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The Shattered Sexes

A novel by Loys Masson

Translated by Denise Folliot and Mildred Shapiro

Published by Channel Press, Inc., Great Neck, New York

THE SHATTERED SEXES



THE SHATTERED SEXES

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The Shattered Sexes

CHAPTER I

Mr. O'Hara,

I am sending this letter to you, care of the *Atlanta Times*, in a sealed, stamped envelope. My one chance is that the newspaper will see that it reaches you. Perhaps you are a subscriber. In any case it should not be too difficult for a competent employee to get your address. In explanation of my request that the letter be forwarded, I pretended that I was an old friend of yours, recently returned from abroad after ten years, and urgently wanting to see you. I described you as well as I could: a non-commissioned officer of the Prison Administration, sent on a mission to the South Pacific at the beginning of last year, and now certainly retired. Is this enough? Oh, God! If only you get this letter! As for the rest, I trust to your kindness, and if I give neither my name nor any details of my whereabouts, this is not because I am suspicious of you, but through fear that my letter may fall into other hands.

I know nothing about you, except for that quality of pity which, rightly or wrongly, I sometimes thought I could discern in you. If you cannot help me, then at least do not betray me. In other circumstances you would perhaps think it your duty to give me away.

But as you know better than anyone, I am only an unhappy wanderer over the earth; my soul and body are ravaged, and I am too broken to be a danger to anyone.

I am one of those who was guarded by you and your colleagues on board the *Bounty Pride*, and later on that island of terror. You knew me; you spoke to me; you bestowed on me the charity of a compassionate glance (was it not perhaps a little ashamed?). Now I stake everything on you. By entrusting myself completely to your discretion, I shall gain access to your heart. I can see no one but you to help me.

So, here is the truth: I have escaped. If you refuse to bear witness for me I shall have done so all for nothing. But in any case I could stand no more. On our return from the Island my comrades and I were placed under observation in a "hospital"—that is, in a prison transformed for the purpose. I will spare you the details of the constant and humiliating examinations; I will not describe that daily fear, like a stone around one's neck, of finding yourself an animal that would never again be a man. We were heavily drugged, and subdued by sleep; that was part of their efficient brainwashing. We were assured that after a few months' treatment we would no longer be physiologically dangerous, and that then our women would be returned to us.

They promised us the moon! Of course, they said, we would not be "free," but the women would live with us. Somewhere (they did not say exactly where) we would form a little community, under surveillance, yet happy . . . they actually used that word! I knew they were lying. I knew we had definitely been cut off from the world. But I was soon the only one to realize it. The others yielded one after another to drugs, to sleep, to hope, to kind words, even to cowardice. Was I mad, as they finally came to pretend?

The attendants could not bear my presence. My companions constantly denounced me to everyone. They insisted that I should be separated from them; they said they would kill me if I were not. Because my doubt was catching, because it was impossible for me to be silent, because I saw my judgment following me with a child's face. Had they forgotten that, or did they merely pretend to forget? Had the narcotics and the silence made such headway in them? And in me? I felt myself yielding in spite of everything. There were gaps in my memory, greater and greater gaps—like pools. I was slipping, I was beginning to forget. But I did not want to forget. I *would* not! Every day I jarred my memory, I braced myself. I became aware that the moment had come when if I were not killed I would be taken elsewhere—and buried. I fled.

I still wonder how I managed it. It was a miracle. I had already formed the idea of seeking your help. Hurry, for I have not much time left.

I had a child by one of the women who were with us on the Island. At least that is probable. A child? Well, a being. Was that not the desired end? That child must now be a little over two months old. I did not escape in order to be free; what meaning could freedom have for me? It was to love that child, to see it and love it.

I don't expect you to take me to it, Mr. O'Hara. How could you? How could you even know where it is? That is certainly part of the secret.

There is only one man who would have the power to do so: the Governor. The man you and I called by that name. I do not know his real name. It was never uttered in my presence. But *you* must know it. Tell me, I beg you. What steps should I take? How should I approach him? My life depends on your reply. I swear that I

have no intention of harming him. I am a beggar, I shall throw myself at his feet. He will not give me away any more than you will. Strange—I have always believed that there was some pity in him, too—just as I believed in his cruelty, at the same moment and with the same certainty. If I find no answer here, I shall there. In some way, he will act.

A child, Mr. O'Hara, my child. Were you informed of that when you started? Were you told *that* would happen? . . . We were wounded in our love. That is the unpardonable crime! In the gift of love God bestowed on us, as on everyone. That was worse than trying to destroy our very souls. The thing in which we were blessed, in which, whatever we did, we stayed pure—they turned that into a thing accursed. If not your heart, your *fear* should have pity on me.

At all costs I must reach the Governor, for soon there will be no time. I want to live with my child, save it. Ah, if only I could summon up the right words, if I could bring out everything that shrieks, burns and sobs within me, you would not refuse your aid! But I am too good at hiding myself. I have trained myself to beware of words. There are too many people spying on me. A careless remark, and all would be over. You must realize that it would be to a good many people's interest to silence me, and it would be surprising if a large reward has not already been offered for my capture. Can I even be sure of my neighbors?

And yet as I look back I cannot deny that chance has favored me since my escape. Too much, perhaps, for it to last much longer. I wanted to get to Atlanta; once I heard you say you lived here. Atlanta was my goal, and I attained it, although I had a very long way to come. I hadn't a cent, I was dying of hunger and fever—and then I met a girl, Elsie. We were strangers. Why did she

smile at me from the doorway of that little bar? Why did she buy me a drink and adopt me, get me this room and even bring me food? She says she loves me, that I am the one man in her life. But she is beginning to grow nervous, and for the last few days the shadow of the police hangs about her as it does about me wherever I go.

She crosses the threshold and stands motionless. Particularly in the evening. There is a perceptible pause before she enters. Is she trying to take me by surprise? Does she hope to catch me talking to myself? She must expect me to end by confessing. Otherwise why should she lay siege to me like this? For there is no love in me that she can desire, and I have not concealed the fact from her. She pretends that love will come, that she is patient, and she fixes her large eyes, like those of a vicious child, on me, and they burn me wherever they rest. Is she lying? She brings me cigarettes and whiskey—a bottle every evening—and when she sits down she manages to hitch her skirt up high. I can see her thighs, and her dress is extraordinarily low-cut. She does not talk much. Her system is simple: she wants me to keep the conversation going practically alone, while she is on the lookout. And yet perhaps after all I am mistaken. Yesterday she lay down beside me. She was burning. But I had turned toward the wall and did not move. Even if I had no intention of remaining faithful to my memories, am I not now a kind of monster? Can't she see that child in my arms, with its hideous little long head to which sleep never comes, where there is never a tear? Can she imagine what it's like never to shed a tear? Not one? To have eyes like two flakes of mica?

Perhaps I ought to confide in her all the same, and send her to find you. Yet I dare not. I know my story will end with her, through her. I argue with myself, but no matter what she does, whether

she comes from the police or not, this conviction never leaves me for a moment. I'm afraid of myself. I'm afraid of her body. She smiles and I am slipping—her eyes gleam and I get hold of myself only at the last minute. I can't tell her who I am—or why, she, because she is a woman, should hate me and go away. I feel that one part of my destiny lies in her. Can I hold out until the end?

For three days I roamed around the prison. I hadn't the courage to go to the office and ask for you; I was a coward. And now . . . I am writing to you. If I were to make you ashamed of anything you did, you could be excused for closing your doors to me. But nothing was your fault! Did you not submit as we did, almost as if you were one of us? In one way or another, we were all in it together.

Answer me through the Personal Column of the paper. I shall go wherever you tell me. I shall study the paper from next Monday on. I shall bless you.

I shall bless you.

CHAPTER II

I am

the person to whom this letter is addressed. My name is John Patrick O'Hara. I chose a career in my country's prison administration, and served honorably for many years. Now I am 68 and my life is finished. My age is not to blame. My health is still excellent. But there are moments in existence from which one does not come back alive.

I am not a writer or a journalist, and I never expected that my name would appear in a book. Chance decided that for me. I feel called on to testify. The author of these pages—as you must have understood by now—is a condemned man, and I was one of his wardens. If certain details, a certain atmosphere, cannot have been the same for me as for him, nevertheless I guarantee the general authenticity of what he relates. All this really happened. I have merely allowed myself to comment on his narrative from time to time. Does he not say that the treatment he underwent for several months was beginning to confuse his memory? "Great gaps like pools." I want my share in the record. I have been as brief as possible . . . How much I could add if I had let myself go!

This man called for my help. I did not listen to him. In any case I could not have saved him. He was committed to his sentence. But I could perhaps have protected him from the final violence that made a murderer of him. May God receive him on the day He chooses: God's justice is not ours, and I have faith in God.

I shall not make a cent from this publication, I want to make that clear. Any royalties will be paid to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, of which I am a member. This money will go to the wretched. It is my wish. The eyes of the wretched purchase joy. I have always thought so and shall think so until I die. On that tragic island, where I go again in memory, I felt the eyes of the wretched upon me. They looked in vain; I had accepted the mission solely because of the money that went with it. I was retired, and I should have been satisfied with my pension. I tried to get more. Otherwise, today I would have been clean; I would have grown old in peace.

In brief, these pages tell the story of a group of prisoners under my surveillance. I am countersigning them, where the facts are concerned, with a few variations.

Will it be said that I should have kept quiet about this matter—that I should have destroyed the manuscript that came into my hands, this testament? Perhaps, for my country's sake. But the human being within me could not be silent. Let them judge me as they will. At a time when the limitless spaces of the Spirit cry out under rockets, when pride voyages even farther than dreams, when God is denied by the speed of movement—God, who is the perfect immobility of love—men are paying for each episode of this revolt of the world against His face. They are paying too harshly, too dearly, for their generation not to be damned each time in their

suffering. This was the case with my prisoner. He begged me and I found no way to help him. Let me at least bear witness for him.

I know what risks I am running. I am betraying what is still a military secret. I had sworn to keep it. My decision has been carefully considered. It is a kind of atonement. What do the consequences matter? I have nothing left worth defending. Not even a wife, after thirty-two years of marriage, not even my two sons and my daughter. How could I now bear the peace of a home?

Family troubles made me take the job. My son-in-law had been in the hospital for three months after an accident, and money was urgently needed. It was then that I was approached and asked to take part, as chief warden, in an "experiment." It was to be a very specialized one, and I would have to take an oath of secrecy. I asked for details. They were, of course, refused. Except for this: the experiment would take place on a small, isolated island in the South Pacific. I was assured that I would be serving my country well. The salary was good, very good. I signed up: signed up with Hell!

I am a jailer, but I have always believed in man. I wanted to believe in man, even down to the dregs of humanity. But others corrupted love. They denied its eternity of happiness. They set Satan in the place that is God's. They abolished the divine likeness. May grace always be denied them: that is my prayer.

My daughter is pregnant—for the first time—and I am afraid. It would be such a terrible, yet perhaps just, revenge for things which . . . no, I fear the words and images lurking in my brain. I thank God for having allowed me to go away from my family. It seems to me that I would contaminate my daughter merely by remembering in her presence. My lot is just and grim and deserved.

That is all I have to tell at this time.

I add that I myself did not desire evil. I was only an accomplice. All my contemporaries are accomplices in an unspeakable renaissance. May that man pardon me. And those other men, those women? Oh, God, those children? . . . "Mr. O'Hara, I had a child by one of those women who were with us. Were you told that would happen?"

No, I swear it! God have mercy!

CHAPTER III

They say

that everyone has the childhood he deserves. Well—I had always been weak. But what's the use of stirring up the past? My one real act of revolt was my desertion in Korea, and that was only a small one. I performed it without faith . . . my faith did not even survive my sentence. When my father, who was head of our town's chapter of the American Legion, slapped my face in open court, I felt guilty.

I became accustomed to my prison, like a termite to a piece of rotten wood. Then, one day, after a medical examination, I was hustled into a ship turned into a jail, going I knew not where. From that moment, in a reflex of wretchedness, I was ready to accept all blows; even, I think, to provoke them. Today I wonder if it was my all-too-apparent uneasiness that influenced my companions right from the start (they alone could say), or whether by a supreme Machiavellism they had also been chosen, as I had, already more or less defeated, already sacrificed and dedicated, incapable of true strength, of the least rebellion. And that includes Bentley, the enormous mechanic from Detroit, in spite of his muscles and his ridiculous posturing.

I try to remember and I try to explain to myself—as though I could summon O'Hara before me, question him, involve him in my anguished struggle, force him to listen to me. To remember! Everything is underlined with a burning shadow where memory wavers, everything until the arrival at the Island. And yet it was like that, it must have been like that. The moment I found myself on board the *Bounty Pride* I knew that until then I had been living under a reprieve, and that it had now ended. I realized that my surrender was complete . . . that I had been surrendered, and without the possibility of any kind of mercy.

I detested O'Hara, to whom I now turn, begging. No one had ever aroused such a feeling in me, the feeling that I was in the grip of tragedy, without any plea to put forth in my own behalf. I looked at him, and in his eyes, and I saw myself bound to him.

It was his age that caused it. The first shock, from which I never recovered, was the age of our jailers. They must have all been recalled from retirement to accompany us. They were something other than ordinary jailers, and the crisis to which they were taking us could not fail to be influenced by this. They bewitched rather than guarded us, those fortune-tellers of our strange fortune.

This menace of age seemed to me more noticeable in O'Hara than in his men, probably because he was in command, because he was the focal point, the pole of blurred light around which everything else was organized. For me there were biblical overtones in his person: his was a face that suddenly went back to the beginning of history to defeat me. He had me in his power beyond even life itself.

There were twenty-five of us, including two Negroes, Jeffy and Hughes, who reminded me of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Perhaps if we had known each other, even slightly, we would have started off better. But what good would that have been? We had

been brought together that same morning on the dock at San Diego, and each of us came from a different prison. What had we in common? Nothing! Neither physical condition nor anything else. No similarity in body or education to give the impression of a team.

Yet there was something! And it terrified me. Our age. The oldest among us was certainly not more than 26 or 27. Why this enormous gap between jailers and prisoners? Why were those in authority people who had reached the stage at which, whether a man realizes it or not, he has already become an accomplice, an ally of death—and why were the rest of us, who had to submit, being launched on this adventure in the full flush of our youth? Why, if not because our future was to be something atrocious, because only those chilled creatures could be present without rebelling? Before us there lay inevitably a port of cruelty. It was mathematically certain. Death was among us. It revealed itself in those men who bore its mark and would transmit it to us as a matter of custom. As a matter of habit. Quite simply and without any need for violence—with calm . . . with gentleness.

With gentleness! That idea in particular, that idea of a pool of death, terrified me.

Where?

Where and when?

There was no answer. When we straggled up on deck for the regulation exercise, there was that silent group, impassive. And I had the impression of being in the process of expiating not only my personal sins and errors, but those of others, and yet others, and yet others—all the crimes of the world, the very name of crime, the absurdity that makes you kill or steal or desert, the absurdity of revolt against absurd laws. I said to myself that I had been judged not by a court but by God. From all time.

CHAPTER IV

What pity

those men—that man—inspire in me! They did not inspire it then.

They did have something in common. Most of them, at least—something serious and weighty. In differing degrees each had betrayed his country by his actions. This particular man, as he says, had deserted during the Korean War, and at the worst possible moment. It was a rotten desertion. And there was a further complication, even more serious, that he does not mention—and which I do not wish to mention. But let no one say to me: "You need not weep for people like that; they are only getting what they deserve." No! Some punishments dishonor a country's justice.

This being granted, my prisoners were in fact extremely docile throughout the voyage. Was it, as the narrator suggests, our "age" that struck them? Or the strange surroundings and atmosphere? Or was it, more simply, a result of the drugs they were given (against seasickness?) in which there was already perhaps something else?

They had been handed over to my care by the Governor in person.

CHAPTER V

Even more

than O'Hara and his men, that piano! From the third night on.

The man who was playing with such hypnotic strength could not be a man like us. He certainly wielded some power, at least at those moments: what his music reproduced was the heart of the night in which each night elaborates those shadowy laws that are to rule the next day. I imagined him living only with the tips of his fingers, and in his mind, I was sure, a vision walked—and we were that vision, that dream. He thought of us, as he played, with a terrible fixity; he played solely for himself and for us.

. . . It seemed as if he floated, and I floated, taking my companions with me, drawn despite ourselves into his orbit, far from our hold, the ship, even the sea. And O'Hara and Malkin, his animal-faced second-in-command—in whom I saw a resemblance somewhere between a bulldog and an anteater—they floated, too, along with the other jailers as flank-guards, and we formed a flying procession in the mist. Their old eyes, fixed on the one who led us, made him shine with a soft, silvery light, like a saint or a magician out of some old engraving. A sacrificial ceremony: I could have no

doubt of it—it was in the man at the piano that we would die, in an obligation imposed on him to kill us soon, just as he would die in us, and in some way through us. He was guiding us and we were at once his remorse and his victory. Bit by bit, he grew more emaciated. It was our mutual death that, almost maternally, he traced out . . . I left the procession and returned to the piano. It must have been in the cabin just above my head. I went in. I could see only two long hands, reverently playing—the hands of a contemplative. They gradually fell apart. Now the instrument was alone, sounding by itself, like witchcraft. Yet hope was being offered us. The charity of the black notes, the cruelty of the white. Charity and cruelty became mingled, like sulphur and incense, in fumes from which all promises and all tortures emerged. It whirled around. It gradually thinned. God, my God, what was about to break from it? . . . Then everything stopped. The silence fell from an immense height, and the man resumed possession of his body, found his life, his glass of whiskey perhaps, his need for movement or relaxation. He went up on deck. Yet I did not hear him walk. Was the echo of his music still in my ears, or was he taking care to make no noise?

I would have given a great deal to appear suddenly at his side, without his hearing me approach. I should then have learned what he had in store for us. He could not have helped himself. Once he had closed his piano, he was surely at one of those moments when a man has no control over himself and opens his heart to the first comer. But a jailer was on guard beneath the three big electric bulbs that burned constantly, and there were others on duty in the passage. I would have preferred a weaker, veiled light and perhaps a sympathetic glance from the guard, so that I could ask him: “Who plays like that every evening? What’s that man like? What

is his name? Do you obey him or is he only one of yourselves?" He would have sent me about my business. My comrades were asleep. Did they not feel their fate stop at the sound of that piano? And even if I were the only one to register the warning, the jailer's look—that December pool of death—would have been enough to enlighten them.

Who was playing like that? Tell me! My life is in suspense. Perhaps there is a chance of saving myself if I can get to that man. A well is dug, or a tower built, and I am here and there. Answer me! Answer! What face has my death?

Who was playing and played again the next day, the day after and the following day? It could not be one of the wardens. For form's sake I observed their hands. The captain of the ship, one of his officers? That again was not possible. They had no connection with our fate; they were transporting us, and that was all. The night music had a direct influence on our fate. The symphony repeated our sentence at all points. It sang it aloud. It was by that man that everything was happening and would happen. His piano was his confessional. In it he laid his soul bare. Were we his shame? Were we his proud dream? Or both at once? He thought of us as he struck each note, and there resulted an endless flowering of a black rose. Who then lived in that cabin, and had decided to remain invisible? Who had need of music to attain his reality, who found reality tragic and thus made it ours?

"Wake up!" I wanted to shout. "Wake up, you deaf idiots! We are being judged now. Here! When we went before the court it was only the beginning. Tonight our sentence is being passed."

But I was silent. They would not have understood me.

"Oh, no more speeches, please! Stop whining. Stop hounding us . . ." That would be Pat Schneider—like Bentley, a former

mechanic, large and broad. Him we called the stoolie, because he was always running up to the guards, ass-kissing, his voice like an adolescent girl's in startling contrast with his size. Or Bentley, suddenly rolling his shoulders like a bear. Or any of them—every one of them. Greenglass, who seemed to burn me with all his freckles . . . I found an echo only among the blacks. Otherwise:

“Shut your trap!”

“You’re a real nut! You’re out of your mind! For God’s sake, let us sleep! All this crap about a piano! Isn’t it bad enough to have it banging away in our ears every night?”

The jailer’s eyes were two silent, watchful fires. Did he know what lay on the other side of the night or was he, like us, trying to find out? His automatic lay across his knees. He would never have to use it; we were already dead for him. No weapons would be used. No ordinary weapon.

CHAPTER VI

I swear it!

I was completely ignorant, to use that man's words, of what lay on the other side of the night. And my staff was even more so. I myself walked like a blind man—physically, because the vast doses I swallowed against seasickness, to which I am very subject, dimmed my eyes; and, if I may use the phrase, morally. For me, too, the atmosphere on the ship was deeply uncomfortable from the moment we left San Diego. I had to contend with solitude, something I have never been able to bear. That "silent group on deck," mentioned just now, precisely describes my guards and me—men enclosed in solitude.

My second-in-command turned out to be a friend from earlier days, George Malkin, whom I hadn't seen for many years. Poor man—he had taken to drink. Aboard ship it became a real passion. Perhaps it was his way of fighting the unbearable climate in which we were forced to move. How then could I have confided in him, how could he have helped me answer all the questions that assailed me?

The first and most important enigma to be solved was the per-

sonality of the man at the piano, the Governor—and that was a hard nut to crack. Who was he? What was his exact position here? From whom did he take his orders? From the Administration? From the Army?—for I had learned that the island on which we were to be stationed was under military control. He was silent on every point, miles away from us and our questions. A stranger, in fact, and anxious to stay that way. Even his manner of calling me “Mister O’Hara,” with a politeness too emphatic to be sincere—a very small detail, admittedly, but one that set him apart from us. I would have sworn that he had not risen from the ranks, as I did, in spite of the post he held and the “mission” entrusted to him. There was too much resolution in his face, a hard and implacable resolution in spite of rather weak features. Arrogant resolution. Yes, he came from somewhere even higher up than the executive offices.

