your children ! ”

The emphasis on the last words was undermined by a circular movement of Edmond's hand, trying to find the ashtray, since he had come to the end of his cigarette. He took his time over stubbing it out. Then he leaned back in his chair, raising both his hands in an outraged gesture.

” Then you begin to wonder if you've done everything you ought to have done for her. And there's no way of knowing what ' everything ' may mean. So you start worrying and racking your brains.”

Aurelien thought that Edmond looked very calm for someone who was racking his brains. He had come in the hope of being able to talk about Berenice. For Berenice hadn't rung up for two days and had only come to the telephone once out of every five times that he had rung her up ; she was always evasive, saying that she had no time, and using Blanchette as a pretext for not going out. He had certainly made a mistake in thinking, with the egoism of those in love, that this unsuccessful suicide would compel Berenice to stay in Paris a while longer and not go home for Christmas. Much good it was doing him ! Now he remembered that he had prepared an excuse for his calling on Edmond and that he hadn't produced it yet.

” There's something I rather wanted to ask you about. But what were you ringing me up for ? ”

” I'll tell you about it. First of all you tell me what you wanted to ask me. Either one has friends or one hasn't.”

” Just a bit of advice. . . . ”

Aurelien took a letter out of his pocket and handed it to Edmond.

” There it is, read that. It's from Armandine. You know

something of my sister, and you know how we get on together. She dropped in to see me, about—let's see, about a week ago, and she didn't breathe a word about this then. But read it for yourself and tell me what you think. It strikes me as rather funny, though I'm not quite sure why. But I don't know anything about business ; you know what I'm like, I don't understand these things. So I thought I'd ask you, because I have a vague impression—but read it for yourself."

Edmond glanced through the letter with a look of interest. What a bore it was when people would regard him as a business man ! Still, it did reflect glory of a kind, and he wasn't going to spoil it. He looked at Aurelien from behind the letter. What on earth did women see in him ? Those big, rather stupid features. . . . Oh, the letter. Ugh, these family affairs ! This seemed a pretty clear case. A pretty heavy-handed welsher, this Armandine. What a lumbering way of going about it ! He hooted with laughter.

" Well ? " Leurtillois asked.

" Well, well ! The letter's just like your sister—this solemn way of beating round the bush—but anyone can see your brother-in-law's finger in the pie. Our worthy Debrest ! I had a contract with him, you know, for rubber cloth. Oh, that reminds me. Those rubber gentlemen, as my clerk calls them, are waiting to see me. Well, can't be helped. If one can't have a bit of a chat with one's friends. . . ."

" If I'm disturbing you——"

" Disturbing me ? Don't be crazy. Let me have a look at this stuff about the estate. If Debrest wants to buy it from you, the chances are that it's a——" He stopped, struck by a sudden idea. He'd only just realised what a piece of luck this was. Marvellous !

" I say, were you thinking of selling this property ? "

" Selling ? No. I'd never thought of such a thing."

" But I thought—I mean, the subject must have come up before."

" Never. This is the way things have been since my mother died. I get the rent from the farms. Fve good farmers who never cause any trouble."

" Doesn't it strike you as fishy ? I'm not suggesting that your sister—of course not—but Debrest wasn't born yesterday. Hasn't anything struck you ? "

" As I said, it did seem vaguely——"

" Vaguely, eh ? Vaguely ! Dammit, they're trying to fleece you, that's what it boils down to. Fleece you ! You hand over your land to them, and what do they hand over to you ? Nothing. They'll pay you the rent and that's all. They're not offering you a share in the factory. A few dividends, and no more, while you're giving them your capital. You see, they're going to build, and it'll be the children's estate, the children's house. You'd never be able to get it back again. And they won't have spent a penny. And if you die first, they won't have to pay death duties, because they'll have the property already. In the future you'll have just the share mum and dad left you, and that's all. Ah, families, families ! Have you answered yet ? "

" No, I wanted to find out first. You think they're trying to do me down ? "

" He asks me if I *think* they're trying to do him down ! "

Aurelien was not particularly surprised. But his pretext for calling in was getting rather out of hand, and he wanted to find out something about Berenice.

" Thank very much," he said, " I wasn't sure about it. Let's change the subject. Is Mme Morel staying on for a few days, now that Blanchette is ill ? "

But it didn't suit Edmond's purpose to change the conversation. He said rapidly :

" Berenice will be staying in Paris quite a time, especially as my cousin has just arrived in town. Yes, her husband. But

this estate—what d'you call it ? Saint-Genest—just about how much is it worth ? "

Aurelien didn't care a tinker's cuss about Saint-Genest, after what he had just heard. Morel in Paris ! So that was why Berenice hadn't rung him up ; that was why she was avoiding him ; that was the explanation of the whole thing, and a pretty uncomfortable explanation too. He must see her again. It was vital that he should speak to her.

" I asked you, how much is Saint-Genest worth ? "

That depended on whether one reckoned its value on the same basis as for income-tax returns, or if one took it as the rent-roll. Today it must be round about. . . .

" But that's fine, old boy ! " Edmond exulted. " Simply fine ! Naturally, there's one aspect of what Armandine writes here that deserves some consideration, as you hold shares in their factory : that's what she says about Debrest needing money. If they need extra capital, it might be a reason for your helping them. But of course all they've got to do is not to buy property at a time like this. Or rather—no, no, that's wrong. Never do business with your relatives, old man, they always make a sucker of you."

He sighed, as one who would say : I know something about that.

" Listen. It's quite true that sooner or later you'll have trouble with your farmer ; he may have a bad year, or there'll be an agricultural crisis, a strike or something. The only thing you're interested in is the income from it, isn't it ? And Armandine, or rather, the Debrests, want a property, don't they, it doesn't matter which property, so long as they don't have to draw on capital to pay for it. Right. Now I'm going to put a proposition to you."

Aurelien was hardly listening. He was shaken by the chemist's unexpected arrival in Paris. It was natural enough, when Berenice hadn't been able to go home for Christmas, that her husband should come to join her. But. . . .

" You see ? I put—shall we say double the value of Saint-Genest—into Debrest's business, and then they can't say anything more. Then you tell them that I've offered you a lot more for Saint-Genest than they would have dreamt of paying. And the amount which I give you, you put into one of my companies, which will bring you in a lot more than your rent-roll. You see what I mean ? It's to my advantage to do it. One of my companies—you couldn't have a better guarantee than that, eh ? It's a company in which I'm interested. Debrests'll be hopping mad at having been dished so neatly. I've been looking round for a little estate. I'll take over Saint-Genest—paying you whatever you like, old man, no worry about that. You'll still be in control of your capital, having invested it with me. You see the difference ? As for your nephews and your brother-in-law and Armandine, well, they get something out of it too, as their factory needs a bit of a leg-up."

Aurelien could not see why Edmond was talking so enthusiastically about all this. It seemed a funny sort of idea, and merely a complication of things as they were. Wouldn't it be simpler for Edmond to put his own money into this business he was talking about, instead of investing it with Debrest and taking it out again to give to Aurelien, and so forth ?

" You forget that I'm wanting a bit of land."

Ah yes, true. But all the same. . . .

" What do you mean—all the same ? Supposing I enjoy forcing your hand so that things look brighter for you in future at the end of the month ? Either one has friends or one hasn't, damn it."

" No, really, I don't want to, I wasn't asking you. . . ."

" Lord, yes, I know ! But you'll accept. I'll enjoy doing it. Don't be an ass, it's only a little scrap of business for me, in the midst of a hell of a lot of other deals. . . ."

" I'm not sure whether I ought. . . . You were saying that M. Morel is in Paris ? "

" Yes, Lucien's arrived. Besides, all that hangs together."

" All what ? "

" Damn it, the business we're talking about! It's a company for beauty products, perfumes and so on. Melrose Products."

" Oh, I see."

" No, you don't see anything at all. First and foremost, I'm a realist. Rose, of course, Rose is the name, that'll make the stuff sell. The important thing is that it's a sound business proposition that I'm keeping my eye on, not so much for Rose as for my father."

" Your father ? "

" He's chairman of the board of directors. So you see I've got the hang of it. I'm seeing to it that my friends get in on it from the start and make something out of the publicity it will cause. Talking of Lucien, Berenice's husband—you know he's my cousin—well, I told you he keeps a chemist's shop, didn't I ? You can imagine how useful a chemist is with an address in the provinces. I'm getting him interested in the business, or rather, I'm putting him in touch with the right people, and I'm sure they'll come to some agreement. I'm glad to be able to do something for Berenice and improve her finances a bit, so that she can have a bit better sort of life."

He saw Aurelien flinch at that, and qualified it by saying :

" Because she's not meant for a humdrum life like that. Between you and me, you're rather fond of my little cousin, aren't you ? Oh, all right, all right, it's your own affair. But don't you think it would be rather a nice touch to have your interests tied up together, by putting your pennies into the same bag that the money comes out of for her to buy her dresses and come to Paris from time to time ? "

Aurelien didn't quite get the hang of all this. Edmond striking a Father Christmas attitude and bringing Berenice into it in this tactless way—what advantage could it be to

Edmond ? He couldn't make it out. He hadn't the right to stop him putting money into the Debrests' business, when it might give them a considerable lift; even if Armandine and Jacques had tried to make a mug of him. And as far as the rest of it was concerned, well anyway, Edmond was an old friend. Aurelien saw him in his mind's eye, trying to stop his whipcord jacket from getting splashed by the mud of Champagne. . . . And this Morel who had turned up so unexpectedly—had he really come because of Melrose Products ?

" As you're here," Edmond said, " I might as well put you in touch with the man who's in charge of Melrose Products. Then you can think about what you want to do. It's not really my business, strictly speaking. What I'm concerned with is the Debrest factory and your property. Actually you've met him, you had lunch with him one day at our place. A young chap with a future. We used to play bowls together at Serianne, before the war. That makes me want to lend him a bit of a hand."

He had rung. The sentimental features of Mile Suzanne, the typist, appeared in the doorway.

" Ah, Mademoiselle, would you be good enough to tell M. Arnaud that I should like to see him in my office ? "

And when she had gone out:

" You'll see, he's a very decent bloke, very straight in business. He's the brains of the whole thing. With Rose as the beauty on the box ! "

" You wanted to see me ? " Adrien Arnaud asked.

Aurelien turned round and looked at the newcomer. He had a funny little moustache and small eyes that Aurelien didn't care for. But one mustn't judge people by that sort of thing. Now what, for example, did Lucien Morel look like ? The thought of Berenice wrung his heart.

CHAPTER XLV

AFTERWARDS Aurelien could not have said how those days passed. Christmas, distant as some far city, had filled his heart with indefinable yearning and nostalgia, not because of the Christian tradition but because of the threat of separation it brought with it: this Christmas that would not be the dawn, however heartbreaking, that he had imagined, such a dawn as when, in the Middle Ages, those who kept the watch were in the lovers' secret and stood on guard for them, calling out a warning when the time came for one of them to rise and go. Christmas had come, just like any other day.

He had had a brief note from Berenice, saying: " You know that I am no longer alone," an expression which had hurt him more even by its dreadful discretion than by its curtness ; and she had asked him not to ring up the Barbentanes, " More to spare my cousin than for any other reason." That scrap of a phrase had brought him nearer to tears than anything else in his life. Berenice promised that she would ring up or write and arrange to see him before she left. What generosity !

He brooded. Had the whole thing been nothing but illusion ? Or play-acting, nothing but atrocious make-believe ? Yet she hadn't done anything at all to discourage him ; she had been avid, even passionate in her attempts to assure herself of his love. And had that been nothing but the vanity of knowing herself loved ? No, that was impossible. There must be some clue somewhere that he couldn't get hold of. He couldn't bring himself to admit such duplicity and hypocrisy. In a way that was like the mirage that appears in the wilds of the desert, Berenice had never been so *visible* to him as she was during this absence. He would wake up in the night, thinking that she had come into the room. In broad daylight, the light coming in through

the window, and falling on the dreary stuff of the furniture, touched only her. There was, as it were, an image in his eyes that reflected back in glimmers of mother-of-pearl from everything he looked at. Was it Berenice or Christmas that he had thought of as a far city ? Caesarea. . . . / *tarried long. . . .*

There are days in all our lives when time ceases to be the warp and woof, the unconscious texture of our living. At first it begins to appear through us like a watermark, a deep shadowy scar that soon becomes an obsession. Time no longer flows, once it has become perceptible. The man who tries to divert his thoughts from grief finds himself stumbling on it everywhere he turns in time, grief now being detached from its original object; and it is time itself that has turned into grief and haunts him everywhere. Time no longer passes. There is no longer any question of finding something to do, for anything such a man could do seems a mere mockery. Despair overtakes him at the idea of this endless pain of time before him : not life, which it is impossible to think of, but time here and now, time, and the next two hours. This pain is more like that of raging toothache than anything else, a pain that he cannot imagine ever coming to an end. There he is, twisting and turning, no longer knowing what to do or how to be rid of his body and its delirium, its implacable memory, whose victim he knows he is and yet is unable to escape.

Aurelien could not bring himself to believe in the very simple and ordinary explanations with which a kind of unseen, sarcastic bystander provided him : " She doesn't love you. She was flattered, she liked being loved. She has a husband and a life of her own. Why the devil should she leave him ? An ordinary middle-class girl who has had her holiday and her fling, and now the holidays are over. A *good* girl, too—for she hasn't been unfaithful to her husband ! " He suppressed that sceptic voice and refused

to listen to the unutterably wretched things that reason whispered to him. He made up long, endless stories, day-dreams, romantic explanations that he knew were all false, and which he yet continued because it was a way of killing time, this merciless time. Then he would break off, blind with rage, and walk up and down the little room of his home, raving like a caged animal. Now he didn't go out any more ; he was waiting for that unlikely sound of the telephone ringing. No, no, he wasn't waiting for the telephone to ring ! But what was the good of going out ? Where should he go ? Why should he delude himself with farcical activity ? He didn't want to see anyone ; he wouldn't see anyone. Even Mme Duvigne was too much. " Don't come tomorrow," he had said to her. She had looked at him, aghast. The day after that he hadn't had the heart to say it again, and so once more she came every morning. It was a punishment he inflicted on himself, this coming-and-going, this ceaseless flow of words—and the relief it was when she went.

Nevertheless, he had to put up with her. For supposing Berenice were to come ? Supposing the door were to open and. . . . Everything must be neat and tidy, ready for her—for Berenice, who did not come. Was he sure that he needed Mme Duvigne ? He spent the whole day morbidly cleaning and polishing his two rooms, the kitchen and the bathroom. When he set about it, beginning to look with unaccustomed eyes at every square inch of floor and wall, and the furniture, and the covers, it seemed that everything needed a great deal of attention, and he brought to this work all the care and suspicion with which he sometimes regarded his own body. One can go on scrubbing endlessly, endlessly polishing, anointing floorboards or the wood of a table with household liniments. Gradually it becomes a mania, until one ceases to be able to believe in cleanliness, and, with an ever acuter sense of how all cleanliness is relative, one subdivides the scope of all this care, which is conscientious as a

nurse, and subdivides again to infinity. And all at once one is seized with despair, realising that in spite of all this passion of furbishing one has not attacked more than an infinitesimal part of the dubious object, which is perhaps a carpet that has been brushed over and over again like a sick animal, and that there still remains an inexhaustible domain of dirt, or, which is worse, the absence of cleanliness. For one begins to prefer the crass reality, the indisputable fact of plain dirt, to relative cleanliness ; since at least the crass reality gives one the opportunity to feel victorious when one has taken up a damp rag or a scraper or whatever it may be.

All the same, on the morning of Christmas day he got up and went out. Because he knew that this morning was sacred to family life and hence that excellent wife, Mme Morel, would be sure to stay by the side of her husband, M. Morel, not leaving him for an instant, and so would not telephone to him, Aurelien, he tore himself free of the flat and his infatuation with cleanliness. He went out without waiting for Mme Duvigne, glad of the chance to escape from her chatter. He hadn't shaved, and he had put on the same dirty shirt. That gave him a morose satisfaction.

It was cloudy, but dry. The wind was blowing from the north. Aurelien shivered like someone who has not been out of the desiccated atmosphere of central-heating for three days. He felt the chill climbing from his ankles to his knees, and buttoned up his overcoat, turned up his collar, put his hands in his pockets and set off downstream along the bank of the Seine, looking at the second-hand booksellers' boxes all shut like coffins. A white horse trotting along the road raised ironical music with its hooves, as it ran between the shafts of a blue delivery van with black stripes and the word *Printemps* painted on it like a challenge. The town seemed empty, as if all the dust and all the life had been beaten out of it. But at the tip of the Cite there was a dense crowd on the embankment and bridge, leaning over and

looking down into the river. There was a clamour of voices. What was happening ?

Aurelien, coming nearer, was caught up in the throng, elbowed hither and thither, and finally borne to the parapet. Down below people were running to and fro in great excitement, several of the men naked and one with a rubber bathing-cap on his head. These bodies so strangely exposed to the cold, all standing in a row, with a mob of seconds and friends beside them, and up above the lookers-on, women, and fools. Suddenly these white beings plunged, like great pale fish or colourless seals. As they sprang into the water, the people shouted and waved and pursued them along the bridge to the other side of the river. Aurelien watched them disappearing into the distance, using speed as a weapon against the cold even more than against each other ; there were perhaps a hundred of them, and it seemed that they knew what they were doing. On the bridge, the movie-camera was turning. Photographers were waiting opposite, on the frozen right bank. The waves were enveloping them in greenish glass, and their athletes' bodies unleashed under the shivering water looked like pieces of butcher's meat; the panting of those who were falling behind gave some idea of what efforts the leading few must be making. Before Aurelien could grasp the meaning of this competition, the spirit of competition had sprung to life in the river. The swimmers were already spreading out into different groups, the fast, picked few leading, then a few more likely bets fighting hard, and then the mass, all much of a muchness, and last of all the stragglers, those who had plunged in together with the others, upheld by an extraordinary illusion and ignorance of their own powers, and now suffering not only from cold but from shame as well.

For a moment Aurelien was sorry that he wasn't on the other side to see them coming in. The best and most interesting swimmers couldn't be seen very well from here

and there was no way of comparing their strokes and style. Then suddenly he remembered Riquet, the young man he had met at the Oberkampf baths. Perhaps he was one of them, not so much trying his luck as satisfying his need for exerting himself, and not at all disappointed at not being among the champs, as he called them, but playing his obscure part in the history of sport. They were mostly fellows like himself who went in for the Christmas Cup, just as at village festivals they went in for climbing the greasy pole, even those who knew they had no chance of reaching the top. And when the shots of it appeared in the news at the cinema, when the Pathe-Gazette came on between the main films, there were always people in the audience who would shiver and say : " Well, they've plenty of nerve, those chaps/ "

A roar greeted the arrival of the winner. His name passed from mouth to mouth among the groups of people galloping towards the right bank. There was a clamour of commentary. The less fortunate swimmers continued to labour in the Seine, without most of the crowd any longer taking any interest in them. Aurelien wondered what to do next. Then he spun round on his heels and hurried up through the narrow streets that wind about between the houses on the left bank, the meandering souvenirs of many centuries, still populated by a mediaeval world of artisans and prostitutes. Aurelien felt that he was fleeing the present when he left the Seine and the swimmers with all that life that was blue in the face with cold, and the eager spectators, the enthusiastic sports-lovers. He was thinking about Riquet, trying to remember him distinctly : a sturdy little fellow, full of coarse, animal energy and resource. For some mysterious reason he couldn't stop thinking about Riquet. As Armandine had said, with her pricelessly solemn air : " This M. Riquet is quite right." He shrugged his shoulders. All the Riquets in the world were right, and he was wrong, that was obvious. He thought of his own

wasted and unused energy—the energy he was spending on polishing his flat as if it were a shoe. He shrugged. He looked up at the name of the dismal little alley he was turning into, taking the streets that run perpendicular to the quays, to keep out of the wind, and he saw that the name of the plate was rue Christine. How alone he was. He had stopped thinking about Berenice. He had stopped thinking about Berenice.

He came back to the subject of Riquet, the symbolic M. Riquet, with his little girl, his job at the factory, and his inclination for breaking out into startling fits of energy. How did he spend his Sundays? What sort of tenement did he live in? Aurelien was not so much interested in Riquet as in the gulf between Riquet and himself. He might have been someone like that. He might have been in the icy water just now, as Riquet had probably been, exerting all the violence of his muscles and the intelligence of his body in the effort to achieve, for his own private satisfaction, an incomprehensible goal. And what was that goal? A sense of duty? A need to justify himself? A desire for dignity? Definitely something that was most unpleasantly lacking in Aurelien at the moment.

He took refuge in the Luxembourg in order to forget Riquet and waste the morning faster. There he watched pale children playing about at their mothers' or nurses' feet, and dragged his way along the edge of the pool which had been emptied, staring at the stone ruins; then he turned slowly homewards, walking across the boulevard Saint-Michel where there wasn't a student to be seen and the glass-fronted cafes were iced up like bottles. He wriggled his toes in his shoes.

Mmc Duvigne was still there.

" Oh, you've been out, sir. *What* a pity ! The lady came only five minutes ago, and she did seem so sorry to have missed you. She left a parcel. She said she'd ring up."

Berenice ! Berenice had come and gone again !

There are times when our movements outpace our thoughts. Aurelien found that his hand had flown to his cheeks, the back of his hand rubbing the unshaven skin. And indeed his first thought was " I oughtn't to have gone out like that," even before " I oughtn't to have gone out." His beard was mixed up with his bewildered thoughts, his disappointment and his renewed hope. What did it matter what he looked like, since Berenice had come when he wasn't at home ? Oh yes, though, it was wrong of him not to have shaved, no, not to have waited for her, to have given up hope of her coming, and done her wrong with his stupid fears. Never again would he let a day pass without shaving, because of her ; he would shave for her sake, as a sign of respect for her. She had come ! He went into the bathroom, hung the strap on its hook, and began stropping his razor.

" Aren't you going to open your parcel, sir ? " Mme Duvigne cried from the other room.

Yes, right enough, the parcel ! He had forgotten it, in his shock at the thought of Berenice. Berenice's parcel. He dropped the strap, left his razor open on the glass shelf, and leapt across the bedroom towards what Mme Duvigne called "the room." Mme Duvigne, on the point of going but checked by her curiosity, had placed it well in evidence on the table. It was a square parcel, about the size of a tin of biscuits, or even a little larger, surrounded with corrugated cardboard and tied with black string. No address—nothing. Yes, there was : in one corner, scribbled at the last minute with that little blue fountain-pen with the gold rings which he had seen in Berenice's handbag, two words : For Aurelien. It was that big, faltering, rather childish handwriting, with comical flowery bits on the capitals, which he had learnt to know so well from that wretched letter he had carried about with him ever since he received it.

He saw Mme Duvigne's glance, and stopped.

" Yes, I'd forgotten about it," he said. And, picking it up, he took it into his bedroom.

Still talking at the top of her voice, Mme Duvigne asked disappointedly :

" Will that be all, sir ? Is there anything special you want for tomorrow morning ? "

" No, no, that's all, nothing special, nothing. Good-morning, Mme Duvigne."

The parcel was burning his hands. It was all he could do to stop himself from opening it before he heard the kitchen door slam. Poor old Duvigne, she must be furious. Well, who cares ! He undid the string, undid the packing of crumpled newspapers, and at last reached the box that had been tightly wedged in the midst of all these precautions. It was labelled " Fragile." And in the midst of a great deal of tissue paper he came on something hard. Ah, now he guessed. His fingers recognised that surface. Berenice had brought him an *Inconnue de la Seine* for his Christmas present. That was it; that was all. He lifted the plaster mask out of its tissue paper, his emotions divided between rather easy sentimentality and a feeling of disappointment. Well, what had he expected it to be ? Berenice had said. . . . Yes, she was jealous of this anonymous face, and she had brought it to him.

At the first glance he didn't understand. He was holding the mask like something familiar, not setting it up anywhere or looking at it with especial care. And then he had a strange feeling that the Unknown had moved ; that is to say, it was like a photograph during which the camera has shifted slightly. It was, and yet it was not, the mask he knew so well. He began to have a vague premonition of what it meant. He turned the mask over, holding it in both hands, and looked at it very carefully.

No, it was not the Unknown. The moulder had gone to a lot of trouble to imitate the arrangement of her hair and

the outline of the mask, but these were other features, above all the mouth was different. Berenice—it was Berenice ! He could not doubt it any longer, although to him this plaster funerary image seemed to be a Berenice who had passed through the mysteries of a metamorphosis. It was so like and yet so unlike. Now he saw how different she was from the Unknown and why it had been some time before he had noticed the resemblance between those two faces. Then he had known the Unknown too well, and not known Berenice well enough. Other people had only a fleeting impression of the two faces and might easily be deceived ; their impression was too superficial to make them notice profound differences that w^rere like the chasms of the heart. But Aurelien could not be deceived. His heart was beating wildly. He remembered the scene when the mask of the Unknown had fallen to the floor and been smashed. Once more he saw the plaster on the carpet. He felt the fragility of what he was holding in his hands and was afraid of dropping it while he was trembling with emotion. He put Berenice's face down on the bed. It seemed a queer thing to do. He had put it down without thinking, but he picked it up again and quietly as a criminal he moved it up to the pillow, on the dark silk. And standing there, motionless and in silence, he gazed at Berenice.

Berenice with her eyes shut.

For his sake she had submitted to that tragic jest, going to the modeller and lying there with her eyes shut. She had had the plaster on her eyes, on her mouth, on her nostrils, at the roots of her hair and in her ears . . . plaster everywhere, like the pallor of death. Under the moist plaster that was assuming the matrix of her features, she had gone on breathing, holding her breath a little, thinking of him and for his sake accepting the unpleasant sensation that must come from such a funeral rite. To that cold, hollow mirror she was confiding the perishable form of herself. She had confided

that message, that confession, to the plaster drying on her lips ; at the touch of the plaster her lips had formed the unspoken confession and the kiss that she had not given with her living lips—the matrix of a kiss. Stirred to the depths of his being, Aurelien gazed at the sorrowful curve of the lips with all their tiny delicate cracks, that petal shape and that expression of despair. These lips that were an outcry of baffled desire and unquenchable thirst. Oh, how much more beautiful she was than the Unknown, how much more terrible, more terribly unknown, Berenice, living and dead, absent and present, the real Berenice !

With a trace of superstitious fear, Aurelien stretched out his hand. He paused for a moment and then touched the mask lightly, very lightly, with the tips of his fingers. He began to talk, half aloud; caressing words rose to his lips and were uttered, whisperingly, before he had recognised the thoughts behind them. His tongue was pliant as a ghost. Perhaps that is what speech is like in the realm of the dead. Nowhere else. They were words like the pollen that the wind gathers from the trees in love, and the seeds that are wafted hundreds of miles away to other trees as yet sterile. Aurelien no longer felt the same man as before. His heart was beating as if it would burst. He was in the grip of a frenzy such as he had never experienced before.

His whole hand stroked the unconscious mask, until suddenly he drew it away, as if shocked, and looked at the traces of white dust on his fingers. Opposing emotions struggled in him. He was afraid of thinking anything definite ; he was afraid of drawing any conclusion about anything from this message and this mask. And yet a certainty was mounting through his mind like a tide. It was flooding through him as if it came from the belly ; then it reached his chest, then the armpits, spreading to his arms and rising to his throat, where it almost forced him to cry out, strangling him and driving the colour into his face. Now there was nothing left

but this certainty ; the contradictions were obliterated, and his knees bent at the edge of the bed. As he leaned towards Berenice, he read in the dead eyes that Berenice loved him.

CHAPTER XLVI

AURELIEN no longer dared to go out. He could not forgive himself for having so stupidly missed Berenice's visit, and now he stayed at home, waiting for her. He waited all the time, looking at the telephone and the door ; he was like a watch-dog. Indeed, his whole life was in suspense. It was an extraordinary pause in thought and feeling, even in pain. He was waiting, and that was all ; and he needed all of his resources for this waiting.

He neither lunched nor dined. Time did not even seem long. He felt scraps of sentences floating through his mind, and ideas that almost came to the surface and then vanished again. Nothing assumed a definite form ; nothing was completed. He seemed to be holding his breath, like a swimmer covering a long distance underneath the water. It seemed to him that nothing in the world existed except this certainty : Berenice loved him. The state of mind that it brought about in him was not the joy he would have expected, but a weird torpor. It was as if this certainty had been the means by which he gained possession of the whole world and the last of all mysteries, beyond which there was only nothingness. It must have been something like this with Alexander, when he watered his horse in the Indian Ocean ; for he did not even know that there were countries beyond that legendary water. Knowing that Berenice loved him, no longer having to doubt her love, did not open the gate of dreams or cause Aurelien to imagine what the next stage in

the adventure would be. For Berenice's love was not an adventure but a state. Since he had gained this certainty, Aurelien was further away than ever from imagining how their love might be when it was shared. He no longer pictured Berenice in his arms ; he no longer pictured the struggle for Berenice and for her love, in that full and yet limited sense which all men, and above all Aurelien, give to the word " love."

About ten o'clock that evening he felt hungry. Hungry as a schoolboy, he said to himself. The twitchings of his stomach reminded him how much time he had wasted in idleness and how the long day had slipped away into the void. On the one hand he began to feel disappointed at Berenice's not having returned or at least telephoned, while on the other he told himself that such a hope was absurd. For had it not been hard enough for her to find the chance of coming to see him that morning ? There was no chance that she would be able to come before tomorrow. He was not quite sure whether he was only inventing excuses to go out and have something to eat ; for he was really hungry. It was too late for the restaurants, but he might get a sandwich. He thought of the night, and shivered ; looking out, he saw that it was raining.

Rain was streaming from the brim of his hat, and his rain-coat was so wet that it looked black, when he entered the cafe with the glaring lights near the Châtelet. Here he was able to have brown soup and some sausages. He had been smoking like a chimney all day, and the dark beer tasted marvellous, in strange harmony with the background to his thoughts.

He wondered where Berenice could be. What was she doing with that husband of hers who had dropped from the clouds ? For Aurelien, this husband was not a living being but merely a kind of phantom, an incarnation of the fatality that separates lovers. He wondered very seriously if he

were jealous, if he could be jealous, of Morel. No, he wasn't jealous of him ; it caused him no pain to know that Berenice was with him, and he had no mental pictures of their intimacy. For the moment, at any rate. He shuddered at the thought that this might change ; he had resolved quite firmly that he was not going to make himself unhappy. Berenice loved him. Berenice loved him.

He toyed with a lump of cheese and some fruit. The rain had stopped, and it was not so cold. He set out on foot towards the Halles, where the traffic began, until he came to the boulevards, which were cluttered up with little New Year's stalls, with their acetylene lamps ; he looked at the mechanical tin toys and astonishingly complicated sock-suspenders, and at last found himself in the Pathephone at the corner of the rue des Italiens. It was almost empty at this time of night, and he listened to the records he had listened to when he used to come here with his school-friends : Chaliapin in the death of Boris, and " rEnchantement du Vendredi Saint " conducted by Nikisch, and, just as they happened to come, " La Demoiselle Elue," " The Sorcerer's Apprentice," " La Foire de Sorochinsk," " Le Coq d'Or," and " Tristan " . . .

He bought some more tokens to put into the machine, and played the same record over three times in succession. No music in the world could fit in with his mood so well as " Tristan " at the beginning of the third act.

He could not escape the magic influence of Montmartre. He found himself there too early for Lulli's, and so he went and sat down in one of the cafes in the place Blanche. There he ran into Fuchs, who greeted him with little yelps, came and sat down at the same table, and hung on to him for over an hour. Heaven alone knew what he talked about. Aurelien took no notice. This sly little man always seemed to have tons of secrets to confide to you, secrets that fluttered an unknown world, an extremely special version of what was

meant by " the whole of Paris " : a world of editors, gay women, bookmakers, painters, colonial officials, and so on. It was all mixed up with the affairs of *The Dug-Out*, which were, as usual, hair-raising. Hadn't Fuchs anything at all to do, that every time when he met you he buttonholed you like this ? Aurelien shook him off round about half-past twelve.

It was no use his staying up until it was nearly daylight; he was awake again by eight o'clock the next morning. And the moment he woke he was back in that state of waiting, as if his sleep had been no interruption at all. His anxiety about having everything spick-and-span, even immaculate, and the urge to polish everything he could find to polish, could not for long take his mind off the thing that was making him so feverishly impatient: he could not do anything but fidget and rush about from one room to the other. He took up a book and stared at it without reading a word ; then he began to write a letter to Armandine, only to tear it up after he had written three lines. He did not want to smoke, for he had had too many cigarettes the day before and had been horrified to find his teeth were no longer as white as he wished them to be. Yet he did smoke, without ever finishing a cigarette, putting them down on the edge of a table or mantelpiece still half-smoked and burning. Mme Duvigne was the last straw. Her mere presence in the flat was enough to make him frantic. And how she did chatter ! There was the report of a sensational crime in the morning's papers—" have you read about it, sir ? " No, he had not read about it, and all he wanted was to have lunch at home, not a lot of fuss but the sort of thing that was ready to eat and wouldn't cause any trouble. No, not *foie gras*, either—that everlasting *foie gras* ! Mme Duvigne wanted to prepare his lunch for him, but that was more than he could bear. Rather offended, she gave up the attempt and finally left him alone.

But it was not long before she was back again, with a

basket of groceries : tins, ham, bread. Anyone would have thought he was going to cross the Atlantic on a raft. There was even a large box of biscuits. Aurelien was impatient for her to go. And now at last she did go.

Waiting had become unendurable.

The groceries lay in a heap on the kitchen table. He did not touch them. He had lost his appetite, and when he remembered the cold meat he had eaten in the night, he could not face another meal.

Suddenly there was a ring at the door. He rushed to open it.

It was the postman, with an envelope marked Printed Matter, containing a calendar. The man smiled in anticipation of his New Year tip, saying that he had called before and not found anyone at home. After the postman came the caretaker, to announce that there was a leak on the staircase. Had M. Leurtillois not heard the noise ? He had come to see if it were coming from M. Leurtillois' flat. No, it was *not* coming from M. Leurtillois' flat.

In the end Aurelien swallowed a slice of ham and some bread. Then it seemed to him that he must be badly in need of a wash ; he went and brushed his teeth and washed his hands without getting rid of this absurd feeling of being dirty. He even undressed and stepped under the shower. He thought of what Armandine would have said at the idea of bathing straight after a meal, for she had that fear of apoplexy which seems to be hereditary among that kind of people. But it did not amuse him ; the thought of Armandine only made him irritable, and it was a relief to think that in liquidating Saint-Genest he was breaking all that really bound him to his family. Yes, it was a thousand times better to invest his money with Edmond than in the family business. No more family ! Finish !

He had given up waiting for Berenice. Every moment that passed made it less likely that she would come or telephone.

He sat looking at her, looking at the mask that was her face and the face of love that lies drowned. He could look at this mask for hours, watching the play of light on its contours; and now he drew the curtains back as far as possible, letting all the light strike full on the plaster features. He had given up waiting for Berenice. He swore to himself that he had given up waiting for her ; and he was not far from weeping.

From outside in the passage he could hear the noise of someone going to and fro ; it was the plumber who had come to repair the broken pipe. If Berenice should come now, the sound of her footsteps would be lost in the clatter, the blow-lamp knocking against the wall, a bag of tools dropped on the floor, the workman walking about. But she was not coming, so what was the need to worry ? Someone coughed outside the door. Then there was a long silence. The light began to fade and the pale sky over Paris was gradually mottled with darkness. The white mask on the wall reigned supreme over this useless waiting. To Aurelien it seemed as though he had been waiting for long centuries ; he must be growing very old. He got up and moved various things from one place to another. Accidentally he overturned the Abdullah ashtray, which was full of ash, cigarette stubs and burnt matches, and he was picking up the mess, thinking that he would have to brush the carpet, when the bell rang.

No, it was impossible. It was not Berenice. He put things to rights as fast as he could, looked at his dirty hands, wishing he had time to wash them, and then the bell rang again. She was becoming impatient. That was the last straw, because of course it couldn't be Berenice at all.

He opened the door, and in walked Blaise Amberieux.

CHAPTER XLVII

" THE women you sleep with don't matter. What's damnable is the women you don't sleep with."

When the painter had uttered this aphorism, a heavy silence settled in the room. The two men were sitting huddled over the fire, darkness behind them and only the firelight casting a faint glitter in their eyes. They had been talking for an hour or more, and each of them felt that the passing of the old year somehow added tragic weight to the ruin each was a prey to. At first Blaise had avoided coming directly to the point; pretending that he had just dropped in casually, without any special motive, simply because he had suddenly felt like it, he had as it were kept the button on his foil. Later he had had to abandon those tactics and admit frankly why he had come. It was a shock for Aurelien, for although he had felt obscurely that there was something more behind this visit, it had not entered his head that Berenice might have seen the painter again alone, without him. Why had she gone to Blaise ? What had happened ? For Blaise had come with a message from her. He had seen her again, and more than once, during that very time when Aurelien had been unable to get hold of her because she was so taken up with Blanchette. So Berenice had wanted to see Blaise, had made an appointment with him and had a long talk. She had told him things that she had never told Aurelien. She had gone to see him again at his house and had taken him into her confidence. Blaise, Uncle Blaise, was the man to whom she had gone, while Aurelien was eating his heart out.

" Listen to me, my boy. I don't want to butt in and upset you—you know I don't make a habit of minding other people's business for them, hang it all. Have I ever tried to interfere with you ? No, I haven't. Well, then, there you are. It was all her doing. I didn't know it was a really

serious affair, either on her side or on yours. When I saw what it was leading up to, upon my soul, I told her I washed my hands of the whole thing."

He didn't know where to begin his story. Wretched and uneasy, he bit at his moustache. What emerged from his embarrassed explanations was that Berenice—or well, no, that wasn't it—Berenice had given him the task of telling Aurelien that she did not love him.

" Now don't get excited, give me a chance to talk ! That isn't it at all. Do I have to tell you all over again ? If you don't realise how it all began, you'll only get a wrong idea."

What was the good of trying to wrap it up, Aurelien wanted to know. " It's very decent of you, Uncle," he said, " trying to sugar the pill for me—softening the blow—but what's the use ? I've understood you well enough. Everything you've told me amounts to the same thing in the end, and a few details here and there won't make any difference."

" Pshah ! " Uncle Blaise exclaimed. " First of all I don't believe she means a word of it when she says she doesn't love you——"

" But she says she doesn't ! Isn't that enough ? "

" Don't be daft, laddie. Don't be daft. That's what she says, but what does that prove ? She says it so that I'll go and pass it on to you, because she can't screw up her courage to telling you herself. If she didn't love you, what would stop her telling you so ? "

" Do you mean to say you don't believe it ? And yet you come and tell me ? "

" Now, now, my dear boy ! Don't pull a face like that. I might have known you'd be cross with me, and Martha said as much."

" Oh, so Aunt Martha said that, did she ? "

" Don't be annoyed. I was so fed up, you see. Nobody likes being given jobs like that to do. But Berenice made me swear I would. And then I thought to myself, if I didn't

tell you, and what with the husband fellow being on the spot now, you might go and do something foolish."

"What did she make you swear?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. What I've been telling you. Do you *want* to make yourself miserable hearing it all over again?"

"She doesn't love me—that's what she says, isn't it? That's what she made you swear to tell me? The rest is just the seasoning. As far as the rest goes, you didn't have to swear to anything. And yet you don't believe her, Uncle Blaise! And you come and tell me that! First you tell me what she says, and then you tell me you don't believe it. Well, I don't believe it either. No, I don't believe it. She loves me. I tell you she loves me! Either I'm mad or she loves me."

He got up and walked up and down the room for a minute; then, picking up another log and throwing it on the fire, he sat down again, as if he were at the theatre, to watch the play of the flames as they devoured this fresh victim. Silence reigned for a while.

Then Uncle Blaise said:

"I say—would you like me to tell you what—well, I mean, shall I tell you the impression it all makes on me? If you like. ..."

And he nibbled at his moustache.

"Well?"

"It's like this. The first time we met, that time in the cafe, she was still fighting, she was trying to build up a defence, she was afraid of herself, and so she thought of a scheme in which she could make use of me. See what I mean?"

"Not exactly."

"It's quite obvious. Now listen. She was so sure of loving you that she had to tell someone she didn't love you. She couldn't tell you, of course, because she was afraid of hurting you."

"Afraid! And then she sends you along!"

" She didn't send me that time. She had to have someone to talk to, someone besides you. There wasn't anyone at home. She couldn't very well talk to her cousin Blanchette, could she ? It was only the second time, after Mme Barbentane's suicide——"

" But the first time—did she say she didn't love me ? "

" Oh yes, of course, of course. Only, if you see what I mean, I didn't believe it."

" And do you believe it now ? "

" Oh, no, no! I keep on trying to make you see that I *don't* believe it ! "

He was getting into deep waters, but Aurelien wouldn't help him. Aurelien felt his head burning, his feet like ice. He was running his fingers through his hair, biting his nails.

Gradually the two meetings began to form a clearer picture. The first time, in the cafe, Berenice had talked very calmly in spite of being very much afraid, as all women are naturally afraid when confronted with real love. She had in fact said that she didn't love Aurelien, or rather that she thought she didn't love him ; but everything in her attitude spoke to the contrary. Otherwise what could she possibly be afraid of ? Fundamentally she was afraid of yielding, of not being able to escape this fate which was overtaking her ; she was afraid of something stirring within herself of which she was no longer mistress. It was not that she had an exaggerated notion of what her yielding could mean to Aurelien. For if she had merely felt rather drawn to him, or if it had been a mere physical attraction, then where would there have been any reason for making such a fuss ? But it was far more serious than that. That was precisely the trouble. What she wanted to do was to hold up the course of this overpowering love ; and yet she could not bring herself to hurt Aurelien any more than she could bring herself to face the fiery ordeal already near enough to scorch her. The long and the short of it was that she could not bear to do without this heat

which was beginning to consume her ; she could not do any longer without this love. She believed in it, she believed in it desperately. And she was afraid, too, that it might die ; she was afraid of Aurelien's love dying, perhaps from lack of nourishment. She believed in him, but she also believed that she had it in her power to discourage and destroy him ; this was the idea that pursued and appalled her. For to her his love was something utterly rare, precious and beyond price. How could she refuse such a gift from fate, a gift such as is offered perhaps once but almost certainly never again ? She was tormented by the thought of refusing this love that she declared she did not share. So then she had come to Uncle Blaise, because Aurelien had told her that Blaise was his best friend. One of the things that made her want to talk to him was that through him she hoped to discover another aspect of Aurelien, some side of him that she did not know. Above all, she wanted to draw near to the seducing flames and circle round the danger that shed so brilliant a light.

" What I mean to say, my dear boy—she was singing a different tune."

She had not asked Uncle Blaise to say anything at all to Aurelien. On the contrary, she had asked him to regard their meeting as a secret between the two of them. Very likely she had harped so much on the fact that she would never be Aurelien's, only because she knew that she was on the brink of yielding to him. After all, Amberieux said, women are like that.

" But then how about the second time ? " Aurelien cried.

The old man raised one hand to calm him down, and then picked up the tongs to shift the logs and rearrange the embers underneath the wood. The flames were sinking.

" The second time she was very upset about Blanchette and all those goings-on. I don't think you quite realise what an effect it had on her. No, don't keep on interrupting me, confound you. I really don't know exactly what one ought

to believe, or whom one ought to believe, or what you've been up to. Damn it all, that's what I say, and I'd thank you not to look at me like that ! How do I know whether Blanchette was your mistress or not ? I'm not asking you anything about it. Very exasperating, this ' all for a woman's honour ' sort of thing you keep trotting out. Damn'ee, if you want to hear the whole story, then you must let me tell it my own way without picking holes in it. I said I don't know what you've been up to."

Aurelien shrugged.

" What it comes to is that the lady wanted to put an end to it all for the sake of your bright eyes. That's it, isn't it ? The rest can go hang. Well, that struck the little girl all of a heap, and there you are. They'd had a long talk about it just before. She gets ideas into her head, don't you know, she felt responsible. Then she blames herself for having done all kinds of things she shouldn't have done, and she promises her cousin, who is lying on her death-bed, never to see you again, and all that sort of tommy-rot."

" Damn it all, she came here yesterday morning ! "

" There's nothing so surprising about that. The fact is, her plan of action was queered. First of all she declared she wouldn't try to see you, and then what must happen but M. Morel arrives on the scene like a bull in a china shop. If it hadn't been for that she would have gone away, she would have put a safe distance between the two of you."

" Distance ! There are such things as railways. I would have gone after her."

" Now that's precisely what she begs you not to do. She can't believe that you would do such a thing to hurt her. That's another thing I promised to tell you, so I'm telling you."

" But she hasn't gone away. She was here yesterday, she came here. The devil of it was I had just gone out. Oh Lord ! "

" Leave the Lord out of it. So she came, ah yes. Perhaps she hadn't much confidence in my qualities as a bearer of messages."

" Yes, she came, but that isn't all. She brought that ! That! Do you understand what that means ? Not a bunch of violets she bought on the way, but that ! A mask she had had made—and certainly not for her husband. She had gone to the modeller, during these last few days, she left her cousin, who might be swallowing more veronal in the meantime, and went to the modeller. You don't imagine she went and had a portrait like that done for this husband of hers who had just turned up in Paris ? Do you know the husband ? No, neither do I. He's a chemist, keeps a shop somewhere down south. You don't expect him to go hanging up a death-mask of his wife in his drawing-room, do you ? Well, then ! What do you say to that ? "

Uncle Blaise regarded this big simpleton with affection. It would be nice if the whole thing would work out without the poor boy's having to go through too much. . . . He was certainly taking it hard. The old painter had only accepted the role of go-between because he was anxious that Aurelien should not have to suffer too much. His thoughts wandered back into the past, to Aurelien's mother and how unhappy she had been without letting anyone notice it—and Blaise himself, by God, how unhappy she had made him, too ! There was that evening when she had said to him : " Dear old Blaise, grit your teeth and listen to me—once and for all, I don't love you." But in that case it had been true, damnably true ; she had not loved him. She was in love with the other fellow, the fellow who had been so like Aurelien. That was in the days before Rose came on the scene—Melie, he called her. Yes, he had had the good fortune to get another chance and go through it all again.

" Does she pretend she loves her husband ? " the young man exclaimed suddenly.

Blaise shook his head.

" No, she's fond of him, she doesn't want to break his heart and spoil his life and all that. But that's not the same as loving him. Oh no, she doesn't love him."

Aurelien gave a great sigh. " So she doesn't want to see me again, and it isn't because of him ? Is it because of Blanchette ? That's incredible."

" In a way it's for Blanchette's sake, and for her husband's, and much more for her own sake."

Aurelien laughed scornfully. " Oh, I see. She's afraid of getting a shock. She doesn't want to be let down. She doesn't love me—well, what makes her so sure that she doesn't love me ? "

" But I tell you she does love you ! "

" Does she or doesn't she ? Why shouldn't she tell the truth about it ? But anyway I don't believe her. She loves me, I know she loves me ! She brought me that mask, and I've seen it in the eyes of the mask." Tears were running down his face. " So she forbids me to write to her or ring her up or go to see her, Uncle ? And she knows that I love her, and she doesn't even want me to stop loving her. ..."

" There's nothing on earth she's more afraid of than that. She's terrified that you might stop loving her."

" Well, then, what does she think is to become of me ? Oh, but she came here. God, how stupid of me, she told Mme Duvigne that she would come back another time."

" Well, perhaps she will come back."

" Perhaps ? How do you expect me to endure not knowing whether she will or not ? "

There was mingled curiosity and affection in the old man's eyes as he gazed at this stammering Aurelien with the breaking voice, so different from any Aurelien he had ever seen before. A devilish queer thing, love !

" My boy," Blaise said once more, " I've only one piece of advice to give you and it's advice you must take to heart,

The women you sleep with don't matter—what's damnable is the women you don't sleep with."

CHAPTER XLVIII

WAITING is terrible. There is only one thing worse, and that is to have given up waiting. Aurelien no longer knew whether he was expecting Berenice or whether he had given up all hope of her ever coming. On the one hand it was impossible to overlook the message Uncle Blaise had brought, or regard it as meaningless ; but it was equally impossible to avoid thinking how Berenice's visit, and the mask, was an utter contradiction. However it was, what was he going to do ? He felt suffocated. Solitude had become unbearable and his thoughts tormented him, but neither could he bear to go out and see other people—people who neither knew nor cared anything about it, who would talk of other things—Tom, Dick, and Harry. Or the other thing ? But nothing was more opposed to Aurelien's temperament than to take someone into his confidence, that last desperate resource of unhappy love, and pour out his heart. Besides, in whom could he confide ? Who were his friends ? He could not consider Edmond as a friend, especially in these circumstances. Neither Charles Honfrey nor Jacques Schoelzer came into question. He felt so utterly alone that he thought for a moment of his old chief, Maitre Bergette. He even thought of looking up Fuchs—what more could be said ? Then there were the women. Diane or Mary—why not ? The telephone was too great a temptation ; he dialled Diane's number. She was not at home, which was only to be expected since she had taken up with Jacques. And he did not ring Mary, for he had not sufficient confidence in her discretion; after

all, it was pretty obvious that fundamentally she preferred Edmond to him.

If it had only been spring, then he would have gone out into the country—anywhere at all—to walk, and climb and lose his way. But it was cold, dirty, gloomy weather. How was he to kill time, how was he to live through the intolerable days that now stretched out before him and yet seemed to dawn so slowly? One thing was certain, he could not stay at home much longer; he could no longer endure the sight of his two rooms, could not bear their dreary atmosphere and the everlasting sameness of the furniture, the unreadable books, the stupefying fire, the daily interview with Mme Duvigne—and above all, oh, more than anything else, he could not endure the sight of that white mask, the death-mask, continual reminder of love and its mortality. Yet he was afraid to go out, in case by some wild chance Berenice should come and he would not be there. Well, it couldn't be helped. Nothing mattered except to get out of all this. Now, with that peculiar sharpness of sensation which usually comes only in the early morning, just before one wakes, Aurelien felt the utter emptiness of his life. Up till now he had believed, more or less, that he was doing something, at least cheating death; fools might think he was a complete wastrel, but actually. . . . After all, he mixed with people, he liked listening to them and summing up, a shade cynically, the world in which he and they lived, he liked entering into the little stirrings on the surface of this world, guessing the while at profounder dramas lying below the surface, and all the time sharing the fun of it all. Some of his adventures were in the nature of explorations and discoveries. From time to time he would set out on his travels, letting himself drift wherever fancy and circumstances wafted him, free and delirious out of reaction from this sultry and irresponsible era that followed the war—for peace was another kind of muffled war beneath the skin. How hollow, how futile that dilettante

existence now seemed. There was nothing that he wanted, not even the warmth of the sun. What on earth had happened ? " One sole being you lack and all the world is bare." That line of Lamartine's, in his memory linked with the thought of Charles Honfrey, rose up in his mind again like anger returning. Ah, had it really come to that ?

He could always ask himself to dinner wth the Honfreys. He thought of young Mme Honfrey and the conversation about fluctuations on the Stock Exchange. Charles would ask him again why he didn't buy Mexican Eagle or something of the sort. No, there was only one person he could have put up with, and that was Dr. Decoeur. Jicky, as his wife called him, was just such another miserable wretch as himself. Then he thought: what a bloody depressed pair of bastards we'd be together—what a blubbering ! The thought of Decoeur suddenly disgusted him, violently unfair though he knew it was. But that shell-fish love of Decoeur's—oh no, no thanks ! Putting up with anything, everything, like that—endless suffering. . . . It was as if he stood on the brink of a deep, black water, and the thought of the plunge made him shudder. Ah, had it really come to that ?

Abruptly he decided to dress, as if he were going out to dinner. Overcome by the idea that he was ill-shaven, he ran the razor over his cheeks again. Then he met his eyes reflected in the three-sided mirror, and was shocked to see the deathly gaze that met his own. His eyes were bloodshot, the lids shadowed with blue, and there was sweat on his temples. He put on powder, a thing he had never done before.

When he had finished dressing and was encased in the ceremonial garments, he looked at himself again. Well, now for the stiff upper lip. He must behave as if—well, as if what ? By now he was succeeding pretty well in avoiding the thought of that woman (" that woman " was how he put

it to himself), as long as he did not see the mask. He took the mask down from the wall, intending to put it away in a cupboard; and there he stood with it in his hands, gazing at it.

After a while he laid it behind his ties, among the handkerchiefs. Once he had shut the cupboard door on it, he raised his eyes again to the empty wall and wondered whether he had just committed an act of treason. No, that was absurd, simply absurd. The point was to avoid suffering—that was the main thing.

He dined at Maxim's. In the front room people were dancing, to the sound of the band in the room at the back. The tables all round him were crowded, there were large parties of people jostling chairs and elbows, and at the bar there were the usual women and the well-known faces. Why had he come here ? Perhaps because he liked the old-style blind, rolled up and tied back with tasselled strings, giving the effect of underclothes, and the modern decorations, in which the chestnut leaf was the leitmotiv ; and because he felt the need of noise and such conventional surroundings as these carpets and lights and the obsequious head waiter ; because he wanted to convince himself that this, after all, was the society he belonged to, this system that continues to function regardless of defeats and victories, the verge of the theatrical world and the Jockey Club. He had to let himself be borne away on this current. And then again, here were the smart and expensive women who would look at him wondering if he would pay or if they would have to, the meaningless women with their clear complexions, luminous shoulders and beautiful creamy hands. Was that it ? In any case, he had come a little too early. He was already drinking his coffee and savouring the brandy, when Diane came in with Jacques Schoelzer and two well dressed men whose hair was turning grey.

" Oh, Aurelien ! " Diane exclaimed, giving him her hand to kiss.

"I say, old man," Schoelzer exclaimed, " since when have you adopted tart's habits ? Dinner over at this time of day ? Come and finish your brandy at our table/"

He made excuses, saying that he had to meet somebody, which was the reason for having dined so early.

" Ah," said Diane, "just the same old Aurelien ! I'm prepared to bet that this somebody has bright eyes worth gazing into."

The arrival of Diane and her friends had unsettled him again, and he was seized with the feeling that it was quite impossible to join their party. It seemed to him that Diane looked inexpressibly lovely and inane. Jacques wasn't worth mentioning.

He went off to the cinema by himself. It was an ordinary little picture house on the boulevards, where a three-man band was awaiting the moment to chime in with a ring of bells as the ship entered Shanghai harbour. The film was a love story, of course, about a tall, dark woman in floating veils, who crossed her legs at every possible opportunity, and a young man who rolled his eyes. After that came a comedy, one of those vaudeville things which are as pathetic as the little cardboard flats in which the story takes place, with the rich old maiden aunts, the girl friends hiding in the wardrobe, and so forth. The band became cheerful to the point of missing out notes in order to play faster.

And what was he to do next ? Out on the pavement at ten o'clock, Aurelien hesitated, wondering whether to go home again. How silly to dress for nothing. He plunged into another cinema a few streets farther on.

Here things were on a grander scale. There w^rere not many people in the audience, but in spite of the usherette's lamp guiding him to a seat, Aurelien stumbled over feet in the darkness. He did not like being too near the front. Once he was seated, it was some time before he could disentangle the American story flashing on the screen. All the women

were so alike that he could not tell one from the other, and he did not know whether the stout man was the husband or why the little girl had been killed. Neither the red subtitles nor the blaring music made things any clearer. It was all damn sentimental—the young couple meeting in a city park, against a horizon of sky-scrapers—and how trim the park was, with its tidy paths and flower beds, and the unemployed and the lovers all over the place.

Aurelien had to get to his feet to let someone else past. The new arrival was an over-perfumed woman, who sat down beside him. He realised immediately what the game was.

When he left the cinema, thoroughly disgusted with himself, he was overwhelmed by despair, mingled with a vague sense of guilt. The whole thing was senseless, quite pointless. He loathed the animal in himself. How easy it was to start it up. . . . He wandered into Montmartre, brushed against by the street women, and the cries of the newspaper sellers ringing in his ears. It was not raining, which was something to be thankful for. Here the cafes cast a glaring white light out on to the street, and there was no need to choose ; he walked into that alcoholic brilliance and there, leaning against the bar, drinking glass after glass, he got drunker than he had ever been in his life. He was sick and tired of himself, utterly sick and tired.

CHAPTER XLIX

THE gallery was quite different by daylight, empty of the crowds that had come to the pre-view ; so different indeed that it was hard to believe this was the same exhibition. Aurelien, in the tight-fitting waisted overcoat that was the

fashion then, hat in hand and with the ferrule of his umbrella under his arm, felt like an outcast in this silence ; there was no sound but the whispering of a couple of passers-by who had happened to drop in and the squeaking pen with which the woman with the scraped-back hair was writing, at her table in the entrance hall where she mounted guard. The eccentric pictures no longer seemed eccentric ; it was as if he had got used to them and they had become pictures like any others, only rather too many for the wall space on which they were crowded together. In the room on the left, where the lights had already been switched on, the electricity broke up the colours, giving a white-lead touch to the white, unpainted areas of paper in the water-colours and the edges of drawings which strove to break into the realms of genius by imitating the tics, the mannerisms, and the wildness of genius.

Here Aurelien found what he was looking for. Profoundly troubled, with a tightness round his heart, he went up to that drawing that was like uncanny outlines glimpsed at through mist, the ambiguous interplay of two faces that were one face. The drawing struck him as thick and muddy. Was it really as like as he had thought ? He noticed that his wet shoes had left marks on the grey pile carpet, and he felt rather like a burglar. What precisely was he afraid of ? He turned round, glancing behind him, only to see that no one was paying any attention to him in his embarrassment. So he felt free to take his time and consider this Berenice whom Zamora had portrayed doubly on this canvas, fixing her there like a butterfly run through with a pin. How disillusioning every picture of her was ! It was so not only with these two superimposed sketches ; he felt the same about the real mask, the mask hanging on his wall at home. It was the real, the true mask, and yet just as false as these images of her here. The strange thing was that Zamora seemed to have stated his own criticism in bringing these two pictures into co-existence,

each denying the validity of the other. It was a confession of helplessness ; he could not solve the problem. Nor was it a problem that confronted only the painter. . . . The elusive Berenice, the will-o'-the-wisp.

Aurelien was becoming irritated with himself for looking at the picture so long. " Anyway," he grumbled to himself, " it's a rotten piece of drawing." But he lost himself again in the network of the overlapping lines, until all resemblance evaporated. Then suddenly it came back again, so that he almost believed the portrait lived and breathed, and for the first time he read in the open eyes that same look of despair he knew so well from the other face with the eyes closed. What was this, what was happening ? Was this an invention of Zamora's, a taste for the tragic—or was it the truth ? Was it possible that the painter had seen something that he, Aurelien, had never noticed ? He heard someone laughing in the next room. Some young men had come, students from the Beaux-Arts, who thought the whole thing no end of a joke. He moved away from the portrait of Berenice, and pretended to be looking at something else ; indeed, he had seen practically nothing the other night at the private view. Not that he cared about the rest. . . .

The portrait was like a magnet, drawing him back again from the other side of the room. He realised that he had half-forgotten how the criss-cross of the interlacing lines went, and he went back to fill his eyes once more with the duality of that loved face. And standing there, gazing at it like this, he suddenly realised what the quality was that lay in those closed eyes, and what it was that . . . Ah, the secret was too simple : it was like those toy boxes with a glass lid, under which grains of mercury run about, which one has to tip this way and that until they all fall into place in little holes, and a picture appears ; it seems very difficult, but once one has got the knack of it, there is nothing in it.

" Get an eye-ful of this ! " he heard a clear, boyish voice

exclaim just behind him. " Talk about squinting—my hat!"

Aurelien turned round to look at the lad, whose cherubic face was adorned with a tiny goatee beard ; he who wore a grey tie with narrow blue stripes, carried a green portfolio under his arm, and a pipe that looked as if it must have been painted on between his thumb and forefinger, since a child like that could scarcely know how to smoke. There were three others of the same brand, and one of them, pointing to Berenice, said in a voice that was not yet quite broken and as affected as his tie :

" This chap thinks he can draw like Ingres, and he only makes a mess like Luc-Olivier Merson."

Aurelien shrugged. He would have liked to put these young rascals across his knee and spank them. But he tugged at his collar, settling his coat on his shoulders, fixed his umbrella more firmly under his crooked arm, and went out into the main hall. Then he hesitated for a moment before approaching the lady with the scraped-back hair, who was neither dark nor fair, old nor young, and whose garments came straight out of a Burne-Jones picture. The only remarkable feature in the face she raised to him was a snub nose ; her skin was sallow and she wore too dark a lipstick.

" Excuse me," Aurelien said, " I should like to know the price of number fifty-seven."

With a faint shudder of her snub nose the lady accorded the customer a smile such as might more fittingly have been shed on a lying-in-state, and apparently remembering that she had a tendency to lose her hairpins, groped searchingly up the back of her neck. Then she rose in her seat, hazarding a guess :

" Number fifty-seven, number fifty-seven—just a moment, please. I must ask the manager. Monsieur Marco Polo ! Monsieur Marco Polo ! "

M. Marco Polo issued from a small door concealed behind

an imitation tapestry portraying a flowery hunting scene. He was a fat man, scented, bulging out of his clothes, with grey in what remained of his hair and a clipped moustache that looked like a little aeroplane pinned on under his nose. He wore an expression of amazement and perplexity. As a rule he sold eighteenth century engravings, coloured prints in the English manner, modern paintings of naked women encircled by serpents, and that sort of thing. Zamora's show was not quite his line of country, but he was glad enough of it, since it was not often that big money came his way.

" Fifty-seven, fifty-seven, let me see. That would be the * Ovaries In the Place of the Heart/ I think. Everyone wants to buy that picture. Not that ? Oh, how silly of me, of course not. The * Portrait of Madame M.,' quite, quite. The ' Portrait of Madame M.' I don't know if it's for sale. Arc you the gentleman who was going to call in again ? Madame Belly-Fontaine ! "

The lady started up from amongst her papers. " Yes, M. Marco Polo ? "

" Madame Belly-Fontaine, did the gentleman come back who said he was going to call in again about the portrait of Madame M. ? "

" What gentleman ? " Mme Belly-Fontaine said primly. " I don't know what you mean." She tightened her sultana coloured lips.

" You see, my dear sir," M, Marco Polo sighed, " one gets no help. How am I to know now ? If that gentleman came back and I wasn't there. . . . He hadn't actually bought it, of course, but. . . ."

" Yes, but what price is the portrait ? "

" I must just look it up in my book. If you don't mind, sir. . . ."

M. Marco Polo went through a good deal of hocus-pocus before producing a long black notebook, which contained a

list of prices entered in hieroglyphics more complicated than the combination of a safe. He translated them into comprehensible terms, murmuring :

" Yes, I thought so," while he calculated the cost of Aurelien's overcoat and umbrella and the silk band on the hat he carried in his hand. " Yes, that is exactly five thousand francs. Five thousand. There you are, sir."

It was an exorbitant price, both for Zamora and for Aurelien, who had expected something in the region of fifteen hundred. Or rather, he had not thought about the price at all. It was a pity. Then suddenly he felt his face growing hot with shame, at the thought that he was bargaining over Berenice.

" That is the fixed price ? " he asked.

M. Marco Polo exclaimed that the price was indeed fixed, if the picture had not been sold already and if—in short, what did one get for five thousand francs in these days ? And a Zamora, what was more ! Then the little man broke off his protestations, thunderstruck, as the customer took out his cheque book and fountain-pen.

^{il} Do I make it out to M. Marco Polo ? "

That was correct. The picture would be conveyed to Aurelien's house immediately the exhibition closed, in another fortnight, or rather, seventeen days.

" Shall I cross it ? "

" If you wish, sir, it doesn't matter. And the address ? "

M. Marco Polo couldn't get over the astonishing deal he had made. He bustled about, waving the cheque between his be-ringed fingers, and when the customer had left, he cried:

" Madame Belly-Fontaine ! Madame Belly-Fontaine ! "

She tore herself away from her register, as though at the sound of her alarm clock going off in the early morning.

" Madame Belly-Fontaine, kindly put a ' Sold ' label on number fifty-seven at once. Immediately. Number fifty-seven—Sold. It makes the right impression."

CHAPTER L

" I AM writing to you," the letter said, " because I can't bear this silence any longer."

Aurelien had found the letter when he came in that evening. It was the second time he had seen Berenice's handwriting, which disturbed him as though it were yet another aspect of her mysterious face. The writing was large and untidy-looking, yet always in straight lines and with more space between the lines than the height of the letters warranted. It was not at all a typical woman's handwriting and had none of those traces of a well brought up little girl's school-days that somehow go to form the character of a modern woman's handwriting. It was an oddly dishevelled handwriting, with breezes blowing through it and now and then something like a flutter of the heart. When Aurelien began to read it, the unfamiliar letters danced before his eyes and he was too much upset to understand what he was reading ; he had to force himself to keep to the point and realise that this was really Berenice talking to him, with this blue ink on paper faintly tinged with pale green, like shallow water. The only question was—which Berenice was talking ? The woman with the open eyes, or she whose eyes were closed ? However it might be, still it was Berenice.

" At first I thought that if I didn't write to you it would be like going to sleep ; for when one sleeps soundly, one is happy. But you see, I am sleeping badly. Or rather, it's a kind of insomnia. I can't stop thinking about you ; I can't think about anything else. I have gone into this silence and it is stifling me. Not hearing you simply means that I don't hear anything at all. I would never have believed such a thing could happen. I have sworn never to see you again, but when the mask came I couldn't help it, I had to bring it myself. It might have got broken, there was nobody else

to take it, oh, there were plenty of reasons why I had to bring it. I decided I would leave it with the caretaker. But he was out, he had pinned up one of those little notices outside. So I went up. You weren't there. Your charwoman told me you had just gone out. So I had kept my word after all. I haven't got over it yet. I oughtn't to be writing to you, either, and I keep telling myself that I shall tear this letter up, I'm not really going to send it. That gives me a despairing courage and so I don't mind your knowing that I am crying. Aurelien, Aurelien, it's all more than I can bear !

" Sometimes I feel quite wild and crazy and my head goes round, when I think of the terrible message I asked Uncle Blaise to bring you. That was at the beginning ; I was still carried away and buoyed up by my mad promise. Blanchette is so appallingly unhappy ! Thinking about that made me believe that I had only lost my head about you and that it would be all right if I held on to myself. Besides, I felt a frenzy of self-sacrifice, and so I really meant what I said when I told M. Amberieux that I didn't love you. And I'm sure he believed me. Didn't he tell you that ? But now I'm frightened. I'm afraid that you might have believed it too, and I'm afraid of making you unhappy, and afraid of losing you. Oh no, it's impossible—my love, my love !

" What a relief it is to write it down like that—*my lore*. Yes, it wasn't true—I do love you. I won't tear this letter up, because I've written in it that I love you. Either I'll keep it by me or I'll send it to you. What is right and what is wrong ? Blanchette must live, because of the children. My cousin believes that she is jealous of him, but when she tried to do it again as soon as she was slightly better, and I knew why, because of all she had told me that night, I felt like a murderer and struggled with her, I had to take hold of her and snatch the tubes of veronal away from her. She said : * Let me die, let me die !' I wrung a promise from her that she wouldn't do it again. But then I owed her something in

return. At the moment it struck me as quite natural and I really thought I could do it.

" Being confronted with her death made a coward of me. I have been a coward about our life too. Perhaps, my love, you will hate me now. Perhaps I have quite lost you and you will despise me, and that lie and then the denial of the lie will only sicken you and make you go away from me. I can't bear the idea of it. No one in the world can imagine what your love, our love, means to me, even although we may never see each other again and if you never take my hand in yours again. Never in my life did anything mean so much to me, and nothing will ever mean so much again. When I saw you for the first time, I was desperate. I pretended to laugh and to be interested in all sorts of things. But I was really dead. There was no sense and no aim in my life. I was only pretending to be alive. I had stopped believing in anything. I was being eaten away by a hopeless feeling that I was to be alone for ever. I just lived from day to day, keeping appointments and doing whatever turned up. I was only alive because I had been born. That was all. Everything I hoped for as a child and a girl had gradually altered and the colour faded out of it; and there was no chance that my life would change—for what could happen to cause a change? I even almost began to believe in those little variations of detail that make up a woman's fate. What it is that makes women happy? Having pretty dresses, living in town instead of in the country—or what? I didn't believe in that any more than in all the rest. Before that, I had thought I was in love, but when I realised my mistake, I swore to myself that I would never admit the mistake to anyone but myself and at least make another person happy, since there was no chance of it for me. For the sort of love that I had dreamed of was mere imagination and only existed in books. It could never happen to me.

" If ever I am mad enough to send you this letter, you

must realise that it is because I trust you to burn it—you will destroy it at once. The mere fact of writing all this to you is crazy. I never dared to think it in so many words before and admit it to myself. It isn't merely a matter of Blanchette, you must realise that, Aurelien. Blanchette simply waked up my conscience, which I was trying to suppress and really had lost for a while. Blanchette is the person to whom I made the promise, she is the person \who extorted that dreadful guarantee from me, but still it isn't only a matter of Blanchette or of her life or of her children. Though when I think about the little girls, it wrings my heart. Children are something I feel dreadfully deeply about—they didn't ask to be born and we——"

(Here a whole paragraph had been crossed out and patiently blacked over, so that Aurelien could not distinguish the words of which there remained only a few tendrils of an 1 or an f, the extremities of a secret.)

" I would rather not talk about that. But there is Lucien. You don't know him. You don't know what he has meant to me ; above all, liberty, and then the intoxication of being young and alive, of being someone in one's own right. He was the first person who spoke to me as a human being, giving me another outlook on to the world than the mournful horizons surrounding life in my father's house. And another thing, between Lucien and me there is the shadow of my father and his unhappiness. I don't know how much you may have remembered of those long stories I told you about my childhood, and the house, and how my mother went away. It is difficult to be fair. Since I began to love you—oh it's extraordinary to think that I write *since I began to love you* as if it were the most natural thing in the world, just as if I were saying *since I got my first wisdom tooth*—since I began to love you, Aurelien, I have come to doubt a number of things. All my youth I gave everything to that furious, silent, unhappy father of mine who poisoned my life. I

always had the memory of how I said, 'Go away' to my mother, with all the romantic feelings of a little girl with her head full of fairy tales. I was in love with love, I was always on the side of love against everyone and everything, and above all against my father, my hated father. But I had never loved, all I knew about it was what it was like being unhappy. Later on, I changed, I understood. I realised that my father with that black mood of his which, until his dying day, never yielded, and the storm in his heart that never died down, had real love—*that* was love. My mother had gone aw^ray in the name of love, but did she really love ? I don't know at all. I only know that my father loved her irrevocably. I understood that when I didn't see you any more, Aurclien, my darling.

" Has anyone the right to do that to anyone else ? Have I the right to do it to you ? But who knows if you love me like that. . . . As for Lucien, he loves me in his fashion. He doesn't know, he can't know, that that fashion differs from any other, or that there is any other kind of love, that there is *love*. Yet if I were to go away and leave him, in the name of love, I know that nothing would ever efface my memory from his mind as long as he lived. And his life would be finished. I am his youth, the moment that decided everything for him. Since then he has changed terribly and dramatically. He can't go back through his life and be again what he was before. With me he has used up, at one blow, all his capacity for happiness, and if I went away. . . . Oh, you don't know him, Aurelien, you can't understand what I mean. But I am thinking of the father I hated with all the strength a child has for hating anyone, and I am thinking of the injustice I did him through not understanding what had happened to him; and then I don't want Lucien some day to be like him, as unhappy all his life long on my account, in that grief that has no end. That was what my father did to me. He didn't love me, or at any rate, he made

me think that he didn't love me, for to him I was a dreadful reminder of his wife, who had gone away with someone else. But at any rate he had me there to hate, and that is only another kind of love and means that one is still alive. I cannot bear to think of Lucien all alone. My poor Lucien. I have no child to leave him.

" And am I then going to be harder on you than on him ? Aurelien. . . . What makes me able to take a stand against ourselves is the very fact that for me you are so much stronger and handsomer and more attractive than he is. You are loved—yes, even if you don't want the love which is offered you. And then I love you too. You will be loved. You won't be alone.

" That thought is worse than all the rest. I won't send this letter. I love you too much. But I had to tell you, I couldn't leave you with that lie. I love you, I love you, Aurelien, I shall always love you. Good-bye, my love, good-bye, don't try to see me. I shall never forget you. I shall never forget you. I shall think of you all the time, when other people are there, in the street, everywhere. I shall never love anyone but you. Good-bye. At least one consolation is left to our love, that nothing can ever spoil it. Aurelien, for the first and last time I put my arms round you and hold you tight against me, my sweet, my sweet, my love. . . ."

CHAPTER LI

AURELIEN didn't really know why he did what he did now. In the whirl of emotion raging as he threw Berenice's letter down, he told himself over and over again that he would keep away; and each time he changed his mind again. In the end he could not help himself; he gave way to his nervous

impatience and the urge to see Berenice once more. So there he was now at Edmond's front door in the rue Raynouard, face to face with a footman in white cotton gloves, who answered his query by saying that Monsieur was not at home and neither was Madame. And Mme Morel ? Mme Morel had gone out with Madame, but if M. Leurtillois wished to see M. Morel. . . . Hastily Aurelien began to beat a retreat, when a door at the end of the hall opened and a rather small, fat man appeared, buttoned up in a grey suit that was too light for the time of year, and holding out his left hand.

" M. Leurtillois ! Do come in. I'm delighted to make your acquaintance. I've heard so much about you. I am Mme Morel's husband."

There was something slightly grotesque and nerve-racking about this sudden appearance. Aurelien didn't know how to make his escape. Thoroughly uncomfortable, he had begun by stammering something about not butting in ; then he felt that he was making himself ridiculous and, letting the other man have his way, followed him into the drawing-room. As Morel stood aside to let him go through the door first, Aurelien noticed a physical detail which had not struck him at once : Berenice's husband had his right sleeve pinned back on his coat, empty,

" Sit down, M. Leurtillois, make yourself comfortable."

" I happened to be passing and I dropped in to see Edmond for a moment on business—•—"

" Yes, I know, I know, I've heard all about it. My cousin isn't at home. But I'm really very glad of the opportunity—•—" And so on.

There was nothing to be done but to sit down, and while the usual conventional phrases were being exchanged, Aurelien surveyed Lucien Morel. He was surprised, and beneath the surprise there lurked something like distress. " I've heard so much about you. . . ." That's what every one says, of course, but it disturbed him to imagine the

conversations in which his name must have been uttered in the husband's hearing. Where was the beginning and where was the end of the lie ?

Lucien Morel must have been about twenty-six, but he was already going a little bald in front, the shining, dark red hair brushed back from his forehead, and his body was that of a little, tubby animal. Indeed, if it hadn't been for the childlike expression on his face, the pouting lips, wide round eyes and tiptilted nose, he might have been taken for at least thirty. He was not really ugly ; it was only that his rather oily skin, especially shiny round the nostrils and the temples, and the unusually thick, brown eyelashes, made him seem to be bursting with good-fellowship. On his cheeks there was still a somewhat obvious trace of white powder, doubtless one of his own wares. He was a neat man, at any rate so far as his appearance went. What struck Aurelien as odd was that Berenice should never have mentioned the amputated arm.

" Are you staying in Paris for long, M. Morel ? " Aurelien asked, and was immediately afraid of having betrayed himself with this conventional query. He was cursing himself for having been such a fool as to come here at all.

" We're leaving straight after the New Year. Actually Berenice was just saying that she was so sorry not to have seen you again."

" I've been very busy the last few days. But I was hoping——•"

" Of course, we quite understand. Berenice was sorry to have missed you, though, because really you've been very good to her during her stay in Paris and she needed a change badly."

This was intolerable. And into the bargain, he couldn't stop his gaze from straying towards the empty sleeve. Aurelien was not good at making conversation at the best of times ; he was not much of a talker—he had little talent for

that sort of thing. And what was he to say to Lucien Morel, of all men ? Yet the other man seemed remarkably at ease ; there was no way of knowing whether he was a hypocrite or merely simple-minded.

" I'm very glad," he was saying, " that we're taking the little girls. Berenice is very fond of children."

" You're taking the little girls back with you ? " Aurelien repeated, for the sake of saying something.

" Yes, Edmond and Blanchette are going to the winter sports, and they're leaving the children with us. I'm particularly glad about it for Berenice's sake. She would so much have liked to have children." He sighed and passed his hand across his forehead. Then he looked at Leurtillois with that naive, kindly air that was so embarrassing, and added :

" I sometimes wonder whether we oughtn't to adopt a child. As things are, Berenice isn't happy. No, she's not happy." He sighed again. " Perhaps you're wondering why I should tell you this ? It's not so strange, really. You know, they've all told me such a lot about you that I've begun to feel that I know you, M. Leurtillois. But here I am talking about my affairs, instead of giving you news of Blanchette. She is quite better, really quite all right now."

" I was thinking she must be. I heard she had gone out."

" Yes, she went out for the first time several days ago. She is getting along nicely, still a little unsteady, but it's all over now. Of course she is still very quiet, very quiet indeed, even depressed. It will do her good to be up in the mountains—fresh air, snow . . . Shall I tell her you called to ask about her ? "

" Oh, yes, of course, do. Please do."

" I'll tell her. Or rather, Berenice will tell her. She is still so liable to be upset, you know, and women have more understanding. Berenice will be very pleased that you called. You know, Berenice doesn't know her mind. I used to think that

she didn't care for Blanchette at all. And now, as things have turned out—•—"

The dreadful discretion in which this man veiled his utterances betrayed to what extent they were all at cross-purposes. All that Morel knew about Aurelien concerned Blanchette. As Aurelien realised this, Berenice's duplicity pierced his mind like sharp beams of light. He imagined her living in this sumptuous house from day to day, alongside this husband of hers who had turned up at the worst possible moment, and Blanchette going out of her mind, Edmond ironical, and the ghastly game of hide-and-seek that must be going on every moment of the day and night.

"I'm sorry," Aurelien said uneasily, and had to stop and clear his throat, "not to have found Edmond at home. It's very hard to get hold of him these days."

"Yes, isn't it? I've hardly seen him since I came. But he has told me about the Melrose products. I know you're interested in it, too."

"Well. . . ."

"It's yet another bond between us, my dear sir. I must inform you that I have accepted. Yes, indeed, I have accepted," and he raised his forefinger comically. "So we're both in the same boat, M. Leurtillois. It should turn out very well—and then of course, my cousin is an excellent business man. You were at the front with him, I believe?"

Aurelien had to admit that this was so, and the chemist plunged into a diatribe against war. Aurelien thought he had heard most of the phrases before. He interrupted politely:

"It's all right for a man like yourself to say that sort of thing. . . ."

Morel stopped short, taken aback. Then he glanced down at his sleeve and exclaimed gaily:

"A man like me? Oh, that! Well, you can call that a

war wound, in a way. Really it was more of an accident. I don't suppose Berenice ever told you about it ? The fact is, it was a shell falling on Paris, a Big Bertha, as I was going along the street to buy my newspapers at the kiosk in front of the gare de l'Est. The result is the same, I suppose—but there's nothing very gallant about it."

Then he leaned forward with a keen look, asking : " Tell me—Berenice never said anything about my arm, did she ? No, I thought not. In fact I would have bet on it. My wife is funny that way, she never tells people, and when they meet me I can see in it their faces—they're so surprised."

Aurelien gazed at him in astonishment. He was startled both by what he had heard and by himself, for the horror the little man aroused in him. There are hundreds of men like that, going about without anyone taking particular notice of them, with a wife and family at home, sitting beside one in the bus, and so on. But the tie between himself and Berenice cast a peculiar light on this young, wheezy animal here, with his shiny complexion, stained teeth, his portliness and short-windedness, and turned him into a nightmare for Aurelien. There he was, complete with feet, belly, secretions, eating, feeling the heat, laughing too easily. And then Aurelien's gaze fell once more on that sleeve, so that he had to stifle a thought that leapt into his mind and sickened him with himself for being capable of thinking such a thing at all.

Morel was still repeating that Berenice would be sorry to have missed Aurelien—the Barbentanes, too, of course, but especially Berenice who had so much wanted to see him. And he wasn't to forget to look them up if he were in their part of the country ; it wasn't a large house, but there was always a bed for a friend. In a word, it was an open invitation.

As Aurelien went down the stairs he felt himself choking with hysterical mirth.

CHAPTER LII

" DOING ten or eleven pylons a day—that's some job, I can tell you. And they call that not getting on with the work ! Every time you've got to shift the stuff—the heavy jacks and all the tools. Of course there's a machine coming along behind for the concrete, but it's bad enough. I'm on the Saint-Etienne-Grenoble stretch."

The waiters were taking away the soup plates. The golden light poured down on the tables, where the guests had already broken the ice as people do after the aperitif (in this case a beaujolais) and a look at the menu. The banquet was taking place at the back of a restaurant that overlooked Paris and all those rooftops muffled in darkness ; but this could not be seen, for the green curtains had been drawn between the party and the outer world. The public part of the restaurant, where the cash desk was and the usual customers sat at their little tables, was half empty ; but the sound of raised voices giving their orders could be heard through the curtains, and the waiters had to come that way with their loaded trays for *The Dug-Out*. The guests must have numbered twenty-five or thirty. At the back stood a sideboard and an upright piano.

Fuchs, red-whiskered and by now crimson in the face, with his collar rising to his chin, stood up and said to his neighbour, the public works contractor, a big man with a wart on his cheek and huge black lashes :

" Get down to your grub, Chapelain. You can throw your weight about later on. Waiter, the Juran\$on—for Christ's sake, the Jurangon ! " There was a clatter of forks on china.

" I didn't know this pub before," said the big dark fellow at the end of the long table. He had untidy straight hair, with a streak of grey in it, a little moustache and a high

colour. He turned his unequal, brilliant eyes on his left-hand neighbour.

" I beg your pardon," the other said in a gentle voice that contrasted with his athletic build, and he bent his fair head, with the frizzy hair and wide eyes, at the same time fingering the scrap of gingery moustache on his upper lip. " I beg your pardon, I didn't catch your name. I didn't know you in the mess——•"

" Dupuy, Stephane Dupuy," the dark man said. " I wasn't in your regiment. I belonged to divisional artillery, but I knew Fuchs before the war."

With a characteristic gesture, lifting one eyebrow, he threw back the hair that kept flopping forward over his brow. A sound chap, the real gunner type, always scrapping, and those thick lips that didn't quite close over the white teeth, the continual little laugh accompanied by a movement of the shoulders—so his companion summed him up, and replied :

" Well, I wasn't there, either. It was a mere fluke counting me as a footslogger. I was a dragoon, discharged in 'sixteen. Marsolleau's the name, Lieutenant Marsolleau, second battalion, first of all in Millet's company. That's Millot over there, see him ? He's in the chair. Captain Millot. Then I was intelligence officer under Commandant Pierre-guise. Ah, that was a bit different ! Between you and me, Millot. . . . Pity the Commandant couldn't come this evening."

There was bedlam from the clamour of so many conversations. Every one was laughing and calling out to someone else. The five glasses in front of each guest were constantly tinkling and ringing against each other. People waved to each other down the length of the table, making private toasts, and one way and another there was a good deal of confusion.

A tall, thin man with a waxed moustache, sitting next to

Chapelain, with his napkin tucked into his waistcoat, had been waving his hands about excitedly as he talked. Suddenly he choked, and the others clapped him on the back and gave him a drink.

" Well, I'm damned," Marsolleau said, as he noticed this, " so there's Blanchard ! Funny idea, that."

" Who is he ? " Dupuy asked.

" Oh, an N.C.O. Nothing much, either." He stroked his moustache and changed the subject.

" No," Dupuy began again, " I didn't know this pub. Not bad, stuck up here on the steps, right by Sacre-Coeur. That bastard Fuchs gets his nose into everything."

" He used to be like that in the trenches," Marsolleau sniffed. " His dearly beloved rag is supposed to be doing pretty well, too. We're quite proud of having had it born among our lot, back in the old days."

" Oh, Fuchs is a real business man. Nobody seems to know how *The Dug-Out* gets sold, but it does sell all right. Masses of subscribers in the colonies, for instance, officials who're fed up to the teeth and haven't anything else to do but read. How he got hold of them, God knows, but it doesn't matter a hoot, does it ? The main thing is, it sells."

" Do you think so ? " Cusse de Ballante called out across the table. He was the big fellow who looked like a publican. " Then why doesn't he pay his illustrators, eh ? Our little Foxy ! He owes me hundreds, thousands ! "

At the other end, Lemoutard, the policeman from the Public Morals Department, already half-seas-over, was insisting on doing a turn for the general entertainment, and as he inclined to gloom and sentimental reminiscence when in his cups, he struck up to the tune of " *Sous les ponts de Paris* " :

" *Au pont de Minaucourt. . . .*"

He was shouted down and told to be quiet. It was a

swarthy, scrubby little man, comically bald and very pink in the cheeks, who called him to order, in a strong accent that proclaimed that he came from the Midi.

" *Mon capitaine*" stammered Lemoutard, sitting down again.

" Who's that ? " the doctor asked Aurelien. As a contributor to *The Dug-Out*, Rose Melrose's husband had been asked to join the party. Fuchs had commissioned some articles from him, the Dr. Cabanes style of thing, dealing with medical curiosities in history ; the subject offered scope for publishing all kinds of indecencies, and that was just the thing for Fuchs' subscribers in the Gaboon or Madagascar.

Aurelien looked across at the man who had been addressed as captain, and smiled. He wondered how he could make the doctor understand what Bompard was like. Bompard was the only one of all these people whom it gave Aurelien any pleasure to see again. He had not wanted to come, but he hadn't known how to get out of it and Fuchs had been very insistent. What a bore it was ! Really, Fuchs was a pain in the neck. If he hadn't sworn black and blue that Edmond had said he was coming, nothing would have induced Aurelien to turn up. And now there wasn't a sign of Edmond. Fuchs declared that he would be along later, he was sure to come in time for coffee, anyway. Meanwhile Aurelien, all his feelings at sixes and sevens, drifting with the current as he had done for the last few days, was grimly aware of how grotesque this was, this rowdy re-union with his old mess-mates and some of Fuchs' special pals. It was staggering to think that Fuchs spent his life getting up sing-songs like this. Had he a private life at all ? He must get a rake-off from the restaurateurs, and besides that, there was the publicity for *La Cagna*.

Aurelien had attached himself to the doctor because there was something about Decœur that echoed his own

preoccupations with the sea and all the drowned. There was a bond between them : these two men could meet and talk about nothing in particular, each knowing that the other was obsessed with things of which he would never breathe a word.

" That's Captain Bompard," Aurelien said. " But I always think of him as Lieutenant Bompard. He didn't get his third pip till right at the end, in '18. I had gone to the East by then. Actually he only counts as a reservist, that's why he lost his rank again. He's wild about it, I can tell you. I shall never forget how I found him, tight as a barrel, in the cellar of a kind of chateau down Soissons way—not that there was much chateau left standing, but at any rate the cellar was there. The Jerries had taken the chateau, but they hadn't found Lieutenant Bompard. When we took it again after a counter-attack in the small hours, there he was, coming up out of the bowels of the earth with a sub-machine-gun—he'd cleaned everything up before we got there. Then he collapsed like a log. I thought he was wounded, so I crawled up to him and put my head down to his ear to ask him how he was. And he was snoring blissfully ! "

He looked at his wrist-watch. By now it was obvious that Edmond was not coming. He would have liked to ask the doctor if he knew what Edmond was doing, but he was afraid of saying something tactless and putting his foot in it. After all, the doctor never knew quite what his wife was up to—or did he ? If so, he was a queer sort.

" Is Mme Melrose acting at present, Doc ? "

" No. But do you know what she told me, Leurtillois ? Is it a fact you're joining our board of directors ? "

Apparently everyone had decided quite definitely that Leurtillois had agreed to join the project; and thinking about Lucien Morel, with his empty sleeve, he didn't deny it. Then he turned the conversation back again to the man opposite, whose round shoulders, arms like a gorilla and

hairy hands brought back memories of other days.

" My dear chap, just look at Bompard with his napkin tucked into his waistcoat, his little wrinkled eyes and that half-witted expression. He looks as if he didn't know—well, I don't know exactly what, but he looks as if he didn't know anything. However, he does know a hell of a lot. He's a smart chap."

" What does he do in civil life ? "

" Oh, nowadays ? He was telling me that he's done a bit of everything. You see the waistcoat under the napkin ? See the black and yellow stripes ? He wore it under his battle dress all the war, nothing would make him take it off. He's put it on specially for us this evening, and I dare say he pretends that he wears it every day. He refers to it as * the waistcoat I used to wear when I was a valet in Nice.' Was he ever a valet ? That's what no one knows. But he enjoys shocking people, and it used to embarrass the officers in the mess. They put up with him because of his courage ; nothing could make him bat an eyelid. He had a cock-eyed system of boasting by saying the opposite of what he meant. Before the war he used to sell oil, and he would have gone on with it, he says, if it had been good oil, but the quality's gone off. He came from Marseilles. The men liked him, even though he was a damned swine. He used to kick his batman around, literally I mean, but after that they'd both go and get dead drunk together."

Talking of these things enabled Aurelien to sink his thoughts in the odour of fried fish ; for he was afraid of his thoughts. He was trying to escape from Berenice, trying to escape from all that had kept him awake the night before, and he was choking back the sobs that he could not control, every moment feeling wild despair mounting in his heart and almost brimming over.

" Here's to you, *mon lieutenant !* " a big roistering fellow opposite called out to him—a vulgar-looking individual with

straw-coloured hair and a vacant stare, over-dressed, his appearance quite spoilt by an enormous chin.

Aurdien raised his glass of white Jurancon. " Here's to you, sergeant."

The doctor asked who the other was.

" Becmeil," Aurelien answered, " one of the few N.C.Os here this evening, along with Lemoutard, Blanchard, and Fuchs himself—a real Paris cockney, all his wits about him. He had rather a gift for acting, a good voice, you know, and people used to ask him in when they had a party. I bet he'll sing *Le Roi d'Ys* after a bit."

Aurelien's left-hand neighbour joined in the conversation :

" Or the serenade to Manon, Leurtillois—anyway, one or the other ! He owes a lot to being able to troll out a song. H.Q. were always snatching him out of things to warble for them, you couldn't ever have him in a section."

The doctor leaned forward across Aurelien to observe the speaker. He had cat's eyes, a jaw like a donkey's and was very young, but with that unattractive plumpness that even the young acquire from being in a sedentary occupation ; his hair was cropped short. The doctor remembered having noticed his walk. Unconsciously the professional eye had recorded the fact that the man probably had a wooden leg. Aurelien introduced them :

" Dr. Decoeur, Husson-Charras."

The doctor remarked that he knew M. Husson-Charras' cousins, the bankers, and they were soon engaged in talk in which there was no need for Aurelien to take part.

By now the roast had been reached and the third wine appeared, to the accompaniment of cheering. It certainly had to be admitted that old Fuchs was the devil of a fellow for organising a feed. What a blow-out !

¹¹ "Gentlemen—"

Everyone began to call for silence, as the chairman raised

his voice, waving his hands. Quiet! The captain is going to say a few words.

" Gentlemen——"

He coughed once or twice, with a mixture of matiness and self-importance. Captain Millot was what in Toulouse they call a fine figure of a man ; before the war he had been a photographer there. His well-built figure had thickened and he had lost much of his hair, which was black and brushed back to cover the bald patch. Alas, he no longer had the smart appearance that his pay and his uniform had given him in the old days. What sums he must have spent on gabardines and whipcord ! In a well-known gesture he passed his finger between his nose and the red tooth-brush moustache that darkened his upper lip. This Don Juan of nineteen-fifteen had softened up, spread, and lost colour.

" Gentlemen! " he said, " I shall not drink to the health of the regiment, but to that of the second battalion, which I had the honour of commanding, only temporarily perhaps, but still, of commanding. All of us, or almost all of us, went through that battalion, which was generally known as *the* battalion, a tough battalion if ever there was one ! We regret that Commandant Pierreguise was unable to join us this evening, but to tell the truth, I personally do not regret it, since his absence permits me to address you and to say——"

The pretentious speech unwound slowly from the soft pasty face, which must once have been attractive to women. There were bouquets for everyone, a remembrance of the fallen, a word for the absent, tribute was paid to Fuchs as a banquet organiser, France was brought in somehow, and an apt phrase referred to the promises made to fighting men, promises which had not been kept. The listeners shrugged their shoulders, whispering to each other remarks such as : " Oh yes, that's right enough, you know—we're the boys of the old brigade." Georges Husson-Charras, uneasily

shifting in his seat, moved his wooden leg under the table to avoid having it kicked by his neighbour. Becmeil sighed : " To hell with it all ! " And Marsolleau, behind his chubby hands, with his fingers spread out in a gesture he meant to be genteel, leaned towards Stephane Dupuy, sniggering and hissing between his white teeth as he murmured : " Poor old Millot ! Just look at him. He's of no account—the war was a godsend for chaps like him. It kept them young. You ought to have seen him with the girls ! It was a scream. He thought he was the cat's pyjamas. It used to annoy me and so we used to have rows. Commandant Pierreguise couldn't stand the sight of him."

A wave of the fat hands completed the story, and Marsolleau plunged into a recital about the bit of fluff he had grabbed from the captain in Alsace—what the devil was her name ?

" Is he still a photographer in Toulouse ? " Stephane Dupuy asked, yawning over these reminiscences.

Marsolleau dropped his voice, and looked furtive, for all the world like a schoolboy talking in class :

" Good lord, no. He'd had a taste of real life, what ! You can imagine he wouldn't settle down in Toulouse after that. All he wanted was capital. On top of that, his wife left him—what a bit of luck ! So he set up in Paris, or rather, at Vaugirard. He got a shop that was all fitted up and ready for use, and got it for a song. He takes photographs of children after their first communion, wedding-groups, shopkeepers. His heart's not as strong as it was. Five years of army life's no joke, eh ? He has to keep on taking pills, drops, bits of this and that to keep him going. Look at him, he's as bloated as anything, and his eyes almost popping out of his head. Now there's no one to call him captain but the folk in the cafe he goes to in Vaugirard. You ought to have seen him in la Sarre, when he was commanding the battalion. What a swell he thought he was ! "

There was a swell of cheering to celebrate the end of the

captain's speech. Lemoutard, by now very drunk, wanted to make a speech too, but Bompard pulled him back on to his chair.

" Put a sock in it, sonnie," Bompard said, thereby arousing general mirth. The public works contractor wiped his streaming eyes.

Bompard whispered to Hureaux :

" Why didn't the Commandant come ? He would have put up a better show, he's the chap to speechify."

Hureaux's yellow head trembled and his eyes rolled behind their glasses as he hissed :

" We're not good enough company for M. *de Pierreguise*."

" It's pretty hot in here," Husson-Charras said. " Nobody would think it's the last day of the year. Have you got your car outside ? Oh, pity. I was hoping you could give me a lift home, on account of my gammy leg. It's all right, Fuchs'll get me a taxi. Who's that Pooh-Bah next to Marsolleau ? Do you know him ? "

Aurelien looked down the length of the table. The man referred to was Stephane Dupuy, and Aurelien explained that he was some sort of gunner and a contributor to *La Cagna*. He had ideas about social reform, hadn't a good word to say for women, and always refused to marry his mistress, a seamstress, whom he begrudged every penny he lent her. His father was a judge, and he lived in a small flat with his parents, on the ground floor. He was deaf in one ear. From the guns, of course.

" He was haranguing me about socialism before we sat down," Husson-Charras said. " Socialism, Russia, God knows what. He thinks the big stores ought to be done away with, and neon lights hurt his eyes. A bit of a crank, isn't he ? "

The doctor was bent on talking to Aurelien at the same time. He was very much taken up with the business of Melrose Products, and insisted on treating Leurtillois as a

shareholder. He wanted to know whether Barbentane had gone into the question of selling perfumes by weight. Mme de Perseval was going to run that side of it and the establishment would be called " Mary-Rose," because of Mary and Rose (you follow me ?). Rose would have her own theatre. Up till now Rose had not had the place that was her due, as a great actress, a woman of genius. When she had her theatre, like Rejane, like the great Sarah. . .

The salad was passed round.

" I hope your wife is well ? " Aurelien asked Husson-Charras. He had married his cousin—what else was there for him to do now ? She was more or less of a nurse to him. But he couldn't go after the women now, with that poacher's skill and enthusiasm many of them remembered from the old days in billets and after the E.O.R. at Bleau. Aurelien remembered the great hulking fellow Husson-Charras had picked out as a batman, a peasant by the name of Miraud, who hadn't his equal for making an officer's bed.

He listened to his neighbour's bleak, melancholy talk of his wife, his home and the work they had found for him in the Husson bank. Oh yes, they'd been very decent and fixed him up, he'd got a job where he only had to sit at a desk. Aurelien thought that he must hate his wife. He had grown fat, too. He had wanted to be a barrister and had done a year's law, before he was called up. But then there was the war. He was constantly shifting his wooden leg under the table, unable to find a comfortable position, and every time he moved it reminded Aurelien of Lucien Morel. He asked :

" But when did you collect your wound ? I mean——"

" The game leg ? " the other said. " Just my luck ! Right at the end, just think. Eighteenth of October, on the Maubeuge road, as we were shoving off from la Malmaison. Fancy doing three years at the front and then—just like that,

wallop ! And you know I'm not one of those chaps who're always dashing into every bit of trouble there is. Fact of the matter is, I was in a stew, I thought I wasn't going to come through, and I was counting my kills. When things were tough, I used to sweat all over. I was always afraid that everyone must notice. Once over the top, it wasn't so bad, but climbing over was the devil. Not that the rest of you looked as though you were exactly enjoying it—but, God ! what I felt like ! When I realised I'd been hit, I started going over myself to see what the damage was : head, arms, legs. Both my legs were still there, but one of them felt queer, damned queer, it was sort of cold."

They hadn't been able to wait, they couldn't last out until dessert. Becmeil was standing up, more tow-headed than ever, with salad oil on his lips and chin, his hand on his heart, and singing in response to a general demand :

" *Si Rosenn bientôt ifarrive*

Je vais, hélas ! hélas ! mourir. . . ."

" How right you were," Husson-Charras said. " But we'll get the *Serenade* straight afterwards, just you wait."

" No," Aurelien said, " as soon as Ballante gets started, there's no holding him."

" Who's Ballante ? "

" Cusse de Ballante—painter—that big chap over there. What's known as the life and soul of the party. When he's not talking about painting——"

Doctor Decœur shook his head :

" It's very odd, Leurtillois. You know everyone here. I never would have thought it of you. I took you for a lone wolf, and then it turns out that you have a lot of social ties nobody ever would have suspected."

Aurelien looked at him, smiling, for at that moment he had been feeling very conscious of his loneliness. He could not prevent himself from turning round to look over his shoulder towards the door of the restaurant, where Edmond

might perhaps come in : Edmond whom he didn't want to seem to be pursuing, Ediftond who would talk to him of Berenice. All at once he became acutely aware of how ridiculous this whole scene was : the brass plates on the wall with electric candles that had tiny, pink, pleated shades, a picture of a storm at sea, which was a pendant piece to another of a calm sea with red rocks ; and the sideboard with the dessert, unlikely bottles, pails of champagne, extra covers. And on the piano, on the tasselled plush cover, stood a large vase (Made In Sevres), bulging with artificial flowers. The room was grotesquely ill-proportioned ; at the other end were little tables where another race of people stared at the banquet, mistrustful as an African tribe suddenly set down in the midst of a Flemish *kermesse*. Hilarity reigned over all. Cries of *Bravo!* punctuated the songs, with laughter and shouting. More than one of the guests obviously wanted to get up and dance. Lemoutard, by now **more** than half-seas-over, waved his fork, while everyone waited for the next number. But while the *parfait glace* was being served, it was not Ballante who got to his feet after Becmeil, but Bompard, Lieutenant Bompard, with his black-and-yellow striped waistcoat. Aurelien said to himself: " Aha, here we are. Just like les Sparges."

Bompard had got up and was waving his arms. He had taken off his jacket, and, in his shirt sleeves, in the famous waistcoat, he closely resembled a gorilla. In Aurelien's eyes he was just as he had been at the front; only his forage cap was missing, the cap he wore tilted on to the back of his head. He still walked in the same way, with the pointed chin sticking out and his arms hanging loose from bowed shoulders. Ten minutes before an attack he used to be seen like that, in his muddy battle-blouse, standing upright on the parapet in order to cause a sensation, and peacefully gazing at the Fritzes through his field-glasses. Now here he was challenging his partners : " Marsolleau ! Oy, Marsolleau 1

You lazy loafer, come and do the toreador ! " Then he turned the other way, calling out: " Hureaux, dear old Hureaux, come and knock us out a tune ! " This caused a good deal of amusement and brought back many memories. Hureaux hung back for awhile and then agreed to play. He grumbled ; he was always in a bad temper, this young man with his bi-focal spectacles, his patchy moustache and shoulders only just wide enough to deserve the name. While he was settling down at the piano, pulling faces at the dust he had to brush off the keys, Bompard and Marsolleau confronted each other with a challenging air. It was easy for Marsolleau ; he could do it on his own, he only needed a napkin to serve as a cape and then he began rising on his toes and going through all the motions of a toreador. Once he was on his feet, the former dragoon looked extremely formidable, rather like a blond Negro with the freckles on his forehead and his *frizzy* hair. He was built like an Apollo, narrow-waisted, with biceps that seemed to be on the point of splitting his sleeves. He was not the sort of man whom women overlooked. Captain Millot, at the head of the table, turned away, his teeth on edge ; he did not care for these over-obvious good looks, and the sight of his former subaltern reminded him of things he did not want to be reminded of.

" Just look at Bompard ! " Husson-Charras exclaimed. " It didn't take him long to find what he needed ! "

Bompard had in fact seized the bunch of artificial flowers which had been crammed into the big blue vase on the side-board, by way of decoration. He had tied them round his forehead with string, so that they stuck up like gigantic bull's horns, and now he was leaping this way and that with humorous savagery, while Lt. Hureaux at the piano strummed vaguely Spanish tunes by way of overture. Lemoutard was on his feet, clapping his hands and shouting : " Toro ! Toro ! " to everyone's great delight. Even the waiters who

were engaged in replenishing the champagne buckets stopped to watch, and the diners in the restaurant stood up to get a better view of what was going on.

Fuchs has also rushed into the performance, bobbing and tumbling like a clown as he acted the part of umpire between Bompard the bull and Marsolleau the toreador. This was an innovation ; it had not been part of the ancient ritual, in the old days in the second battalion, when the bull had been coursed in some narrow shelter in the line or in a temporary mess while they were out resting. The audience enjoyed this, and in a moment Becmeil and Ballante, by common accord, set about acting as seconds. There were great possibilities in the role of seconds to the bull: it gave scope for massaging his horns, dusting his tail, and so on, just the sort of thing Ballante liked, for he always had to be the centre of attention himself. Fuchs paraded up and down, snapping his fingers, taking each of the combatants by the hand and presenting them to the audience, just as it is customary to introduce one's fiancée to the family. In pantomime, as Rigadin used to do it on the films, Fuchs was indicating the outlines of the fight that was about to begin. Then he retired, kissing his hand to the public. Hureaux burst into *Carmen* : " Toreador, beware, beware ! " and all the guests joined in, in full chorus.

Dr. Decœur shook his head. He was amazed to see the look on Leurtillois' face. Well, if that wasn't the limit—the chap actually seemed to find it touching !

" You look as though it meant something to you, old man," he said.

Aurelien turned round. " Yes, it's rather silly, I suppose. But you see, Doc, for us this tomfoolery is a bit of the war, it brings things back to us. . . . "

Marsolleau was making passes with his napkin, while Bompard's skull lunged and parried, shining through the foliage piled up round his ears. Now and then Bompard

would make a feint, as if he were about to charge down upon the audience; then he would pull up before an imaginary barrier and trot the length of it.

" Toro ! Toro ! " the cries rang out.

" The last time I saw this, Doc," Aurelien went on " Bompard was playing the bull as usual, but the toreador was a lad called Vanderpyle, a student from Lille. He was so pink and white he might have been taken for a girl. That was at les fiparges. The student was killed in an attack the next day, when they rushed us. Oh, I know, it's a terribly obvious and conventional story."

Everyone was yelling with delight, Bompard was simply priceless, and he was wearing out Marsolleau, who must have been quite fifteen years younger than himself. The piano was strumming along, louder and louder. Over in his corner Lemoutard was dancing a Spanish dance all by himself, snapping his fingers like castanets and using his napkin as a shawl. Nobody seemed to notice him.

" It's a queer thing, how you chaps feel about the war," the doctor said, " people like me, in the cushy jobs, never thought of it like this."

The bull-fight ended with the *coup de grace*, Bompard rolled on the ground, and amid acclamation the torero blew kisses to his audience. At the tables, the waiters were pouring out champagne. The pianist, who had had enough of it, tossed off a glass, and complained :

" No, no, Fuchs, it won't do. The champagne's no good. It's swetffc"

Fuchs protested that it was all a matter of taste, and he couldn't suft everybody. Anyway he didn't give a damn about chanipagne. It was only because it was the New Year, that was all there was to it.

" That's right," Captain Millot called out, " Hureaux's always grumbling about something. What a fuss-pot! "

" But, *won capitaine*, the champagne——"

" Stop captaining him! He wants champagne, right, we'll give it him ! "

Four or five of them set about the struggling Hureaux, holding a bottle to his lips and forcing him to drink. The wine spilt all over the place, trickling about, sticky and disgusting. Lemoutard was no longer alone in being slightly lit-up. Becmeil too had begun to feel musical, but Ballante, who had been on tenterhooks for a chance to perform, began to pace up and down.

" Ah, here we are/" Stephane Dupuy chuckled, " here's Ballante doing the postman ! "

This was Ballante's star turn. Whenever he had had a few drinks, he would begin to act the postman. He walked along with his sack, touching his hat politely to people in the imaginary street, climbing the stairs in blocks of flats, having a door opened to him by a young woman without any clothes on, dropping in on a priest who—well, enough said ! Then too at the concierge's little office, or cycling along a country road. His audience never entirely understood the whole of the performance, but it was the thing to laugh. Ballante hurried across the restaurant, gained the attention of the diners sitting at the little tables beyond, and so came back, all the time going on steadily with his dumb show. Finally he began to sing in his fine voice that was now muffled from the effects of wine.

" Manon, behold the sun ! " he sang.

The banquet had begun to break up into some slight disorder, the guests were gathering into smaller groups and calling out to each other across the room. Then the coffee and liqueurs appeared and cigars were lighted. By now the tables showed the signs of destruction ; sauce and wine had been spilt, ash had been dropped into the melted remains of the ice, and here and there someone had crumbled his roll or biscuit into crumbs beside his plate. Ballante was worked up to a high pitch of excitement and giving full voice. When

he struck up his favourite aria, *La Tonkinoise*, everyone joined in the chorus—Dupuy, Hureaux, Blanchard, Marsolleau, all of them—singing :

" *Mon Annana, man Annana, mon Annamite !* "

" Fundamentally," the doctor said to Aurelien, " your War seems to have consisted of officers and N.C.Os. There isn't a single private here."

Aurelien shrugged. " You haven't quite got the idea, old man. There are all sorts of ex-servicemen's associations. This is simply a re-union of old cronies. Some of us happened to be N.C.Os, and some of us had pips instead of tapes. Anyway, that's the way we were dressed in the old days when we were dodging the bullets. And here we are again. That's all."

" Here, I say, Leurtillois ! " Husson-Charras called out from where he was sitting with his leg stretched out before him. " Why aren't you singing too ? "

The doctor looked at Aurelien, and saw that he had begun to sing. Decoeur bit his lips, though not to prevent himself from smiling ; rather he was thinking of the unsuspected depths that lie hidden in people one thinks one knows, depths that may suddenly be laid bare and then reveal the other as a stranger, quite unlike the man who was there before. This slightly dandified, tall fellow whom one would run into sauntering about Montmartre or at Mary de Perseval's house or Barbentane's, this far from talkative man who was always well turned out and seemed to have nothing to do—here he was now, singing with the others, and the sweat was running down his face. For the first time Leurtillois didn't seem to be holding himself in check ; he was, as the doctor realised, in his element and completely at home. He reflected with profound bitterness that Aurelien was not the only case of such a discovery ; there were the unknown depths in Rose too, that genius Rose, reciting Rimbaud. He sighed and shrugged his shoulders, then, feeling a touch on his arm,

turned round to see Stephane Dupuy, very red in the face, with his hair flopping into his eyes more than ever, biting the ends of his moustache, with the fidgetiness of a footballer before a match.

" I say, doctor, Fuchs has just been dropping a few hints to me about this business of the Melrose Products. Rattling good idea. It'll go with a bang, won't it ? Fuchs suggested I might get an interview."

Oh, did he ? This chap Fuchs certainly knew which side his bread was buttered, he was always hot on the scent. Decœur saw how it would work out: the editor of *The Dug-Out* would drop in at Barbentane's office and get something at that end. He made an appointment with Dupuy, who was thrilled at the prospect of meeting Rose and so could not defer enough to her husband. Must be the devil of a chap, Dupuy thought to himself, and he began trying to ingratiate himself, talking of the book he was writing. It was a novel about a man who comes back from the army to find that life is meaningless for him after the intoxication of the war years ; with the taste of blood in his mouth, as it were, the world seems very dull indeed, the very air stale. . . .

" I suppose you yourself have seen a good deal of blood spilt ? " the doctor asked in his flat, sophisticated voice.

The other guffawed with embarrassment, wriggled his shoulders, and flung his hair back out of his eyes. " Oh, I was a gunner, you know. But of course I knew plenty of chaps who were in at the death, lots of them here ..." and he waved his hand towards the little convivial groups.

Some of them were gathered around Captain Millot, others round Fuchs and Lemoutard who were doing tricks with matches ; and Becmeil was standing all by himself, singing *Le Reve passe*.

" There they are, the hussars, the dragoons, the guards. . . ."

" I see," Decœur said, " that you know what you're talking

about. But people like myself who spent the war as dodgers——"

There was a characteristic and slightly challenging curl of the lip that the doctor reserved for this remark of his. He saw that Dupuy was shocked. As a matter of fact, Dupuy was also rather impressed, and for two pins he would have remarked that actually he himself, as a gunner. . . . But he left it at that and returned to the plot of his novel, enlarging on the revolutionary aspect of it and the hero's revolt against the life which disgusted him, against Paris with its commercial taint, its politics and rackets. Then of course there was the lyrical side : the flight into the solitude of the country, cut off from the world, and the disillusioned end.

" Naturally I can't make Boule—that's the name of my hero—I can't make him go off to Tahiti the way all the rest of them do—that Harrar stuff. So he'll go to the coast of Brittany, to a lonely part away from the tourists, and live alone among the islands, the fishermen and hunters. It ends up a bit like the beginning of Knut Hamsun's *Pan*. Do you like Hamsun ? "

Of course the doctor liked Hamsun ; he liked everything.

" Don't you think," Hureaux interrupted them, " that we could do with some girls ? "

No one would have thought this slack-looking, hang-dog fellow capable of earning his own living. He had a high-pitched voice that was almost embarrassing to listen to, issuing oddly from a very average clerk of average height, with average feet. He worked as book-keeper for a large firm that sold musical instruments. This information was volunteered by Husson-Charras, who came along, rather forlornly dragging his leg, to join the doctor and Dupuy. Was that the reason, he wondered, why Hureaux played the piano ? Or was it the other way round ?

" Ah," the doctor said, " the good old law of causality."

Anyway, one way and another Hureaux had developed notions about art; and he was fond of saying that he remained single in order to go to concerts instead.

" I say, Leurtillois," Husson-Charras said, hitching on to Aurelien, " do you remember Hureaux at le Mort-Homme ?"

" You mean the time his bottle of cough mixture came to grief?"

They both burst out laughing. What a crank Hureaux had been in those days ! He was notorious for his mania for tidiness, even in the trenches. With a square yard at his disposal, he organised his property according to the rules of logic : mug here, mess-tin there, knife just so.

" And his muffler, Husson, don't forget his muffler ! That and his cough mixture, his main shield against the possibilities of violent death. What a face he pulled when a bullet smashed his precious bottle ! "

" It wasn't a bullet, it was an explosion."

They argued this point of history.

" How he did clamour for female company that night ! "

" Good lord," the doctor said, " I must confess—I mean, I know why Leurtillois and I came here on our own, but how about the others ? What have they all done with their women-folk ? And the last night of the Old Year, into the bargain."

" Oh," Dupuy said, " most of them are seeing in the New Year in the bosom of their family. But some of us don't at all object to a few hours off, like this."

" Really ? Queer " The doctor nodded towards Marsolleau and asked : " Isn't he married ? "

" No," Husson said, " he has a girl who keeps him in ties. And Bompard has left Mme Bompard in Marseille—he's only here for a few days. You remember, Leurtillois ? Those photographs of Mme Bompard that he was always showing round ? Hair scraped back, a gold cross bouncing

on her bosom, little piggy eyes, and altogether the look of being not *that* sort of girl at all, but a thoroughly *nice* girl. Not that that stopped him from carrying on with all the local lassies when we were in billets. Remember ? He must lead his good little wife the very deuce of a life." He went on to speak of Becmeil, whose brothers had been killed in action, so that he was left with his mother to support, as well as three children, and his wife wailing night and day about how sickly the brats were. Here, this evening, he had the chance of snatching back a little of his lost youth. Poor chap, he was a traveller in millinery—heaven alone knew how many doorbells he had rung, how many doormats he had shuffled about on, hat in hand, haunted by the knowledge of all these mouths to feed ! And Blanchard, whose job was selling tyres somewhere near the porte Maillot, had to bring up five daughters single-handed, since his wife had gone off and left him.

The doctor shook his head in silence and then turned to Stephane saying :

" Yes, my dear chap, you're right, it's a rotten world, Pity there isn't a war on all the time. ..."

Husson grunted and fidgeted with his wooden leg. Aurelien gazed at the doctor uncomprehendingly. Only Dupuy picked up the thread instantly and replied :

" Yes, I dare say it's the only good time some people ever have."

CHAPTER LIII

THE little banquet had come to a miserable end. Afterwards nobody knew precisely how the trouble had started; but there had been a good deal of drinking and after they had come to the end of the burgundy they had tried out the armagnac, and after that there had been a schnaps that would have lifted

the top off your head. It was this schnaps which had provided the cue for all sorts of anecdotes about Alsace after the armistice ; and here there had been plenty of disagreement. It may have been Lemoutard, who had certainly had more than one over the eight, who had provoked Blanchard, for he didn't like Blanchard. But in that case, what was it that Blanchard had said just previously ? This big scarecrow of a fellow, thin and dark, with his lovelocks falling forward into his eyes, his tanned complexion and a way of waving his arms about like a windmill, had been a good boy all during dinner. But everyone knew what his ideas were, and it was an idiotic idea of Fuchs' to have asked him. He must have irritated Lemoutard by something he had said. He was shouting that no one was going to give him any lessons in patriotism, and everyone knew that he had a whale of a Croix de Guerre, but even that was no excuse for saying some of the things he did say. In the indescribable confusion that then arose, and as soon as someone had lashed out at someone else and there was no longer any way of knowing what was going on, some of them, like Marsolleau for instance, lost their tempers. It wasn't that Marsolleau had any liking for the ex-inspector of police, but it maddened him to see Lemoutard being knocked about when he was not in a fit state to understand anything. The fact was that Marsolleau couldn't very well take on that hulking great Blanchard, whose weight he couldn't equal; and so he found himself face to face with Becmeil, who, if he had been sober, would never have dreamed of engaging in fisticuffs with his former lieutenant—but by this time he had quite forgotten himself and didn't care what he was doing.

An attempt was made to separate them, there was a great deal of shouting of " Look here ! I say, look here ! " all the more as Marsolleau was a heavy-weight compared to Becmeil. When the rest of them saw him draw blood from Becmeil's nose, they thought the thing had gone far enough. Hureaux

was yelling at the top of his voice. Aurelien grabbed Marsolleau by one arm and pulled him backwards. Marsolleau protested, but there was just time for Captain Millot, followed by Bompard, to intervene ; they were the presiding spirits of the party. Millot pretended not to know how it had all begun, blamed Marsolleau because he couldn't stand the sight of him anyway, and more, indeed, because Marsolleau ought to have remembered his rank before striking a sergeant. Uttering the ritual formula " Brothers as we were in battle," he broke up the fight and set about covering up the traces by making another speech.

There were broken glasses on the tables and on the floor, wine spilt on the tablecloth, fragments of food on the floor, and all the dirty dishes. " What a mess ! " Hureaux said. And Dupuy, with his heroic airs, adopted the attitude of someone who hadn't quite had time to intervene—what's all this ? he was asking, flexing his biceps. That, Hureaux reflected, must be the type the gunner was.

At last the party began to break up. Husson-Charras asked Fuchs to get him a taxi. People began to pick up their hats and coats.

" Are you going on anywhere to see the New Year in ? " the doctor asked Aurelien.

Aurelien shook his head, and they decided to spend the rest of the evening together. Husson-Charras would have liked Aurelien to share his taxi with him, but the rain had stopped and the others felt that it would be a good thing to walk for a while in order to clear the fumes out of their heads. They found themselves going down the steps of Sacre-Coeur together with Hureaux and Bompard, who took Aurelien by the arm with a familiar gesture :

" Nice to see you again, old boy. No chance to talk during dinner. How's tricks, what ? How's this bastard life treating you ? Married ? No ? Quite right. Don't get married. Never get married/"

Over them there towered the moonlit pile of the cathedral and at their feet the city lay in a haze of lights. It was cold, and they tightened their overcoats around them and turned up their collars. Hureaux was groaning, as usual.

" Marsolleau. Of course, Marsolleau, he *would*. Always kicking up a row that chap, damn his eyes. When he was attached to the Commandant he spent all his time nosing around, putting his spoke into everybody's business."

" Damn it all/" Bompard said. " It's obvious. If the Commandant had been there nothing would've happened. Nobody takes any notice of Millot."

" Don't you start defending Marsolleau, Bompard, my lad. You know I was with the Commandant before Marsolleau and then the colonel took me along with him. The colonel appreciated my qualities ; he liked efficiency. So I knew quite a number of things. Who was it who stopped you from getting your other pip for two years, eh, Bompard ? "

Bompard started. He pulled up short, with his hand on the railings, as they were half-way down the steps. " Go on ! " he said, tapping Hureaux on the shoulder. " You don't mean to say—Marsolleau ? Hell ! "

They walked on without speaking. From below there drifted up through the night a confused sound of music and motor horns. The doctor made a remark about Montmartre and the dying year. Aurelien was thinking about Berenice.

" Do you believe that, Leurtillois ? " Bompard suddenly exploded. " Marsolleau—buggering things up for me like that! A blighter who was always trying to borrow a bit here and a bit there and never paid you back. He did himself very well at our expense and then—the bastard ! "

" I wish I could show you my records," Hureaux grunted, " I've got a Marsolleau file. You remember at les Sparges. ..."

" Not half we remember ! His men had it in for him be-

cause he lay low during the attack, and it was me who saved his bacon for him. The bastard ! To think——"

" Ah well/" the doctor sighed, " we never imagined that things were like that at the front, while we were at home in the cushy jobs."

A chilliness fell on the others at this remark. But Hureaux was in full spate. Fuming with the accumulated resentment of years, he was itching to work off all that he had on his mind.

" Yes. Brothers as we were in battle—huh! You heard him, that ass Millot. He was thick as thieves with Marsolleau, till Marsolleau got a bit of skirt away from him, and then any stick was good enough to beat Marsolleau with. And it wasn't only a private rivalry. . . . Oughtn't I to have had the red ribbon twenty times if I ought to have had it once. You know who did me out of it ? The divisional chaplain, of course, the mucking swine. I was in the colonel's good books, but once the Jesuits have put their spoke in, it's all up. I could tell you a thing or two about Father Beliard. Roll on the day when my files can be published ! "

They were sauntering down the rue Lepic. The streets were crowded, in spite of the cold ; all the windows were lit up, the cafes open, and the whole atmosphere was one of festivity. When they stopped in the Place Blanche, in the blaze of the big cafes, Bompard murmured :

* " Damn Marsolleau—blast him ! And me playing the bull with him ! "

They went into Wepler's.

Hureaux's bad temper amused the doctor, who egged him on by asking him questions that reminded him of old grudges, while Bompard was still entirely preoccupied with the amazing treachery that had been revealed to him. So that was why he had got his third pip so late that he did not count as a war substantive and so lost his rank. He was still at his old

job, a salesman of cheap oil, bitterly resentful of his lot and convinced that he had never had what he deserved from life. He would have liked to be a real, dyed-in-the-wool captain. Gradually Aurelien began to work his way back into the conversation, for he too was possessed with a sense of injustice. He would have liked to join the attack on the Jesuits and the Freemasons. But he really couldn't. All he could think of was that she loved him. And what was the good of that ? She loved him, and she was going to run away from him. She would never belong to him. " This chap Blanchard," the doctor said, " what was he in civil life ? A tyre salesman ? "

" That's pretty good ! " Hureaux gibed, " you can call it that if you like. He's a second-hand dealer, actually, somewhere out along the suburban railway. Always hard up. His wife cleared off and left him with a family on his hands. The deceived and pathetic husband, eh ? "

" Aren't we all ? " the doctor said.

Bompard chortled. But Hureaux tightened his lips and protested :

" Speak for yourself, speak for yourself. Everyone has the right to his own opinions. It's one of the Rights of Man. But that isn't a reason for him to come along and create a stir in our midst. The worst of it is that people like Marsolleau get mixed up in that sort of thing. Personally, I'm as much of a pacifist as anyone. Not that that stopped me from . . . Only I don't like to see people brandishing their pacifism about in that flag-waving manner."

What was it all about ? The doctor seemed to have the clue to it, but Aurelien was a hundred miles away from the conversation, gazing at a sorrowful face with closed eyes, a very still, pearly face round which the fair hair hung loose, and a cloudy light shining in it, and the mouth—ah, that mouth that was never the same from one minute to another !

Was it really Bompard's mouth at all ? The outline of a

mouth is something we shape to our desire ; and in Aurélien's longing there mingled together all the lips he had ever known, blending with his memory of Berenice, until Berenice was no longer only his love of today but all the love he had ever known, the passion he had known with other women, the haunting sense of love that he had borne in his heart all through the long night of the war, the dreams of his boyhood and the grown man's desires and frustrations. Then suddenly it came back to him ; the curve of the cheekbones, Berenice with her eyes slowly opening, those slanting eyes so full of shadow that he remembered so well.

" Joking apart/" Bompard said, " tell me, Hureaux, old boy—honestly, did Marsolleau really——? "

" Oh hell ! " the accountant burst out, " can't you shut up about it ? Yammering on and on like that ! I could tell you—but you were there yourself—oh no, you weren't, that's right, you'd been wounded a few days before. When we arrived at the Ailette canal, what's the name of the village ?—I can't remember what it was called, but anyway, it doesn't matter—it was Migle who took over the position with a detachment from the 5th company. You remember him, a big countrified chap with pink cheeks and curly hair and a moustache. Surely you remember him ? He was a second-lieutenant and was going to be a schoolmaster. It was just after Rouques had been evacuated, so there was no one left to defend Migle. The commandant was with the regiment, the colonel had just left us. It was all a put-up job between Millot and Marsolleau. Millot was commanding the battalion. Well, Marsolleau got a medal out of it and no one had ever seen him in the front line. Migle got his. Oh well, that's the way it is. No luck, poor kid. He had a little girl at home down Charentes way, they were engaged—student of economics she was. The nth of November, 1918 ! And a French shell, into the bargain. Just before everything packed up, they were shooting off

their ammo, one of those damn gunners it was. Poor old Migne, he got it there and then. Rubbed right out—there weren't any bits to pick up. I collected his things, I read his letters. On the nth, about half-past nine, in Lorraine," He grunted. " Brothers as in battle, eh ? A nice thing, I must say."

Hureaux had had too much to drink. The doctor read suppressed irritation on Aurelien's face. Bompard was still preoccupied with his discovery, and the saucers were piling up in front of him. He was the melancholy type of drinker.

" I wonder," he murmured, " why the Commandant didn't come. He's in Paris all right. He's at the War Office."

" I suppose he was dining at home," Aurelien suggested.

" Tell that to the marines ! " Hureaux sneered, tipping down a whole glassful of brandy. " Do I dine at home ? And how about our precious major, then ? Was he dining at home as well ? Barbentane, eh ? The fact of the matter is that those blokes don't recognise us any more. We're not up to their standard—not classy enough for them."

At the back of the restaurant people were beginning to take their seats at tables reserved for a New Year's party. Decœur leaned over to Leurtillois and whispered :

" Let's go and see the year out somewhere else "

The others didn't notice when he paid, and hardly seemed to realise when he and the doctor got up and left. Hureaux was repeating : " If only my files could be published ! " There was a smell of welsh rarebit and beer, and a wave of heat as from an oven ; an Argentine band was tuning up. Aurelien let himself be led away, and, once outside, where the catherine-wheels on the Moulin Rouge shone over the place, he drew a deep breath of relief.

" What are we going to do now ? " he asked.

Decœur, who had realised that Leurtillois was in a restless, neurotic condition and had been keeping a watchful eye on him all the evening, said in a fatherly way:

" How about Lulli's, my dear chap ? Talking about civilian life, that's what we've got to adjust ourselves to now, isn't it ? " Then : " Christ ! " he exclaimed violently.

If he had not seized hold of Aurelien's arm, Aurelien would have been run down at the corner by a little Bugatti that came tearing down the street, wildly driven by a young man who had a girl perched up on each side of him. The car could still be heard roaring and back-firing as it disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER LIV

ONCE more he was there in the narrow smoky bar with the pink lights, once more surrounded by mahogany and brass, the high stools, bottles, cocktail shakers, other bottles, straw-covered, the absurd, unlikely daubs hanging on the walls together with the gay college banners from Yale and Harvard ; once more there was the music coming from the Moorish dance hall and the babel of voices, laughter and the raised voices of the drunk and the sober, the Americans and the dance hostesses, ladies in full evening dress escorted by dark men, and the accustomed faces of Suzy, Georgette, Yvonne . . . once more this background of insomnia and alcohol, over which hung like a tremendous weight all the thoughts that each was trying to escape, the buried thoughts, and in the midst of it the dance of all who were afraid to sleep or afraid of not sleeping. The barmen in their white coats flung potent mixtures rhythmically to and fro between this drugged world and their own professionally smiling faces. Fat Lulli was parading his Venetian paunch from group to group, clapping his hands and crying : " Olle ! Olle ! " An extremely stout old woman in pink, with bare arms, hair

died the colour of iodine, and a huge silk collar as pendulous as her bosom, was standing close to the counter talking to Mme Lulli at the cash desk; she talked and talked with - inexhaustible vitality, shaking her pearl-embroidered hand-bag at her loose flesh.

" Still, if you hadn't grabbed me by the arm just now/*
Leurtillois said, " by this time . . . "

" You don't think Yd let one of the stockholders slip away like that, do you ? "

The jesting remark had something inevitable about it, which affected Aurelien unpleasantly. This affair of the shares began to haunt him ; it turned up everywhere. Once and for all he wanted to make his position clear.

" Listen to me, Doc," he said.

Before he could go any further, Decoeur interrupted him with : " I know, I know. I saw M. Morel only today. Delightful man, intelligent—for a chemist, I mean. That arm of his must be a nuisance when he's making up prescriptions. He'll be very useful to us. He's rather touching, everything he does isn't for himself at all; he doesn't want to get anything out of it; it's all for Mme Morel. He'd do anything for her. Very nice to see that sort of thing nowadays. It isn't often one comes across people feeling like that. We've forgotten the meaning of the words ' happy marriage.' One has to go into the provinces to find a husband who's devoted to his wife. . . . "

Always that blank, bitter voice. There was never anything the doctor said in which Rose did not appear, an outline glimmering behind the words, a shadow, and the hint of their life together, farce or tragedy, whichever it was. Sometimes Aurelien wondered which it was. But for the moment one thought prevailed over all others and he asked anxiously :

" Did you see Mme Morel, too ? "

" Oh no. She'd gone out. Last minute shopping. They're leaving Paris tomorrow night. Women always have

to rummage round the shops before they go and bury themselves in the country/

" Tomorrow evening ? "

" Yes, after they've celebrated New Year's Day with their relations."

Aurelien had gone on clutching at the hope that Edmond would come to the banquet, if not while dinner was in progress, then at least in time for coffee, at the liqueur stage. He must find out something definite, and he could ask Edmond. Now he had a crazy idea, one which he had had, actually, since Decoeur had suggested going to Lulli's. Either Edmond was in the plot, or Berenice herself. . . . It was so completely natural that Aurelien should be there that night. Where else should he have been ? So they were coming. At midnight. Yes, of course. They were coming. She would suddenly be there in the big room, where he had first held her hand. She would have worked it all out: she would show Lucien where she had spent that delightful evening—Montmartre, and all it meant for her. Did the little chemist know Montmartre ? Either with Edmond or without him. Edmond was probably with Rose. The doctor was talking about Rose and the singular sensitiveness she had in her feelings about people. Rose—and the privileges such higher beings have in life—how they cannot be judged like other people or according to the same norms. " Norm " was a word for which the doctor had a particular fancy.

" Would you mind if we glanced in at the dancing, doctor ? "

" No, no, on the contrary, I should like to."

The atmosphere in the dance hall was thick enough to be cut with a knife. There were the masses of people arriving, the doors swinging to and fro at the entrance, the ushers hastening here and there, the flower-sellers, and a blue light playing over everything while the dancers waltzed, the light

catching on the women's skin, their spangled dresses, the men's black shoulders and stiff dress-shirts, the tablecloths bathed in the colour of the arc-lights. The light changed as a disc revolved in front of the lamp at the back of the room. Now it was mauve. On the polished square of floor between the tables with their champagne buckets and bottles, the throng of dancers glided languorously to and fro, carelessly embracing one another. The place was an Alhambra without fountains, with so many almehs that it was almost repulsive, like elaborate cream cakes. Aurelien glanced at his watch. The revolving lights from the witch-like disc spilt multi-coloured beams over the whole room, the balconies, the dancers, as the music whirled towards its finals. A clatter of plates and laughter arose into the silence then, and clapping broke out as the dancers applauded the band. Obediently the musicians took up the waltz again, and everything swam in blue light, everything w^as blue, blue, blue. . . H,

Aurelien's gaze probed the depths of brightness and shadow, sometimes arrested for an instant by the curve of an arm, a woman's shoulder hiding a face that was turned the other way, and sometimes he would move in order to see past a waiter who blocked his view. A snub-nosed man, sitting beside a multi-coloured pillar, wore an expression that revealed all those yearnings that the music had veiled. Excited little laughs tinkled like jingled coins from a corner where the paper tablecloth was on fire. But there was no one there—no one he wanted to see. Staring at the watch on his wrist, he watched the hands creep round to midnight. They were going to come, they were bound to come. There was Lulli, like an enormous, fat, black fly with its wings outspread, cleaving a way through the crowd, where the waves of dancers closed behind him again as he passed ; he shouted something to the band, which no one else heard. A group of men in evening dress and women in long light dresses had

just arrived, the women surpassingly calm, majestic, and cool as if they had stepped out of scented water. Waiters hurried up. People sitting at tables farther along were elbowed and bumped, to make way for the new arrivals. The band rose to its feet to play *The Star-Spangled Banner*. The men of the party making their way across the room, nodded to the dancers, who had stopped to look at who had come. "From the American Embassy/" a pale, red-haired tart murmured in the half-light, beside Leurtillois and the doctor.

The hands crept on towards midnight. Smoking dishes issued from the kitchens, and the dance started up again, another waltz with coloured beams from the arc-lights. The hands of the watch were all that Aurelien saw ; his eyes no longer left the circle on his wrist. In his wrist the blood was pulsing. She was coming. How could she possibly not come ?* He refused to believe such a thing. What was Decoeur saying ? God knows what he was gabbling about. Mist before his eyes, Aurelien realised that the shadows were splitting up and the dancers clapping ; it was Lulli's favourite trick, which he had copied from the *Musee Grevin*: light falling like snow, in pale flakes that seemed to be falling from the arches overhead, petals drifting down into the mock patio, all the lyricism of two minutes to midnight in the rue Pigalle, while the supper guests applauded and the band played an Irving Berlin waltz.

The fat woman from the bar, with the pink collar, came to sit down beside them, to watch. "Colossal, isn't she ?" the doctor said, doubtless thinking of her glands. And he added : "Picasso in his latest manner."

Aurelien murmured something. Perhaps, he thought, at this very minute, outside on the wet pavement, Berenice was getting out of the taxi.

There was a clash of cymbals, a rolling of the drums, a general outcry. The lights went out. Everything was dark,

and in the darkness Aur&ien saw the pallid glimmer of the figures on his watch. Midnight. An obscure sense of rejoicing spread through the room, enfolding all the lost and scattered spirits, uniting those who could no longer see; there was a muffled scramble of people changing places, suppressed exclamations, and over it all fat Lulli giving tongue in English, with his mongrel accent: " Happy New Year! Happy New Year !"

Suddenly Aurelien felt two arms round him, two bare arms that slid round his shoulders, and fingers groping for his face, a little awkwardly. To the rolling of the drum, in the darkness, amid all the clamour that left these two alone as in a desert, an oasis of love, he turned and, bending down, held her to him. For the very first time he pressed her against his body, touched her face, found her yielding, shuddering mouth, and kissed her, crushing and biting her lips, no longer knowing what he was doing or caring that in a moment the lights would go up, her husband perhaps would be there beside her, Berenice's husband—ah, Berenice—• there was no longer anything in the world but her name and herself, the beginning of the New Year and all time. Berenice. . . !

The light was like a trumpet. The wild moment broke, the secret blazed before all eyes. People stood back from each other, women passed their fingers across their lips and mechanically patted their hair.

Aurelien, reluctantly letting his arms fall to his sides, recognised Simone. But where was Berenice ?

Berenice hadn't been there at all.

CHAPTER LV

" ANOTHER bottle ! "

The champagne bucket came flying over people's heads. It was three o'clock in the morning, and the worn, gross faces, the bodies sagging where they sat, suffered by contrast with the debonair carriage of the head waiter.

They had gone on from El Garron, where the crush was so great that one could not get beyond the bar, to the Chateau Caucassien, where the knife-dancing was a little more than Aurelien's nerves could bear. At last they had landed up in this new *boite*, so deliberately, typically French, where people were humming Maurice Yvain's tunes and flourishing dolls they had bought from a tall, fair girl in blue—she was over there in a corner now, yawning, stealthily slipping off a silver slipper which was hurting her. Champagne was flowing like water. The doctor was beyond caring what Aurelien did, and Simone, maternal in her sensuality, was drinking herself into a quiet dream.

" There's something on your mind, big boy, I know you've got something on your mind. Here, have a drink. Tip it down. Don't you want to go home yet ? "

No, he didn't want to go home yet. " What sort of hog wash is this ? Do you call this Ayala ? It's an outrage."

The manager came rushing along, apologising. The champagne was warm. How many times had they to be told it must be thoroughly chilled ? The gentlemen would be so good as to accept his apologies. Once more that silver bucket floated over their heads.