He did command respect. That I grant, although I never felt at one with him, not in the least. He was no more at ease with me. He irritated me with the offhand, quietly detached manner that contrasted with the determination I knew was in the depths of his soul. And yet even there I was sometimes confused. At certain moments I seemed to be faced by a lost man, uprooted, seeking his destiny among us who could do nothing for him.

Then I would pull myself together. I provided an explanation for his curious attitude that struck me as plausible though somewhat summary. When I would meet him on deck or in the corridors (never at meals, which he did not take with us) it was a sleeping man with whom I had to deal. He frequently suffered from insomnia. He exasperated me with his piano, which he played nearly all night. He had supervised the loading and placing of that piano personally.

Each of us remained within himself. I loathed the sea and the smells of the ship. I guessed nothing, foresaw nothing. Together with my eleven men I waited. Ordinarily this would have seemed far too large a staff to supervise twenty-five prisoners. But in view of the general situation and the Governor himself (what scheme was he planning?) I could almost have wished for one warden for each man—those men so young, still so new to misfortune, already half free . . . and we were so old!

CHAPTER VII

Undoubtedly

the crew had received strict orders. During the first week we met with nothing from them but silence, so complete and so humiliating that I would have thanked one of the sailors for even an insult, whatever kind, for the most malicious action. A mute crew, with mute officers and mute guards! Was it not being half-dead to hear only oneself, those words that ended by being prisoners like ourselves?

Then gradually the discipline relaxed. Now people sometimes spoke in our presence; at least there was no self-imposed silence when we were near, either when we went on deck or were coming back from the showers. Then one morning—the ninth or tenth after our departure—a red-faced, red-haired sailor with a boxer's nose called a crewman's attention to the presence of a ship astern the *Bounty Pride*; and it seemed to me, without knowing why, that he was speaking for our benefit. This ship, an old Liberty ship like ours, had appeared on the previous evening. From now on we sailed in convoy.

That day our jailers showed palpable ill will for the first time.

The bad feeling grew as the day went by. Malkin, in particular, was like a bear tormented by tender paws. He bullied us for no reason, without even trying to invent one. His rage was all the more confusing to me since it coincided, inexplicably, with the approach of the other ship. What had happened? What did this news mean to him? (I recalled the sailor's ironic wink.) Malkin never left us. He saw everything, heard everything, and spared us nothing. Yet so far his violence had remained verbal.

Toward the end of the afternoon, when I was certainly not expecting it, I became his target. I was naked, having just finished showering, and was leaving the washroom when he lumbered toward me. He was livid. His coarse face, contorted into an ugly grimace, almost touched mine. He seized my arms.

"Let go of me," I said quietly.

"Bastard!" he yelled. "Filthy bastard! Is this an exhibition or what?"

I twisted free.

"Let me go. The rules forbid you to hit me."

"That's right. You know all the rules! What else? What else do they allow you to do? Scum! Pig! How much longer are you going to show off your family jewels? Why don't you climb up on a pedestal, while you're at it?"

"But . . ."

"Or perhaps you're having your picture taken?"

Suddenly he swung at me. I blocked his fist, more or less, with my arm. Then he stepped back and I realized he was going to kick me in the groin. I had just enough time to protect myself.

"You filthy animal. I saw what you were getting at—I saw it, all right. I saw it right on your ugly mug."

He was working himself up, almost hysterical now. I retreated

to the back of the washroom and he followed me. He was full of hate, yet appeared oppressed, too. My nakedness was provoking him. Yes, that was it, I suddenly realized. Why? Why today? What had I done to him? I felt two knife points on me, two eyes filled more with defiance than indignation.

"I was washing, sir. What's wrong with that?"

He struck me again. Now I made no movement to dodge his blow; I accepted it. I thought to myself that this would throw him off guard, bring him to his senses. The blow, from his open hand, rang out. But instead of snapping him back, it set him off again. He could have killed me! Now the other men were bunched at the door to the washroom. No one intervened, no one attempted to calm him: with a man in that state a shot is too easily fired. They watched me. What was this all about? Obviously, they decided, I had offended the guard in one way or another. Malkin was hot-tempered, but usually maintained his good humor.

"Look out for your balls!" someone shouted.

There was no time to turn aside. Luckily Malkin's foot caught me higher in the groin, and I bent double. With an effort I straightened up, but I could scarcely breathe for the pain.

"I'll teach you to behave!"

"You're out of your mind!"

"Shut up when I'm speaking! And stand at attention!"

Bentley left the group and supported me, his huge arms under mine. I needed it.

"Listen to me: just because there's that damned ship . . ." Malkin began.

He hesitated, looked away; then his eyes came back to me.

"What are you thinking of? There's a ship, on the same course as ourselves—you've been told that. Okay—so what? What are you

hoping for? That she's bringing company for you so you can show what a big man you are?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Malkin?" said Bentley. "I don't understand."

"Let go of that man and shut up," Malkin snapped.

I staggered and held on to the partition.

"Malkin's been drinking," someone muttered.

Malkin continued as though he had not heard.

"What the hell's got into your head?"

He came at me again, then restrained himself. All his strength had gone into that kick, and now he was almost pitiable.

"Good God," he grumbled, "where do you think you're being taken? To a celebration? To a nice little surprise party under the palm trees? Do you think old Malkin is your damned chaperone? You'll learn to respect me, d'you hear? Just because we've a cargo of madness I don't have to put up with everything . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders and abruptly walked out of the room.

We remained silent. He had gone over us like a steamroller. What were we to understand? What could we understand? The whole scene had been a nightmare. Was I the only one to feel the new threat hanging over us?

"This time he must have killed a whole gallon. You heard him. Really crocked."

I was not so sure. At least I wasn't convinced that his drinking was the sole explanation of his behavior. There was something else, some other kind of intoxication in him. "Just because we've a cargo of madness . . ." The phrase beat into me; I could not understand it.

Bentley began to laugh. When he laughed the lower part of his face, already heavy, widened still more, giving him two jowls. Somehow I noticed this now for the first time.

"Look," he said, "the old bastard can't get his mind above the belt, that's all it is. All that liquor made you look a lot better hung than you are—and he's jealous. Between ourselves you've got nothing to write home about. But hell, whatever *he* has is probably due for the junk pile."

He was the only one laughing. He did not go on; his jowls disappeared.

"That ship," I said. "When they spoke of it this morning, didn't they mention women aboard it?"

"You're crazy."

I remembered the red-haired sailor's face. His pale eyes, with lashes rather like a cow's . . .

"And yet, if you took Malkin literally . . ." I continued.

"You *are* nuts. Get off it."

"Will you think for just a minute about what he said? Will you?" I insisted.

"Don't talk shit."

"I don't know *what* women, but there are women on board that ship."

"What fools we are!" cried Bentley. "Of course! Their wives, the guards' wives, of course! What else could it be? That's it for sure! Suppose they're to be with us for a year or more—don't you think they'll want to get rid of their surplus from time to time?"

The jowls again. Two ripe pears, on either side of his face.

"The old fart was thinking: 'Suppose our wives get bored with us over there? Suppose the new climate gives them ideas about these nice young boys . . .' Hell, you never know! 'The Grandmas and the Cons,'—that would make a good movie! So old Malkin saw red, took aim, and bang! . . ."

"Shut up!" I yelled. Then, thinking aloud, I said: "The man at

the piano played louder and longer yesterday. I was sure something new would happen."

I bored them stiff with my man at the piano, and they told me so. But I *knew*. He had played later only because of that ship. And if Malkin had been drunker than usual today it was because he had been unable to resist drink, an excess of drink, in the face of an event that was particularly disturbing. Something was up. The adventure on which we were embarked had revealed its outlines a little more clearly to the musician. But what about us? The veil was not drawn aside. And Malkin had felt insulted by my youth—my sexual youth. How else could I have offended him?

"Ship or no ship, put your pants on. You're really asking for trouble now."

The pain was less acute, duller. It was spreading to my loins.

"He'll come back," said Bentley, suddenly the smart one. "If not him, one of the others. If it's like I say, they'll never leave us alone now. I may have been joking just now, but maybe I'm right. How can we tell?"

I did not reply. Malkin was only a puppet, and I knew who held the strings; no one else existed. And he was steering us on a strange course.

The guard had avenged himself on me for the appearance of that vessel. I had no doubt of it. He might just as easily have attacked one of the others. What mattered was to understand why Malkin thought he had been defied. Was it directly connected with us, or was that simply an idea of mine? No one would tell me. No one could.

Of one thing I was now certain: at last I would see the man with the piano. It could not fail. Today.

CHAPTER VIII

I find it

difficult to accept this version of the incident, and yet Malkin never gave me more than a confused explanation of it. According to him he caught the prisoner indulging in improper actions, but at the same time he implied that he had perhaps been mistaken and that he had been too brutal. At any other time I would have gotten to the bottom of the affair, and I would have been severe on the man if he had been guilty of an obscene act. But now my mind was wandering far from any concern with punishment.

A ship, the Harrymount, had in fact been signalled astern of us on the previous evening. She was carrying women, as the Governor had told me point-blank, although I had not asked him. (Thus for the first time he broke his rule of silence.) She carried a group of prisoners bound for the same destination as ourselves. How can I hope to convey all that this news aroused in my men and in me? Women? Why? How? What women?

"You will know in time, Mister O'Hara. Why try to anticipate events? I am content to wait! Yet like yourself I wonder."

He was lying. His eyes were suddenly very bright. Even today I can remember them, in spite of all that has happened since.

"Do you mean that . . . ?"

"That I was unaware of this event? No, no, you would not believe me! But of other things, yes. Much more complex, I assure you, Mister O'Hara."

His eyes embarrassed me. Could he read me, was he studying my reactions? Was he looking beyond me? He made a sharp gesture, indicative of his determination not to let anything distract him from his goal—and his gesture made me understand that it was not for me to question him, that I was mistaken if I hoped to induce him to share further confidences.

I am inclined to think that Malkin, being like myself upset by something inexplicable but deeply shocking, and being drunk in the bargain, imagined God knows what.

That same God must know what went through my mind, too, and must have known that things were going to turn out much worse. Malkin wanted, in his brutal way, to be a righter of moral wrongs. What was waiting for him at the end of our "mission" justifies my point of view.

CHAPTER IX

It was his

hands I saw. I identified them. Very long hands. There was a heavy swell, and he was holding on to the rail; he was watching the sea and the other ship that followed us by perhaps half a mile. At the sound of our footsteps he turned around. When the last of us was on deck he folded his hands over his stomach.

It was certainly he. Young, compared with the guards, fifty at most, rather plump, with a thick neck. *And they were his hands!* They were living their own life in the pale sun, as though independent of everything else, a life that would be miraculously prolonged after his body had ceased to be. Had I ever seen their equal? Never! Rulers and slaves; radiant—and absurd. If a judge had hands like that, I thought, he would pass sentence with them. He would wave them and justice would be reconciled with love . . .

I went nearer. Now I could see them quite close. The veins were swollen. They indicated the fatigue of someone who had lived too long at high tension; but although his general appearance, his stooping shoulders confirmed this impression, the hands themselves remained admirably serene. The man's whole personality resided in

his hands. It was around them and through them, too, that his destiny had taken shape. They were almost a woman's hands.

He felt my glance. He uncrossed his arms and put his hands in his pockets. A moment later they reappeared. They could not be deprived of that afternoon sun; they were storing up energy to shed later on the piano keys, on the song of death. That was what I was hearing: night visited by light. Now I understood how death and music were wedded for him, and how he made us witnesses of that union. Who was he? O'Hara's superior, a jailer like him, like Malkin and the others? No, it was impossible! He belonged to another race of humanity. His hands represented equilibrium and the world. But he?

. . . It was no use, the hands crept up to my shoulders, tightened around my neck, and in my head the sounds of the piano started again. No use to struggle—the decision had been made long ago. I had been born and had existed only for this end, and everything came back to me, vanished and came back again . . . My face as a child. Sickly. Eyes so large they seemed to swallow up everything else. "How do you expect him ever to be a man?" cried my father to my mother, whose eyes were like mine, too large, so that she retained at thirty-three the appearance of a little girl. "How can you expect it? He'll always be a scared rabbit running from a hunter, any hunter." He blew the smoke of his cigar into my face. "Fight! Curse! Talk back! Forget everything your mama has told you about your angelic eyes, you little fool!" I ran to hide. All my life I remembered: "He'll always be a scared rabbit running from a hunter, any hunter." Adolescence: my mother who wept for three quarters of the day, who wound her bony arms round me; my choleric father, noisily protective, the cigars he had not given up and that made me sick, the approach of manhood, the disappointing

little adventures that never opened the door to the great adventure. Finally Korea, where I had been sent, to a war whose very name I hated. "I shall desert. I'm a scared rabbit, am I, and you like cigars, the army, your country—I'll show you that I spit on all three. A man, by God! You wouldn't know one if you fell over him!" I was captured like a rabbit after all. I could have crossed into China, and at the last moment my resolution failed me. Because everything was alike to me, everything was stupid, petty, depressing. Then prison . . .

The hands disappeared once more. It was like a deliverance, and yet it made my fate worse. For although they left me not the least little loophole, they also protected me. How can I describe it? They safeguarded me from a certain extremity of physical pain that had always terrified me . . . Now I no longer saw them, and in front of me there was only an ordinary man, neither tall nor short, undistinguished, a creature of habit, indifferent, incapable of either the best or the worst, an average man—as those who hunt and execute always are. I looked in vain for anything distinctive in him. He was as impersonal as the guards. Like them he was ready for cruelty and pity—but for measured cruelty, and pity in measured amounts.

Was that the third or the fourth time his hands had left his pockets? Was he playing a game? When I lifted my head he was watching me. Such determination, such silence emanated from him that I knew I would always respect him, whatever happened, as one respects fire. His glance had not hardened; it was not that. But it had suddenly assumed something, a kind of enveloping gentleness and defiance at one and the same time. This lasted for barely an instant. He turned away. Now he seemed shy. How could that be? He seemed weaker than I. Ill at ease. My heart beat furiously. Which of the two was the real man? My fate depended on it. And

who could have told me why I feared the second even more, the one who had just displayed that curious discomfort?

We were forbidden to speak during our daily exercise. Until then we had always found it easy to break that rule. It was nothing that mattered, and I am sure that nobody paid much attention. A few words here or there; a weak joke, a laugh that never quite rang true. That day we remained silent.

Because of the Governor? (I had just heard O'Hara call him that.)

No doubt.

Because of the ship, too. For some time as I watched it rolling heavily, I played a game in which I knew myself beaten in advance. I tried to guess what it represented. Then the attraction was too powerful for me to resist—I turned back toward the Governor. He had gone back to his cabin.

I still seemed to see his hands, however. His folded hands, transparent . . .

O'Hara cut the walk short. He blew his whistle with evident relief.

I did not budge. The hands were still there . . .

CHAPTER X

And now

the Island. Earlier we had seen its clouds far in the distance, lazily illuminated, innocence halted on a stormy horizon.

"There it is," one of the guards said. And gradually it took shape beneath that stretch of cotton-wool caught on its peak. A channel between the reefs foamed just enough to seem real; its semicircular bay was almost entirely bordered by mangroves that turned the water green where their shadows fell, leaving it clear everywhere else. There was the cement landing; and in the valley, barracks.

"There it is."

Without surprise I saw the women disembark from the *Harry-mount's* two launches, and line up on the beach to the right of the little pier, in the custody of several of our guards who had gone over to take charge of them. I had thought I would receive a shock of beauty and desire, like the shattering of a glass vibrating in the ear. But my heart stayed dry and watchful. I was trying to discover my future in everything that was slowly coming to meet us—odors, muted shudders, reflections, the welcome that was travelling across the bay. What were they going to do with us, with those women?

We disembarked in our turn. About fifty yards separated us . . .

"What's the name of this place?" Greenglass asked. "Do any of you know?"

"No business of yours," one of the guards said. "Just shut up!"

"What the hell are we going to do here? I don't like this," Greenglass went on in a low voice.

"I said shut up! Didn't you hear me?"

The guard was watching the *Bounty Pride* turning in the channel now to go out to sea again. All the guards were doing the same. They were watching the ship—their ship—as one watches something that will never return.

"They don't look any happier than we do," someone muttered.

The *Bounty Pride's* whistle pierced the afternoon, and from every side there sounded the beating of wings, the roaring of a rising flame. The metallic echo climbed up the valley beyond the landing-stage, rose to the peaks, exploded against the rocks, re-echoed a hundred times, and then was silent. A second blast came, then a third of farewell. Abruptly the valley closed down again around its peace, but only for an instant did we have the sensation that we were more closely grouped in a suddenly reduced space; for then the birds came. From every tree, from the low cliffs and the thickets they rose, deformed by their flight of fear into circles, diamonds and triangles, into streaming pennants whirling green, red and gold. Were they really rising? It was impossible and yet it was true—they were *descending*; the sky had opened. So widely and with such munificence that all its treasure was pouring out, and there would be nothing left for the rest of the earth. Geography became disembodied. Nothing existed but this earth, here, under one's feet, nothing but its spell penetrating one's skin. The elements were irredeemably separated. It was once more the beginning of

the world. There was no longer any communication between the sea and the island under its canopy. Over there the *Bounty Pride* was still making her laborious half turn. In ten minutes she would be out of the channel, and in an hour at most the open sea would have seized her, while waiting for the *Harrymount* to follow. But she was already alone, borne away into solitude. She was a pawn of solitude—a mere shadow, perhaps, that would return to shadow and to nothingness, where no one would ever reclaim her.

The extreme edge of the moving fringe of wildly flapping, diving birds stopped at the shore, as though some law forbade farther flight. Very high up, white with that noble whiteness which even movement did not diminish, white tropic-birds dominated the throng. They flew, glided, returned, and the sky and the surge obeyed their rhythm. They reached the peak, flew around it to the west, then reappeared. Now the other birds were beginning to be reassured. They settled in groups, without a sound. Soon only the enigmatic web-footed waterfowls remained soaring. I wanted to see them come down too. I needed this—with a physical need. They were my other jailers, jailers of a soul that could not bribe them. They widened the mystery. "Here is a mystery," they proclaimed. "Here nothing will be as it has been. How can your lives meet our life in its imperial whiteness without a tremendous shock?" That was their prophecy: unavoidable catastrophe. They were untiring. At the most they came down a few dozen yards, still silently. More than that: the sky that had spilled treasure now spilled silence, and they fastened it on the land like air within the air. They made it the reigning spirit of the place.

Malkin grabbed his submachine gun. With him, violence was always near the surface. O'Hara took him anxiously by the arm and Malkin twisted away, grumbling. He could not bear that white

siege. Was I then not the only one to think that my life was being decided a hundred yards above my head? I looked around. The same feeling could be seen on the face of Williamson, next to me—a brutal face, almost angular. I looked back at Malkin. His eyes, too, were lost and hard. Yet I should have thought that it was only over our future as condemned men that the host of great birds were flying. Our future seemed the prey of their purity and silence. Innocence? Malkin's fingers strayed to the trigger. Twice he was about to fire, but did not dare. Through fear of the Governor? The Governor, standing somewhat back on the pier, was paying no attention either to us or to what was happening above. Williamson nudged me with his elbow. He had taken off his cap and I saw uneasiness on his prematurely-lined forehead. Our eyes met. In the sky tropic-birds were writing a prediction we could not understand. But we were aware of the drama of it . . . and between us, too, there hovered an incommunicable message.

"Queer . . . Those are queer birds," Williamson said. "They seem to be waiting and waiting . . . Waiting for what? They're not the same ones that follow ships when there's death on board, are they?"

"They're tropic-birds," Malkin growled. "Cut the talk!"

His neck swelled and his face grew even thicker. He walked toward us. His eye fell on me, then left me for the two Negroes, standing a little apart. He had picked on them as his whipping-boys ever since my run-in with him. He did not go on; he could not. He was at the end of his rope. He turned away, yet he had to make some positive gesture. I could feel that. Was he not Authority that did not dare let itself be imposed upon without losing face?

"You . . . your birds . . . your talk, your ugly mugs—you all make me sick."

He hesitated for a second, then suddenly triggered a burst. Afterwards he stood quite straight, his back slightly arched—grotesque.

A feeling of liberation swept over us from the other guards, aroused by the shots. Greenglass shook his head twice—the brightness of his eyes restored in a freckled expanse. Bentley, momentarily rigid among a group of statues, moved heavily, shifted his feet, puffed out his cheeks and spat.

"Hell!"

We all stared at Malkin. He withstood our glance. His back was still arched. He had put down his gun and was brandishing a cane. He passed close to me and I mechanically protected my belly, the only thing that stopped him from hitting me. (I also intercepted a warning look from O'Hara.) Malkin grabbed Jeffy-Quixote, who looked thinner than ever.

"Can't stand you niggers, never could. . . ."

Hate made him tremble; perhaps it was his way of controlling himself. The unfortunate Quixote looked sideways at Hughes, showing the whites of his eyes in an appeal for help, but Sancho was looking fixedly at his own feet.

"They used to call me the bulldozer. Don't get the idea that I'm old, Mac! I'll show you a few things. The easy life on board's finished. I don't know what they're planning for you, but I've got some ideas of my own. Jailbirds with time on their hands make me puke . . ."

He shifted his cane to his other hand. He would have happily used it for something more than a toy. A gesture, *that* authoritative gesture, the prison atmosphere restored here, and the world would return to normal; the immaculate birds would be merely in-

offensive white birds. Was not that what he needed, to shake off the sudden strength of that clandestine island, to enter it as master and to live there from then on beneath that first, intangible presence? But there was not the least motive for brutality. No one made a misstep. It was beyond our strength.

“Get in line!” (With a gesture he asked permission of O’Hara, who agreed weakly.) “Behind me! We’ll have some discipline. Get a move on, I’m warning you. Come on—*move!* You’ve been getting rusty on that damned tub. On the double—to the barracks! Or I’ll blow my top! And don’t get tough with me. George Malkin has known quite a few tough guys before your time.”