" You'll ruin yourself," the doctor whispered in mild protest.

Aurelien waved his hand vaguely.

" Personally," Simone said, " when I'm fed up . . ." Nobody ever knew what she did when she was fed up. She

was stroking the back of Aorelien's neck and crumpling the tablecloth. " I'm ever so fond of linen/" she murmured. " Ever so fond of linen, I must say I've ever so fond ..."

How on earth had they picked up that thin little cad with the low collar and dreadfully long neck, where the Adam's apple went up and down, far too big for such a small head and such weedy arms ? Decoeur seemed to know him. Had he been with them at the Chateau Caucasien ? He was like an apparition ; after a time Aurelien had noticed that he was there, without knowing how he had come to be there. His dinner jacket was too small and he kept on tugging at his trouser-legs, crossing his legs and then uncrossing them.

" You're not nearly drunk enough yet, young man," Aurelien said, pouring him out another glass.

The jacket was creeping up his chest again, gathering into creases, the Adam's apple was popping up and down, and the imbecile face sank into the champagne. He seemed to think it his duty to talk to Simone, and Simone was obviously wondering why. She was patiently waiting for Leurtillois, her Roger as he was to her, to come away and go to bed. She would take him home with her and he would have a bit of a sleep, that was all; but in the morning she would have what she wanted, she would have him all to herself, she would liave him there to make love to.

A light lady in a pistachio green dress had come to make up the party at their table. Who had asked her to sit down—Decoeur ? The young man with the Adam's apple ? Or she herself ? She was haranguing them and demanding pretzels.

The decoration scheme of the little cafe was not up to much : the walls were painted bright canary yellow, with rosy Greeks portrayed there together with their bare-bosomed girl friends, in a style reminiscent of " Phi-Phi."

The young man's Adam's apple was becoming an obsession with Aurelien. He found himself loathing the over-large throat of this weedy, feeble creature ; it was almost obscene. He leaned forward across the aubergine seat towards the doctor and asked loudly, pointing to this giraffe-like glottis :

" See what I mean, Doc ? "

" Not exactly."

It was too hard to explain. Supposing he just bashed the pansy fellow's teeth in ? God, it was revolting how he kept fidgetting with the crease in his trousers, moving it up and down. Just the way the thing in his throat kept bobbing up and down.

" Did you see who's just come in ? " shrilled the pistachio female into the doctor's ear. Apparently he had seen. What the devil could it possibly matter to him who had come in ?

It was a group of dubious-looking characters, no longer young, around whom the women immediately settled like flies—definitely not an attractive company. The last straw about the whole place was the little " tango " shades on the table-lamps, and the background to it all was a band, consisting of a piano, an accordion, and a flute, playing a Java.

" I say, Doc . . . " But he had already forgotten what it was he wanted to say to the doctor.

Decoeur was saying, in reply to the pistachio :

" Gosh, that's true."

What was true ? Damn silly the way people talked. What he meant was . . . The two of them seemed to be getting on all right together ; the sawbones seemed to know what the pistachio was talking about. " Voline," that was what she said. Must be the name of the blighter with the black moustache, everyone bowing to him. " How about bashing his teeth in ? " Leurtillois wondered aloud. The others told him to be quiet, while Simone turned her head away. She seemed to know what was going on, just like the others.

" Bash Voline's teeth in ? He doesn't know what he's talking about ! " The pistachio was shuddering at the thought. Powdering her nose, she added :

" I knew someone once who pinched a young lady off of him, and no one ever saw him again."

Doctor Decoeur leaned across the table to explain to the young man—not to Aurelien.

" Know him ? What, you don't know Voline ! He's a big bug. He makes the wheels go round, I can tell you. The biggest drug wholesaler in China, via Siberia, all done up in black wax paper boxes. He keeps a racing stable."

A woman in a man's jacket, with an eton crop, was crossing the room near the band ; she was rather plump, bulging out of her clothes, but her eyes were very fine and there was something attractive in the tilt of her nose. At her approach, Voline rose to his feet, like a tombstone rolling back from a sepulchre. She laughed, but there was, nevertheless, something scared in the look she gave him. When she sat down and crossed her legs, her excessively short skirt rose high above her knees, revealing chubby thighs.

Aurelien looked across at his obsession ; the beastly fellow was tugging at the bottom of his trousers.

Once more the pistachio explained :

" That's Manon Greuze. You'll hear her in a minute. She sings ever so well."

" A lizzie ? " the doctor asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. She wasn't going into details.

The accordion player was doing a solo for Voline's benefit. Behind the great man women were standing and peering forward like the gamblers behind the croupier at the casino.

" Another bottle ! " Aurelien shouted.

Simone sighed. A nice state he was going to be in. She would have liked him to buy her flowers, but when the

flower seller came round she shook her head imperceptibly, for she was afraid of being disappointed. The specimen with the Adam's apple was talking literature.

" Have you read the *prix Goncourt* ? Fancy giving the *prise Goncourt* to a nigger ! *Batouala*—what a book ! I couldn't get on with it at all. The whole thing's a mistake. Low stuff. Crazy, too—what will they think of us abroad ? As if we weren't capable of writing our own novels ! "

" And how would you have awarded the prize ? " Decoeur asked.

" Well . . . *VEpithalame* for instance. Two years after Proust—a nigger ! " He went on to talk about Robert de Montesquiou, who had just died.

" Sooner or later I shall have to bash his teeth in," Aurelien muttered.

The woman in the masculine jacket was standing up, and the piano was beginning a tune. Then she sang. Her voice was vulgar, deep, and husky, and while she sang she held one unexpectedly long and beautiful hand on her throat, where it emerged from the hard collar. What she sang was trashy, sentimental stuff about a broken romance and a room overlooking a harbour and a lover who laughed as he went away. All at once Leurtillois felt himself moved to tears ; and Simone, stroking his face with her fingers, was startled to find them wet. He swallowed a glass of wine at one draught. People were clapping. As the singer was about to begin another song, a little, fat man with a beard turning grey, who looked as though he oughtn't to be there at all, came into the room followed by the cloakroom attendant who was helping him out of his overcoat. He was wearing a lounge suit, with a white silk muffler round his neck and the Legion of Honour in his buttonhole. The singer turned towards him, and he bowed to her. From Voline's table someone stood up and called out: "*Monsieur le Snrateur !* " The fat little man spun round and rushed over

to the table to shake both Voline's hands. There was something obsequious in his haste and enthusiasm.

" He's Manon Greuze's gentleman friend," the pistachio informed the doctor. " He's a senator, the real McCoy."

Manon Greuze was in the throes of another sentimental ballad. This time it was the apache style of thing, with all the inveigling atmosphere of the *bal musette* and the two penn'-orth of violets. The senator applauded and raised his glass to Voline. The other man, with his little black toothbrush of a moustache in the middle of his white face, smiled but did not drink. " Oh, I say, I say," the doctor was chuckling, embarrassed at not being able to call Leurtillois by his first name, since for Simone his name was Roger. " I say, Leurtillois."

Aurelien didn't care a damn about the doctor. He had just remembered the elusive thing that had been on the edge of his mind for the last two hours, a confused memory that now sprang sharply into life again, loss and dismay.

" Don't you recognise Voline's guest ? Manon Greuze's friend ? Oh, I say, old boy, take another look at him. Senator, eh ? What a senator ! "

" What the hell," Aurelien said, " even if it were the Pope himself. . . ."

" You're tight, old boy, but just take a look at him. The senator ! Senator Barbentane, damn it all ! Edmond's old man ! The chairman of your board of directors ! "

The name of Barbentane touched Leurtillois' wound on the raw. Groaning, he sat up and looked. Manon Greuze had just sat down beside the newcomer, to the applause of the drinkers and the girls they had picked up. There was no doubt about it. He would have recognised that smooth, ruffianly face anywhere. Old man Barbentane, the Right Honourable, in a dump in the rue Frochot at four o'clock in the morning ! Not bad ! Definitely not bad at all !

Aurelien laid one hand on his heart and with his other arm

sketched a wide gesture of salutation across the room, the drinkers and the waiters, in the direction of that worthy citizen. The senator happened to look that way at the moment. He blinked, seemed obviously to be trying to remember something, and then recognised Decoeur. He shifted uneasily in his seat. Pushing aside Manon Greuze, who was tapping him on the thighs, he replied to something Voline had said : then obviously he couldn't bear it any longer, and he stood up, revolving like a teetotum, regained his equilibrium, took one step backwards, made an apology to Voline, stealthily pinched the singer's cheek, and set out across the room. His beard stuck out before him, topped by a smile. He was coming towards the doctor and his friends, affecting surprise, oh, he was happily surprised and delighted, he was going to be nice to them; from a couple of yards away he launched into a greeting that combined the hearty with the confidential.

" Ah, doctor ! Monsieur Leurtillois ! Ladies ! " Was he going to wish them a Happy New Year ?

" Do sit down, Senator." It was Aurelien who said that.

The elder Barbentane took a chair, smiled at the pistachio, and bowed two or three times to Simone, to whom no one made any attempt to introduce him. He was gazing slyly at her breasts.

" M. de Malemort," Decoeur began to introduce them, " Senator Bar——"

The senator interrupted hastily. He had not been expecting to be introduced to this young man with the extraordinary neck and the impossible name.

" Please, gentlemen, I beg of you ! You haven't seen me tonight. You understand me, of course—you haven't seen me tonight. I am not here. I am at the Luxembourg." He giggled continually, and his Midi accent made the glasses ring. He could not bring himself to refuse a drink. The champagne trickled down his beard and surreptitiously

he pinched his neighbour, whom he must know through his association with Manon Greuze.

" Yes, gentlemen, I can depend on you, of course, of course, I haven't left the Senate for a moment tonight. What an historic night it has been too ! For the fourth time since 1870 the Republic's budget will have been voted punctually, without dozens of amendments. Historic indeed ! Thanks, that is, to that legal subterfuge which permits the year to be prolonged by some hours. At a quarter-past eleven the beadle stopped the clock in the Debating Chamber, and at half-past three I left my colleagues, still living in the past year, to pass the remaining clauses. They'll be lucky if they finish by six or half-past. So I popped out, you see. The fourth time since 1870 ! For Mme Barbentane's sake, it would be better if you were not to say anything to my son. Gentlemen's agreement! Now you must excuse me, my friends are expecting me."

He hastened back to Voline's table.

" There you are, my dear fellow," Decoeur said. " Almost a Melrose Products directors' meeting. Only the cripple missing. Oh no, no, don't let's have another bottle ! "

" What the hell," Aurelien muttered peevishly. " The fourth time since 1870 ! Waiter ! "

" You ought to come home to bed, Roger," Simone sighed.

He looked at her. There he was with her, while she waited for him to go home with her. . . . Really, life was a pretty dim affair. The senator, the champagne, Simone. . . . All right, then, he'd go home and doss down with her.

" Waiter ! " Yes, but not before having a bash at this jack-in-the-box opposite.

He grabbed M. de Malemort by the tie. Glasses crashed to the floor, there was a sound of breaking glass, arms flew in all directions, the doctor sprang between them, and people turned round to see what was going on. The young man was stuttering : " He's out of his mind ! " Aurelien flung down

a thousand-franc note on the table and ignored Simone, who was saying :

" Your change, I say, Roger, your change." She picked it up and left a tip. " You know where I live, in that little alley beside the Moulin Rouge. Come along now. I'll light the gas and warm the place up."

Without knowing how it had happened, he found himself jolting along in a horse cab. Now the doctor had disappeared together with the creature whose Adam's apple bounced up and down, and the pistachio ; there was only Simone, gentle, coaxing, her arms round him and her soft, moist mouth pressed to his. The lights in the place Blanche hurt his eyes. " There, there, lean on me," she was saying, and they were going up the narrow, dark staircase to her room. Then all that he saw was the bed. And the photographs in the pink jumble next to the window⁷. The curtains had fringes at the bottom.

Aurelien felt his shoes being taken off. Uncomprehendingly he stared at a naked baby lying on a little cushion, inside a frame of shells. Behind a flowered screen stood the bidet and a little kitchen, a green-painted stove. It was all like some bad dream. What had the senator been doing there ? And that lizzie.

" My great big boy, you may not believe me, Roger, but I've had a yen for you for months and months. And you wouldn't ever come."

This woman kneeling in front of him. . . . Then the soft mattress yielding under his weight, and the half-light. . . . He tried to focus his thoughts and realise what it was all about. First there had been the War, and Hureaux, Bompard, Salonica. . . . All the things he had dreamt of and never found in reality. . . . The years slipping by. . . . Who was this girl here ? Roughly he pulled her head to him and tossed her hair about. She gave a little cry, staring at him in surprise. She had been undressing him, and still with his

clothes hanging about him, he threw her on the bed.

" Roger," she moaned, " Roger ! "

What the hell was it all about ? If she didn't stop, he'd bash her in the face. Suddenly in a mirror opposite the bed he saw the whole thing, the chaos and barbarity of this love-making. Then he abandoned himself to it furiously.

CHAPTER LVI

IT must have been after ten o'clock when Aurelien came home and saw Edmond's car on the quay outside. Now what could that mean ? Had Edmond come to wish him a happy and prosperous New Year ? Leurtillois felt extremely uncomfortable and his skin seemed to be unnaturally dry all over. He ran up the stairs two at a time.

A curious sight awaited him in the landing outside his flat. There was a sound of raised voices, and then he saw Barbentane, in a superb grey, heather-mixture overcoat, his felt hat cocked to one side, standing with one foot in the doorway, to prevent the door being slammed in his face, for all the world exactly like a police detective with a search warrant who is determined to get in. Mme Duvigne, of whom there was nothing to be seen but one hand and some hair, was talking in a sharp voice through the gap.

" Well, what's all this about ? Let M. Barbentane in, Madame Duvigne ! "

He pushed Edmond by the shoulders, while Mme Duvigne beat a retreat, very flustered and tight-lipped.

" Here's M. Leurtillois ! " she said as a parting shot. " The gentleman wouldn't believe me, sir, I kept on telling him you were out.¹

It was only when they were both in the sitting-room that

Aurelien noticed how red his visitor was in the face and how puzzled he looked. But first of all he called out :

" Madame Duvigne, make some tea, please, very strong, and with lemon."

" Tea in the morning, sir ! Are you sure ? There's plenty of coffee."

" Yes, I tell you ! Well," as she hesitated, " what's the matter ? Leave us alone, please, Madame Duvigne."

When she had gone, Edmond burst out:

" Where's Berenice ? "

" Berenice ? "

" Don't play the fool. She's here ! "

It was rather beyond a joke. But Edmond didn't look as if he were joking. He had taken hold of Aurelien by the shoulders.

" Are you crazy ? You're going on like a jealous husband ! "

Edmond took a step back.

" Do you mean to say you don't know where she is ? "

" I give you my word. And why should you come here to look for her ? "

" Where the devil should I look for her ? Don't waste my time with that line of talk. As long as things kept within certain bounds—but, really, this is going a bit far ! "

" I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

This went on for a few minutes, until it struck Aurelien that Berenice must really have disappeared. Perhaps there was really something in it.

" Tell me what this is all about," he said. " Berenice—well, what has happened to Berenice ? "

" Good God, that's the limit ! You ask *me* that ! "

" Yes, I am asking you. What has happened ? "

" I never suspected you were such an actor."

Edmond sat down and pushed his hat on to the back of his head. He looked more like a sleuth than ever.

" Berenice left us last night, a little before midnight, after her husband had made a few rather strong remarks. We thought we'd find her at home. We were at the Boeuf. There was nobody at home. That was last night. In the morning, still no Berenice. So I came along."

He seemed to take it quite for granted. But Aurelien's anxiety was genuine and Edmond's irony infuriated him.

" God damn it, I'm not Mme Morel's lover ! "

" Oh, aren't you ? Pity ! " His facetious tone was searing.

" If you weren't in my house——"

" Come off it! You're going too far ! "

They were within an ace of coming to blows. Edmond's face was redder than ever, and Aurelien was deadly pale. He could not help thinking of the Seine down there below and all the drowned who were dragged out of the water, the unknown woman, and the dead girl he had heard about the other day, the girl whose finger had been cut off.

" Look here," he said, " this isn't like her. She's not the sort of woman to go off at the deep end."

" The sort of woman ! Very nice. From your extensive experience of women you are able to classify them. ..."

" I've a good mind to knock you down."

The kitchen door opened and Mme Duvigne brought the tea in. She set the tray on the table, with two cups.

" You must let it draw for a minute, sir."

She looked as though she had something more to say, but Aurelien waved her away irritably. " That's all," he said. Then, turning to Barbentane :

" Do you want some tea ? "

" No, thanks, not in the morning. I agree with that dragon of a charwoman."

Finding the tea was not yet strong enough, Aurelien stopped pouring it into the cup, where a slice of lemon already lay.

" Do you mean to say," Barbentane was saying, " that you haven't seen Berenice since half-past eleven yesterday ?"

This was a cross-examination. Aurelien decided that he might as well put up with it.

" No. I was at Lulli's, with a gang of people. I got tight as a lord and slept out. With that kid Simone, if you want to know. Nothing to boast of, is it ? Does that satisfy you ? " He had burst out with it furiously and now the manner in which he stared gloomily at the tea-pot and stirred the lemon with his tea-spoon provided strong circumstantial evidence that he must have been dead drunk the night before.

Edmond shook his head. " Damned queer ! I could have sworn . . . Well, what on earth can the girl have gone and done ? On top of it all I've got that ass Lucien on my hands, blubbering all the time. All he's capable of doing, just blubbering."

" And what else do you expect him to do ? "

" He might come and knock your teeth down your throat ! "

" Thanks. But seeing that I——"

" Oh, I dare say she isn't here, but it all boils down to the same thing."

" I tell you I am not Mme Morel's lover. Is that clear ? Once and for all, do you get that ? " He clenched his teeth. He felt rotten. " Now something's got to be done to find her. Something may have happened to her. She may have had an accident. Anything might have happened."

" What do you want me to do ? Go on a tour of the Morgue ? "

" You damn fool, you don't care two hoots in hell. As soon as you know she isn't here, you don't give a damn. But I do, I——"

" Oh, I thought you weren't Mme Morel's lover ? "

" No, but I love her, damn you, I love her ! Can't you understand that ? "

Edmond burst out into scornful laughter. That was the finishing touch ! Now the tragic emotions, the Paul and Virginie stuff, Romeo and Juliet ! In the meantime the question remained—where could she have gone last night ?

" Did you call me, sir ? "

Mme Duvigne had reappeared in the doorway. She must be afraid of a fight between the two men. She'd been listening at the keyhole, of course.

" Oh, for God's sake, Mme Duvigne—! "

Once again she beat a retreat, muttering to herself.

At last Edmond gave it up.

" You'll let me know if you get any news, won't you ? Ring up. . . . "

Aurelien's anguished expression made Barbentane laugh.

" Oh yes, yes, of course. And my compliments to Simone, don't forget—my profoundest respects to her ! "

Leurtillois was drinking his third cup of tea. He took the slice of lemon between his teeth and relished the acid taste. Hell, what a thick night that had been ! He decided to have a shower.

He was in the middle of his bedroom before he saw Berenice standing in front of him.

CHAPTER LVII

SHE was in evening dress, the lotus dress she had worn at Mary's, her bare arms and shoulders issuing from the shiveringly white material and her long black gloves falling back on her wrists. Her squirrel coat lay on the floor behind her ; she must have just let it fall. On her face was a look of weariness and the kind of dismay that comes with broad

daylight; her fair hair was tumbled. She looked at Aurelien, who did not speak.

Neither of them had anything to say. Everything had been said already, everything was appallingly clear. He thought that she looked the very image of grief ; her lower lip trembled more than ever and the little thread-like lines were more visible without lipstick. What she was thinking was : I must be looking dreadful.

He sighed, conscious of anti-climax.

" You heard ? "

" Every word."

That did not improve the situation. He wanted to explain away Simone and tell her how that meant nothing, less than nothing, absolutely nothing at all. She was overwhelmed with hatred for her cousin. So they both said the very thing that ought not to have been said.

He said : " I swear that you are the only woman I love."

And she: " He needn't have talked about Lucien like that in front of you."

To anyone with an interest in psychology, such utterances offer a vast amount of material for hitherto unsuspected generalisations : such as the extent to which communication between two people may be said hardly to exist at all. Here each was trying hard to follow the other's thoughts, in order to save the situation. Thus it was that at the very moment when Berenice was saying :

" You were lying to me," she heard him replying to her previous exclamation, with : " Oh, so you're only thinking about *him* ? "

In the room Mme Duvigne could be heard pottering about. In an access of annoyance, Aurelien went back to the door and saw her clearing away the tea things.

" Leave it, Mme Duvigne, leave us alone."

She put the already loaded tray down again and said protestingly, her gaze still on the cups :

" I was trying to tell you, sir, but you wouldn't let me get a word in edgeways."

" All right, Mme Duvigne, all right."

" The poor young lady ! There she was asleep in the armchair. I couldn't leave her there outside."

He watched her as she went back into the kitchen. Then he returned to the bedroom, where Berenice was sitting at the foot of the bed, her squirrel coat over her shoulders, her face averted.

" Did you really sleep out there in the armchair—on the landing ? "

She nodded. When she spoke, in a changed, artificial tone, it seemed to cost her an effort :

" It must have been midnight when I came. You weren't there. I wanted to wait, and I waited a long time, and I went to sleep. The charwoman found me there."

He noticed how crumpled her dress was and he remembered what had happened at midnight: he had been at Lulli's with another woman's arms around him in the darkness. And he murmured :

" So you really came, after all."

After that they both paused, meditating the depths of the silence and the irrevocable catastrophe, the ruin, the appalling thing that had befallen them. Berenice's eyes still reflected that long night of waiting and dismay, and, at last, exhaustion. They did not know that there had been an instant in the night that was gone when their thoughts had crossed, as they had crossed at midnight.

He knew that she could not forgive him for that betrayal, that one false step he had taken as the old year went out. Simone—how utterly absurd it was, absurd !

" Let me explain," he said.

She buried her face in her hands. She was weeping.

" Don't cry, Berenice. Berenice ! "

" No, don't touch me, leave me alone, leave me alone ! "

He let his hand fall again. He could have killed himself for what he had done. But there was no use saying anything, for he had done it, and there he was, still alive; and there she was too, who had come to be with him.

" You came to be with me," he said, " and I—oh God, I _____"

" And you . . ."

What more was there to be said ? Wasn't it all perfectly obvious, just as the catastrophe was ? With an impulse of revulsion he said :

" But you know that I love you ! You know I don't love anyone else. You're my whole life."

Desperate, he was saying all those big words that have been used so often, so pathetically, while she let them fall into the silence like stones splashing into still water. He began to stride up and down the room with his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. Then he sighed and stopped beside the curtains at the window. He stroked them senselessly, until he realised what his hand was doing and stopped short, put his hand back in his pocket. Then he ran to the woman who sat there crying so quietly, *the* woman (he thought), the only woman in the world, and he was almost shouting :

" Say something ! Say something ! I can't bear it when you sit there without talking. Call me anything you like, spit in my face, I don't care what you do, only don't sit there like that, crying to yourself. Say something !"

Once more she shook her head. This time she looked at him, the man who had made such a thorough mess of everything for both of them, ruining their love and their life. She had never seen him like this, frantic as he was ; in a few minutes he would be blaming her for it all, he would have become abusive and quarrelsome. Now he was no longer pale. His face, bluish with a night's growth of beard, had red marks where unconsciously he had pressed his hands

against his face, as though he was ashamed to look at himself in a mirror.

" Oh God," she said, " what have you done to us both ? "

" But, but it isn't as bad as all that, you must let me explain, yes I know, I know, and you must forgive me, it's all too much for me, really I——"

He stopped, seeing in Berenice's eyes the sardonic comment that recognised his attitude. " You admit you're wrong," she was saying, " only you're not as much in the wrong as all that, not as much as the others, all the others. ..." He could hear it as distinctly as if she had said it aloud, and with mounting horror and despair he went on:

" I'm a fool—I'm in the wrong, I'm in the wrong ! But, all the same, can't we begin again, surely we can begin again ? Say something, do say something. It's driving me mad to have you sitting there like that."

She made a very laudable effort to control herself and rise above the doom which seemed to be sweeping her away. She tried to explain :

" Poor, dear boy, it's just the way I am. When something is stained or cracked or chipped, it doesn't matter how beautiful it is, I can't bear the sight of it any more. It just has to be thrown away. I can't bear to look at it any more."

Once more she gave that little chilly movement he knew so well. But he could not let that sentence pass without appealing against it. He could not let it go at that.

" Do you mean to throw our love away ? "

She huddled closer into her fur coat, and all the time her hands were covering each other, first one way and then the other, as if they were trying to rub something off. She was meditating, lost in contemplation, on this word " love." And again the silence grew up like a wall between them.

" Berenice, last night—whether you meant it like that or

not—the fact remains that you did a very serious thing. You left your husband for me."

She looked at him, with an attempt at laughter. It was ghastly.

" And I didn't find you. That's all there is to it."

All at once he was struck by something remarkable : she no longer had that child-like quality that he knew and loved so much ; she was no longer a little girl, but a tired and unhappy woman, with dark shadows under her red-rimmed eyes. He saw her with all the cruelty which at first he had turned against himself. He did not know how to talk to this woman, who was so different, an unknown woman, the unknown. . . . Well, was there anything to make such a fuss about ? He had slept with Simone—right, he admitted that and begged her pardon—and then what ? Suddenly he couldn't endure the sound of Berenice's weeping, those little, choking sobs, and with a typically masculine reaction, on an impulse, he took her in his arms ; for like every other * man, he believed that there was some peculiar consolation in his embrace. She did not resist. He held her tightly to him, his hands wandering over her body as though it were something that belonged to him and he tipped her head back, found her lips, and kissed her.

He might as well have been kissing a dead woman. She lay still and suffered his touch with a dreadful passivity which was worse than any revulsion or attempt at struggle. He lost his head entirely, still embracing something that was not there, and refusing to be beaten. All she said was:

" You're hurting me."

Then he was ashamed and let her go.

Again that wall of silence, that atmosphere of utter loss and nothingness. This time it was Berenice who broke the silence ; for it was suffocating her, and he seemed to be prolonging it with a deliberate desire to hurt.

Q*

" First her, then me. You only left her an hour ago, you still smell of her perfume. . . ."

He stammered something unintelligible. Was it possible ? Surely she must be inventing that about the perfume. Then idiotic joy surged up in him, as he realised she was jealous, and he made the terrible mistake of saying what he had thought:

" Are you jealous ? "

It was the last thing he ought to have said. But what ought he to say ? Would it be better to talk and talk, flooding Berenice with words, drowning her in words, carrying her away ? Into the bargain, he had the devil of a headache. It seemed to him that he had held poor cards all his life, and he felt inclined to throw them away and ask for a re-deal.

" And what are you going to do now ? "

The question was meant to provoke her, but she did not answer. He went on :

" You could go home, of course, like a good, penitent wife, and say you're sorry. Anyway, you could throw yourself on your husband's mercy, or his tact, or whatever he has."

" Please don't talk about my husband, or about tact either."

She had spoken coldly and sharply. He knelt down, saying :

" Berenice, I'm a brute. But I love you. And you love me, or at any rate you were on the point of loving me, or at least I was supposed to think so. You came here last night—this very night—and what am I to believe ? I can't imagine that it was just a mistake, just a silly thing you suddenly did, or however you like to explain it."

" I don't want to. My dear man, I don't want to. It's no use talking, and it doesn't matter what you call it. Do you think that it's less horrible for me than for you ? All last night I waited outside there in the armchair, for hours and hours, and I had lots of time to think. It's terrifying, but

that's the way it is—and that's all there is to it. And not just because in the end of course I shall go back. There will be a few hours, or a few days, that it will be hard to live through. Explanations, or even worse, no explanation at all, but that noble silence and refusal to ask questions which is worse than anything else. Like people walking on tip-toe through life, as if it were a sickroom and the sick person mustn't be waked up."

She made a wild, helpless gesture ; then, controlling herself, she said :

" No—but there'll still be the whole of life to be lived, Aurelien, a whole long life, day after day after day—and I don't know how I can bear it."

She fell silent, biting her lips so hard that it was a wonder they did not bleed.

" Well then," he said, " well then . . ." with that masculine obstinacy which always draws the most optimistic conclusions from despair, regarding the final absurdity as evidence of being in the right, and the end of the road merely as a proof of having lost the way. There he was, like a big dog, ready at any moment to caress her ; humble and abashed as a dog. Looking at him, she saw how utterly he failed to understand, how there was no understanding possible between them ; and this hurt her far more than all the rest.

" But you don't understand ! " she cried. " You don't see what I mean. The whole of life, the whole of life ! "

He didn't understand, that was obvious.

If one has contemplated a man up to the point where one only sees what is characteristic, what distinguishes him from all other people, it comes as a shock, all the more because one had forgotten it, to discover how much the essential element in him is precisely that element in which he most resembles the others. What was most significant about Aurelien was not the way in which Berenice saw him, but his existence

on another plane, as in one of those anatomical cross-sections in an encyclopaedia, where the flesh is rolled back to reveal the muscles and internal organs. He could not stop believing that the main thing was the fact that Berenice had come to him in the past night. He was obsessed with this idea. When a woman goes to a bachelor's flat in the night, it only means one thing. If he had thought it out, he would have recognised his stupidity ; but on the face of it, the whole thing seemed quite obvious. Anyone else in his place would have arrived at the same conclusions. She couldn't have come without realising. . . . However crude this idea might be, still—it was what he could hardly help thinking, indeed, she had given him the right to think in such a way. For from the moment when a woman's thoughts about a man begin to assume a certain form, that man has a right over her that no man will contest. Everything else is sheer misunderstanding.

For how much did the misunderstanding count, if at all ? There she was, in his rooms, and all he had to do was to bolt the door.

Abruptly, violently, he realised how crass his attitude was—indeed, the whole thing. What were they talking about ? Their words were all at cross-purposes, and in the battle of words what was said counted for less than all that was not said. He pictured the action to come, Berenice's resistance, the lotus dress torn from her shoulders. . . . She had come to him, in the night. Then, too, there was all that she had left for his sake, the courage she had shown, as it were throwing her herself away, plunging into the tide. . . . Had Edmond been mistaken ? No, indeed he hadn't; and doubtless the one-armed husband had no doubts about it either. . . . She had thrown her life overboard. So how was he to believe that he was defeated ? She couldn't have done all that only to let herself be turned aside by some trivial accident: thinking so, he was filled with enormous

pride in what she had done for him. Pride is the really fundamental thing about a man, and Aurelien resembled other men far more in his pride than in his arms or his feet or his desire. She had left Lucien and her settled life, her home in the country, all her customary ways, without a thought for what the world would say, what people would think. Her courage went to his head. And when it struck him that she had thought of these things, and had discounted them, he felt a great welling up of gratitude, and he said :

" No, Berenice, you aren't going home. You're not going back to that man. You aren't going to admit yourself beaten. You mustn't ask to be forgiven or put up with that terrible kindness. Why should you ? You know that I love you, and you love me, you know you love me ! I dare you to say that you don't love me."

She was silent.

Triumphant, he burst out:

" There, you see ! One must look life in the face." That was a fine way of putting things. He went on to explain :
" You'll get a divorce and you'll be my wife."

Berenice began to laugh. That was the last straw ! What did he take her for ? Men were all the same, they thought they had said the last word when they mentioned marriage. But she wasn't either an inexperienced young girl or the Simone sort; she knew all about marriage already. What a gift men had for reducing everything to the ridiculous !

Then she stopped laughing, for there was really nothing funny about it. She had caught a glimpse of a whole world and the abyss that it meant for her, and that world and that abyss, were there in Aurelien's mind. No man is alone. All that he thinks and feels is made up of what that world thinks and feels, the world he has living in his mind ; all his ideas are other people's ideas, the outlook of his family, his friends and acquaintances and the people who don't matter,

including the charwoman. She had stopped laughing as she realised that it was Aurelien who was talking like this, so absurdly, and Aurelien— ah, Aurelien was the man she loved. The tears rose to her eyes again, rolled down her cheeks. She sniffed. Good lord, what on earth must she be looking like ? She looked round for the mirror.

He was beside her. He took her hands in his, asking :

" Won't you be my wife ? "

There was nothing harsh or malicious in the question : he was only offering her what he had. She tried to imagine what it would be like : Madame Aurelien Leurtillois. . . . People would say that it was quite easy to understand—• after all, such a charming man—and her first husband keeping a chemist's shop down in the provinces. Such were the terms to which everything could be reduced ! She had been drunk with their love story, and now, today, in this bedroom, in this bachelor flat, here she was in evening dress, in full daylight, with this tall man who had just come home from a night with a whore and who, all the same, was going to open the bed, turn back the sheets, touch her breasts—and then he would ask her to forgive him, he would knot his tie again, and they would have lunch at the Mariniers or somewhere like that. And after a while she would be Mme Aurelien Leurtillois. The thought nauseated her.

And how he went on talking ! He was promising her everything he could think of. They would go and live in the country—or in America, if she liked, or if she preferred Tahiti, then they would go there. He was pathetic. Was this the man she had idolised ? Once before she had made a mistake, with Lucien ; and the thought of that wrung her heart. Lucien—how terribly he needed her ! Whatever happened, she would have to consider Lucien; she could not overlook the question of what was to become of Lucien. She knew what it would be like: he wouldn't go to bed any more, he wouldn't eat. , . . That was what he was

like. It would be a kind of moral blackmail, and he would know no limits. All too clearly she saw what he would look like in three or four days, and she couldn't bear to think of it. And his poor empty sleeve. . . .

All in vain Aurelien was pouring out all the wealth of eloquence he could summon. Berenice's eyes were gradually closing, her eyelids fluttered once or twice, and she would give a little start, until at last she said :

" My dear, I'm sorry, I'm falling asleep. I'm dead tired."

As he picked her up in his arms, he had been full of self-confidence ; but it was all different now. Confused and awkward, he laid her on the bed, slipped a pillow under her head, and covered her with the big rug. She was fast asleep already. He didn't dare to look at her. Already she was a child again.

When for once he wanted her, Mme Duvigne had cleared off. In a huff, no doubt. She had left a note on the kitchen table, saying that she would be in at the usual time the next day : there was butter in the larder, she had done the washing up but not tidied the rooms. And by way of signature, she had written : " Happy New Year, Sir." He hadn't even given her a chance to say that.

Very well then, he must manage on his own. He would go out to get something for lunch ; they would have a cold snack. It was difficult to get anything on the island during the holidays, and he had to cross over to the Left Bank, where he knew a good delicatessen shop. It was miserable weather, with sleet falling and an icy wind that chilled him to the marrow. As he crossed the bridge, he looked down at the Seine that still flowed on the same, making the same complicated twists round the islands and the bridges.

When he came back, he was loaded with parcels—for Aurelien was very good at improvising picnic meals, and today he was as hungry as a wolf. He moved quietly about

the flat. Then he dropped a tin of roll-mops on the floor and, afraid of having waked Berenice, he went to the bedroom door. His heart full of tenderness, he looked towards the bed.

There was no one on the bed or in the bedroom or anywhere else. But, unlike Mme Duvigne, Berenice hadn't left a note.

CHAPTER LVIII

CONSTERNATION reigned in the rue Raynouard. Blanchette was roaming aimlessly from room to room, while Lucien followed her with wild eyes, his dapper little face reddened on one side, as though he were on the verge of pneumonia. Edmond had put in several appearances and vanished again. He felt the whole thing was ludicrously irrelevant and none of his business ; and anyway, he had had quite enough of Berenice and of Lucien. She had come to stay with them for a fortnight, and then one thing had led to another, until on the very day when they were due to leave, she had to go and . . . oh, hell! he thought. He wanted to set out for the winter sports. And the damnable thing was to know what to do with the children, whom the Morels had been going to take back with them. Well, they would have to stay in Paris, with Nannie to look after them. On top of everything, heaven alone knew what Marie Victoire had done, but her mother had slapped her and there had been cries and tears. He had had quite enough of it. For the third time he rang up Aureien. Still no news ? With his hand on the telephone he called out to Blanchette, summoning her with a wave of his hand. He gave her the

receiver. Aurelien was saying no, there was still no news, and this time it was his turn to be surprised.

" She really hasn't come back yet ? What time is it ? I don't understand it at all."

Definitely, Blanchette thought, Aurelien was behaving oddly. Why should he think she must have come back ?

The mere sight of Lucien got on her nerves dreadfully. He kept on saying that he had been unjust to Berenice, and if she would only come back, he wouldn't say anything, he wouldn't say anything at all. He went on like that until Edmond burst out:

" That's your idea of how to treat her, and you see where it gets you ! Not saying anything about it ! Letting it go at that ! Sticking your head in the sand ! "

" But what ought I to have done ? " the chemist asked pathetically.

Edmond shrugged. Oh, Lucien was hopeless ! In the meantime, they had him on their hands. Just when he wanted to go and have tea with Rose, too. . . .

Finally a note came for Lucien. Edmond hurled himself into action, asking the messenger where he had come from, who had given him the note. The man was a *chasseur* from a cafe, and all he knew was that a lady had given it to him and that she had gone. " Oh, give him a tip," Edmond said irritably.

Berenice had written telling Lucien to go away. He was to go home, to his work, where he was needed. She was all right. There was nothing to worry about. She was alone. She wouldn't do anything silly, she just needed to be alone. Later on she would see, she would write and tell him when she was coming back. But on condition that he left her alone now. She would come back to the Barbentanes* when he had got over it. He wasn't to try and trick her by staying and waiting for her. That wouldn't do any good at all. She wanted to be alone. Later on she would be able to come

back as if nothing had happened. She didn't want to make him unhappy, and if she were to see him now, she couldn't answer for the consequences.

" Oh God, oh God ! " Lucien groaned, " what have I done to her ? "

He was sweating hard, and the red marks on his face made him look like something in a Punch and Judy show.

Edmond realised at once what the note meant and what must be done. Poor little girl, he didn't really blame her. The main thing was to get rid of Lucien ; that was the long and the short of it.

" Do you think I ought to go ? "

" My dear chap, it's like this. Either you're fed up with her, in which case don't let her call the tune. Or you'll knuckle under, in which case you've got to do what she says—buzz off. Either way, buzz off ! "

On the other hand, he thought to himself, his little cousin mustn't think they were going to be greatly concerned about her carryings-on. He was going to Megeve. He was going to have his winter sports, no matter what else.

Blanchette, however, thought it would be better if Lucien stayed. After all, one never knew.

That, Edmond decided, was their headache. He left them to it.

When he went out, they were still in the library, not letting each other out of their sight, lingering near the telephone. Both of them wanted to ring up Aurelien, but neither would do it in front of the other. Suddenly the telephone rang. Blanchette lifted the receiver. It was Aurelien.

She looked at Lucien without replying to his question: " Who is it ? "

" Is that you, Blanchette ? Hasn't she come in yet! But why not ? What on earth can she be doing ? "

She let him go on talking, let him go on suffering. It was his turn to suffer now. She was revelling in the bitterness of

it. Anyway, the two of them weren't together. She didn't tell him that a note had come from Berenice.

Nor did she say anything that would have revealed to Lucien that she was speaking to Leurtillois. She was realising fully how much he loved Berenice ; for now he wasn't even bothering to pretend, and he had no mercy on Blanchette.

Then she began to wonder why he was so surprised that Berenice hadn't come in. It was strange that he should use that expression—come *in*. All at once she understood. He had seen her; she had left him, and he thought she must have gone back to the rue Raynouard. She asked :

" Did she say she was coming straight back ? "

" No," he replied without thinking.

He had betrayed himself. But so had she. For Lucien was standing up, he was coming over to the telephone. She rang off.

" Was that M. Leurtillois ? It's no use trying to hide it from me, Blanchette, I know it was. I'm going to ring him up. I must know. After all, I've a right to know. The two of you are playing at something between me and them. . . ."

" Them ? "

Then he realised what he had said. He had admitted it, he had admitted knowing what it was all about. He bit his lips, groaning, at the thought of Berenice and another man, all that it meant when he said " them." It had rested only with him not to let it come to this; so long as he did not admit it, there was no " them." But what must he think now ? He would have liked to ask Blanchette : Leurtillois is in love with her, isn't he ? But he remembered the horror she had gone through, and he could not hurt her like that; it must be bad enough for her to have to acknowledge it to herself. Now he realised the significance of her attempted suicide. Ah, how blind he had been !

But she had none of these delicate scruples about him.

She looked at him and said in a voice full of hatred :

" Yes, they're in love with each other. Well ? Didn't you know ? What can you do about it ? What can anyone do about things like that ? They're in love."

" What have I done to you, Blanchette ? "

" You ? Oh, it's too terribly funny ! You ? Good heavens, *you* haven't done anything ! I don't see why it should be hidden from you, you're not a child, you're old enough to suffer. It hurts, does it ? It really hurts, does it ? "

She must be wanting someone to share her unhappiness with her.

The telephone rang. It was Aurelien again. He had guessed that Blanchette must be keeping something back. Why should she have told him everything ? Anyway, what did he mean by " everything " ? So she sparred with him, making the most of her poor little secret, avenging herself, between these two heart-broken men. This time she could not prevent Lucien from taking the receiver. She stepped back and watched him talking to the other man. She saw his trembling lips, his shaking hand, the empty sleeve, the fidgetty manner, the blood rising to his head, so that he made little movements as if to loosen his collar.

" Yes, this is Lucien Morel. *Monsieur*. . . . No, my wife hasn't come back. I've had a note from her."

The cry from the other end of the line made the metal disc ring. The chemist's face changed, as though a faint light had gone out.

" No, no," he said, " not at all, it's quite natural. I understand. She says . . . Yes, I'm going back. . . . At once . . . I assure you . . . I believe you . . . She says ..."

Blanchette, listening to this incredible conversation, hated Lucien. The man had no character ! He was talking to his wife's lover like that, without raising his voice, almost—good heavens !—as though he sympathised with the other

man's anxiety. Oh, if she had been in his place ! He ought to kill Aurelien, he ought to kill him ! Suddenly filled with this idea, she looked with suspicion at the man who was telephoning. Supposing this calm were mere pretence ? Supposing it were a trick ? He must go away, just as Berenice wanted. God, to think that she hadn't thought of that!

When he rang off, she said :

" Shall I come and help you pack ? "

" Pack ? "

" I mean, you've decided to go, haven't you ? "

" Decided to ... But you said . . . "

" What can you have been thinking of ? If Berenice wants you to go, you must go. You can see for yourself it's all over between them. It's only due to you, you've been so clumsy, you say the wrong thing, like last night. If it hadn't been for you, she would have been home by this time, she wouldn't have seen him again."

" Do you believe that ? "

He didn't know what to do or what to believe. Blanchette's face was hard and set, her lips tight, with that decisive look she had from her father. Lucien had hardly known old Quesnel at all, but he remembered that look.

" Well, shall we get on with the packing ? "

He gave in.

Lucien didn't go that evening, that New Year's day. He couldn't make up his mind. He hung on at the Barbentanes' for another two days, and Berenice rang up three times during those two days. She refused to say where she was. But she consented to speak to Lucien, to beg him to go away. That was what decided him in the end.

Those two days, when Edmond had been irritable and sulky, and Blanchette anxiously restless, had been a long-drawn, crushing torture for Aurelien. He was so overwhelmed with a feeling of guilt towards Berenice and with the

sense of how false his position was, where the Barbantanes were concerned, that his mind was more confused than ever. There was nothing but emptiness and waiting. And something that was not despair, but only the absence of hope—no hope at all. He no longer wished for anything. Only it was unbearable not to know where Berenice was and what she was doing. On the first day he went out for a walk, with the mad idea that chance would throw him into her path ; somewhere or other he would meet her. On the second day he no longer dared leave the telephone. Edmond sent him packing ; by now he was driving Edmond mad with constant repetitions of the same questions.

Edmond found, into the bargain, that his father was getting on his nerves. The senator was full of the backstairs rumours then circulating ; it seemed likely that Briand's government would fall, and Poincare had promised him . . . In that event, the senator said, it would be better not to float the Melrose Company at once, in case it should give rise to gossip. At that Edmond lost his temper. What ? His father was an alarmist—not that that was anything new to him ! But just when for once he might do Edmond a service ! And all because of this recurring mirage of a position in the government—oh no, that was too much ! The senator was an old humbug. And in front of him Edmond rang up Adrien and told him to press on with the floating of the company. To hell with anyone's objections ! He wasn't going to listen to any explanations or excuses. No more shilly-shallying ! And he rang off.

The senator stared at his son in amazement. He didn't understand this fury.

" Really, Edmond," he said, " I don't know what's the matter with you. It seems to me that my career is rather more important. After all, a father who's a minister isn't to be sniffed at. Or even an Under-secretary of State."

It was really comical. But Edmond, catching sight of

himself in the mirror, was by no means amused ; his face was red, he had been running his fingers through his hair, and now his fingers were greasy with hair-oil. As if he hadn't enough to upset him, with Berenice, Lucien, and all the rest of it. He groaned at the thought of how Blanchette, too, was becoming queerer and queerer in her attitude to him.

In the evening, when Lucien left, things calmed down.

The next day Berenice came to collect her things. She was wearing a cheap dress she had bought at the Galeries, and she didn't look well. Her cousin asked her where she had gone into retreat, but she wouldn't give a straight answer : she was staying with friends, that was all she would say. Oh well, she was old enough to look after herself.

The atmosphere was not so mild at her meeting with Blanchette, though nothing of special significance was said by either. Berenice sent her apologies for Lucien and was sorry not to see the children or to be able to take them with her. Blanchette was on edge, trembling, and anxious for Berenice to realise that the only thing she felt—absolutely the only thing—was something that there was no need to describe exactly : a kind of bitter contempt. Berenice had given her word and she had broken it, hadn't she ? That was the only thing that mattered. M. Leurtillois was not mentioned ; his name was never uttered : but neither of them, thought or spoke about anything else. Berenice asked her if she was talking about M. Leurtillois, and Blanchette asked her what M. Leurtillois had to do with it. Oh, and by the way, he had rung up several times. Then there was silence. So Berenice meant to go back to Lucien ? Soon ? Berenice said she didn't know ; she would see. Later, perhaps. Were the Barbentanes going to Megeve ?

Another outburst from Edmond. By the Lord Harry, they *were* going to Megeve, and pretty smartly, too. He was sick of Paris and everybody in it, including his relatives.

Snow and skiing—that was the idea. If the government fell, he didn't mean to be there, to see his old man acting the fool yet once again, sweating in hope of picking up something as he hung around the likely candidate for the premiership ! Fresh air and scenery ! Once up in the mountains one could forget all these rackets.

" I've been wondering who these friends of hers are. Have you any idea ? " Blanchette asked, trying to work it all out, now that Berenice had packed her case and gone.

" Me ? " Edmond said. " Not the faintest. Unless—h'm, you never know."

" Do you really think so ? " She spoke with such desperate anxiety that the colour mounted to her face. Edmond laughed scornfully.

" Anyway, *you* seem to think so ! "

" But—what do you mean ? I don't know what you're talking about."

" Oh yes, you do, *darling*, you know very well what I'm talking about."

He was being utterly hateful. They both caught each other looking at the telephone. There it was on the table, like some latter-day idol, black and threatening. Edmond carried his offensiveness to the point of stroking it.

" Tell me . . ." Blanchette's voice sounded so strange that Edmond looked at her face. He raised his eyebrows.

" Tell me—at Megeve—are we going to meet Mme Melrose ? "

It was the first time she had spoken of the affair so directly. But Edmond was a sportsman and his reflexes were in good condition.

" Not this time, *darling*. She has an engagement."

He wriggled his shoulders as if he felt his jacket too tight. He was not the man ever to be caught off his guard. Whatever turned up, he scored every time ; and every time Blanchette was beaten. He added casually :

" Would you like me to ask Aurelien to come along with us ? He's not at all bad at the slalom."

" What are you telling me that for ? A moment ago you said . . ."

• " Oh, I was only joking. Of course, if you don't care about it, we won't ask him. Anyway, he'd go around looking as if he were at a funeral, wondering what's happened to Nicette."

She didn't answer. She had sat down and begun, mechanically, to cut the pages of a book Mme Cruppi had recommended to her : *Cantegril*, the latest Femina-Vie-Heureuse prize.

CHAPTER LIX

SINCE the Barbentanes had gone to Megeve, Aurelien no longer had anyone to clutch at who might be able to give him news of Berenice. All the time he was wondering where she was and whether she was still in Paris. There were even moments when he would rather that she had gone back to R. with her husband. This torture that she had conjured up, this mystery in which she had wrapped herself, her having vanished so completely, could not last, or so it seemed to him at first, it simply could not last.

Three or four days of this had been nearly as much as his patience could bear. After that, it was just the reverse of the process when physical pain gradually mounts into unendurable agony : with him the emotional agony began fading into mere pain. It would have been some relief if only he had been able to doubt his own existence, now that he no longer doubted his love for Berenice : for no doubt is possible about an open wound. The ghastly and damnable thing was her inexplicable way of going about it. Aurelien

tried to understand the whole thing, in the hope that when he tried to understand, and when he understood, his torment would become easier to bear. So then he began to grope among the shades of those few, rare weeks that had only just slipped into the past, and tried to seize hold of what he already thought of as his happiness, as though . . . Yet what did it all come to in the end ? By racking his memory and tearing at his heart, Leurtillois built up that already distant epoch once again, minute by minute, that lost adventure which amazed him every time he thought how brief a thing it had been. He began a pilgrimage through all the places where they had been together. In that boulevard cafe where he had held her hand, he felt her absence more acutely than anywhere else. He made it a regular port of call for every day. But what of the night ? How could he go back to Lulli's ? It was not that he was afraid of seeing Simone again ; but he felt that it was casting something like a slur on Berenice to go back there. There were plenty of places where he could drift about at night, unable to sleep ; yet he came home a little after midnight every night now. What strange scruple or preconceived idea could account for this snapping of all his former habits, what eccentric ritual, as it seemed to him, to which he had fallen a prey ? The balance of his life was upset by these changes, to such an extent that the thing assumed the nature of a punishment. That was what he was doing : he was punishing himself by having to stay at home, instead of walking at random through the streets, or enjoying music or the company of women, or drinking somewhere under bright lights ; he had shut himself out of that artificial paradise without which he found it so hard to sleep. He was like an opium addict whose supplies of the drug have suddenly been cut off. He became jumpy and nervous. He paced about his flat like a wild animal in a cage. Mme Duvigne couldn't understand what had happened to him, for he no longer kept his usual hours ;

suddenly overtaken by the need for sleep, he would collapse on his bed, fully dressed, around midday or one o'clock, only to wake again at nightfall and go in search of the bright lights and his memories, which robbed him of sleep.

Two things happened in the course of the week.

The first was that a parcel was delivered one morning : Zamora's portrait of Berenice, which the gallery had sent now that the exhibition was over. Mme Duvigne was there at the time and naturally she had a great many questions to ask, with a spate of ejaculations and comments. Aurelien could have wrung her neck.

When the portrait was hung in his room, with the plaster mask opposite it, he thought it would drive him mad. What a bad joke it was, this jiggling grimace of the superimposed drawings ! Aurelien had never cared for modern art, and now he began to hate it. The fact that this work of Zamora's haunted him made no difference ; it was all just as if there were some sly character, " modern art," who had played a treacherous trick on him. The painter had been playing with loaded dice when he lent Berenice that ambiguous quality of the double face, and at that very moment, into the bargain. Zamora had taken advantage of all sorts of thing which weren't part of his medium at all ; or so it seemed to Aurelien, who was not sufficiently philosophical to realise that this was always the way with works of art. Here, anyway, was this jumble of a portrait hanging on the wall, the obsessive element during two days, mingled with Aurelien's innermost, utterly unhappy thoughts, the chaos of ideas that were foreign both to the grief and to the secret. Then gradually the portrait lost its hold over him, and the mask that hung there facing it regained its former power and all its haunting presence.

The second event was the note from Adrien Arnaud asking M. Leurtillois to call in at his office in the rue Pillet-Will.

Aurelien called there. He went with a beating heart and the expectation of hearing something, at least of picking up some scrap of news. But no one there so much as mentioned Berenice. Nevertheless, so far as he was concerned, she was the person in whom the whole affair centred, for he had always vaguely imagined this peculiar bartering of Saint-Genest in exchange for Melrose shares as being bound up with Berenice.

Adrien Arnaud talked about the business as though it were already settled, as indeed M. Barbentane considered it was. Besides, it was an unusually favourable proposition for Leurtillois. All the time Adrien was talking, he seemed to be metaphorically clicking his tongue ; for there was no one like Adrien Arnaud for conducting business in an atmosphere of the grave and dignified.

How could Aurelien have got out of it ? Hadn't he something to make up to Berenice for the wrong he had done her ? Was he not sacrificing his material, middle-class security to her ? Saint-Genest was by way of being a propitiatory sacrifice, and there would have been something sordid in having any argument about it. Besides, it was an excellent deal, at any rate at the moment. It all ran together in confusion in Aurelien's thoughts—the deal, the sacrifice, and Saint-Genest—rather as Zamora's portrait did ; factors that were irrelevant to the financial considerations cast a slightly crazy light over the deal. Perhaps what he was doing was silly. But he would have despised himself if he had not done it. He also suspected himself of being not without greed—• wasn't he getting the better of Edmond ? Good lord ! *he* hadn't asked for it. He gave his consent.

Adrien asked him to come back the next day, when the papers would be ready. M. Barbentane had left blank forms ready signed. As for the guarantee, Mme Melrose's signature was all that was necessary. Oh, yes, her ! Aurelien had forgotten her.

When he came back to the rue Fillet-Will the next day, the great Rose was there in an exquisitely tailored black silk costume with white button-holes, flowers on her lapel, and a great display of her lovely legs. It was hardly possible to see anything but her legs, as she sat with them crossed, and her skirt—short as the fashion then was—slipping up every time she moved ; Aurelien averted his eyes.

" I didn't know you were in Paris, *ch&re madame*" he said, for the sake of something to say. " The doctor is quite elusive these days."

Rose flashed him a laugh.

" Decœur's up to his eyes in work, my dear man. There are the perfumes, the lab., publicity, the fitting out of the place. . . . We're just moving in, in the avenue Champs-filysees—just fancy ! So you can imagine we're busy."

Arnaud interrupted them. A signature here, a signature there. He explained how the thing worked, while Aurelien tried to follow. But Aurelien's head was not clear and he kept losing the thread ; he had practically not slept at all for three nights. For form's sake he asked a few questions, in order to seem to be taking an interest. But his eyes were being drawn irresistibly towards those long silken legs that were so youthful and alive, and that seemed to be aware that they were being looked at. Good lord, he thought to himself, how naked women's legs are ! Even with stockings on.

Blotting paper was pressed down over the signatures.

" Have you got your car here ? " Rose asked, and when she heard that he had, she went on : " Be a lamb and drop me at Hellestern's. They're frightfully tiresome. This is the third time they've made me come back, and I've simply no shoes at all to wear in the Cocteau play. Oh, didn't you know ? Yes, I'm going to act Cocteau. Such fun ! "

Well, there it was. Saint-Genest no longer belonged to Leurtillois. How furious Armandine was going to be. But what the hell. . . .

When they were in the little car, Rose said :

" I'm not in your way, am I, for getting at the gears ? "

He felt her leg against him as he changed into third and he had the idea that she was leaning against his hand. What a cad he was : now Rose was unsettling him. And there was Rose saying:

" You know, M. Leurtillois, it seems to me that we're both rather high and dry these days, aren't we ? Paris is an utter vacuum."

One wouldn't have thought so, if the traffic was anything to judge by. He muttered something indistinctly and Rose added :

" Let's have dinner together."

Aurelien drew up in the place Vendome. He felt dizzy and queer, very hot in the face and with cold feet. Doubtless that was from having slept badly.

""I'm sorry," he said, " I don't feel well."

As he watched her going into the shoe shop, he was struck once more by her extraordinary poise.

The evening newspapers were out, the hawkers shouting. He bought *L'Intransigeant*. The cabinet was out on its neck, after a year in power, a year to the very day. Last time it had been Leygues who had been for the high jump, and now it was Briand. The reasons weren't very clear to someone like Aurelien, who didn't keep up with politics. One year, he thought to himself—prime minister, a leading statesman. This time it was going to be a strong and capable government. The president had summoned Poincare.

Everything began to go round in front of Aurelien's eyes. He saw nothing but black spots dancing. It couldn't be the fall of the cabinet that affected him like this, surely ? God, another attack—he had got the shudders again. It was all

he could do to get the car back to the island. There are a great many variations on the heroic.

At home he found a note from Uncle Blaise, asking him to drop in at the place Clichy. Well, he couldn't, that was all. He threw himself down on his bed just as he was, rolling himself up in the rug. The fever shook him like a dog.

CHAPTER LX

IT was the first time that a former president of the Republic returned to politics as prime minister. Stephane Dupuy was talking about it as he waited—with butterfly tie, fancy trousers, straight hair hanging into his eyes, and the moustache he was always tugging at—at Decoeur's for Rose to come home. He had been there an hour already, waiting to interview her.

" Poincare ! " he was saying. " Why not Deschanel while they're at it ? " And he went on, unsuspecting of how completely the doctor was unmoved by changes of government : " Funny sort of mixture, isn't it—Maginot and Barthou, not to mention Sarraut at the Colonial Office. Fuchs is getting out an issue on painting."

" I don't see the connection."

" Oh, but it's obvious. Sarraut at the Colonial Office. . . . Fuchs wants more readers, and the Minister is a patron of the arts. Good old Fuchs, he knows his onions ! " Then, drumming his fingers on his thighs : " And how about your chairman of the directors, eh ? The senator's taking over the merchant navy—perfect job for a doctor ! That'll help to sell Melrose perfumes."

" Ah, here she is ! "

Rose came in, tired out and quite enchanting. There was

just a little wrinkle near her mouth. She had had to stay with Mary de Perseval, explaining things to her ; both of them had been in a little " bar " somewhere, for a drop of whisky worked wonders with Mary.

" What's the matter with her ? " the doctor asked.

He had lost a great deal of weight, there was no getting away from that. But he was beginning to pick up again now, and the winter sports did him good, he said.

" I'll tell you all about it. Forgive me a moment, Stephane. I'm just going to slip my things off."

Unfortunately she did not mean it quite literally. As a matter of fact, no one cared a scrap what happened to Mary or what became of her, and Rose's account was not quite literal in that case either. It was Mary who had taken her to have a whisky, and actually the " bar " had been Leurtillois' flat. Not that there was really anything to hide ; it was just that Leurtillois had rung up Mary to tell her he was ill, and she was looking after him. He needed someone to keep him amused. Mary had had the bright idea of taking Rose along with her, as well as some petits-fours. What a state Leurtillois was in, to be sure, and all for the sake of that silly little goose. One couldn't help wondering how on earth men could fall in love with some women. Yes, there was nothing to hide, but Rose enjoyed not speaking the truth. In her room, she took off her dress and stood for a moment looking at her breasts ; then she chose a flowered wrap, a pretty thing from Babani's, which she liked because it always seemed to be coming undone. Then she kicked off her little shoes, and stepped into her red mules.

" Now for our interview."

Stephane stared at her like a schoolboy who has been hauled up before the whole school. She was the great Rose.

" Do you want me to tell you about the perfumes ? Or my Circassian masseur ? Or the Cocteau play ? It's no

use expecting any gossip column stuff from me about Gabriele. I haven't seen him since—oh, I don't know when, but it doesn't make me any younger to go so far back." She smiled. She had brought some flowers in with her, and while she talked she was arranging them in vases. "Not that sort of thing? Do you want to know if the perfumes are pleased with the new cabinet minister? Look, write up whatever you want, and then show it to me. If it's all right, I'll sign it. Is that all right? And put in a bit about how 'It is not the wish of Rose Melrose, the unforgettable Gioconda, to keep the secret of her youth only for herself,' and so forth—after all, that's your job, isn't it. Did anyone call today? Any messages?" she added, turning to the doctor.

He pulled a wry face. Yes, someone had rung up. Who? That painter of hers. At that she started to laugh.

"You're not jealous of Baby, are you?"

No, he wasn't jealous of Amberieux, who was a harmless sort of old stick. Still . . .

Dupuy was nibbling at his moustache in a manner horrifying to behold.

"It looks as if I've been waiting for nothing," he said.

"Well—yes and no. You've seen me, my dear boy. And you're a journalist, aren't you? Listen, go and have dinner somewhere together. I've millions of things to do before the show tonight. I'm not going to have anything to eat. Now really, darling, don't pull sulky faces like that. Go and have a feed with Stephane and let me have half an hour to myself. Imagine what it'd be like if I came on, that first scene that's all blue, looking the way I do now. I'll see you at the theatre."

Out on the little square, in front of the Theatre Montmartre, it was cold but dry; the streets weren't yet lighted. When the two men arrived, they found a number of groups of people milling around and young men shouting and waving walking-sticks. Instantly the doctor began to worry.

It was obviously a demonstration and he was terrified of its being a demonstration against Rose. St^phane had got hold of one of the demonstrators and found out that they were friends of Paul Denis who couldn't stand Cocteau. Everyone knew they were going to hiss, so they hadn't been allowed into the auditorium. Now they were forced to raise a shindy outside. Paul Denis, accompanied by a little fat man, came across to Decoeur the moment he saw him.

" Doctor ! This is absolutely crazy ! We've paid for our seats and they've thrown us out ! Tell Madame Melrose. . . .

The doctor shrugged. He was quite aware that the management knew what they were up to.

" It's a scandal ! " Paul Denis was shouting at the top of his voice. " It's outrageous ! They're throwing the poets out in the street ! " Then in a lower voice he added : " Of course we weren't going to hiss Mme Melrose. You can tell her that."

" There, there now, my dear boy, this is none of my business. I won't be seeing Rose before the interval."

" I say, doctor, do fix it up for me. Please do ! Otherwise I shall have to wait until the show's over to smash Cocteau's ugly mug."

" Dear me, you *are* making a fuss."

" I shall have to. Not that I like that sort of thing, but the others wouldn't forgive me if I didn't do it. None of them would, not even Frederic, they simply wouldn't understand it."

" Oh, I don't mind what you do," the doctor said, " but you could fix it up with Mary, couldn't you. It's more in her line than in mine."

At the mention of Mary's name the boy's face darkened. " I say, don't you know ? About Mary and me, I mean. It's all over." He was astonished as if the doctor hadn't heard that there was a change of government. " As a matter

of fact, that's why I ... I simply must . . ." He shot a glance at Stephane, who misunderstood the look and introduced himself.

" We met once at *The Dug-Out*" Dupuy added.

Paul nodded coolly and then drew the doctor aside. " I must explain to you. You can do something that means a lot to me. The most extraordinary thing has just happened to me. I've fallen in love."

" Congratulations."

" Thanks, you needn't laugh. I mean really in love. It's marvellous. I've chucked everything—the old woman, my course at the university, the research at the Institute of Oceanography, and my family, everything. We're going off somewhere together. ' Anywhere out of the world.' Only, there are other people to consider. ..."

" Other people ? Why should you have to consider them, if you've chucked everything."

" I'm chucking everything, I tell you. Well, not poetry and not my friends, of course. It's the same with them as it is with love, you've got to take it seriously. Well, I mean, they don't understand, you see, they don't believe it's really serious—you know what they're like, don't you ? They're awful tyrants. Ready to suspect you the moment they think you might be going to clear out. Then there was this play of Cocteau's. Preposterous ! It's all very well for Madame Melrose, but—well, you know who's behind it, of course. Right. So then it was agreed that we'd come here tonight and stop the show. We were prepared to be hauled off to the cells, we didn't mind being thrown out. But then I fell in love. I'm going away tomorrow. A real melodramatic elopement, meeting in a cafe at seven in the morning. Menestrel came to see me and made an awful scene. He said he'd never speak to me again, he'd get up a campaign against me, he'd say this, that, and the other. Not that I'm afraid of anything he can say. But honestly, I don't want to have a row with

them. They're my best friends. Jean-Frederic Sicre, the musician, he's my best friend. And he agrees with Menestrel. And they'll all fall in with whatever he says. You can't imagine what an influence Menestrel has on the others. So I said to myself: ' Right, this evening—can't be helped—I've got to stake everything on this for the sake of everything else. Tomorrow I'm going away, but there's still tonight.' And now they won't let us in."

Cars were beginning to arrive in the square. People were getting out of a taxi, and as they crossed to the theatre they were jostled by some of the demonstrators. Paul Denis' face, which was always extremely expressive, suddenly wore such a peculiar look that the doctor turned round to see what the cause was.

It was Mary de Perseval, in her chinchilla, exclaiming :

" Hello, doctor ! are you with this young man here ? Come along, Rose will be waiting for us in her dressing-room."

" Mary," Paul Denis murmured. He had quite lost his self-confidence.

" What is it ? " she said. " You're a young puppy ! I don't want to talk to you."

She dragged Decœur away.

At the same moment Menestrel hurled himself between Paul and Mary. He was a tall young man muffled up to the eyes in a scarf, carrying a walking stick which he grasped half-way down as if he were going to lay everyone low, and surrounded by friends of the most various shapes and sizes, dressed in every imaginable style. He wasn't interested in what was going on ; he just wanted someone to talk to.

" Well," he said furiously, " what the hell are we mucking about here for ? Cocteau must be having a belly-laugh. You're making fools of us. That's all—you're just making fools of us ! "

The little fat man who had been there a few minutes ago

came trotting up behind him. This was Paul's alter ego, Frederic, whose bulging eyes always seemed to be going on ahead of him.

Paul flung his arms up over his head. Everything was happening at once ! The warning bell could be heard from the theatre, the street lights were lit, there were masses of people everywhere, everyone that everyone else knew, as well as the journalists. There was some shouting going on outside the doors. Nobody quite knew what it was about, but Menestrel took up the cry. Holding his stick at both ends, he began to wave it to and fro. The ends of his scarf were flying in all directions. The others chimed in, including Denis.

" What are they saying ? " the couturier Charles Roussel asked Mrs. Goodman, whom he had just met. She didn't know, but she thought it was " Vive Baudelaire ! " Why were they cheering Baudelaire ? Well, that was just one of those things one couldn't understand.

" I wonder," the couturier said, " how Baudelaire comes to be mixed up in all this. Well, well, it's youth, so to speak. . . . "

Suddenly there was uproar. People began to run. There was a scuffle and Menestrel's group began to fall back before a charge. The police had arrived. The manager appeared in evening dress on the steps of the theatre. Denis came whirling past and almost banged into Roussel. Startled, the older man stretched out an arm and stopped him.

" Now, now, young man—oh, it's you, is it ? " Denis had received a blow in the face and his nose was bleeding. Roussel swept him off to the little cafe opposite.

Outside, the others were scrapping.

Roussel considered young Denis with something like admiration. The boy was panting ; his collar was torn and there was blood on his tie.

" Youth, youth. Perhaps you would care to write a little

something for me, a sort of sketch for my collection, of what happened tonight ? I have the manuscript play, which I bought from Cocteau, and I could have them both bound together. It would have a certain interest, a—so to speak . . ."

Paul Denis was beginning to recover. He asked for a *fine*. All at once he was struck by an idea and he turned to his companion.

" Mousieur Roussel," he said.

" Well, my dear boy ? "

" Mousieur Roussel, I'm at a turning-point in my life and it's rather queer. I wasn't looking for you, but there you are. And so——"

" And so-well ? "

" You can do something for me which would mean a very great deal indeed. This is how it is. Monsieur Roussel, I am in love."

The couturier showed lively interest. " Don't you think we ought to sit down ? " he said. " Here. Now tell me all about it."

Outside the police were passing by, with two of the demonstrators in their midst. One of them was the little fat man with the goggling eyes, the musician Jean-Frederic Sicre, Paul's best friend.