Over there the women had undoubtedly been given a similar order, for they too picked up their bundles and fell into line. One of them began to laugh nervously. Her laugh was loud, very loud. I could hear her from where I stood. It was a sin in that enormous silence. A guard slapped her on the shoulder. She laughed louder, as though he were tickling her. He raised his fist and she ran awkwardly to the back of the line.

O’Hara mopped his forehead and set his cap straight, the peak well down over his eyes. All his importance summed up in that gesture.

“We’ve wasted too much time already!” And his voice took on a necessary harshness.

“March!” ordered the guards as they spread out.

We did not obey. We were watching the Governor. He had finally turned his back on the sea and was coming toward us.

“One moment, if you please. I have something to say to them.”

He was brusque, almost aggressive. If anyone had told me then that he despised his staff I would have believed it. They looked at him in amazement. Malkin tapped the inside of one shoe with his

cane. The Governor looked attentively at the guards for a few seconds, as though reviewing them. Was he defying them, or was he, on the contrary, trying to conciliate them?

He left them and came forward. His voice barely softened to speak to us, and yet in spite of his cutting tones and almost-theatrical stiffness, I felt he was making some effort at communion with us. How shall I put it? Something paternal seemed to emanate from him that he could not or would not entirely conceal. Yet at the same time he was a man ruled by an inflexible passion, a will that nothing would ever subdue.

"My friends," he said, "you belong to the society that has judged you, to your country. I represent it, and in me your sentence continues. Yet here you will have a new life that no prisoner before you has ever lived. With me you will be part of an experiment that will make you into different men and different women, essentially different from what you have hitherto been. It is those new men and those women I want to welcome—those men and women whom I should like to call my children."

That word, when he spoke it, was offensive. Worse—it hurt, with its two over-emphasized, heavy syllables. Did he realize this? He smiled as though to weaken the effect, but his smile was 'so unnatural! He does not know how to smile, I thought. He is a man who is never free of himself. Immediately it seemed to me that he enclosed himself behind a wall. He spoke from behind a wall.

"I intend to overlook your past," he continued. "Whatever you may have done or not done, your errors, your omissions, your gravest crimes do not interest me. In my eyes you are all merely guilty people. It is only as of today that I know you and see you. You must understand that you exist for me only in relation to the mission entrusted to me, to certain studies, certain tests that will be

carried out on you—that I am ordered to prepare. All this will take place in due time. Meanwhile you will be free here, as free as circumstances permit, free and dignified, with a dignity that in the last resort will depend on yourselves. No one will force you, no one will require routine or fixed work from you, nothing, nothing at all. Free . . . And respected, too, on condition that you respect your own persons.”

Once again he looked long at the jailers. This was the first time I had heard him. That voice reverberated along my nerves. Greenglass twitched, and was suddenly revealed to me with new clarity. His freckled face was no longer that of a sad little weasel-nosed clown. He had changed before my eyes. He was not a guilty prisoner who had repented, but Greenglass as he once must have been, passionately interested in electricity, ashamed of his ferret-like nose and freckles, who had one day somehow avenged himself for those defects. We all saw, deeply within each other, the image each presented of his new destiny, and under this new aspect we beheld and followed the Governor. We understood matters more clearly than we had on the top step of the jetty.

The white birds let themselves drop lower, seemed to swoop. He had signalled them . . . No, no, I was losing my mind! It was to the women that he had signalled. They moved toward him. The girl with the hysterical laugh came last, a jailer pushing her.

“Listen to me, all of you, listen carefully. There are men and women here. You will be neighbors. You will be separated, and yet to a certain extent you will be together. Between you there will be only a barbed-wire fence. You will see each other every day and talk to each other. That is as it should be.”

He stressed the words.

“That is as it should be. It forms part of a given situation, in

respect to very definite problems. But do not, I warn you in all good faith, try to get over the obstacle. Not only will the guards shoot at sight, but the whole of the central portion is strongly electrified. I hope I shall not have to regret any death during my stay." (He paused, briefly looked away for an instant, then caught us once more in a glance as cold and consuming as the flame of an acetylene torch.) 'Why all this?' you will ask. Such a question can hardly be avoided, can it? Why absence and presence at once?"

He paused again. Would he reply? All at once he seemed again to be almost gentle, paternal. "Well, that's how things are! I am not obliged to give you any explanations."

He grew excited, but in a curious way. Even in his emotion, whether feigned or genuine, his speech was stilted.

"You should rather consider that today you have the opportunity of redeeming yourselves, of becoming once more honorable in the eyes of your country. Yes, yes! Certain circles over there, those in authority—those who *are* America—have their eyes on you. For them you are the key to a world . . . almost . . . to another world than the one that allowed you to slide into evil, and which sentenced you. A peaceful world at last—yes, peaceful! It is for the sake of peace that you are here on this island with me—so that one day there may be peace between men . . . men plunged into fear and then saved from their demons."

. . . His voice grew louder, but I was no longer listening to him. He had folded his hands, just as on that evening on board when the *Harrymount* sailed over the horizon of his will. Two long notes sang out and my soul ran, ran after them, ran after their echo. Where were they leading me? I followed them, I panted after them and still followed them. Was it toward the past, toward some resounding and tense day in the past when that man had taken

power? Or toward the future, toward a dream, a dark red star whose fiery satellites we were?

From the flock of tropic-birds returning from the peak, now at treetop level, a cry came, a stab of stone, falling on his hands . . .

That cry, that sign of life—how I had sought it! Earlier I would have welcomed it. Now it exploded the very freedom held out to us, those women at once offered to us and refused. And how quickly freedom corroded! Everything was being built on a crumbling rock. That whiteness, that death over us, locked its ring; nothing would break it.

I became aware, in a wave of cold, in a shudder throughout all my being, that the Governor's words had not brought me the least hope—had, in fact, terrified me. There was going to be some unspeakable exchange. Greenglass again had his hunted-weasel look. But perhaps I was attributing my own formless anguish to him. God, if I could believe, live! In vain I searched the faces around me; they were made of ice. And it hurt me even more to find the same wretched rigidity among the women. It took all grace from them—they were old, old mummies. The girl who laughed burst out again and I detested her.

And the bird cried again, and again the pallor of the pale hands received the cry. I could have sworn it was the bird who flew at the center of the flock with the most rapid wing-beats. If only it would be silent! Enough, enough! . . . God and the Devil were fighting in him, around him, around me, in everything, in the smells and colors of the sea we had crossed—and they were grappling together on the threshold of Eden. Who would triumph? Would we not be destroyed by this sham battle in which we were the stakes and also the battleground? As I thought of this I understood what it was in the Governor that paralyzed me: that same struggle between the

kindness of the apostle and a black determination, both of which existed in him, and it was a suspension in which truth and life were two, in which duality, with the shadows it bred, was the law. It was as though I had been swept away by a green wave, with Leviathan at the bottom, carried on to annihilation . . .

We set off in disorder toward our barracks. They were separated from the women's dwelling—a single, long, white building—by a line of barbed wire that until then had been hidden from us by the trees.

The four thicknesses of the fence cut the valley almost exactly in two. We were moved by an instinct to rebel. We thought our conduct would exasperate our guards; but if we had listened more carefully to our thoughts we would have kept in line, keeping at least an illusion of protection, a pretense of order against the unforeseen.

Those women . . . There. Flesh and blood, and so near!

But was it not around them that the ineluctable terror would take shape? Were they not its instrument? Oh yes, that was it; they were the bait.

They were the bait. I knew it!

CHAPTER XI

The picture

I retain of that disembarkation is not at all the same. However, I should also have to dwell on too many details to correct it, and now it is all so far away! I shall merely point out that my men and I certainly did not have the grotesque attitude attributed to us. My drama, on that beach, near that pink cement jetty, was different from anything the prisoner could imagine.

Land had scarcely been sighted when the Governor summoned us to the officers' mess and gave us our orders. Again I saw the piercing stare, almost cruel in its intensity, that had already struck me so forcibly. The prisoners—according to his orders—were to be left to themselves, free to act as they pleased both day and night.

"Men and women?"

"Men and women, Mister O'Hara. They will be separated by a barbed-wire fence—a very solid one, don't worry, and electrified in the bargain. Apart from that I want them to be free, as I say. Free to see and speak to each other."

"But . . ."

"Yes—everything else you have thought of as well, Mister O'Hara. That was what I meant. Why not?"

"Why not, indeed?"

I found it difficult to remain calm. What were we undertaking? He acted as though this were all perfectly natural, but I could feel his will working on me, on us, his presence as compelling as a magnet. Of course he knew he would be obeyed; how could we have refused? But that was not enough. He meant to be followed. His eyes had not left me. He possessed the art of domination.

"You were recruited for a very special task, were you not? You were warned. If it had been a question of the same old humdrum routine, Mister O'Hara, would it have been necessary to call on a man of your self-possession and experience?"

I was in his power and could not free myself. He was so much stronger than us all! Like a great cat . . .

"A man of your self-possession," he continued, "and men of trust, like your men, were needed. Don't ever forget, I beg you, that here you will serve your country as valuably as if you were defending her in battle. Oh yes! Without the help of all of you, without your discreet but effective surveillance, without your protection, really, how could I carry out my mission? I must have order among those people and at the same time the true appearance of freedom: two contradictory things you will have to reconcile. You see that your task is far from being negligible or easy. What happens on this island will be followed with great interest in high places. The results of the experiment are eagerly awaited. You have too much sense of discipline to ask me what they may be."

I tried with all my strength to shake off this hold, to see clearly; I could not. He was the master, and he was so without question. Even Malkin, so quick to be roused, like a rhinoceros, was silent. And yet I would not, I could not in these circumstances, give up my right to criticize. I would have felt that I was being false to

everything I had been. I protested—weakly, I admit—that it was inhuman to allow acquaintanceship between men and women who were destined never to come together, that it was destructive of all morale, and moreover that it amounted to encouraging the most dangerous excitement.

"I suppose," he said shortly, "that if necessary you could control the disorder? What the devil, you have a salary to earn, a contract to fulfill. As for the excitement, as you call it, who knows if it is not one of the keys to the situation, if it is not deliberately sought—so long as there is a certain amount of discipline, of course. Your mistake is to look on these people as ordinary prisoners. They are not! No longer! Since they were chosen they have become something else. Protagonists. Men and women who are witnesses, if you prefer."

He had become heated. Now he was calm. He asserted that he had expected our objections and did not despise them, and that he would probably have had the same scruples were he in our position. But he gave us his word of honor that the projected undertaking had incalculable importance for the United States.

"A scientific experiment?" (The question inflamed me.)

"Yes, in a certain way."

As though to blot out what he had just said, he immediately reminded me that we were under military authority and were not permitted, any more than he was, to argue or comment.

Would those men and women meet one day? Here? Without the fence? This was another question that had begun to nag at me.

He replied that in his opinion it was probable, but that a decision would be made later. How would this help the United States? He retreated behind the rule of secrecy, suddenly embarrassed; and

again, more strongly this time, he emphasized that we were under military authority.

I asked: "If these people are going to get together, why should they not do so now?" He replied that preparation was needed for this, and his eyes again gleamed with that violent light that disturbed me, a light at once sad and dominating. He added that for the moment we must be satisfied with this explanation, that he had told us all he could, and that the attention of the scientific world of the United States was fixed on us. I asked him nothing about the preparations he had mentioned. A kind of cowardice had seized me. Perhaps there were some things it was better not to know.

When the prisoner attributes our undoubted uneasiness to the fantastic birds of the Island—and there were, in fact, hundreds of them . . . or to the strange country, or to the presence of the unexpected, he is wrong. The cause lay much deeper . . .

When he writes, too, that we heard the Governor's speech with lethargy, he is again mistaken. It was the voiceless panic growing in him and his companions that shook me, the air with which they greeted the announcement of their freedom and the proximity of the women.

The idea of a crushing malediction weighing them down, an idea that had already crossed my mind aboard ship, returned even more clearly. Those faces knew. Those faces reflected the whole of a catastrophe to come.

Toward noon I had gone to take charge of the women prisoners in the Harrymount. Pretty poor specimens. Most of them, according to the records, were sneak thieves. For the first time in my life as a jailer I was dealing with women, and for the first time I felt embarrassed in the presence of the guilty. I could not say exactly what I observed in them, whether it was anxiety, or sluttishness, or

anguish. But anxiety, sluttishness, anguish were their way of life. It came too naturally from them—and my heart ached for them. When, by chance, this was concealed in the eyes of one or another of them, it was replaced by sad, pitiful defiance or the offer of dishonorable complicity.

What did those women see me as? I was a jailer, of course, but what else? A man who was taking them to other men for a single base purpose, like a pimp? What did they expect of me? And why did I suddenly think of my daughter when I was with them, as though needing a contrast? Why, when the disembarkation was finished, could I not dismiss that thought, and why did it haunt me all through the night as we were getting settled? Why, through all the questions from my men to which I could not reply, did I see my daughter, their daughters—their children?

My daughter who every day, invisibly, now reproaches me. That man and his testament . . .

CHAPTER XII

Night began

to fall when we had hardly finished moving into the barracks. We seemed to hear death singing in the electric transformer of the barracks; naming us, one after the other, as the current travelled along the barbed wire.

We were assigned to three buildings, each about fifty yards from the other in a square of eucalyptus trees where shrill, giant cicadas were forever buzzing. Was it them that I could see here and there in the leaves, slightly phosphorescent, or some other insects? With me, apart from the usual little group—Mortensen and Schneider, Greenglass, Williamson—there were Bentley and the two Negroes.

Dusk came cautiously, as though it were being embroidered on the sky. In the whole of the east and the north were long grey threads. The eucalyptus gave me a headache. Other presences besides the cicadas—but like them, faintly luminous—could be seen in the trees, in the plants and on the rocks, and I felt lost. The absence of guards weighed on me, as though my soul had been mortgaged for freedom from them. For the first time in years I was not being watched, protected by that fact, as night fell. It was like being

naked. The darkness was a gully I could not cross alone. For too many years other eyes had scanned the night for me and made it safe for my steps. Here was a fleet of nightmares, contradicted by pleasant dreams, just as menacing for being impossible, and at every moment the smell of the eucalyptus became stronger and the insects brighter. Guards—come back, for God's sake! Reassure me! Chase the demons and the spirits! . . . But we had been given a meal in the dining hall, near the jailers' barracks, and then they had left us. A little later O'Hara had made a whirlwind inspection, and that was all. [NOTE BY J. O'HARA: *Whirlwind, I admit. I was suddenly afraid of those men.*]

There was a rapid mingling of colors as evening arrived, and for a moment the land was at war with itself, darkness against tenderness, illuminated, almost devoured by flashes of light that passed as quickly as a thought. The conquering obscurity squatted down between the stones, on the hot sand. And then a blessed thing happened. I cannot call it a noise—it was made of dozens and dozens of different songs, shrill, quavering or fluting cries, like ripples in a stream, twitterings, soft scrapings, even bells. The birds were passing from day to night: a church whose members achieved God at the top of their voices. The sound undulated in the slight breeze, broke off sharply, began again. The garland of birds; momentarily torn, mended itself; the scarf, winding around a leafy shoulder, hung slack and then floated out to attach itself to something else. Near the peak the sound roared; as it fell toward the sea it grew weaker, and among the mangroves on the beach, in the thickets already given over to evil spells, it was barely a rustling. A man was suddenly cured of everything in advance, but also re-sentenced into infinity. Following the song a smell of sand rose up. All the afternoon it had slept, remained humble. Now it reigned

in its turn. It was so unexpected! It covered me. It absolved me. I was paying for a crime greater than myself; I was made innocent. It prefigured a freedom that would be real in spite of what was already drawing near in its shadow. It was a young, clean odor—the island was reborn—and the smell of the sea cut across it, like a narrow corridor, towards the sentinel-peak.

I went outside. Williamson was waiting for me. How could we have slept? Here and there groups were wandering, like us, near the barracks, carrying on low-voiced discussions without daring to go too far from each other. Once I was outside, the breath of the eucalyptus enveloped me like a scorching mantle. I was surrounded by large, bright yellow flies; then they left. For a short while we paced up and down, Williamson and I, on a kind of terrace linking the three buildings. Then we went farther, almost halfway to the barbed-wire fence.

Perhaps ten minutes went by without our speaking.

“Do you understand any of this?” he asked at last. “Bentley can go to hell. To hear him you’d think everything was going to go like clockwork. I left him, just now.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. A little patience and we would have it nice and easy! He can’t keep his big mouth shut . . . I left him. He wanted me to go with him to the fence . . . What about you? What do you think?”

“Me? . . . As far as I’m concerned anything may happen. But there’s a trap here somewhere.”

I did not say that “death” waited. I was trying to forget that word. I thought of the piano on board and I shivered. There were so many things in preparation! The Governor had set them in

motion, they were gliding toward us from every side like jellyfish, and they would arrive in their own time, in secrecy.

"An experiment?" said Williamson. "What the hell sort of experiment do you make on jailbirds? They drag us this way or that, nothing more. What does a prisoner want? He only hopes to escape for two days, three days, four, that's all. It reminds me of when I had my printing press and was printing political leaflets in Manila. Every evening I asked myself: 'Will they get me tonight—or tomorrow?' I got bald just from waiting for them and holding them off at the same time. But that didn't stop them from turning up one fine morning, with a smile, coming with a smile, mind you, without hurrying, like Sunday coming after Saturday, quite naturally."

He tried to laugh.

"It's the same story here. Sunday follows Saturday and if I had any hair left to lose I think it would fall out in the sea air."

I was silent. What could I tell him? Two hands were guiding the night, that first night and all the others that would come, and they would make the darkness around us ferment until it burst. How could one foresee events? "You are the key to a world," the Governor had declared, and his hands, commenting, had designed a rebus, a puzzle—a line of crystal and a line of blood and the two lines finally crossed. What was that world? What could it be? A one-day world destined to be destroyed along with its builders? A world that was damned? Why else would we have been chosen as its pioneers?

"Forget it," I said. "What's the use of beating our brains out . . ."

"And yet," Williamson went on, "I would like to know the idea behind this piece of crap, I'd like to know how it will all work out."

He was thinking of the women. Could anyone think of anything else? I, too, was with them, but by common consent we did not speak of them. It was from them that danger was signalling to us. Danger had assumed the face of a woman, the smell of a woman.

"Have you spoken to Bentley?"

"No."

"Sometimes I wonder if he isn't right. And then I think it's impossible."

. . . A judgment-hall. The Governor took his seat there. And it was not the old guards but the women who were testifying against us. In spite of themselves. Because of the temptations with which they were filled. Tender, tenderly seductive allies of death.

We went on walking for a few minutes. We could not help it, we were going toward the barrier. It incited us . . . The silence was now complete. A slight breeze wafted the smell of eucalyptus upwards. The night was becoming nervous.

"No," I said, "don't let's go there. Not tonight. Let things settle down a bit first. Everything's still too raw in me."

"Oh, I don't care that much about it! Of course we must try and size up the situation first. It was Bentley who was taking me over there just when you came out."

"Well, pals, everything going all right?"

It was Bentley. We had not heard him approach. Was he returning from his exploration, or had he not gone the whole way, had he been unable to?

"They're already in bed, the darlings! Not a light showing." He leered. "But we'll get there, we'll get there yet, I promise you. And when we do, their pants will be as hot as ours!"

"Scram, Bentley," said Williamson, moving away.

Bentley heaved a comic sigh. His hand fell on my neck. It was damp; it made me think of a bull in heat.

"What did you get out of that Easter sermon? A lot of hot air, I can tell you—his steering wheel's all cockeyed. Freedom? That's fine. But freedom wrapped up in barbed wire. He said so and I've seen it. And a good charge of electricity running through too, if he means what he says. All that between the girls o' my heart and me, like the song says. What do they want? For us to jerk off in front of them? That's not polite, is it? All right. Which means, in my opinion, that that barbed-wire fence won't be standing much longer!"

His laugh grated and grated—contradicted, up above, by an impassive Southern Cross.

Williamson moved off, turned and beckoned to me. But Bentley was holding me in an iron grip.

"Don't waste your time with Williamson. You can't get the time of day from him."

"Leave me alone."

"Are you chicken too?"

"What about you?" I growled. "Is everything going the way you want?" This in defiance of that heavy, sweating hand, which grew heavier.

"Why not? I tell you we'll get at those women, as sure as you're standing here. Perhaps not tomorrow or the next day, but soon, that's a cinch."

His fingers sank into my flesh. He was intensely excited.

"Come on, Bentley, let go of me!"

He shook his head. The half light made him still more impressive, more defined in outline, a bear that could smell a warm female bear nearby.

"What are *you* doing out here?" he challenged.

"Nothing."

"Then get the hell out of here."

"I'm allowed to stay up, and I'm going to stay up. For years I haven't had the chance."

"D'you think you can stop me?" he went on, angrily. "Are you trying to be first?"

"Oh, balls!"

He was too different from me. Everything separated us. His size and strength merely confirmed the differences. I did not know much about him. A mechanic, occasionally a pimp, on one occasion a stupid murderer—"without meaning to kill," he explained. He said too that he was a Communist (but perhaps that was by way of getting the rest forgotten, or had he really become one, finally, in despair, in an attempt to redeem himself, to "be" something in his own eyes?). At that moment we were as far removed from each other as if we had been living at opposite ends of the earth.

He had calmed down and let go of me.

"Listen, I'm an old hand at this game. It's been a long time, bud, since I've bothered my head with questions. A hell of a long time! What with one thing and another I wasn't even seventeen when I started my tricks. I've got prison in my blood. This'll surprise you, but it gave me a kind of common sense. I see all of you guys arguing, fluttering, panicking. Get with it! One thing is certain, once prison's got you it means that death doesn't want you—their death, I mean, legal death. The whole point of the thing is, nothing worse can happen to you."

He was talking with unusual calm, without raising his voice, childishly and pleasantly.

"Don't deny it . . . Besides, you're precious to your jailers. I'm

used to that. You see, they need you. They have a right to treat you like shit and believe me, bud, they won't let that go down the drain! They nurse it. It's sacred. Put yourself in their place. They look at you and they feel strong, even if a cancer is chewing up their bellies. They smash you and their pain goes away. You're what they need, their pal as well as the guy they piss on. The jailer loves his prisoners all right, almost as much as his wife or his floozies. It'd take a lot to make him do something really bad to you. Why should he kill you? A guard in his right mind—especially old pros, like the ones here—why he's the lowest and least dangerous thing there is. Do you shake in front of the Governor? You're scum! He's only one more jailer, as much as he may try to act like a big shot."

His right hand was back on my shoulder. It twitched from time to time.

"Scum for scum, I'd rather have this scum . . ."

He broke off. He wanted agreement. His hand pressed with all its weight.

"Christ, yes! I don't know where you were. Where I was doing my stretch it was pretty tough. I was just saying that prison is a sign that death turned its back on you. Believe me, at first I'd rather have croaked. I begged for death—me, Ronald Bentley, with my big talk. I couldn't stand it, it was too much. I used to cry like a baby, like a dame, particularly at first, from madness and because I was so damned tired. You can make fun of me, but death would have meant getting back my head and my body."

He pressed, pressed . . .

"You're hurting me!"

"And then when I set foot on this lousy island I breathed again. I didn't care what came next. If I'd been told to strangle you all,

one after the other, I'd have done it. I was like a man who's just gotten over a disease and won't have it again at any price. I watched the women—and I was in the air at last. Where there are women, things *have* to be better. It can't be the same as where there are only men. D'you see?"

He hesitated.

"Of course, there was that speech, and there they are."

His voice had changed.

"Just now I said that one day or another we'll be on top of them. But I'm not sure. Maybe not. Maybe we've been thrown into a worse prison than the others. If there was a solid wall between us it wouldn't be the same thing. No hope, O.K. But here there's only the fence, we're allowed to look at each other, talk to each other. As for me, what the hell! The Bentleys have never been very bright . . ."

I freed myself. His strength had gone.

"It's too friggin' much! Really it's too much," he whined. "Or else it's not enough."

I was walking very quickly. He did not follow me. Should I go down to the sea? The tide must be very low. Someone in my childhood, an uncle, had drawn a picture for me of those southern islands where thousands of phosphorescent flakes come out to play at night, like phantom eyes, in the seaweed on the beach. He was dead now. I felt that his eyes had closed on that last vision. Surely the sand was studded tonight with little greenish cold lights? So many fires of death.

"Hey! Where are you going?"

I quickened my step. Should I find Williamson? But I had nothing to say to him. Perhaps Bentley, Bentley the philosopher, was right. But had not the other Bentley just upset everything?

I started. Shadows were approaching.

At once I turned back, as though afraid that they were going to catch me trying to escape. And yet I had a right to be there. The shadows took shape. They were five and did not speak. Five guards. They walked in single file along the barbed-wire fence. And on the other side five more marched at the same speed in the women's camp.

I was shaken with pain, and smelled once more the harsh odor of the eucalyptus. The Governor had appeared about forty yards from the jailers. [NOTE BY J. O'HARA: *He had insisted, very late, on this appearance of inspection. Did he want to go among the men and was he afraid of them, as I had been afraid during my afternoon round? Did he imagine that they would already be posted like sentries in front of the barrier? Or perhaps he wanted to check the obstacles for the last time . . . We went in and the electric current was switched on.*] I could see him clearly against the sky, which was still light. His back bent, his head low, his hands behind his back. What was he looking for? What was he dreaming of . . . of whom was he dreaming? Of us, certainly; of those women. But what was the face of his dream? He was walking so slowly! The air must weigh heavily around him, like air before a tropical storm. Go back, I beg you! Not tonight! Tonight, at least, this first night, give us peace! Was he inspecting the wire fence? Did his presence summon God or Satan? At all costs I must go back to Williamson, prevent him from crossing that man's path . . . but it was as if I were nailed to the spot.

I saw his little shadow disappearing, rapidly, and the slightly staggering shadow of Bentley.

CHAPTER XIII

When day came

the whole length of the barrier stretched out before us. Of course I had looked at it several times the day before, but without really seeing it. My head had still been spinning—what with the birds, the women, the effort of trying to guess my fate. Now the barrier came alive. It emerged, watchful, from the morning mists, like a sentry. It was much more than an obstacle between the women and ourselves. It was a presence, a kind of being that wanted to keep us constantly in its power, that would interpret all our gestures, our slightest emotions, and immediately report them to God . . . At our first meeting on board the *Bounty Pride* O'Hara arose over the scorched fields of the Bible to confound me. As I gazed at the barrier I experienced the same feeling as then—that I had been delivered up with no hope of pardon. Like him, even more than for him, the barrier prolonged my sentence to eternity.

Even if we had not been warned that its central part, which was separated from the rest, would be electrified, the fence would have been impassable. It was too thick and too high, too straight

as well—everything had been thought of. From their own barracks near the jetty—which was protected by a grille, also electrified—the jailers could sweep its whole length with two machine guns that had quickly been mounted. At the south end the barrier entered the water, and at the north end as well, having made a detour to left and right at the foot of the peak which it singled out from the terrifying, pointed rocks. Someone—Bentley, probably—claimed that at night a good swimmer could get around it and reach the women by sea. That was just talk! It went much too far out for that, right out to the channel, which we had seen to be infested with sharks. No, there was no hope! It was upright, very upright and massive. It was an offense to the countryside; it gave the landscape the lie. An opening had been made in it, not far from the jailer's barracks, an iron door in an iron frame. It was so solidly and so completely bolted that Death would be the only one to use it on the day the two hearts of that valley, now pulsing separately, were united. No one else would ever pass through it . . .

Had this forbidding monument been raised solely on our account? Or had there formerly been a prison camp, from the time of the Japanese? Or had other women, other men, before ourselves, undergone what was in store for us? That was the answer! I would search the trees and the stones. There I would find names, a message persisting in spite of the tropical storms, and I would know my horizon and my road.

Before it was even dawn Bentley had shaken me. "Come with me." As on the previous evening he was like a bear searching for a female whose scent was carried on the breeze. "Come on . . ." But we did not go out. Seeing the fog I drew back and he did not insist. He was probably too sensitive himself to the threats of

that milky world to go any farther. As a result his anger had not lessened. He did not understand us, he grumbled. We were weaklings and yellow. He had asked ten times for someone to go with him, and no one had come forward. Was it possible? When we woke up hadn't we heard something yelling in our heads, hadn't we thought that at the same time the women over there were waking up, returning to the world with their real flesh, with the thrills hidden between their thighs, and all the warm promises in their eyes? How could we stay here? We were sure as hell different from him.

"You're a fine bunch! You've got lead in your pants!"

"Oh, shove it!"

"O.K., O.K. But what do you need to get you moving?"

"Go by yourself, then! What d'you want *us* for?"

"Some pals you are. They don't make them like you any more."

He left the window for the door, went down the three steps, then came in again. He was just as ill at ease as I was, as all of us were. Might not that mist in the valley hide a trap? In its domain of silence, sand and dew, Death was prowling. In a vague way we were waiting for the jailers. Only they could give us back the right to life.

"That's right! They'll spit in your eye and you'll say pretty please. D'you really think everything's going to go easy with us?"

Morning was slowly appearing and gave promise of a bright day. First an opal light, then powdered pearl, then . . . And yet night was resisting. Everything green stayed in its arms, fragile and attenuated. First the birds escaped, species after species. Red feathers in a fluting sound, then white, then grey in a kind of stifled laugh near the beach. The various voices, mingling at first, gradually separated. All those singers, those mockers, those street criers once

more became individuals. Following their example we too began to exist, each inside his own body. During the night we had been as though one, conglomerate—a single face as sentry against the shadows. Had we slept? I had dozed off just before Bentley shook me. He was the only one alive . . . and he would break out, I could feel it. But he could not make up his mind to take the plunge, and that humiliated him.

“Listen, we’ll have an agreement,” he said suddenly to the Negroes. “You come with me to the barrier, and after that I’ll be your pal through thick and thin. If anything goes wrong, you call on me and I’ll come. You’ll need me, I know.”

Hughes, who was next to him, looked at him for a moment without answering.

“Yes, Hughes, it’s you I’m talking to.”

“No,” said Hughes.

“Why not?”

“Go to hell.” Hughes shrugged, rose from his stool and went to sit near Jeffy. Bentley followed him, the anger in his voice now more evident.

“What’s got into your heads? Don’t you understand that Bentley isn’t afraid? I just need a friend! Just so there are two of us if we happen to meet one of the old guys from the barracks and it’s not the right time to be out walking. If there are two or three of you you’re never so badly treated as if you’re alone, I’ve learned that.”

He leaned toward Hughes.

“You’re not going to make me believe you’ve got nothing under your fly, nothing at all, when there are women right under your eyes?”

“Cut it out,” said Hughes.

Did his eyelids flicker nervously for a moment?

"Take a good look at yourself, nigger, look into your nigger soul . . ."

"Lousy bastard!" cried Hughes.

He stood up and made a sign to Jeffy, who joined him. They both left the building. But they remained on the tin-roofed porch, next to each other, their shoulders touching. They obviously did not want to leave. The whites would never forgive them if they got there first. Here they were part of the mass. The protection of the group reached out to them, softening the perils of the morning valley. There was no sign of life in the other two barracks, but no doubt there were faces watching from behind the steamy windows.

"You're all washed up!" Bentley shouted back from the door. "I'd have it out with you, but you're not worth it. I'll go alone, but there'll be trouble later, I promise you. I won't forget that you guys chickened out."

Now day had brought back three-quarters of the world and its reassuring shapes. Large canaries, very yellow and very shrill, filled the eucalyptus with song. They were the soul of that piercing odor. The mangroves bore large sea-green wounds—evidences of a sweet, satanic passion. The jailers were still not to be seen. Had they paced the barbed-wire fence all during the night, or had they gone in after their first inspection was over?

I went through the door in my turn. Suddenly I had found the room suffocating. Jeffy seemed to be brooding. Over some insult from Bentley, or over that proclamation of innocence he was always dinning into our ears? As though we were judges! Hughes was far away.

Bentley appeared behind me. He took my arm and I could not free myself.

"This time I'll break your jaw. And don't think I don't mean it."

A tropic-bird had begun to describe long, regular circles. A single bird whose whiteness seemed checked by the dawning, hesitant sky. After a few turns it flew off toward the peak, which, with its collar of mist, seemed itself to be moving . . .

"Come on, don't get me steamed up!" said Bentley as I tried to force him to let go.

Schneider hesitated a moment, then joined us, together with Mortensen. Now Bentley was strong. He swept us off. The Negroes shrugged their shoulders and looked at each other. Still concealing the women's long barracks, which lay somewhat lower than ours, was the mist, a cube of white cloud. But the sun was whittling away at all its corners, and the canaries were drilling at its foundations.

"The girls will soon come out to look at the morning. It'll be nice to say hello to them. Nice and profitable, if tomorrow turns out as I think."

The tropic-bird was still turning. Birds with black caps and scarlet wings—cocks-of-the-rock, perhaps—were chasing each other between the stones, like a hail of firebrands.

"You can stuff all those speeches," said Mortensen. "I wouldn't be surprised if this barrier thing is just set up so that we can get slapped down or even shot."

"Crap!" said Bentley. "What crime are we committing?"

"O'Hara and that other guy will decide whether there's a crime or not."

"I don't give a good goddamn."

"Listen, Bentley, you're making a big mistake . . ."

Bentley's determination drove him on. He advanced with rapid strides, dragging me on one side and Mortensen on the other. Schneider followed as best he could.

"What's the crime, tell me that! What the hell's the crime, for God's sake?"

His voice was hoarse, reverberating at certain words.

"From the very first moment I knew we'd go there, or else they'd come to us. That's what'll happen, I swear. I know those guys—cops, guards, all the rest. They can't keep the machine going without oil and they wouldn't have put us here to sweat it out in front of each other if they hadn't some idea in their heads. If they wanted to push us into the arms of those dames they wouldn't have done anything else. You start with words and then . . . then nature takes its course."

I went on with no more resistance. Bentley talked and talked, and as he did strange warmth sucked up rainbows towards the sun. I looked back; the barracks were full of life. There was still no sign of the guards. I said: "Bentley, there's some trap behind all this . . ." and the violet in the rainbow swallowed up the other colors. But Bentley just shook his head.

A line of low bushes grew along the path to the barrier. Beyond them was smooth sand for about fifty yards. The bushes were all in flower—large, heavy pale-blue flowers like bells. A flock of tiny birds was busy on them, uttering little cries like the click of knitting needles. When we were close they flew away in a cloud of rose and russet. Some young ones fell on the grass. Schneider picked one up. He immediately dropped it. "What got into me?" he muttered. "What got into me?" He stood still. "I should never have touched it."

"What's the matter with you?" asked Bentley brusquely.

"It's all crap, of course. I . . ."

"Look, what the hell's the matter with you?" Bentley repeated, raising his voice.

"I don't know." (All at once he looked a hundred years old.)

"Are you crazy or something? Look at him!"

Bentley turned back quickly.

"Goddamn fool!"

Schneider raised his eyes. Eyes like an owl's.

"When I had it in my hand I felt I should never have touched it."

"Are you an old woman, carrying on like that about a lousy bird?" said Bentley. "Here's what *I* do."

He crushed the bird with his heel. Schneider gasped.

"Stop it!" I yelled. "Stop it!"

I shoved him and he raised his fist.

"Wait!" said Mortensen. "Look . . . Look! The women . . ."

Inside me something tore like silk. There were six of them, the first group to appear. A motionless dance. Apart from them nothing existed under the pale sun. The earth was changing. It was love: all the leaves and all the stones smelled of love.

One of the women raised her hand and made a sign, and other silhouettes appeared, following her with the quivering clarity of a feverish dream. Only that woman existed; she was the soul of the others, the precursor of their reality. After a moment another stood out, smaller, rather frail, and she too entered into life. Again there was a sound of silk near me. My forehead was burning. A rotten past was wiped out. I was born again to myself. I could see myself among them, a white phantom with long, white caressing gestures. Was it true? Or was I inventing it? The phantom, fulfilled, took on consistency. On the other hand there was that

silence—that silence heavy in my head. Would I get hold of myself before reaching the barrier and its madness? Unconsciously I had longed too much for that moment; I was crushed by emotion. Last night, for the whole of that endless night, I had repeated the same enormous phrase: six years of my life for a hello of hope. And now it remained on my heart. I would never have the warmth of the sun within me in time. I would not be able to answer a sign with a sign.

Schneider stepped in front of Bentley and called a welcome, in a voice at once vibrant and broken.

“No, no!” Bentley exclaimed.

A fierce hate for Schneider possessed him. I too suddenly detested the man.

“You shit!” Bentley screamed. “I’m the first! I’m the first!”

Schneider was filching his property. Bentley grabbed Schneider by his shirt collar; it tore in his hand. Schneider was stealing that first chance that belonged to him. Without him who would have had the courage and daring? Not a single one!

With a left hook he sent Schneider spinning; then he turned to me. For a moment we faced each other. Then he shrugged his shoulders and began to run. On reaching the barrier he gripped one of the iron stakes and looked back at us. For a few seconds he seemed to me even bigger than he was, legendary. I came up. Schneider and Mortensen began to move slowly forward. Beyond, among the blue bushes, second and third groups were approaching.

Other women came out and gathered in the paved courtyard before the building; its windows had been opened. The women in front, who had come to meet us, waited. Where they were standing, having moved over to the right, as far as possible from the jailers’ square barracks, tall grass came up to their waists. They

were at the same time given and forever refused, condemned by the very happiness they offered, to be longed for only in fear and unhappiness. It was as though they were naked. Naked—and each one of those grass stems that brushed against them was myself. I lived from all of them. I pressed against the barbed wire and my blood flowed. I would show them my bleeding palms, they would like that blood, it would resemble possession. Pain was a cry toward their breasts. . . . Behind me I could hear Schneider panting. Mortensen passed to my right, his lifted arms like interminable spider's legs. On a look from Bentley, he dropped them to his side. Bentley was the master. Nothing could be done without his permission. At the same moment the second group flowed over us, then the third. In a fog, I noticed the two Negroes apart from the rest. They walked with their heads forward; they had no chins at all.

The silence left my head. There was a medicinal chill on my temples. I could hear a voice, my own voice, curiously distorted. "Count," it said. "Count them! This is too serious to be only accident. Nothing here will ever be by accident. And if it is not chance, then figure it out . . . now is the time. . . ." I counted, but I was sure of the figure beforehand. Twenty-five women. Just as we were twenty-five.

"Hey, Bentley. Bentley? . . ."

He was paying no attention to me. I looked for Williamson, Greenglass—someone to whom I could tell this. But they were too far away.

I turned automatically toward the little tower, like a watchtower, where the Governor lived. I saw him at the window. His arms were folded. . . . Then the window closed again and the curtains were drawn.

CHAPTER XIV

I told her

my name. "My name is Loa," she said. She was tall, calm. But she had retained something childlike in her face and, in fact, for me she remains a child.

I never knew her past. I never questioned her, except once, and then she did not reply. I did not feel the need to insist; we were living too much in the present for that, we were too attached to the idea of remaining there at all costs. . . . A girl without a past.

"Loa Blyth, and I don't know if there can ever be another day like this one on the whole earth."

. . . The world was suddenly instinct with the thrilling presence of God. A great rejoicing without movement or noise, half approved, half condemned; and the barrier-archangel, that metal being, would decide our fate. It took my pulse, listened to my heart—to Loa's pulse and Loa's heart. Very soon the guards would spread wings and fly and the spectral procession I had already imagined on board the *Bounty Pride* would take place. The Governor would arise with Christ's wound in his side, or with Lucifer's blasphemy of the reversed cross. . . .

"No, Loa, you are right. This has certainly never happened before. . . . I was saying to myself this morning that perhaps other women, other men like us had been here, just like us. . . . No! No one would do a thing like this twice, they would be afraid. As for me, no one has ever come into my life as you have. You changed nothing and yet everything is changed."

Would she say to herself that this was too sudden, like a cheap compliment? Ah, but that frozen wave of barbed wire created another notion of time where one had to hasten to reach truth. She smiled—a child's smile, in spite of a tinge of irony. I would have given anything for her, simply for the innocence she restored to me.

"No one? . . . Really?"

"No one like you."

"You're lying. . . . Have we such a long way ahead of us?"

"I got six years, and that wiped everything out. Before that there was no one like you, I swear."

Yet she was not one of those I had noticed at first. She had been one of the last to emerge, a good while later. How was it we were now face to face? What had urged me toward her, rather than to this one or that? I would never know. Loa. The barrier. Loa and I.

Those two groups, compact at first, had slowly scattered, like a fleet deploying, and each one had accepted a partner. Death must indeed be above us, the long, soft resonance of Death that alone could preside over the extreme order, the almost metaphysical calm in which everything had unwound. No pushing, hardly any disputes, as though we had to anticipate an event that would throw us back into our nothingness, as though we must quickly find salvation and pardon. We were in a church. For each one of us, man and woman, an indissoluble marriage was pronounced. No

one would go back on his choice. Death was the registrar—Death sitting with Joy, shoulder to shoulder in the sun.

“My name is Loa Blyth . . .”

Her voice did not jar the meditations of the cathedral. There was the same note in my voice. The same leaven of silence on both sides of the barrier. Everywhere, at the same moment, names were being exchanged, as here, promising we knew not what, perhaps only futile waiting. The same silence. Was it the music of death, like the music of the Governor? Were they alike?

“Why were you sentenced?”

She seemed to retreat.

“Must you really know?”

“Of course not,” I said gently. “I asked you just as the men asked me the first time we met, that’s all. Isn’t it part of our personality? But it’s of no importance. . . . I deserted in Korea. There are two of us deserters here. I loathed that war.”

She came back at once. The child in her came back. Death and Joy in the sun were young, too, as at the beginning of time.

“How much longer have you got to do?”

“Five years,” I said.

Why did I lie? So much more than five years! Did I think to build a temple of hope in her, and live there? It was so useless! The distant odor of eucalyptus reminded us that we would never meet elsewhere. Never.

“It’s too much. We’ll have forgotten each other.”

“And you?”

“Three years.”

The smells slapped me. Twice on the left, twice on the right. And then like the caress of a cat’s paw, the smells whispered, “You will never leave this island. This is your wedding.”

"What does it matter?" Loa went on, shaking her head. "We don't choose our own road, do we? A day like today shows us that anything may happen. A lot of things can happen in three years, in five years."

"If we last, you'll wait for me," I said emphatically. "Or I'll escape and find you."

Did she believe me? She shook her head again.

"Did you know it was us on the *Harrymount*?"

"No. We weren't even told that another ship was sailing with ours. Then when the sailors began to hint at one thing or another, they wouldn't let us talk."

"It's odd," she went on. "The first thing that we couldn't figure out when we came ashore was you men, of course. But after that, there was a smell . . . a strange smell, one that distressed and consoled you at the same time. It laid out a whole world ahead of me with a locked door at the end of it."

"Eucalyptus."

"You already knew it?"

"Vaguely."

"And now what will happen?"

I looked at her. She lived in me. Tell me, tell me we shall live! I need to believe it. Everything seems so fugitive beneath the spiky eternity of the barrier!

"What will happen?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters is to live, one with another, one through another, without questions."

To continue to see her, to love her in that labyrinth where I was lost. Yes, tell me it will last! I try to convince myself, but . . .

"Have you hurt yourself?" she asked.

"It's nothing!"

"Your hands are covered with blood."

"It's that damned fence."

I laughed, or tried to.

"I was just crazy."

Ah, if I could have held her hands, pressed them between my own! Then that blood would have belonged to her. She would have been mine in exchange, in death and beyond it. But she was too far away.

"You took such a long time to come! Why were you so long? When I think it might have been another girl instead of you!"

"Which one would you have liked?"

"I don't know. No girl more than another. Do you know that there are twenty-five of you and twenty-five of us? That's what I was doing before you came. I was counting and asking myself, why? why?"