CHAPTER LXI

" IT'S simply terrific ! " Diane exclaimed.

The light fur of her coat suited her to perfection. It hung open, revealing a very simple black dress, with Parma violets tucked in at the belt; she had an odd little hat perched over one eye. Schoelzer was very proud of Mme de Netten-court. He wasn't so keen about visiting the *institut Melrose*,

but everything that amused Diane was good enough for him. Mile Agathopoulos was doing the honours; Mary had installed her there as a kind of forewoman. Zoe had refused to return to Greece as her father wished, and now that supplies were cut off, she had to have a job. There wasn't very much that she could do, apart from this. She looked like a personified catalogue of Melrose products : the blue of her eyelids, the plucked brows, the ochre powder and scarlet nails. None of this made any difference to that beak of a nose, nor to the angles of which her figures consisted. She looked like a geometrical model in her pink dress like a nurse's uniform, with a veil drawn tightly across her forehead. This was the uniform designed for all the saleswomen in the salons ; and in it Zoe looked as neat and elegant as anyone could have wished.

It was one of those buildings with ceilings twice the normal height that one finds in the Champs-Élysées, where banks crash so fast, since the people who used to live there have flitted on somewhere else. Ascending the monumental staircase, which was surrounded by lifts with imitation panelling, one arrived in a circular hall with grey mouldings, mauve moquette and green chairs, all of which had been designed by Paul Iribe, who had placed over the door some Juan Gris works bought at the Kahnweiler sale (the Picassos had been a bit *too expensive*). Off this hall three rooms opened out, with balconies overlooking the avenue. They were large rooms, each knocked together out of two smaller ones. Alongside was a passage with the offices, the cash desk and 30 on. At the end was a little staircase leading up to what Zoe called the Clinic, an upstairs apartment where the apparatus proper was gleaming, all nickel and paint: everything for massage, gymnastics, hairdressing, facial treatment, and the stock of manicure instruments, vibro and heaven knows what else. Downstairs on the other side the management had its own offices.

They had not gone to the expense of re-decorating these rooms like the salons ; they had been left as they were found, with striped wallpaper and chestnut woodwork and only the addition of yellow oilcloth screens, counters that had been built in, with partitions breast high. Here were women of a different kind, who wore grey blouses and no lipstick, with pins and needles stuck in their lapels, a pencil behind one ear ; and delivery messengers standing by parcels, piles of smart cardboard boxes with Rose's signature on them magnified to ten times its normal size.

" But what I like best," Diane said, " is the little salon."

This was the room in the middle, decorated entirely in gold, with black Chinese furniture and three Foujitas, one between the windows, one over the Louis Quinze mantelpiece, and the third on an easel from which trailed, as though by chance, an ancient Spanish brocade.

The perfumes were in two jeweller's show-cases in the red-and-white salon, with a big canvas by Mme Marval of women sitting under apple trees. What Zoe liked best were the Marie Laurencins in the third room, which was stippled in blue and rose ; nor did she conceal her preference.

" Will Mme Melrose be in today ? " Diane asked.

" Oh, we hardly ever see her, you know/" Mile Agathopoulos said. " But if you wish, you could see the doctor, he's upstairs in his office. And between two consultations . . ."

" Thanks very much, mademoiselle, it doesn't matter. We're in a hurry."

There was a sound of laughter from a little collection of people in the circular hall. A saleswoman went forward, and Zoe cast a glance in the same direction. As it happened, it was Rose, with a man who was sniffing from the cold outside—the weather was still atrocious.

" How divine to see you ! " Diane cried. " Monsieur Leurtillois ! I heard you were ill. You must excuse me,

Rose darling, I was dying of curiosity. It's quite heavenly. You know Schcelzer, don't you ? "

Everyone was already acquainted. Rose had a faint air of depression, which her gaiety could not quite conceal. Diane was aware of it at once, and looked at Aurelien. He wasn't even trying to hide his ill-humour. Diane was still fond of him and she knew him well. As they were going out (they were in such a hurry !) she said to her escort:

" Do you think they sleep together ? "

Schcelzer pooh-poohed the idea. " My cousin Barbentane isn't in Paris," he said.

To which Diane replied :

" You know, Rose is beginning to look her age."

Aurelien had sat down in the room with the Foujitas. Rose had gone up to see the doctor, and then she wanted to make an appointment with the Circassian for a Brazilian singer whom she had met at the Ministry—there had been a party at the offices of the merchant navy department. Rose had recited the *Invitation au voyage*. It had been the fitting thing.

Aurelien loathed this sumptuous style of interior decoration. But apparently it was necessary. He didn't like the Foujitas much, but the model, the same girl each time, he did find attractive. Since the attack of malaria he had just had, he was nearly desperate with the feeling of how empty his life was. It was funny : you didn't notice you had nothing to do, and then one fine day it suddenly became unbearable. If he hadn't had Rose . . .

She reappeared with the latest *Vogue*, which she had found upstairs.

" Aren't you hungry ? " she asked. " I'm simply fainting. It's nearly one o'clock, you know. Lead me to food ! Besides, you must eat properly, my poor boy. You must get your strength up." She stroked his cheek.

It was a fact that she had suddenly began to look her age.

Or, if that was putting it too strongly, at least she was no longer as young as she had been. There was something like weariness in Mme Melrose's face. The lines at each corner of her mouth had become habitual. The cream and powder seemed to be hiding her skin, instead of blending, as they used to do, with that tissue in which the life had flowered so exquisitely only a fortnight earlier. She must have tired herself out with the Cocteau play : her role was an exhausting one. There was something peculiar, too, about this violent infatuation she had developed for Aurelien Leurtillois. He was so little her type that it almost looked as though she were running after him.

" You were saying . . . Were you going to tell me something ? " Aurelien looked at her enquiringly.

They were in the " bar " in the rue Washington where they had settled down in front of spaghetti al sugo, with one of those bottles of Chianti which are always encased in a jacket of plaited straw. Over their heads were photographs of actors stuck in the frame of the mirror.

Rose sighed, wrinkling up her eyes in her most short-sighted manner, and twirled the spaghetti carefully round her fork :

" It's funny, darling. I wonder what's happening to me. I suppose it's just a passing weakness, but after all . . . "

" What are you talking about, my dear ? "

" Need you ask ? Look, I'm not as ugly or as old as all that yet. Just fancy, it's a fortnight now, yes, a fortnight to the day, and—nothing ! Not a thing ! Can you actually bring yourself to believe that such a thing ever happened to me before, even once before ? No—don't interrupt, I feel like talking. It's even beginning to interest me. If I didn't know Diane—and Mary, for that matter—I should think that you weren't—well—not normal."

He shrugged his shoulders. So Mary had told Rose—all

women were the same ! He adopted a gallant expression, saying :

" But I assure you, it only depends on you."

" Oh, don't be an ass ! You're not a schoolboy, and I'm not one of your mother's friends. I'm not in the habit of seducing little boys—it hasn't come to that yet. But really, it's the first time I've come across such a thing. Actually I find it rather fascinating, only it does rather puzzle me. And I wonder, too ..." She broke off, dreamily.

The schnitzels came along then. She worked the waiter hard. He was a handsome, dark fellow ; his ill-cared for hands poured out the gravy in an assured manner.

" Tell me, Aurelien," she began again, " and no kidding, mind—do you think men are likely to go on falling in love with me ? Don't laugh. Perhaps I'm just a silly cow, but there are days when I . . ."

He looked at her in surprise. He knew at least three men who were in love with her : the doctor, Edmond, and Uncle Blaise ; and he told her so. She shrugged : that wasn't the point. Then too, of course, he said, there was all the young men who had seen her on the stage. Did that count ? She thought not ; it must be somebody who didn't know who she was, someone who would see her somewhere without knowing the who, what, and how of it all.

" Once," she said, " if I so much as looked at a man, he lost his head, he was ready to do anything, anything. . . ! "

Aurelien helped himself to more mashed potatoes. " In other words," he said, "I'm behaving like a cad."

" Don't pretend to be stupid. It's not a matter of being polite about it. Listen, one day, in Florence . . ."

He only listened with half an ear to her stories, quite aware that she had something else to tell him. He said as much, and she confessed:

" Well, yes, as a matter of fact, there is something else.

But I like talking about myself. Do you know that Baby—oh, Blaise, I mean—well, I met him yesterday, and . . . Really I oughtn't to be telling you this, he made me promise . . ."

Aurelien wrinkled up his nose. How the deuce was his uncle mixed up in this ? He laughed not without mockery, saying :

" As if you ever kept a promise ! "

She wasn't offended. She took his hand and went on :

" It's funny, you know, the way I like you. I don't know what it is about you. After all, you're not particularly good looking, and you haven't much in the way of brains. ..."

" What did you promise Uncle Blaise ? "

" I promised not to tell you—oh, what on earth does it matter ! It was his house where Mme Morel went to stay when she ran away from Edmond's."

" What ? " Aurelien's humorous air vanished completely. " She went to Uncle's ? Why didn't he tell me ? Is she still there ? "

No, she was no longer there ; she had gone away. The fact was that Blaise had promised her not to say anything ; and then he had gone so far as to drop Aurelien a note, telling him to call in.

" I didn't know what he wanted me to come for. And then I was ill—you know all about that."

Of course she did. In the meantime, little Berenice had completely turned Amberieux's head; when he spoke of her, it was with tears in his eyes, and he was not far off considering Aurelien a brute and a bounder. What in the world could she have said to him ? Anyway, she hadn't gone back to her husband.

" Waiter ! The bill. Forgive me, Rose—you understand, don't you ? "

She did indeed understand. All the same, she ordered coffee for herself, and a liqueur. Now that Aurdien had gone,

she became thoughtful: there were so many things that came back to her, choking her with memories, making her head swim. This armagnac wasn't up to much. What a lousy life it was : just like the theatre, with the illusion of the scenery and the lights—and then you went backstage and saw the actors taking off their make-up. . . . Well, she must put up a good show. She wasn't going to let herself be pushed off like the others. She still had a bit of time ahead of her, and she meant her last curtain to be a triumphal one.

" *Mon enfant, ma sœur,
Songe d la douceur. . . .*"

Oh, to hell with it ! She stubbed out the cigarette she had just lit.

Sitting just opposite her was an extremely smart, fair young man with freckles and a snub nose. He was staring at her in a way she knew very well. She gazed back at him with all the bold, reckless brilliance of her short-sighted eyes, until he blushed and then suddenly grew pale. Then she remembered the way she looked at Hippolyte when she was playing Phedre ; and she turned on that glorious seductive smile.

CHAPTER LXII

" IT'S the passing of a world we knew, so to speak, an epoch. . . ."

M. Roussel was deeply moved. He was old, and it had been his world and his epoch. He remembered the dresses he had made for *La Femme Nue*. Then Bataille was his neighbour, a neighbour who, so to speak—ah well, all the same. . . .

There was already a pale sunshine in the air, and the fields

were beginning to show their early, delicate tints, a sprinkling of faint corn-tips on the ploughed earth that was brown or white or sandy-coloured or reddish ; and the fruit trees wore their first white blossoms. The countryside spread out against the near-by hills that were crowned with little woods and sliced with quarries ; there was a small railway running down from the sand pits. Here was the road, here were the fields and thickets that hid the Seine from view ; it all spread out for miles and miles. On the other side of the valley the landscape blurred with shadow and a suggestion of plains beyond, a whole countryside extending into the distance.

The big tourer stopped in the road leading down to the mill ; it was left in the charge of a chauffeur in navy blue uniform and cap, who looked as if he were waiting for his employer to come out of the Opera.

The celebrated dressmaker and Paul Denis strolled down the lane between the fields, along the side of the estate where there were so many flowers.

" I remember," Roussel said, " down there—that's the Epte, isn't it ? I came along here once, let me see—ah well, many years ago—coming to see Octave Mirbeau. He was a man who was, so to speak . . ." With the tip of his furled umbrella, which he was using as a walking stick, he knocked a pebble out of his path. Paul Denis watched the pebble bouncing and then, looking at his visitor's feet, saw that they were enclosed in black shoes with spats.

" What gave you the idea of coming here, Denis, my boy ? "

" You know, sir, it was all the same, here or anywhere else, the main thing was to get away. I've an American friend, a young writer, who came down here with his wife to write a thesis on Diderot in peace and quiet. So I said to myself . . . I had to find somewhere quickly, some little place. I happened to run into them and they thought of

the Mill at once. Archibald introduced me to the owners, the young couple you saw, and everything was fixed up/'

" Is the cooking at all tolerable ? "

" Ugh ! Still, that's not what we were interested in. The main thing was a little place where there wouldn't be any fuss. The only people who know we're here are Archie and Molly. You know what Americans are like. We only see them when we feel like it, once a week or so. We have it all to ourselves, we're hermits."

" Happy ? "

" Oh yes, definitely. Very happy."

He fell silent. He was unrecognisable, without a jacket, wearing a grey pullover and no collar, and already tanned by the March sun. He had lost his fidgettiness. His gaze wandered while the other talked ; he was thinking of something else. He had that easy, springy stride of people who walk a great deal, climbing hills and forgetting the time while they stroll through the woods.

" You ought to have your hair cut, my boy," the couturier remarked.

Paul nodded. " I'll go into Vernon tomorrow." He had probably said that every day since they had come. All the same, he owed Roussel a very great deal: a thousand francs a month wasn't the sort of thing one could pick up in every gutter. And then, just like that, as easy as falling off a log, just because he had said : " I'm in love and we want to go off somewhere into the country by ourselves." Really, the old buffer had been very decent, whatever one thought of his little mannerisms and so to speak. . . . People laughed at him. But how many of them would have done as much ? All he wanted in return was a sort of literary notebook for his collection, ten or fifteen pages a month. There was no getting away from it, he was really very decent.

It was obvious that he hadn't been able to contain himself for curiosity. He couldn't resist coming down and seeing

for himself how his young protege was living ; and doubtless he also wanted to see this mysterious girl whom Denis only spoke of in a roundabout way. When the car had arrived at the Mill, Charles Roussel had just caught sight of a light dress under the trees and someone escaping into the house. The next moment Paul Denis had appeared. He came up to Roussel, who was talking to that young man in riding breeches on his motor bike—the owner of the boarding house, no doubt. The girl who had fled was small and fair, and he was pretty sure that she was not a beauty.

Cutting short what he was saying about Henry Bataille's death, which had, nevertheless, upset him a good deal, he asked :

" How about your friends, Menestrel and company ? "

Paul made a non-committal gesture. Out here in the country, with the spring coming along and at the bottom of the fields the Seine, where he would soon be able to bathe, and the last wintry puddles in the mud and ruts of the lanes, and the hedges in bud, a great many things that he had formerly thought essential, things he couldn't imagine himself living without, had now lost their significance. The day before, they had done twenty-five miles there and back.

(Roussel observed that the young man now always used the plural number.)

" So they haven't tried to see you again ? But they know where you are ? "

Paul explained that only one of them had his address and if anyone wanted to write to him, they would have to give the letter to this one friend, who was sure to keep the secret, had in fact promised. Yes, of course, Menestrel was furious. But the group as a whole respected love, which was indeed the only thing that could excuse. . . .

" Does he know Madame—I mean, does Menestrel know your lady friend ? "

" Oh no. Anyway, I don't want him butting in and disapproving of her."

" A tyrant, so to speak."

Denis gritted his teeth. He didn't like to hear Menestrel called a tyrant; or a dictator, either, for that matter, which was the word that occurred to most people. When people talked about dictatorship in connection with Menestrel, it was generally because they weren't so hot themselves. Menestrel was always right.

To change the subject, Paul began to explain about the Mill.

" It belongs to a young couple. His lungs are in rather a bad way. He had an uncle in Vernon, and they settled down here, you saw the garage on the way in. She's very nice. I expect you saw her, a little fair girl in a print dress, she ran into the house when you came along, because she hadn't changed."

Aha, so he had been mistaken ; that wasn't the girl.

" The place looks a bit like something out of an operetta : ultra-cottagey, with English prints on the walls and tiles everywhere. And they're broad-minded, too, you know what I mean. Most of the people who come here are painters, Montparnasse and all that. Sometimes there are two women who take the big bedroom downstairs for the week-end. Lesbians—not that I care what they are."

" Do you see much of the people who come down like that ? "

" We can't help it. Oh, we don't see *much* of them, I wouldn't say that, but we have our meals together and so one gets into conversation. And then there's the gramophone, we dance a bit sometimes in the evening. The other night when that big storm came on, all the lights fused and the girls were frightened, so we lit candles and all came downstairs. There's a tiny little upright in the room, which I usually prefer not to touch, but that night I was playing till two o'clock in the morning."

Charles Roussel had been saving up for the moment when he would say:

"How would you care to come along into Vernon with me for lunch? There's an excellent restaurant there that I know."

Paul Denis was quite taken aback. He didn't dare refuse.

"I'm not alone," he said.

"I know, I know, but perhaps your friend would like . . . It's just, so to speak . . . An old man like myself."

There was no chance of refusing. Roussel had come in order to see him, and after all he was keeping him, Denis. But it did leave him with a slightly bad taste in his mouth; it was as though a door had suddenly been flung back, to reveal the secrets of his happiness. The old lecher, nothing more or less than a beastly old voyeur. . . . Obviously he was dying to meet her. Now Paul would have to talk her over: "Don't you see, we owe it all to him." And he knew what her answer would be, he could almost hear the irony in her voice. God, what a bore this was.

But it turned out quite differently from what he expected. The whole thing went on wheels. Perhaps it was that after five weeks in the country she did have some craving for civilisation; or perhaps she found it amusing to meet Roussel; it might even be the fact of having a better lunch than what they were used to at the Mill. If only it would occur to the old chap to order *champagne nature*.

"Do you love me?"

She shook her head: "I can't tell you what isn't true."

He said: "Oh, you know, Henry Bataille's dead."

"What difference do you expect that to make to me?"

Indeed, what difference did he think it could make to her? But the point was that while Bataille was dying, a long way off, down in the country, at precisely the same moment, the very moment he died, Berthe Bady—"you know, Bady, his first wife"—she didn't know anything about it at all, she was

just coming downstairs, and her heart broke. She was dead. " Don't you think it's amazing, Honey-Bunch ? "

" Oh," Berenice said, " I think it's quite natural."

CHAPTER LXIII

SHE let herself drift with the passing of time and the whirl of her thoughts. She no longer put up any fight against the things that were happening to her. She had slipped into the whole thing almost without noticing it and without any sense of permanence. It had begun as an idle escapade, a stroll that had gone farther and then farther. There was that feeling, which everyone knows, that one really ought to be somewhere else, perhaps, though not necessarily, at home ; that there is a meal, or something of the sort, waiting for one ; and yet one goes a little farther, feeling a little guiltier with every step—just another five minutes, another two, just one more. And one doesn't go home. This is stolen time, a little handful of time that is different from the rest of time ; and not only stolen, but wasted and spoilt. A deep-seated sense of duty mingles with a peculiar awareness of the need for thrift, the incomprehensible economy of the fleeting minutes, so that when one is doing something other than what one is supposed to be doing and ought to be doing, it is as though one were not living at all. But it can't be helped, one isn't going to go home. It isn't that one is especially set on loafing about here or that one prefers being here ; but here one is. That's all. There one is, dazed with one's own disobedience.

Berenice remembered how, as a child, when she used to make sandcastles and carried the sand in her blue bucket from the pile that there was on the other side of the path,

she used to play a trick on herself: she would spill almost all of it on the way, out of sheer perversity, without knowing why. Then she would have to start all over again. Actually she was supposed to be building sandcastles ; but, without admitting it to herself, she was playing at going and getting sand. It came back to her now, and the memory was a vague analogy of—she was not quite sure what, somehow bound up with this life she had begun in the year 1922.

By now the whole countryside was filled with spring. In these parts in Normandy, spring did not come with the same suddenness as it did at R. nor was it the same as in Provence, where sometimes there is no transition and one wakes up one morning to find oneself in full summer. Nor was it the same as in Paris, where it lights up, one fine day, in the very same theatrical tradition as sets the footlights ablaze when an actor walks on carrying a little candle. Here it was different, here spring was a slow invasion emerging from the depths of the soil and the moisture of the fields. It was like a haze lifting. It had the slowness and the heaviness of slightly warm water. If it was not yet quite spring, at least the first stirrings were there. How strange everything was. Berenice was developing a taste for solitude ; the approach of spring was separating her from Paul more than anything else did.

For there was Paul, too, and there was no getting away from that. This lad with his comical mouth, his auburn hair that was beginning to fade in the open air, and that fidgety skinny look that reminded her of a little boy. He was a stranger who had come into her life by chance, and then remained to acquire a disproportionate importance. Yes, it might as well be admitted : disproportionate.

She enjoyed the mornings, when he lingered over his dressing and, still unshaven, came down to breakfast, to dip his rolls into the milky coffee ; or the way it was when he would throw himself face downwards on his bed, amidst

sheets of manuscript, and write things that had neither beginning nor end, things that would assume shape later on. She liked to go out in the morning, leaving him to idle through the hours of dreaminess that were for him what holidays meant. Then she would walk through the fields alone ; now that the weather was better, she needed only a strong pair of shoes, no galoshes, and the little chestnut coat that was *almost* waterproof ; for it didn't always rain. There were times in the day when the sun would break through the clouds, so that she thought she must clap her hands or sing for sheer joy.

Yes, there was Paul, but there was also someone else who was never mentioned. It was enough to go down there beyond the fringe of trees, over the bank where the fresh grass was sprouting and the soil was sticky and full of changing colours ; then she would find her way into that track, among the dead leaves that had turned black since autumn. It was easy walking there, in spite of the big thorny branches that jumped out now and again from the bushes, catching her across the face or legs. There she could walk uphill or down, according to the day, but always in the awareness of that softly rippling presence, that whispering caress and hostility of the yellowish-white water that sometimes turned to green or would spin in an eddy among fallen branches : the unending flow of water, water that streamed on and on like the thoughts in her mind, water that she could gaze at for hours, that talked to her, cradled her, sang to her.

There was Paul, but there was also the Seine.

The same Seine—it was queer to think of that—the very same Seine. Soon a day would come, when the weather was a little warmer, when Paul would want to bathe in the Seine ; he talked about it a lot already. He had even brought his bathing trunks with him, and there were days when he would take them out of his case and look at them as if they were a ball dress. What a baby he was ! It was impossible to be

cross with him for being that way he was, with those unexpected flashes of something else, and his moods of sweetness. When he sat down to the piano, he was marvellous—so long as he didn't take to playing the music of his dear friend, Jean-Frederic Sicre . . . *that* was a different matter ! If only he weren't so absent-minded sometimes, just when he ought to have been different.

But nothing diverted the Seine ; it was always the same. Rivers pursue their ideas to the last conclusion. Berenice liked to think of the river flowing on like that, always towards the one end, never forgetting and never mistaken. When she climbed up the embankment again, there were hidden little patches and tangles of greenery that had gradually revealed their inmost character to her, as friends do, until they were like people she knew. The trees hailed her as she went past, each in its distinct and individual fashion.

There was a kind of beach where a trace of foam died out upon the pebbles ; then the big field sloping right down to the river ; a curve of the bank, and a willow. Bit by bit she came to the place where the Epte flows into the Seine ; and there she would follow the little river back up its course, and if she felt so inclined, as far as the locks higher up, past that deserted estate where a timbered house stood with its shutters closed, that garden sunk deep in the shady melancholy of long weeds. That was a place of special kind with the voice of the weir and then the bar of foam, the little balconies jutting out over the water towards the pavilion on the other side, quite tiny and far away on the other bank, where the main road ran and cars went rushing along, some north, some south, all that mysterious traffic.

The same Seine, its barges gliding by like a strange wonder, with that incomprehensible humanity on board : people who seemed to spend the whole of their life like that, standing there motionless as they were borne away. And dead branches being dragged down into the eddying waters. Sometimes

a scrap of flotsam. But always the same Seine, mesmerising her as she thought of how it flowed down from Paris and was flowing away towards the sea, forever, always the same—coming from Paris—and going away—to the sea.

Here Berenice was all alone. It was astounding how empty the countryside could be. Sometimes there would be a peasant in the distance, his bent silhouette suggesting one whose work was weeding the furrows ; but that only made her feel more acutely all this space and solitude, the wonderfully unpeopled wilderness. No one else had the idea of walking along the Seine. Why should they have done so ? Who would have had such an idea ? Sensible people don't go walking along the Seine : for afterwards there's nothing to do but go back again—and where does that get one ?

And Paul was idling through the morning, bless his heart. It would take him at least another hour to polish his shoes. Berenice was free. She was fond of him, of course, but they couldn't be together all the time. He would have wished it, except when he had one of his absent-minded phases, and even then when it didn't matter a scrap to him. Said like that, it didn't sound quite fair, but that is what it came to at bottom. Berenice congratulated herself on not having given way on the question of bedrooms ; she had insisted that they should take separate rooms at the Mill, one each. Paul didn't agree at first; he had thought of having one room and one big bed. There were excellent reasons for such an arrangement; first of all, it was cheaper, and secondly, surely it couldn't be any hardship to them. Nobody had any illusions about the situation, nor were the Vanhouts the kind of people to see any objection on the grounds that they weren't married. The Vanhouts, the owners, were nice people : a funny little couple, absolutely trustworthy. All the same, Bfer^nice had stuck to her point: she was still married to Lucien, she had no reason for doing this, and she even

preferred that it should be she who went to join Paul in his room at night, when the maid had gone to bed, and taking care that no one should see her. The arrangement had the further advantage that she could go away again, if she wished. She did not at all dislike sleeping with Paul, w^ho was a quiet and considerate bed-mate and rather nice to look at when he was asleep ; nevertheless, if they had had only one room—well, on the whole it was better the way it was.

There was a bench by the lock, an old mossy bench made of wood, which was not as cold as stone. Berenice would sit there and look at the sluice-gates. Here was a tug coming down stream—to pick up a barge, probably ; it would haul it up against the current, like a girl being dragged along by her hair, forcing it along this course that was against nature. It would take it to some other place, by force ; home, perhaps. They might even pass the He Saint-Louis.

She would have to go to Vernon, the day after tomorrow at the latest. At the post office there she picked up the letters that came from Lucien, and posted her own ; in this way, no surprise was possible. She did not trust Lucien, with his understanding attitude and that sentimentality of his. She wasn't thinking about Lucien at all ; but she had to write regularly, once a week, if only to avert some catastrophe, the moral pressure his anxiety would exert on her conscience. Some people tyrannise over others by the mere fact of their existence ; and however many miles one puts between oneself and them, it makes no difference. Naturally she had not told him that she was with Paul ; and from the moment that he knew Aurelien was not with her, his mind would be at rest. What was the use of giving him fresh cause for anxiety and helping him to torment himself ? He was making himself quite unhappy enough without knowing about the lad's existence, though, on the other hand, he was capable of accepting that too. And that would have been a bit too much ; Berenice would never have forgiven

him. Or he would have wanted to talk it over : " Are you sure you love him ? Do you really love him ? Is he capable of making a woman happy ? " A husband like that was worse than a mother.

Down there in the Seine was an island. There are islands all along the Seine, but this was one which no one ever visited ; it was no use to anyone. It was long and narrow, with a few trees, and beyond it one could see that river, on the other side where the boats went by. That made it seem her private island. Berenice wondered of she would be able to swim as far as that, when the time came for them to go bathing. Paul was a good swimmer apparently. She could hardly imagine him in the water, and she was a little anxious for his sake. But she could imagine quite clearly what Aurelien would be like when swimming. He had talked to her about it for hours it was, indeed, one of the few things of which he talked well, for he was not a particularly eloquent person. She could see him in the Seine, swimming. How well he swam ! It wouldn't be any trouble to him to swim as far as the island. There must be mud on the edges of the island, and from here she would see him coming up out of the water and that big clumsy body plodding through the mud. She was sitting here on this bench in order to watch him better over there on the island. He was a man of the islands. It was not surprising.

The tug had passed through the lock and was proceeding proudly beyond the trees, with a hoarse cry. It was black with a band of chestnut and white on its funnel.

Oh lord, it must be late. Lunch ! And Paul would be sulky with her because she had left him in the lurch.

CHAPTER LXIV

"PRECISELY ! If I didn't sleep with Leurtillois, it was only because he didn't want to."

Edmond was annoyed—and how handsome he was when he was annoyed ! Rose laughed her most theatrical laugh. They were in the little office next to the salons at the beauty-centre. There was Edmond superbly tanned from his holiday, the confounded fellow. He was like a piece of ceramic, perfectly baked, firm of outline. . . and those white teeth ! He was magnificent in his grey suit with the faint trace of pink, which would have looked effeminate on anyone else. Rose, in a black fur coat with a cape, and long black gloves, black shoes, and an extravagant starched green jabot, said as though speaking to a small child :

"Now you're not going to be jealous, are you, and smash your nice little toy ? "

"That's enough joking, darling. Why shouldn't I be jealous ? I come back only to hear a thing like that ! A nice homecoming ! "

"Would you rather I hid things from you ? You come back, and I tell you all the things that have happened while you've been away. What do you expect me to do ? His lordship goes off for three weeks, for the winter sports, he says, stays away for a month, doesn't dream of coming home, does the Cote d'Azur, stays on for the Carnival, stays on after the Carnival's over—together with his wife the whole time—and then assumes the right to be jealous ! "

"You know very well my wife doesn't count."

"That's always the excuse. But I didn't go to bed with Leurtillois, while you, on the other hand, if you didn't sleep with your wife, then only because you were sleeping with someone else."

Edmond explained that it had been necessary to give

Blanchette some amusement and take her mind off things. He didn't want to have a divorce, not yet, anyway.

" It's too bad ! " Rose interrupted him. " Don't go and do something silly, my lad. If you have a divorce, I won't be able to make the pace with you. It's touch and go as it is, with your wife to keep you busy."

He condescended to laugh. It was a wry laugh, with the thought of Aurelien in the background. Why Aurelien ? The damned fellow turned up all over the place, with Edmond's wife, with Edmond's mistress—hang it all, it was really a bit thick.

" You've nothing to laugh about," Rose said. " I saw your photograph in *Town and Country*—* A pageant on the French Riviera'—complete with the Duke of Connaught, M. and Mme Barbentane, and, on the left, the beautiful Mme Quesnel. Now I don't mind your wife, she doesn't worry me. But I draw the line at your mother-in-law. Carlotta worries me."

" Funny," Edmond remarked. " Blanchette said to me : ' You can have a completely free hand with Mme Melrose. But Carlotta—that's a different matter ! ' "

Rose whistled.

" Very nice, I must say ! So I have your wife's blessing, have I ? Blanchette thinks I'm old enough for you."

" Don't be silly." He kissed her hand.

" What were you dressed up as ? "

" Nothing in particular. An artist friend of Carlotta's copied costumes from Masaccio. So the reason why our handsome Aurelien wasn't having any was that he was thinking about Berenice, eh ? I wonder where she can be. Is he in mourning ? "

Rose changed the subject. How did director Barbentane like the place, the salons, the style of decoration, the flowers, the typists, the masseur, the hairdressers ? " We've been terribly quick, you know. You can't imagine what a rush it

was. But if I'd missed the end of January it would have been all up with the season. We have *masses* of people coming in."

" And that wasn't enough to keep Madame occupied ? "

" You know what I'm like, duckie, I'm faithful to the people on the spot. A short life and a merry one, that's my attitude. What are you going to do this afternoon ? "

He replied with such an obscenity that even Rose blushed, though the colour was hardly noticeable under her make-up.

" If you like," she sighed, " though it isn't exactly my favourite . . . not today, though. I was going to ask you to take us out for a run in the country, Amberieux and me. Have you got the car ? "

" What an idea ! Taking out Madame and her painter ! Do you think that's what I came back for ? I have reserves to draw on and I'm not in the mood for a nice harmless afternoon out."

" Silly, oh silly ! You didn't tell me you were coming, and I've promised Baby."

" Well, you'll just have to put your boy friend off, that's all."

" No I can't do that. We've fixed something up. I've been wanting to go for a long time, and Baby has made an appointment for me with Claude Monet."

" Claude Monet ? Do you think you're a nymph ? "

" You must start trying to be sensible. Amberieux is an old friend of Monet's and he's promised me for ages. One can't put Monet off. And he lives in the country."

" I'm sorry. Blanchette's using the car and the other one's in dock. What a hair-brained idea ! "

" All right, I'll ask Leurtillois. We'll have to pack into the two-seater, that's all."

" I say, you're going to give me the pleasure. ..."

" I'll give you the pleasure tomorrow, when I let you ..."
she finished the sentence with a coarse gesture that couldn't

be misunderstood. And she picked up the telephone, leaving Edmond to fume.

" Hello ? Are you there ? Do come down, here's Barbentane wanting to say hello to you." And over her shoulder: " My husband ! "

Edmond muttered something about not caring two hoots in hell about the cuckold.

" Oh, naughty ! " she said. " What a horrid word—and it might bring you bad luck."

CHAPTER LXV

" IT'S incredible, isn't it ? It's almost hot."

The morning sun was streaming into the sparsely furnished room, where the window opened straight onto an old, red-tiled roof ; and a few young early wasps flew in through the window.

The blue, soapy water in the still unemptied slop-pail, the disorder of clothes left lying where they had been thrown off, the open suit-case with ties lying spread out for their owner's better consideration, all spread out like a dance around Paul as he dressed. So it seemed to Berenice, as she sat on the unmade bed, watching him with critical eyes.

" You ought to have a shave," she said.

" Do you think so ? " He stopped in front of the mirror in the door of the pitch-pine wardrobe. Rubbing his hand over his cheeks he went on: " Vanhout says when a man shaves in the morning, it's a sign that there's something wrong with his sex-life."

" That's what Vanhout says, is it ? He only shaves every second day. You'll never be ready, and your friends'll be here."

" D'you think they will ? What a bore. I didn't ask them to come."

" You may not have asked them to come, but it would be nicer if you made yourself respectable to receive them."

There was a pause.

Then Paul began again : " Frederic had no right to pass on my address."

" He may not have had any right, but he had your address and so. . . ."

" Well, someone had to have it, hadn't they ? For forwarding letters and—well, something might have happened."

" Oh yes, of course, something might have happened. Not that it matters. But you needn't be surprised if they turn up. It was bound to happen."

" Are you cross, Honey-Bunch ? "

She flinched ; she hated being called Honey-Bunch. But she said she wasn't cross ; she would slip out somewhere for lunch, that was all.

" Do you really not want to see them ? You don't want to see Menestrel ? "

" What should I see him for ? "

He had told her often enough that he wasn't especially keen on her knowing Menestrel; he didn't want to risk any. . . . What was it, actually, that he didn't want to risk ? Her opinion of Menestrel or Menestrel's opinion of her ? She didn't say anything, but she smiled. She knew quite well that he was extremely anxious to have the good opinion of that tyrannical friend. But for her it meant the end of the wilderness, the lovely solitude.

" How many of them will there be ? "

" Fifteen. The telegram says fifteen or sixteen. I told Vanhout fifteen. Because if another one comes, if there's enough for fifteen, it'll be enough for sixteen, too."

The telegram was there on the table Berenice took it

and read it. Paul had begun to shave; he always began with his chin, using a safety razor. In a few minutes he would be turning this way and that, trying to find a scrap of newspaper to wipe off the soap.

" I can't think how I ever managed to live without you."

This kind of outburst, out of the blue like that, always rubbed Berenice up the wrong way. But there was nothing to be done about it: that was what Paul was like.

" You had Mary," she countered.

" Oh, her ! "

" Why do you say that ? She was very nice to you."

" Yes, but I didn't love her, you know that."

" You thought you did, for about a fortnight. You told me yourself. And then there was Paris, and your work, the research. Are you sure you don't miss the Institute of Oceanography and the axolotls ? "

" To prove that I don't, you can have my ticket. Oh ! " He had cut himself, and he was pulling faces, twisting his funny mouth.

She couldn't help laughing.

" What are you laughing at ? What's so funny ? I've cut myself."

She looked at the tiny trickle of blood near his lips and said : " What a nice colour your blood is ! "

He turned round, flattered. If it hadn't been for the soap, he would have kissed her. " I should jolly well think I don't miss the axolotls ! Not to speak of Asnieres and Mum and my kid brothers and the little flat that smells of carbolic to keep down the stink of cabbage."

" Yes, but there was the cafe in the place Pigalle, and M6nestrel and the others. You don't mind seeing them again, do you, h'm ? "

He didn't answer at once. Then he said in an artificially casual tone : " Oh well, of course, naturally it'll be amusing

to see what they're up to. In five weeks they'll have invented something. After five weeks they won't still be talking about automatic poems. They seem to have come into some money from an unfrocked priest. Federic's written a tango for ocarinas."

So he must have had a letter and not told her about it. He loved her, Berenice thought—she had no doubts of that. But he loved her in his own way, and he would be dreadfully shocked and disillusioned if she were to tell him what she thought about it. He would be capable of doing something crazy, just to show that he really loved her. And what would it prove? With people like him, love was something that went to make up the general picture. Nevertheless, he did love her.

"After all/' Paul was saying, "what can I do about it? They sent me a wire. They present me with a *fait accompli*. I can't stop them coming, so we've just got to put up with it. Just like Menestrel, forcing one's hand."

Menestrel certainly counted for more with Paul than the whole of the rest of the world put together. But Paul felt he must keep up some show of independence. Berenice had not the slightest desire to see Paul's friends. She was not going to figure in the Group's artistic assembly; she had no intention of being the object of curiosity to these fifteen or sixteen pairs of eyes—no thanks. She knew that Menestrel missed Paul, too, and that was all the more reason for not wanting to be regarded as the dreadful person who was preventing him from taking his mandarin cura9ao at the cafe in the place Pigalle and playing at paper games with Menestrel. It was queer to think that this thin boy, whose sunburn could not quite hide the city pallor natural to him, was the person with whom she had suddenly gone away like that, on a moment's impulse. There were times when she wondered if it had really happened at all. She had been so weary, so drained of all her strength, when she had met him

by chance on that day in January, as she was wandering along the quays, not far from the Rue Bonaparte. She had been looking at the Seine, that same Seine, and thinking of the Unknown, and of the Morgue. She had not wanted to go back to Lucien and say she was sorry. And the other ? Ah, it was no use tormenting herself by thinking about the other.

At first she had been put out at meeting someone. She had been staying at the Amberieux's for the last week and she was tired of being preached to by old Blaise. The Seine. . . . Well, if she had to talk to someone, she might as well talk to Paul Denis. She heard herself talking, and she was surprised that it sounded like someone completely different. Paul Denis had taken her hands in his. No, no, she mustn't kill herself. Was she mad ? Had she said that she had been going to kill herself ? She could no longer remember exactly. But that was how it had begun.

He was freshly shaven and very well satisfied with his appearance.

" Is that smooth ? Feel ! " he cried, throwing himself upon her.

" Oh, Paul ! Do be careful."

" Honey-Bunch, it's going to be ages and ages till we meet again—just think, a whole afternoon. It's the first time. It's terrible."

" Oh no, it won't be so bad. You'll see. The time will go quickly, there'll be such a lot of things to talk about, the unfrocked priest, the latest story about Cocteau, and there'll be Menestrel too. It'll be evening before you know where you are."

He shook his head in disagreement, looking at her with shining eyes. He didn't seem in the least depressed. Then he held out his arms.

" Oh," she said, " not *all* the time."

His face fell. But it was only a moment before the cloud

passed. " Listen, Nicette. As we're going to be separated, let s go out together. How would you like to go for a little walk, as far as the Murphys' ? "

She smiled. He couldn't go out without going somewhere, without the Murphys' as a destination. Well, why not ? When they had first come there, to listen to him talk, one would have thought they had fled to remotest Ethiopia. Anyway, the Murphys weren't at all bad ; Berenice quite liked them, and she was amused by him, with his big head and everything about him that suggested the baseball player.

" Wait downstairs," she said, " I must go to my room for a minute."

She had to go down one flight and along a dark passage with another step up. Her room had little red and white checked curtains, and frills on practically all the furniture, which was in the Norman peasant style. The hogskin suitcases on the floor emphasised the fleeting nature of her occupation.

Berenice sprinkled perfume on her handkerchief and looked at herself in the dressing-table mirror. She must powder her nose. Paul was always rubbing her powder off.

It was strange how such a room could change its character : in broad daylight, when everything was put tidily, it had hardly anything in common with the lamplit room it was by night, when clothes and little possessions were strewn about, like the turmoil of love that also sprang to life there.

Yes, one had to use the same word, love, for this. She recalled the first days, when she had tried to find some diversion, when she had been wanting to spoil something, smash something, break the tension between herself and the other. . . . So she had yielded to this boy's pleading, since all at once he believed himself to be in love. And perhaps he was. From the first evening when they had met at Mary's,

until now the idea of making love to her, or even of flirting with her, had never entered his head. They enjoyed talking music together ; and Paul had not seen her, literally had not seen her, until that day when he found her leaning on the parapet on the quai Malaquais. Need the shock happen, the thunderbolt fall (always supposing there is any such thing at all), the first time two glances cross ? It may equally well happen by delayed action. Sometimes she told herself that he must have been fed up with everything that day, sick of his life, of Mme de Perseval, of Asnieres and the axolotls and even of Menestrel. He had had a row with the whole cafe de Pigalle gang, about Victor Hugo. And he switched all his capacity for enthusiasm over to her.

She could not bring herself to go downstairs. She wasn't so very keen on going to see Archibald and Molly, and so she sat and looked round her room, which was for the time being all the home she had.

The first day she had let him have his way, for after all that was why she had come. He had seemed so happy, wild with happiness, utterly spendthrift with his energy and not letting her sleep until, because he had no idea of his own limits, he was suddenly surprised by an impotence that was merely natural, and he wept like a child. She had to comfort him, very gently, until he fell asleep. He fell away from her into sleep, as though over the edge of a precipice ; and she lay alone beside him, in real and utter solitude.

It was then that she decided she would rather it happened in his room, for then she could get up and leave him when he fell asleep, and go back to her own room.

" What are you doing ? I've been waiting downstairs for an hour, with the little Vanhout girl hanging around me. She's been telling me all about her unhappy childhood—• need I say more ? "

" I've been thinking about you," she said in all good faith. He was overjoyed.

The weather was beautiful. Indeed, one would have thought oneself in May, at least: lilac was out at the bottom of the garden, and as they went along the lane a sweet, heady scent hung around them, belonging to no flower that Berenice could name.

"Do you remember the night of the storm?" Paul murmured.

She trembled. Ah, that was it, the scent that was borne on the wind just before the rain came. It must be blowing this way.

"The night of the storm," Paul repeated, drifting into a sentimental mood. He had slipped his arm around her waist, and so they walked on together. She took a skip to get into step with him. Paul was never in step.

Indeed, she wouldn't forget that night so quickly, the night of the storm. They had gone upstairs again after dinner. The air was suffocatingly close. Then it had begun: doors banging, the wind rising to a roar, and lightning fiercer than any she had ever seen. The whole house shook with the tumult. The rain fell in torrents, smashing the gutters, and through the walls one seemed to hear voices talking in the dark. Downstairs that fool was strumming the piano. Had all that had anything to do with it? Perhaps it had. Certainly what she had experienced in his embrace was unlike anything she had ever known before. She had not suspected herself capable of such violent abandon. What was queer was that it should be this ragamuffin Paul, the very person she had been putting up with for weeks, paying no particular attention to his caresses, who should have given her that pleasure. It was incredible. She simply couldn't believe it. It must have been the storm. At the time she had thought: Perhaps—perhaps I shall have a child now after all.

She knew quite well that it was impossible.

He liked talking about that night. She had been so amazed by what happened to her that she had told him. How proud

that made him ! He lost no opportunity of talking about it or alluding to it. For she had even been so beside herself as to whisper to him : "I love you." How could she help it! It had slipped out before she knew what she was saying ; and it was no use her denying it later, for obviously Paul didn't believe her denials. That "I love you " had gone straight to his heart. She was not cruel enough to withdraw it completely, but now she had one more grudge against life, in the awareness that perhaps it might have been like that—oh, what mightn't it have been like !—with the other, if only she had been able to believe in him.

Paul never spoke of Aurelien.

They were walking past that delightful garden, so luxurious with flowers. The gardeners tended and changed them by night so that the owner should never see a faded bloom. Since dawn that morning they had been blue. The day before, the flower beds were all orange. Paul pretended to think this was eccentric, but really he liked eccentricity and, as a matter of fact, he was impressed. The lane went across the property, coming out the other side where a little stream meandered, with a sunken, wooden footbridge.

" I've finished reading *Wuthering Heights*" Berenice said. " I've been wondering how one could translate the title into French. I ought to have brought it with me for Murphy, but I forgot."

" And how about me ? I haven't read it."

" You know very well you won't read it."

" Why shouldn't I read it ? You say it's marvellous. Is it a love story ? "

" Yes, it's a love story."

The Murphys lived at the other end of the village, in the house behind Madame Praise's grocery shop. It was a typical village house, with high walls and no garden, only a courtyard where hens pecked about among the dung. One climbed a staircase that was actually nothing but a

ladder, up to two large communicating rooms, high-ceilinged granaries that had been converted into attic-studios for painters. The first room was furnished in the most elementary way; primitive divan-beds and a partition hiding what they called the kitchen, with a big, black stove, the bend of its chimney disappearing up through the roof, were sufficient setting for the happiness of Archibald Murphy and his wife, Molly, a small quaint girl with a tip-tilted nose, not at all pretty but radiantly energetic.

Archie loathed Menestrel heartily and he could not bear the sight of "the group." The only exception he made was in favour of Paul Denis, who amused him. In Paul he saw the typical Frenchman, who nowadays no longer resembles that stage character with his moustache, pointed beard, waisted frock-coat, and everlasting visiting-cards thrust under the nose of everyone he meets.

Molly was cooking some strange dish which she assured them was going to be a *demi-lapin*. There was a bottle of *fine* on the table, which was covered with oil-cloth because this was France and it was quite bad enough not to be wearing braces like everyone else.

They made Berenice stay to lunch. She had thought of going for a walk along towards La Roche-Guyon, but she let them change her mind for her. Paul pouted and said : " So I've got to go home by myself ? All that way. . . ." Still, he was rather sweet. Bless his heart. . . So-long !

" I forgot to bring *Wuthering Heights* back. Have you anything you can lend me to read, Archie ? "

Archibald Murphy's outstanding characteristic was his taste for going about in his shirt sleeves, with his shirt coming out of his trousers at the waist. He folded those strong arms which had done such good service on the Yale playing fields, and grasped his chin in order to think better :

" Wait a minute. Have you read *MobyDick* ? "

It turned out that Berenice hadn't read it.

" *A table !* " Molly called out, in her accent that was more French than anything normally spoken in France. " *A table, chevaliers et demoiselles !* The rabbit salutes you, the radishes await you." She was waltzing about with the dish. " Darling, put your pipe away. You can smoke afterwards."

The untidiness here was of a different kind from Paul's. Molly had an extraordinary talent for irrelevance ; wherever she went, objects were monstrously copulated, stamps in the egg cups, forks in the books, and everything else in similarly unsuitable places. Turning to Berenice, she suddenly and quite unexpectedly pinched her arm, saying :

" Sit down. It's a recipe of Mme Praise's. Rabbit a la Fraise. *Aperitif*, h'm ? "

A sound of shouting could be heard down below.

" Don't bother about that, it's only Mme Fraise having a dust up. *Elle se querelle*. You can say that, can't you ? "

The three of them were sitting round a little table that was rather too small. Mrs. Murphy strewed the floor around them with things that they needed for the meal, pepper, mustard, butter and plates for the next course, so that they wouldn't have to get up.

" You don't know Menestrel, do you, Berenice ? " Archie asked in his deep bass voice. He pronounced her name in his own American way, so that it sounded comically like Burnus. He began to talk about Menestrel, and the picture that he evoked in Berenice's imagination was quite unlike the picture Paul had called up of his friend : this was a pompous and pedantic creature, quite unbearable, jealous of his friends, whom he exploited, a petty monarch surrounded by a court which was riddled with intrigues, in the attempt always to find out what would be most pleasing to the potentate. It was funny how one man could be the origin of two such different pictures ; it was also rather disagreeable. Archibald talked slowly, with many pauses, when he

would lower his chin. He had amusing, brown, curly hair and a little scar under his left eye. He was pouring out red wine into glasses big enough for giants.

"Here I am," Berenice was thinking, "here I am. I'm listening to talk about Menestrel, and Molly keeps kicking me under the table, and Mme Praise is shrieking downstairs, and the flowers that were orange in that garden yesterday are blue this morning. How did I get here? What does it all mean? Paul thinks he loves me, and he rushes off to see an unfrocked priest. Lucien obediently writes to me *poste restante* and sighs as he sells packets of aspirin. And all I'm thinking about is Aurelien. Why shouldn't I admit it? That's all I'm thinking about—Aurelien. But it's all over with Aurelien and me, over before it began, because it would have had to be so sublime and great and perfect in order to be like that at all. Otherwise it couldn't have existed. I could have—but I couldn't have, no, I couldn't have, not with Aurelien. Paul's different, that doesn't count."

Archibald Murphy had stopped talking. He was conscientiously eating his way through the meal, like some one who, even if he no longer plays baseball, still has a sportsman's appetite. Molly took advantage of Berenice's pre-occupation to cram her with rabbit. This rabbit *d la Praise* was peculiar: it was evidently cardboard, surrounded by small onions. Archie was still pouring out red wine.

Suddenly he said:

"Excuse me, Berenice—why don't you love Paul?"

He had dropped a brick with a vengeance. In the silence that followed, Berenice listened to the question echoing on in her mind and realised that positive expression had been given to something she had not quite admitted. Turning her eyes to Archie, she asked:

"Is it so obvious?"

He didn't answer, and it was she who went on: "He doesn't think so, you know."

Archie bent sideways to pick up the salad from the floor. He stirred the lettuce gravely before he said: " One oughtn't to hurt him. He's a nice little lad."

Berenice wasn't surprised ; this conversation was merely the continuation of her thoughts. I am here, and the baseball player is stirring the salad, Molly is biting her nails, we are talking about Paul Denis, a young poet with a brilliant future, my lover. She shivered : it was the first time that she realised in so many words that she had a lover.

" He oughtn't to get hurt," Archie repeated. " Paul's worth a lot more than all those folk around the place Pigalle. He doesn't know it yet, but he is. He's still taking everything terribly seriously, all the more because he doesn't show it. He think it's serious with you. If you leave him, it'll be a dreadful blow to him."

Molly was clearing away and serving the next course. The dessert was too much for her and made her capsize, her feet flew into the air, the jam went under the cupboard, and the apples rolled all over the room. Berenice bent down to pick one up,

" What do you think I should do ? " she said, her eyes still lowered. " It can't last for ever. I haven't promised him anything."

" You know very well, madame, that that isn't the question."

He gave that " madame " an American emphasis, bowing at the same time across the table, while he went on peeling his apple. He had a way of doing it spirally so that not a scrap of the skin was lost and it came off all in one piece. He was eating fruit and cheese together, a very blue Gorgonzola. He emptied his glass.

" Paul has friends," Berenice said. " He isn't the sort of person who can go on living in the country. He has to read the reviews, all the literary periodicals. He has to work himself into a fury about poems he doesn't like and people

who aren't his sort, he has to invent fashions — neglected books and absurd heroes. He likes playing the piano, and having new ties, and going to the cinema. He's very susceptible to being flattered and it's very easy for him to think he's getting on well with a girl. He forgets why he burst into tears a few minutes earlier, because he's so interested in everything. He might even get a craze for politics. I won't have been anything but an episode, a passing phase."

" I'm afraid that's not true. You musn't deceive yourself."

Molly was rushing about making the coffee. Everything she did was like a vaudeville turn : she turned the handle of the coffee mill as if she w^rere handling a thoroughbred horse, and the ceremony with the filter resembled a religious ritual. As for the coffee itself, the result was somewhat like dishwater.

" Put lots of sugar in," she commanded, " the coffee's bad."

She put another two lumps into Berenice's cup. It was going to be like hot syrup.

" You can see for yourself," Berenice said, " he's begun to leave me for the sake of going to see Menestrel. The thing that matters to him isn't a girl he's in love with, but the group."

" The group ! " Archibald said, and began to swear with coarse Shakespearean oaths, until the language he was using made him laugh. Then he explained the words to Berenice, in a professorial tone, pressing his chin back so far against his throat that he gave himself a double chin. He told her about the Elizabethan drama and found that Berenice hadn't read *The Spanish Tragedy*. At his most paternal, in his deepest basso profundo, he translated : " *La tragedie espagnoler*

His accent split the words up into separate syllables and the mute E was lengthened absurdly. At Yale it had been

explained to him that the French language has no tonic accent and all the syllables have equal value : pom-pom-pom-pom.

Berenice did not notice that it was she, and not Archie, who came back to the subject of Paul:

" But if I don't love him . . . Of course I'm very fond of him, only not the way he would like me to be."

" The way he thinks you are."

" The way he thinks I am, yes. But what about me, Archie ? I have a heart too."

" And does it already belong to someone ? "

She didn't answer. Molly had slid down on to the floor and picked up something that had fallen down with a bang, as though it were heavy at one end and light at the other. It was a banjo, and now she began softly playing an accompaniment to this conversation, from which she was so strangely shut out, a stranger.

" Supposing it did belong to someone ? " Berenice turned pale as she said that.

Archie murmured, in a voice like a distant roll of thunder :
" Poor little old Paul."

The banjo was twanging out *My Old Kentucky Home*. Archie's eyes were wet, apparently from the effects of the music ; or perhaps it was the *fine*, which he had been drinking pretty steadily.

" Supposing your heart belonged to someone else—then, Berenice, why did you yield to Paul and not to your someone else ? Why?"

She hardly knew Archibald Murphy. She had met him five or six times, for ten minutes, for an hour—how long had the acquaintance lasted altogether ? What gave him the right to cross-examine her ? But she didn't ask herself that question ; she was preoccupied with the question why she had yielded to Paul and not to . . .

" You know," she said hardily, " it's much easier to go to bed with someone you don't really love than with someone you do love."

Murphy looked at her and shook his head. More to himself than to Berenice he declared :

" Funny sort of people, you French. That's the sort of thing that makes it so hard for us to understand Racine. All his women attract us and frighten us off both at the same time. Like you."

Here the banjo broke off and Molly, whom they had quite forgotten, exclaimed :

" Archie ! You silly old dog ! "

And something that might have been a slipper came sailing through the air. But the next moment the music began again, with all the sentimental languour of Southern rivers. The tune she was strumming must have been one that Archie found very touching, for scarcely had he dodged the slipper when he began to nod his head in time to the rhythm, then to sing, rolling his eyes the while. Berenice was left alone with her thoughts, losing the thread now and again as the music flowed over her.

At last she stood up and said :

" Thank you, Archie, you're a real friend for saying what you said to me. I'll think it over. You don't mind if I go, do you, Molly ? I feel like going for a walk in the fresh air, I want to think."

They came downstairs with her, their pretext being that they wanted to protect her from Mme Fraise. Archie opened the front door for her and called after her :

" Don't go back to the Mill too soon ! Menestrel'll eat you." Then he gave one of his deep laughs, his chin thrust back. She smiled at him and he realised that his shirt was hanging out of his trousers, a bit more than usual this time, even rather more than was decent.

I'll go to Vernon, Berenice said to herself. Perhaps there'll

be a letter from Lucien. All I've got to do is to go along the road down there ; from the Mill no one can see, and they're probably all in the garden now, playing one of their favourite little parlour games.

She slipped along between the blind walls in the village. It was a beautiful day, the kind of weather that could make one forget everything else. She went down the lane where it turned towards the Epte, and came up the side of the Mill. The sun's rays w^ere catching on the fresh green of the branches, and there was dust on the road already. A cart went past, driven by a young countryman who looked at her hard. Farther along a little girl said good afternoon to her. Yellow butterflies were flitting in the air.

When she came to the beautiful garden across which the path, ran she stopped and looked left towards the bridge, the water, the slender trees, the faint shimmer of new buds, and the water weeds. Then she turned towards the house where the tall old man lived, the old man she had often seen in the distance, who was so famous in the countryside and could not bear to see withering flowers. She saw the blue flowers, and how freshly hoed the earth was round about them—blue flowers everywhere. There was the little path towards the house, and the smooth lawn, and still more blue flowers. She leant against the iron gate and fell into reverie, thinking how much easier it would be if one could only break off the flowers in oneself the moment they began to fade, put others in their place, change the colour of one's heart overnight, remaining ahways at that perfect moment of full blossoming, and forgetting, or not even forgetting, but having nothing to forget.

The light was so lovely on the flowers. What were they ? She didn't know their names. People said there was no such thing as a truly blue flower, and yet, who knows, perhaps the tall old man in there saw them as blue. They said his sight was failing. He might be going blind. That was terrible to

think of : a man with all his life in his eyes, over eighty now and perhaps going blind. One could imagine that he would still insist on having the flowers cut off before they faded, just the same, even though he would never see them again. The blue flowers would give way to pink ones, and then there would be white ones, and each time it would suddenly be as if the garden had been repainted. She wondered what stage of nostalgia one must have reached to order such a thing. At the bottom of the garden she could see gardeners moving to and fro ; they had something uneasy in their movements, as though they hadn't anything to do. They must be inspecting the flowers. Supposing by accident one of those orange daisies of yesterday had been forgotten in some obscure corner. After all, nobody knew what might not be overlooked in some corner of the heart. And how many old letters lie about in drawers !

Berenice brought her face close to the grating and looked at the house. How calm, almost empty, it looked with its green shutters and red roof behind its grove of flowers, almost like a house somewhere in the tropics. Perhaps the people inside were all asleep. Reflections from the blue flowers splashed faintly on the gravel path. Was there nobody there but those shadowy gardeners moving about soundlessly. . ? Nobody but Berenice. . . . Berenice with her dreams, nobody there any more to hold her back from her dreaming, nobody. . . . Neither Paul nor Archie, nor the Vanhouts' conspiratorial, understanding smile, nor Molly's banjo, only Berenice alone with her dreams. Now all that troubled her was forgotten, and she felt nothing but a song that was never sung before, there amidst the blue flowers, the immaculately smooth paths, in front of that house that was like the houses one sees in dreams. And in the dream there's a man, a tall man coming, slowly, hesitantly, with a gently rolling motion of his shoulders . . . he has black hair . . . he's the man who bears her heart away, who talks little and

has a smile she knows so well. . . . Aurelien, my love, Aurelien. . . .

" Berenice ! "

Her heart leapt. Who had called her ? Someone had called her from the other side of the iron gate. It was impossible. There he stood, bare-headed, smiling at her, his eyes moist and shining. A tall man, coming slowly, hesitantly . . . Aurelien. . . . She drew her hand across her forehead.

" Berenice ! "

He had called her again. It was not a dream. Aurelien was there in Claude Monet's garden, and he was looking at her, and he had tears in his eyes. The flowers were blue, there was no doubt of that, and the sun was shining in his dark face.

Berenice felt her heart thudding with fear. She must escape. But she couldn't make her hands let go of the grating. Suddenly she saw that he was coming nearer to the gate.

Then she took flight, running down the lane.

CHAPTER LXVI

HE was running after her. Was it the beating of her heart, or was it that she realised it was useless to run away, or that her flight suddenly seemed futile and absurd ? She stopped and turned round, leaning against the bank, panting.

Aurelien came towards her, seeing the quick rise and fall of her breast, the little drops of sweat on her temples, her face upturned, her head thrown back and the fair hair tumbling all to one side. The lowered eyelids, too, and those shadows round the eyes that lent them more of mystery,

and that trembling mouth with the white clenched teeth that were like a cat's teeth. . . .

He stopped. He was standing very close to her, looking down at her. He had never seen her like this before, in country clothes, a short light brown skirt and a yellow jumper. So they both waited, listening to each other's breathing. Neither spoke.

It was she, with her woman's instinct for defence, who seized the advantage of speaking first :

" So you followed me. You're spying on me."

" I swear to you——" he began to protest.

" Don't swear anything," she cut him short.

" But it was mere chance, Berenice."

" Chance! What a story !"

Now that the first shock was over, it was she who took the lead, reversed their positions. If she had run another three steps, he would have caught her in his arms.

" It's extraordinary," he said, " I know, it's incredible, but it's pure chance, a marvellous accident. I didn't know, I hadn't the faintest idea. I brought Rose and Uncle Blaise out here in the two-seater, to see Claude Monet. Rose wanted to meet him just once—to have met him anyway. Uncle promised her ages ago. Rose had heard such a lot about Monet from Charlotte Lyses, who she says is the greatest comedienne we have. They're in the house. I didn't want to butt in, I'm only here really because I'm the driver. I came out into the garden to walk round a bit, and then . . ."

After all, why shouldn't he be telling the truth ? But she was determined not to lose the upper hand, so she cut him short again :

" Let's leave it at that, then. But why this sudden friendship with Mme Melrose ? I suppose she's the attraction ? " Then she bit her lip, afraid that he would take that for a sign of jealousy, and added : " Oh well,

whoever it is, Mme Melrose or Simone, what's the difference ! "

It wasn't a very successful stroke. Even Aurelien felt that.

"Berenice," he said, "Berenice, why did you run away from me ? You do love me still."

She looked at him with such an expression of fear that he misunderstood and said :

"I won't touch you, Berenice. Only—say that you still love me."

It wasn't he whom she feared, but herself. She was cornered, like a hunted animal. She was struggling to get out of the trap. She knew only too well that she loved him, it was all she could think of, it was the only thing she was afraid of: he was the man she loved, and so he was her adversary and all the attack she dreaded. She had lost her advantage, was no longer anything but a woman, unsure of herself, reduced to a mere instinct of escape.

"Why did you come ? I didn't tell you to come, did I ? Couldn't you have left me alone in peace ? "

"Berenice, I swear ..."

"That's all you can say ! Don't you see, can't you understand ? It's all different now, there's something broken between us."

"That's impossible. Just because of one evening, one night, a single night's misfortune, because of that girl and because I was drunk, I was so unhappy . . . Can you be so heartless ? "

"No, it's not because of that girl. If there weren't anything between us but that one night . . ."

"Oh, then you still love me ! You forgive me ! "

She shook her head. And this time it was his turn to be afraid.

"Then what is it ? What else could separate us ? I can't imagine ..."

"It's not that one night," she said, "it's the whole of life,

all the days and nights of this new year, my days, my nights. . . ."

"What do you mean? It doesn't make sense, Berenice."

"My days and my nights. Yes, I've forgiven you for that moment of weakness, that betrayal. But what about me? You might forgive me, but it wouldn't change anything for me."

He was going to grasp her wrist and draw her towards him, from a dim feeling that these evasions amounted to nothing more than woman's obscure stratagems, the vacillations of primordial fear. But at that moment there was a roar, a cloud of dust. . . .

"Look out!" she cried.

He leapt to one side. It was a young man, on a motor-bike, wearing a cap like the typical Englishman of the illustrated papers, waving cheerfully to Berenice as he hurtled past, shouting some remark. She seemed upset; there was embarrassment in her smile.

"Somebody you know?" Aurelien asked.

"Yes, it's rather awkward. What will he think, seeing us alone together like this, obviously having an argument?"

He was taken aback. What she said revealed that she knew people here at Giverny and had some kind of social ties. . . . He had imagined her alone here, where he had found her again. He couldn't know that the motor-cyclist was only Vanhout. For him the motor-cyclist called up a cloud of question marks.

"So you see," she said, "we can't possibly stand here talking."

It was a new wile; she was going to take her secret away with her. Aurelien was no match for this. But after the first speechless instant he returned, brutally, to what she had been saying just before the motor-bike came round the corner of the lane.

"What were you saying? Something about how it wouldn't change anything for you. What is it? What could make any difference to you?"

Her eyelids flickered. "I didn't know what I was saying."

She was being forced back, she must gain time while she tried to find a new position from which to attack. She no longer had any plan; she didn't know what to say to him. She didn't even know whether she wanted to tell him the truth or not.

Now it was he who had the upper hand:

"Where are you staying? You must go and pack. I'll take you away somewhere where no one knows you, not even the motor-cyclists, somewhere where you'll be free to choose. Then we'll decide what we're going to do about it."

"No, you aren't going to take me away."

She spoke with such assurance that he was baffled.

"Why?" he murmured. "Who'll stop me? Who'll stop me?"

She hesitated, on the point of saying: "My lover." But that challenge died on her lips; she was ashamed, though she didn't know^T why. After all, why shouldn't she have a lover? what if she had? But she said quite simply:

"I will."

They were silent. Flies buzzed around them, and from beyond the trees came the cry of a barge's siren. Both of them thought of the Seine, that fatal thread flowing through their story.

"That's not true," Aurelien said. "It's not true. Why aren't you telling me the truth, Berenice?"

She shivered. For all at once she was flooded with a vision of the water and the drowned. Every day Paul would ask the Vanhouts: "Do you think it's still too cold to bathe?" until it was quite maddening. In her mind's eye she saw the ripples spreading out round the swimmer and closing her eyes, she said:

" Aureien, I'm not alone here."

At first he didn't understand. What difference did that make ? he asked. But she shook her head ; she kept on shaking her head. Oh, Lucien ? No ? Not Lucien ? he silence was like the slow tearing of a piece of silk. Aurelien stared at the pebbles on the ground, refusing to realise the full sense of what she had just told him, while the slow weight of it gathered about him in the spring air, like the pulsing of blood in the temples. The sky was no longer blue, though nothing had changed ; there only seemed to be a dim, stormy haze over everything. The sun was inclining down to where the Seine flowed by on the other side of the trees. Through a gap in the hedge he had a view of the fields, the hills and spinnies in the distance. He wanted to ask her : " Who is it ? " But the question choked into silence before he could utter it; for he couldn't quite believe as yet that there was any such person, couldn't believe in the tragic thing that had happened to him, or not yet sufficiently to lend it some man's features. All he could say was :

" You—you love him ? "

Then Berenice raised her eyes towards this sky that seemed to have changed colour. Everything was unbearably hot, close, suffocating. This was asking too much of her ; she could not say *no* in reply to Aurelien's question, for what gave her the right to say *no* ? Precisely because Paul still believed in her, she couldn't say *no* to Aurelien's question. She was caught up in the toils of a game, she was playing at keeping faith, and she couldn't see how, by doing what she did, she was actually breaking faith, above all with herself. Then, too, she was afraid of Aurelien's contempt, afraid she would lose his respect if she admitted that she didn't love the man she had gone away with. Since it was easier to say, she said, with averted face :

" Yes."

At that moment voices began to call: " Aurelien,

Aurelien ! " and people could be seen among the trees in Claude Monet's garden. There was a light-coloured dress, and a man. Rose and Blaise were ready to go home.

" Your friends are calling you. I can't see them. Good-bye, Aurelien."

He watched her disappearing down the lane. She walked with her shoulders bent, trying to look like someone who was not in a hurry, pulling a long grass as she passed. Then she turned the corner.

She loved someone else. She had said so. Who was it ? He was paralysed by that confession of hers. No, it couldn't be true ! Could it ? Oh, it was true, she wouldn't lie to him.

" Well, darling,¹ Rose said, " have you been turned into a pillar of salt ? Did you meet someone you knew ? I thought I saw . . ."

" It was a mistake," he said. " I'm at your service. Shall we go back to Paris ? "

CHAPTER LXVII

WHEN Adrien Arnaud looked back, he couldn't help feeling a certain bitterness. True, he was making a very fair amount of money and his prospects for the future were excellent. He was twenty-eight, almost twenty-nine, which could scarcely be called old. Barbentane had given him a good start in his career, pulling him out of the mess after the war and his father's bankruptcy ; and Adrien was progressing slowly but surely. By now he could afford to enjoy himself in a modest way ; he lived with cousins, so avoiding the expense of board and lodging, and Isabelle, Kis host's wife, was on the whole a discreet and comfortable sort of

mistress to have, the sort whom he would be able to drop without any trouble when the time came to go and live somewhere else. From his father he inherited a sound sense of thrift, though neither the old man's sallow complexion nor his delicate frame. He had the gift of being able to manage on very little and even to save enough to buy Royal Dutch and Mexican Eagle, and then, with satisfaction, sit back and watch their stock going up.

Time was passing, and it seemed to him that there wasn't much else to be said ; that was as far as he had got. He was filled with the sense of his own value, and that he was not getting his due. All the same, when he was playing bowls at Serianne, and in the old days when he was still expecting to inherit the Nouvelles Galeries and was monarch of the Pro Patria group he had founded, as well as leader of youthful society in the little town, Adrien Arnaud seemed to be taking his leave in a cloud of glory that vaguely surrounded him : though whither he was departing, no one could have said. Certainly no one would have thought it w^ras for that career as right-hand man to his friend, Barbentane junior, who was obviously so much less brilliant and less hard-working and doubtless would make a good successor to the doctor, that was all. How differently things had turned out ! In fairness to Edmond it must be admitted that he had known how to get on in the world. And he had not forgotten his old friends, either. What would Adrien Arnaud have been without him ?

But still, it wasn't good enough. Considering his war record, which was by no means merely average, and the medals he had (not many people had so many), it wasn't what he expected. He had been a real tough, always right in the midst of things wherever it was heavy going, at le Mort-Homme, Vauquois, les Sparges, Verdun, and so on. He would have stayed on in the army, but he hadn't felt inclined to see himself outpaced by people who had the

advantage of having been through Saint-Cyr—no, indeed ! Finding his feet again in civilian life had been bloody hard. If it hadn't been for Edmond . . . Even with Edmond behind him it had been bad enough. He had been ready to take on anything, he had fallen in with all Edmond's whims—even right down to driving a taxi, and that was saying a good deal. Now, of course, things were a bit more normal, and besides, he had won the boss's confidence. The boss ! Just fancy, this chap he used to give points to at bowls had now become the boss ! Well, that's what life's like. At first he had felt a good deal of humiliation ; but not now. He had got used to it. Besides, now he was always well-dressed ; Isabelle looked after his shirts. His life was shaping quite nicely ; or so at least they would have said in Champagne.

Adrien was not an adventurer. He was ambitious, but he wasn't an adventurer. He would never have plunged into the sort of affair where he was likely to have to play his last card ; it was quite bad enough having had one bankruptcy in the family. Then, too, from his father he inherited that practical good sense which made Edmond, who had picked up the expression from Mary, say that Adrien was always so *matter of fact*. Not that it mattered; when one took a closer look at Edmond, it was rather sickening. It was all very well for Barbentane to act the business man ; he didn't understand a thing, not a thing. If he hadn't had other people round him to do the work, he would have been done for. He really was an ass, with his affectations of elegance and his bogus philosophy, all just to camouflage a total vacancy of mind. Well, he'd done the chief a few good turns in his time, and the other had not been ungrateful; or any at rate he had seemed not ungrateful. It had to be seen to be believed, Edmond speechifying in his office in the rue Pillet-Will. It was enough to give you a pain in the neck.

Naturally Barbentane hadn't got where he was on account of any real instinct for business. Women took to him, of

course, that was supposed to be it. Adrien had his own ideas on that subject, too. After all, they'd spent enough time together at the Panier-Fleuri, at Serianne, and he thought he could say he knew the boss pretty well on that score. Not up to much. Adrien drifted into reminiscences of that past era and Marie Reboul, the little curly-head at the Panier, and he recalled many of those meetings. No, there was no more reason there than in anything else for Edmond's having had better luck than he had. So it must have been sheer luck. And luck was something that needed a helping hand now and then.

Hadn't he, Adrien, at least as much sex appeal as Edmond ? Hang it all, he wasn't blind, he only had to think of Isabelle. But the queer thing was that though he was successful on a certain social plane, he couldn't get beyond that. He had, so to speak, his ceiling. It was shop girls and typists who fell for him. There was no accounting for that sort of thing—what was to be done about it ? He had to accept the facts as they were. For instance, there was that little secretary creature at the rue Fillet-Will office—it was quite obvious he only had to lift his little finger. If he didn't it wasn't because of Isabelle, nor was it that the girl herself was unattractive ; but it was all far too easy. He could picture what her underclothes were like ; he had plenty of experience of that sort of thing. Still, he used to give her a smile when he came into the office, and she would begin tapping away at her machine quickly to hide her confusion. Pathetic ! Oh, he'd had enough of that sort. He was sickened by it, especially at those times when he was trying to get his own back, the days when he felt the injustice of his fate too keenly and so would yield, twenty or thirty times, to the mute appeal of such girls, only out of a desire to show himself that he was irresistible. It was a cheap satisfaction, and he plunged into it only to find confirmation of his fate, the very fate with which he was so dissatisfied. A man is whatever

he makes of himself, with women as with the whole of life. Look at Edmond : first Carlotta, then his wife—the wife wasn't exactly glamorous, by the way—Carlotta was a damn sight neater piece of work—but still, the chap knew what he was out for and he'd got it—and all those tarts and other men's wives, into the bargain ! Adrien had seen them by the dozen, for Edmond had an infuriating habit of showing them off to him. Not in order to involve him in any way, of course, probably just to take him down a peg. It was an old habit, a hang-over from the Panier Fleuri. The flame of the moment, that actress woman, wasn't up Adrien's street. But he thought he could have done something about her, and after all, she couldn't be such a handful. He might have tried turning on the old sex-appeal; only it would be a hell of a risk, because Edmond would be bound to take an extremely poor view of it—and it wasn't worth being landed into anything. There was something about her, there was no getting away from that. In spite of everything, he understood Edmond's point of view. She must have a thorough hang of things, and she'd be pretty versatile in bed, too. You could see that with half an eye.

Such were the thoughts that nagged at Adrien, worse and worse each day that he got to know more of his chief's affairs. He could see clearly how he would have managed them on his own. He had to listen to the other playing the knowing businessman, the busy man, the man crushed under a load of responsibility. It was enough to make a cat laugh. Since the formation of Melrose Perfumes Ltd., with all that involved, he had begun to notice that under the front Barbentane kept up there was a muffled anxiety which the boss might be able to hide from others, but not from him.. The game of bowls must be going badly. Oh yes, he knew him through and through, he could certainly say that he knew him all right!

It wasn't hard to see where the crack in the armour was.

There was only one way of explaining Edmond's middle-class Machiavellism. At first Adrien only took an interest in it because he foresaw that the chief's worries would give him an opening for getting some of his own back on the quiet: but then he began to realise that it might have tiresome repercussions on his own security. Obviously he must back up his old playmate to the best of his ability; their interests were bound up together. If Edmond came a cropper, what would become of him, Adrien ? Still, there were several ways of regarding the situation. Only an idiot would stake everything on one throw and, it must be repeated, Adrien was definitely not an adventurer. So, almost imperceptibly, he began to contemplate the possibilities for himself if, one fine day, Barbentane's situation were to go to the dogs. It wouldn't be very amusing, for himself or for anyone else, but after all, it was on the cards, and there was no use refusing to look things in the face. There was no sense in sticking one's head in the sand.

This became more and more of a preoccupation with Adrien, hovering at the back of his mind. At first he wondered how to withdraw his stake in the game before it came to a crash ; and then gradually, instead of that, he began to consider the best way of turning the situation to his own advantage, so that he would come out on top and even make a good thing of it.

There were two main dangers for Edmond : one was the Palmede group's campaign on the board of the syndicate, about which apparently the boss didn't worry a scrap, which was almost certainly a mistake. The other evidently did bother him : that was his wife, the fact that their money all belonged to her, and that sooner or later. . . .

All this Melrose Perfumes stunt, and this fantastic tie-up with Aurelien Leurtillois, had made a great many things clear to Adrien, particularly on the score of Barbentane's relations with his wife, and had lent shape to his day-dreams.

He was on very good terms, not with Palmfede, but with Palm&de's son-in-law, a very smart fellow who was well in with people in political circles. The acquaintance had been more or less thrust on him : he had had to see this man about the petrol-pump business and have a good many discussions with him. At the back of his mind he had the idea that it might be useful some day. Besides, this man was playing a rather different game from his father-in-law's and was prepared to listen to suggestions for doing a deal here and there. In the first place Barbentane couldn't deal with him directly, and so it had been quite natural for Adrien to act as go-between.

But what provided him with most food for thought was how the land lay between Edmond and his wife. If Mme Barbentane were to wake up to the situation some day, then it really didn't matter whether she loved her husband or not, it was her money, after all, it belonged to her and her daughters. At the bottom of his heart Adrien thought Edmond was playing a very shabby part, and he was entirely on Blanchette's side, not from any particular liking for her personally, but because he believed in the institution of the family, the home, and children. And besides, it increased his good opinion of himself to feel that everything pointed to the Tightness of his being on that side : it made it much easier to frame moral condemnations of Edmond's behaviour. He himself did things decently. So he liked to think.

It may have been this that made him take a more than normal interest in Edmond's affairs. Melrose Perfumes Ltd., formed a convenient pretext. So far as Estates Limited was concerned, he was fairly well up in how things stood, but therfc were some gaps to be filled. He owed a lot to the secretary, Mile Marie, who let him peruse the files in the rue Pillet-Will during those interminable hours when he waited for the chief to turn up, if he was going to turn up at

all; he had to do something to pass the time. He was sufficiently established as the boss's right-hand man for it to be considered quite natural.

He very soon became fascinated by what he discovered in the intricate complexities of Edmond's business. The irregularities were many. The main thing Edmond was concerned with was raising the wind, and his methods were anything but scrupulous, though probably no worse than plenty of other people's. And there were several rather peculiar wangles. Adrien regarded these investigations of his, this picking up of the threads, as more a matter of curiosity than anything else ; but at the same time he found a number of weapons for use against the Palmede group, in a concern bound up with the taxis. No one else had noticed it, and it might come in handy for Edmond some day—or for Adrien himself, in talking over the pump business with the son-in-law. The further he went in his explorations, the more respect he felt for that vast machinery of society, and the less he felt for the amateurs and smart-alicks of the Edmond type, who got themselves mixed up in it all without understanding the slightest thing about it. Business steamed ahead, and they thought, or they pretended to think, that it was really their doing. Pathetic ! Men like Edmond were nothing but parasites. Supposing Mme Barbentane decided to divorce him, what would remain of that sham five minutes later, that phoney great man, that figure in Parisian society, who passed himself off as a captain of industry ? Not that anyone took that seriously, anyway.

" Mademoiselle Marie, would you pass me that file ? You know, the business about the N.W. real estate. It's in a pink cover, I think."

The secretary was gazing at him, and he had to repeat what he had said. Not at all bad-looking, this lass. As she bent down to look for the pink file, he couldn't stop himself fingering the back of her neck. She trembled, without mov-

ing away, and went on looking for the pink file. Slowly his fingers closed round that delicate nape, nestling among the little fair curls. Ah, his masterful fingers. . . .

That time it was definitely Barbentane's fault. It was vital that Adrien should see -him to get a signature, and Barbentane didn't turn up. So Arnaud installed hhnself in the director's office, reading, reading, and taking notes.

" I don't know if I should have ..." Mile Marie murmured.

What was she talking about ? Did she mean the little intimacies of a few moments ago, or the files she had taken out of a cupboard without his having asked ? She was a bright girl. She could see what he wanted and she anticipated his wishes. He smiled at her.

" That's all right, Mademoiselle Marie, I'll take all the responsibility."

She went out in some confusion.

As Edmond, for by no means the first time, hadn't kept his appointment, Adrien decided to drop in and see him at his house. He felt the need of some fresh air : he wanted to walk. He went down the boulevards, la Concorde, the Cours la Reine, thinking that Barbentane couldn't very well be at home. So what was the use of going ? Adrien didn't wonder about that; he had a vague idea that involved a mental picture of Blanchette Barbentane. It was funny to think he couldn't ever have looked at Edmond's wife properly, for he couldn't summon up a clear picture of what she was like, or even of her face. She wasn't really good-looking, but she wasn't plain either ; he had the impression that she was rather Heavily built, but perhaps that was because she didn't wear the right clothes. She needed someone around her to tell her what. . . . Still, perhaps Edmond would be at home.

Paris in the spring weather had an amazing quality of charm. If only there weren't such a lot of traffic. . . .

The Trocadero gardens were full of children, even as late as this, at five o'clock. Adrien strolled along the quay, taking his time ; for the later he came, the better chance he would have. . . .

He walked up the steps from the metro at Passy, thinking how much he liked this district where really rich people lived.

Nevertheless, if he had had a lot of money he would not have liked to live here. He would have looked for something more aristocratic than the rue Raynouard ; something on the Left Bank. He raised his head and sniffed slightly, critically eyeing the big block of flats where the Barbentanes lived. De luxe prisons, that was what they were. And the street was narrow, too ; a lorry would block it completely, like this one coming. . . .

Suddenly he broke into a run, even before he knew what he was doing. People were shouting. He had snatched up that little bundle of damask and lace, jumping to one side before the approaching monster, and then his foot slipped and he felt the shock of the wheel going over him. The sky wavered above him, then there was a screaming of brakes, a smell of dust and oil and grease. . . .

Someone was picking him up. No, the child wasn't hurt. Little Marie-Victoire was crying, the governess was waving her black-clad arms, and the lorry driver was explaining resentfully to the policeman. Ow ! There was an atrocious pain in his leg, and it wouldn't take his weight. He fell to the ground again. He couldn't walk. The workman who was supporting him asked some questions, and Adrien clenched his teeth until he was able to smile and answer:

" It's nothing much. I think my leg's broken."

He looked at Edmond's children and their governess. He had saved the child's life—the boss's child—he thought and then became faint again.

" He can't stand up," a man's voice said.

Somebody else said: " We must get him to the chemist's."

Then a woman gave a loud cry (it must be the governess) and exclaimed:

" Oh, it's Monsieur Arnaud. He's a friend of Monsieur Barbentane's ! "

She knelt down beside him, and he opened his eyes.

" It's nothing much," he said, " it'll be all right.*"

" You saved the little girl's life ! "

True enough, he had saved the little girl's life. He was still light-headed with the sense of it, for he was fond of children, and besides. . . . But he was still too weak to draw any conclusions from this new and extraordinary fact, which made all the difference.

" No," the governess was babbling, " he can't go to hospital, he's a friend of Monsieur Barbentane's ! Bring him into the house ! Madame would never forgive me ! He saved the child's life ! Help me—you, monsieur. . . ."

Someone had grasped Adrien under the arms, someone else picked up his feet and moved the injured leg. He uttered a groan.

With all possible care three men whose faces he couldn't quite distinguish were carrying him into the house just opposite. It took a long time getting him into the lift. The governess cried :

" I'll go up the stairs and get a bed ready. I'll go and ring up the doctor."

The pain in his leg was atrocious.

An accident, a wonderful accident!

CHAPTER LXVIII

THE Vanhouts mustn't realise what had happened. Paul Denis took deep breaths and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. He had been running—for nothing. His airtex shirt irritated him, and he had lost the button off the collar. He was choking with tears, but he was determined not to give way ; and he found, as others have found, thnt it was surprisingly easy not to weep. But going down to lunch with all the rest of them, that was rather too much. Nor could he linger in the room with the little red-and-white checked curtains, though he w^lould have liked to stay there, looking at the open wardrobe, the empty scent bottle left on the dressing-table, some crumpled paper lying on the floor, and the bed not yet made. He would have liked to lock himself up with his grief. Only what would people have thought ? So he went downstairs again.

Little Mme Vanhout held out the mail to him.

" You didn't take your letters, Monsieur Denis," she said and seemed to be looking at him with pity in her eyes..

He couldn't stand that.

There were two letters, a periodical and a newspaper. Taking them, he said :

" Excuse me, madame, I won't be in to lunch today. I hope it's not too late to let you know ? "

" No, no, that's all right, Monsieur Denis."

How young and tender this early April was ! That morning Paul had been able to have his first bathe in the Seine. It wasn't hot yet, but what joy there was in the water, the grasses on the bank, and even the mud into which his bare feet sank. The sun was already strong enough to burn one's skin, and Paul had a V-shaped patch of tan at his throat, where his shirt fell open. He had wanted to take Berenice along with him, to that field near the river with the hedges

enclosing it, where one could sun-bathe without causing any comment. He would have taken her English book away from her, while she would have set about reading the manuscript of the *Promenades notres*, which he had just finished and which Berenice only knew from fragments. Then, as a change from that, he had gone running along the road home, in the full glare of the sun, downhill towards the Mill. And there he had found her room empty, and only a note saying :

" I'm going away, Paul, darling boy. I wouldn't want to hurt you, and this is a mistake for both of us. It would be very wrong of me to let it go on any longer. Don't cry too much, think about something else. You've got your life and your writing (remember that I like what you write very much) and your friends. Don't stay alone. Go back to them. You don't need me as much as you think. Menestrel will have invented something interesting again, there'll be new people at the place Pigalle. Don't try to see me. Isn't it better to separate like this, quite suddenly, without any fuss or scenes, just a clean break ? My decision is irrevocable. I've gone away for always, you must understand that. We spent almost three months together, the end of the winter and the beginning of the fine weather. Now the fine weather has come, it's here. For us it's goodbye. I shall always have a very sweet memory of these three months. Don't spoil it, will you ? Please don't spoil it. Don't pull faces and twist up your funny little mouth. Leave me to my own life. Thank you for having lent me yours all this time and for having been a real help to me at a difficult time. It's all right now, I'm strong, and I'm going away. I kiss you affectionately. Berenice."

What had she said to the Vanhouts when she left ? Had she given the impression that he knew about her going ? How did they account for his not having been there when she was going away, and that he hadn't gone into Vernon

with her? It was ghastly to have to put up with people's pity. He would have to behave as if the whole thing were a natural arrangement and as if he knew all about it before hand. He would have to act the part of one who knew what was going on. What train had she taken? Half-past twelve, probably. It was a quarter-past. If only he hadn't lazed about like that in the sun, he would have been back ten minutes earlier, if he rushed he would have time to catch her up. But now. . . . If he had jumped on Vanhout's motor-bike he might have done it, one can get up such speed on a motor-bike. Only she might have gone on the eleven forty-seven. He couldn't ask them, because she had told him not to try and find her. "A mistake, for both of us;" so she was still thinking of Leurtillois. She had gone back to Leurtillois. Well, what if she had? If that was what she liked, good luck to her with her Leurtillois. He kept on repeating this name that caused him such pain.

Then he thought that it wasn't possible. Or could one be so deceived? She loved him, didn't she, she loved him, her own dear little Paul. "I kiss you affectionately." He bit his lips to stop himself from bursting into tears. Here in the little study with the English prints, that wouldn't do—among the tobacco tins and pipe racks and the furniture covered with pink and green chintz. Mme Vanhout looked as if she were dusting things, but she was looking at him under half-closed eyelids. He realised that he wasn't reading his mail, but was standing there with Berenice's letter open in his hand. He ripped an envelope open and went out.

It was a letter from his publisher demanding the *Promenades noires* and saying that a drawing by Picasso would help sales, especially if they could get several more for the limited edition.

He went out of the front door.

"I say, Monsieur Denis!" Vanhout called out to him from where he was squatting beside his motor-bike, under

the lean-to that served him as a garage, " I've had the piano tuned. Those young ladies are arriving this afternoon. They'll expect you to play for us tonight."

Those young ladies were the Lesbians. It was Saturday today. Paul muttered something and drifted off down to the clover field. He wanted to give the impression that he was going to lunch with the Murphys.

What was he going to do now ? Should he stay at Giverny and put a good face on his bad luck ? Play the piano for the lizzies and chess with Vanhout, and write to Picasso asking him for the promised drawing and, to Roussel, some reflections on the younger literary reviews. To hell with it!

He reached the lane, and there he felt the tears brimming in his eyes. Walking with bent head, he looked at the ground, the crossing lines of cart tracks, the wild flowers in the banks, and the blue and brown butterflies. At the corner he stumbled on a couple of lovers, a country girl wedged up against a green barrier, firmly clasped by a sturdy swain in a black jacket, with his cap on the back of his head and laughing eyes and a reddish moustache. The man looked knowingly at Paul, who turned his head away.

What was he going to do with his time ? What was he going to do with his life ? As he came up to Monet's garden he felt his heart swelling and thought lingeringly, vaguely, of old age and glory. Not so bad, after all, Monet, and impressionism. ... It had amounted to something then, in its day. ... All those stories that were told far and wide about those chaps' youth. It all ended with a little bit of land and some flowers. He must go to the Grangerie, he thought, he must go to Paris and see that big canvas, the Nymphs : it was supposed to be pretty terrific. If they were going to have to do an operation for cataract, it wasn't going to be very jolly for poor old Monet. He had a nephew who did batik work, a hell of a big chap whom Paul had once met at the Murphys',

Where had she gone ? To Paris ? But she wouldn't stay in Paris. Had she gone to stay with the Barbentanes ? Or with the Amberieux ? Oh, well. . . . Suddenly he thought of Aurelien and his heart contracted. Oh no, no, it was all over between them, he knew very well that Berenice wasn't running away from him only to go back to Aurelien. No, she would be going home to her husband. That was as clear as daylight. She had tried to break out, an abortive rising . . . a parenthesis in her life . . . three months, not even three months, and then back to the domestic hearth. He laughed aloud, bitterly. She was a good little bourgeoisie like all the others. Oh well, he'd better stop thinking about it. Run after her ?—not much ! What else did she want ? Her life was too bleak and she had felt the need of some adventure ; and now a bit of melodrama wouldn't be out of place. Well, he wasn't going to be such an imbecile. No thanks, not him ! Anyway, what she said was true enough, he had his friends, Menestrel, his writing. . . . It was nice of her to have emphasised that. " Remember that I like what you write very much." There was something very sweet about Berenice. Oh Honey-Bunch, Honey-Bunch !

His wandering thoughts began to assume an appalling clarity, a physical intensity. When he came to the bank of the Seine, where he had been bathing only a little while ago, he stared at the islet opposite with unseeing eyes and began to be afraid of the night that was drawing nearer. Perhaps Berenice was right, he shouldn't stay at Giverny, he ought to get back to Paris and the place Pigalle cate, the usual mandarin-curasao, and his friends. In town it was always possible to creep away into a cinema when things got too bad, and at night there were all the lights. About midnight, or one o'clock in the morning, at Lulli's, he would meet Leurtillois and then at least he would be able to prove to himself that Leurtillois was alone and mourning. And—who knows ?—he might even have a drink with Leurtillois.

The water where he had bathed wasn't really very clean ; there were little bits of stick floating and tossing about in it. He could see the more vivid green of the water flowing down from the Epte, still very cold and still reluctant to lose its identity in the larger river. Behind the trees, from the creek where he had undressed, Paul began to walk upstream, trying to make up his mind whether to return to Paris or not. He passed by the track leading to the bridge at the end of the village, the way to the locks, the way Berenice loved to go. Berenice. . . . God, could she really have gone back to that Lucien of hers ? He remembered with brutal lucidity something that she had said to him, which had made him shudder even then. It had been at night, in that hour of abandon when for him she was like the very darkness, so warm and soft. She had pressed herself against him as he lay still transported with pleasure, and she had murmured with fierce rapture : " You can't imagine how marvellous it is with a man who has both his arms." When he remembered that atrocious thing she had said, his blood ran cold, even now. And she had gone back to her Lucien.

Paul's aimless walk had brought him past the houses in the village, sunk in midday torpor. The sun beating on his head was making him giddy ; there were big flies buzzing about, and he could hear a horse kicking in a stable somewhere. Unconsciously he was approaching the house where the Murphys lived.

He remembered that he had only opened one of his two letters and that he still had them in his hand. The second envelope contained a dentist's bill for five hundred and sixty-five francs, and the paper had an article on Deschanel, who had just died, with the title : A Great Calumny. Paul tore the wrapper off *The Dug-Out* and looked at the photographs, war pictures, reminiscences about Queen Ranavaloa, and an article about the songs in the Black Cat.

Among the editorials Fuchs had an article against Menestrel, an incredibly underhand and spiteful article, Paul clenched his teeth with fury at the idea that scum like Fuchs should *dare* . . . ! Menestrel was far beyond the reach of that kind of thing, of course, but all the same, it was unspeakable. The finishing touch was that there was a kindly word about him, Paul Denis. It was just one of those damned journalists' dodges, *divide et impera*, trying to make bad blood between friends. What would Menestrel think ? Paul began revolving ideas for a letter to Fuchs :

" Sir——"—should he call him sir ? " My good ruffian " would be more the right style. " Dear sir and ruffian," that was the touch ! How did it go ? " Dear sir and ruffian, by what right do you presume to think me a good poet"—no, that was no good. " I can't help wondering who it is, in the gaols where you get your articles done on the cheap, who perceives me to have the mark of——" well, something like that. And then : " Between Menestrel and myself there is no room for any slimy blackguard to come poking in his snout." It would fall into shape when he wrote it.

Paul Denis had quite a reputation for such letters. They always brought about some skirmishing and uproar. He said that he loved it, whereas in fact he loathed it; but he had to keep up his reputation. This time the thought of having a dust-up rather appealed to him. It would take his mind off things, and then—that ex-serviceman style *The Dug-Out* went in for simply enraged him. What had the N.R.F. said to that sharper Fuchs ? Fuchs had drawn cheques that were dishonoured, he had forged signatures. It was Gallimard who'd got him out of that, because apparently he always found crooks amusing. Of course that was just the type that had the nerve to attack Menestrel. It was maddening ! What had Berenice told him one day about Fuchs ? Berenice knowing Fuchs was just one of those crazy things that couldn't happen anywhere but in Paris.

Where was he going to get the five hundred and sixty-five francs for the dentist ? Perhaps he could send the bill to Roussel ? After all, he'd probably pay it. Paul considered making him a present of a little Kisling drawing he was tired of—not that the old man cared about that sort of thing, but it would look better.

" Hi ! Hello there ? Can I come up ? " he shouted from the bottom of Mme Praise's dark staircase. At once Archie came thundering down half-way in his big shoes, then stopped to lean over and shout: " Paul ! " with that Yankee swelling out of the syllabic that always made the Frenchman wonder if it was really he, Paul Denis, who was meant.

" Come right up, buddy ! *Grimpez done*, Paul ! "

Molly was on the sofa with a towel round her head, smoking a pipe. She was lying on her stomach among the cushions with a wine-glass beside her, and the coffee among a pile of books on the floor, earnestly reading the personal column advertisements in the *Intransigent*. The remains of lunch were still scattered on the little round table and on the floor. The atmosphere was full of smoke and a smell of fried fish.

" You've had lunch ? Have you really ? Because it's quite easy to. . . . Help yourself."

" Thanks, I've had lunch."

" Coffee, *alors* ? And you won't say no to a spot of something ? I know you ! "

The small finger raised mock threateningly, the ha-ha's from the depths of her throat, the extravagant society lady gestures, the head shaken understandingly, and the half closed eyes, all this was Molly doing her act as a hostess. Obviously one couldn't say no.

Archibald Murphy, sitting cross-legged on the floor with four or five piles of paper around him weighted down by old books, was talking about Diderot. He found points of resemblance between *Jacques le Fataliste* and the *Promenades*

noires. Gazing at Paul over imaginary spectacles, he said :

" There's only one difference—just this difference—that *Jacques le Fataliste* wasn't an early work. And if I want to compare you and Diderot, I have to try and imagine a twenty-two-year old Diderot—or a Paul Denis aged forty-five. Now what will you look like by the time you're forty-five, I wonder ? With a big belly and your hair going grey—you'll be quite grown up by then, I mean, you won't be a boy any more."

" I shall never be forty-five," Paul said.

Molly had heated up the coffee again. She took off the towel that had been bound round her head, but her hair wasn't dry yet, and she looked rather miserably like a dog that has been in the water. She tried, without much success, to make her hair fluff out, and asked :

" How fares the high and mighty lady Berenice ? "

Paul didn't answer. Molly, who was standing in front of a broken piece of mirror on the wall, re-blackening her eyebrows, turned round in surprise at his silence. Archie was very busy picking up his piles of papers and arranging them in neat bundles, and he hadn't seen the change in Paul's expression.

But Molly dashed across, exclaiming :

" But don't you see he's crying ? Paul, Paul sweet ! What's the matter ? What a brute you are, Archie, talking about Diderot ! Paul, drink the coffee while it's hot. No, don't try to talk. Have another drink. Have one with me. Take it easy. Oh, Archie, you never notice anything ! Diderot ! I ask you ! "

Paul was standing there helplessly, almost stunned.

" She's gone ? " Murphy asked, and Paul nodded. Then there was a long silence. Molly patted the cushions, put one behind Paul's head, and kissed him on the forehead. She smelt of alcohol. Murmuring: " Poor child," she took

his hands in hers. Outside a car was back-firing. A dog barked.

" Now," Molly said, " tell us all about it."

CHAPTER LXIX

PAUL'S and Berenice's secret had not been kept a secret for long. It had been like a bale of straw which is lit in a number of places at once—afterwards no one knows who set it on fire. There was Charles Roussel for one : nothing could compare with his dreadful discretion, his air of " if I only choose to say." All that he had not said was what the lady's name was ; he had revealed that Paul Denis was at Giverny with a person—a lady known in society—married—and so on, quite enough to kindle Mrs. Goodman's curiosity. For Mrs. Goodman had been dining at Roussel's together with Zamora, to see how the Hermaphrodite Pander looked now it was hung in a frame by Legrain and fixed on hinges, like a shutter, on the bathroom wall, in such a way that Mme Roussel could swing it back so that she needn't see it during her ablutions. And *Zamora* had asked Mencstrel who it was—Menestrel had been at Giverny, but he hadn't met the lady. Only Jean-Frederic Sicre, the musician, who was Paul's bosom friend, had indicated that Zamora knew her—and he wouldn't say another word, not even if he were to be cut into little bits ! What a conspiratorial expression his big, bulging eyes wore as he said that. Who had had the nerve to talk about it in front of Mary de Perseval ? It must have been Diane de Nettencourt—and how had *she* come to know about it ? The fact remained that Mary had talked about it to Rose, and Rose had thought it over for a while and vaguely remembered Giverny and the little lane and the disappearing form and Leurtillois' evasive answer. She meant no harm really, and after all why shouldn't she

mention it to Edmond or to Decœur ? At the beauty centre, the doctor passed the word to Zoe Agathopoulos, who lost no time in giving her great friend Mary the latest news. Blanchette, who heard it from Edmond, burst out laughing bitterly. That little creature Berenice ! Too wonderful ! She had immediately told Adrien, who was to have the plaster on his leg changed the next day ; it had been a thoroughly bad fracture, and it was only to be hoped that the leg wouldn't be shortened. Oh heavens, would she ever forget coming home that evening ? What a state she had been in about her little Marie-Victoire. Nannie had been right : one couldn't possibly let the man who had saved Marie-Victoire's life be taken off to hospital. There was plenty of room in the house, and it might be bad for him to be moved. Besides, wasn't Adrien Edmond's oldest friend ? And he had a double fracture, a pierced artery, and heaven alone knows what !

Apart from the fact that it was the least they could do, Adrien was hardly any trouble at all. Or rather, he wouldn't have been any trouble at all if it hadn't been for that cousin of his, a tall, dark woman with soft features and melting eyes, who would have been quite capable of installing herself at M. Arnaud's bedside if they had let her have her way, if they hadn't given her to understand—oh, with all the tact in the world !—that one couldn't always be running in and out of the house of people one didn't know. In a hospital, of course, there was a notice up stating the visiting hours, which was much simpler : but at the same time one must have some sense of the fitness of things. There must be something between her and her cousin, though it seemed absurd ; if so, it was all on her side, for he seemed to find her company more nerve-racking than anything.

It was funny listening to Edmond and Adrien talk. They generally had their coffee in Adrien's room, when Edmond was there. They had their childhood in common, the little

southern town where they had grown up, the games of bowls they had played on the ramparts, and their escapades during their 'teens. Blanchette listened with astonishment, discovering an Edmond who was quite different from her husband, a young fellow she was sorry she had never known, for he must have been charming ; and inevitably she came to identify Adrien with that other Edmond, more or less. Besides, Adrien was a hero. Edmond had told her all about it: he had been magnificent at the front, and there was nothing surprising about that, either, judging by the way he had flung himself under the lorry to save the child.

In all of this Blanchette's thoughts constantly returned to Aurelien. She thought of him bitterly, but with a grim satisfaction in knowing that he had been let down by what Berenice had done, by her having gone off like that with somebody else, with that little guttersnipe. The dominant emotion Blanchette felt could not be called jealousy : it was rather the direct opposite of jealousy. A great peace descended on her, and from that moment it no longer caused her the slightest qualm to realise that when Edmond left her it was always to go to the Melrose woman. She felt herself filled with goodness ; she was good. And she thanked the Lord for not having let her pray in vain.

As for the little girls, the long and the short of it was that they had lost their hearts to M. Arnaud : especially the older one, who was so fond of her little sister that she was brimming over with gratitude towards her saviour. Adrien was so good with the little girls, so patient, that it had to be seen to be believed. They weren't accustomed to it from their father. In general Adrien Arnaud showed a patience and serenity of mood that was quite astounding. For it was under precisely such circumstances as these that man's weaknesses of character were revealed : what a test it was for such an active man, not yet thirty, to be forced to lie in bed and suffer all the petty little irritations of helplessness

and confinement to one room. To say nothing of his leg. Those extension contraptions were ghastly ; and yet doubtless it had to be done, so that the pieces of bone would join up without overlapping. What one has to put up with in the way of extensions is bad enough when one has a simple fracture, but with a wound, and having to have it dressed... ! Not for anything in the world would Blanchette have let anyone else do that for him. After all, she had been a nurse during the war, you know.

Blanchette's life was now utterly transformed. The house no longer seemed empty, the children like troublesome flies, and the hours of waiting for Edmond a long torture. And above all, it seemed as if the shadow of sin were no longer hanging over her. She scarcely thought of Aurelien any more, and then quite tranquilly. A very important factor in this change was the turn things had taken, in robbing Aurelien of a good deal of his glamour as a result of his bad luck with Berenice. But there was no denying that M. Arnaud's presence counted for even more. It was as if she had driven out the obsession.

For Blanchette, Adrien was a protection ; the mere fact of his being there was soothing to her. When she felt the old torment stirring in her, she would make some excuse for going to his room and paying a visit to this guest who lay a captive on his bed. And then his face would light up ; he always seemed glad to see her. He didn't seem to want anything else. And he was an entertaining talker ; he had seen a great deal more than one would have suspected from his appearance, and had knocked about the world. With that, he always kept his distance from her, never permitted himself the slightest liberty or joke that might have been out of place. Only when Edmond's wife left the room again, when she went out and left him, his eloquent eyes would follow her to the door.

In the midst of all this the minister had come to see

Adrien. Senator Barbentane was a good sort and he was very fond of his grand-daughters, whom he never saw much of because he hadn't the time. He had been deeply shocked to hear about the accident. Then he remembered that Arnaud—let's see, h'm, yes, of course—he was the lad from Serianne. It all came back to him now : Arnaud was the son of the Nouvelles Galeries fellow. His father was my enemy in politics, he even played me a low trick over that business of replacing the trams by buses in—1913, was it? or 1912 ?—I can't remember now, anyway, before the war. Pooh, that's a long time ago now. He came to a bad end, if I remember rightly, went bankrupt. Still, his son can't help that. And we owe him a lot for saving our little Marie-Victoire's life.

The interview between the minister and Adrien went off in the grand manner. Barbentane almost created the atmosphere of being there to pin a medal on Adrien's breast.

" Young man, your family and mine were opponents years ago. That's all over now. People like ourselves can forget and forgive : we are all Frenchmen. When you are on your feet again, come and see me at the Ministry. If there's any little thing I can do for you—you'll come along, won't you ? "

Adrien was not without a sense of the ridiculous. True, the senator's accent was less noticeable to him than to most people, for it was the accent he had grown up with and still had, though less pronounced ; since the war Adrien had made a considerable effort to rid himself of it. But the absurdity affected him less than the fact that an Under-secretary of State had gone to the trouble of coming to see him. Other people called Barbentane " the minister," because it sounded better, but for Adrien Arnaud there was something both more mysterious and more real in the title Under-secretary of State. He had always had a profound respect for everything connected with officialdom, authority and

government. He blessed the accident that had earned him this strange holiday, these long hours when he had nothing to do but day-dream ; and he had a premonition of how the adventure would end.

Isabelle was a nuisance. She annoyed him because she symbolised his former life, the mediocrity that still clung to him. What on earth did she want to come here for, bothering him ? Couldn't she see the difference between the room where he was now and the room he had had in her house ? On top of that, she was always dying to be alone with him, and he was afraid of someone coming in at the wrong moment: the door might open and a servant might come in, or even Mme Barbentane. One can't do that sort of thing in other people's houses. What a sloppy creature Isabelle was! And what a job it was to make her realise. . . .

It was better to take precautions. It would never do if Mme Barbentane were to notice something. So he took her into his confidence. He wouldn't have dreamt—and then on his cousin's account—personally, he thought these things should be kept to oneself—she mustn't think badly of him, he couldn't bear to think she might—it was just that Isabelle couldn't realise, it was all her fault. Finally, he trusted Blanchette completely—it was quite irrational, but there it was, absolute trust.

" You don't know me," she said.

He raised his expressive eyes to her. Oh yes, he did know her, far better than she dreamed. They had got to know each other in such an unconventional way.

" All right," she said, " tell me about your cousin. Are you in love with her ? "

It would have been very wrong of him to say he wasn't fond of her; really he was, very fond of her, though he found her rather exasperating too. The thing had been going on for a long time. Adrien wasn't the flirtatious type, but it was difficult to go on being faithful to someone for

whom one didn't care deeply; when a thing wasn't based on real love, it couldn't last. And he had to admit, too, that it happened more or less by accident, as a result of circumstances ; they lived in the same house and his cousin was often away—he worked for a big grain import firm and often had to go to Marseilles or Saint-Nazaire. So there was an empty house with nobody in it but a man and a woman, both young. . . .

" Excuse me," Blanchette said, " I must speak to the servants."

CHAPTER LXX

" OH ! What a sight! This is something like an entrance ! "

People were crowding along the terrace in the glare of the arc-lights. The footmen in their gold livery formed a guard of honour, while others glided behind the ornamental lake, and the guests, as they arrived, stepped out on to the mauve sand. The whole scene—the great forest coming down to the lawn spread with an immense gold carpet, the painted trees whose every leaf was clad in gilt paper—the shimmering naked shoulders of lovely women and the multiplicity of the men's disguises—all was enough to turn Blanchette's head. Edmond had brought her there for reasons of his own, and he was hardly taking any notice of her, leaving her in the hands of an Englishman who had just been introduced to her. This was a man of the so-called Oxford type, red-haired., stout, somewhere on the brink of middle age, and dressed scantily enough, with a spear, a shield and a thick golden fillet round his head. Blanchette hadn't caught his name; she only knew that he was frightfully rich.

For the last three months this party had been the talk of Paris. No one wanted to miss the due de Valmondois' fete. His house, which he referred to as his craze, was not far from Coty's house at Louveciennes. He had camouflaged it down to the last detail with gilt panels and had had the sphinxes on the staircase painted with brass powder. The inside of the house was still more amazing. There the crush was at its height round about midnight, and the jewels had to be seen to be believed. The grounds, too, were alive with flitting shadows, detectives wandering about all over the place, and people who thought of going to drink their champagne in the groves would find themselves suddenly stopped and questioned by persons rising up out of the clumps of bushes. The fact was that the fete had caused a great stir among the common people, who had gathered in considerable numbers at the gates to the park and were roaming along the railings trying to catch a glimpse of what was going on inside. It was rumoured that this display of wealth and luxury was giving rise to ugly murmurs, and the police were preparing for trouble. Bare-headed women had insulted guests as they arrived. That added to the atmosphere of tension and even increased the party's charm.

When the twelve tall women dressed as Walkyries had climbed the staircase, singing : "*Heiotoho ! Heia-ha !*" quite in the best tradition, a doge hurried up to Blanchette waving his arms in their wide sleeves. It was Cuss6 de Ballante. with his cloak flying open in all directions.

" Dear lady, do tell me what you are. Danae, I bet. Couldn't you have found something a shade more undressed ? I was looking forward to getting a real eyeful tonight." He looked at Mme Barbentane's striking companion, who bowed and introduced himself:

" Hugh Walter Trevelyan."

That meant something to Cuss£, who burst out:

" You're not *the* Trevelyan, by any chance ? "

" As a matter of fact, I am,"

" And I've been thinking every one here was got up in imitation jewellery tonight. Don't you think it makes an awfully *nouveau riche* impression for a Valmondois, a golden ball like this ? "

He left them as abruptly as he had appeared. He would have liked to do his postman turn as usual, but it didn't fit in with the surroundings and his Venetian cloak. Everything was swamped in the jazz pouring out through the open windows, where people could be seen dancing in the ground floor rooms. On the illuminated balconies higher up leaned laughing couples. It was like a theatre.

" Your dress is delicious," Trevelyan said. " The only one that isn't an utter mess."

Blanchette smiled at this exaggeration. She passed one hand over the big cardboard spangles sweeping all round her and reassured herself that all her jewellery from the props box, the necklace, bracelets and tiara, were still in place. It was the real Chanel touch, with all those glowing stones; the dress was by Chanel. Before going out she had gone to show herself to Adrien. His astonished admiration had amused her; but he had been quite sincere in saying that she looked beautiful. He was getting used to his hostess by now, but this vision of wealth and beauty, this Danae dripping with gold and jewels, was something that went to his heart. Blanchette found his exclamations very touching ; as a matter of fact, she would rather have stayed with him than have come to dawdle about here. A glimpse of it was enough ; but she had to wait until the spirit should move Edmond.

Trevelyan took two wine-glasses from a servant's tray, as they passed, and they sat down a little to one side, in the embrasure of a window. They talked in English. He was surprised at the ease with which she spoke his language.

" But you're American ! " he exclaimed.

She laughed a little :

" I thought I'd got rid of my accent. I've lived in America." But then she stopped listening to what he was saying.

Walking past in front of them were two people : Diane de Nettencourt, dressed as the huntress Diana, with stars in her hair and two greyhounds on a leash, and a man, one of the few men present wearing ordinary evening dress, with a golden mask over his face and a gilded wig. He bowed to Blanchette. She gave him a cold hand.

" You, Aurelien," she murmured. So that was why she was here. It was inevitable that they must meet again some day. But it was strange to see him again, in a mask, faceless.

" You realise," he said, " I couldn't let Mme de Nettencourt come by herself. She asked me to come with her. Jacques had to come with his wife, of course."

She wondered why he was making excuses, until she remembered that she was Berenice's cousin. She had seen Mme Schoelzer at the head of the staircase, behaving almost as though she were receiving the guests, reckless to the point of brazenness ; and she didn't see why Aurelien need escort Jacques Schoelzer's mistress while Jacques wife was flaunting her liaison with Valmondois so openly. But all she said was :

" So you've come back to this world, my dear man. We haven't seen you anywhere all this year."

He bowed, preparing to take his leave :

" You have been away for a long time yourself."

She watched him walking away with Diane and her dogs.

" Who's that handsome fellow ? " Trevelyan asked. She replied vaguely and left it to him to make conversation.

" You can't imagine how changed I find Paris. I simply don't recognise France. I've been out of France for a long

time—I was in Africa, you know, when the war broke out. I loathe wars. So I stayed in Africa. Everything's so simple out there. You have a boy—or some other arrangement if you prefer it. I love colonials. They're on such a big scale. They drink a lot and they don't ask questions, I've just got back from Kenya. I find France unrecognisable. What a long way things have moved since before the war ! "

For the sake of saying something, she remarked that he must have been very young before the war.

Flattered, he laughed loudly. " I'm forty-eight! Forty-eight ! You wouldn't have thought it, would you ? I'm still pretty spry for forty-eight " In fact he didn't look his age at all; he might have been thirty-five.

" Do tell me," she said, " what has made the change in France ? We don't notice these things, you know."

" Yes, you're in the thick of it, and so you don't notice. Well, I know it isn't my business to preach, but this country really has become thoroughly degenerate. There's no longer any enjoyment in having any vices."

" Degenerate ? "

" Look, there are those goings-on in the Bois de Boulogne, not to speak of other things. It isn't safe to go to the cinema. Or you're at the house of very respectable people, when they suggest finishing up the evening at—well, let's leave it at that. And that extraordinary word * partouze ' is a French invention. In Kenya no one would have dreamt of such things."

Blanchette said: "Will you excuse me for a moment, I must speak to my husband."

She pretended to follow Edmond, who was going past in conversation with an old gentleman she didn't recognise. She went up the steps into the house, into the clamour of the jazz, and crossed the rooms where the dancing was going on, with the multi-coleured whirl of fancy dress, the sudden heat, and an atmosphere that she had not been ex-

peering, which made her think of what Trevelyan had just been saying.

" Here I am, Blanchette," a voice said behind her.

He knew that she was looking for him ; he admitted knowing it. He had pushed his mask up among his weird, brassy curls, under which his skin looked darker than ever.

They sat down in two little round armchairs, in the midst of the tumult and all those comings and goings. The room was high, opening on every⁷ side either on to the garden or on to further drawing-rooms, so that it was a kind of central roundhouse, decked with roses and a Coysevox statue in a niche. Aurelien began saying again that he was only there because Diane had asked him, it was a difficult situation for her. Blanchette became ironical at the idea of it being difficult for such a beauty as Mme de Nettencourt to find any other escort than this sad-faced Aurelien.

" People are saying that you must have had a bad blow of some kind, to make you disappear like that."

He overlooked that. He wasn't interested in Blanchette's little pretences. She knew quite well what he wanted from her.

She pretended not to understand—she didn't know anything that everyone else didn't know.

" And what does everyone know ? "

" Oh, don't be so childish. People talk about it enough. Oh, of course, I was forgetting that you don't go anywhere now. Mary was saying. ..."

" Why do you say that ? Mme de Perseval is one of the few people I've seen anything of this winter."

" Really ? Have you been consoling each other ? "

He looked at Blanchette, this decked out and aggressive Blanchette. It had all happened on this sophisticated level: the emotions they had borne in their hearts had gold paper pasted on them, just like the trees in the garden. It was so long since he had seen this woman, that it was with a slight

shock that he remembered her attempted suicide : he hadn't seen her since then. Taking her hand, he said :

" Blanchette, can't we be friends ? "

She pulled her hand away and said curtly : " No, my dear, we can't. Never."

It was odd. Was it because of the place, or the absurd wig he was wearing, or what ? She realised that when she looked at him she no longer felt that distress which, as she admitted to herself, she had been running after when she left Trevelyan. She was able to look at Aurelien without a tremor. What had happened to her ? All that was left in her heart now was a certain resentment, a trace of malice. It was funny how quickly the change had come about, for a moment earlier she hadn't known anything about it; and perhaps she was even a little sorry. She too was thinking that it wasn't so long ago since she had wanted to die.

" How bohemian this is, how very Arts Ball the faubourg Saint-Germain is being ! " Cusse de Ballante cried, as he went past dancing the farandole with the Walkyries.

Aurelien shrugged. " Haven't you any news ? No news at all ? " He didn't utter the name.

" News of whom ? " she said, deliberately baiting him.

" Of Berenice," he said with an effort.

And there, in the absurd, artificial glitter of those surroundings, both their hearts stood still for a moment, for quite different reasons, at the sound of this loved and hated name.

" No, nothing fresh. You knew she was staying somewhere near Vernon ? "

Yes, he had known that. He had met her there by chance. Blanchette was astonished to hear that—met her? She wouldn't have believed it possible that this could have such an effect on her. It was strange how the thought of Berenice still upset her, when Aurelien's presence had ceased to matter. He was saying something about how he had gone

out to Giverny with some friends, to see Claude Monet—he thought it more tactful to avoid mentioning Mme Melrose. He needed to tell someone about it, he simply had to talk to someone ; and, as luck would have it, it had to happen to Blanchette. She listened. She wasn't quite cured yet. When he had been at Monet's, he had not been expecting that meeting ; but she had been warned, and she sat listening to the story he told so slowly, waiting for him to come to that meeting. He was describing the garden, the blue flowers, that tall old man with the veiled eyes, and then—suddenly, at the iron gate. . . .

Berenice hovered over them, a demonic presence. He began to talk about her as he had never talked about her before, to anyone, not even to himself. She was there, in her short, fawn skirt, with her black eyes and mutinous hair.

The golden breath of the pageant was wafted over them, but they were elsewhere, out of reach. They were in the shadowy lane, near the little bridge where the water slept and there was no longer anyone to see the nymphs in their beauty, as in time past. Now things that he had not noticed at the time came back to Aurelien's memory and he saw that pattern of shadow that the branches cast on the ground, a green frontier, and that way Berenice had of lifting her shoulders and bending her head to one side, revealing the shape of her neck, as he came towards her. . . . How her mouth had trembled, that tremulous mouth that he had not pressed against his own !

Darkly anger mounted in Blanchette, something stirring in her that was like a verse from the Bible. She hated Berenice, that frustrated, hypocritical, middle-class little bitch. Should she tell Aurelien that Edmond had had a letter from Lucien that very morning, exulting in his happiness that his wife had come back to R——? Oh, *he* wasn't hard to please, anyway ! And she too, with a husband like that, she was on velvet. She listened to Aurelien talking, the

egotistical, the implacable Aurelien, and thought that people never hear anything but their own heart speaking. Henceforth, she swore to herself, she would listen only to her own. Then all at once she realised somehow that Leurtillois didn't know who Berenice's lover was. How in heaven's name was it possible he didn't know ?

" But," she said, " do you mean to say Mary didn't tell you ? Don't you know it's the Denis boy ? I'm awfully sorry if I've hurt you—but, of course, that harmless little fellow—after all, you ought to prefer it that way. . . ."

She watched him and saw how he was suffering. Why should he have preferred one rather than another in such a connection ? Paul Denis—that was merely giving the unknown factor a face and a name. Now he would begin imagining all the things he had so savagely forbidden himself to think of at all.

Suddenly Blanchette saw Edmond standing not far away, regarding them fixedly. She smiled. For the first time she caught that gaze of his without any sensation of guilt.

CHAPTER LXXI

ALL that Edmond asked from life was that he shouldn't be bored. He was always on the verge of it. He liked money, but he didn't care about it; he was afraid of losing it, in case he should lose that wonderful liberty of action that wealth brought with it, and at the same time he wondered what the devil was the use of this liberty—what was he to do with it ? This played a part in the terrible game he was playing with Blanchette, and his security. He liked drawing fire on himself, and he also liked to foil the attack before it was well launched. Either way, it pleased his vanity. The pleasure he felt in being unfaithful to his wife was never

complete unless he was sure that she knew, and not only that, but that he triumphed over her, seeing her give way and accept her defeat. But that was only the small change of his dreams. That was the least of the many kinds of excitement he had become addicted to, almost as if to cocaine ; so that he had actually lost his taste for pursuing and seduction, that taste of his which had formed the basis of their first years of marriage. From the moment when he had, apart from Blanchette, a woman who was well-versed in love, he had no longer felt the former urge to indulge in airy flirtations, that pointless expenditure of energy which might have been concentrated on one object. And so he began to be bored again. It would not be true to say that he was tired of Rose Melrose. Quite the contrary: he was delighted with her, delighted as if with some expensive object that provides its owner with a legitimate sensation of pride every time he uses it. She was really perfect. Indeed, she was perfect for the very reason that she was no longer quite young ; in the same way that clothes that have been worn, and worn well, or a suitcase which has already done a journey, are in better taste and have a more established voluptuous character than clothes which have come fresh from the tailor, or a suitcase straight from the shop. People with a well-stocked wardrobe always despise others whose clothes are too new. Perhaps it is comprehensible to say that Rose, by her very perfections, had brought Edmond back to Blanchette, closer to her, than any of the rest of his mistresses. Rose alone, proud though he was of her and intensely though he felt the reflected glory of her prestige and that life of the theatre into which she was always slipping away, ever so slightly eluding him, Rose alone would have bored him. And she had a trace of possessiveness, which had made him not sorry to let a breeze through their relationship when he took himself off to M6g£ve. So he had found time to consider Blanchette, observing her like a butterfly caught in his net, and to invent new mys-

teries with her at their centre, mysteries that were mingled with new perils for himself. She began to preoccupy him. Fundamentally, what he felt for her was a sort of love, the love of which he was still capable, when he was cruel to her as he knew how to be. He could afford the luxury of being jealous of her, feeding this paradoxical jealousy and providing it with a body. He even appreciated that cloudy, sombre character of hers, that Huguenot reserve that made her so different from most women. If it had not been for the contrast with Blanchette, would he have been able to find Rose so completely interesting ? Blanchette lent everything a sense of sin, for sin was something of which she was acutely aware; and that was exquisite for Edmond precisely because he, not believing in anything, could not find that strange, exotic savour anywhere in himself. It was not merely Blanchette's money that for Edmond formed a key to a more exalted world, that kingdom of the spirit from which he assumed the poor were excluded : Blanchette herself, on whom he exercised his subtlety and his dilettante taste for psychology, was for him a source of pleasures such as a woman like Rose could never offer. For a while she had even made him able to grasp the idea of God and religion. He had found the midwinter holiday full of unique entertainment ; at bottom, and without admitting it, he had been considerably affected by Blanchette's attempt at suicide, which had restored a meaning, an aroma, to their relationship. Edmond was playing at respecting his wife, after that terrible incident, and carefully measuring out the stages of an emotional convalescence. So he was able to persecute her, very delicately, with sheer tact as his instrument. What art he had practised in bringing back the spectre of Aurclien to Blanchette's conscience, without ever uttering his name—what skill, what finesse ! He had leaned over that troubled soul as though bending over a puppet, and what delicate nourishment he was preparing for the fishes in the shadows !

He lay in wait, watching for the moment of weakness that must come. But he did not provoke it; he had plenty of time. Every word he spoke had the innocence of a double meaning, and he was never so happy as when his wife only noticed it after an instant of delay. Gradually he increased the dosage of his allusions. He wasn't in a hurry. He was drawing the unhappy woman into a gloomy forest that looked at first like some fresh, cooling pasture. . . . He wasn't in a hurry. He had even prolonged their holiday, and not for an instant had he been bored, and that meeting with Carlotta on the Cote d'Azur had woven into the major theme of his perversity the very gentle languor of a regret, the urbane beauty of a memory. . . . Nothing had put him out in the slightest. It had been restful, too, to have indulged for a few weeks in nothing more strenuous than the pleasures of the mind.

On his return to Paris, apart from the relish of picking up with Rose again, and the Melrose beauty centre, and his various pastimes and sidelines, he began paving the way for this meeting between Blanchette and Aurelien. The whole thing worked beautifully, right down to the elimination of Berenice, who had played her part and would only have been odd-man-out and a hindrance to the development of the plot. Edmond had seen Aurelien again, but he had contrived to avoid having this fateful meeting take place too soon : he expected a great deal from it. There was something godlike about this manner in which he disposed of another's destiny. From a long way off he had fixed on the due de Valmondois' ball for the moment of the pre-ordained fall. What more fittingly artificial setting could he have chosen, what more likely to stir the imagination than Valmondois' craze all tricked out in golden tints ? Privately Edmond enjoyed seeing in this a symbolic blending of Blanchette herself and her wealth, with the daring of staking his money—her money !—on her. He went to endless

trouble, made the most elaborate and complex preparations, taking weeks to complete,; traces of it all were to be found in the disguise he had chosen for Mme Barbentane. It was his idea that she should go as Danae and he had spent a fantastic amount of care on that dress, which he had insisted on her ordering from Chanel; he himself had long talks with the great dress-designer about it and followed the various fittings with surprising intensity. He knew Blanchette through and through. He knew better than anyone else what suited her and what didn't. He rejoiced in the power he had of bringing it about, without either Blanchette or the dressmaker having any idea of it, that the dress which was being made should, by the faintest touch, turn his wife either into a creature without charm or grace, or into almost a beauty. He took command of the situation, overwhelming the fitter with suggestions, and causing turmoil in Blanchette's heart, so that she wondered why and for what reason he was making such a busybody of himself. And he was still pretending to himself not to have decided yet whether he meant this dress to ruin Blanchette's chances definitely, with Aurelien, or on the contrary, to increase them. Blanchette was becoming nervous; she would much rather have left the whole thing to Chanel as usual; and for her this gilded ball at Louveciennes was nothing but a tiresome social duty, a party to which she would much rather not go.

Nevertheless, she had been richly rewarded for what she had been through, and indeed in the most unexpected fashion, when she went in to show herself to Adrien Arnaud, who had begged her to do so. She knew, of course, that she was looking her best; and she was trying to work out what could be behind Edmond's insistence on making her look as she did. She was not used to anything like social snobbery from him. Could it be that he was suddenly so flattered by their being asked to 'Valmondois' place? Was he hoping to see his wife's photograph in *Vogue*, with

a description of what she was wearing ? That wouldn't be like him. But when Adrien had accorded her such a reception, looking at her with admiration that was so unaffected, so spontaneous, she forgot Edmond and the fears she had been harbouring lest there might be some diabolic trick behind this sudden interest in her clothes. She felt herself blushing under her make-up. Any wish she had had to go to the Valmondois' party disappeared, and she would gladly have spent the evening at Adrien's bedside, in her beautiful dress with the golden spangles and her multicoloured jewels.

At that moment when Blanchette was dressed as Danae she was, both for her husband and for Adrien (devoured by ambition and yet falling a prey to his desires), a symbol of a very similar frenzy. At that moment indeed she had everything that a woman can wish for from these two men: disinterested admiration. It would not last, that was obvious ; but at that moment she was loved for herself alone. It was the culminating point in her life as a woman. And she knew nothing of it. Nobody knew. The extraordinary thing was that it should have taken a dress to bring this about: this dress which, by giving these two greedy men the material image of the wealth with which they were both intoxicated, turned the woman who wore it into a woman who haunted their blood and was, for the first and perhaps the last time in her life, nothing but a woman.

When Edmond had wrapped her in her cloak, he was tempted for an instant to say to his wife : " Let's stay at home—don't let's bother about the fete." She trembled slightly at the way he had put his arms round her, adjusting the cloak. He frightened her this evening. What was going on in his mind, behind this pose of attentive gallantry ? But Barbentane knew very well that there was more thrill to be had out of denying oneself a woman, when one desires her, than in taking her when she is at one's disposal. Not

for anything in the world would he have spoilt this evening. He had prepared everything. Hadn't he personally persuaded Diane de Nettencourt that convention demanded she should make her entry into Mme Schcelzer's lover's house on the arm of a man who was generally known to have been her lover ? And hadn't he advised Aurelien in preference to Wisner, for example. . . ?

Edmond Barbentane himself was wearing a Venetian costume with a somewhat outrageous jerkin ; for his legs weren't the only things of which he was proud. It was all gilded, naturally ; but the quaint finishing touch was that he had made up his face and hands with bronze grease paint, so that he almost looked like a South Sea islander, and he had put on a curly wig. He was Othello ; no one but himself could savour the peculiar tang of that.

It was thus that he was surprised to catch Blanchette and Aurelien, while the ball was in full swing, sitting in the Coysevox niche. For a moment it seemed that they were both so absorbed in each other that they simply didn't see him. From where he stood among the swirl of the dancers, the laughing and chattering of women, the loud voices, the uproar of the jazz, Edmond could not hear what his wife and Leurtillois were saying to each other. He would have liked to hold this moment fast and crystallise it for ever, so that no trace of his feelings should be lost. Beautifully Shakespearean feelings they were, too. But Blanchette raised her eyes and saw him.

Then the unexpected, the shattering thing, happened : instead of turning pale, she smiled. This upset all Edmond's plans, threw his calculations out. She was looking at him calmly, smiling. It occurred to him that he might have gone too far in getting himself up as he had, and it might be the stage nigger effect which was amusing Blanchette ? But no, it wasn't that. He was dimly conscious that some psychological factor on which he hadn't counted had entered

into the problem. Then his heart began to beat hard.

Yet the look on Aurelien's face reassured him: it was abstracted and dreamy, even bemused. The wig of gilded wood-shavings had slipped a shade to one side, like that of an English barrister which some gesture knocks crooked, thus revealing nature itself under the trappings of ceremony. Aurelien didn't look as if he felt victorious ; he didn't look like a man in luck. The more Edmond thought about it, the more what he had observed began to worry him. His plan had been to approach the imagined lovers, rather melodramatically leading into a scene where he had all the lines worked out; his tone would be playful, detached, the merest bit grating. But at the sight of Blanchette's smile, he refrained. From where he stood he kept the couple under observation, saw them get up and go in different directions, and wondered whether to give his attention to Blanchette or to Aurelien. He could see Aurelien drifting through the throng, aimless and off his guard, like something blown along on the waves. Was this a trick ? Perhaps it was meant to put him off the scent. Edmond applied his wits, all his wits, to tactics whose object was the avoidance of his wife. He didn't want to meet her too soon after the incident of the smile, and he couldn't help thinking that Blanchette wanted to get hold of him. He knew her very well; he knew she had had enough of the ball and would ask him if they couldn't go home. So he eluded her, asking Diane de Netten-court to dance just at the moment when Blanchette was drawing near to him. If there was no other way he could torment her, at least he would inflict this long night on her and this long wait, when she would be longing to sleep and bored to tears, for he knew that was how such situations affected her. He was having his revenge, though he didn't know exactly what for ; and he kept it up until four o'clock in the morning. He saw her, she was giving up the struggle ; she danced with Trevelyan, let Cusse de Ballante make con-

versation with her, talked to Schoelzer for a while. She must be pretty desperate with boredom by the time she would talk to Schoelzer. It made him sorry for her, and he came to release her.

" My dear, you won't refuse me a dance, will you ? "

She looked up at him with pleading in her eyes : " Oh, Edmond, please. . . . I can hardly keep on my feet/" But he stuck to the point, saying with a very good imitation of a coaxing and affectionate husband : " Just once, darling, do, really. . . ." Schoelzer noticed it and fell back a step, deliberately over-tactful. She put her right hand on Edmond's shoulder and let herself be drawn into the dance. The new band was playing a blues. It was queer to think there had been a time when she would have given anything in the world for a dance like that, with Edmond so gallantly insisting that she really must dance with him. At the moment, however, all she felt was something that made her suspicious and at the same time frightened. As they danced through a door, in the shadow of the arch, he clasped her more closely to him. Then she looked up at him and was horrified by what she saw. What stage Negro was this that looked like Edmond. . . . ? He bent over her and whispered in her ear : " Do you really want to go home ? " There was an overtone that made her afraid to answer: " I'm so tired."

He took her away. In the night that was transfigured by arc lights, where the golden trees and the sand were like something in a nightmare, the multitude of the guests was beginning to melt away. Servants ran to and fro, opening the doors of cars that had been called for. " Barbentane ! Barbentane ! " they could hear their name fading away into the distance, like an echo from the last judgment. The big Wisner drew up beside the terrace and they stepped into the enfolding darkness. Edmond told the chauffeur to drive fast as he came out of the park : he had heard that people

had jumped on to the running board and torn the dress of Mme Rino, the rich Peruvian.

As they drove past, they glimpsed the wan, haggard faces of crowds that hadn't been able to go to bed so long as the " craze " was still flaring in its golden array.

" Is there really so much misery all round us ? " Blanchette murmured. It w^as said mainly to break the silence with which Edmond surrounded her, and also in order to drive away certain thoughts that weighed too heavily on her mind.

" I don't know," he said. " You were enchanting tonight."

He had put his arm round her, and she trembled from head to foot. Besides, she was so tired that she was nearly in tears. And why was he being so conventionally flirtatious with her, so artificially distant in his apparent affection for her ? He came closer to her, apparently having forgotten the black make-up on his face. The mockery of the grease-paint and the unmistakable determination of his caresses combined to make Blanchette loathe this home coming. " Please don't," she said.

He obeyed her so promptly that she realised he was only postponing the attack. And when they were at home again in the rue Raynouard and Edmond came stealthily into the bathroom that separated their bedrooms, and took her in his arms, she was really panic-stricken. It was so long since he had demanded anything of her. She struggled weakly.

" But I'm your husband, darling," he said.

Dawn light, creeping in at the windows, lit up the man's painted face and disordered clothes, turning them into something at once grotesque and sinister. On a chair the spangled Danae dress lay drooping like the body of a dead woman. A jet of hot water was splashing softly into the black marble bath. What had happened to Edmond ? He desired his wife violently and savagely. Nor was his desire lessened

by the sight of the pallid dawn on Blanchette's face, revealing how exhausted it was, worn and almost ugly.

Quite the contrary.

CHAPTER LXXII

IT was more than four months now that Aurelien had been drifting with the tide. The *He Saint-Louis* was like a boat swept away on a ceaseless current, without any goal or apparent reason, lapping against all those sands banks only to flow on in the whirlpools of memory. It was hard for him to know which was worse, the physical absence or the imaginary presence ; nor was he always able to distinguish one from the other. He could no more define his feelings than a drowning man has any choice between the water and the weeds. Those who have never been the prey of such an obsession cannot understand Aurelien and the disease that was ravaging him. He himself could not understand it; he merely suffered it. It seemed to him a punishment inflicted for an unintelligible fault which he must have committed, without knowing anything of it and without being able to find the clue to it now. He drove himself to desperation, trying to find a moral in something that had none. For he was determined, at all costs, that the game must have been played on the moral plane ; then at least he would be able to tell himself that it was the right thing. That, he thought, would bring himself some relief and tranquillity. Berenice, by the act of disappearing from his life, had opened up a whole vista. It seemed to him to provide some explanation of his life : for surely this passive attitude of his, this lack of any bold action, arose from an obscure feeling that what he had to offer Berenice was not good enough for her. At any price he wanted to be rid of the necessity of tormenting himself, and to be rid of the gnawing

sense of injustice that he felt at his heart. He was trying not to suffer. He was even convinced that it ought to be easy—easy to think of something else, easy to avert his face from grief, just as it was easy not to love. Reasoning thus, he arrived at the end of his reasoning only to find himself confronted once more with the unendurable facts.

He had accepted his defeat without a murmur. That was what he could not forgive himself for : that he hadn't gone down fighting. For he knew beyond all possibility of doubt that he had lost Berenice for ever. It is the same with a woman as with one's country : the loss is stupefying. The man who has plumbed such depths of fate may die, but if he survives, he will not be the same man. Some of those who suffer such a destiny are a prey to strange delusions ; and some are beaten down by the storm, like corn that will not lift its head again. Both sorts of men are waiting for an unlikely sun. From where could that essential warmth come for Aurelien, that radiance ? He did not believe in God, and he had cut himself off from mankind. All the support he had was that frail raft of the apartment where he lived, and the rents from the little farms, and idleness. If he had had to fight his way through life, perhaps he would have found the way to Berenice, or, if not that, then forgetfulness. But living as he did in ease and irresponsibility, he remained in the grip of a spectre, a mere shadow. A picture and a plaster mask were the mirrors in which that puff of smoke was permanently reflected. Not for nothing had the God of the Jews forbidden the making of graven images ; in reproducing the features of a creature of flesh and blood there is something akin to magic, at any rate for those who are not insulated against that current.

Aurelien had suffered both these strokes of fortune.