"I counted, too," she said calmly. "Yesterday, while that man was talking. Everyone must have done the same. It was the first thing we thought of. And all last night I said that there must be something some day, that it was impossible for them to just leave us confronting each other."

"And for what reason should they have pity on us?"

"What? It would be a crime! It would be monstrous, and so useless."

"A crime against men and women, yes. But are we men and women to that man? To him we are lower than animals."

"I'm not so sure."

She was thinking, and her forehead was suddenly wrinkled.

"In a certain sense, of course, you're right. He can do what he likes with us and perhaps not even consider it cruel . . . like having fun with dogs by making them bark at the moon. But on another

level, I know—I can guess—that we are something quite different for him, that he needs our lives as men and women, that it is on our lives as men and women that his whole plan will be built. I can't explain it. It's confused and vague. And yet I can't make myself believe that his sole aim is to make us suffer. We'll pay the price, a heavy price, a horrible price, but he'll bring us together one day or another. He needs that and so do those who sent him."

"You're just hoping—it can't be."

"You think the same way I do."

How could I deny it? The smell of eucalyptus was a bridge toward her.

"What, do you think he'll do all that and then let us live happily ever after? I can't go along with such foolishness!"

I resisted as well as I could. I said to myself that I had to resist. Barely three yards between us. Six years in a cell and now three yards between me and life. Bentley's perplexed mutterings of the evening before sounded in my ears: "It's too much, or else it's not enough."

But what hovered then in that dead space, separating us, separating that island in two, making of it a great mutilated body trying desperately to come together again?

There was a low cry, then a sob, not far from me. I started. The sob was repeated—impious, a blasphemy against hope. It was Jeffy. His head was in his hands and the woman in front of him was watching him with horror and almost with terror. She was tall and thin, horse-faced—I had heard someone say her name was June Toynbee.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Hey, nigger, shut up!"

But he could not. He sobbed even more.

"Stop it."

People yelled at him from all sides. There was a movement toward him from right and left. Greenglass came running, his face red; he stopped and shrugged his shoulders. Jeffy, by his tears, had become our enemy. He was denouncing the terrible emptiness of what we were living through.

"Stop crying, for God's sake!"

"Jeffy, shut up or get the hell out of here!"

I began to loathe that man. It was unjust, since he was suffering. Perhaps his suffering would soon attack me. It was disgraceful, but I could not stop myself. One animal was in panic in front of the slaughterhouse and was dragging us with it into darkness and blood. Because of it we were once more faced with our sentence. Even Hughes, the other Negro, fought with difficulty to suppress his anger. He looked now at Jeffy, now at the woman Jeffy had chosen, with beseeching eyes, as though this despair were a racial sin and he himself was soiled by it and was asking absolution.

"Shut him up, for God's sake! It's too much . . ."

"D'you hear? Shut up, Jeffy . . . shut up . . ."

"Shut up . . ."

His sobs mounted toward the sun, and in the sun Death pushed Joy away. Joy fell and was crushed. It had no more tenacity than the little bird Bentley had squashed. A wretched little blot on the face of Time. Why was Jeffy weeping? What had he sensed, before we did? Or was he weeping over his past, or for some remnant of happiness forever lost, glimpsed in the eyes of that blanched woman facing him? She did not attempt to console him. She was upright, silent, without a gesture. She no longer had reality. Someone picked up a stone and threw it at Jeffy. It missed him, but

nearly hit her. She grew paler, and in her turn uttered a cry and hid her face.

"Bentley," someone called. "Hey, Bentley!"

"Go on, Bentley, it's your job."

"Hurry up!"

Just as beneath the whirling white birds the day before, it was now another Bentley I saw. He hesitated for some time, came forward, picked up the Negro, who did not defend himself, carried him for about twenty yards and dropped him on the ground—without any brutality.

Then Bentley turned. He was hangdog, almost suffering, another kind of brute—an uneasy brute. No less menacing than usual. He bent down, patted Jeffy's shoulder three or four times, straightened up and wiped his forehead. Was he brushing away a nightmare that rose before him? Had Jeffy wept for him, for us all? Bentley went toward the barrier again, going more slowly than when he had left it, preoccupied. Jeffy remained face down in the sand. Had he fainted? "His" woman called him, but he did not answer. She wandered for a few minutes along the barbed wire, trying to link up with one or another of her companions. No one gave her the sweet charity of a sign or a word. It was the same on our side. What could we have given her? Little by little she moved away, but she could not make up her mind to return to the hut. She sat down, away from us, on a large stone.

I went back to Loa and the wound that had opened in me with Jeffy's terror closed again. Her eyes had not left me. She appeared indifferent to the scene that had just taken place. The full movement of her breast had not altered. The blot on Time, the mutilated Joy, began insensibly to revive.

"Were you married, Loa, when . . . when it happened?"

What could that matter to me, and what difference would it make? But it would. That half-jealousy was part of life. It made the barrier seem less durable.

"No."

"Ah, good."

"Good, yes. Perhaps, I don't know . . ."

"If anything ever did happen, Loa, if we got away from here safe and sound, if you were freed and then, after that, who knows? . . . Would you be the same for me?"

She was silent. But were her eyes suddenly more brilliant? We were walking side by side in the future, in the countryside, among fresh molehills that breathed healthy desire on our feet. My arm was around her waist. She leaned against me. It was late in the afternoon. Night would fall and we would make love.

"I could have got married," she said, "and had a kid. It nearly happened. He was a good guy, a truck driver. He was a steady man and had some savings . . . I wouldn't be here."

Prevent her from regretting! Do not go back on your word! You have given yourself, do not take yourself back . . .

"But that's life," she went on. "It never shows its hand in advance."

"Who knows? Where we are now, for example . . . today?"

Did that little sensual light gleam once more in her eyes?

"This morning life showed us a way, I'm sure. We would be blind not to see it. Perhaps there's blood on it, perhaps a kind of happiness. Anyway, nothing will ever be like yesterday."

I put my question. To do so I turned away a little.

"Loa, you said just now that this barrier would not always be there. Do you really think so?"

She hesitated.

"How can I answer? Yes and no. The feeling comes and goes."

But she was full of light.

"The barrier will go. I know it now. What do the tests they talk about matter? You don't make tests on dead people. You're going to be mine, Loa, and that will be life at last."

As soon as I said it I was afraid. Should I build so much on the moment? It was madness.

And then I saw the guards.

They came in two groups, just as on the evening before. They reminded me of those jellyfish infesting the water around the landing-stage. There was the same lazy progress, the thought of movement rather than movement itself, the irresistible and slimy advent of sin into Eden. If they had run or shouted there would not have been that sensation of suffocation against which one was powerless. Had I noticed how truly old they were? Perhaps I now had that impression because I had returned to life. Against our youth was ranged age that had known and condemned everything. Into what burrow could one run to escape them? O'Hara and five guards on our side, Malkin and five others in the women's camp. They were armed, but the danger was not so much in their automatics as in their grey faces, in that air of the confessional that emanated from them. It must have been in this form that Death first entered Adam's domain.

Slowly, slowly, silently . . .

Speak, for God's sake! Swear! Curse! Fire a volley, riddle one of us with shots! This way you give no quarter, you are destroying us all.

They were as silent as algae attaching themselves forever to a coral reef.

"Did they lie to us, Loa? Did they give us this little scrap of

time together so that we would regret it for days on end? Shall we ever return here?"

One of her companions pulled her away. They all drew back. I wanted to make one last sign, but I could not. What made my arms so heavy, what fused my joints?

As old as sin in the world. . . . They were resuming possession of their property. Of a desert. Solitude walked before them, solitude followed them. "I hate you . . ." I was not even capable of that, not even master of my hate.

We had fallen into line, in spite of ourselves. Jeffy remained stretched out in the same place. Had he felt their approach by that pervasive chill? We did not dare call him. There already seemed to be a spell around him. In my eyes he had almost ceased to exist. A jailer kicked him in the ribs and he rose painfully to his knees. His face was still bathed in tears. I could hear the guard panting like a horse after a race. He pointed to the barracks. Did the Negro understand? He was still on his knees. The guard drew his foot back, ready for a second kick.

"No!" said O'Hara, in a sharper voice than usual.

He slipped his arms under Jeffy's, stood him upright at the second attempt. Then supporting him, as one supports an invalid, he led him to us. Over there the jailer spat. Another guard took aim at us and burst out laughing. . . . O'Hara was breathing quickly and with difficulty. His glance stopped at me. I tried to avoid it, but yielded. He wrapped me in pity and it was worse than any degree of anger. I was crushed under his pity . . .

He signalled to us to go inside.

CHAPTER XV

On one hand

the Governor's instructions. On the other that order, given by me around eleven o'clock, to disperse the prisoners.

What had happened? Well—brawls, the business with Jeffy being the most marked. And, as far as I was concerned, strong pressure from my men, by whom I allowed myself to be overruled. I admit this frankly. Why not? I do not know what anyone else could have done in the circumstances. How could I have insisted on obedience when I could not manage to obey myself? Imagine my position, faced with this fantastic, this scandalous innovation, absolutely inexplicable in its purpose, terrifying: men and women you were accustomed to treating as robots, whom prison had depersonalized, suddenly returning to desire, to expectation and to defiance as well. Defiance of a discipline, of the "silence" that, during all the years we had exercised our profession, had ended by becoming part of us, our very nature. We would not have been more humiliated had they spat in our faces—nor more revolted! Each of those chance couples soiled the love of our wives, our homes, the modesty we had taught our children. In vain I told myself I was serving my country,

but all that was swallowed up by rage. I had to know precisely how I was serving my country—and even then I would not have been strong enough, on that first day, not strong enough to resist.

I spoke of brawls. There were several, all more or less violent. The prisoner describes an almost religious calm. I am obliged to contradict him. If the confrontation of the prisoners at the barrier began relatively peacefully, then the atmosphere certainly changed some time before we came to disperse them. Why doesn't he mention those quarrels, apart from the Jeffy affair (which he also describes inaccurately)? Is it a conscious omission? I do not think so, and this brings me to a parenthesis. He isolated himself from his companions on the Bounty Pride and I noticed it increasingly as the days went by. Did he find that he was too different from them? His education, his past seemed to haunt him without respite. Had he withdrawn so much into himself that he was preoccupied only with his own personality? In camp I nearly always met him alone, alone and withdrawn.

Was he unaware of those shameful quarrels between the wretched males—and the females too—that nauseated us, or are they effaced from his memory? A sentence in the letter he wrote me comes back to my mind and no doubt often will: "I was beginning to forget. I did not want to forget." This is perhaps an explanation. However that may be, the Negro Jeffy was given a good going-over by three of his comrades, and had a bad cut over one eye. The reasons for the quarrel have remained unknown to me. Quite possibly they were racial. (Or did I merely think I saw that—from far off? I wish to be scrupulous to the very end.)

Would I have intervened without that atmosphere of violence? Probably. After all, it was only a pretext. My men and I absolutely had to have a respite. Was it not really a pillaging of our conscience,

the negation of all our former life, of the law and morality without which we could not live? I had been warned the night before of what was awaiting me, of course, but I had the feeling that I was walking unclothed in a jeering crowd, and I could see the moment coming when the guards, escaping from my control, would act on their own account with the worst possible consequences. I was at my wit's end. I realized what a hopeless fate mine would be, continually torn between the Governor and my men, between the orders I received and those I would have to impose.

"Go on, break up that brothel . . .!" At the same time I was saying to myself: "We'll see about it later. Let's be patient." I was frightened by the hate growing in my men for those prisoners, who had in fact done nothing. But what could I have prevented? Goodwin, kicking Jeffy, was somehow a kind of restoration of balance. I disapproved (as shown by my personal attitude), but those kicks gave me relief—I cannot help admitting it. They restored me to myself, and I was able to feel pity freely.

The Governor let the day go by. He shut himself up in his room. Why should he be in a hurry? He had plenty of time. And no doubt he was not dissatisfied with those events. I have told myself that more than once. Were they not helping him? Thanks to them he was making allies of those men and women. When the time came he would give them back to "their" barrier and thus appear as humane, great and good—as honest, too—and would make himself beloved by them and gain their confidence. In this way he would be able to destroy them from within. As for us, it was all settled: we would be the rotten bastards.

I have always believed, always felt, that he despised us. Not individually, of course—he wouldn't consider us worth it—but

insofar as we represented a certain group. He professed horror of the professional jailer, as I could not help observing. Under his coldness he was something of a free thinker. He had grasped power, I thought, only by opposing society, so that he might destroy its traditional forms.

At the beginning of the evening he sent for me and said, with an icy amiability that was like a blow in the face, that he hoped "the intermission we had entertained ourselves with was now over; that we were back to reality, and now would see no objection to letting matters resume their proper course." He was standing before his piano, overwhelmingly calm. He struck a few notes—very faint, almost acid. They, too, were contemptuous.

"Make no mistake, Mister O'Hara, I have great respect for you and your men and for the demands made on you by a modesty that is, unfortunately, out of date. No, I am not being ironical! Yet I cannot make that my sole concern. I have been entrusted with responsibilities and given a path that I must follow. Mind you, I have no intention of inflicting any punishment because of what has happened. Please dismiss that ugly word from your mind. Washington decides for me, if necessary. I forgot to tell you that I have to make a daily report, by radio, on what happens here. . . . Nothing to report today, as a matter of fact. Let us not make any guesses about tomorrow. Quite the contrary—let us prepare for it, together, so that it will be free of all incident."

Nothing has ever cost me so much as to give the prisoners, the way I did, permission to meet again. I immediately felt drained, and in order to regain the calm necessary to my work, I welcomed, welcomed with gratitude, as a blessing, the thought that those men and women would soon die, die a revolting death, that their

downfall must lie in the barrier and its fever. It seemed to me that without this idea I could not have borne them. I pleaded, I was full of warmth. And, with the exception of Malkin, my guards gave in.

CHAPTER XVI

We saw O'Hara

again just as we were finishing dinner. The sentries he had stationed at the barbed-wire fence had been relieved a few minutes before he entered the dining hall. He was accompanied by Malkin, White (called Snowball), and a third man whose name I have forgotten. He was concealing his obvious agitation with difficulty. I noticed that he was no longer wearing his row of ribbons. His bare uniform was shocking; he did not seem the same man. What did he wish to demonstrate? I felt that he was angry and humiliated, but the pity had not gone out of his eyes—that slightly soiled pity one feels for toads. Perhaps the look he gave us when he came in was even more convincing. He paced up and down the room nervously, without making up his mind to speak—and inwardly I was ordering him, begging him: "Give me back Loa Blyth, at whatever price I have to pay later, at whatever price even she herself may have to pay! Keep what you know to yourself, do not hurl us back into fear. Give me back Loa, dreams, madness, death, never mind by what name you call it . . ."

He walked to the rear of the room, then retraced his steps. What

did he want of us? He scrutinized us, one after the other, with a sort of sorrowful affection. It was almost as if he were begging for our help. He was so much weaker than his three men!

Suddenly his face turned to stone.

"You can go back. The prohibition is removed."

His harsh tone contrasted with the coldness for which he was striving. I felt now even more strongly that he was tormented, furious with everyone and with himself. He stiffened, and turned toward his men. Was he seeking approval? He jerked his head. But Malkin was musing, ugly. White was looking obstinately at the ground. Had this decision been taken against their will, and had he not yet been able to impose it on them?

"Yes, there . . . You can go back there. You have the right to go back there . . ."

He had only just regained self-confidence. There was rebellion showing in Malkin. O'Hara let himself go.

"Whatever happens, I wash my hands of it!" (I got the impression that this was a concession to his men, that he was speaking to them rather than to us.) "When the stuff really hits the fans—when strong measures are really needed—I'm damned if I'm going to be blamed! I've done what I can. I've nothing on my conscience."

[NOTE BY J. O'HARA: *I do not believe I made these remarks, neither these nor the ones that follow, but in spite of that they are fairly well representative of what I was feeling at the time. As for poor Malkin . . .*]

He left the three men and came toward me, raising his voice.

"D'you hear? Don't complain, later on, telling me: 'Mr. O'Hara, it was your duty to do this and to do that . . .' I was told: 'O'Hara, let them dance until they drop.' I'll let you dance, all right. Dance,

my friends—and enjoy yourselves. Do you understand? You can take root in front of that damned barrier, for all I care!”

He said all this in one breath. He wanted to get rid of it, to deliver the message he had to give, and go away.

“To hell with it,” he repeated to the guards, and to Malkin, who was approaching in his turn.

There was a whistle blasting in my ears. So it had been only a false alarm, and everything, life, would begin again? My head was hot and my eyes blurred. The room, O’Hara, the jailers, all disappeared in mist. I leaned against the wall, but immediately stiffened to attention. I felt Malkin’s look on my belly, my sex; and White and the other man were also looking at me with dangerous insistence. Was the incident on board ship going to be repeated? More than Malkin’s violence it was his face that I remembered, that old man’s rage in which I had read a curse. I made myself as small as possible and tried to hide behind Bentley. I blessed him for being so big.

O’Hara shrugged. His nervousness, gone for a moment, reappeared. We were broken. We remained motionless in our places. Were we afraid of some new trap? Were we so accustomed to expect only hypocrisy and lies? O’Hara lost his temper.

“What do you expect? That I’m going to lead you? Take you each by the hand?”

“No!” cried Malkin.

He shouldered past his chief. He was beside himself.

“I obey only when I understand. When I am in agreement . . .”

“Please . . .” O’Hara murmured.

“When I am in agreement. Otherwise, *never!*”

“Take it easy,” White said softly.

Malkin pushed him aside. O’Hara was observing him with a

reproving yet humble look. How could he have prevented Malkin from expressing a feeling that he himself shared?

Bentley set the example. We rushed toward the door.

"Stop!" Malkin screeched. *"Halt!"*

"Relax, Malkin, take it easy," said White, while O'Hara tried to intervene. But Malkin would listen to no one. He had set himself at the door. No one would make him yield.

"I don't know what the hell I'm doing here any more than you, O'Hara. But listen to me, all of you, and listen hard: when I see a dog pumping away at a bitch out in the streets, I club them! I can't stand that! That's my nature. So don't you dirty, foul bastards push me too far. I've never been a pimp in my life."

O'Hara did not know what to do. White and the other guard tried gently to drag Malkin away, but in vain.

"I'm an honest man. I've got a family. I've brought them up respectably and in full view of the world. I've never had anything to be ashamed of, and I'm not going to start today." His eyes swept over us. They stopped at Bentley. "Here, you ape, here's your wedding present!"

He cracked his billy across Bentley's right temple. Bentley gave a stifled roar, seemed to sag, then straightened up, swearing, and seized Malkin's wrist. He could easily have broken it, yet he dropped it at once.

"Excuse me, sergeant . . ."

He bent his head. He was panting.

"For God's sake, hit me a dozen times if you like . . . but let me go there . . . let me go there!"

Now Bentley turned to O'Hara, put his hands on his shoulders, and shook him in a frenzy.

"You said it was authorized! You gave us permission . . . I was wrong. I saw red. I'm sorry."

"Fool!" said O'Hara.

He freed himself and sighed. His shoulders were broad and protective. Even Malkin seemed softened.

"Poor fool! You're all fools. What are you waiting for, you poor stupid animals? Fools! Don't you understand that there's nothing before you but a big zero, always a great big zero?"

His anger had left him. He retained only his agonizing pity.

"You're the mice and there is a cat. Because he has not told you his name you think yourselves protected. Idiots! There will be plenty of time later."

He was about to tell us more. I could guess it by the emotion he was not even trying to conceal—and once more I silently implored him: "Don't destroy the little dream that life has offered us. All right, all right, Mr. O'Hara. Come what may . . ." No doubt he became aware that he was about to go beyond his official character.

"Let's go."

This time Malkin did not resist. They went away. Night set sail behind them. In the west a storm was brewing over the sea. It had already sent its vanguard of heat against us. Another 'storm was brewing in the north. They were meeting face to face.

I ran. I did not want to think.

The two storms seemed to advance at the same speed.

Were we offending that sensual darkness that was everywhere straining toward the sky with a tireless movement of the loins, a movement of love? Were we disturbing a mysterious intercourse of warmth with warmth, the mingling at the feet of God of electric currents surging suddenly from Genesis? It seemed to me that the

night breathed on our footsteps and effaced them. We had broken into it with our desire, we were afire in it, and its order was defiled. Would it be restored with the coming of the great male lightning, with the triumphant and modest nudity of the marriage of gold and silence? Night was working toward this. It slowed our steps and obliterated us at the same time. As we walked we were melting gradually in the extreme heat. We were weightless; we existed only in our call to our women.

There was no link between us. In what state would we arrive at the barrier? Almost without any hearts! Only intense thirst. All our veins crying out our thirst on the surface of our body, singing, crying our love like a thirst that would never be quenched. "Poor, stupid animals. Fools!" O'Hara's voice in my ears, the lightning. The first lightning. "Poor fools!" A burning forest sliding into the sea in the west revealed us to each other. Was it really us? Such thin, narrow faces! Endless legs and apelike arms absurdly waving; shrunken bodies. Us? We looked like caricatures of O'Hara. Why should there be any more need of sentries? O'Hara had multiplied among us.

The first lightning flash. The second, still in the west, very far away, and all our menacing silhouettes attenuated, crumbling. The third flash, covering a good half of the sky, carelessly, like a haphazardly tossed grenade. We reached the barrier.

No one!

I was going blind. . . . I called softly. I was surely at the same place where Loa and I had parted. Each man had returned to his place. The fourth flash lit up the deserted barrier.

"Loa! Loa! . . ."

I went on calling quietly. I was praying, praying. Sweat dripped from me. Come, Loa, come! I summoned her in everything, by

everything. Had they not been warned, she and her companions, that this night was the night of reunion? What was happening? What was being planned? A cloud of great phosphorescent insects was flying in the thick, syrupy odor of eucalyptus up and down the wires left and right. They brushed by me. What was the meaning of those green-gold beetles? Were they shining for the heart of the night, for the storm, or were they the secret letters of a message, an answer to my prayer?

"The women are locked up," someone said. "We won't see them."

"It's impossible! Why were we sent here then?"

"Why do dogs bark?"

"Your guess is as good as mine!"

Silence turned and turned in the heat. We bathed in sweat.

"Let's all yell at once."

"Don't do that!"

"We must. How will they know we're here?"

"Quiet, for God's sake! Not so loud! D'you want to bring that pack of bastards down on us?"

"The stinking bastards! I can see what it is. They send us off to put on a show, and then they put the women under lock and key, that's all. It amuses those sons of bitches."

Come, Loa, come. You cannot fail to hear me call you in your own blood. I beseech you!

Over the sea the lightning flashes were scythes, lances, swords, curved sabres. A battle for a grail of peace. And Loa's love was in the grail, floating on a great stretch of warm, slack silk. Through each of the scythes, swords, curved sabres and through the pure silk I prayed to her. "Fool!" O'Hara repeated.

"Leave me alone!"

"Fool! You're all fools."

A lightning flash cut off his head, his old head out of an old inferno. It rolled away. A thousand jellyfish received it. And I burst forth from the sea, in my youth, toward the grail of hope.

"Shout. We'll all shout! With all this waiting I'm going mad!"

"Don't do it!"

"I tell you, I can't stand any more."

Bentley shouted.

He made me afraid. He was defying the night. The heat redoubled. His voice was like salt, that voice rising from his loins—our voice. Our shout ran trailing fire under hanging fire. And with that shout the world spun from its orbit into a universe of fever; everything sinned. Nothing could interrupt this insane flight. The peak sent that shout back to the trees, the smallest rocks caught it up and repeated it. The very birds sleeping under their wings heard it and sinned, the sweat, the odor of a hundred tons of eucalyptus, the very phosphorescent insects sinned.

The scythes over the sea were suddenly very straight and very near and the swords were straight too: I beheld Loa. I had not heard her coming. She had run hard and was panting. There were other breaths, other voices in the shadow. The birds now found a scent of woman at the end of their sleep, the bright phosphorescent insects flew in the perfume of woman. But we would never experience our women who were there; we would never reach them except by word and look. Before us, day after day, would be that zero O'Hara had forecast for us.

"There you are! I was beginning to think we were sunk, that it was all over. Didn't you really know? It's not possible! Didn't you know we were waiting for you?"

What did we have to say to each other that night? I no longer remember. The heat was a world within the world, an intoxication

inspired by the eucalyptus. We spoke little. We could barely make the effort. Each flash of lightning made a clean, scorching sweep of everything. It crackled, died away in its echo and we had to persist in finding each other again, learning, almost reinventing joy and anguish from their beginnings. Loa and I had gradually moved away from our companions, toward the beach. I moved in a mantle of sweat.

Thunder had always shaken me. I belong to both poles, I am wedded. I go in terror, I feel guilty like the beasts and then I try furiously to become innocent by living—I am all senses and desire, possessed, passionate. A blessed, yet tragic derangement.

I could not see Loa, or at least I saw her only at moments, unreal and distorted. Perhaps, indeed, I was not even trying to see her. I already had everything of her: sweat gave me her patient nudity. Was she not sweating too, over there, clothed in my shivering? Her moist body, clinging; her moist belly under mine. Nearer still. Still given. The lightning flash, the separation. Once more the circle of waiting. . . .

“I love you.”

Down my neck, on my chest, my back, were a hundred little liquid threads, her hands ten times over—each finger, sharp in its caress, now a point of fire, now a point of ice, then honey, then velvet.

“I love you,” she said, said Loa sweating.

“When shall we be together?”

No, do not answer! Be silent! We need no other words between us this evening.

“I am with you,” said her sweat, “and you are with me. We are the storm and the night. We are married.”

“We are married.”

The sliding of her fingers over my hips, over my buttocks, my hips, my buttocks, became caresses over my belly, and in my loins there was a swirling eddy.

"You, Loa. There will never be enough of you. You, you, you . . ."

The lightning crackled, the gold slid into the sweat of the neck, into the heavy sweat of the shoulders, into the odor of eucalyptus which numbed the shoulder blades. Another flash, the two globes of her breasts. I had them beneath mine. Her embrace clung like tentacles. My heart beat in my throat. A violent, white taste choked in my throat.

Sweat, lightning; sweat, lightning.

Sweat . . .

. . . And the explosion made my heart shrivel, stopped it, then brought it back to shape and movement.

"You . . ."

My sweat became hers. She could offer nothing else and I could take nothing else. We had possessed each other from birth.

"With you I roll and roll and everything is a bed . . ."

I closed my arms around her. Nothing would tear them away. Even death, if it came, would be a warm death, another kind of love, a sweat . . .

. . . the amorous passage over my whole body of a liquid spider.

How long did we remain there before it started to rain? We could not go on like that. At each moment I was ground under a millstone. One of the large, shining insects fell down at my feet; was it a signal? It wriggled in frantic, green-gold convulsions, its feet waving in all directions, trying vainly to take the place of its dead wings. Was it an image of myself? It moved toward a stone and crawled halfway up. Was it hoping to find a springboard for a

new start? It became motionless. Strange death-agony of a color, of the green-gold gradually losing its richness, shading toward white—decaying. Again it moved its long legs in a despairing attempt. A second insect fell quite close. Could it see this second one still intact and alight? Was it enraged, or were they the male and female, was the newcomer calling with a grating sound? It sparkled feebly toward the lighthouse. Its wings abandoned, it began a slow, degrading descent. But then it tumbled down.

Was it a symbol of myself, of Loa, of both of us? I was once more a prisoner who was tolerated for a moment in a waiting room before being finally put into chains.

“Did you see it, Loa?”

“What? See what?”

What could I say? Night had led us to the point where it could no longer give us anything. Only Death would now take the reins, or impossible freedom.

“Like that insect—haven’t we come to the end of the rope . . . ? That’s the point—will there ever be anything else?”

My sweat suddenly cooled. Above me something breathed, an inexhaustible inhalation, expiring in a moment. Thunder. I turned toward the peak, as though compelled. All the scythes, all the swords at once, and the curved sabres twirled halfway down the slope. All the scythes and swords in a single beam. At once the rain came, heavy, overcalm—a deluge. The release of a fulfilled double impetus.

At that moment, just as Loa was leaving me, as the flood, the death of the night’s desire, was carrying her away, I heard the piano, for the first time since we had arrived. . . . What had the Governor been doing all this time? Why had he ceased playing, while on board his music filled every night? Had his soul been

open to the storm, as mine had, and was he singing the peaceful birthpangs of the world that had resulted from it, the blessed rain? Was he offering to the night the recaptured serenity of his soul, so that everything might be serene?

Serenity or hell?

I had halted, despite myself. I looked back. Why did I notice that tall rock? Why so distinctly? On the side of the rock, come out for the damp, come out for the music—how should I ever know?—was a great lizard, with its eyes of mica, its eyes of tragic dryness in the rain. It looked at me. It was not afraid of me. It did not move. It read my heart within me. It left me and crawled toward the dying insect. The piano sounded; the lizard slid. The piano celebrated peace and death and the lizard went toward what had flown and had fallen in the exhaustion of love. When it seized the fly that was almost dead I understood that henceforth it would always have its place in me—in the name of Loa.

The next day

came, then another day, several days. Hardly anything to relate. The days went by in good humor and we no longer had to fight the fear each evening that each evening would be our last at the barrier. Now it was part of our lives. As night fell, and colors were extinguished, the fence blended so well with the landscape that it seemed to have stood there since the beginning of the world.

Perhaps our past in prison, our passage in the *Bounty Pride*, our condition, had made us different from other men. Sobered down? Tamed? Above all, spineless! [NOTE BY J. O'HARA: *Drugged! . . . On the one hand, will and personality carefully weakened day by day; on the other, intensive hormonotherapy. This had already begun on board ship. . . .*] We no longer knew how to demand what was offered us. We were satisfied. Even Bentley had lost his vehemence. Besides, by rebelling, even in silence, would we not destroy the half-joy we had succeeded in establishing within ourselves, that temptation which in its way promised us life? This small offering was already so precious! Who would have dreamed of it on the *Bounty Pride*? We cherished it as my mother used to

cherish her old family china, with the same finicky, rather childish care. And if by chance one or another of us began to curse our wretched fate, he immediately became a target for everyone's animosity. Regret was forbidden! We had to live like children. It was through candor, the simple heart, that we would survive. It was enough for us to recognize the shadow at the end of the road without denouncing it by name, for then it would grow and grow and spread over the whole road.

"Shut your ugly mug!"

"My guts are falling out . . ."

"Shut your damn mouth! No one wants to hear all that crap. Leave us alone."

I pacified the shadow on the road. Cautiously I freed myself from it. I led it toward the sea or toward the peak so that it would get lost in the brown grass where no one had ever been, where no one would ever go.

By pressure of circumstances we gradually attained a kind of purity. [NOTE BY J. O'HARA: *Perhaps, since he says so. Perhaps with some others like himself, but with all of them? The guards knew very well we were living among filth—we saw it.*] Undoubtedly the mystery that surrounded us was responsible. It had brought us to this pass and was keeping us there. It was quietly churning fear. It was our harsh angel. Give and take was more than ever the rule: the least lapse would summon misfortune.

We spoke rarely of our women. No doubt this will be considered odd. I do not know whether it was through mutual consideration or because we men were gradually becoming more widely separated from each other, too full of our own dreams and fears to be companionable, too preoccupied in warding off the tentacles of fate. We did not even look at each other; we rubbed shoulders, that was

all. Meals, sleep—goodbye! The very idea of a group future vanished. Each man held fast to the idea that he would survive his companions. How many times, face to face with Loa, did I play at this game of drawing lots from which I always emerged the winner! And in the evening I felt myself a stranger to the others, in a welcome solitude.

Solitude . . . time . . . and boredom. I wondered: "Why are we not forced to do some work? Why is it not even suggested? Anyone would think they wanted us to go mad from boredom . . ." Now I have the answer. Nothing was to distract us from our women and our women from us. That slow drifting, two by two, was necessary—until the day of the maelstrom. Our heads were filled with a single thought, constantly revived by the monotony of time. We were possessed.

From time to time there was a brutal outburst at the barrier. It happened to me, to someone else, to a third. This couple, and that one, and the other. It seemed to take us by turns. A contagion. Just like those little hot pustules that covered most of our faces—dry, adolescent pimples. Then by common consent the man and woman would separate. They would exchange an apologetic look. They would go away to recover in solitude, for the whole day, to rebuild their patience.

The only distraction was bathing in a specially provided creek with shallow, clear water, thoroughly protected from the sharks. But I soon got tired of it; we all did. Only the barrier attracted us. It had the magic of a magnet. We had the impression that we would end by making it fall with our continued pressure, with our waiting there beneath the light of a dark lantern that depicted us as timid and almost innocent.

Up to the very last moment I shall wonder. Did the Governor

need that troubled purity, was it the star in his night? How can I decide, since I have no key to his soul? Yet it seems to me that it was so—I am almost sure. Did that excuse him in the task he had undertaken? Did it cleanse him and could he proclaim himself pure in the face of his “experiment”? Did he console himself by saying: “I am entering those men and women to destroy man and woman, but I shall have given them something beforehand—like God I shall have rebuilt beauty for them”?

He came and went among us for long periods in the day, and sometimes in the evening: he who had been invisible for so long. He had grown lighter, even in feature. Certainly his determination had not disappeared, that tension of the will like a steel blade. Far from it! Nor had the embarrassment—I can find no other word—that sometimes returned. But at present an almost warm amiability softened it. Often, too, I thought I noticed in him some respect for us, and I said to myself that I could not be so grossly mistaken. A confused yet distinct deference in him for his prisoners. The charity of a ruler? I soon gave up that idea and my mind went roving. There was a kind of gratitude at the base of his respect. He seemed to be grateful to us for existing, for being there, for being dependent on him. It was not expressed in words, of course. Was I the only one to feel it? I do not think so, although they made fun of me when I spoke of it. There was a look, a sign here or there, at once friendly and distant—and that play of hands which he had not given up. I could not be mistaken. His pity was not that of a superior and did not degrade us, as did O'Hara's. It came from someone who was different in kind from the jailers and ourselves. It was a flash, from the depths of death or of elusive hope.

“How are you, my friends? You don't hate me too much? Perhaps you take me for a torturer? You know nothing about me.

. . . Perhaps I *am* a torturer. No one knows himself completely.” (There was a profound message in his eyes: of cruelty or of fear?) “Yet if I told you I loved you, really loved you, would you believe it? You must believe it! You are not my prisoners. No! You are my companions and my associates.”

I am making up these phrases. He did not utter them. I translated them from his attitude, his way of stopping near me, placing his hand on my shoulder. He rarely remained more than a minute or two with anyone. He was always in a hurry to move on, to speak to another. When anyone looked too long or too clearly at him he became nervous.

“Do you miss your prison? Do you think: ‘There we were peaceful and protected, we were not afraid, we had no problems’? The future! Who can decipher the future? I am building your future and killing myself as I apply myself with greater vigor to my mission.”

Then abolish that barrier! Why do you offer us only temptation? Is your power limited to that? What is your goal? Nothing is ever explained! Now then, put your cards on the table—you are holding things back and it’s killing us.

Yet we were careful not to say this, through fear of him and also because the barbed-wire fence was taboo. The future was the fence. A throw of the dice: supposing that instead of hope it was night that came up? “The fence will outlast you, and when you are like those sea shells, filled with the murmur of a single passion, you will return to your prisons, you will be even more separated from those women than you are at present.” We were silent. Besides, the question had barely risen to our lips when the Governor became impenetrable. He had divined it! He retired into his citadel. “Abolish that barrier!” His eyes would leave us for the sea or the mountain

or the whirling tropic-birds. He would fold his hands. Even for my comrades those hands finally revealed their power of intimidation. We remained with the barrier and the mystery, shaken, surprised at being in front of him and yet remaining alive.

Sometimes he would visit the women. He went to them far less often than he came to us. He did not linger there.

"What was he like, Loa?"

"Absent."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. I would not even swear that he looked at us, that we really existed in his eyes."

"And yet when he is here we feel that nothing escapes him, that we could not conceal so much as a headache from him."

"With us he looks scared. And listen . . . I often think his hands must be made of ice."

"Then why does he visit you?"

"Ask *him*! Because he has to make an inspection from time to time, perhaps. He is odd! The other day, when he came in, some of us were washing and were naked. He turned away violently. He was red! It was not modesty, oh no! His movement was too sudden for that. With him it was a kind of disgust."

She had never noticed before the characteristic in the Governor that I had mentioned to her: his hate. A wave of cold and shameful hate. But now she said it.

"Shameful? What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't quite know. I thought perhaps he might be queer—a fairy or something. He's so distant from us! Or else he's had some bad luck with a woman and bears the rest of us a grudge. Anyway, there's something not normal about him."

The days went by. . . . When he spoke to us he was like a

doctor. He studied our appearance. His glance sounded our heart-beats while it conveyed paternal affection. In spite of everything that happened, in spite of that terror that will be mine until I die, I should be suppressing the truth if I did not emphasize this. *Paternal*—I can imagine no other description of him. I am sure that in a certain sense he loved us and that he suffered from what he was doing. Lucifer is indeed a cry of suffering.

[NOTE BY J. O'HARA: "*Mister O'Hara, it is very important that my directives should be carried out to the letter with regard to the drugs to be introduced into the food and drink of these men and women. I must remind you once more. Everything has been carefully drawn up.*" (He was almost aggressive.) "*The success of this undertaking depends to a large extent on your punctuality. . . . Distribute these products in the way I have ordered and do not forget that with the men, each barracks must be treated in a special way.*"

He stared at me, preventing any questions on my part. The prisoner writes somewhere that his glance was like the flame of an acetylene torch. That is true. It consumed you.

"On coming here, I assumed all responsibility, I assure you. I relieve you of all scruples. America, and she alone, will judge. I have calculated the risks, the good and evil, as much for you as for myself. I am much more humane than those who speak of humanity and are contented with words. Much more, believe me."]

He was always alone on his rounds. The guards did not accompany him. They detested him as much as—perhaps more than—we did. No question of that! (But I sometimes wondered whether their hatred for us was not simply a function of the sequel they could foresee—the end of the barrier.) As soon as the Governor left

us they took their revenge for what shocked them to their depths. We would see them returning, grim-faced (usually with the exception of O'Hara, who kept himself shut up, more or less). It was a patient undermining. Their old meanness broke out. But they must have been given strict orders. They refrained from all violence, Malkin as well as the others. They contented themselves with humiliating us, with making endless jokes about "our" women, our "engagements," in terms that can be imagined. Did they want to defile in us that youthful love they could no longer hope to obtain? That defied them, although it was sacrificed in advance? Did they want to insult the youth of our bodies? Or was their cruelty a means of attacking their chief? In any case I found it easy to forgive them. They had to survive one way or another, each in his fashion. Was not the order of the world offended here every day, before their eyes, and with their enforced complicity, the order of jailer-prisoner that was part of their being? They bore it as best they could. They had no other weapons but insults.

Their jests have disappeared; it is the Governor who remains. It is he who prepared us, summoned the cloud of our damnation. Our jailers submitted just as we did. They too renounced the appearance of man and all real joy henceforth. Like trainers, they lived too long among animals, and ended by smelling like animals.

All the preceding appears inconceivable, even to myself, even while I write it. I tell myself that it is impossible that this was all there was—that the burning future was on its way and was making itself evident, at least by a few signs. What! in six weeks only that monotonous greyness? Yes, I examine and recall in vain. Nothing but a carefully maintained greyness, stifling. A mist surmounted only by the barrier, so that we thought only of that and were ready for anything. Or else—or else the Governor was hesitating, and

that long, uneventful stretch was the period of his hardening of purpose. For him, too, there may have been, who knows, a cross to bear.

The Governor!

Was I not disgusted by him? Yes, probably. But I could not positively swear it. My feeling had lost its edge. He disarmed it. Did I preserve my lucidity? Had he taken possession of me? I pretended to myself that he was sincere; each day, therefore, he made more headway. He settled down among us with his omnipotence and his position—and that unhappy past behind him that Loa had diagnosed. He was closer to me on that account particularly. I even came to feel sorry for him.

He had not abandoned his piano. Less than ever. But now he played quite different tunes. He played for our little humble joys, to guide us. . . . Usually very late at night. Never in the old, insistent way. He captured a brief, passing thrill, a sign, a fugitive charity in the warm night and transmitted it to us. The marriage of reflections in the bay.

That lasted until the return of the great lizard on the rock.

I had been there on several occasions. Was I trying to kill it in order to free myself from an obsession with it? Merely to see it again, or to make it lower its eyes before me, its torrid eyes that had sentenced me on the evening of the storm and seen within me Loa dead and eaten? From superstition I never went near that round stone when she was about. I waited for her to go in or else I went there at daybreak, when no one was out. Mostly at daybreak. The others would have made fun of me. "A lizard? You're going crazy! What does a lizard matter, you half-wit? Now our fate depends on a lizard?" But the rock and its approaches remained deserted.

Did I go at the wrong time? Did I not know how to look, or where was it hidden, biding its time?

I saw it again—the ever-unsatisfied movement. Never sleeping, balanced at the end of a tail like a pendulum. Eyes wide open in the noonday sand. The blunt axe of the head.

What was I doing there? I was suddenly choked. And there was something like a cold band around my neck.

I picked up a stone, but did not throw it. I did not have the strength. Another lizard appeared; then another, another, another, another. And what was the use of persuading myself that it was the season, the mating time? . . . Ah yes, indeed, the mating time! Unspeakable mating, foreshadowing another. . . . Mating time. Oh God, have pity! God, who made me with arms and legs, not with short paws, clinging and membraneous. The time for *their* mating, and there is no gleam of mercy in You!

CHAPTER XVIII

It was barely

dawn when Jeffy let in the storm. He was pale, with that tragic pallor of Negroes that is in truth the death of color. Hardly any neck, with his head sunk between the shoulders, nodding, nodding, his thick lips slack.

“For Christ’s sake, all of you . . .”

He was stammering.

“I knew this would happen. Since the very first day . . . the first day at the barrier, when you nearly killed me.”

He was breathing fast and with difficulty. In order to free his breath he thumped his chest several times. His nose became flatter still.

“For God’s sake! Go and see, go on. . . . There’s a ship out in the roads. What the hell is it doing here if not to take away the women—or us?”

I sat up. The world was rocking.

“When I went out to piss I saw its lights between the trees. I said to myself: ‘You’re dreaming, you poor shit, it’s not possible, you’ve got a fever.’ I went down to the water and there it was. It must have come into the harbor during the night.

"Go and see for yourselves, if you don't believe me!" he shouted, as we remained motionless. "Would anyone lie about a thing like this? We're going to be separated, that's what it is. No more . . ."

I went toward the porch. Only a few steps, but it was like walking through a quagmire. Greenglass passed near me, a panting little shadow without weight, and almost at once Bentley, still naked, was framed in the doorway.

"O God," the Negro went on, "will You allow them to separate us? Will You allow that, God? If that ship is going to take our women away from us, will You close Your eyes and ears, God? In Your blessed house can't You hear the wind blowing where we are, can't You hear us? I beg You!"

He could hardly stand. He stumbled toward Hughes, fell on his knees before him, shook him, both arms clasped around his waist. Everything was mixed up in his prayer: his woman, whose name was June; God; the barrier; the ship; the Governor. It was a succession of disconnected phrases, a lamentation punctuated by oaths. He tried to get up, and sank back again.

"Christ Almighty, why should I be lying? We have to do something!"

"Something!" Williamson muttered. "What kind of something? What can we do against the guards? Against their machine guns?"

From the doorway Bentley exclaimed: "It's true. It's a destroyer."

Schneider, who had gone outside with him, could utter only a kind of sob.

"They're going to separate us!"

The two other barracks emptied. The noise resounded, an animal terror welling up from the beginning of time—the death of a mammoth. Above everything else was Jeffy's voice: "In Your blessed house, God our Father . . . In your blessed house, with Your stars, Your light . . ."