Losing one's country. . . . On the eve of defeat the conquered man wonders what can be the use of any further effort. For what and for whom would he be working now ? What

meaning would there be in that expenditure of his strength ? He is afraid of being nothing but a pawn in the conqueror's hands and cheated of his energy, as he had been robbed of his land ; he feels himself abased to the level of a beast of burden. But Aurelien had never worked ; nothing more was demanded from him in reparations; he remained in possession of his former territory, which was utter solitude. He thought of seeking a futile weariness, the sweat that came from playing games, the sound sleep that was the sportsman's reward; he plunged into activity in the full awareness of being a coward. Never for an instant could he avoid seeing how monstrous was the vacancy of his life. Was this all—the only thing that distinguished him from other men, such a wretched twist of luck, such a dismal and ordinary fate ? And was he to accept it ? Now that Berenice had vanished he discovered again the secret wound that had been hidden by her presence. For a few weeks, a few weeks only, love had covered up his sense of shame ; for a time he had deceived himself about its nature, seeing it as a state of grace, a readiness for the love that must come, that had come. But today, in his loneliness and despair, it seemed profanation to have used that as a paltry excuse for the inexcusable. Wasn't it his very unworthiness in the face of life that had made him unworthy of his love ? It didn't matter much whether Berenice perceived that unworthiness or not; it wasn't just because of Simone that she had gone away, despairing of him. Over and above the insignificant facts and the words that had been uttered, there lay some graver judgment. Aurelien had gone before some invisible tribunal, and he had been condemned ; he was defeated. He could not fail to see that even if, by some wild, impossible chance, he could find Berenice and bring her back, reconcile her and re-establish their love, it would no longer be anything but a patched-up affair. She herself had told him that she could not endure anything broken or cracked or chipped, and that

anything like that affected her as a ceaseless reproach. Love was not the sort of thing that could be mended. They had both set their love on too high a pedestal; they had both been too proud in their love, and too proud of it, to admit that it could survive on a lower level, after concessions had been made and faults overlooked. It is like a sketch that comes into being on an impulse, with a pure, clear line, until all at once, perhaps, the hand falters, the pencil wavers, and there is nothing to be done but tear it up ; any attempt to go over it again would only spoil it, it couldn't ever be the same. But even while he was thinking this, Aurelien heard a faint voice somewhere in the depths of his heart telling him that he could adapt himself nevertheless, he could make the best of those living shards. Yes, he could, perhaps—but what of her ? He had seen enough of that passion glowing in her eyes, the passion for the absolute, to know that with Berenice it was different. Even supposing that he should still be capable of such a touch of weakness, such a human failing, where their love was concerned, there was still Berenice who would never accept a compromise ; she would never consent to owe their happiness to a humiliation, a lowering of their standards imposed on them by circumstance. Never. She had no inclination towards compromise, none at all. There were moments of revolt when all Aurelien asked for was to be happy, when he only wanted Berenice, and he would not admit that she was denied to him for ever ; then, forgetting that he was defeated, he set about concocting mad schemes and daring plans of action. Then again the consciousness of his defeat would overwhelm him. And at such times it seemed to him that the only reasonable thing to do was to convince himself of it through and through, to try to acclimatise himself to the defeat and make his peace with it. He must reduce his life and his thoughts to the framework of this reality, never forgetting it for a moment and measuring his ambitions and all his actions against the

humiliation he had suffered. Perhaps indeed by recognising his limits he would be able to gain some worth in his own eyes and so rebuild a tolerable existence. But first of all he must drive out the ghost of Berenice.

It was more easily said than done. The mask and the picture, after having been down for two days, resumed their place on the wall. Aurelien was like a people that tries to banish its heroes ; they spring to birth again on every side, and from being statues they turn into phantoms.

Aurelien slid restlessly from one resolve to another, foundering in always deeper waters. He had thought of making something of himself, anything at all, taking up work of some kind. In his day-dreams he inclined towards jobs of the most poetical kind, open air labour such as stone-breaking or driving a lorry : he had even gone so far as to consider working on the land. It was all nothing more than a fancy, of course. He continued to draw on his dividends, going to the cinema and dining in restaurants. There was nothing ahead of him, neither an upheaval of fate nor any horizon. Everything reminded him of Berenice. Even the most unlikely books all contained something that echoed his own thoughts of her. For instance, he spent several intensely enthusiastic days devouring Balzac: *La Habouilleuse* imprinted on his mind the hallucinatory image of half-pay men, and he began to think that he was on love's retired list. Watching how terribly the Napoleonic soldier gradually broke up, he took it for an omen of his own doom. Any subject was food for his misery, reminding him of himself and his failure; but nothing could offer him such sheer unhappiness as the thought of Berenice herself, that slight, unremarkable girl, with her straight fair hair that wasn't even well kept, her angular face, and her eyes that were dark and as though fleeing before a pursuing huntsman. He could not rid his mind of the picture as he had last seen it, on the road to Giverny, with

that light brown skirt (a press-stud missing at the side), the white blouse that had short sleeves narrowing to little beaks half way down her arms—and how she had gone away, pretending not to be in a hurry, pulling a grass now and then from the bank, her head bent, her shoulders lifted. That moment had been his real defeat, the acceptance of his defeat. It was in order to go through that experience that he had passed through the dangers at the front, at Vauquois, Verdun, Salonica, and all the rest. Death hadn't wanted him ; there was much worse in store for him than the bursting of a shell.

What he was destined for was the loss of self-respect.

The distractions he sought made no difference : none was any use, neither reading, nor drinking, nor solitude. When Diane asked him to accompany her to the Valmondois affair, he had laughed scoffingly. It seemed so ridiculous. Then it occurred to him that it would help to make the time pass ; he would go and let the clownings of sophisticated society fever his mind. Whom would he meet at Louveciennes ? Then there was the business of fancy dress ; as a matter of fact, it was the idea of dressing up that made him decide to go with Diane. It was one of those farcically paradoxical things about people, that once they were grown up and had had all their glands in full working order for some time, then one night they would dress up as something or other, with gold paint all over them into the bargain—crazy ! The sheer bitterness of the joke resolved him to fall in and do the same. For when a man feels a certain degree of contempt for himself, he finds in self-abasement a perverse renewal of his dignity. The ball at the due de Valmondois' provided Aurelien with an opportunity for feeling superior to other people, in his awareness that they were unaware. Who would deprive himself of such a satisfaction, above all when he was sunk in the depths of doubt and shame ? In the same spirit he might equally well have gone to a brothel ; a

thought which had, moreover, already occurred to him. So he had a wig of gilded wood chips made according to the instructions given by Diane, who remembered and liked the pre-war style of fancy dress ball and was not without taste in such matters.

Aurelien could not escape the thought of Berenice. She was what had been present for him in his meeting with Blanchette, and from that moment he hardly noticed anything more of his surroundings, the noise of all these people and the fete. Since he no longer cherished any hope, what was he trying to get from interrogating Mme Barbentane ? He didn't know : at least, whatever he found was not what he was looking for. For since Giverny he had succeeded in holding off that haunting by the shadow of a shadow, the unknown element, until he was almost able to believe that it didn't exist. After all, Berenice might have invented this other character in the *dramatis persona* merely in order to deepen the cleft between them and make the thing irreparable. She had been making it up. He told himself again and again that she had been making it up. -And so far this being without a face, this abstract lover in the background, did nothing to make the thought of Berenice's flight more painful, nothing that was not already there in the real, flesh and blood husband, the one-armed Lucien. The other had no age, no face. Aurelien steadily refused to believe that he existed at all.

All at once, through the rhythm of a ragtime, this phantom assumed a form. Others had seen him ; he had ceased to be, as he had been earlier, a whim of Berenice's trembling lips. He had a name, he was recognisable. Aurelien, as he recognised him, saw him looming up through memory : that pale lad, all skin and bone, Paul Denis. Aurelien recalled how he had been at Mary's, the evening when Rose recited Rimbaud, and how he had clenched his glass in his fist, his face white with hatred. . . . He remembered Berenice at

the piano, beside Paul. . . . He remembered how jealous he had been the day that Berenice and Paul had gone to Picasso's together. How far back he could trace the first roots of the affair, and how appallingly clear Berenice's duplicity had become. . . . It caused him agony to think that it should have been that wretched boy who came between him and the radiance of Berenice, walking in her footsteps. He would have given anything to have it to be someone else, anyone, only not Paul Denis. He wouldn't have minded so much if it had been Zamora, or Decoeur, or old Blaise, anyone with any other features would have been less intolerable, easier to stomach, than this ragamuffin boy. He could have put up with imagining Berenice the victim of some nameless brute, a race-course tough, a thick-necked blackguard with a red face, some worthy citizen from her home town, someone she'd met in the train, a mere pick-up. But Paul Denis. . . .

Paul Denis put Aurelien's pride to the hardest test it had ever undergone. Now the world had changed colour, and the dancers here at this fete had turned to insubstantial shadows, together with Blanchette and Edmond, and behind these shadows lay an intenser vision, overpowering their false reality. It was the vision of Berenice bound for ever to that scrubby urchin who held her in his arms, that guttersnipe whose odd, thick mouth, so uncommonly expressive, recurred to Aurelien's memory in the inexorable way of things apparently not even noticed at the time.

Blanchette was no longer there. People talked to him, and his replies were so very wide of the mark that people looked at him in surprise, wondering what was the matter. He finished the night drinking with Hugh Walter Trevelyan, who told him stories about Kenya and anecdotes of Oscar Wilde's last years. Why was he still hanging about here in the dawn with this Anglo-Saxon lion-tamer, on whose hairless chest he could see, in the growing light, little scars

from insect bites—or they might have been from stabs made with nail scissors. He thought he was waiting for Diane, who had disappeared a long time ago in company with Jacques Schoelzer. Not that it mattered ; it was a point of honour, that was all. People were falling asleep on the Aubusson carpet in the pink drawing-room, the wax candles were smoking in their holders, under the crystal candelabra of the electric lights. Servants passed to and fro among the chairs, picking up glasses and plates. Through the window came the distant shriek of a train, and cocks crowing, and the last cars leaving. Valmondois, coming up very much with the air of a host whom nothing can surprise, hailed Trevelyan and with a strikingly familiar gesture chucked him under the chin.

"How about another drop of champagne, Hugh, old lad?"

Aurelien remembered having heard talk about the duke's younger days, but he had forgotten the details now. It must have been something about elephant shooting. In this light Trevelyan's forty-eight years became quite obvious, and the uncertainty of his naked arms added a special horror to the whole scene.

Aurelien slipped away. He found his car at the other end of the park. By now it was almost broad daylight. The golden paper on the trees glittered unpleasantly. Leaving that world was like coming out of a cake shop crammed with pastry and cream cakes. On the road lorries were streaming towards Paris, somewhere a factory's siren was blowing, and from a little further off came the tramping footsteps of men in their working clothes. Everything was falling back into place, in urgent haste to reach full daylight* Tired to the point of collapse, Aurelien sat at the wheel, seeing the pictures in his memory flickering in confusion among the clouds of dust rising from the road. He almost ran a woman down* It was all he could do to keep his eyes open.

CHAPTER LXXIII

PARIS was once more full of American sailors. On those fine evenings towards the end of May, when the air was mild and poignant and the lingering twilight faded slowly into the night, their white uniforms struck a note of lithe, gay pageantry. These tall, manly figures seemed to pour out into the town at every point, little groups knotting and scattering again like a school breaking up for the holidays. They all seemed to know each other, and when they met it was with shouts and outbursts of laughter. They were playing with an enormous toy. Sometimes one could be seen wandering along the streets alone, most likely drunk. They thronged the cafes of Montparnasse and Montmartre too, where to crown everything there was a carnival going on, with merry-go-rounds and swings and shooting booths. They glided along the Paris pavements as though on the perfectly holystoned deck of a great ship, with long, loose strides from the hip. They sang all night down the dark streets, yelling with the full strength of their lungs. Nobody knew how many there were ; but, though there couldn't really be as many as there seemed to be, at least there were enough of them to make the Parisians feel no longer quite at home.

" Weren't you there when they turned up in '18 ? No, that's right, you'd gone to Salonica. Well, that's what they're like, you can see for yourself."

Cusse de Ballante waved his hand, pointing out to Aurelien a bunch of these white-clad sailors, who were all storming a merry-go-round although it was in full swing.

" Perhaps that gives you some idea. I can still see them there by Chateau Thierry. We'd been over the top a few times—1 needn't say more, need I ? You can imagine we were getting pretty worked up about being relieved. We

Were creeping back on tip-toe, and then there was a racket like hell let loose, whistling, singing, shouting, swearing, banging away on their tins—and then the pipes. We yelled out to them : Your pipes ! What the devil. They didn't know what we were talking about. They just laughed and said, ' *Veev le France,*' to us. Talk about being relieved—a queer show that was. They'd hardly got up to the line when you began to see them coming back in the ambulances, in peculiar attitudes."

They had strolled about the fair together, Ballante with one of those little rubber toys he was so good at working and which he always seemed to be on the point of bursting, and a boater tipped over one ear. Fairs and circuses were just the thing for him : he was in his element. He had insisted on watching the Roman wrestling, and he took it on himself to hiss, cheer, and clap until he had made himself the darling of the audience. Then he had been a star turn at the shooting booth. At throwing the ring he won a bottle and at throwing the knife two Billykin dolls. Somewhere he had collected a wreath of paper flowers, which he wore slung round his neck, and his arms were loaded with his trophies. The back-chat he conducted with the girls was dazzling. He was the ideal companion for Aurelien that evening, capable of pushing him masterfully along into the maze or to see the performing fleas. But what Ballante himself obviously liked best of all was the dogs' pantomime, with the wedding, and the deserter who came before a firing squad.

They landed up in a bistro near Anvers, where they sat at one of the iron tables on the rather murkily lit terrace, among packed crowds of people ; behind them, indoors, a gramophone was playing slightly out-of-date tunes. Beer flowed like water. Tables had hardly been wiped when they were awash again from the drinks of the next arrivals. Glasses came waltzing over the drinkers' heads, and the waiters' faces were grim with concentration, as they put down a tray

here, worked out the bill there, and whipped out change. Chairs were continually being scraped back as people came and went. Ballante had put his dolls, his bottle and his flowers down in front of Aurelien and was already striking up an acquaintance with ladies of uncertain virtue at the next table. He was temperamentally unable to stay quiet. Aurelien let himself be borne away on this mechanical torrent, vaguely picking up scraps of talk from the next table, where four men sat, well-dressed somewhat beyond the limits of the correct, and similarly exaggerated in their build. In their midst a tall, motionless woman in a big white hat sat smiling, not saying a word.

" Let them stay at home if they don't like it," one of them was saying with a groan. " They make me sick. We're in France, aren't we ? This isn't Chicago." The next remarks were lost in the sound of beer being poured out. Aurelien began to think sombrely of Monet's garden and that afternoon light on the flowers. . . . " Anyway," shouted the big fellow who had his fat, beringed hand on the woman's shoulder, " we don't care a bloody hang about the Yanks. The Senegalese are niggers too, aren't they, or aren't they ? Well, there you are, they fought for us, didn't they ? "

There was Cusse de Ballante waving his arms about. Then he rounded his hands before his mouth and uttered a yell to a whole crowd of friends he had just caught sight of—• ah, what luck. The more people there are to play the fool, the more fun it is. Not that Aurelien quite agreed. " No, old man, really, if you want to carry on with them, all right, if you feel like it. . . ." Ballante, however, wouldn't leave an old pal who was feeling depressed. The others were coming over to their table, five or six people of whom two were women. Ballante stood up and performed introductions. " I'll explain it all later," the painter whispered in Aurelien's ear. One of the men was recounting how the

day before, when he had been having a glass in a wine restaurant, some Americans—not sailors, absolutely respectable sort of people—had insisted on having a Negro turned out, who had been there having a drink. The anecdote formed a queer continuation to the conversation at the next table, and people began to talk about incidents there had been in the streets, the sailors causing trouble. " In Martinique, in Martinique, Martinique/" Cusse de Ballante began to sing. For him the word " Negro " meant going about in one's skin, or at the most " in just a little loin-cloth," and talking pidgin, and big w'hite chief him friends allee same along darky, and the bamboo hut under the palm trees. In the end they joined up with Ballante's friends and went down towards the place Pigalle.

" You live in the Prince de R——'s house, don't you, Monsieur Leurtillois ? " one of the women said. She was a willowy creature in a flame-red dress ; she had beautiful hands and clung to her husband's arm. " We're neighbours of yours—very nearly, anyway, we live on the quai d'Anjou. I often see you."

How amazing. Leurtillois exhibited delight at the coincidence, since there was, in any case, nothing else he could do. He had just been wondering where he had seen her before : one remembers a person vaguely without having any idea of where and when. . . .

At the gate of the Cirque d'Hiver there was some stir going on, police standing about, people dashing to and fro, and blinding lights shining. The women rushed forward to see what was happening. A film was being shot. Actors in their make-up were standing about patiently in the glare, men on the production side were issuing orders. The crowd was pushed back to make way for the arrival of a taxi which was part of the scene.

Aurelien's neighbour from the quai d'Anjou murmured in his ear : " Just look at that—isn't he beautiful ? " She

pointed to a magnificent Negro in grey flannels, standing in the front row of the crowd around the film set. " And what musicians." Leurtillois did not quite follow. " Is he a musician ? " he asked. She did not answer. She was enchanting, and her name was Mme Floresse. Paris, Leurtillois thought, was full of women one didn't know. Her husband was saying : " You must come and see us, Monsieur Leurtillois." Oh, of course, yes, delighted.

Cusse de Ballante had distributed his dolls among the women. He still had the bottle, which he was brandishing about. How about going to Ernest's for a drink ? Ernest turned out to be one of the men, and it seemed that he had a perfect duck of a flat. And as the place already had a fairly dim reputation, it didn't matter what one did there, stamping about on the floor, yelling songs at the top of one's voice, smashing plates, and so forth. Laughter from Ernest, a pink little man approaching forty. Aurelien made his excuses, he must be getting along home. Ballante protested : " I say, that's too bad of you. You don't mean you're just going to clear off ? Well, anyway, you must have my flowers." And he hung his paper wreath round Aurelien's neck. The women laughed and waved to Aurelien as he walked off.

Alone, he crossed the place Pigalle. The multi-coloured saltire still ornamented his shoulders, and he jeered at himself for the figure he must be cutting. He was walking on without any idea of what to do next; there was no difference between the way he was now and any other hour in his life, this life of his that went on and on. If he had been a normal type of man, if he had been like everyone else, he would have stayed with Ballante and the others. He would have flirted with Mme Floresse—come to think of it, a woman who lived almost on his own doorstep was quite a piece of luck, and he would have certainly slept with her sooner or later. She wasn't quite as full-bosomed as he

liked, but still, she must be fairly well worth. . . . He tried to imagine what Mme Floresse's thighs were like.

" You might have the decency to look where you're going," someone was saying furiously.

Aurelien was only too ready to beg the other's pardon. An eddy in the crowd had caused him to push a passerby almost off the pavement, as a car drove across the square, just where people were gathered round an American sailor who was pulling at the lever of a Try Your Strength machine, his white sleeves rolled up over his sunburnt arms. Then Aurelien and the person who had uttered the exclamation of rage stopped and stared at each other, almost stunned by recognition. Aurelien tugged at Ballante's flowers and flung them to the ground.

" Just the very man," Paul Denis said. " I was looking for you."

CHAPTER LXXIV

" No," Blanchette said, " I don't think so. You see, when we were married I made over a certain amount to him by deed of gift. Quite a large amount, actually. Aren't you comfortable ? Shall I fix the cushions for you ? Would you like another one ? "

It was the first evening Adrien had had his splint and so been able to dine downstairs in the dining-room, with Blanchette ; for Edmond was out, as usual. In this sumptuous room Adrien had felt a strange sensation. Here he was alone with Blanchette, officially alone, in the servant's eyes, even if not actually so, being served by a footman in white gloves, with Blanchette opposite him and the Puyforce silver gleaming and countless little subtle touches that spoke of wealth, such as the wine that he rolled round his tongue,

though it needn't have been served in a decanter. And the dress Blanchette wore was in his honour: a very simple black dress (black suited her so well), drawn up to a high collar in front, and the back cut away to display her fine shoulders. By now Adrien had become accustomed to Blanchette's somewhat large, almost plain features, and even saw a certain charm in her face. He thought that if she would only fluff out her hair a bit more, she would be quite good looking. Well, he would teach her to fluff it out. She was wearing her pearls.

After dinner they had moved into the library. The window was open on to the terrace, and here, with the shaded lamps and the big blue Picasso in the shadows, there reigned a mild tranquillity that yet had a faint pulse beating in it, as it were, the distant throb of Paris. They were alone together, but the dark presence of the city there outside was a safeguard, almost a third person, and at the same time vaguely provocative.

"By and large," Adrien said thoughtfully, as he tipped the ash from his cigar into the blue ashtray, "Edmond is his own master—by and large."

Blanchette sighed, as though she were thinking of something else. "In a manner of speaking," she murmured and behind those words she must be glimpsing Mme Melrose's studied smile and her husband's cruelty and all those evenings, like this evening, when she had dined alone, and the children who never came to kiss their father, in that exquisite room to which Adrien would soon be going back. She repeated: "In a manner of speaking."

Then, as though she guessed that Adrien had caught something of her bitter regret for the independence she had given Edmond, she said:

"You think you're acting all for the best, and you only lay the basis of your own unhappiness."

His long eyelashes flickered over almost closed eyes; he

was watching her unobtrusively. " Do you think that would have made any difference ? " he asked.

She didn't ask what difference or press for his meaning. This was one of those times when talk is elliptical.

" I'm afraid," she said, " that it's been a tragic mistake from A to Z."

" Your children aren't a mistake."

" Yes, of course, there are the children. If it weren't for the children. . . . When I think that if it hadn't been for you. . . . My sweet little Marie-Victoire. . . ."

Adrien waved his hand in a gesture that conveyed : Let's talk about something else, shall we ? A little ash fell on to the floor and he moved as though to bend down.

" Don't bother about that," she said gently. " It doesn't matter. How lovely this evening is."

" Lovely. . . ."

She looked at him, admiring the long lashes that were almost like a woman's. He was rather pale now from not having been up or in the fresh air for so long, and he had lost that faint suggestion of the swash-buckling that she had not cared for in him before. He was fingering his moustache, and she wondered what Edmond would look like with a moustache. That brought her back to the subject of the money she had made over to her husband, and she went on in explanation :

" I have my own allowance for the housekeeping, the children, and my clothes, but the money itself, the bulk of the money, is in Edmond's hands ; he has it in the Estates, and the syndicate. . . ."

" **Yes, I know.**"

" We don't live up to our income, by any means. One has to think of the future, one has to think of the children."

Doubtless that was what Edmond told her. And then, too, there must be something about this quiet, relatively modest manner of living that was gratifying to the Huguenot in her.

Adrien thought of the file which Mme Marie had passed over to him, and he felt ill at ease.

" The long and the short of it is—I'm sorry, would you mind ? I should like another cushion."

" Oh, you should have told me."

—She hastened to bring him a cushion, and as he leaned forward and she slipped it behind him, her cheek brushed against his moustache. She felt him hold his breath suddenly, and she lingered a moment before drawing back. He was looking at the nape of her neck, her bent head, and the line of her back that simply cried out for his hand to be laid on it. But the moment hadn't come yet. Quickly, quickly, he must talk about something else, as far removed as possible from this disquietude that emanated from the bending woman.

" I don't understand Edmond. He's become insatiable."

" Insatiable ? What do you mean, Adrien ? He never asks me for anything, you know. Only the big Packard last year."

I hat was a mere trifle. That little word " only " was just the first rung on the ladder. Adrien thought to himself, and he leaned back, his hand on the plaster.

" Are you in pain ? "

" H'm ? Oh no. I was just thinking."

What was he really thinking ? He saw that she was wondering what caused the tremor in his voice, which he hadn't been able to control. He himself wasn't sure what the trouble w^ras, whether it was the woman's nearness that upset him, after such a long period of chastity, or the thought of her wealth, this dream of wealth; or perhaps it was a mingling of all these things. Naturally, he was trying to hide the turmoil of his emotions, but at the same time he was dimly aware of being glad that something of it showed through the veneer of his self-command and communicated itself to her.

" It's funny," Blanchette said, over-emphasising the calm of her voice, " you're different this evening, Adrien."

Perhaps the implied question was a rash one. He was still sitting with those long lashes almost closed over his eyes, seeking the right tone of voice and the words that would be deliberately banal. " It may be because it's so beautiful this evening. So beautiful that——" He stopped short.

She asked with a touch of curtness that did not ring quite true :

" So beautiful that what ? "

" So beautiful that it makes one believe in God."

The remark was not only forced but also in poor taste, and misplaced in this conversation about the Barbentanes' financial arrangements. It shocked Blanchette into asking :

" You're not an atheist, are you ? "

" No, of course not. I was brought up in the church—but sometimes it's hard to believe in anything—and then at other times—there are evenings like this."

She was deeply moved, for she had suffered greatly under Edmond's mockery and lack of belief in any kind of religion. " Are you a Catholic ? " she asked gravely.

He nodded.

It was another obstacle to be overcome between them, but this time it was different. Blanchette foresaw many long and serious talks about these things, talks that would lay open corners of her mind which she had never revealed to anyone, and certainly not to Edmond. Catholics were a puzzle to her ; she did not understand their mysterious love of churches, stained glass, organs, the Virgin Mary. It was above all the Marian cult that embarrassed Blanchette ; for she could at a pinch have brought herself to accept the Actual Presence.

From fear of the cleft between them, she returned to the subject of Edmond:

" How old were you and Barbentane when you first knew

each other ? " She avoided saying " Edmond " in order to keep up a distant atmosphere between herself and Adrien.

He interpreted it differently and replied :

" Oh, I forget. We were quite small, anyway."

" It's funny, though, that he never believed in anything, ever."

" It was his father, you see. It caused Mme Barbentane a lot of pain."

Her lips tightened at the thought of her mother-in-law. It was probably the first time in her life that she thought of Esther as a human being. It wasn't exactly pleasant to think that the same disunion occurred in generation after generation, if indeed the vexed question between Edmond and Blanchette was one of a religious nature at all. At least it was simpler to act as though it were. She realised that Adrien was talking. He was telling her about Serianne, the games of bowls, the Pro Patria group which he had founded to help that cousin of Schelzer's who was a chocolate manufacturer. Yes, Blanchette had met the Barrel family. Jacqueline had had all that trouble. . . .

" Adrien, you know a great deal about Edmond's business. Between ourselves, tell me—you can tell me the truth, I won't mind—how is he actually involved in Melrose Perfumes ? "

" Good Lord, you put me in an awkward position. I told you, Blanchette, I'd rather not talk about it."

" Don't be absurd. What difference can it make ? You don't think I'm really jealous, do you ? And as for the money, after all, it can only be the money that belongs to Edmond, and he can do what he likes with his own money. I've told you that I made over a considerable amount to him."

" I say, let's talk about something else. It makes me very uncomfortable."

" I don't see why. It's quite ridiculous. You must have a very low idea of me."

" Blanchette."

" And what do you expect me to think, seeing you so embarrassed ? You almost make me think——"

" Please, Blanchette."

" But it's you, with your way of defending Barbentane, whom nobody's attacking, anyway. You're putting ideas into my head."

" I assure you. Can't you see that where Edmond is concerned my position is doubly delicate ? "

" Doubly ? "

" I mean, I'm actually his right-hand man. . . ."

" Doubly ? "

He didn't answer.

She felt her heart pounding : her thoughts were in turmoil. On the one hand she was becoming more and more sure that Edmond was brewing some plot against her and was tricking her out of money ; every talk with Adrien made that clearer, in spite of his honourable loyalty and his staunch, upright refusal to tell her anything. On the other hand, the faster her trust in the father of her children dwindled away, the more some other emotion gained a hold on her. Perhaps it was she who was dishonourable. She was startled at the change in her voice when she asked, falteringly :

" I hope you're not too tired ? "

" No," he said. " Listen."

That distant, nostalgic rumour in the darkness that had now fallen was the sound of the underground trains crossing the Seine. So Adrien had a feeling for the romantic things of the imagination, for all his look of an officer in mufti. And she thought of what Edmond had told her about Adrien at the front; he was a hero.

" To think," she sighed, " that I might have known you then—first."

" Blanchette." It was almost a shout. Forgetting his leg, he flung himself towards her.

" Oh, sit still. Have you hurt yourself ? Adrien, Adriert, you crazy boy." She had caught him in her arms to prevent him falling, and unconsciously she was pressing him to her, while his hot hands moved up and down her naked back and slid in through the opening of the dress. His moustache ... the aroma of the cigar ... no one had ever kissed her like that before. In the end she laid her cheek on his shoulder and groaned. Adrien—at last, at last, someone loved her.

" My dear," she said, " your poor leg." And she helped him back to his chair.

He was like a big baby, murmuring little loving words and excuses and promises. When she stood up, her pearls dangled for an instant caressingly in Adrien's face.

CHAPTER LXXV

" FIRST of all, what is love ? "

" You can't ask questions like that. Either you love or you don't."

" But supposing you only think you do. Supposing it weren't really love."

It was the talk of men who were very drunk. Yet it was only their words that intoxicated them, and this hot night that was growing steadily later, and the hatred that had blown up between them like a strong wind.

" If you loved Berenice," Paul Denis said, " you wouldn't ask such a question."

Pale, challenging, he looked the other straight in the eye, with a calculated malice that did not last, but faded out. He couldn't hate Leurtillois after all. The same woman had hurt them both in the same way. Right at the start he might have gone for him, but once they had spoken, it was too late.

Here they were in this little cafe on the place Saint-Georges, with mirrors all round them, brass bars, little cubicles like the compartments in some weird, gothic train, a blaze of lights, and the place almost empty, only a waiter yawning over the evening paper.

" Do you think," Aurelien said, " do you think, dear boy, that I don't love her ? "

He had put the question slowly, unsure of himself, and adopting this blunt, supercilious manner of addressing the other because he was, after all, a mere kid, a shivering, skinny little lad with a faint, unearthly look that the lights emphasised—but still, only a lad.

Paul said in a choked voice :

" I forbid you to call me your dear boy ! "

Aurelien shrugged his shoulders. It was queer to think that, in the first moment of their meeting, he could cheerfully have killed the brat. It was extraordinary to think of him as Berenice's lover ; the thought was both strange and revolting. It was like catching schoolboys smoking on the sly. *This* was what she had chosen to prefer instead of him, Aurelien. She had preferred this little urchin ! He was angry with himself for trying to argue with the facts.

" Perhaps you're right, dear boy." He repeated the expression obstinately, but Paul Denis already seemed to have forgotten that he had forbidden him to use it. " Perhaps I don't love her. Perhaps that isn't really love. But then what is it ? Are you going to tell me I've just been making it all up ? " There was silence for a moment, and then Aurelien went on : " Do you think she's good looking ? "

The boy turned his head furiously, his face contorted ; he looked as if he were on the brink of tears. That was what Berenice called his " funny mouth."

" I don't," Aurelien concluded.

Denis thumped the marble table with his fist, making the little spoons jump. The waiter looked up from his reading

and then saw that there was no need for him to do anything. Paul hissed:

" You don't love her ! You never loved her ! "

" Perhaps you're right. It would simplify everything."

Aurelien felt ill with misery. Shutting his eyes, he saw behind his eyelids the plaster face that hung on his wall at home, and the woman of flesh and blood, the light on her cheek bones, her head flung back. It was almost more than he could do to imagine all of her, her whole body, not the details but just the whole woman at some distance, say in the street; he could only do it by remembering what she had been like at Giverny, as she walked away down the road, with that movement of her shoulders.

Paul Denis was talking and talking. They must have been together for at least two hours.

" . . . Anyway, how^r can it possibly be the same ? You didn't have her, you didn't," and he beat on his chest, " you didn't! How can you pretend there's any comparison ? Oh yes, I know all that stuff about ideal, platonic love, the communion of two minds, and all that rot. But you just look at yourself in that mirror and ask yourself—a chap like you, is it likely ? But I had her for myself, you see, and now I haven't got her. That's different, that means something. When I wake up and find myself alone. . . . When I think that she's somewhere else, anywhere else at all. . . . But you—in God's name, what the hell can it matter to you ? "

He listened to the lad talking. As a matter of fact, he respected his grief, even if he thought it wasn't very lasting. For the moment Paul Denis was really suffering, there was no doubt about that. Aurelien murmured :

" Don't get worked up. That's not the whole story."

They looked across at each other like two boxers between rounds. An idea suddenly woke up in Leurtillois' brain.

" All the same," he said, " she left you."

It was a rotten thing to say, hitting below the belt. Paul bowed his head, taking the blow. Then he parried :

" There was the husband. . . ."

Oh, so there was. He had been quite forgotten. Even Paul, who had spoken of him, was as surprised as Aurelien was. The husband !

" A pretty sight he must be in his pants," Aurelien said.

They both hooted with laughter, and Paul, whose mood was now malignant, made a derisive movement with his left elbow, in imitation of a penguin. Both of them felt a desperate need to taunt the absent third. Their thoughts raced : they were both imagining what kind of love-making it must be between Berenice and her one-armed husband, and their imagination took them a long way, to the depths of the scurrilous.

Paul Denis began repeating things that Berenice had said, desecrating words she had uttered in moments of abandon. He seemed to be finding a ghastly pleasure in betraying her. Perhaps, too, he was trying to outrage the man who sat opposite him, by raising the echo of an intimacy that he could not think of without pain. Paul overstepped the mark, and the atmosphere became stiff with embarrassment.

" All the same/* Aurelien said, " supposing she did love him, after all ? " He didn't believe it. It was sheer spite, only said to envenom Paul.

Paul revenged himself:

" You must be bloody jealous to say a thing like that."

Yes, Aurelien was jealous, wild with jealousy. He was seeing red. His hate mounted to his head, blinding him. Berenice with this brat here—oh, God damn her for a whore !

" And here we are," Paul said, " talking about her, both of us. It's monstrous. It's absolutely monstrous."

Leurtillois found a bitter satisfaction in this conversation ; it was like pulling the scab off a wound. He knew that every

word, every thought, every look was going to make it all the more terribly hard to bear afterwards, when he would leave this cafe and be alone again, always alone, with the darkness and the days to come. Unless it suddenly stopped ; unless he decided never to think of it again ? Denis wasn't exactly making it easier to do that.

" Can't you understand ? " he was saying. " No other woman ever mattered, never in all my life. When I think of the others, it just makes me laugh. I was just having a shot with the others, and that was all. I despised them, and their way of moving and behaving. The main thing was I couldn't talk to them. They've always got reasons for giving way to you. There's always something that settles them. Shouldn't be taken in."

" And then this time you were had, that's it, isn't it ? "

" I tell you that's got nothing to do with it. I love her. Can't you realise that ? "

Funny thing, here they both were talking about love, and neither of them had any idea what the word meant. Aurelien tried to think : " I don't love her." But he couldn't convince himself. He wouldn't get out of it by blasphemy.

" You love her, I love her, we love her. The husband loves her, too in his own way. But how about her ? What does she think ? What can she think ? I could have sworn that she loved me. She went to bed with you. ..."

" I could have sworn that she loved me."

" And she took a run-out powder."

" Do you *enjoy* hurting me ? "

" Perhaps I do."

" Well, I should like to point out that it's not in your power. She hurts me, but you can't, do you get that ? She did it, and you're just sitting there trying to bait me."

" You fool! I'm not doing anything to you, I'm only baiting myself."

Berenice's presence, hovering between them, was be-

coming unbearable. They turned away from each other. Outside cars were jamming up together, horns tooting; it must be late, people were coming out of the theatres. Paul Denis, his eye staring into the middle distance, was sunk in a trance of gloom. His funny mouth trembled, and when he spoke he was still staring straight ahead of him, ignoring Leurtillois :

" I shall do myself in."

Aurelien felt a queer shock. This lad. Oh no, the girl wasn't worth it.

" Shut up, boy. Are you crazy ? People only kill themselves for someone who's worthy of it. She's just a bitch who goes from one man to another."

" First of all, I've told you you're not to call me ' boy ' ! And secondly, what the hell are you telling me ? She goes from one man to another, does she ? What do I care if there was someone in her life before me, if there was anyone. ..."

" This time I didn't mean to hurt you, Paul, believe me, but I swear to you——"

" Swear as much as you like. You make me laugh, with your ideas. ... So that's the type you are, is it ? Women deteriorate in passing from hand to hand, according to your way of thinking, And how many hands have you passed through, eh ? "

" That's not the same thing, you know that perfectly well."

" I don't know anything of the kind. God ! your masculine morality makes me vomit ! "

" You're not in your right mind." Leurtillois spoke very curtly. He had just run up against something that he didn't much care for—another world, all the ideas of these people who think themselves so clever, with their anarchical notions and all that stuff about being " advanced." As if there were no difference between the sexes—what an idea !

Paul Denis said in a low voice :

" Perhaps I'm really not in my right mind."

Aurélien caught him up at once :

" You think you're in love—you long to be in love with someone, for of course everyone wants to love and be loved, and that's all there is to it, my boy. And it isn't a matter of choice. It's a mere fluke whether this woman or that turns up at the right moment. I tell you I didn't even think she was good-looking. But I loved her. And so did you. It isn't the woman that matters, but love itself."

He was talking like this in the attempt to convince himself. As he listened to himself talking, he realised that he was making it up as he went along: he hadn't known that he thought this way, and now he wondered what he was going to say next and what he was going to think next. Paul evaded the issue, with vague denials. Aurélien cut him short, saying:

" You make your own idea of a woman, you go about with it in the back of your mind. And then one day you meet Berenice. Naturally the picture fits, because you make it fit, it's got to. I'm not saying that either of us was looking for a woman with the idea that she shouldn't be shop-soiled—not a bit of it. But I mean, what do you know about her? Do you think it's the first time she's done this sort of thing? People get fed up living in the country, in a little town like that. . . ."

" Shut up ! "

" Oh, I dare say it's easier to stop your ears ! It didn't take long for her to shift from me to you, did it, and here you are talking about killing yourself for her? What a miserable idea ! "

" Oh, you never loved her. That's obvious from every word you say."

" Because I see her as she is? Don't deceive yourself: it all depends on how you feel, it varies from one evening

to another, just as it does, only the other way round, when you're in love. Now honestly, was the picture that we had of her, before she was there, the same thing? You might as well admit frankly that it wasn't. Love! You must forgive me if I have a typically masculine point of view, I know it makes you sick, but I can't help it. For me, Berenice was practically a young girl. So you see what a fool one can be."

He laughed mirthlessly. The other raised his head and looked at him. Aurelien looked very different from what Paul had been imagining: his face was running with sweat and he hadn't been over-nice in shaving. Paul had never before noticed his protruding cheek bones and the chin. "Practically a young girl"... what was so stupid about thinking her almost like a young girl? Anyway, some of these men with their taste for young girls—ugh, it made him sick.

"So," Paul asked, "if she had been—a young girl, as you put it, you would really have loved her? Not just play-acting, but really? And if she'd slept with me all the same, she would have been fit for nothing but the garbage heap—that's the idea, is it?"

He was trying to say too many things all at once, and the result was a jumble. But Aurelien understood him very well, as it happened, catching the angry tone running through this medley of thoughts.

"First of all," he said, "who said anything about a young girl?" He had already forgotten that he had. "Love isn't just a matter of sleeping around."

"No. But what you call sleeping around doesn't spoil love. I'm not one of these high-minded people like you, *monsieur*"

Aurelien shrugged. The boy hadn't succeeded in annoying him.

"Oh, I know all about it," Paul Denis went on. "You and the rest of your sort concede a woman the right to

love adulterously, so long as it only happens once. A husband doesn't count. A wife is really pretty much the same thing as a virgin. A woman can be respected if she's only unfaithful to her husband with one man—and so long as there are a few tears, of course—naturally—and a long life afterwards when she looks back on it and sighs. God, what an attitude ! "

Paul Denis found it utterly revolting. Aurelien had never thought of it, but now it seemed to him that this was, as a matter of fact, what he thought about marriage and adultery. None of it was particularly new or original, but then, that wasn't the point. In his eyes a woman ruined herself by throwing herself away on a mere lad, some Paul Denis or other. If Berenice had gone straight back to Lucien, without turning aside for the adventure at Giverny, he would have had quite a different memory of her, a pure and haunting memory that would probably have gone with him to the end of his days. Then she would have been and would have remained his love. But this Berenice was tarnished. . . . Yet what difference could this young intellectual, with his white, pinched face, really make ? In another era a woman who had a lover was a lost woman. Nowadays dubious progress had been made: she could have one lover, but not two. What was the lad talking about now ? Aurelien wasn't listening. He was thinking of his mother, in whose life there had never been more than one man ; that was, apart from her husband. That at any rate was what Aurelien thought, but he didn't really know anything about it. Not that he judged other women by his mother ; he had his own ideas about life and about love. Well, when he said his " own " ideas, he had also to admit that quite a large number of people shared them. But then, nobody had his ideas all to himself: a hundred people are all thinking at the same time that the sun is shining. The fact is, quite simply, that the sun *is* shining.

" Shall we move on somewhere else ? " he said. " We're wearing the seats out here." He had come to the end of his packet of cigarettes.

They went out into a night that was moist and immanent, one of those nights in Paris when no one wants to go to bed and all the streets are loaded with some nameless secret, the voices of passers-by like scraps of a thousand stories, and every woman looks as though she had been taken by surprise, in the half-darkness that never quite hides what it hints at. Along the rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, along the rue Fontaine. . . . Down there, were the high flaring lights of the Moulin Rouge. An all-night chemist's shop at the crossing brought them back to the subject of Berenice's husband. They passed a *boite de nuit* and could see the women among the flowers and the well-dressed men. The place Blanche was ablaze with lights, and in spite of the late hour, there were plenty of people still sitting on the terraces. On the boulevards the fair-booths, now sunk in darkness, looked like an assemblage of ghosts; and near the Moulin, in an island of light by the entrance to the dance hall, a little group of American sailors stood, their white uniforms glimmering.

" I don't know," Aurelien said, " but those fellows get on my nerves. And not only on mine."

" I have some very good American friends," Paul declared.

" I don't see the connection."

Indeed, there wasn't much connection, perhaps. But from the moment when Aurelien mentioned the Negroes, he found Paul Denis taking their side. That led to a discussion about all sorts of things, such as jazz and the subject races. Leurtillois' view was that there were Negroes who had become civilised, like the man who had won the prix Goncourt, but that wasn't the same thing as saying. . . . On the whole he wasn't on either side, the Negroes or the Americans.

" And what do you think, dear boy, that Berenice's views are on the question ? "

He had asked that in his most ironical tone. At the moment the thing that struck him chiefly was that he was here wasting his time in silly talk with Paul Denis, and for one reason only, that the boy had slept with Berenice. If it hadn't been for that, they wouldn't have had anything at all to talk about.

At the tobacconist's where Aurelien wanted to go in and buy a packet of Lucky Strike, the bar was chock-a-block with sailors in white and blue, laughing and slapping each other on the back, great masses of pink-and-white flesh, all of them more or less drunk and talking through their noses, like gramophones, under the blinding glare of the electric lights. A few girls were clinging to their giant shoulders, reminding Aurelien vaguely of Simone. They must be doing pretty well this week, he thought. A group of Frenchmen, the local breed, were watching the performance from where they leaned on the benches, their thumbs tucked in their waistcoats, their shirts a wonderful array of many colours. The pretty brunette at the cash-desk didn't know whether she was on her head or her heels ; she was handing a customer fifty francs in change and apologising for her carelessness. She had a little gold tooth on one side.

There was a sudden tumult outside, shouts and screams. As though someone had pressed a button, the *tabac* emptied. People stood up, craning their necks, and in the rush Paul was swept outside. Through the swirl of citizenry, and hampered as he was by getting his change, Aurelien had difficulty in seeing what was going on. It was a completely drunk sailor outside on the terrace, who had picked up one of the little round, marble-topped tables and was waving it at arm's length. Women screamed. A tall, thin Negro in a grey flannel suit had his arms stretched out before him, warding off the blow. The table struck him. It struck him

in the face, and blood spurted forth as the table was swung into the air again. The hubbub was terrific, the other sailors gathered round the aggressor, there were startled Negroes here and there on all sides, and the ordinary little men, in their green and pink shirts, joined in to heighten the roar of rage as they shouldered their way through the blue-clad sailors and the enormous hands that were crimson under the glare of the arc lights.

Aurelien found himself outside. The place Blanche looked as if it had been stricken by the sound of an air-raid warning : men were rushing from all sides towards the *tabac*, like grains of sand poured out of a bag. Behind them pockets of space opened up, queerly vacant; in the almost empty roadway two or three taxis were coasting along, as though bewildered. On the pavement opposite, down there at the corner of the streets that ran head-on into the city, a band of women were screaming and wailing senselessly. And all around there was a grumbling murmur that seemed to rise from the huts and booths of the fair, where all the lights were out. There was something murderous in the artificial light.

*

American voices shouted over all the tumult, a knot of white uniforms formed again round the drunk, and one of them had caught the marble-topped table in mid-air, as though the whole thing were a rigger scrum. Instinctively they formed a protective wall round the lunatic, who kept on bellowing : " Bloody nigger ! Bloody nigger ! " The whole square trembled with the black revolt, the indignation of the whores and their companions, and the fear and rage of the Negroes who were still some way behind these unexpected allies in the defence of their cause. Here and there a knife was being withdrawn from its sheath.

" As usual,*" the waiter said at Aurelien's side, " not a sign of the police ! "

The crowd was closing in on the sailors, pushing and

driving up against them with slow, muffled anger, and the sailors wanted to get the guilty man out of the clutches of these people. Outside the Moulin Rouge, the victim was exhibiting his bleeding face to other men who were darker than himself. Now that the blood was running down his face, one could see that he was a very light-coloured Negro. Someone had hailed a taxi, and four or five sailors were hoisting their almost unconscious comrade in, while he went on repeating : " Bloody nigger ! " By now the crowd had jammed the wheels, and the taxi-driver was waving his arms about, explaining that he couldn't start. Cries of " Kill him ! " were heard. The driver took fright and began to argue ; he didn't want to take the sailors, in the face of a crowd like this.

A sailor, hanging on to the taxi from where he stood on the step, tried to harangue the crowd, and insults were soon flying. Then missiles followed. He put up his arm to protect his face. The pure white of the linen uniforms struck oddly into this atmosphere that was a reminder of Saint Bartholomew's night and its massacre. Suddenly, from the other side of the road, at the corner of the rue Blanche and the rue Fontaine, one of the Malabar Indians who were generally to be met with in that district came hurrying across with long strides, a giant of a man in a beige lounge suit, with his shoulders hunched up. He came on so fast that before people had quite realised what was happening, he had sprung on to the running-board of the taxi.

But there had just been time enough for a shiver of horror to run through hundreds of those watching, in the certainty that they were about to behold a crime. The next instant an arm rose, a blade flashed. No one dared to move forward or do anything to parry the blow. It was like a nightmare in which the dreamer is dumb and cannot scream.

No one ? Yes, there was somebody, a slight, thin lad, a mere child beside those linen-clad titans and the murderer

in his light suit. He had started out from the terrace in front of the *tabac*, in front of Cyrano's, and before anyone could stop him he was up against the taxi, between the armed man and the sailors. When the arm fell, there was one terrible cry, then silence.

And no one stopped the man who had wielded the knife, as he slipped behind the crowd and into the shadows of the rue Lepic, vanishing into the night. But in the midst of the white sailors, Aurelien saw something collapse, like a bundle of old clothes, and knew it was the body of Paul Denis.

He was kneeling beside the taxi, and God alone knew how he had got there ; but the boy's head was in his arms. " It's all right," Paul Denis moaned, " leave me alone, I'm all right." His hands were covered with blood. Someone was trying to loosen Paul's tie, and a sailor was saying : " He aint dead, is he ? " And that frightful wound in the throat, blood, blood everywhere, the body that he could feel growing limp. Then at last the police arrived.

A woman dressed in pale blue, with black gloves up to her elbows, cried frantically : " It's all your fault! " And she spat in the taxi driver's face.

CHAPTER LXXVI

THE whole thing was appalling. The lad had been taken by taxi to Beaujon, to that ancient building that looked more like a prison than a hospital. Aurelien, who had also come in the taxi, was swung like an erratic pendulum between the admittance office, the house surgeon on duty, the police enquiries, and the telephone ; he scarcely knew what was most urgent. The house surgeon was a friend of that friend of Aurelien's, the writer's brother, that student who had

shaved off his moustache to please a woman. He put Leurtillois in the medical staff's sitting-room, a small, low room full of smoke, which faced on to the court yard and was adorned with libidinous pictures in various shades of gravy brown. He came back, a short while later, to say that the boy had been given an injection, but . . . And he shook his head doubtfully.

The next thing was that the Menestrels arrived, man and wife; they had heard the news from Mary. Mme Menestrel was a slender, fair, good-looking girl, and very upset. She had a great many questions to ask : How on earth had it happened ? What had he been thinking of to get involved in that sort of thing ? And so forth. Menestrel paced up and down, clutching his walking-stick in both hands. There was no point in their having come, he said. There was nothing they could do. The house surgeon had some acquaintance with modern literature, and Menestrel's arrival put another face on things so far as he was concerned. A moment later a nurse came to fetch him.

Aurelien was haunted by what Paul had said just before the terrible thing happened. " I'm going to do myself in." He tried to tell the others about it, and Mme Menestrel burst out: " Oh, so it was suicide ! " and her husband cut that short with :

" I say, you know, one can't go about saying that sort of thing."

Then Mary had joined them. The sitting-room began to look as if a meeting were being held there. Mary was a pathetic sight; so late at night she looked worn and haggard and old, and she had pulled on the first hat she found. She kept on saying:

" The little fool! The little fool! "

The house surgeon came down again, his face solemn. The patient. . . . He broke off and asked if there were a relative present. So Paul Denis was dead.

He had lost too much blood on the way, and anyway. . . . Here followed technical details of the kind some doctors like to give. It was at that moment that the mother arrived.

She was a thin little woman, of about fifty, with a bloodless skin and ash-grey hair, and wore a dark costume. She explained apologetically that she hadn't been able to get there sooner because Asnieres was some distance away, after all, and then she asked if it was Mme Menestrel who had rung her up. Mary came forward and took her hands, then the others saw a second newcomer, a tall man with a drooping fair moustache and blotchy cheeks, of uncertain age, dressed in a long raincoat with a mourning-band on his sleeve and a black hat in one hand.

" My brother," Mme Denis introduced him to the gathering, " Monsieur Jean-Pierre Bedaride."

What a staid, grim little scene it was. The mother hadn't realised yet; she was still the respectable housewife from Asnieres, the civil servant's widow, slightly bewildered by all these people and convinced that her scapegrace of a son had been up to one of his tricks again. She had come prepared to scold him and bewail her lot. Now suddenly there was no one to scold. This was worse than any of his childish naughtiness ; this was the sort of thing that got into the newspapers ; he had been behaving like a rowdy in a street fight. Was he hurt ? she asked. Nobody had the heart to tell her. On the point of bursting into a torrent of denunciation, she said to her brother, M. Jean-Pierre Bedaride :

" I suppose it's that Menestrel again."

That did not make the atmosphere any happier. Menestrel was obviously, in her opinion, her son's evil genius. Then all at once Mary began to sob, and in the ensuing confusion Aurelien and the house surgeon managed to draw the uncle aside and tell him that the boy was dead.

With a trembling hand M. Bedaride held his hat before his face.

" Jeanette," he breathed.

His sister turned and looked at him. Then she understood and her mouth twisted just as Paul's had done—his funny mouth.

The uncle was taken upstairs to see the body. The mother wanted to go too, but it was better that she should not see it, at any rate for the present.

Aurelien, Mary and the Menestrels remained alone.

" We'd do better to go," Menestrel said. " We're only in the way here." He was raging about the mother's accusation, that senseless outcry. But his wife insisted on waiting to hear details from the house surgeon. She was weeping quietly, wishing that Frederic could have been told, for he would surely have wanted to see his friend once more. Menestrel said that it didn't make any difference, couldn't do any good. Mary was sitting down, in a state of collapse. Aurelien rested his head on the window pane and stared out into the darkness.

The uncle returned to them with the doctor. He had already adopted the tone of a coroner at an inquest, he wanted to clear the business up, and he began by asking Aurelien if it was he who had been with Paul. Family suspicion was already falling on Leurtillois, who replied vaguely. What was the good, he thought, of stoking up the desperation that would break out at any moment now ? Nor did the mother's return improve matters. She wanted to take her son away and not leave him in this frightful hospital, which was so dreadfully sad and gloomy ; she wanted to take him home and surround him with flowers and candles, where the friends of the family could file past the coffin and she would be able to weep to her heart's content in the privacy of her home. But she was not given permission. The police would not allow it ; she must wait till the next day, until the formalities were over. For murder had been committed.

Murder ? What did they mean ? So it hadn't been an

accident ? She turned a tragic gaze to all those present, mutely asking who was the murderer.

Mme Menestrel, trembling but with blazing eyes, seized the other woman's hands with something like ecstasy and tried to explain:

" Your son is a hero, Madame. He was trying to defend the Negroes."

Defend the Negroes ? Mme Denis was utterly bewildered.

They were all shown out, gently but firmly. Outside in the street the little group broke up in a rather miserable manner, with confused emotions. The mother turned round to take another look at the walls of the hospital, the huge, high, narrow vault of the archway, and the windows behind which somewhere there lay the body of her child who had to be left behind. The sound of her voice, broken with sobs, rose into the night air, while the man in the rain-coat dragged her away in a red taxi he had signalled as it was on its way towards the city ; then they drove off down the avenue Friedland.

Menestrel shrugged his shoulders, remarking :

" It reminds me of what Denis used to say about his family."

When they arrived at the station, Aurelien decided to see Mary home, and the Menestrels went up towards Montmartre.

" Do you think Frederic will know that woman's address ? " Mme Menestrel asked her husband. " Someone ought to write and tell her."

Menestrel shrugged his shoulders.

The next day Leurtillois had to make a statement to the police. It was quite simple and everything went off decorously. But the evening papers got hold of the story, and there was a small note about it in several of the morning papers. The incident in the place Blanche had been written

up, someone had procured a photograph of Paul Denis, and there was talk about the Menestrel group. Oh well, that was bound to happen. The day after that the *Petit Parisien* made a story of it, and there was a sequel in the evening, at the bottom of a coloumn in *L'Intran*. After that it was ancient history. There had, it was true, been some mention of incidents between American sailors and Montmartre Negroes, but none of the papers dwelt on the matter, because of the Embassy.

The funeral was a thing Aurelien was not likely to forget for a very long time. He had felt obliged to go ; but at Asnieres, in the heat, surrounded by the hysteria and mourning veils of women accompanying the mother, not to mention the male relatives and forty or fifty people who made up the world in which Denis had lived, Aurelien felt utterly out of place, as though naked. It was a queer feeling. Among this flock of noisy, chattering, tearful people he looked in vain for Menestrel. The group had stayed away on principle ; they were opposed to funerals. Even Frederic hadn't come. Aurelien couldn't blame them.

After earth had been scattered on the coffin, when Aurelien had shaken hands with the Denis family, M. Bedaride shuffled slightly nearer to him. He broke down, like a piece of dry wood snapping. Through his drooping moustache he whispered :

" Thank you very much for coming, Monsieur Leurtillois. My poor sister will appreciate your gesture. . . . "

Behind Aurelien were a couple of Americans whom no one knew, a hatless man with a sad expression on his big face, and a tip-tilted little scrap of a girl: both walked slowly, awkwardly, past the grave and went away without shaking hands with any one. The Murphys were grotesquely torn between their grief and the amazement they felt at being confronted with the macabres rites and customs of the French lower middle class,

Edmond had gone to see Mary the moment he heard the news. Poor woman—much good it had done Paul to leave her as he did. She was in a terrible state of nerves, simply terrible. She dropped everything she touched and had smashed a large opalme bowl of which she was extremely fond.

" I'll get Rose to come and see you," Edmond said.

" Oh no, anything but that! I'm very fond of Rose, but—well, there are some things. . . . Rose is very good-hearted, but she can get on one's nerves. Of course, it's different for you, but I'm not exactly in the mood for the dramatic just now."

She was being very unfair, Edmond thought. Rose was the soul of tact. They both talked about Rose, but it wasn't Rose that they meant. Not for anything in the world would Edmond have mentioned his cousin by name, and it was Mary who broke out at last, saying :

" She killed him, Edmond, she killed him ! " Mme de Perseval hated Berenice. It was all rubbish about the Negroes, an out-and-out fairy-tale. She had had a talk with Leurtillois and he had told her that almost the last thing Paul had said was : "*I'm going to kill myself.*" So it was perfectly clear, wasn't it—suicide ! And all because of that woman. It was nonsense talking about jealousy, the fact remained that she had killed him, and that was all there was to it.

Edmond wanted to get it straight in his own mind and went off to cross-examine Aurelien. He had some difficulty in getting hold of him ; when he rang up, either there was no answer or the engaged signal sounded—engaged—engaged. Aurelien must have taken the receiver off. Finally, two days later, Edmond went round early in the morning ; he found Aurelien in a bull-doggishly obstinate frame of mind and could get nothing out of him. It was an accident, Leurtillois insisted ; the boy had acted on a wild impulse,

that was all. No, he hadn't any message to send to Mme Morel. None at all. And to himself he thought: she would be damnably pleased to think that Paul had killed himself for her sake. For once, there it was—the absolute degree of love. The bloody bitch !

A deputation of the dead boy's friends came to the He Saint-Louis, including Jean-Frederic Sicre and Menestrel. They wanted to get a better idea of what had happened and so be able to put the legends in perspective, as the legends came into being. Frederic seemed really moved, and his big eyes made him look like a scared fish trying to escape the net. The private detective attitude, which might easily have been offensive, struck Aurelien as child-like. They stayed for over two hours, smoking until the air in the room was blue, and dropping cigarette stubs all over the place. After this it was their intention to go on a sort of post-mortem tour including Giverny, where they would see the Murphys and the people at the Mill. And they were going to find out all they could from Mme de Perseval.

Aurelien's next visitor was Fuchs, who was determined to worm something out of him at all costs. He had a little unpublished manuscript by Paul Denis, which he thought wouldn't be at all bad in the next number of *The Dug-Out* but he needed a paragraph to head it with and Aurelien, after all, had been a friend of Denis'. . . . Aurelien thought it a bit steep. He told Fuchs that he had hardly known Denis. And when Fuchs asked what was behind this talk about the Negroes, Aurelien threw him out.

Fuchs had been indiscreet enough to mention this incident to Stephane Dupuy, who did some free-lance work for a leading theatrical and literary weekly and was also always rather short of money. The editor of this weekly, delighted at being able to do Fuchs out of the story, had published an article on the colour question by Rene Maran side by side with Dupuy's article, which was a jumble of comments and

ideas on the Pigalle group, Menestrel, pessimism, dadaism, and how the whole movement had its origins in Munich, and the stuff the dead boy had drunk—neat mandarin—and how he had enjoyed showing you the way it ate into the marble top of the table. Psycho-analysis, Freud, and Charcot were also mentioned in passing. So the Negroes were yet another form of the (Edipus complex !

An emergency meeting was called at Menestrel's. All Paul's friends were nauseated by this publicity, above all Frederic. What hogwash ! And Dupuy—he was an utter louse. They considered beating him up, but decided that that wouldn't help matters and would very likely only have unpleasant repercussions and make the whole thing drag on still longer. Besides, when one defends certain ideas, one has no right to get one's own reputation sullied. Menestrel had prepared, point for point, a reply that he proposed sending to the editor of the magazine. He read it to them and they all agreed that it was very good, in fact magnificent, but that something more was needed. It must be established that Paul Denis had died for a cause. All this stuff about suicide or an accident was all very well, but his death had been above all a *spontaneous* act, and that was the main thing. " The spontaneous act " was the group's latest hobby-horse. In the end they decided that they couldn't let other people exploit this death, no matter who they were. For this death belonged to them, and they had the right to interpret to it. They would issue a manifesto. Three or four of them would get together and they would draw up a manifesto.

There was one person there that evening who had behaved extremely queerly, and that was Zamora. He had been disgustingly frivolous, constantly interrupting to tell one of his stories or to talk about a ballerina's legs. He was, in fact, completely out of tune with the rest of them—a horribly wrong note. With him was Mrs. Goodman, who didn't

say a word all the evening, until just before they were leaving she found her tongue in order to speak of Rose Melrose and Charles Roussel.

The dress designer himself had been to see Menestrel, prepared to buy everything Paul had ever written, whatever the group could lay hands on, manuscripts, poems, letters, even music he had copied. The others protested, but then someone pointed out that it was doing Paul's memory a better service to have all his works collected. Roussel would bequeath his collection to the city of Paris. Zamora, when he heard that, gave vent to a wild laugh that was utterly uncalled for.

Menestrel didn't mince his words, and since the painter had a fairly malicious tongue himself, the conversation took a venomous turn. Old grievances were brought up and reproaches hurled at each other for things that everyone had supposed forgotten or even never noticed.

" Last year at the Ballets Russes. . . ." Zamora said.

" Well," Menestrel countered, " I don't propose bandying words with someone who. . . ."

They parted coldly.

The result was that in the next number of the weekly, Menestrel's reply appeared with several cuts, tucked away in an inconspicuous corner, while the first page flaunted an interview with Zamora, complete with photograph, reproductions of his paintings, a drawing that was supposed to be Paul Denis, and a little snap that Mrs. Goodman had taken with her Zeiss the summer before, showing Paul Denis at Mary de Perseval's at le Touquet, together with Zamora and a Spanish lass. The article was written in the most ironical tone imaginable and treated the " spontaneous act " as a huge joke. Zamora affirmed that he had known all about psycho-analysis before Freud came on the scene at all, and told a story about a fox-terrier. It meant a complete break with Menestrel and his friends, with whom Zamora

had only been mixed up, he claimed, because putrefaction often had a tonic effect, especially if one took a good bath afterwards. "As a rule I change my friends just like my socks, because it's cleaner," he declared.

Then he came to the subject of Paul Denis' death, only to denounce the fuss that his precious friends were trying to stir up about it. In reality, he explained, it had all had nothing at all to do with the defence of the Negroes, nor with any of this decadent romanticism which was no more modern than the steam engine. Paul Denis had committed suicide for a woman's sake, as everyone knew ; it was only not admitted because some people thought that kind of thing out of date. And indeed it was out of date, just like the fashion for postcards, performing fleas, and so forth, which prevailed in those sham-modern circles, among these belated aesthetes of the symbolist movement. But Denis was merely a victim, a weak character who had fallen under the influence of the Pigalle group. That sort of thing wasn't wanted, any more than the art that reflected that concerted onychophagy. Here was the chance to make a clean sweep of all the avant-garde that was a breeding ground for it, and of Picasso as well. (Zamora loathed Picasso particularly.) Cocteau was dragged into it also, just to make it more complicated.

Finally the article raised the question : "Who is the mysterious woman ?—if it isn't indiscreet to ask !" While he appeared to act the gentleman, Zamora revealed in passing that he knew the lady very well ; she was a rather extraordinary person whose portrait he had painted, and she had lived at Giverny for some time, together with the dead man. That gave him the opportunity to make a dig at Monet in passing. These young men were obviously still infatuated with nymphs and all that Bernheim painting.

According to Zamora, "everyone knew" that for a long time past it had been Bernheim himself, who painted with

not more than average talent under the name of Georges Villiers, who was responsible for the production of the paintings he sold, although they bore such signatures as Monet, Degas, Matisse, K. X. Roussel, and so on, according to what he happened to be feeling like. Personally, Zamora saw no harm in that; as a matter of fact he very often got Mrs. Goodman to paint his pictures for him, so he didn't mind if Bernheim wanted to manufacture Zamoras. The conclusion was that to find a way out of this situation what was necessary was a new art, rather like Zamora's own, with pictures that would be bright as new pins, all nickel and electro-plating and beautiful condensed milk babies. Away with the shades of cubism, impressionism and, worst of all, fauvism !

In the midst of all this Menestrel's manifesto appeared, too late, however, to take stock of that idiotic, infuriating article. It was enough to make the group tear their hair.

Frederic Sicre was wild with rage at the way Paul had been treated. " And the worst of it all, I beg you to note, is the attempted seduction of Bernheim. The dirty bastard thinks he has a hope of getting the most unapproachable of all dealers interested in his painting. As if Bernheim would take any notice of him ! "

M. Jean-Pierre Bedaride descended on the He Saint-Louis with a great bundle of papers : the dailies, the weeklies, and the manifesto. He also had a companion, whom he treated with the utmost deference. This was a man of about forty, wearing striped trousers, a dark grey jacket, and a straw hat; his angular face was clean-shaven, his hair already turning grey, and he looked like an actor from the Latin Quarter, gesticulating consciously with heavily be ringed hands. This was Arnaud de Pfister, the novelist, *the* de Pfister. He was a great psychologist, and that was what was needed in this case.

" You will realise why I have brought Arnaud de Pfister

along," M. Bedaride said, removing his raincoat. " This affair must be cleared up. I have the greatest confidence in the author of *The Beast with a Hundred Faces*." He bowed to M. de Pfister, who waved his rings about as though disclaiming any right to the compliment. " Don't protest, my dear sir ! You know I have great confidence in you."

The unfortunate Aurelien found his flat invaded by these two mad-hatters and his table piled high with papers. He was caught. There was M. de Pfister flinging back his long hair and rubbing his hands as though he were washing them. The novelist hated Menestrel and his friends, so that the affaire Denis and the contradictory opinions that prevailed about it were a unique piece of luck for him. His attitude to the master of the house was extremely caustic; he was convinced that Leurtillois must be one of those ridiculous avant-gardistes, like all the dead boy's friends. This led to endless misunderstandings, and when Aurelien, not without difficulty, succeeded in disillusioning him, the expert in psychology changed his tone, although he was still ill-humoured. Aurelien had to put up with a lecture on the unconscious, the conscious and the sub-conscious, not to speak of pan-sexuality—pan-sexuality, my dear sir ! Did they want that sort of thing in France ? It was all right for the constipated Anglo-Saxons or the frigid Germano-Scandinavians. M. Bedaride shook his head, he thought this was wandering somewhat from the point. What he would have liked to know was why, if Paul was in love with a society lady, he had gone to his death for the Negroes, as they said he had, but in fact in order to save a Yank's skin. People had been telling the sorrowing mother such stories. . . .

Arnaud de Pfister cut him short. He was strongly in favour of throwing all the—he didn't want to call them the *works*—of these young puppies into the garbage bin. Look at what Zamora said ! Not that Zamora was any better than

they were, but after all he knew them, and he was a man with a brain. Drilling was what they needed—one, two ! one, two ! And cold show^{ers} as well, if he had his way.

Suddenly he froze, with a fascinated stare and his mouth falling open. The subtle changes of expression on his face ran through the gamut of the emotions, as one might have imagined Plato on his first entering the ideal world.

" There ! " he said. " There ! " He was pointing at the portrait of Berenice.

Ah, now this M. Leurtillois wouldn't be able to get out of it. It wouldn't be any more use his trying to pretend that he hadn't anything to do with those degenerates.

" You appreciate, my dear Bedaride, the neuropathic character of this drawing ? The hypnotic type, materialisation, drugs, mental asylum ? "

Aurelien felt his temper rising. He was on the point of politely showing them to the door, when the psychologist suddenly saw the light. So this was the mysterious lady! Oh, of course, it must be ! Zamora had done her portrait. It was obvious, here was the picture in the possession of the man who had witnessed the murder. For after all, there was no getting away from it, it was murder.

" He's a marvel ! " M. Bedaride said with a sigh of admiration. " Sherlock Holmes come to life ! "

It was an unpleasant complication for Aurelien. He didn't want to have Berenice mixed up in it. If he had turned the intruders out straight after this observation, he would only have put them on the track ; and so he had to put up with the masquerade for more than an hour longer, a martyr to the worthy author's scatter-brained notions, his hatreds, his posturings, and his craze for psychology.