I was cut in two. Somehow I managed to get down the steps. Everyone rushed out.

"To the barrier, quick!"

"They're going to take them away!"

"Perhaps it's already happened."

"To the barrier!"

"To hell with the current and the guns and the guards—I'm going to try to break through."

I followed without strength. I knew I would not try, in spite of my love, and I was defiled in my tears. I wanted to kill myself, but with a death I could manage, not one requiring too much initial courage, the death of a coward who had always lived slowly. I would wait until the ship had weighed anchor, then I would hang myself on one of those trees, or throw myself into the water among the sharks. The sun was shining over the bay and the snowstorm of tropic-birds was rising gently toward the sun. On the beach, beneath the mangroves, the first shadows were blood-red . . .

We saw the women. They had climbed a little hill and were watching the sea. In the trembling light they created a world in dissolution.

"Come on, come on! It's the last time."

"They're going to take us away, us or you!" one of them cried in a curiously sharp voice. "It's over."

"Hurry up . . . hurry."

"It's over . . ."

God became transparent and deserted creation.

"It's over . . ."

People were calling each other from every side. Animals in the Flood. Knock down those posts, soften that iron heart—get through! But it was so useless! Bentley tensed himself. I could

see his hands become red. In my palms the scar, a memory of another time, came to life again. I suddenly understood that I could find a kind of joy in dying if I were far from Loa—a kind of courage I did not know I possessed—and that frightened me and I began to yell hysterically. Mortensen hit me in the face with his fist. The insipid, heavy blood gushed from my nose. The shouts did not die. The women's cries seemed to hollow out the rocks.

"It's over . . . over."

Silence fell brutally. Even among the birds. Perhaps the noise had alarmed them. They were quiet. The women had come forward gradually, as though they were afraid of us. They were there, but they continued to belong to a dead world. Jeffy fell on his knees, and on the other side of the barbed wire June Toynbee did the same. They joined their hands and prayed aloud. It was a funeral prayer, so sensual that I pitied and hated them at the same time. One might have thought they had already possessed each other and knew all of each other's bodies. Loa was standing very straight. "Look at me, why don't you look at me?" She was already on her way, the sea had taken her, she had eyes like the sea. Had I never until now noticed her fragile neck? Half-strangled.

"Now it's good-bye, my poor darling."

She scarcely moved. One hand was slightly clenched.

"Nothing more, Loa. Look at me! Say something. At least tell me I have blood on my face. . . . Come back, you are at the other end of the earth. I still have years and years to do. I lied to you. A long stretch. Where shall I find you again? I know nothing but your name."

"147 Bond Street, Birmingham. Try. If possible I shall be there. My mother lives there."

She had eyes only for June Toynbee and Jeffy. She was listening

to their prayer, the marvellous, despairing lamentation of their senses. Did she believe they were praying for her, too? I no longer knew how to pray, I could not. I was dead. My eyes had sealed over.

“Don’t listen! Enough! You must hear me. We have only these wretched few minutes.”

I loved her. I had never realized it so utterly. I desired her as wind blows or rain falls; it was impossible that I should survive her departure.

“Don’t listen to Jeffy! He’s not the one you love. Look at me. Everything’s over before it even began, and if by chance we should meet again we will no longer be the same.”

She returned to herself, to me. A phantom. On the frontiers of that ruined world from which she came. The barrier stretched that far, as far as separation.

“Promise me . . .”

No, there was nothing to promise. The Governor had enslaved us both. We belonged to him. As at the beginning of time, he was abolishing the semblance of Eden. What was he doing behind his tightly closed windows? I had the idea he was laughing. Or that he was weeping. In any case it was certain that he wanted to hide from our supplications.

The guards . . .

We had been watching them for several minutes in the barracks square. They were in no hurry to start off. In a last-minute gesture of charity, did they want to leave us time to say good-bye? Or were they merely waiting for an order, living in advance for that moment, like a holiday for them, when they would push us all away from both sides of the barbed wire forever? Now Malkin, facing O’Hara, was shouting, arguing with wild gestures. What was he saying? Why was he, in particular, taking so long? Was his wish about to

be realized? The silence now was like overheated metal. The world was exploding around us. It smelled of eucalyptus, but of something else, too—diseased flesh, fever.

At last our jailers came forward. They did so reluctantly. Something was troubling them. It seemed as though their profession suddenly humiliated them. The nearer they came, the more they hung back. They stopped about half way. Malkin began to talk again, with the same grotesque gestures. Two of the others were trying to reason with him. The discussion dragged on. O'Hara put an end to it. His bony old hand fell on Malkin's shoulder, and Malkin raised his head and they remained for a moment facing each other. O'Hara turned away, regained his energy—he was in profile, his chin projecting. The second half of the distance was covered at greater speed.

"No!" Jeffy yelled, as the guards approached. "Have mercy, for God's sake! You can't do this, it's too rotten. No!" The jailers spread out, deploying in infantry fashion. The heat became heavier. Malkin grabbed me by the shoulders. He was stronger than I, in spite of his age. I seized his throat—I would have done anything for a few seconds more with Loa. But I could not choke him . . . I had no real muscles. He freed himself easily, without violence. I could feel that he was as unhappy as I. I escaped him; he caught me again. He did not utter an oath, maintaining an inexplicable patience.

"O.K. bud, take it easy."

He was gruff, but his usual bad temper had left him. He smelled strongly of whiskey, and whiskey always made him brutal. Then what had happened? He had changed character completely. Only the day before he would have leaped at this opportunity for revenge

that I had just given him. At the very least he would have smashed my face with the stock of his machine gun.

"Take it easy, you damn fool!"

Even his voice was transformed.

"Take it easy, for God's sake! . . . What you tried is between you and me. I'll forget it. But now go back to your barracks—and no more crapping around."

Our eyes met. It was no longer Malkin. The mastiff was dead. Another, strange Malkin had taken his place.

"No funny business. We've got our orders and they must be carried out."

Once more I tried to escape. He did not release me, but neither did he become excited. Gently, step by step, he forced me back, gently and firmly. He must once have been a courageous man.

"I ask only to see her again for a moment," I stammered. "Only for a moment."

I was so certain of his contempt—so astonished not to find it. No, he showed only a flash of anger that he immediately mastered.

"For the last time, before they take her away, Mr. Malkin. How can you refuse me that?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Have you lost your mind?" he growled. "Who told you that your floozies were going to be taken away? Who said anything about a last time? No one tries to separate bedbugs or roaches!"

In spite of his language he was not trying to insult me. It was his way of talking, that was all, his customary speech. He could hardly help it.

"You're lying!" I cried. Begging to be contradicted!

I was still holding him. "Then what's that ship for? Tell me."

"You'll know soon enough. Get along! I've got to get you indoors

—and see that you don't go out for the rest of the day. I'm carrying out my orders, that's all. I don't have to give you any explanations. Besides, I'd be ashamed to . . ."

He flared up: "I'd be ashamed to, damn it! Ashamed. . . . Shove off."

At last he raised his fist. I obeyed. My head was bursting. Which Malkin was this? What was his secret? Had my companions been spoken to in the same way? They too were returning docilely to the barracks. Williamson took my arm and drew me along. He was green, and sweat was beading his high forehead. As we moved away I thought I heard Malkin sigh. I thought I heard him say: "My God, how long will You let this go on? What madness, worse than bloodshed!" I turned around. He waved me on brusquely. Over there the women had dispersed. The sun was rising. What had they decided to inflict on us that was more horrible than separation, so painful that even our jailers were appalled?

"Hey, Johnny, what's cooking? What's going to happen?"

"It seems there's going to be a medical inspection," Williamson answered.

He made a little fatalistic gesture, but he avoided my eyes.

"An Army medical board."

"What's that? Is that what the ship came for?"

A destroyer to bring doctors to a few prisoners on a nameless atoll in the Pacific? Suddenly we had become very important. "The whole of America was watching us." It was this importance that upset me. Death was throwing too clear a shadow.

"I don't understand."

"Perhaps they'll tell us," he said. "Maybe we'll know something at last. Why not?"

His eyes held a kind of defiance. A defiance of his own anguish.

"Why not?" he repeated. "One day or another they have to tell us what this is all about. They're coming for something, aren't they, something definite? They're not puppets. Well, no one here is sick."

"Yes, they are," I said.

A brutal white light broke over me. My whole body became painful. Two fires, one in each groin. I said slowly: "You, me, all of us. Poisoned. . . . Didn't it ever occur to you?"

His eyes flickered.

"No!" he said angrily. "Don't talk such shit."

But he began to believe it himself, I could see. The two fires grew hotter. He could not turn away from me and now he horrified me, he was the proof of my suspicion. Malkin, too, just now: "My God, how long? . . . This madness worse than bloodshed!" Were we being scientifically poisoned, for some reason known only to the Governor? And were the doctors there to observe the progress of the experiment, take notes, advise and consult? Everything was possible. But what was the point of the barrier, in that case? Why the women? For a moment I detested the women. They represented danger, just as they had on the first day. Or at least they made me *see* danger—almost as unforgivable. Were we being given new poisons that acted in different ways on men and women, which perhaps left them untouched while attacking us? And was there some kind of military connection to all this, since the doctors were coming in a destroyer—Army medics? If so, then we could not count on the least pity. The idea crackled like a whip of fire: we were being sexually poisoned, in our generative capacity, and one day—perhaps tomorrow or even today—the barrier would be swept aside and we would no longer be men facing women, but pitiable, laughable, limp rags, the demons of our futile contortions. Oh yes, that was it! I hate you, Loa, I hate you. Would she not despise me, in spite of herself? I wanted to wound her suddenly, to see her

blood flow, I did not know why; then bandage her, forgive her through the flood of red. Only then would she be weaker than I Yet she arose at my side, intact and gentle. She smiled at me. The end was near. She trembled a little. Even in decay I would love her and she would love me. . . .

Almost immediately a launch left the destroyer and the Governor appeared on the jetty. He walked with his head high—I was able to observe him—with something provocative in his bearing, very different from his usual appearance. He turned and Loa disappeared, abandoning me to reawakened dread. The barracks doors were closed. Four guards took up their positions in the yard, two on the right and two on the left. There was a new flag over the barracks. The Island was wrapped in heavy torpor. Only the flag flew, uncaring: our country was doing this! The valley waited, in unnatural calm, for Lot, his daughters and hell-fire. Somewhere in the sky up there was a God, a Virgin, and love, the music of radiant creations echoing from angel to angel. But none of that was for us, who were cut off from everything, tracked down, hunted. And we had not even clear-cut evil for ransom, evil that we could name. Nothing. Everything was masked. We had no right to prayer or to hell. No one had ever been in our position, loving without being able to love, condemned without being judged, real and yet absurd. I, Williamson, little Greenglass, all the others, who were we? I began to be moved by a religious fear for my neighbors. We were no longer in the world; even the shudders of our bodies were no longer real. And doctors would not speak to dead men . . . [NOTE BY J. O'HARA: *I shall say later what, at least in my opinion, they had come to do.*]

They began with the women. That went on all morning. Then they had lunch. We could hear their voices and their laughter. We

hated them, but did not say so. We kept utter silence concerning them. That kept them still at a distance for us. An illusory protection, somewhat as a man on the operating table shuts his eyes to the injections putting him to sleep: he escapes in a cloud of cotton padding. And then, I think, we were afraid of each other, afraid of speaking to each other. We became enemies through our very likeness. And we could avoid that room—for a last moment of life or dreams—only by keeping silent.

It was around three o'clock when we were shown into the annex to the barracks where the doctors were sitting. We were lined up before them. There were four doctors, young men, not much older than ourselves, in whom at any other time there must have been room for charity and kind looks and words—but they wanted to keep distance between us. I could feel how they despised us! (Or was it an attitude adopted for this special mission? Perhaps it helped them to bear their task, which they knew to be revolting, in the absence of any complicity with us, by showing us from the outset that we must be considered an inferior species? They were not unaware that we were guinea pigs!)

“The sixth man, please.”

One of the guards, a slight, shamefaced robot, herded one man after another into the laboratory. The seventh, eighth, ninth.

“Well, Green?”

I looked at Greenglass. Too pale. His freckles looked like spots of white leprosy.

“What did they say to you?”

“Oh, shove it.” A jailer hustled him out. “It’s your turn.”

I was burning; it was as if I had been sitting on a stove.

“Yes, you, over there!”

Four faces, masks saying “Let’s get this unimportant business

matter over with." Almost copies of each other. The same leaden eyes. And a pervasive odor, a mixture of drugs and urine. What questions could one ask there? How could one dare to ask questions?

"Gentlemen, I . . ."

"Yes?"

A shutter closed suddenly.

"Good morning, son. Sit there. Name? Good. Barracks number three . . . Don't tremble like that, no one's going to hurt you! Now then, you mustn't take offense . . ."

I was on the slab. The quality of the meat was being assessed. They had even decided to speak to us crudely.

My parents. Vital statistics. My antecedents. Did my father drink? My mother? (A dossier related all these things. Why ask, then, what they already knew? Only to humiliate? Just routine?)

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"Think carefully and answer: since you've been here, what have you felt in particular? Not in the domain of the pure emotions, of course."

A laugh that was not even ironic, quite simply gay and calm.

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." (But the idea nagged at me: what could I have felt? I experienced strong uneasiness.)

"Now then, are you trying to hand us a line?"

Searching eyes. And my sweat spoke for me! But what was it saying? Were my life and death at stake in my answer? I had felt nothing. Or ought I to admit that all day my sex was heavy and I was exhausted with weariness and excitement? Wasn't that normal,

with Loa and the barrier? I sweated harder. Where was the poison? Where? Where?

More than ever on the slab.

The eyes narrowed.

"After all, it's not so important. If you don't want to answer, you don't have to."

I tried to find what it was that was staring at me through those transparent eyes. It was mica. It was the lizards. They were drawing me invincibly toward them—I ceased to have a man's destiny.

"Have you ever had children? A child? You're not married, I know, but . . ."

"What difference does that make? I was asked the same question before we got aboard."

"Don't be insolent."

"I'm not. I mean, what difference does that make *now*?"

"Nothing, or a great deal. How could you understand?"

"I've never had a child."

"Good," murmured the thinnest of the four doctors, wiping his brow.

"Good," I repeated after him, and my voice seemed to echo to eternity.

The Governor was there. He was as white as his shirt. He avoided my gaze. There were deep circles under his eyes.

"Now then, my boy, don't be offended, we have to analyze everything, your blood—and so on. After all, it's a very serious matter. What must be done must be done. Here we're all in the service of our country."

. . . Now they are going to discover the poison and tell me. Be silent, whatever you may know!

Blood was taken for a test. The Governor looked at the blood;

he did not look at me. His almost haggard eyes were on the little tube of blood—and they were too gentle.

. . . Be silent! Do not tell me that tomorrow you will confront me with Loa and that . . .

A label. A number corresponding to my name. I became a number. I lived no longer; only as fragile and floating blood, only in the Governor's gaze at the little dark red tube.

. . . Shall I have Loa? Will the door in the barrier open? Shall I make love to Loa? Shall I ever make love again? Have you killed love within me?

. . . How can I tell everything? But I must! The atmosphere of that room. It had begun already! It was the first draft of that caricature of love whose perpetual prisoners we are.

. . . I must tell everything . . .

"Now, my friend, you must masturbate . . . You don't mind that, do you?"

The erection. The erection I should have liked to hide, to forget. It would hand me over. I would be naked, lost.

"If it's any help, imagine that the barrier is down, that you are with your girl friend and that she is speaking to you tenderly, caressing you. Who can tell that it won't really happen soon?"

The Governor was whiter than ever. Could anyone be so white without fainting? And at the same time so haughty!

In spite of myself I thought of Loa. In spite of myself. All those eyes forced me to. The hope they aroused in me, grumbling, rebelling, tumultuous, harmful—the hope that, no matter how, union would be the outcome of humiliation. So I was not poisoned, I was not, or at least not in the way I had feared. I thought of Loa and she was defiled. Not only through my actions but through the

multiplicity of the same actions here. By that atmosphere of a stud farm.

The Governor, like the thin doctor just now, wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. He turned and disappeared in the strong odor of stud. He seemed to be calling for help and to be judging us at the same time.

Jeffy was kept at the doctors' disposition. Then, toward evening, two others were sent for, both from barracks number one—Tierney and Jackson. We did not see them again.

The next day we were informed (we knew it already) . . . that our companions had been questioned like us and examined solely from the sexual point of view. For some reason, both Tierney's and Jackson's women had been detained, as had Jeffy's. As for Tierney and Jackson—and as for June, whom poor Jeffy loved—even today I still do not know the reason for their departure. Was it the Governor's taste for harmony, for coupling? Perhaps so. Like God, he had joined together and put asunder.

The destroyer put out to sea with her six new passengers, who were returning to their prisons, and we were sent back to our old life.

CHAPTER XIX

It is not

for me to speak of my own life here, or of the life of my men. Yet I would like in my turn to devote a few words to the extraordinary atmosphere of monotony—active boredom—mentioned by the prisoner, and to emphasize that it was perhaps as hard for us as for him and his companions. It did as much, perhaps, to keep us off our guard and to weaken our self-control. It was the same harmful ferment. . . . That monotony, that sandbank of silence from which only the barbed-wire fence stood out, the material and spiritual presence of the barrier. Wherever one went and whatever one wanted to do or to think, there was only that, what it offered, what it prohibited, what it foreshadowed.

On us, too, it acted like a magnet. We could not forget it in the daily routine. Although we became used to the sight of those women and those men in their endless conversations and posturing and pawing of the ground, and although the tragedy of their situation became clearer to us each day, they still irritated us, and we rebelled. How could we give our blessing to all this? It was impossible!

I have already mentioned that rebellion. I shall not return to it.

At one time the feeling that these prisoners were destined for some crushing sacrifice of which the barrier was the precursor or witness had consoled us (I am unjust to my men and myself!—had, let us say, dazed us, enabled us to bear the unbearable). Must we not pity them on that account? Their approaching death was everywhere and with them at every moment. Sometimes we lost sight of it. Then we relieved ourselves by cheap sarcasms. I say “we,” but it was never I.

Suddenly we were delivered of this waiting. But relief was too long in coming. Three weeks, a month, six weeks. Besides, we had never really hoped for this; we had only lulled ourselves into calm. How dreadful it is to have to write that! Now we no longer even mentioned the future sufferings of those people when we were angry—when, for example, there was too much activity—to use a discreet word—around the barbed wire; when our ears and eyes also were too much offended. We no longer tried to imagine the fate in store for them. After all, one can get used to any situation . . .

That man says that I shut myself up. True enough. I was like a sick dog that hides in the darkest part of the cellar. I suffered, but my suffering is my own business. I suffered because of my responsibilities in a task whose meaning and outcome were completely obscure to me—and probably partly from my conscience, too, from my relations with the Governor and with my officers. And I suffered for my family, knowing that the sins of the father . . .

And also—I suffered from that oppressive yoke of monotony. Without that, everything might have been different. If occupations and distractions had been carefully planned—if, in short, both sides had had something besides those long, empty days that sapped our strength like tuberculosis. I can guess what such a life must have been for people abandoned to desire without ever seeing any light

ahead, for whom each morning resembled the other in its absurd impatience. Even I, who was on the side of official calm, sometimes felt myself sliding toward madness. Mad from monotony, mad from inactivity and inertia, besieged by insoluble questions. Screaming mad. I did not drink (and that was nothing new for me), but why was there such an abundance of liquor, such a well-stocked bar—and all the gin and whiskey free! I have often thought that the Governor took pleasure in abasing my staff, to some extent, in the eyes of those we were guarding—belittling us, trying to make us seem petty and mean to those to whom he had given as their lot a hopeless, scorching passion. Was this juggling act indispensable to a mind in perpetual ebb and flow? Was it a wish to vilify order (anarchist!)? Maybe drink was simply a kind of drug intended to weaken our reactions, as the sedatives handed out freely to the prisoners bred in them a moral torpor that made them more tractable. I do not know.

In short, that was our life. So flat that the days that followed these could only be mountains by contrast, and they were. We had been surrounded by walls without a window. Then everything changed with the disembarkation of the Army medical mission. The idea that our convicts were destined for a horror far exceeding our worst imaginings drummed anew in our brains—the Army doesn't put itself out for nothing! It was a gunshot, and I realized that I had been wounded in my quality as a man and would never recover. Was I a coward, a weakling? It is not for me to judge. All I know is that rebellion again took possession of our hearts, but in a different way—now it was rebellion for those men and women. We knew that those Army doctors who came to the Island aboard a destroyer—with all the official backing this implies!—did not come

merely to check the prisoners' general health, and the fact that they were capable of having children (as the Governor had hinted to me on the previous evening, with a note of defiance in his voice). There was certainly something else, and we were bordering on the diabolical. I shall return to that in a moment, but I wish first to make two points of this account clear.

In the first place, the visits to the women (who lived in one vast building, probably because they were not the object of the same studies and were only a passive element of the problem):

It is true that the Governor went there very seldom. He left the regulation daily inspection to me. The sentence the prisoner attributes to his Loa—"He seems frightened by us"—strikes me as being perfectly accurate. It resembles the impression I myself had on those rare occasions—two or three—when he accompanied me to this part of the camp. He seemed positively scared by those women, violently disgusted by them and incapable of hiding it. He carried out his inspection hurriedly, stooping (he who bore himself so upright among the male prisoners), as though all his power and even his pride had failed. And I quickly realized that my presence was a help to him, that without me he would never have ventured there. He no longer "dominated," to use a word that keeps on recurring in these pages. His look was devoid of all presence, of all that muted affection that was in him when he walked among the men. He would never have placed his hand on a woman's shoulder.

My second parenthesis deals with the hatred for the Governor that the prisoner attributes to me and my men:

No, I do not think it existed, and yet I would like to be able to say so, for it would have cleansed me, if only a little, from these obscenities. It did exist somewhat later, too late, when even the most hardened criminal would have been shocked into hatred.