The same evening he looked up a train timetable, packed his bags, and, having made sure that his passport was still valid, he set out for the Tyrol, where the fall of the crown would enable him to indulge in all the whims that occurred

to him. The main thing was to turn his back on this pack of jackals and not hear any more talk about anything. And then he would be at liberty, he would have a complete change and forget. There are mountain tracks above Innsbruck where one can walk hour after hour with nothing but the sun and the wind, nothing but the sun and the wind. . . .

Nothing but the sun and the wind. . . . In the train that was sweeping him away, the phrase went on repeating itself, like a worn-out gramophone record : Nothing but the sun. . . . But, good God ! it struck him suddenly—he knew this refrain. What was it ? It reminded him of something, but his mind was a blank, he couldn't remember.

Nothing but the sun and the wind. . . .

CHAPTER LXXVII

" JUST think of it ! That insignificant little creature Berenice with Negroes fighting over her ! "

Edmond shrugged. Rose was exaggerating just a shade. But he was relieved to find she could talk about something apart from her theatre ; she was becoming a nuisance about it recently. It wasn't so easy to arrange. First of all one had to find the theatre, then the money ; then it had to be more or less of a proposition, and had to be covered, too, by someone else whose name he could use.

" Well, I don't suppose people will go on for ever killing for my sake," she said regretfully. " Nor getting themselves killed. Is your wife all right ? "

He laughed scornfully.

" Because," she said, " I have a suspicion that you're being unfaithful to me with her. Oh, don't tell me you're not. You've perverse tastes. Hand me my safe."

Yet once again she was packing. She had only just come back from Dax, where she had been taking her annual cure with Jicky, who was the resident doctor for the season. She had left him there. It was the off-season for the Melrose beauty parlour, and three weeks at Dax were an adequate sacrifice to Decoeur. After a few days in Paris seeing Edmond again, she was leaving on another trip. This time she was taking Edmond with her, to Sweden. It was the first time that Edmond had gone on a tour with an actress; Rose was going to play the Gioconda in Stockholm.

"That chap d'Annunzio," he said, "I can't stand him at any price."

"Oh, he's jealous, the pet! But don't forget about my theatre!"

"Adrien'll look after that while we're away."

"How is he? How's his leg?"

"Oh, he still needs a stick, you know, but he's all right."

"You owe him a hell of a lot," she said. "Not only on account of the little girl, the poor mite. But you can imagine you'd have had to face the music from your wife if the kid had been run over. My word, what a bore that would have been! I'd rather not think about it."

Their liaison had undergone a change, perhaps as a counter-balance to their separation in the winter. It had become settled, and they had drawn closer together. Edmond was gradually losing all contact with Blanchette, whose attitude was very calm now; and he was bored with her; she no longer asked any questions. In Sweden the month of August was glorious. And Rose discovered a young man who was crashingly beautiful, though perhaps a trifle flabby, and who fell in love with her. What was more, he owned all the matches in the country. He offered to buy her the Comedie des Champs-elysees, a theatre which was very much in the public eye in Stockholm since Jean Berlin's

Ballets Suedois. They could hitch up with Rolf de Mare who would use the large hall in the Opera.

" Let me tell you, my sweet/' Edmond said, " if you like him, go to bed with him—I don't give a damn about it. But if you take his money, it's all over between us. I don't intend to be made a laughing stock/'

" How perfectly silly you are ! " she said, kissing him. " I like you. Besides, one isn't unfaithful to a man who has such beautiful luggage."

A fat lot Barbentane cared about his beautiful luggage ! But he did wire to Adrien Arnaud, telling him to take steps to get the Gymnase, if Bernstein wasn't taking it. There was nothing else for it. The Gymnase was even better than the Comedie des Champs-filysees.

Anyway the attractive young match manufacturer wasn't a proposition to be taken to bed. And then there was Norway, too.

Rose Melrose was an actress, and an actress had to have been to Norway. Ibsen, you know. . . . So they did the fjords. Adrien wrote to say that things weren't going too well in the syndicate ; the Palmede group were conducting systematic opposition to the scheme for the filling stations in Paris. Edmond shrugged his shoulders : he could leave that to Adrien, who was well able to manage that sort of business. The syndicate only interested Edmond in so far as it guaranteed him his liberty. Once it began to interfere with his liberty—to hell with it! He wasn't one of the money-grubbing sort. In the meantime Adrien said nothing about the Gymnase. Well, if they couldn't get the Gymnase, it would be just as well not to turn up their noses at the Comedie des Champs-Elysees.

" But I thought Ivar wasn't a proposition for bed, darling ? "

" Not a proposition ! I'm not as interested as all that! "

While they were at Narvik they received a letter from

Mary, a mixture of talk about the Melrose perfumes and her grief over Paul's death. She also mentioned, rather more than seemed necessary, that young musician, Jean-Frederic Thingummibob, who had been the dead boy's dearest friend. Probably she was sleeping with him.

But the doctor's letters to his wife were heart-rending. Rose wanted to go home, to clear up the position about the Gymnase and give her poor Jicky a few days, since it seemed only right. That beastly Edmond, though, his luggage was superb !

" I say, you know, you don't give a chap any peace. You don't think about anything any more except your theatre."

" And my husband. I'm worried about him. Anyway, what do you think I am ? You can't have it all your own way. I've my career to think of."

" How about the Melrose beauty parlour ? Doesn't that count at all ? It ought to be keeping your Jicky busy enough."

" I don't say that it doesn't count, only I'm not cut out for being merely a trade-mark on scent bottles."

When they came back in September Blanchette was not at the flat in the rue Raynouard ; she had taken the children to their villa at Biarritz. Rose kept Decoeur trailing about everywhere with her. The fellow never stopped quoting figures. The beauty parlour was doing very well, even too well. The holidays, and the season at Dax, apparently hadn't diminished the terrific turn-over, and they were so besieged with orders that they needed to mobilise more capital. People simply didn't realise what it was like! The Gymnase business began to be complicated. Edmond would have felt easier in his mind about something smaller, but Rose made a scene at the mere suggestion. Summer in Paris was hard on the nerves, and it was especially trying for Edmond when he discovered that a disgruntled body of the shareholders of Taxis Limited were insisting on seeing

the books, trying to poke their noses into all sorts of things that didn't concern them, and making a fuss about the various subsidiary companies, even talking about capitalisation.

" I shall go mad if I stay here. You take charge of everything ! " Edmond said to Adrien. " By the way, how's the leg ? "

After that he dropped business almost entirely. He dashed off to Biarritz, where he found the children grown and their mother's attitude remote, torpid, as though she were going about in a dream.

At the casino play ran high, and Edmond's luck was in. Diane de Nettencourt was there cutting a dash at the tables, magnificent in her beauty, with Schoelzer never far away. Gossip reported that she was going about a lot with a toreador. Rose, who had taken a room at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, ran into Edmond and was annoyed with him for gambling.

" You won't buy me a theatre, but here you are chucking your money away. You certainly have real cuckold's luck. But not the way you think ! "

He spent a week with her at Saint-Jean. Blanchette took no notice of anything. But the crowds were terrific ; one could hardly stir hand or foot, and there was Spain so very temptingly near at hand. Rose had her moments when she went quite Barres: the Basque country was delightful, but it had its disadvantages. How did Edmond feel about Toledo ? They went to Toledo, where she bothered him perpetually about the Gymnase. In desperation he showed her the letters he was receiving from Adrien. All sorts of things were going wrong, Palmede was making trouble, enquiry was being held into the affairs of the taxi corilpany, and God alone knew what else.

" I'm no business woman," she said. " I don't understand anything about it."

After that they wandered off into Andalusia.

It was the very beginning of October when they descended on Cordova, and the toldos were still stretched across the narrow streets. It was marvellously hot weather, with evenings of almost Mexican luxury, when the air was filled with the scent of the orange trees and everything was so romantic : the high-walled, invisible gardens, and the men leaning up against windows, their hands on the bars behind which one could imagine their sweethearts, and the duenna always at the girl's side.

" Honestly," Rose said, " if I only knew that it was going to be all right about the Gymnase, I think I should be perfectly happy."

Suddenly a telegram arrived, recalling Edmond to Paris. Blanchette was asking for a divorce.

" What's come over her ? I'll fix it up somehow. You stay here if you like, but I must clear off."

" Oh, how sad ! I should love to go to Cadiz—and to Seville. I told you your wife was just the respectable good wife and mother type, didn't I ? A nice mess we'll be in if she drops us."

" You leave it all to me, I'll see to everything."

" Don't forget the Gymnase ! "

She might well talk about the Gymnase. Apparently it was, in fact, the Gymnase that had finally turned the scales. How had Blanchette got wind of it ? For she was not only asking for a divorce, she was also having investigations made into Edmond's affairs, allegedly for the children's sake. And how cunning she had been ! When she had seemed not to be caring about anything, at Biarritz, she had actually set detectives on his track; and at Saint-Jean-de-Luz he had paid Mme Melrose's hotel bill and occupied the room next to hers, besides which there was the evidence of the servants. Not to speak of the fact that he had just come back from Sweden. They had been seen together in Spain. What a bitch she was, pretending to have just this minute discovered

what was going on! It was her money she was after, of course, Edmond's lawyer told him that he had been very careless.

Barbentane dashed off to see his father. Did the minister realise what an uproar the papers would make about this divorce if it became public? And there were the taxis; and the revenue department beginning to fuss, as a result of the stupid way the shareholders had behaved; and Palmede. . . .

"What's Palmede got to do with it?" the senator asked. He scolded his son for not having listened to all the warnings he had issued. It was no good waking up to the situation now.

"Palmede, my dear boy, is a party member. We voted together at the last Congress. Radicals have got to stand by each other, you must realise that."

He wasn't to be shifted from this position. What His Excellency found most deplorable about the whole thing was that the police were so sloppy in their work and his daughter-in-law could ask for a divorce without his being informed of it at once.

"I shall make a complaint to the Home Office," he said. "And how is Mme Melrose?"

Good lord! Edmond had forgotten all about the beauty parlour. If they got hold of that business as well, he was in the soup.

"And you're chairman of the directors," he said to his father. "Don't forget that!"

The senator shrugged his shoulders. He would see Poincare about all this.

The last straw was that Adrien wasn't in Paris. The rue Pillet-Will was very depressing in the autumn. Simoneau couldn't cope with the situation; he was an excellent clerk, confidential secretary and all that, but when anything cropped up outside the usual routine, he had no initiative at all. The office was in a state of turmoil and dismay; and Mile Marie had red eyes. Edmond plunged into the study of

mountains of papers. Was Simoneau sure at least that a certain deal they had made last year wasn't traceable ? No, Simoneau wasn't sure of anything. And the Melrose beauty products musn't be forgotten. He would have to see Mary, and Leurtillois, and what's-his-name, that old buffer of Rose's, the painter. . . .

Mary was having an idyllic love-affair with Frederic and had followed him to London, where he was giving a recital. Old Amberieux couldn't be found, for the very good reason that he had had the same idea as Aurelien and decided to take advantage of the foreign exchange rate, by going to pick up the threads again with long-lost friends in Munich. They had been separated long enough by that lousy war. Edmond did not regret their absence ; it simplified the social aspect. So he would have to manage without them. It was to be hoped there was no hitch at the Melrose beauty parlour. He called Simoneau and gave him a telegram for M. Arnaud at Serianne. It was Serianne where he said he was going, wasn't it. Right. Then he wrote to Rose, telling her to come back : it wasn't the time for spending money in all directions. That reminded him again: the beauty parlour ! He went along there and found Mile Agathopoulos with a carbuncle on her cheek, which was certainly an original way of advertising beauty treatments. The accountant explained to Edmond that a hundred thousand francs were needed for the expiry date on the fifteenth. People weren't paying their bills. Very nice ! As for Decoeur, he was drinking like a fish. Now that the season at Dax was over, he wouldn't have Rose to himself again for another year. He asked Edmond what he had done with his wife, and his tone was a ghastly mixture of arrogance and humility. Oh, it was marvellous to be in Paris ! If only Aurelien had been there, at any rate, that would have been a way of passing the evenings, with a quiet chap like that in front of whom one could just say what one was thinking. But that was off,

too ; Leurtillois was travelling in Germany. After he had had his fill of mountains, he had come down from the Tyrol into the Salzkammergut, and from there to Vienna, and so on to Berlin ; and at the rate at which the mark was falling, he wouldn't be back so soon, either. He sent his friends picture postcards, coloured ones. Edmond had found three or four at the flat.

A nice mess ! He took the train to Biarritz, but Blanchette had already left. She had gone to Antibes, to seek the protection of her step-mother. It was enough to make a cat laugh—Blanchette at Carlotta's ! Or at least, not at Carlotta's, but next door, in the bungalow they had had built for themselves. Well, if she was with Carlotta, it wasn't so bad ; he would have someone on his side. The journey from Biarritz to Antibes was simply hellish, with all those changes, and those damnable south-western trains. He thought it would never end. If only he had had the car ! Edmond spent the whole of the journey working out figures ; the more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that he was lucky to have Carlotta. Only as it turned out, Carlotta was having a holiday in Egypt. As soon as she had seen her step-daughter and the children installed in the bungalow, she had dashed off. Oh well, now for the great scene with Blanchette ; there was no getting out of that. He took a room at Juan-les-Pins and then went to the hair-dresser for massage and to have his nails attended to. Juan-les-Pins was in the throes of the high wind that blew in October. Edmond lost ten thousand francs at the casino, just to show that he wasn't funkling the big jump ahead. He gave himself twenty-four hours' grace before going to see Blanchette. Friday slipped by. He was no longer sure of himself.

CHAPTER LXXVIII

IN the summer cool air filled the hotel, with its thick walls that had been built against snow. Aurelien wandered through the shady corridors, between white-washed walls. The place was reminiscent of a convent, or of a caravanserai. Napoleon's troops had camped in the neighbourhood, and a marshal had made this his headquarters. It was set in the midst of the little town, in the dip of the street that went uphill in each direction, and it was crowded out, crawling with foreigners. Leurtillois spoke to no one. He was irritated by the tactless way these people behaved, pulling out wads of notes and brandishing ten thousand crown notes in the servants' faces. As a matter of fact, the servants didn't care much one way or the other. On the whole, there was no shortage : they had milk, eggs, fruit and quite a lot of meat. In the towns, according to what people said, it must be terrible. But the country was different; in the country one could always manage somehow. And the scenery was enchanting—little hollow valleys with rushing streams, green hillsides, and here and there those churches so different from the churches at home, with their almost oriental steeples, a rustic baroque. And the wooden houses, too, low-lying under their slanting roofs. The people were neat, quiet, and mild-mannered. Aurelien enjoyed returning their *Grilss Gott!* when they passed him on the road. It was impossible to believe these people could have been one's enemies.

Above Steinach, Leurtillois made the standard expeditions, which took several days. In spite of the hotel-keeper's horrified warnings and advice, he went out without a guide, following his own instinct and spending his days in those blunt, rocky, untamed mountains where the tracks were hardly visible or there was no track at all. He went straight

up through the forest, making the difficult climb to the first barren spurs that led to the peaks. He would set out before dawn, so as to reach the edelweiss meadows when the sun was only just over the horizon ; there, after three hours of climbing, he would turn round to look down on the interlocking valleys, as far as Innsbruck to the north and away to the south to where the Dolomites lay. Here on the roof of Europe he felt he could almost see Switzerland and Italy. This was where the great, lonely freedom of the heights began.

From here Aurelien would walk and climb, recking little of the dangers a climber knows of, hatless, bare to the waist, his skin so tanned that it was almost black, except where he had peeled after the early days of too strong sun, and with his shirt knotted on to his walking-stick. He had set his heart on keeping as close to the open sky as he could. Heedless of the screees, and against the advice of the hotel Baedeker, he would go along the crest of this mountain, or that one yonder, or a third ; in those parts the tops of the ranges are as narrow as a knife-blade, and here and there they turn into battlements so that the climber can only cross them through a chimney where the least sound loosens great rocks that come tumbling down. Their sharp angles conceal all sorts of surprises : he is suddenly confronted by, say, another watershed, a valley like a trench in the mountains, an abyss where a shining torrent goes frothing downwards, twisting like a snake, to disappear into the forest far below. Then there is a wilderness of rocks, an enormous crater, desolate as purgatory. Back to the crest the climber goes, to the dividing line between two worlds, falling four thousand feet on this side and three thousand on the other ; and he walks on, with a hollow universe spread out under his feet and the huge sun blazing over it all, casting the shadows of the peaks down into those gigantic dips. Soon he even forgets the heat beating down from the sky, for the touch of the air is so keen

on his skin and the shade seems fitting only for those down in the plains, unworthy of one who has come so high. He is drunk with the mere fact of walking, of straining his muscles and overcoming obstacles, and, being among mountains, he too gains in stature. What strength a man has when he is utterly alone ! He even has the strength to cease from thinking ; and he has drunk such long draughts of this landscape, a slave to his eyes and to this pure world of other dimensions, that it takes the place of thought and becomes his only passion, so that it seems to be dictating the man's steps and the beating of his heart and the flow of his ideas. Every step he takes has to be calculated and all his muscles must be wide awake. The guides claim that one must have been born in the country in order to make one's way from that mountain region to those places there below, which are generally reached by taking a long way round, not by coming along the crest. But that was sheer nonsense, just to make one believe they were indispensable. So Aurelien thought.

On this side of the mountains there were few shelters. The next place was the chalet, the only one in sight, where one could rest after four or five hours of walking. There would be tourists there ; peasants who would consent to yodel, to the great delight of the Englishwomen ; priests with athletic clubs in tow ; and young men who regarded their climbing in the light of a trade union and were to be seen here and there in little groups, half-naked, fair-haired and bronzed, with medals hanging round their necks. These last were *Naturfreunde*. Then there were others, who had their wives with them and carried rucksacks ; they were just like the pictures of Germans in comic papers. There were also men of the schoolmaster type, whose distinguishing characteristic was that they didn't say *Gruss Gott* in passing, as everyone else did. They went about in shirt-sleeves and were evidently members of socialist organisations.

Night had usually fallen by the time Aurelien came back

down into Steinach. He would dine alone in the big room that was by then almost empty, with only the last tourists finishing their dessert. In the next room the younger people were playing the gramophone.

But one evening he came back much earlier than usual, about six o'clock, because a storm had been threatening, though later it had passed over ; he was nearly in the village when he saw an absurd couple coming down the gentle slope opposite. They were outlined against the gold of the setting sun, like something in an operetta. The man was got up as a Tyrolean, with bare knees, wide braces, waistcoat open to show an embroidered shirt, and the regulation hat with the feather ; he looked so French that it was too good to be true. He was in his forties, with a little moustache and pink cheeks, and he had a black Skye terrier on a leash, a long-haired rough animal with pointed ears, which resembled a caterpillar. The big alpenstock in the other hand completed the picture of this gentleman. The woman, in her black flowered dress and straw hat, bought complete in Innsbruck, was no more convincing as a country lass than he was as a mountaineer ; she wore eye-shadow and nail varnish. But she was a tall, lithe, good-looking girl, and she skidded about gracefully, digging her heels into the screes.

Leurtillois wondered where he had seen these people before. They couldn't possibly have been further than a quarter of a mile from the village, that was pretty clear. Suddenly they began waving to him, swinging their arms in the air and calling out. There was no doubt about it, they were calling Aurelien. It was the Floresses, those neighbours from the quai d'Anjou whom he had met at the Montmartre fair with Cusse de Ballante. It was all up with his solitude.

He found it almost impossible to avoid them. They had rented a peasant's house, which they had decorated in the same style as their clothing ; they had two servants from among the local girls ; the dog sat up and ate at table ; and

they were bored to death. They knew no German, and Mme Floresse made herself more or less understood by means of gestures.

" You know, Leurtillois," her husband said, " astounding, honestly, price of things. Mere joke, couldn't let bargain slip through fingers. Living in our eyes, everything a picture, memory for later on. Moment in one's life." His style was almost telegraphic. He owned a thumping big paper business in the centre of Paris, but all the same, he was fed up.

Aurelien was well aware what was going to happen. It was plain as mud. He did everything he could to dodge them, but what it came to was that he slept with Regine Floresse because there was no way of getting out of it. But he didn't like that hole-in-the-corner kind of little affair; he had never liked it, and he was glad of the open air and sky. Afterwards he could always go out and climb. He made several trips lasting two or three days and reached the glaciers above the valley, climbed up the Brenner to the Italian frontier, and chatted with the bersaglieri on guard. Here for the first time he really felt it was true that there had been a war. He had quite stopped thinking about Berenice.

Gradually, however, he felt his mind growing more and more uneasy. It seemed to date from the time when he had first been landed with the Floresses. God knows he did everything he could to wear himself out, but there were still the long drawn-out evenings in Steinach and the still burning magic of the nights. Then he would set out to battle with the heights again, starting at dawn. Climbing was the only thing that gave him any satisfaction. But it was queer; it was as if there were a gap soitiewhere, where something had been broken ; the scenery was no longer enough to fill his thoughts. He would find himself thinking of a little French town, the county town of a south-western *canton*, with its dusty streets exactly like the streets of any

other little country town, and a chemist's shop in the high street. And before his eyes drifted visions of the evenings, when people were going home from work and for ten minutes the high street was crowded, Berenice passing by, a group of men raising their hats to her. " Madame Morel! Good evening to you, Madame Morel! "

Abruptly he turned and looked around him. There was nothing but the sky, the rocks, and far away below, in the depths of that treeless, ragged maze, a tiny monastery no bigger than a handful of chick-peas. In local legend it was associated somehow with Charles V, but no one knew why.

Well, he decided, he must go and tell Regine they would have to break it off, on account of Floresse. She would have a good laugh at him for his scruples.

She did laugh. " Don't be an idiot, Aurelien ! Now come and tell me what you think of my latest acquisition."

It was a seventeenth century church painting of the Garden of Olives, almost black with age. It was but another addition to the already vast number of things the Floresses had bought: primitive peasant art, saints painted on glass, old chests, earrings, and so on.

" I wonder if we shall have any difficulties with the customs ? " Gontran Floresse said. " Apparently the Austrians have taken draconian measures to see that one doesn't get anything out of the country."

" That would be the last straw ! " Regine exclaimed, furious at the mere idea. " Have we paid for the stuff, or haven't we ? Well then ! If it belongs to us, surely we can do what we like with it."

Gontran's diffident attempts to make his wife realise that property is a relative idea, depending on changing circumstances, remained quite futile.

" And I mean, after all," she cried, " we won the war, didn't we ? "

It was the first time Aurelien had heard this expression

used by a woman, and it gave him a queer feeling. All the same, he didn't approve of his countrymen's essays in the gentle art of looting. He wasn't exactly proud of them.

Then one morning, taking his favourite course along a mountain ridge north-east of Steinach, he wandered some way off his course and found himself—bare to the waist as usual, the wind blowing on his skin, and his bundle slung over his shoulder, with two sandwiches in it—alone face to face with ten or eleven Germans. They were real Germans, all fawn and green. Several of the women, when they recognised this sunburnt tourist as a foreigner, shook their fists at him and shouted that he and all his like ought to be turned out of the country. A moment later, while the men were whispering to the women, calming them down, Aurelien had to pass them all on the narrow path between two precipices, quite aware that a push in the back would send him over the edge to the rocks a thousand feet below. He felt he must be looking very hang-dog and precious little like someone who had just won a war. The worst of it was knowing that in their place he would have felt the same ; and the Floresses weren't exactly the people to make him think differently—far from it. But this kind of incident was very rare. The Austrians themselves could hardly have been nicer.

He was in some financial difficulty, for his monthly cheque was late; the bank had done something silly, and all the time the crown was falling. It wasn't serious ; he could still manage. But he accepted the Floresses' invitation and moved into a spare room in their house. It was a vast house ; and the only expense he was to them was sending the sheets to be laundered. Besides, Regine would have been very hurt if he had refused.

Nevertheless, when a letter came from Uncle Blaise, he couldn't help feeling like Livingstone when Stanley's caravan loomed on the horizon. The old man was going to

Munich and had come round via Innsbruck in order to see Aurelien ; but he wanted Aurelien to meet him, for Steinach was too far out of his way.

It was delightful to meet them at the station and see his uncle and Aunt Martha just the same as ever. They hadn't changed a bit. How well Aurelien knew that old suit of twilled silk that Blaise trotted out every year when the weather became really hot! And his aunt was the same familiar figure, in her grey tailor-made and black straw hat, and a big bag with her knitting in it.

" You're just the same as ever, Aunt Martha. Just the way you used to be when I was small and we used to come with the pony, with mother."

" You're black as a nigger, laddie," she said in her husky toper's voice. " But this is no place for us."

She had got a bad fright. The night before there had been some kind of demonstration at the memorial to some Tyrolean patriot who had borne arms against Napoleon, and a number of the tradespeople had shut up shop as a protest against the presence of so many foreigners.

" One almost gets the impression that we're not popular here," Aurelien sighed.

" I don't see what they can have against us," Martha said.

Aurelien shrugged, but his uncle explained :

" There were a few fireworks in the town last night."

It was always the same thing. People simply didn't think ; they just acted on what their bellies told them. Aurelien said there was no difference between France and Germany ; it was all the same, people were crassly materialistic. But for the moment it was very nice to be among friends, for an evening—or could they stay a couple of days ? Definitely they must stay till the day after tomorrow ; he wouldn't let them go before that.

CHAPTER LXXIX

" TAKE it from me, sonnie, you're wrong."

Blaise was sitting at the edge of the terrace, dashing off lightning sketches. Aunt Martha took almost no part in the conversation ; she was absorbed in her broderie anglaise tray-cloth, with its lace edges hanging down from the round yellow frame on which the work was stretched, and green and black oilcloth underneath, full of needle holes.

" I tell you you're not being fair. Menestrel's really clever—though it doesn't matter a hang whether he is nor not, because he's got something better than cleverness. People like him turn up in every generation. I don't mind admitting that they're often surrounded by a gang of very queer fish. I remember, for instance, in the old days, with the symbolists—oh, I admired some rum chaps in my youth. I can't help laughing when I think about it now. Still, Menestrel amounts to something, my boy, Menestrel—well, you'll see some day."

How had they come to talk about Menestrel, here in this vast landscape, in this blaze of light ? They had taken the funicular up to that immense terrace from where they looked down, not only on Innsbruck, but on the whole valley of the Inn, until they even imagined they could see the Danube valley in the distance. Aunt Martha and Aurelien had ordered beer, but Blaise insisted on having a big glass of milk.

" Personally," Aunt Martha said, " I don't understand a word of the stuff those people write. But if your uncle thinks it's good, there's bound to be something in it. I've often noticed, when no one cares a damn about a painter or a writer, and your uncle wags his head like that—there, just look at him, will you !—sure enough, ten years later it's all the other way round. The people who don't know anything

about these things have all gone mad about the fellow, and my Blaise can't say anything bad enough about him."

As a matter of fact, Aurelien didn't care a hoot about Menestrel. What he was really concerned with, though no names were mentioned, was Paul Denis. The boy had made a wound in Aurelien's heart, and then turned the knife in it; it hurt even now that he was dead. Perhaps it was an unworthy emotion, but Aurelien couldn't very well help that; it was just the way he felt. He was getting to the point where he could forget Berenice, but the death of that boy Denis still troubled him. It was so senseless, and perhaps for that very reason all the more bitter, all the harder to forget.

"I wish you could have been there, Uncle, when the worthy Bedaride turned up with his worthy friend Pfister. It was sickening the way they went on asking questions. Not that there was much to choose between them and Menestrel's little lot, with their post-mortem. Simply nauseating! When I think that little what's-his-name Sicre, their precious Freddy, has taken up with the widow Perseval—it's enough to make a cat laugh! But tell me. . . ."

He looked embarrassed. Blaise urged him on, with encouraging words.

"Well, I thought—you haven't ever—I mean, she—Berenice hasn't ever written to you, has she?"

Oh yes, she had written two or three times. Nothing very much, just a bread-and-butter letter and then some news from home. Not a word about Aurelien. Once she mentioned her husband: *Lucien has been quite perfect. . . .* That was all.

Ah. . . . Aurelien was very thoughtful for a while* He had something on his mind and he was tired of keeping it all to himself. He had thought about it countless times, and sooner or later he would have to tell someone. It might as well be Uncle. He glanced at his aunt, whose presence

embarrassed him slightly, although really it wasn't as blunt as all that—even if it was an intimate matter, who cared ?

" It's like this," he said and then there was a long pause. " It's like this. The night he was killed, the Denis lad told me something. . . . Oh, he would have done better if he'd held his tongue. It makes you realise the sort of creature he was. That's what makes me so wild, to think she could confide in a guttersnipe like that. Women are crazy."

" None of your cheek about women !—" Aunt Martha screeched.

" Don't interrupt him," Blaise said severely. " What were you saying, laddie ? I get the impression that you're beating round the bush."

" H'm ? No, it's only—well, it's rather a revolting thing to repeat. And he may have been making it up, anyway."

" You're being rather a bore."

" Sorry. Well, it was the night he was killed. I don't know how he came to say such a thing, but he told me that Berenice said. . . . They were in bed, I imagine. Sorry, Auntie ! "

" What is all this about ? " she cried. " You needn't put on side with me. Well, they were making love, that's what you mean, is it ? "

Aurelien reddened under his tan. Then he went on slowly :

" Suddenly she said to him—and I think these are the exact words, anyway, they're the exact words as he said them to me—' *You can't imagine how wonderful it is with a man who has two arms.*' " He broke off, and then he murmured once more: " *You can't imagine.* . . . " He was overcome by what he had said.

Amberieux was shaking his head. He was shocked, and not without cause.

The silence became ghastly. Beyond, the panorama of the mountains gleamed like a wall where lizards sun themselves.

The old man made a popping sound with his lips, as if in contempt, then scratched his nose. His face was a mass of wrinkles, with freckles mingled with the discolorations of age.

" Pretty rotten form," he grunted, " the Denis chap telling you a thing like that."

The aunt laid her embroidery frame and her needle on her knees and exclaimed:

" Just like men ! Just look at yourselves, you two ! What hypocrites ! Personally, I must say it seems quite a natural thing for the girl to say. Don't goggle at me like that, the pair of you ! It's awful how revolted you are when once in a while a woman happens to say something to the point. And what would you say if I told you what I think wonderful about a man ? You needn't pull a face like that, my dear Blaise. I've completely forgotten whatever it was I can possibly have thought was wonderful about the whole pack of you,"

Blaise changed the subject. She was capable of saying absolutely anything, and Aurelien—well, after all, Aurelien had been brought up rather differently.

" By the way, I've had a letter from this Monsieur Arnaud, you know—that's his name, isn't it ?—about the beauty parlour." He didn't say the Melrose beauty parlour; he shot a glance at Martha, who was plying her needle and muttering that if *she* had been in Berenice's place, poor little wench. . . . Blaise pulled his chair closer to Aurelien's and went on :

" I can't make head or tail of it, but I have the impression—merely an impression—that there's some sort of a hitch."

The hitch, so far as Leurtillois was concerned, was that he had arranged to have his money sent through a bank each month, since travellers' cheques were not valid in Austria, and the thing had been held up so long that by the time he got the money, the crown was worth less than ever. For he was paid in crowns, not in francs, and according to what the

rate of exchange was on the date the money was sent. It was sheer highway robbery.

The waiter who removed the glasses said in perfect French:

"Would you like to order anything else, sir ? " They smiled. Here was another foreigner.

It was not until later, when they were on their way back to Innsbruck, that old Amberieux risked asking the question he had had on the tip of his tongue for a long time :

" Tell me, my boy—was it a very bad business ? At any rate, I hope it's over and done with now."

" Yes, honestly, I think it is. I never think about it. Well, hardly ever. Actually it's funny how much easier it is to get over it than you'd expect. I don't think about it any more, that's all." Aurelien paused sunk in thought, and then went on : " But talking about it brings it on again. It's like those little bits of shrapnel that the surgeon leaves stuck in you. You walk around with them there and you don't notice, until you happen to put your finger on the place. ..."

The uncle gave a little cough :

" Sorry I mentioned it. I shouldn't have said anything."

" It's just as well to check up now and then, to see how one stands. Sometimes it's enough to make one scream, not knowing anything about her any more."

" Why not write to her ? "

" And supposing she didn't answer ? I don't mean to lay myself open to anything ; I'd only be bringing it on myself. And then, if I did, it would start the whole thing up again, in my own mind. I don't know what I want now. The long and the short of it is that the Denis boy separated us well and truly."

" Can't you forgive her for having taken a lover ? "

" No, of course I can't forgive her. After all, I'm just

the same as everyone else. I could have got over it if he'd lived. But being dead like that—that's the thing I can't get past, you see—he's dead, he died for her. The way it seems to me is that I haven't the right. ..."

"That's utter nonsense, and you don't believe it yourself. On the contrary, now that he's dead. ..."

How could Aurelien explain the mental conflicts that had been his only company during those long expeditions in the mountains? His uncle wouldn't understand it in the least. There was that momentary pang that passed off again without really hurting and there was the way he could hurt himself by concentrating on it. The fact was that one fell out of love exactly as one fell in love, by making up one's mind to it; and that realisation was a profound disappointment to Leurtillois. He had come out on the other side of love, with empty hands, and now his life had less significance than ever. He recalled what Dr. Decoeur used to say: "My love is like war—it's war." He had survived his love just as he had survived the war, with the same vague regret and the same stunned sensation of loss. Today, just as then, he didn't believe in the reality of what he had been through, and he felt sickened when he remembered those days in November nineteen eighteen when he had shared everyone else's wild joy at victory. Victory! A pretty sight victory was! He only had to look round, here, in the Tyrol. . . . The Floresse couple were the people to talk about victory.

Any pretext was good enough, so long as it bore him away from the thought of Berenice to something else. What did the future hold for him? A world without honour, a world without love. There was nothing that he could call a justification of his existence. After Regine, there would be some other Regine; there would be winter in Paris, the Russian ballet. . . . Perhaps he could afford to go to the winter sports at Megeve; then there was golf at la Boulie, too, and the spring would come round again. . . . That was what

people called living one's life. Everything that he did, thinking it was for the best, slipped between his fingers in the end. There had had to be les fiparges in order that the Floresses could buy antiques which would be confiscated at the customs. Little Denis had died so that Berenice. . . .

On his return to Steinach Aurelien ran into Floresse right outside the station. When the other saw him he waved his arms and cried :

" Ah, my dear chap, frightfully sorry ! Don't know how to explain, can't imagine what happened. Postman comes, post on table, lots more bills. Just dashing out, peasant offering sell us really remarkable, absolutely remarkable sixteenth century chest—mere song—swindle, of course. Thought there was something for you, couldn't find it afterwards. Asked Regine, hadn't seen anything."

Good God ! Perhaps it had been a letter from Berenice ? What was the writing like ? Gontran hadn't even looked at the stamp ; it was from France, that was all he could say. When Aurelien asked Regine about it, she repeated that she hadn't seen anything and asked him rather sourly if he was expecting a letter from a woman. She must have sneaked it and read it. It must have been a letter from Berenice. But supposing it wasn't from Berenice ? He couldn't write and ask her, that was out of the question. Did he still love her ? What a faint-hearted love it was then, not admitted even to himself, though it seemed that he was doomed to suffer this latent anxiety to the end of his days, just as the incident of the letter had re-awakened it now. A mere trifle, a lost letter, could throw him back into a life he thought for gotten. He must be candid with himself. For a long time his surroundings had taken his mind off Berenice, and now suddenly Berenice sprang to life again ; it might well be because his surroundings wrung the heart, as indeed they did at times, that they brought back other things that wrung the heart. He remembered the evening that Armandine

came, when he had come to the conclusion, definitely, that he loved Berenice ; that was after the day he had spent with Riquet. And then Armandine—she stood for everything he hated to think of, the family, his childhood, the vicious circle from which there is no escape. He had made up his mind to be in love with Berenice. Berenice had made him forget about other people, about life, even about his own life. Then when he wanted to forget Berenice, he had had to summon a whole world against her, a world of towering peaks, the Tyrol with its blazing sun, its solitude and liberty. But it was not so solitary that there weren't valleys where the Floresses turned up, and even on the ridges one was likely to run into tourists and their violent emotions. Gradually this Tyrol, which was meant to be a complete change, had begun to confront Leurtillois with the same questions that Riquet had asked and Armandine had asked, only in another form. Gradually even the air on the peaks was becoming unbreathable. The vision of Berenice appeared again, forming like a crystal in his mind, and once more it was she who made him forget where he was and what he must do next. He must be candid with himself. That was all.

He had had enough of Regine. He couldn't forgive her for the business of the letter. It was awkward to go on living in their house ; but though he could have gone back to the hotel, since his next dividends came along more promptly, that was awkward too. He didn't want to seem to be running away, but he loathed the way Regine was always drifting into his room, on the slightest pretext. Then the autumn came and the weather broke. He announced that he was leaving and made the excuse that his brother-in-law had written to him. Actually his brother-in-law hadn't written to him at all; and instead of dashing off to Paris he went down into the Salzkammergut and from there to Vienna and then on to Berlin. It was an immense relief to have flung off the Floresses.

Now came the whirl of a changing countryside, city after city, wealth and ease on the one hand and misery on the other, and with it all Aurelien's power of doing as he liked. There was practically nothing that he need deny himself, now that money had lost its value and the limits that pleasure had formerly had now receded further and further; all these things blurred the vision of Berenice, clouding it, obliterating it. ...

The fragment of shrapnel he had in his heart had settled again after the instant's touch from Uncle Blaise, and gave him no pain.

In November he was in a cafe on the Nollendorfplatz when the police charged the crowd, right in front of him. Since the war he had seen nothing to equal this violence. The waiters stood on the roofed terrace and looked out, pale and trembling. Inside, the band was playing *Bubchen*. The mokka was drinkable. This was Germany. There were big notices on the walls, in Gothic lettering, and more or less cubist pictures.

"After all," Aurelien thought, "why should I bother my head about it? Victory's always like this. And this time we happen to have won."

CHAPTER LXXX

THE storm broke when judicial proceedings were opened, at the demand of a group of Taxis Limited shareholders. Edmond Barbentane's difficult situation was rendered all the more precarious by the fact that he had had to make way for a commercial lawyer, who not only represented Blanchette's interests but was working against him. Both on the board of Taxis Limited and in the syndicate, if he still appeared

at all it was in the name of Mme Quesnel, whose confidence he still had. Since the divorce became public, people were clearing out as fast as they could. There was no more credit. Even Leurtillois had written him a worried letter from Berlin. Well, for a time at any rate Edmond would still have the money to pay *him*, if no one else. After that, the only thing to do would be to mortgage Saint-Genest. At the beauty parlour Decoeur, with the incomprehensible backing of Adrien Arnaud, had run up such amazing expenses that they had had to call on new capital; and this was discovered, that is to say, Rose discovered it on her return from Andalusia, when she engaged a somewhat dubious character by the name of Mozart, believe it or not, Mozart, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. What was more, this Mozart was a genius too, in his own peculiar fashion. Together with his staff he installed himself in the Champs-Élysées, and they all burrowed into the books, contested the creditors' claims, sacked the employees (beginning with Zoe Agathapoulos), and when they lighted on the monthly payments Barbentane was having made to a certain M. Leurtillois, they raised their voices in screams of protest. There could be no argument about it: if this gentleman was a shareholder, he was entitled to normal dividends and not a penny more. All right then, Edmond had to make it up himself.

There was no more question of a theatre, the Gymnase or any other. Rose must count herself lucky if she got out of it without a flaming scandal. Why on earth had Edmond got her into such a mess? And there was Jicky going round in a dream all the time, going completely neurasthenic. She thought bitterly of the handsome young man at Stockholm: that would have been more amusing than M. Mozart, anyway!

Rose's ingratitude didn't surprise Edmond particularly. He had always known that she was like that, and besides, at

the moment he had other things to think about; he must try to save what crumbs he could. He didn't mind very much having a divorce, for he had had this eventuality in mind for a long time and made his preparations ; he had got a certain amount tucked away. The frightful thing was that Blanchette's agent possessed the most fiendish ingenuity and hit on all the blanket operations and bogus sales, one after the other. It really looked as if someone were giving him inside information. He no sooner had the evidence in his hands than he informed Edmond, through his lawyer, M. Blutel, that he did not recognise this or that, and that if Edmond would not consent to such and such a concession, then action would be taken. Edmond, who was still hoping to save more than a little from the ruins, knuckled under, so that in the end he found himself with his hands tied, forced to take the blame in the divorce proceedings and to throw himself on Blanchette's extremely doubtful mercy.

To his great astonishment, all this time Adrien Arnaud treated him with cool reserve. And this was the chap he had set on his feet, whom he had, in fact, made ! When Adrien came to say that he had definitely decided to leave him, because he didn't wish to be mixed up in all this business, Edmond thought that he was going rather far. To be let down by Rose was one thing—but Adrien ! The friend of his childhood days !

" What do you expect me to do ? " Adrien asked. " I don't approve of your way of going about things, and I don't want to have to give evidence against you, if it should come to that. I know about far too many things in this business and I don't like them. ' After the way your wife looked after me. . . . "

That was the last straw. That was absolutely the bloody last straw. He was siding with Blanchette ! The scene was a stormy one, but Adrian got away with it. And that was all.

A few days later Mme Barbentane's lawyer asked for the

confiscation of property Edmond had acquired under the terms of the separation but thanks to abuses of confidence, since he was in control of his wife's affairs. Edmond didn't even have time to mortgage Saint-Genest. It was only a trifle among so much, but it showed how serious things were. Where was he to turn now ? Really, what was happening suggested very strongly that someone who held all the cards was tipping off the lawyer.

Edmond was staying at the Carlton ; he thought it better form to leave the flat to his wife. He was finding it very difficult to work out how things stood ; before very long he was entangled in a web he himself had woven. And Simoneau was no help to him at all. Simoneau was an old clerk of the Quesnels, and the Quesnel family could rely on him. If Arnaud had stuck to him, at least, it would have made all the difference in the matters he was familiar with, the syndicate, the beauty parlour. Palmede kept up a merciless attack on him. He had to sell the filling stations which had been bought all over Paris and the suburbs, and he sold at a loss ; obviously the buyer was merely a cover man for Palmede. He had to leave the Carlton and put up with the senator and Esther, who lived in the avenue de l'Observatoire in order to be near the Ministry. The senator was not very pleased with the arrangement; he had received unfavourable reports about his son's position and there had been echos in the gossip columns.

One didn't need any great perspicacity to see that ruin was staring Edmond in the face. Poincare took his under-secretary of State aside and warned him that Palmede was behind all this ; Dr. Barbentane would be well advised to reach an understanding with Palmede, who wasn't a bad sort, and a very staunch member of the party. When certain people express opinion, it amounts to a command. The minister went to see Palmede. He found him just as he had been led to expect: by no means desirous of bringing about

the death of the sinner, and even prepared to arrive at a compromise. But the difficulty was that through the syndicate he had interests in common with Mine Blanchette Barbentane, the daughter of that excellent Quesnel; they had even reached an agreement on several points, thanks to the intervention of a very intelligent young man, M. Arnaud, wasn't that the name, with whom Palmede's son. . . . Oho, so that was it, \was it? The rotten little bastard! Edmond couldn't get over it, when he heard the story from his father. This explained everything.

Edmond was not the type to be completely paralysed by such a discovery. On the contrary, it roused him to a fighting mood such as he had not known in those years of ease and luxury. He saw at once that he must go over to the attack, for things were going very much further than he had imagined at first. He would have to make a completely new start. The first thing was to get the divorce over and done with; so he stopped putting spokes in the wheels, as for some time he had been trying to do. He did everything to hurry it along.

And then a telegram from Alexandria brought him the answer to one he had sent: Carlotta agreed to become his wife. That was a considerable victory, for Carlotta's fortune was at least as considerable as Blanchette's. Edmond had visions of his triumph when he returned to the Parisian scene with Carlotta on his arm. What a blow it would be for Blanchette! He was both re-establishing himself and taking his revenge. Now he could meet Palmede on equal terms. There was nothing more to fear; but first of all he must make a clean sweep of the past, for he couldn't decently bring the second Mme Edmond Barbentane a dowry of the debts, entanglements and difficulties with which Blanchette's husband was burdened. He only had to throw everything overboard, the beauty parlour, Taxis Limited, Saint-Genest and all the rest of it, turning it over to the mother

of his children. He wouldn't keep anything but what she had granted him by deed of gift—and just one or two little things that he had managed to snatch from the shipwreck. . . .

Rose was in America, on a tour organised by M. Mozart. The beauty parlour, completely transformed and set up on a new basis, passed into the hands of a certain Dr. Perlmutter and various efficient persons who were organising the export of Melrose cream and Rose-Marie perfumes to Central Europe and the United States. Dr. Decœur was only kept on for form's sake. Aurelien, who had just arrived back in Paris, met him one night at Lulli's, practically maudlin and surrounded by young women of doubtful repute. He was horrified at the change that had taken place in him, and how thin he was, with an unhealthy flush on his cheekbones.

" Won't you sit down and join us ? " the doctor asked.

" Lucette, tell the gentleman to sit down."

Lucette had a pink balloon floating at the end of a string, and someone going past popped it with his burning cigarette.

" Beast ! Beast ! " she cried.

" He's not a beast, Lucette," Decœur said, " he's that young man—let me see, what's his name ? "

Aurelien fled to the bar, where the doctor followed him.

" Well, don't we talk to our old friend any more, Leurtillois ? Or is it something the matter with the ticker ? " He plunged into tremendous tales about Rose's success in New York and M. Mozart's ability as an impresario. " Oh, perhaps you don't know—it's all over with Rose and me. Out—pft ! Amazing, isn't it, such a solid marriage, or at any rate one that looked so solid. Well, it's only to be expected, a rare being like her and a dead weight of a chap like me. It couldn't last for ever. And how's the great love ? It was a great love, wasn't it ? "

He was in a dreadful state, shabby, rather dirty about the collar, with spots on his dinner jacket. What was he living

on ? Suddenly Aurelien was overwhelmed with pity for him. He saw that Decoeur's hands were shaking, and it wasn't drunkenness that made them tremble, either ; the man must be very ill.

" You ought to go home, Doc, and go to bed."

" I can't," Decoeur said. " I've got those girls with me—Lucette. Between ourselves, I suppose you couldn't lend me a thousand francs ? "

No, Aurelien was no longer in the position to lend anyone a thousand francs. He was in a bad enough fix as it was. The Saint-Genest property having passed into Blanchette's hands, Edmond had given him to understand that he couldn't do anything for him ; and the Melrose concern only guaranteed a very small sum annually, the normal interest on the money invested. It all depended on the extent to which Blanchette was likely to recognise purely moral obligations. Edmond himself couldn't give him what he hadn't got. And of course discussing it with Blanchette was a painfully delicate matter.

Aurelien was surprised to find himself face to face with an utterly changed woman, as hard as nails. He hardly recognised her. And she was all the more inclined to be harsh in her treatment of a man with whom she had once thought she was in love, since now she regarded him as an accomplice of Edmond's in an attempt to swindle her. She didn't mince her words ; he was asked to apply to her lawyer. The compromise which resulted, after Aurelien had really believed that all was lost, seemed almost too good to be true ; but it was still not enough to live on, in the style in which he had been living. It wasn't quite half of what the Saint-Genest farmer had sent him the year before. On top of all this, Armandine had begged him not to do anything to offend Mme Edmond Barbentane, with whom Debrest had made a deal about the factory ; she reminded him that Edmond had put money into it. It had to be admitted that Jacques Debrest had treated

his brother-in-law very decently. He had offered him a small job at the factory, which would have made up for the loss of his dividends. Aurelien didn't accept straight away, for he would have had to leave the *lie Saint-Louis* and go and live in *Lille*. He might be forced to do so, but he wanted to think about it.

In the meantime he still hung about in Paris. It was a year since he met Berenice, and it seemed to him that the whole upheaval in his destiny had started then, with that meeting. He was walking in last year's footsteps, and they were the footsteps of the two Berenices. Nothing looked the same any more ; the warmth had gone out of things. One winter followed another. . . . He was no longer in love with this woman, he no longer thought of her day and night; he could have sworn that. But she had left a lingering regret in his life, something of which he would never quite rid himself; and he set himself a kind of penance, going back over the traces of that incomprehensible love and the scenes where they had spent impassioned days. He wanted to arrive at a conclusion, to find out how much had vanished and how barren and stale life would be without that haunting magic in the air. Not for a moment, not even once, did it occur to him that he might be able to find that magic again. He never thought of taking a train and going to find her once more ; for when love was dead, it was dead for ever. Still, the tomb remained, and Aurelien thought to himself that he would always have that corpse of love in his heart, like a wreath of withered flowers. But the times had changed, and no thoughts of love could alter the fact that he had to earn his living; the year nineteen twenty-three looked like being a hard year. He had a lot of trouble, too, shaking off *Regine Floresse*, which was all the worse since *Gontran* had entered into it and wanted to create a triangle situation for Aurelien to cope with. Aurelien wasn't having any ; he had his principles.

At the beginning of February he wrote to his brother-in-law to say that he had thought it over and was accepting the job in the factory.

EPILOGUE I

FAINT touches of dawn outlined the hanging branches, the black leaves. It was not a road, even barely a track through the forest. They had had to pull up among the last trees, and on the right they could see fences round the fields, the upturned, furrowed earth that proclaimed they were not far from the habitations of man. The lorries only just had room to pass between the hedges, an endless broken caterpillar that had come to a stop there, frozen with exhaustion in those first rays of daylight. Officers walked up and down, swinging their arms across their chests, stamping on the ground, going back along the column more from boredom than because they had any duty to carry out. As they went past, faces peered out of the lorries, all of them grey from lack of sleep, an unspoken question in the eyes. The dragoons huddled together under the dropboards, were talking in low, voices, and here and there metal flashed, as a rifle was shifted or a mess-tin. What were they waiting for ? That was what nobody ever knew. Every man followed the vehicle in front, that was all. These night convoys were enough to make one die of boredom, and the worst thing was the slowness. " Don't get out, for Christ's sake ! " a warning voice cried. All the lorries here were flanked by motor-bicycles and sidecars, a kaleidoscope of men and wheels. A cadet was asleep in his sidecar; his nostrils pointing skywards, his mouth open, and his face pale as the morning light. Others were dropping asleep in their saddles, rifle slung on shoulders:

and some were already sleeping as they sat, doubled up with exhaustion. Still more of them were making the most of the halt, here in this road jammed with traffic, by stretching out on their machines as though in a cradle, their heads on the saddle and feet on the handlebars. They were young men, whose steel helmets had been screwed on to their heads so long that they couldn't sleep without them. They were men of leather and metal; and staring into their faces in the dawn light it was startling to see that their beards had grown in the night.

They had been stagnating there for three-quarters of an hour, which was a long time after a whole night such as they had spent meandering on through the darkness. Village after village they had gone through, and a town—what town had it been, did anyone know?—with high walls, and the people who said—anyway, that's what they had said—that the Germans were there; and all the time the racket of unidentified cars at a cross-roads, and losing touch with the others, and the obsession of the little white spot one mustn't lose sight of on the mudguard of the vehicle in front, being continually on the look-out until one was ready to drop, and the road that went on and on like a fever, where no one knew the way . . . driving on without a map, without a light, silently travelling forwards, except when everything came to a halt like this and the halt seemed to last for ever. All that seemed to fade like a dream after so many nights, each the same as the last, and in the morning the brain was clouded with uncertainty. They had lost count of so many things; above all they had lost their geographical sense, for they had gone this way and that across France for so long that they no longer had any idea where they were—nor how many of the boys had got lost on the way. It was to be hoped, anyway, that the tanks were coming up behind. What they were most conscious of was the dust in their mouths and throats.

Faint voices rose into the air. Someone said they couldn't pick up the signal cars any more. Oh well, so long as it wasn't the tanks. . . . Everyone's nerves were strained to breaking point. At a crossing two convoys had become entangled and now no one knew who any one else was ; a squadron had been sliced in two, the medical corps had doubled in size, and who were these medical blokes anyway ? —bastards from the rear. You slave yourself to death and then *they* have to come along and muck everything up. And who was this in the five-ton Renault ? Aha, gendarmes ! What the hell did anyone want the police here for ? And those chaps there ? They didn't belong here, so why come and make more trouble in the column ?

In the staff car that was grey as the rest of the army figures began to stir ; a shoulder slipped out from under a blanket. There were four of them crammed inside. A sallow face peered through the glass, taking a look at the sky, and two men walking past scented an officer and dodged out of the way. The face was almost yellow, with black hair, the forehead already growing bald.

Huddled inside the car, hampered by the boots of his sleeping companions, Captain Leurtillois was feeling very uncomfortable. It was damned inconvenient having a bout of fever in the midst of a show like this. This morning he didn't feel quite so ill, but what didn't help was not having undressed for days, clothes stiff with sweat, a dirty shirt, and no chance of getting one's shoes off. Not a drop in his water-bottle, either. If only they had stopped in that hole of a place where they were going, instead of here in the open fields. By now the head of the convoy might have got there. Being on the move was one thing when you were alone, but a very different matter with a whole division on top of you. Oh, of course, the door didn't open. He remembered that the handle had been fixed with a length of wire. The only thing was to step right over the lieutenants.

" Getting out, sir ? " said Blaisot, who was dozing at the wheel.

" Just going to get a breath of air," Aurelien said.

The chill of the fresh air struck him in the face. It was surprising, too, how hard the ground was. One leg was so numb that his foot almost gave way under him ; pins and needles ran up and down like thousands of little lights prickling. He wasn't as young as he had been. . . . There were men making water in the fields. A little dumpy fellow said with a groan : " What wouldn't I give for a sleep ! " Mechanically Aurelien put his feet down sharply as he had seen the others doing. He shivered.

He might have had himself evacuated, as the major had wanted him to do. But hang it all, he couldn't leave his men, and anyway, he had preferred to cross the Loire with the army. The evacuees were being swept here, there, and everywhere, more or less at random, and each morning people who thought they had gone so far and were well in safety found that they had been left behind.

Aurelien had no inclination to be put on his back in a hospital; it was better to drag along somehow with the remnants of his company. They had hitched up with this mechanised division somewhere outside Angers. They had lost the others. Leurtillois requisitioned a civilian van, himself repaired an abandoned lorry, packed his fifty men into it and—right away there, lads—they were motorised just like these chaps alongside now. When he reported to General T., Aurelien explained the situation to him and they had been taken on as part of the division's impedimenta. Aurelien and his two second lieutenants messed with the M.O.s. They managed somehow—damn it, they had to, it had been going on like this since the Somme. The dragoons had come back from Dunkirk via England, including the medical corps, which had all the real cavalry pride. They had taken the foot-sloggers under their wing. Blokes who fight on

a bit when the Italians joined in, but still, he had spared his family the ordeal of this exodus, along all these terrible roads. Heaven alone knew what had become of Armandine and his brother-in-law. He wondered how much of the factory was left. The fat colonel at staff H.Q. had been saying that there was pretty heavy fighting in those parts. . . . Suddenly he thought of Mary de Perseval; she must have been at Le Touquet, and now she would be fleeing along the northern roads. Poor old thing—at her age ! And all the rest of them. . . . Aurelien was astonished to realise that this was the first time he had really thought about people as individuals and wondered what had become of the people caught in this catastrophe. He hadn't had the time to think about it. And apart from Georgette, there was no one he cared about.

" Morning, Captain ! How goes it this morning ? "

The assistant medical officer, his steel helmet dangling at his belt, and wearing a police cap with a dent in the crown like a British forage cap, was smiling all over his face ; he came from Marseilles and looked like a Chinese. He had been going up along the column. They had stopped, he told Aurelien, to let troop-carriers pass. Afterwards their road was to be the high road. It was still uncertain where they were going ; they had come forty-five miles in order to cut off an enemy motorised detachment, but reconnaissance reported that there was no one there. It was just one more false rumour that had diverted a whole division. " Better take no notice at all," that was Fenestre's view.

Fenestre had also been through the last war, and that was a bond between the two men. He lit a cigarette and said :

" If only we could still get the wireless."

Aurelien shrugged. He didn't like the wireless. " All the same," he said, " the chief M.O. must have had something to go on. We shall have to get a rest somewhere or other."

Fenestre laughed silently. People like you and me, his

mirth conveyed, we know a thing or two, we've been through it all before.

" Funny to think your place was down at base. It'd take a bit of finding now."

" What's the good of talking about base. Anyway, there still are depots. So what does the M.O. say ? "

" Well, this morning we're going to stop at R. and wait for orders."

The numbness in the leg had gone, but Aurelien had a ringing in his head, like muffled, far-off bells, and the shivering was getting worse. So they must have gone round in a circle during this last long night. It seemed incredible. He had thought they were far further south, bearing towards the west. Yesterday he had looked at the *Atlas des bons vins*, an advertisement booklet that Pelissier, the cookie, had dug up at Verneuil; it had been very useful to him since then, with its crude regional maps illustrated with little houses, inns, and vineyards. But since even Michelin maps were a cause of heart burnings to these troops, he was glad to have what he could get.

" R. ? Are you sure, doctor ? "

How could he be sure of anything ? Things like that one only listened to with half an ear.

" Especially with these blokes here, captain ! They nearly muddled us up three times last night. Oh yes, believe it or not, the Fritzes were in Saint-Maixent ahead of us."

" But, doctor, how do you expect a whole division——"

" Don't ask me, I don't expect anything ! They were at Saint-Maixent at six o'clock. We went through about midnight. That's all I know. That tomfoolery yesterday, making us go through Parthenay three times ! It might have been disastrous."

" I thought we were aiming straight ahead for Saint-Jean-de-1'Angcly."

" Yes, we were up till now. Lieutenant Gros had even promised us some cognac from his cellar. He's going to pull a long face when he sees we're bearing east. In that village down there all the local potentates came out to meet the cars. The mayor had his robes on. When they saw we were only French, he was furious. * You're not going to defend the town, are you ?' That's what he said. ' You'll get us all slaughtered.' "

" We won't be stopping there if we're going to be in R. this morning. About how far is it ? "

" Wait a minute. I've made a note of it. Fifteen—let's see—fifteen and six is twenty-one, twenty-one and five is twenty-six. Twenty-six miles. I'm driving myself, my driver keeps falling asleep at the wheel."

Twenty-six miles to R. . . . Now it was no longer something unreal, a fairy-tale place like Ys or Bagdad. Twenty-six miles and then R. . . . There had to be all these upheavals, this defeat, the incomprehensible events of the last two months, this crushed country falling into rack and ruin, this vast chaos, this migration of a whole people, so that Aurelien might come to R. The day before, when he had looked at Pelissier's map, he had seen the name ; there it was, not far away, marked with a sort of church on a hill, with little bottles beside it. He hadn't given a thought to the fact that he was passing so near, just missing this town which had been a beacon in his dreams for so long that he could not believe it really existed. No, it hadn't been on the route they seemed to be taking ; he had thought they were making for Saint-Jean-de-l'Angely, and so it hadn't meant anything more to him than some outlandish town in a distant country. The name R. was marked on the map all right, but that was only what one expected. The names of towns were always marked on maps. That didn't mean one was going through them.

He was trembling with another bout of feverish chill ;

but this time it wasn't malaria. It was his youth that was making him tremble. A whole world had gone down the drain, and now, in the thick of Armageddon, he was going to pass through that imaginary town. Twenty-six miles. With luck, they would be there in two hours, or two and a half.

Suddenly he saw that the people on the road were throwing themselves flat against the banks or into the ditches. Overhead was the sound of an engine. Heads turned towards the sky. There was nothing to be seen ; by now the 'plane must have gone over, flying southwards. Almost reluctantly, the men got to their feet. There was some laughter, and a murmur of voices arose all along the convoy.

Twenty-six miles.

Slowly and gently something was happening in Aurelien's heart: a picture was forming; He did not try to stop it; nor was he impatient for it to be complete. But now he no longer saw the lorries all round him, the motor-cycles, the crowded road, the fields. . . . When Fenestre left him, he stood alone among this jumble of soldiers and vehicles, alone with his dreams, the haze of his dreams. . . .

So it had had to come to this. Only defeat had been able to bring him so far, and now he was going to R. He was going to R., the place he had thought of for twenty years and never seen ; there was no avoiding it now, for he was in the grip of the machine. If he had consented to be evacuated, he would not have been swept along to this place that was his destiny. That, he thought wryly, was what people call chance ! For twenty years he had avoided R., and now, in another couple of hours, he would be there. It was not Berenice of whom he thought, but Georgette. There was nothing to be done about it, for it didn't depend on him and Georgette couldn't blame him for what was happening. And yet it was Berenice who disturbed his mind, and not Georgette, not even R., it was the blurred image of Berenice, and the curve of her lip, and the ambiguous play of her face

and eyes. He was trying to escape her, and at the same time he was uneasy because he couldn't awaken her picture in his memory. Her hair was untidy, uncared for, that much he could remember. But what was that line of the jaw, how did it go ? Strangely, he found himself imagining her near Mme de Perseval, while Rose Melrose was reading Rimbaud, and she was wearing a silver dress—no, not silver—and her arms were like those of a little girl. So much had happened since that evening ; a life had passed by in the meantime, a whole life, and so many people had disappeared from the scene. He didn't know why, but he found himself thinking of Dr. Decoeur and Paul Denis, both of them dead ; war wasn't the only way of dying. And he pursued the thought of these ghosts, as though that would help him ward off the ghost of Berenice. With extraordinary precision he remembered that trampling throng of men, all those footsteps under the trees of the Champs-Élysées, one evening in February, 1934. They were coming up from the left. The greenish bronze statue of Clemenceau scarcely overtopped the heads of the crowd.

Twenty-six miles.

All up and down the convoy men began to whistle. The dragoons leapt into their lorries, which were painted in the colours of spring and autumn. There were shouts, the roar of engines starting up, coughing starting again, the clatter of the motor-cycles ready to start at any moment. . . . A sort of jolting wave passed through the convoy. Fenestre went by at a run.

They were moving on. Somehow or other Aurelien scrambled back in his car ; someone had got the door open for him, and he climbed in among the others. Second lieutenant de Becqueville smiled at him, looking more like a little dog than ever. The blankets were folded all wrong, flung together in a heap, and they were in the way when he tried to sit down. Then they were all jerked as the car went

into gear. What a wreck of a car ! I say, Blaisot, lad, mind what you're doing. . . .

Captain Leurtillois said " Oh ! " as though the sudden start had hurt him, and Becqueville inquired anxiously :

" Are you ill, sir ? "

" What ? Oh, no, I'm all right."

Aurelien didn't seem to know what the other man meant. But he had just seen Berenice opening her eyes.

II

TWENTY-SIX miles, and being so tired, and the fever. . . . Dozing, semi-conscious, Aurelien was haunted by ghosts—and the idea of R. that was so near at hand. Vague, half-forgotten pictures in his mind, floating and dancing like will-o'-the-wisps, were taking him away down into the past. . . . There was Edmond Barbentane in Morocco, with his second wife Carlotta, and their enormous estates and their yacht. . . . Blanchette Arnaud, whose son must be fifteen by now, and one of her daughters married . . . and Adrien in all the avatars of these last years, organising study-groups to promote a better understanding between workers and employers, steeping himself in the Matignon conventions, and then. . . . And the wretched end of Dr. Decoeur. . . . And Rose Melrose, now playing the lady of the manor, financing a home for retired actors, and giving performances of Racine, in mediaeval costume, under the trees of her park in Burgundy. . . . All the characters of the by-gone drama were there, if indeed it had been a drama. And today's drama must have cast roles for them, too.

Now that he was approaching R., Aurelien knew with absolute certainty that his heart had never, never forgotten

Berenice. He had fallen in love with Georgette, and he loved her now. Georgette had never known anything about Berenice, and if it hadn't been for the war and all this horror, he would never have seen Berenice again; perhaps he wouldn't even have seen her again in his mind's eye with such brilliant clarity. For eighteen and a half years he had kept this purest of memories, which had grown purer still with the passage of time. He loved Georgette ; his life was lived entirely for Georgette and the children. But when he closed his eyes, he saw Berenice again. It was his secret; he had never spoken of it to anyone since that conversation with Uncle Blaise at Innsbruck. (Good God, what could have happened to Uncle in this hell ? He must be at least eighty-five.) No, he had never spoken of it to anyone. The plaster mask had lain hidden in the depths of a cupboard, together with the Zamora painting, and no one had ever set eyes on them since. He had kept them both in his own hands when they moved house in 1936 ; and he would have liked to go back to the house now and destroy them, for it was not pleasant to think of a fragment of one's past being left behind for others to see. He loved Georgette, but Berenice was his secret, the undertone of poetry in his life, the thing that had never been quite attained and had never come to an end.

How many times, when he had been faced with a decision, he had wondered what Berenice would think of what he was going to do, and he had always done what he believed she would have thought right. He would not for the world have done anything to lower himself in her eyes. He was afraid of doing anything that would not fit to that high idea of himself which had been her ideal of him, in the legendary story of their love, the legend that almost imperceptibly had taken shape again, floating slowly to the surface of his thoughts, after the break, after the grief of separation had worn away.

He had not met Georgette until a long time later. Geor-

gette was the love of his mature years ; they were married in 1930. But Berenice was the unifying element of his life, his youth, or as much of his youth as survived in his being. When he reflected, he realised that he had not seen her and known her for more than two months ; yet those two months were the whole of his youth and had driven out the remnants of his youth, only to dominate the rest of his life. It was nearly twenty years. . . . When he shut his eyes, Berenice came back to him, an idealised Berenice.

His life. . . . How queer it was, here in this car, packed in amongst the blankets, shaken by fever, looking out of the window at the wide, meaningless landscapes stricken by daylight, with its roads and villages—how queer it was to recall that life which had been so little of his own choosing and so little of his own making ! The Aurelien whom Berenice had known could never have imagined what twists of luck lay in store for him. For Berenice had known him at the moment when the crisis of his own irresolution was being worked out, which was born of the other war. It was strange to think of that again. He sighed to think what a hash they had made of their victory then ; they had seemed to be the winners of the war, and that had been good enough for them. He had expected life to be ready-made for him, as though life could come right automatically. Then the two-fold blow had fallen, the loss of Berenice and Barben-tane's bankruptcy. After that Aurelien had to recast his life on*an entirely new basis ; he had been compelled to look at life through new eyes. His whole attitude had been turned upside-down when he went to work in the factory, with his brother-in-law, where he had soon assumed a position in the management; for once Aurelien overcame his indolence he turned out to be what people call a very capable man. A man who is thrown into the midst of practical problems has to adjust his outlook to the circumstances in which he lives and works. So the factory had put an end to his

dilettantism. There he had given up flirting with alluring notions of the kind it was so pleasant to play about with just because they were dangerous. No more nonsense, eh—no more nonsense !

But no man can live without his little store of illusions ; he needs a dream to help him endure reality. For Aurelien this dream was Berenice. For him Berenice stood for everything that was noble, all the high, proud things of which the mind of man is capable. The thought of her was mingled in all his meditations ; it was from her that he sought counsel, and it was even she who had guided him towards Georgette. But it would have been very difficult to recognise this Aurelien as the same man whom one could be practically sure of running into at Lulli's, about two o'clock in the morning, in the old days. He was an established man, with his wife Georgette, his son and daughter, a position as director of a business that had grown considerably—thanks, it must be admitted, to the financial support of the Arnauds—a man absorbed in his job. No one could trace the path along which he had gone, from that to this, except the spirit of Berenice that lived and moved before his closed eyes. He held conversation with her. . . . In the industrial district of Lille, which had become his home, he had had to cope with problems that were not within his own domain. It was all very well to say to himself that he would have nothing to do with some of the things that engaged other people ; without his having done anything to bring it about, these things would come and seize him by the throat. It was like that with politics. Leurtillois would have laughed incredulously if anyone had told him that one fine night in 1934 he would find himself tramping along under the trees in the Champs-Élysées, together with thousands of others. That evening, that sixth of February, was only the outcome of another illusion, one that must take firm root in a man whose youth had been ravaged by the war. The fact was that he had had no

youth at all, because of the war ; and in such a case it was natural enough to believe in ex-servicemen's movements and to believe that one could shake off all that seemed unjust and rotten in society, merely by uniting with the others, the men with whom one had been together in the trenches. The trouble was that opinions were divided. They didn't all believe in the same things. They were all dissatisfied, but they were in opposition to each other. Nevertheless, Aurelien had come to Paris that day from Lille, along with the others. But everything had broken up in rioting, shots fired, buses set on fire. He couldn't understand it. And even the next day, with the shock of the dead and the feeling that they must have called the whole country into revolt, Aurelien believed that this wasn't the end of it; something would come of it. And then nothing happened, nothing at all. It was as though they were stifled. Later still he lost his confidence in campaigns conducted by licensed organisations, official spokesmen, and the old soldiers' leagues. Different methods were necessary. So he had put his trust in different methods ; but they were never the same for long, and all disappointed him; the political struggle, the electoral struggle, was hopeless in his part of the country. He had listened to all sides, and he belonged to those people who believe the world cannot be changed except by violence. He did not much enjoy thinking back over these last years, which had only brought him to this. Perhaps some good would come of the great evil. . . . For the moment his eyelids were closing over his eyes, and once more Berenice was with him. . . .

What the hell was Becqueville talking about ? " How long do you think this is going on, sir ? If they're going to make an armistice, they ought to make it quickly."

They were just entering a shapeless little town that sprawled in all directions, with a long road leading out of it and up the other side of the valley. It might be the main

focus of the place, but it was more like a caterpillar, with feet straddled out right and left, all these streets they began steering their way through, not very clear about where it was taking them.

" Just look at this, *mon capitaine*" Blaisot said. " Real old antique place, this is. All carvings—and too mucking many people." They could all see that for themselves. The convoy wound its way through road blocks in to a wide square, where trenches were dug everywhere, in front of iron tables and little crooked houses. The lorries backed up on the pavement, lined up close together, and already there were soldiers strolling about, a group of officers here, and there a general crossing the square followed by some of his staff. The civilians were all standing on their doorsteps, as though they were looking on at something that had nothing to do with them. Some Senegalese drove by, piled up in vehicles that had been made for a very different purpose. There was a shouting of orders, and the convoy stopped. Behind the clattering old vehicles came the dragoons. A car coming out of a sidestreet skidded and swung round on its axis. People fell back to get out of the way.

" Where are we ? " Captain Leurtillois asked.

According to Blaisot, it must be R., and Becqueville confirmed the surmise. " This is R., sir."

Now came the job of finding billets.

III

" AH ! Monsieur Leurtillois—or rather, Captain Leurtillois ! I would have recognised you anywhere ! "

The chemist had grown enormous. He was completely bald except for a thin tail of hair brushed over his skull, but

his face was still youthful. His empty sleeve had acquired a look of heroic significance with the passing of the years, from the fact that he now wore some kind of coloured ribbon in his buttonhole.

It was dreadfully hot, and there was too much to look at all at once. Here was Berenice's house, and there were these people, the old lady in the wickerwork chair, a red dog barking, tall green plants. . . . Lucien Morel's shop faced on to the high street and there was a statue of the Virgin at the corner of an alley running down the side of the building. It was an old, high house, with a roof like something out of a picture-book. The young woman in the white blouse, who had curly brown hair and looked almost as naked in her thin, airy clothes as if she had just got out of her bath, led the way through the door in the little narrow alley round the corner into the Morels' private house. They passed through the high doorway into a triangular court, which was as crooked as the rest of the building here, where tall green plants grew in green pots ; the door into the house was shaded by a huge awning, and there too were flowers in big blue-and-white vases, and some deck chairs. Here the group was assembled, the uniforms, the light dresses, and some men in shirt sleeves.

" What is it, Gisele?" the master of the house had asked, stepping forward. His attitude was so proprietary that it was instantly obvious what the relation was between Gisele and himself. It was equally plain that the boney, sallow-faced young man in the checked shirt, who had just stood up, was not at all happy about the intimacy. In one hand he held a number of branches with very green, torn leaves. The old lady must be almost blind. There was Dr. Fenestre, just turning round, and with him two officers from the ambulance corps. They hailed Leurtillois with welcoming gestures. The two other men, who looked as if they had just dropped in on their way, rose and bowed uncertainly.

"Well, I declare!"

It was an old house, probably sixteenth century that had been replastered a good deal. And here in this sheltered court were singing birds in cages—they were only canaries, but to Aurelien's eyes they seemed multicoloured. A cat was playing with the ball of wool that had fallen from the old lady's lap as she knitted. She wore a sky-blue dress and a wide black ribbon round her ruined neck.

The recognition was noisy. Gisele was just slipping away when the chemist called out to her :

" Gisele, just guess who it is ! "

Gisele couldn't guess.

" It's M. Leurtillois—you know, Aurelien Leurtillois."

The bony young man rushed to open the glass door for her, which an unexpected draught was just about to slam.

" Oh, do you know the captain ?" asked Fenestre, thunder-struck.

Fremont, one of the ambulance officers, gave up his cane chair to the new arrival. It was good to sit down. There had been too much to see and too much to hear ; it was as exhausting as listening to someone else's description of a play. Here it all was just as he had imagined it would be, the futile exclamations, the things that had to be explained, the chemist with his double chin, the old lady who couldn't understand what was going on, because she could hardly see, and she had to be told over and over again. " M. Leurtillois ? I don't remember. M. Leurtillois—isn't he a cousin of the Bresanges ? " and Lucien bursting out:

" But it's M. Leurtillois, Mother, you *know*, M. Leurtillois ! "

In time it all became quite clear. Everyone was talking at once, and Fenestre kept on exclaiming: " Well, I say, what a coincidence ! " while the little ambulance chap asked questions and the bony young man said in a voice of thunder;

" Berenice must be told."

They were given orgeat to drink, and now everyone seemed to understand the situation, even the two men who had dropped in for a moment and, now that their questions had been answered, said : " Oh, I see ! " and both trained a steady stare on the newcomer. One of them has a wen on his forehead. The sound of the radio came from the house next door, and the gravel was a funny colour, almost orange, probably due to an admixture of powdered brick. The house looked shady, with its lowered blinds, and through the open door came the twinkling of brass.

The old lady moaned slightly, trying to see the newcomer through her dark glasses.

" I'm afraid," she said, " my eyes are not very strong. And so you are our Berenice's Aurelien ? "

Leurtillois' discomfort increased, and he wondered what all this could mean. The big-boned, thin young man bent over him and muttered :

" Don't be surprised. You're a bit of a legend here, you see."

Lucien Morel was laughing excitedly. The maid, a strong young girl of about sixteen, was summoned to bring more orgeat. It was rather sticky, but cool and refreshing. Fenestre had begun recounting his war experiences: he had been somewhere in the Ablain-Saint-Nazaire district. . . . Was anyone listening ? Yes, a big, very dark girl with a sad face who was sitting rather to one side. Aurelien hadn't noticed her at first. She was wearing a striped brown linen dress, and her unevenly sunburnt arms stuck out of her short sleeves, revealing white patches from another day when she must have been wearing a dress with longer sleeves. This was Berenice's little world, and this was where Fenestre's luck had brought him ; now he was lounging on the ground beside the green tub, a badly folded Michelin map beside him.

" Everything's happening all at the same time," Lucien was saying in a tone of ecstasy, rolling his words round his tongue. " The war, the defeat, all these people pouring through an abandoned country, and M. Leurtillois, after all these years ! Just guess, monsieur Leurtillois, whom we had three days ago—no, not three days—oh, we're all losing our sense of times—Edmond ! Yes, Edmond and Carlotta ! The Barbentanes ! You should just have seen their car ! Mattresses on the roof, pink blankets, and trunks—oh, the trunks ! Incredible ! Carlotta was taking all her clothes. People have gone mad, they've gone out of their minds. Personally, if the Germans were to get to R. . . ."

" They won't get here ! " the bony fellow cried.

" I'm rather afraid they will," Fenestre said.

" Well," Lucien went on, " I'm not shifting from here, whatever other people may do. But what can Berenice be doing ? She'll be wild with delight when she knows. . . ."

The two neighbours showed signs of excitement, like a couple of puppets at a tug on the strings. One of them was wearing a blue linen jacket that had lost colour in constant washings ; he was put completely in the shade by the other, who was breath-takingly smart and townified, with a little beard as a counterweight to the wen.

" Don't tell me you've taken a room somewhere else ! " Lucien cried. " I won't allow it ! Just take it easy now, and your batman will go and fetch your things."

" By the way," Fenestre said, " the captain's not well."

That was the crowning touch. Everyone seemed to be veiled in a yellowish, sweating haze that danced before Aurelien's eyes, and here was the old lady crying that a really hot bath was the thing. Lucien noticed that there were no biscuits left and burst out into exclamations: " Good Heavens, what a way to welcome you ! I have some maraschino—oh yes, really, you must—or perhaps armagnac would be better for you in your condition. What do you

think, doctor ? Armagnac ? And then how about you ? You're not ill, are you ? I'll go and get the armagnac and, Gaston, you show M. Leurtillois up to the yellow room. One of these gentlemen will tell your batman."

The ambulance officers leapt into activity. " I'll go ! " " No, me ! " and they both sat down again, in unison.

There was no point in arguing, for Aurelien was really longing to lie down, and he followed Gaston, since that was all there was to be done. The house seemed to be full of dark materials and upholstery, with the sifted light falling through the blinds, and farm-house furniture, enamel pots and pans, painted earthenware, and plates on the wall. Ah, yes, of course, the chemist collected plates. As they passed through the house, the lean young man whose name was Gaston tried to explain about two or three rare pieces. He did it rather furtively, obviously profiting by the owner's absence in order to steal his thunder. But Aurelien wasn't listening; he was going through Berenice's house with his mind in a state of turmoil that verged on the fantastic. The whole effect was rather too well done, the paintings cleaned too recently, the blending of the antique and the modern, together with the carefully studied simplicity, was too much in the style of what comes from the Trois-Quartiers, or say Liberty's, though the ornaments, if one considered them one by one, were not at all bad. Aurelien felt tall, even gigantic, in these rooms that were really neither higher nor smaller than other rooms ; perhaps it was because of his dirty boots. He felt as though a single clumsy movement would knock everything over. It was all dreadfully queer, here in the midst of war, only a few hours ago trailing along in the convoy, reports of enemy advances . . . the Germans at R. . . ! The thought was nightmare. They weren't here yet, but something must. . . . Then the door opened into the yellow room.

" *Mon capitaine*, make yourself absolutely at home. If

there's anything you want, just tell us. Mme Morel would never forgive us if everything weren't just as you wish."

It must be a corner room, with one window on to the alley and one on to the main street, above the chemist's shop. There were shelves full of books, including Quillet's *Encyclopaedia*, and a divan bed, and big yellow plush chairs with head rests. Gaston opened another door, revealing a kind of little wash-room, with an enclosed basin. He turned the two taps on and then turned them off again, as though to show that they worked. What a miracle it was to see running water ! Leurtillois took off his sam brown and put his head under this stream of fresh coolness, while the other watched him.

" *Mon capitaine*. . . ."

What did the wan tapeworm fellow want ? Aurelien turned his head under the tap and opened one eye to look at him.

" *Mon capitaine*," Gaston said, his voice rough and hesitant as a worn-out gramophone record, " I hope you'll excuse me for butting in on something that's none of my business, but—you haven't been here before and you couldn't know, so I think I ought to tell you. . . . It's about Ber—. . I mean Mme Morel"

" Yes ? " Aurelien said, blowing his nose in the water, He saw that Gaston had nice eyes, like a big, faithful dog, with a little burst blood vessel in the white of one.

With a deliberate movement, Gaston sat down on one of the yellow chairs and crossed his long legs. One hand pulled the trouser-leg back from a sock that had slipped down and hung in folds about his hairy ankle ; he gripped the ankle, rubbing it, and leaned forward in order to talk better. His shirt was made of stuff with a small green-and-mauve check on a white ground, and there was a laundry mark on the shoulder. Confidentially he said:

" First of all, I must tell you that for years now Morel and

his wife have been strangers to each other. You've seen Gisele, haven't you, the pharmacy student. . . ." He gave a little cough.

" That has nothing to do with me," Aurelien said curtly.

The other waved the remark aside. " Oh, but it has, very much. You've got to know about it. You'll see Mme Morel any time now—she only went out for a moment. If you didn't know, you might say something that would spoil everything/' He wouldn't let Aurelien protest; his voice rose sharply as he talked Aurelien down. " For twenty years Berenice has been living on a memory. Don't you see what I mean ? You're her whole life, you meant everything to her."

" This is absurd ! Why are you telling me this ? "

" First of all, that's how it is. And you've got to realise it before you meet her. When a woman's whole life has been. . . ."

There was too much to think about all at once. Aurelien sat down on the edge of the bed, vaguely noticing the goffered pattern on the yellow counterpane. His feet hurt, and he had difficulty in undoing the knots in his bootlaces. The boots fell to the floor, one on top of the other, grotesquely human looking, liked folded hands. Leurtillois lifted his feet, which were crushed by the leather, and held them in his hands, first one, then the other, in their dirty grey socks. He must lie down.

The other man went on talking :

" For a long time Lucien tried to win her back. He couldn't bring himself to believe that she was really out of his reach. And then—well, what can you expect ? Life reasserts itself. At first she was glad of it, it was like a blessing. Now—but you must have seen at once how it is—there's Gisele, she's studying dispensing at Toulouse, she came here last year. She's a funny girl, you know, a very decent sort."

What he was saying reached Aurelien through a kind of mist, with the ghastly lucidity that is typical of bad dreams, where what happens in both mad and unco-ordinated and yet possessed of an underlying logic. And it was all mixed up with the bitter misery of the last few days, this feeling of tumbling down a bottomless well, the shame of defeat, and not being able to understand what was really going on. ... What had the chemist said about Edmond and Carlotta just now? The pale young man was wriggling about in his chair, like a maggot. There was an impassioned light of youth in his eyes and he was twisting his unhappy mouth. ... It was the kind of mouth with which women never fall in love. What was he talking about? He was in love with her himself. But who was she? Gisele, of course. . . . No, that was just it, not Gisele . . . good lord, this was crazy, he was in love with Berenice. . . . Oh, so *that* was it! What was he saying about her mother? Vaguely Aurelien remembered what Berenice had told him, years ago, about her mother, who had gone away to Africa, and he said it aloud.

" But you saw her—down there ! She's the old lady in blue ! "

Ah, so the old lady was Berenice's mother. So she had come back. According to what Gaston was saying, her life's romance had ended up in fiasco; her lover left her when she grew old, and she had come back to spend her last years near her daughter, a prisoner of her blindness. Actually, if Aurelien hadn't dragged it out of him, this fellow Gaston wouldn't have talked about anything but himself. It was his own life he was dying to talk about, his childhood, his father who had been a distinguished mathematician. . . .

There was the sound of an explosion in the distance. Gaston looked towards the window with a worried expression and asked:

" What was that ? "

"A bomb," Aurélien murmured, swinging himself on to the bed, his hand over his eyes. He would have liked to sleep.

"In her shadow. . . . For six years I've been living in her shadow, with that ghost confronting me. You can't do anything against a ghost. And now there you are, I'm talking to you, you're lying on the bed in the yellow room. I used to hate you, but she loves you."

The whole thing was ridiculous. Georgette. . . . Aurélien tried to summon the thought of Georgette to his aid, but he couldn't picture her behind his closed eyes. It was as though Georgette and the children had sunk down into some obscure corner in his memory. And here, where he was, how everything was echoing with noise, voices. . . . Gaston was still doggedly talking, Gaston who, anyway?

"So I used to take out my little car—I've got an old Wisner, you know—and clear off into the country. Do you know the country round here?"

Aurélien was slipping down into a shadowy tide that would soon bear him away, while he put up a faint resistance, as a dozing man does when he knows he mustn't go to sleep. That's the way it was driving in night convoy, when he sat beside the driver, keeping his eyes fixed on the square of white paint on the mudguard of the vehicle in front, with no light at all, only the white square that shoots away ahead into the darkness or comes dangerously close, the dancing square in the wide-open eyes, the white square that ceased to be there when he thought of it, or even when he looked at it, the white square of a laughable duty, this impossible vigil. . . .

Where was he? On this road north of Arras, where a broken human mass stirred and pushed, in a wild jumble, surrounded by a deathly, threatening landscape where somewhere an overturned lorry was going up in flames . . . a drunk had

scrambled on to the running-board, wanting to show them the way. Aurelien had put one foot on his chest and kicked him off.

Suddenly he felt how frail the silence was, as though a sheet were slipping off him. He moved on the bed, with a sense that something had gone wrong. Then he didn't need to open his eyes; without looking he knew that she was there. Berenice was there. He opened his eyes. Berenice was there.

IV

THEY were alone in the yellow room. Gaston had vanished. There was nothing more to be seen at all, only Berenice, and yet everything crowded in on her and got in the way, distracting his attention from her—a print of a storm and grottos over which stood Roman ruins, some fishermen, and a wrecked sailing-ship, all in a black frame. . . . And there was something on the what-not there in the corner, in a haze . . . and Berenice . . . and on a firescreen of saffron brocade, with stripes and shells or cornucopias there was a fringe of fruit or flowers. . . . And Berenice. . . .

"You ought to go to bed, Aurelien," she said. "The doctor says you're not well."

He started at the sound of that still familiar voice. The bed was sliding away under him like a boat. He succeeded in sitting up, with a drawn face, and took her hands. She let one stay in his grasp, but she withdrew the other and pulled the pillow from under the counterpane, in order to prop him into a sitting position.

"Berenice. . . ." What more could he say, what more than this name that summed up so many things?

She understood him. With a pale smile she said :

" Well, this is it, Aurelien. It was bound to be like this."

He was beginning to see her more clearly. Her face had not changed at all, unless perhaps it had hardened slightly, with the jaw-bones more marked ; but her expression was just the same. Only now her eyelids were heavier, darkened with pigment, and besides, she was sunburnt. Her hair was arranged differently, with curls in front and a plaited coronet; the influence of the hairdresser was obvious. Perhaps, too, her hair had faded. But what really made all the difference wasn't the slight thickening of her figure, but something in her face : some lost radiance, a secret light that had gone out. Berenice wore much more lipstick than she used to ; she must have made her face up again before coming to the yellow room. Aurelien dropped his eyes.

" It was bound to be like this," he repeated. Then he noticed his socks and jumped like a man who is just going to get to his feet quickly. But she stopped him.

" No, sit still, my dear. You don't have to be on your best behaviour with me. ..."

They were old friends. He hadn't seen her since that afternoon in Giverny, in the spring of 1922 ; that was eighteen years ago. And he said :

" We might have had a son who'd be seventeen now."

She turned her head away.

He took advantage of that to say :

" Berenice—why didn't you ever write to me ? Why did you never answer ? "

" Your letters came so late. When they came, I couldn't do anything about it. And if I'd answered, what difference would it have made ? Besides, I did answer. I wrote to you, Aurelien, I've written to you every day of my life."

" But I never had your letters ! "

" Of course not, because I never sent them. Never."

She must be forty-two. She didn't look her best in this

straight, pale brown dress ; her arms were thinner, and the little cape under which her arms appeared, sleeveless, only made her shoulders look rounder.

Feverishly Aurelien's fingers crept up one of those cool arms. How very strange it was ! Now he couldn't think about Georgette at all ; he didn't even know what Georgette looked like.

" It's to be hoped," Berenice said, " that your regiment stays here long enough for you to have a proper rest."

When she said that, he remembered everything, the war, the retreat, the Germans who would be in R. before long, if the armistice wasn't signed at once, and they were taking their time about the armistice. . . . And Aurelien was overcome by his own weakness and the fever in his veins. All the circumstances that had brought this meeting about were breaking around the meeting itself, like the foam on an equinoctial wave. The circumstances began to assume exaggerated importance. On the point of saying one thing, he said something else :

" Edmond passed through here, didn't he ? "

She said yes ; with a movements of her eyelids, those darkening eyelids where there were little spots of lighter colour, almost like spangles. She was no longer a young woman. She must have seen what he was thinking, for she made a movement, with her shoulders and arms, as though to guard her breast from the man's gaze.

" You didn't forget me ? " he said. And then, 'to break the painful silence, he added : " We ruined our lives."

Then she said with a trace of bitterness, though quite naturally:

" Your wife is beautiful. I've seen photographs of her, and of your children, too."

At that instant her expression was so exactly like something years ago, so perfectly *recaptured*, that for a fleeting moment he was back in a little *café* of the boulevards, in the

December light, in Paris. . . . Georgette ? He tried to recall what she looked like, but he could only remember her dresses. And the children ? A gesture had obliterated all of it. Now fever was pulsing in his temples, and an upsurge of energy drove him to speak, though it was as if someone else were speaking and not himself at all:

" You needn't believe me, if you don't want to, Berenice. But I've never loved anyone but you. You never left me. I haven't regretted anything in my youth, except you—only you ! I wanted to tell you. During all these years I rehearsed the things I would say on the day. And now that day has turned out so differently from what I imagined. I must apologise for the state I'm in."

She gave a little embarrassed laugh, like a child. " Is that what you rehearsed to say to me ? You don't know how frightened I've been for you. I knew that you were in the army, and it was dreadful being without any news. After all, it's fifteen years since you wrote to me last. When Edmond and Carlotta came through here the other day, they didn't know anything about you. They said you were probably on the Somme front. Oh God, what a nightmare ! "

He was still holding her bare arm, and he pressed it. She was trying very hard not to burst into tears. So circumstances were gaining the upper hand over them again.

" How ridiculous life is," he murmured. " We've ruined our lives. Not only you and me, but everyone, everything. We won the war, and then—we ought——" Words rose to his lips, all the things that for more than a week now had been obsessing these conquered men, these officers with their shattered companies and few remaining weapons, in the midst of embittered, mutinous troops. What he had to say was all ready, the hasty explanations, the excuses, the platitudes that were coming into being, the new expressions that were already minted and passing into currency, from man to man, from unit to unit, in this army steadily

advancing, like some monstrous thing in a dream, towards the Pyrenees, asking : " And then what ? "—the words that would enrage the disappointed and soothe the bad conscience, throwing responsibility for this horror on to straw men and phantoms, and so would make it bearable to go on living, when the speakers had thrown in their hand. . . .

Berenice listened to him talking about something other than love. Perhaps she felt dimly that he was experiencing some sense of a connection between all these shipwrecks, their own and the huge shipwreck that involved them all; and that all the defeats of his life were real in these words, which for her had not yet become the mechanical phrases they would soon be, something harped in a hundred times, day in and day out. She still felt the urge to argue. Once or twice she felt a gush of emotion against the things he was saying, but it began to sound as though it were only the fever talking, and she musn't forget that Aurelien was ill.

" You must go to bed, dear."

His talk assumed a sudden harshness, a vengeful tone, and he spoke of the easy way out. It was the first time Berenice had heard that. She almost forgot who was talking, and that it was Aurelien here, in the yellow room, raving with fever.

" I don't know what you mean," she said. " Whose life is easy ? Was life ever as easy as that ? "

Suddenly she saw him as a stranger, no longer the Aijrelien of her dreams, the Aurelien of the old days, when she had been young, but a different man. This was a big, lean, swarthy fellow, taut and muscular, his hair gone thin and greying at the temples, his features sharpened with illness ; and he was a French officer shaken with fever, who had taken off his captain's jacket and dropped it on the back of a chair over there, and taken off his flying boots, and was sitting there on the yellow bed, with the pillow behind his back, his khaki shirt and laced breeches, uttering expressions that

were difficult to get hold of. There were flickers and twitches of expression in his face that she had not known before. Was he really Aurelien ? He had shaved before coming to her house, but he had done it badly, and there was a blue patch on his chin. He was raging about politics.

She shrugged her shoulders and said :

" Aurelien—are we really going to talk politics now ? "

They were both filled with embarrassed misery.

V

TOWARDS evening the fever decreased. Against the M.O.'s advice Leurtillois, who had been quartered with the Morels, went along to the divisional office to see how the wind was blowing. He had to climb the long street that went uphill, with its narrow little houses squashed up against each other in an endless line of Gothic trickery, until all at once he came to a small hotel standing back behind grey trellises full of roses already beginning to fade. There was an incredible crowd of seething men from every sort of unit, all coming and going and hardly bothering to salute the officers. At the street corner were some Senegalese. A group of foot-sloggers were having a shouting match with a fat woman who was leaning out of a ground floor window, screaming her loathing of the whole army and her desire to see it all finished, so that the Germans could come and put things straight. On the whole the civilians didn't look very friendly. Some old corks of cars were going past. The division had installed itself in three gloomy rooms downstairs in a big building that smelt of mildew; in the dark hall were life-size statues of a soldier in the Franco-Prussian war and an ogling dandy holding out a tiny handkerchief to some unseen lady.

" Mme de Grisery's father was an artist," murmured the young sergeant who took Aurelien to see Colonel Bouillet.

The commandant was taking down map references. He had a fat, kindly face and grey hair, and he swept the board with the enemy, right, left and centre, wielding his blue and red for all the world as though they were back in the days when they had been advancing into Belgium.

" Oh, hello, Leurtillois. Must apologise for the state of things, it's all a bit. . . ." He laid down his pencils and sighed. " How are you feeling ? "

Aurelien declared that he was fighting fit. The other rubbed his nose. With his great jowls he looked like a sentimental bulldog. He sighed again and said :

" Oh, well, we'll get it fixed. Yes. . . . We're relieving the division that relieved us yesterday. We were slipped off southwards on account of a motorised column that had got through to the east, according to reliable reports we had. Went to look for 'em, and there was no more sign of a column than there is in my——" He chuckled, but he looked tired. An N.C.O. came in with papers to be signed. He groaned. " We'll still be tangled up in red tape when we wake up at Saint-Sebastien ! " Then, turning back to Aurelien : " So we're getting back on to our course. Forty-five miles northwards tonight. In God's name, when is there going to be an end to it ? A nice job, telling the men to move off while the towns are being opened, and how the civilians love us, when everyone know's it's all up ! I'm leaving you here, Leurtillois, with your men. I don't need your help in these acrobatics. You'll be attached to the Senegalese. If we come back this way we'll pick you up and take you along with the kitchens. , Tomorrow evening, probably. Ever been in Bidassoa ? " Colonel Bouillet gave a very wry laugh. He grimaced, his fat cheeks piling up round his snub nose. " You were through the last war, eh ? Well, I should advise you not to talk about it too much."

It didn't become any cooler when night fell. Everywhere there was a smell of petrol and dust. Only the sky was calm, ethereal, between the roofs, there where the streets opened out towards the east. Silly to talk about pink satin, it was more like salmon, with these last rays reflected in the window panes. Some trees on the other side of a wall looked as though they were just waking up. Aurelien went on to the company H.Q. The blokes had sorted themselves out not at all badly. It had taken them a fairly long time, that morning, to persuade people to let them in, but now they had fixed themselves up, shaken down a bed of some kind, though it was a dreadful squash. Becqueville had seen to everything, while the captain was tucked up in bed with the shivers.

" Nothing to worry about, sir, they've got all they need. Are we moving off ? " Then, when he heard they were staying, he asked : " Will you have dinner with us ? The mess is fixed up in the school. The schoolmistress is very nice."

No, Aurelien couldn't, because the Morels were expecting him. He would rather have stayed with his men and shared their dinner, he would rather have shared their lot altogether. But perhaps Becqueville would come along to a meal with him, at the Morels' ? Becqueville refused, on account of the schoolmistress. He was a well-fed, plump Norman, bulging out of his uniform, and it would have taken more than a lost war to stop him going after women, who were his natural prey. What nonsense it was to say that the French were degenerate!

As slowly as he could, Aurelien strolled back to the Morels'. Dinner was an experience ; there was the old, blind mother, and the student girl, and the young man who was in love with Berenice, and the chemist, and the conversation. So that was what life was like in a little country town. The chemist had been reading Duhamel and Giraudoux; he

admired Cezanne ; he knew what mattered and what didn't. And then there were the plates. Aurelien had to admire an Italian specimen, Gubbio stuff, attributed to heaven knows whom, and he thought of the avenue de Wagram. Now why the avenue de Wagram ? Oh, probably because of the Ceramic Hotel, opposite the Empire.

The queer thing was that Leurtillois couldn't imagine what the future would be like. He couldn't imagine the future at all, not even the following day, not even how they would spend the evening. It was natural enough to be like that at twenty, but by the time one was fifty. . . . He couldn't imagine continuing this nomad life, nor giving it up, either. Georgette, the kids. . . . How far away they were from each other, Georgette and the kids and himself. He felt as though he would never be able to get back to the life they had led before the war. He had no regrets for the factory that had been destroyed, but it did mean that a chapter was closed. And Georgette, who had shared his life with him ? How could Berenice, with her forty years gone, be compared to the freshness of that young mother, who was so clear-skinned, so lithe and radiant ? He realised that during the whole of the past day, without admitting it in so many words, he had acted as though he were going to take Berenice away with him and live with her and forget everything else for her sake. He knew he was falling under her sway, a victim to that monstrous love of hers. No, no, it wouldn't do ! She must have thought of something else besides him, in the meantime. Had he forgotten Paul Denis ? But when Aurelien told himself such things he failed to convince his own heart. He was overwhelmed by the fact of this devotion that had lasted twenty years, as near as made no matter; and he felt guilty towards Berenice and wished there were some way in which he could make it up to her. There was no use bringing up that old story about Paul Denis. Berenice's love , . , He would have wished

the story to have such an end as this, an apotheosis for Berenice. ... It made his head spin and set his heart on fire, to think that for one person he was everything in the world that counted. That dream of hers cast a glory, as of some legendary love, and stirred the egotism of a man of fifty, who has a young wife and so can never be quite easy in his mind. And anyway, he had stopped thinking about his wife. All that was faded in Berenice was only another argument in favour of this romantic fury raging in his mind. He slid into sentimentality, saying to himself: " How she has changed ! "

The uproar of a wireless came from a window above his head. A voice full of violent hatred was shouting : " Mark your men ! Follow the instructions given by the bearers of yellow cards ! " What was it all about ? Aurelien shrugged his shoulders.

VI

THEY dined in the courtyard, around a big round table, with a blue cloth and three heavy cut glasses for each person. Never had the ground been so brilliantly orange as it was in the last rays of the setting sun, with pitchy shadows slicing the table and the diners' bodies, like a scene on board ship, while a lingering beam touched the blond old lady's head, turning it bright pink. The two maids—the strong, pretty girl of sixteen whom Aurelien had already seen, and a worn woman, no longer young, with long strands of black hair bound round her head, and a face as grey as dust—paraded round the guests with the dishes, the silver, and the smell of soup. Gisele, in her black apron and a transparent blouse of white lawn, through which pink ribbons could be seen,

on her shoulders, had all that look of fresh coolness that belongs to very young brunettes, like a stream in the mountains. But there was something coarse in her smile. Morel must be very much in love. No matter how much he talked to the tall, sad girl, a cousin of theirs, with her patchy arms and her striped brown dress, replying only in monosyllables ; and no matter how often he turned to the captain, with a worried look in his eyes ; and though he passed the dishes to Berenice and said this and that to the other men, it was plain that he couldn't think of anything but Gisele and her isolation in this world where she might be neglected. He was round and puffy, and as he whirled this way and that, his empty sleeve swung oddly. Opposite him the shadows were swallowing up Gaston, translating his thinness in a green veil, an unhealthy light through which his protuberant cheek bones shone. Everyone talked very hard and quite artificially, even the blind lady. The only silence was around Berenice and her faded fairness. Aurelien noticed the two lines that had dug into each corner of her mouth. Looking at her mother, he could see what those lines would become later on, those two furrows that were the marks of a disappointed life. But Berenice blotted them out with a constrained smile, an habitual, stiff smile like the front she had kept up for eighteen years. Her eyelids that were heavier now weighed down the black gaze which he could only imagine. Perhaps she had powdered them with ochre powder matching her skin, or perhaps it was the light from the sunset. Berenice's face was the only one here that showed no a trace of sweat. No one could have found anything in her face now to remind him of the Zamora portrait, and yet, with a startled sensation at his heart, Aurelien recalled the expression of the drowned girl, the plaster mask. Berenice hadn't changed her dress for dinner, but she had hung five or six rows of coral round her neck, a very ordinary, cheap little coral necklace such as dangle on the arms of street

vendors in Florence, selling souvenirs. It seemed to be pulling her neck forward. The red dog was gambolling round her.

The talk was all of no consequence, meaningless, running wild. Among all those stray ends of floating thoughts, scraps of disconnected anxieties and things at the back of the mind, Aurelien thought there was one thing they all had in common ; perhaps it was the reflection of his secret thoughts that still haunted him, but there it was—defeat. No one spoke a word about the end of the war, and yet this defeat echoed in the clinking of the glasses, coloured the tablecloth, the flicker of a smile here and there, and the futility of the conversation. It was the same feeling—"Heavens, it can't possibly happen !"—that no one could escape any more. With a bitterness that amounted almost to intoxication, he tried to think that it would have been worse if the French had been the conquerors. One must adjust oneself to defeat, ^vcoue oneself into believing it was all for the best. How else could one come to terms with defeat ? For of course they were going to come to terms with it. He started : Berenice was talking to him, and he didn't know what he answered.

This meeting, too, this reunion after twenty years was another rout. It was really costing him an effort to recognise this woman, a stranger to him now, as the love of his life. He had kept the idea of Berenice in his heart, but Berenice disturbed that idea by her presence. He thought to himself, bitterly enough, that it was one and the same thing, life had flowed between him and his enthusiasm, bearing him away to a country where he could no longer recognise any landmark.

He could not recognise Berenice, and he couldn't recognise France. Was this the France he had known in his youth, the same country for which he had fought once more—was it the same now in this downfall, the wild flight down the

roads, the young men on bicycles and the girls in shorts ? No, no, no ! It was the Republic, but it wasn't France. Where had he got that idea ? Who had whispered it in his ear ? He didn't know, but it helped him to live, and it was everywhere in the air, making the shame more bearable. And the same with Berenice. This wasn't Berenice, this woman who had aged—his Berenice was the plaster mask, that young dead girl who would remain beautiful for ever. And France, too, the France he loved, was dead ; it wasn't the same as the France he could see before his eyes. There was happiness in loving the dead whether it was a woman or a country; he could make anything he liked of it, for it could not speak and suddenly say something he wished it had not said.

" Have you seen the mayor's proclamation ? " Berenice asked him. No, he hadn't seen it. Mme Morel came to life. She was almost ugly, there was such intense fury in her eyes. " The mayor says the Germans are going to enter the town and he recommends us to maintain a polite, respectful attitude to them—and in this way, he says, we can hope to win the enemy over into understanding of our situation, perhaps even sympathy. ..." The men laughed scornfully. The mayor was not popular. He wasn't the mayor who had been elected; the real mayor had been removed from his position the preceding winter, for personal reasons, and this was a right-wing radical who had been waiting all his life for the chance to be mayor. He had been appointed by decree. Aha, a radical ! Aurelien felt almost on Berenice's side. He didn't like the radicals; there was old Barbantane, for instance. He joined in the laughter.

" I think," Berenice said, " we're not talking about the same thing." He looked at her. Was this the woman who for eighteen years had lived on the memory of a few days in their youth—she whose only sun had been himself ? For another moment he felt that intoxication, as though from a

forbidden drink, and he shut his eyes, thinking : " She's no longer young—what does that matter ? I am going to sacrifice my life to her. I will give this story its unexpected end, its real romantic ending." All at once he felt to the full how frustrated his life had been. He had never thought about it, but now it had him by the throat. His wife, his children. . . . He was ready to leave it all, in order to pick up a thread that had seemed lost. At any rate he let this temptation carry him away for the moment, a shudder that shook him from head to foot. He said to himself: " I shall go away with Berenice. I shall make this woman happy," and he was filled with the pride such a thought inspires. But in reality he knew that he wouldn't do anything. Perhaps he was a coward.

" The Germans have beaten us," he said, " because they were better equipped than we were, and above all because they had better discipline. And then, their government isn't just a talking shop, like ours, everyone wanting to run the show. . . ."

" And so what conclusion do you come to ? " Morel asked.

Berenice's eyes met his and he stopped. He played with his knife.

" A good sportsman's a good loser," Gaston said.

Aurelien didn't hear what Gisele was calling out. They were being served with liqueurs. Everyone wasn't of the same opinion. Morel thought the mistake had been in beginning the war at all. Leurtillois sank under the clamour of talk ; he wanted to take Berenice's hand, but when he reached out, she moved her hand away, without haste or resentment.

Who was it who had first started this absurd conversation ? They had been sitting there for ages, among the dirty plates and the disarray of the dessert. They must have been talking about this freak of fate since the beginning of dinner. Perhaps it had been Morel; or Gaston. At first no one had

listened, they were talking of other things ; then the subject had come up again, obstinately confronting them. They had tried to avoid it, but it was a waste of effort; the thing was established. And now they were in the thick of argument, Berenice was very angry, crying: " But this is madness ! You don't mean it! Aurelien's still sick. . . ."

" Oh, no," he said, " not at all. Once the temperature goes down it's not worth mentioning."

It was almost as if there were some kind of conspiracy afoot, a plot that surrounded both of them, while everyone else looked on. They were the reunited lovers, in Morel's eyes at least as much as in everyone else's. There had been a good deal of drinking, and they all felt that the more they drank, the more they were stealing a march on the enemy. So they went on drinking. There was still a trace of daylight dissolving in the empty glasses, and the evening was as warm as ever, dense, heavy, like the arms of a woman in love. Berenice was arguing fiercely :

" I say no ! Listen, Aurelien, tell them that it's crazy. One can't get along the roads."

Gaston adopted a persuasive tone, saying nonsense, they would take the car, his old bus, just leave it to him, the police had other things to worry about. . . .

" You're out of your mind, Gaston ! Aurelien's a captain, It might get him into trouble."

Nobody cared a damn about that, frankly. Captain Leurtillois wasn't interested in getting on in the army, was he, by any chance ? Gisele said that Gaston's house was so pretty. . . . And keenest of all was Morel. The old blind woman shook her head in despair and asked: " Is the sun still shining ? "

That little question, almost lost among the chatter, the banality of the dinner-table, where coffee had just been served, rang with deep and genuine despair. It was the echo of a ruined life. Berenice looked at her mother and shivered.

" You really ought to go up to your room, *maman*." When she said that her voice was different from the voice Aurelien knew, deeper, almost whispering, a voice she must have had when she was a little girl, when mother and daughter talked secretly about that terrible father, that storm of a man in the big house. . . . The whole story came back to Aurelien, just as Berenice had told it to him in Paris, twenty years earlier.

Gaston took him by the arm and said :

" My dear chap, if you just say you would enjoy it, Berenice would. . . ."

Aurelien looked at him blankly. What were they all getting at ?

" You can't imagine, Monsieur Leurtillois," Morel said, " Gaston's garden is a marvel. Huge chestnut trees—huge chestnut trees."

What is it that overturns a conviction or unleashes a desire ? He looked at Berenice, who was leading her mother towards the house. He said he would enjoy it.

VII

No one had stopped the car. Gaston had driven them through the little streets and out of the town with all the skill of a Red Indian on the warpath, or of a drunk. There were no Senegalese on guard over here. They bowled along between ruins that opened out on to an empty landscape of fields, vineyards, and country villas. The vine props were blue with sulphate, as though the night had spread out from them. The road, and it was indeed a road, climbed the hill like a dog that runs alongside dodging the wheels. The red dog . . . yes, he had accompanied them for a while and then,

when he had left them, Berenice had leaned out of the car and gazed back at him.

" Poor old chap, he can't keep up either."

There was no need to ask who else couldn't keep up. She hadn't meant anyone or anything in particular. Of course not.

Aurelien felt her pressed against him, between himself and Gaston, who was driving. She was both the woman who was there and the woman who could never be there again. He had one arm behind her, round her shoulders, so as to make more room, and he felt her holding her breath with that strange self-control of women who quite definitely will not give in. In the depths of the little patched up Wisner that Gaston must have had for at least ten years, he could hear Gisele laughing, where she sat between Morel and the sad girl cousin, and Morel fidgeting about and talking a great deal. The evening air was stifling. What was the idea of this excursion into the country all of a sudden ? It was a day of defeat on the wane, with birds sweeping down from the vines, and dust settling on everything in their wake. The plan was to sample the local wine, which was to be found at Gaston's. There was something lunatic about the whole thing ; and here was Berenice, whose swelling breast weighed against the man she had loved all her life, though the idea that dwelt in her breast was an alien one. And how alien was the feeling of her leg against Aurelien's, and the trembling lip towards which he would never lean. It was all very well saying that the house was hardly three miles from R. . . . The escapade seemed to have no end and to be going on in silence, with only a few remarks from Gaston, which no one listened to, like the abrupt changes of gear.

Aurelien was thinking that his life had faded out behind him, nothing recorded there that was worth the trouble. Was it the same for everyone ? There must be people whose

destiny was filled with a blaze of sunlight, like the black grapes—so why not his ? Why this flight in search of nothing at all, this long, false manoeuvre of his life ? It was as pointless as this drive into the country, an unhappy ending that looked like a broadside attack. In the end he would still have missed everything worth having. Wasn't it possible to start again, to throw in one's hand and claim a re-deal ? There was France, there was Berenice, and Georgette. . . .

The scenery changed when they had crossed the hump of the hill, and they came down into a closed valley full of tall trees. Now the broad scene of the plain and the town had vanished, and evening was slowly turning into night. There was something like a prayer in the embrace with which Aurelien held Berenice, imperceptibly tightening his arm on her ; and she was as though dead, she didn't notice the man's arm round her shoulders. Once, she sighed. He leaned towards her and heard her say: " It's still as hot as ever." And he relaxed the pressure of his arm, with all that vain supplication and sensual questioning, to which a few words of refusal had been answer enough. There was Gisfele's silly laughter again. Gaston was swearing at his engine, which wasn't pulling well enough. The road grew steeper, and then they turned aside to where tall, black trees joined their leafy hands over the travellers, with their shadows forming an entrance to the night that had now come.

It was a country of abandoned estates. The wing of night gradually blotted out the differences between the fallow ground and the fields under cultivation, like patches on a garment that isn't worth mending. And it was a countryside of abandoned houses, too. There were little cottages where the stones were beginning to crumble apart, sticking up here and there among the jumble of faded tiles. They were narrow little cottages, with the doors torn off, and the wind blowing through them as if it were the sole owner. Then there were more trees—downhill again—still more trees,

and a sound of water falling. The car slowed up. Gisele's coarse laughter rang out like a loud voice in a church. "Golly!" she cried, "it gives you a thirst, Gaston, my pet!" And to Morel, "Oh, you did make me hot!"

It was a ravaged countryside, with the silence falling again. But it wasn't war that had ravaged it; it had been eaten away by the cancer within itself, a cancer that consumed the fields, then the houses. It was a desert; a desert one would have imagined still inhabited, if one didn't look at it too closely, a desert with trees and running water, but a desert because there were no human beings in it. It was strange to stumble into this, after the crowded roads along which poured the great exodus of the retreat—these trees, these lanes, these abandoned walls knew nothing yet of the catastrophe, and the nearby river unfurling about that town, along by the high road down there, leaving aside these empty houses in a countryside larger than misfortune. One might have thought that this district was awaiting the return, in a flood, of that people and its armies, with every clod of earth, every pebble. Oh, well, it was no use thinking of that sort of thing. The country had depths that one would never plumb. Aurelien thought of what the reconnaissance officer of the dragoons had said to him, when they were talking about a government formed by Laval and the Marshal. He had said: "Anything you like, but not Laval! If it's Laval, I'm taking to the wild woods, I'll go underground." Must have been a freemason. What had made that come into Aurelien's mind just then? Oh yes, the depths of the country. . . . So they were entering the epoch of conspiracies and plots. . . . The depths of the country. . . . There would be wide spaces that would never know anything of it. Or perhaps the other way round—for hunted men.

The car pulled up in a leafy lane, at the bottom of which was a wooden stile, too new for the derelict wall. They got out and shook themselves, Berenice escaped from

Aureien as though from a danger threatening her. There were roses in the garden, fading without anyone to cut them, a square kitchen garden and smoke rising. " You'll see," Gaston said, " the real garden's on the other side."

They went into the house, in darkness. There was no electricity. Gaston groped about in the shadows of a large, low-ceilinged room, looking for an oil-lamp. " Antonio ! " he shouted. " Where the devil has the bastard got to ? " A door opened, and the dim outline of a window on to the garden was visible on the other side. " Antonio ! " " It's his Spaniard," Morel said in explanation. What Spaniard ? The lamp barely lit up a room that was a cross between a farmhouse kitchen and a library. There were shelves loaded with dusty books, and a big fireplace with the remains of a scattered fire. Aurelien saw the girl cousin's face ; she didn't look so sad here in this spectral light, she was in her element now. Gisele, who seemed to be at home here, had opened a little cupboard and brought out some glasses, exclaiming because there were no biscuits left. " And how many are we ? Five, six—six counting me." In front of a little mirror, with a gilt Louis-Philippe frame, Berenice was tidying her hair in silence.

" Yes," Morel said, " his Spaniard. Antonio. He's a Republican Gaston took in to please Berenice, after they were defeated." He had emphasised, in quite a new way, that *they* had been defeated. The two men both instantly felt embarrassed, and the chemist gave a little shame-faced laugh, saying : " It's funny, now that we are, too. . . ."

So it had been to please Berenice ? Aurelien asked :

" And why did that please Berenice ? "

" Oh, you know what she's like, always on committees, all sorts of stuff. Because of course that's not Gaston's way of thinking at all, he belongs to Action Française, you know. But Antonio's a good servant to him, looks after the house, sees to the garden. Gaston has a room in the town. This is

his father's house—a great scholar, you know—he used to write poems in Provengal, too—yes, yes."

Gaston came back with a sunburnt peasant, a young man with a fine, mild face and black eyes, not very big but sturdily built, with his khaki shirt open, his sleeves rolled up, and blue linen trousers. He spoke a gibberish that Gaston seemed to understand, and carried an immense basket of white cherries. "Hello, Antonio!" Gisèle called out. He bowed, smiling from ear to ear. Aurelien gazed at Berenice, repeating to himself what Morel had just said: You know what she's like, always on committees. . . . It wasn't only the country that had unsuspected depths.

Now a second lamp was alight, making the room almost gay and revealing a portrait of a woman on the wall, of the time of Felix Faure, and a prize-winning diploma from a flower show, which the girl cousin explained for Aurelien's benefit. He shrugged. What was he supposed to think? Then all at once there was music.

It was a piano that had sprung into life, in the shadows of the kitchen, under a pile of notebooks, among which a faience fruit basket trembled with the music. Gaston was playing Chopin's Minorcan prelude.

"Let's have some jazz!" Gisèle cried, and turning to Leurtillois she added, "you can't imagine, captain, how eccentric and old-world Gaston is. No gramophone, no wireless in the house!"

"Oh, no," he protested from the piano, "no wireless, I should think not."

It was true, everyone was sick and tired of the wireless, with the dreary news that it harped on day after day. . . .

"Do you remember?" Morel was saying to Gisele, "all the lilacs last spring. . . ?"

Gisèle evidently remembered. But how about the glass of wine—wasn't that on its way yet? From the piano Gaston said that Antonio had gone to get it. And at that moment he

came in, together with Eunice, who had gone with him.

" Since when does Berenice speak Spanish ? " Aurelien asked.

" Oh, she learnt it," the cousin answered. " Berenice is always learning something. Once it was shorthand, once it was Spanish." Did she think it was a good thing, or not ? He couldn't make out what this girl thought. Then the piano broke off and Gisele summoned them to the table.

There were cherries, little cakes, blue cheese and white wine. The white wine was indeed well worth coming for. The vintage that Gaston set before them was by no means the sort of wine you drank every day; there was maraschino, too, for the ladies, the same as Morel's, incidentally, but everyone agreed to concentrate on the white wine. Perhaps the captain would like to take a couple of bottles back for the mess ? Gaston would take no refusal. Morel was talking a lot, about the war, the enamel ware, and reminiscences of other trips with Gisele. The girl cousin, slightly maudlin by now, was humming a tune from a film—no one could remember quite what—Henri Garrat had been in it, at the beginning he was a student and then he went into the country. Gaston was showing Aurelien an old family album, with photographs of his father. Throwing back his head, he began to recite a poem, in Provengal so far as Aurelien could judge, with a lot of gargling in it. Aurelien pretended to be listening, but his eyes were on Berenice. She wasn't talking, she was staring into space, crumbling a wafer, with nervous little twitches of her fingers. Now and then Gisele gave a loud laugh. The Spaniard appeared in the doorway and said something in his jargon to Gaston, who turned his head to say : " No, no, thanks, Antonio." From outside arose an ear-splitting, frantic croaking of frogs.

" Don't you think it's hot ? " Berenice said. To whom was she speaking ? To everyone to no one in particular, and at any rate not to Aurelien, least of all to him. It was Gaston

who answered, and not to Berenice, but Aurelien, dropping his voice slightly :

" Would you like to have a look at the garden ? "

It really was very hot, and the white wine had gone to their heads. Aurelien crossed the further room, only faintly lit by a ray of light from the kitchen, and he stood back to let Berenice go on ahead of him. They stopped on the threshold of the garden. They were alone. No one had followed them. It was very dark ; there was no moon these nights, and the garden was a well of darkness among the chestnut trees. All along the garden, bounded by two tall, fantastic walls, there was the feeling of the fields beyond. In a corner, there was a sort of arbour, with a bench and a round table, and everything was running to seed, with wild flowers on the paths, and the chestnut trees rolling their burrs underfoot.

They walked forward together, not speaking, as if they wanted to put a long distance between the house and themselves. Right at the bottom of the garden, a wall of dry stones formed a balcony overlooking the countryside, but in the confusion of shadows it was impossible to distinguish any details of the scenery. Still the night was no cooler. Mosquitos were buzzing in the air.

" How is it," Aurelien asked, " that this Spaniard isn't in a concentration camp ? "

He wasn't particularly interested in an answer ; he had only spoken to rid himself of a sense of restlessness and uncertainty. Here in the darkness Berenice was once more the little Berenice of 1921, and he would have been surprised if she had understood what he meant. But she had understood him, ah yes, she had understood. Nevertheless she said, without emotion :

" Gaston knows people. He guaranteed him."

It seemed that everything that happened only served to widen the abyss between them. Aurelien shivered.

" Aren't you well, my dear ? "

Her question rang out in the darkness like the sound of a musical instrument struck by accident. He had been going to tell her. . . . Was there any choice for them, for either of them ? Their youth would never return, and yet each had meant romance for the other; there was nothing they could do to change that. He said: " Berenice. . . " and the sound of her name faded slowly in the silence of everything he would not say, everything he had always failed to say.

" You have children/" she said. " How queer that is—and how wonderful! I envy you. I should like to know them. Perhaps the boy is like you ; perhaps the little girl does the same things that you do."

He murmured : " Yes, the boy's like me."

Something flew through the air, not very far from their heads. He guessed, rather than saw, how Berenice had raised her hands to her hair. She seemed to have realised that he had surprised her gesture, for she asked : " There aren't any bats, are there ? " He didn't know, but he said, to reassure her : "I don't think so."

Was she really thinking about the children ? It was so dark that she might well be speaking the truth. Everything that Aurelien wanted to tell her was about being big enough for the situation—but never had he felt such a burning need or had such a sense of not being able to rise to a situation.

" You see, Berenice, here, in this garden, in this night among the weeds, I ought to. . . ." He wanted to say: " I ought to take your hands." But he couldn't say it.

She didn't ask him to finish the sentence. Perhaps she was finishing it for him—and with what words ? What was she waiting for him to do, what unfinished sentence did she expect to be completed now, what was he failing to do and never would do now, because he didn't know exactly what it was she expected from him—or at least, what she was expecting him to do.

He wanted to say : " I ought to take your hands." And he hadn't said it. It was too late now, and then other words had chased it away, flung it out, other words neither of them had uttered but that still fell one upon the other in the silence, like the scattering petals of a rose. And again, and again. . . . He took it on himself to pronounce words of graver import. This time he didn't say her name, because he was afraid it would stop him once again, like a too heavy stone or a perfume that robs one of breath.

" You stood for all the better things in my life, you were the deepest things. . . . No, don't interrupt me, it's been hard enough for me to make up my mind to speak. You're all the music there ever was in my life, and if I ever had a vision—I mean—do you see what I mean ? One tries to justify oneself in one's own eyes. And then we grow older. One doesn't want to spoil the romance. We won't let that happen, will we ? I have tonight before me, and I shall have a dream—or at the worst I shall regret a dream that went wrong—the only dream. . . ."

What was he actually trying to say? She seemed to be in no doubt when, after a pause, she said in a remote voice :

" You only speak of yourself."

He misunderstood that and said he was speaking of her as well. But she had meant that she thought it strange that Aurelien could think of anything besides the defeat, that terrible adventure in which all were involved, and France itself. . . .

In Aurelien's ears the name of France was a false note ; it sounded grandiloquent from those invisible lips, that he remembered with their two tiny vertical lines. And in his mind's eye, he saw the mask of the drowned girl, in the old days, and the cheekbones. . . . And then, there she was, saying: " France." He felt an annoyance he couldn't quite explain. What she had just said disturbed him, upset his conception of Berenice, and was a sign of the distance

stretching between the doll in his memory and this living woman, the distance of those twenty years behind him. It was everything that had happened in this twenty years, everything that separated them one from the other. Berenice was saying:

" I know what you mean, you and the others. When you hit on something to talk about, oh, you hang on to it, you won't let it go ! I know what you mean. You're only too glad to go off at a tangent and be amusing. You're all the same, you men. You have the satisfaction of having done your duty. You were mobilised, you've done your duty. So what can anyone ask more from you ? Now it's over, it's all over, and you just drift. It's just as if you stopped shaving because the war's lost. You stand in the midst of life in your shirtsleeves."

" But—Berenice, of course it's all over ! What do you expect us to say, what do you expect us to do ? After all, it's no good running one's head against a brick wall ! "

" Why not ? But if you don't do it this time, it's quite certain there's not the faintest chance that you ever will do it. Your precious skin ! Admit that you heaved a sigh of relief when you realised it was all over."

" First of all, it isn't all over yet."

" Not yet ? Didn't you hear the speech he made ? "

" Whose speech ? "

" The Marshal—* my children '—tears in his voice—dear God ! "

" Don't talk like that. The old man was terribly moving. And anyway, what do you expect anyone to do, now it's come to this ? "

She didn't answer. Triumphant he said :

" There you are, you see ! "

She exploded with rage :

" Do you want to know what I want ? We should resist! We should fight ! "

"But we did fight!"

"Yes, the poor wretches who thought they were fighting for a cause. And actually. ..."

"I don't understand you. First you say one thing and then you say another. Haven't enough people been killed, aren't you satisfied?"

"So many people have been killed that we have no right to betray them, to make it so they died for nothing."

"So we ought to have got ourselves cut to pieces. . . ."

'Fight, I say, fight! Oh, to think that we didn't defend Paris!"

"According to your way of thinking, we should have let Paris be smashed to bits. Is that it? Well, no, thanks very much."

"It would have been better to destroy Paris."

"It's easy for you to say that, living in R. . . ."

"Don't be a fool. One can live in R. and still love Paris, just as much as in Lille or in Paris itself. And tomorrow if they come to R. . . ."

"You want to perish in the ashes of R., I suppose?"

He was astonished at himself and the frivolity of his tone, and he caught himself up. "What on earth are we saying?"

Berenice said:

"We're saying the only things that can be said today—tonight. No, don't protest, don't say you want to talk to me about love—like the old days."

What bitterness there was in those last four words, and the little pause that had come first. If Gaston was right and Aurelien had meant everything to her in those dead years between, how was it that now there was this world separating him from Berenice, separating them more than a lifetime could? It was a world of ideas too: ideas that he regarded as ridiculous, elementary, but still ideas that were all the more vivid and intoxicating, as though he had found her wearing

a cheap perfume, dishonouring herself, tarnishing the idealised remembrance of her that he bore in his heart. And it was he who broke the silence, saying :

" Berenice. . . . I left you, I left a passionate, impulsive little girl, ignorant of the world, oh, so profoundly alien to the world where men fight and struggle and throw themselves on ideas that barely conceal the self-interest and intrigues behind them. And now I find a woman who has the same passion, but instead of giving it to life, she gives it to those damaged things, murky things, the things that are the root of all our troubles—a woman who's just as easily drunk on the crooked words that the mob used as, once upon a time, the little girl was drunk with Paris, or an evening, or a song. . . ."

Why must his voice grow so pleading ? What was he begging from her ? He didn't even know himself, and Berenice felt there was a false note there, something like hypocrisy. Their youth was no longer there to lend them the illusion of a wonderful unity, though each of them remembered it, magnified to something greater than it had ever been. Berenice was right: what should they have talked about that night ? The words that they had vaguely waited for, each waiting to hear it from another, had dissolved in the darkness—overwhelming words that, once uttered, would have proclaimed themselves a lie. It was better to leave it as it was.

A voice called from the square of floating light in the door behind them :

" Does anyone want armagnac ? Do you want any armagnac, love-birds ? "

There was laughter indoors, the piano strumming one tune and then another, and then Gisele's voice rose in song ; it was the kind of voice that go sharp after the first few notes, and the song was a vulgar, tripping melody in the style of French jazz:

" *What are we waiting for? Let's be happy !* "

" You don't think it's going to rain, do you ? " Berenice asked. The sky was lowering, the atmosphere very sultry. Aurelien wouldn't admit that this meant: " Let's go indoors," and he said in the rough tone that had made him aghast a few moments earlier:

" What makes you take such an interest in these Spaniards, Berenice ? They're all Reds."

She answered quickly, as though she hadn't needed to think about it for a moment:

" Their misfortune."

That irritated him.

" Look here," he retorted, " the misfortunes of people who are in the wrong is nothing but justice."

" That," she said, " is just what the Germans will be saying about us, any day now."

There was a great rent of silence in this black lace that enfolded them. Then Berenice's voice sounded again, as though she had just come to the crest of a hard climb :

" There's really nothing left in common between you and me, my dear Aurelien, nothing at all. Don't you realise that ? I wonder why we had to meet at such a time as this. Perhaps it was just for that reason, so that we would know, and then each would go his own way with. ..."

The rest of the sentence was lost as she dropped her voice. Aurelien's heart was thumping with a wild medley of emotions—the horror of feeling himself judged, the certainty of being right, and anger at finding, not the girl he remembered, but this woman with her opinions and arguments. He loathed women who argued. The memory of his wife, and her youthfulness and freshness came back to him on a wave of remembrance. God, yes, Georgette wasn't like this ! She was different! There had been times when he had thought her limited, from an intellectual point of view. But that had been unfair. A woman's intelligence was of a different kind. So long as they didn't concern them-

selves with things that weren't their business. . . .

" So we've spoilt our memory of the past, that's all."

He said that in a detached tone. And yet it pierced him to the heart when he heard her answer :

" Yes, that's all."

It was extraordinary to think he could have dreamt of taking this Berenice away with him—breaking with every thing for her sake, for the sake of that old affair of eighteen years ago. He had been ill with fever, there was that, of course. . . . All the same, he thought, one couldn't take a defeat lying down. And then another interpretation of that remark struck him bitterly, ironically, and he gave a short dry laugh.

" Does it strike you as funny ? " Berenice asked.

He apologised.

" No, it was just something I thought of—something else. Don't you mind, doesn't it matter to you, that this is all ? "

This time she let the question hang in the air.

" No," she said then, " or rather, yes. We might talk about it in a detached way, if it weren't for that stupid masculine pride that you have just like all the others, my dear Aurelien."

He noticed that she had a way of her own, this time just as the first time, of lingering on that " my dear " ; and it was neither aggressive nor a mere manner of speaking. Rather it was as if she were speaking to a dead man.

" My dear Aurelien," she repeated. And for all he knew, she was in tears.

VIII

THE armagnac was Gaston's surprise for them. He had kept it until after the maraschino and the white wine, as a studied

effect, a curtain rising on the sensation of the evening. The repercussions were obvious. First of all there was Morel, who had got to the sentimental stage—incredibly sentimental. And good heavens, what a state Gisele was in ! To say nothing of the girl cousin. Still, it was late. Cutting short her husband's emotional speech about the strange circumstances, the unheard-of events, that fate had engineered in order to land M. Leurtillois into their midst—and Lucien had an over-affectionate gleam in his eyes as he looked at Berenice—she said it was getting late and, after all, there was a war on. Gaston said that traffic was, of course, not permitted, but people had other things to keep them busy. And the girl cousin was reciting *Polyeucte*, heaven knows why she should want to recite Corneille, but she knew *Polyeucte* by heart and she didn't know *Occupe-toi d'Amelie*.

They climbed into the dusty old car, and when Gaston started off they were all flung to one side, so that it seemed like a practical joke. They had taken the same seats as on their journey out. And as a matter of course Aurelien put his arm round Mme Morel's shoulder. They had agreed tacitly to behave just as they were expected to before the others, in order to avoid explanations. Morel murmured : " They are reunited, Gisele, they are reunited ! It's enough to make one believe in God." Gaston wriggled his shoulders in a queer way as he heard that, and the girl cousin tried to touch the windscreen, declaring that the glass was just as fragile as it was lovely to look at.

The countryside fled away behind them. They took the same road as before, but at a headlong pace, plunging through the leafy darkness to the main road, where the trees no longer grew so close together and the Wisner wound its way uphill. It was no longer so hot; the sky was almost overcast with big clouds racing across the stars. Gaston was driving rather erratically, though it could not be said that he was actually drunk ; he was only in a hurry to get back, and

that made him drive wildly. It was strange, this journey back along the same road that was familiar to the others, but which Aurelien knew only just well enough to share the nervous tension of the man driving. And there was the darkness of the sky. They were sinking deeper into the shadow. After all those nights in the convoy, it was a queer feeling to be rolling along in a car that was on its own, jerking along quite independently, not checked in its leaping forward by any great interlocking chain that extended beyond the limits of the imagination. Aurelien tried not to think of anything. He was going back to R. . . . and that was all. His fatigue, made heavier still by alcohol, was stronger than the tracery of memories, all those scraps of thoughts whirling inside his head. He had cramp in the arm that was round Berenice's shoulders, and the fingers of that hand seemed a long way away, and they were hurting. Still he didn't move. What was going on in the mind of this silent woman beside him? The divorce between them, wrapped in an absurd lie and the ambiguous sentimentality of the others, who still clung to their illusion. . . . He told himself at one point that this story of theirs, with the utter rout of their love, the lie that life had given love, and this illusion of love, this incomprehensible illusion that had wakened again after eighteen years of increasing forgetfulness. . . . But whatever he was telling himself came to no conclusion, there was no end to it. He stiffened. Now look, it was like this : talking of the rout of love in connection with such an affair, broken off right at the start, and then all the rest of life between the two of them, hardly thinking of it at all—no, that wasn't true either, he had gone on thinking of it all the time. . . . All the same, it wasn't as if. . . . The jerking of the car threw them against each other, heightening their embarrassment. It was like the feeling of being in bed with a woman after a quarrel with her, and having to sleep with her all the same. . . . How the car jolted. . . . Eighteen years

of forgetting. . . . Steadily forgetting. , , . He told himself. . . . He kept on telling himself—the whole of life, the whole of my life. . . . And he pitied himself immensely, absurdly, like the two people flung together by mistake. . . . Perhaps it was a mistake that he was sorry for himself ? Especially on a night like this, when such things were happening in the whole country. Aurelien felt like an animal in a storm, trying to hide under the leaves in the forest. It was this story, all this old story of their love. It was utterly unbearable, and at the same time it was utterly important. It was a distraction in the midst of the flame.

There was a muffled noise in the distance. They were coming nearer to it.

" Do you hear ? " Gaston called out to him.

Yes, it was cars on the move—at least, it sounded like cars. What was it ? The division coming back ? Or were they evacuating the town ? The noise faded away, a moment after it had been growing louder, and it thinned out into the cotton wool of the darkness. They couldn't be far from R. now.

Berenice's silence was a dead weight in the midst of them. The people behind tried to say something. Gaston changed gear and the car came out on to the main road, at the cross-roads. And then it happened.

" What is it ? What's happening ? Oh, what's happening ? "

The voices clashed in mid-air and were lost in the scream of the brakes as they lurched to a standstill.

Machine-guns !

The rackety noise of machine-gunning, like hail, with that fire on their right.

" This is it," Aurelien thought, " I'm wounded." His arm was heavy, dreadfully heavy. It didn't hurt. It must be bleeding. It was the arm he had round Berenice.

He shouted to Gaston :

" Carry on, don't stop ! "

Gaston had brought the car round into the track continuing the lane along which they had come, instead of turning into the main road. That had been presence of mind. There had been sound of glass smashing—the windscreen—and some glass had spattered on to them.

" Are you hurt ? " Morel asked, in a sober, terrified voice.

" No, no ! " Aurelien said. He was afraid that they would stop if he told them.

" Berenice ? Gaston ? "

Gaston panted :

" How about you, there behind ? "

In the back the girl cousin was laughing hysterically, that was all. Aurelien said to Gaston :

" Accelerate, old man. Can't be helped. Do you know where this lane goes ? No. Well, the best thing's to get out of their way."

" Out of their way ? Whose way ? "

The question came from the back. It was Gisele, standing up. " Sit down, for Christ's sake, Gisele ! " the chemist had pulled her down again. The car was jolting fantastically.

" The Boches, of course ! " Aurelien said. He didn't move his arm. He must be losing blood. It must have been an armoured car, one of those cars that they sent out like a stray, to get the feel of the road. These days they were making such reconnaissances in order to avoid useless losses ; they didn't bother to make a stand when they met any opposition, they just turned off to left or right, to come up behind the others along other roads. ... He wanted to touch his arm, which was numb with a far-off pain.

Gaston was swearing. The others at the back heard him cursing and asked:

" Are they following us ? "

" I don't think so, can you see ? "

The last question was to Aurelien, Groping along his

arm he felt the blood that had run down on to Berenice's shoulder. She must notice it at any minute now. And he said :

" Berenice, don't be frightened."

" I'm not frightened," she murmured.

It was the voice she used to have, the voice he had heard in a taxi one night in Paris. Aurelien felt an absurd pride surging up in him on account of his wound.

" It's nothing much," he whispered to her.

And she answered :

" I know. It's nothing much."

He was rather hurt. It seemed to him that it was his part to say that it wasn't much—and how lightly she was taking it ? So he explained to her:

" I'm wounded."

But Gaston heard him, and as though he had known what was coming, he braked sharply.

" Wounded ? "

" Oh, slightly." Leurtillois felt Berenice's head lolling against him.

" He's wounded ? " the girl cousin gabbled from behind.

" M. Leurtillois is wounded ! "

Gaston had got out his pocket lamp, and the yellow pencil of light flickered first on the knees, then leapt to their faces, trying to establish what there was to be seen.

" My arm," Leurtillois said, to guide the lamp.

And the light fell on the dangling hand, that embrace of the supposed lovers, the bleeding arm that held Berenice, and how the blood had run down her dress, and her drooping head.

" Berenice ! "

They all shouted at once. Aurelien's good hand lifted her face. Her eyes were half shut, and she was smiling with the same smile as the Unknown of the Seine. The bullets had passed like a great leap to death. She was dead. Aurelien saw at once that she was dead.

" And I was talking about my arm ! " he said.

Fortunately no one had heard him. Gisele burst into wild sobs, and the fat little chemist was moaning and wailing :

" Nicette ! It isn't true ! Nicette ! "

The light had gone out.

Gaston said in a colourless voice :

" Now we must take her home."

THE END