Until the arrival of the doctors, our feeling was merely one of distrust, although that is nothing of which I can be proud. Even with Malkin, with me and the others, hate was inconceivable toward a superior who symbolized the interests of our country, however mysterious those interests were to us. We were suspicious, ready for hate, probably, but it had not come. I am sorry for that.

I now turn to the doctors.

What was the aim of their mission? I said I would be able to answer, and I shall try. The view I now have of the events after the atomic explosion—and the ensuing results—obviously does not correspond with the one I had at that time. Then, just like the prisoner, I thought that he and his companions had been poisoned, sexually poisoned by some of the drugs introduced daily into their food and drink; and further, that the progress of the poison was to be observed and if necessary checked and regulated. And our anger, and Malkin's frenzied indignation—which was to take him far, as will be seen—stemmed from that.

Matters were really quite different.

I now know, after the nightmare of the radioactive fallout in which we were to be plunged a few days later, that those people were not all subjected in the same way and to the same extent to the horror prepared for them. I was told so. Some of them, perhaps, are safe. Some of them. I refer, of course, to the offspring born of their union. Some were protected by various products with names I do not know—acids or other chemical derivatives which they swallowed together with those slow-working aphrodisiacs. Whereas for the others, left to themselves, the outcome was fatal. I deduce that the medical board had come to the Island to decide whether the protagonist guinea pigs were ready to take their assigned parts, whether the saved would be saved and whether the lost were already

lost. I should add that in view of the half morbid, loving attraction of the Governor for some prisoners rather than others, I am right in thinking that the men of barracks number three—among them the author of this account—were the most exposed, and were sacrificed down to their souls. Mere chance had brought those few men together. (It will be remembered that the drugs given to me by the Governor varied according to the barracks. I scrupulously carried out his orders. I could almost call them “prescriptions.”)

The whole story is there.

As for its prolongation! There is a demon in the typewriter before me on my table and I, I am its acolyte in the surplice of discipline . . .

It will easily be imagined what a terrible thing it was for us, when the doctors arrived—and with that idea of poison filling our minds—to separate those couples at the barrier, to take the men and women back to their respective barracks and keep them there until they were called. We could not look at each other. We despised each other. Each thought of the other’s shame. Each was judged by all the rest . . .

The Governor had informed me of this visit late on the previous evening, as I said. I did not sleep all night. Probably I was hoping, like the convicts, that a chance confidence from the doctors, a phrase escaping from one or the other of them, would allow me to get some glimpse of the future. But they crushed us with their silence. Even their “hello” was thrown like a punch. And humiliation was grafted on to anguish. If it had not been for me, Malkin would already have provoked a serious scandal. For his sake alone, I had to hold him back.

We clashed brutally enough, anyway, and he had to yield. I am sure he forgave my sharpness at the very moment he told me to go to hell. But the tumultuous change that had taken place in him made me ashamed of the surface calm I was unfortunately obliged

to display. I am not a writer and all this sounds very insignificant. And yet! . . . It was finally agreed between Malkin and myself—and it was only after this agreement that he obeyed me—that we would go to the Governor once the doctors had left in order to inform him that we felt incapable henceforth of carrying out our task and that we were cancelling our contract (as if that were possible!). But on the next day I put off this step until the evening, partly through cowardice and also because Malkin was only too obviously aching for and ready for a scene. I was trying to gain time, and I told myself that it was only common sense. During the day I saw the Governor secretly and asked that my comrade be discharged, officially, and in front of the prisoners themselves, from his service—it was a compromise that might have satisfied him.

The Governor refused. He was pale and very brusque. If my colleague were in a dangerous and critical state, I should take it on myself to arrest him and shut him up, that was all. He did not want to be involved in it. Was he indifferent; or was he pleased at seeing the fall of one of the men he loathed? I knew he was brave enough and rash enough to face anything that came from Malkin or anyone else.

The following day it was too late for my unfortunate friend. I wonder where he is now and whether his situation is worse than mine. He has no remorse and I envy him. The rest of us, the ten guards and myself, were swept away by a disaster like a tidal wave.

As for Jeffy, the Negro, and as for the two other prisoners and the three women whom the destroyer took away: "Nervousness," the Governor told me, as the ship was weighing anchor. "They were too nervous, too anxious, too shaky, you understand. Nervousness, Mister O'Hara, spreads like rust. If they went mad can you imagine the effect on their companions? Everything would have to begin again from scratch."

"That is not it."

"That is it, Mister O'Hara."

I believed him, or pretended to. I thought of the slow process of poisoning—certainty of this then filled my mind. I wondered why, why. Didn't the poison act on them? Had he spared them?

We were rough with the three men when we took them on board. Our blows, the kicks and the shoving, seemed to be avenging those who stayed; and perhaps we were avenging ourselves, too.

CHAPTER XX

The morning

was exhausting. I can remember the almost tangible weight of time: it crushed my shoulders. I was waspish, whining, woebegone. Jeffy's bench had become almost sacred to us; we did not dare sit there or even move the half-folded blanket or the pillow where his head had made a grey dent. Everything had to remain as it was. He was still there and nothing definite had happened, neither for him nor for us.

We went out late, without wanting to. At the barrier we did not notice those who were there—just the six who were absent: six fresh-wood fires. In vain we tried to avoid them, all of us on fire at one moment or another, blazing with questions. Why? What had happened? What did it mean? Jeffy and June Toynbee were still weeping and praying, invisible and indivisible, at the spot where they usually stood. And farther along were Tierney and his redhead with the hollow shoulders, and Jackson and Cecily Smith; pins at the end of an alley, and the ball was rolling . . . I'm sure that at some point, that morning, each of us made a pilgrimage to those three now-empty sectors of the barrier (for some inexplicable

reason, they were contiguous, as though there were some blight on them). I use the word "blight"; I used it then, but to do so was insane. On the contrary, happy Jeffy who had escaped! How could he even have imagined how deep our descent was to be! When I think that perhaps he thought himself sacrificed!

I went to the barrier, and I went back there again and yet again. Jeffy, old pal, where are you now? How is the sea around you? What port lies ahead of you, where are they taking you? Are they kind to you? Where is June? Can you still see her, or? . . . It's over, isn't it? *Answer me!* What was it that made such a loathsome scar on your life? What sin, what sickness were you concealing? If you told me perhaps it would help me to find my way, give me a landmark. At least, if I knew the reason for your departure! Are you saved or are you more than ever the underdog who gets kicked around? Now one answer, now another, round and round in faster and faster circles . . . I lose myself looking for the truth.

The day was filled with contradictory omens, weaving a pattern of Fate around Jeffy, June, the other four. The heat, the rain heaped up in one great cloud low over the sea to the north; something restrained, almost comatose, in the design of the creepers, in the movement of the grass, pale plumes suddenly bending. Had the embarkation of these six, for whatever reason, withdrawn them from the catastrophe hovering over us? But how could we have thought that—without at the same time accepting our damnation? If they were safe, then there was no hope for us—so we preferred to be sorry for them. We wore mourning for them, and for us it was a kind of reassurance. We reproached ourselves for not having shown them enough friendship, for having misunderstood them, for having too often humiliated Jeffy for his melancholy forebodings. The mysterious tropic-birds whirled over the mystery of the abduction. Were the birds angels of pity or witnesses for the prosecu-

tion? Oh, witnesses certainly, very pragmatic witnesses: "They have gone because they were not men and women like you, because they were unsuitable, because they weren't thoroughly examined before we all left. They were sick . . ." But in that case, were we healthy? Was the end of the barrier now assured?

"You've got screwing on your mind, all right! You're ready for it . . . I can see it written all over you. Don't lie! You dreamed of it all night."

"Can't you ever shut your mouth?"

"You dreamed of it, all right, don't kid me! It's normal, isn't it? Isn't that what we're here for? We're prize stallions, brother, that's our job."

"Bentley, turn it off, for God's sake."

"Listen to me—they're going to *make* us screw! For science or something! Okay—I'm ready. You'll see that I'm the man for the job, all right."

"You make everything as dirty as your own filthy mouth!"

"Because I'm talking straight, the truth?"

"You make us into animals."

"Well, we are animals, for God's sake! What else do you expect? Animals with nice female animals waiting all warm for them. . . . Did you think you were going to start a new life, make love on schedule like the bank clerk who takes his pants down after dinner? They've examined your blood and your sperm and you're all right. Don't ask for more!"

"And supposing they've poisoned us?"

"Still shooting your mouth off about that, are you?"

"I can't help it. I keep worrying—supposing they've poisoned us?"

Supposing they've poisoned us? . . . Supposing they've poisoned us?

Supposing they've poisoned us?

"Supposing Jeffy and the others were just those the poison didn't affect—suppose they're the ones that are all right?"

"Quit it! Enough of that crap."

"I don't know what they've done, or how they've managed it, or what the results are supposed to be. But I repeat: supposing Jeffy, Tierney, Jackson or their women . . ."

"Enough, damn it!"

Supposing Jeffy?

I was silent. I spoke into the ground, like King Midas in the legend. Implacably, horribly, a pale sun was above us, a faint dawn.

Near noon the rain came. It had come a long way over the sea and lasted for hours. I saw it come with relief. It was a gift; it restored order. Afterwards it would be easier for us to forget those whom we had lost. We would no longer have to reckon with their ghosts and all the anxiety they stirred up. It would sweep everything clean. We would no longer say: "Poor Jeffy was blubbering here, just here, do you remember, as though he had guessed, the fool! . . . and here was the big stone June sat on, and there was Tierney, looking like a Jap." The rain would take them away. Their adventure was over; now they would no longer haunt ours, and we would be able to think again of *our* fate, to start again, far from them, without thinking of them at every step and without wondering what they were thinking about us now, what they might have learned about us from the people on board. They would leave us forever with their secrets, buried under wet leaves. That good, kind rain! It would also clear away the muck in which we rolled. Thanks to it I could once more be worthy of Loa and myself. For the moment I could no longer love her. The indispensable light was lacking.

We did not manage to meet. Something that had somehow been offered to us, open to us only the day before, was now missing. The road was barred. All morning, in spite of the fact that we were permitted to go to the fence, we avoided each other. When we spoke to each other it was from a distance. I was burdened with remorse for a crime. I had defiled Loa. She had been a beautiful white form reclining before me, and I had trampled on her face. One step, another and another. The doctors had demanded it. Had they so great a need to destroy? Their eyes were still fixed on me, brilliant and narrow, like cats' eyes in the sun. "Now, son, behave as though your girl friend were with you." They had gone back to the ship, but I could still hear them. They came and went, without a second's respite. I had soiled and stained my love on their account, for them, because I didn't have the strength to rebel, because hope had cried out within me and conquered me, had made me yield to their demands as a possible way—and I had corrupted Loa. My love had appeared at my side before my magistrates, in that courtroom of experiments, and like me had become impregnated with the insipid horror, the smell of blood, formaldehyde and urine of that room where they were holding court. My love had appeared and had been condemned. I had masturbated and had soiled my love, and all those who preceded and followed me had done the same, had soiled their loves as I had. How could I be forgiven? How could *that* not be between Loa and myself forever? I had forced her to be my accomplice, and we had been chosen, she and I, all of us, as Satan had chosen his angels, to annihilate the face of love. From now on she was just my bitch, my appointed mate for coupling.

All during the time the heavy rain lasted, my companions and I remained indoors—the seven from barracks number three and the

memory of Jeffy—and we argued. It was the first time hate settled down among us. What violence and prolonged insults there were, what grudges grew, with our women suddenly at stake! There was a ceaseless fight, implied or open, blows were not always withheld, and Bentley's strength broke loose. Perhaps we had unwittingly accumulated a great store of anger against each other, or else my comrades, in differing degrees, shared my feeling that each saw himself humiliated in front of his neighbors. We were all aware of the imminent end of the barrier, but we awaited it with an involuntary repugnance, with an apprehension, indeed, that we could not succeed in overcoming. What lay behind all this? It was time for us to know. Soon the temptation of lucidity would be dissipated, blown away, and we would roll in the chaos prepared for us. But what could it be? Keep your damned ideas to yourself! and the quarrels would flare up again. I tried to go out. But the rain was coming down in sheets. I went back to my bed. Could I redeem myself before the immense moment that was approaching? I could see my own defeat in the eyes of this man and that one, and this man and that one undoubtedly saw nothing else in me. I could only have recovered alone, and in silence. I cursed those men with all my heart.

Twice I nearly came to blows with Bentley, and with Hughes as well—Hughes, the Negro, who was for all of us a reflection of Jeffy and of the anxiety aroused merely by his name. Yes—two quick moments of fury, in spite of the fact that I am timid, peaceful through weakness. They separated us. A quarter of an hour later we were separating others in their turn. The rain went on, washed the Island—and to no avail. A stifled quarrel came suddenly to the surface, and at the same time another was brewing. A hyena howled at a group of hyenas. A pig turned over the trough. Without realiz-

ing it we had been furiously observing each other for several weeks and had noted each others' most minute faults. Everything came to a head at once.

Then weariness appeared, like sleep, as the rain slackened. For a long time it maintained a veil between the women and ourselves—almost as if our exhaustion was planned, to shield us from a premature reunion.

Late in the afternoon the downpour stopped. Night came creeping after, arriving without those heavy scents it usually spread before it; a harsh night over a harsh land. We ventured to the barrier without speaking and without our usual haste. Something had changed. A shivering form dominated the sky. What words of reunion would there be between Loa and myself? And between the others? An impossible greeting—until a woman began to sing.

The song of that woman—Anna Sullivan—in the drowning night. Even today I can still hear it. It floats, imponderable, like white silk. Suddenly I am remote from unhappiness. I re-enter a world that has just crystalized, and my place is there—for an instant I am blessed.

[NOTE BY J. O'HARA: *I, too, can never forget it, old man though I am. It was like a return of purity to the world. And no use my saying I was insane to think so, then or now. I can hear it. I can see myself and my guards. I can see tears in Malkin's eyes. He had been drinking and was still drinking. I tried in vain to bring him to reason.*

"For Christ's sake!" he cried, "you know we are dogs doing a dog's job! It can't go on."

I seem to remember that the Governor was at his window, but I am not sure. All the lights were out in his rooms. The song sounded, sounded, echoed. Fragile. I thought of my daughter and I was cold.

Then suddenly the lights in the Governor's rooms went on, and next I saw him standing near his piano, bent double, almost broken in two.]

She was singing. She was not with us; she had stayed in the barracks. But in her voice she came to me naked—I think she came naked for everyone. Naked and pure, so pure that a miracle took place: her song, the wonderful nakedness of her song and the other women who were there were mingled; and we, too, had a share in the redemption, and everything that had been tarnished recovered its childhood. Had we been hurled into the depths? Then we came forth as from a deep pit. Our liberty was on the pit's edge. Our liberty defied our masters. Our youth, even our poverty triumphed over them. As we loved, so the earth loved us, and bore us on the strong shoulder of its base, on its constantly renewed bounty. There was something within us, a soul, that no one would reach. It was like the first day. It was the shy, overwhelming hope of the first day here.

How long did Anna Sullivan sing? She stopped and I returned from legend to life. But I returned rich with a treasure of courage—almost carefree, filled with the sap of fresh young trees. Calm, amazingly untouched, perhaps heroic. Where had I been in her wake, and what fragile secrets had I captured? Everything that had until now divided Loa and myself had vanished.

“Sing again!” someone cried.

Bentley ran along the barrier, muttering and laughing, his lips wet with saliva, for she belonged to him . . .

“Bentley, tell her to sing again. Don't just run around like a wild animal.”

He pushed aside the man who spoke.

"Don't tell *me* what to do, buddy. I've got a right to have her in front of me, haven't I?"

Everything was childlike. No more tragedy on the earth. White silk enveloped the horizon.

Then, from the depths of the kingdom of white silk, drenched in white silk, ever more imponderable, the Governor's piano could be heard. Had he, too, at the same time as ourselves, become reconciled with this land, with his destiny? He had been silent for three days, and I understood what had been missing. "Nothing is his fault, nothing, nothing," his music said. "He loves you, he is your friend, your protector, you will understand him some day." His piano opened up an avenue in the night and he appeared among us, supporting us, restoring in us I know not what absurd confidence. . . . [NOTE BY J. O'HARA: "*I'll kill him!*" *Malkin growled. "I'd rather have a pig for a boss than that man."* He was foaming; even his sweat smelled of whiskey. We had to carry him to bed and hold him there until he fell asleep, in order to avoid a scene. For the Governor was coming down, his footsteps on the stone staircase abnormally slow and heavy.

The scene—a violent one—was to take place quite soon, however.]

CHAPTER XXI

A rectangle

of light took shape and returned to darkness—his door. I sensed that he had decided to walk among us, in the camp. My head emptied. During the time he had been playing at the piano he had safeguarded me, but now he was coming to claim his payment of darkness. I wished desperately to know where he was, where he was going—so that in returning to the barracks, I could take a path to the left or right of him, and be sure of not meeting him. But I could not see him, in spite of the moon riding clear of the clouds. Why did he delay? Where was he? What was he doing? Had he turned back? Had he stopped near this man or that? Had he finally thrown off his mask?

On both sides of the barrier, without even the noise of disturbed pebbles, shadows were slipping in the direction of the barracks. They were fleeing from him—so that they would not hear, so that they could ignore the message he was bringing—for the Governor had not come outdoors merely for the pleasure of breathing the air after a day of rain.

They did not want to know the truth; its name would be death.

Now it would be too late for me. For the sake of a few minutes more with Loa, a little scrap of sky retained in the face of everything, I had provoked fire.

"Tomorrow, darling. I shall take the short cut by the shore. There I shall have more chance . . ."

She did not reply. Her eyelids fluttered. She was no longer the Loa of a few moments before. She was distant and breathless.

"Can you see him? Where?"

She made a sign, then abruptly moved off. I realized that he was behind me. I wanted to bellow—it was as though hot coals were passing over my body. I took hold of myself, or tried to, but I was in no condition to resist him. In any case, the moment he had left his room, all control had left me. Yet if only I could go away, could take advantage of that first reaction of timidity he always revealed! If I could rejoin my comrades! He would not venture as far as the barracks; never, except for the day we disembarked, had he spoken to us as a group. I started, then froze. It was impossible, he already possessed me. He was behind me. . . .

It seemed to take me an infinity of time to turn. I do not know if it was the Governor I first noticed, or the great lizard. The lizard was on the right; and he was at my left, half-hidden by a bush, about five or six yards behind me. He moved, entered the light; and at the same time, a little way ahead, I heard the tap-tap of the reptile, and saw it on a log, rigid and very long, pointing at the moon. My eyes blinked, then closed at the force of those two dry, staring pupils; and for a moment I could see nothing else. Oh, chase it—chase it away! But in that stony world, I no longer mattered. The lizard lived; the only reality in me was the taste of bitter saliva, thick as a cork in my throat.

Never before had I experienced the full shock of the piercing

reptile eyes. The glance had impact; the eyes were two needles, and my forehead, face, and neck seemed pricked all over. I wanted to take refuge in the Governor's presence; only thus could I escape the spell. But he offered me only the same indifferent stare he had given the tube of my blood at the medical examination—the same expression, in which I could not distinguish between interest or hate, anguish or the extremity of cruelty.

The paralysis that had gripped me gradually relaxed, and I took one step. But like the drunkard who is no longer master of his movements, who lurches absurdly to the right when he wants to go to the left, I moved straight toward the lizard. It did not budge or show the least sign of uneasiness. I was no longer casting a shadow on it and it seemed to have grown even longer! It pointed toward the moon, that segment of white death. It was completely, terrifyingly motionless, except for the tip of its tail, twitching almost imperceptibly. At last it moved its head. Twice. The mica from which I had been freed for an instant found me again—this time in the belly and then lower down, in the genitals. It was precisely in this way that Malkin had condemned me, when he was in a rage, before his metamorphosis. It was thus that the doctors had received me when I came before them in the examination room. And was I sure that I had never caught the Governor's eyes there before? Sex—everyone, everywhere, sex, sex! My hands went down to my belly; I was a target. For a few seconds I was protected, then the two needles of mica ran hot again, pierced my hands. The mica eyes entered deep into my flesh, consuming me. My arms dangled. What was the use of defending myself? I devoted the little will power I had left to not sinking down on that log, on the animal that drew me inexorably. But once more I went nearer. The lizard had lost its colors and

was moon-color on the rotting wood. It cried out. From afar there was a rapid tapping in reply. Was it from afar or from quite close? It was both at once. The cry seemed to come from the other end of the Island and at the same time it came from me, from a reflection of Loa persisting in the spot she had just left, from my narrow shadow reaching out toward her. And from the Governor's shadow, too, which had just moved and was decapitating mine.

Go away! Leave me—or take me away. I do not want to stay here. I cannot . . .

The words would not come out. Like myself he was watching the lizard intently. Was there some kind of relationship between the reptile and what he had to tell me? He came forward. He smiled. At once the tapping rapped out and this time again it was answered from my shadow. I now began to differentiate between these metallic calls, not so much by tone as by force. The nearby echo was like little pieces of glass clinking together quickly and passionately—a female in heat perhaps? The Governor put his hands on my shoulders and the male lizard raised itself a little. Its eyes clouded and its tail ceased twitching.

The Governor clasped me in his arms. What can I say? I had the impression of being embraced by a woman rather than by a man. Nothing in him was masculine. He surrendered himself to me; he weighed nothing. He was my master, according to the rules, but tonight I dominated him. He was seeking my aid against I knew not what; my succor, even; he was piteous. And there was in him a trembling tenderness, a shamed tenderness flowing from his body toward my body. I freed myself and he lurched toward me again.

He had been drinking. He smelt of booze—gin. And the per-

fume of the gin was stale, feminine. For a moment he wrung his hands. There was no light in them now; they were swollen. They climbed toward my shoulders. He was panting. The lizard cried out, lower now than I had ever heard, and the clinking of glass, the invitation from the female, mingled with its cries. My whole belly and the upper part of my thighs were encased in a quicklime plaster.

Now the second lizard appeared right at my feet. The Governor wound his arms round me. Gradually his embrace grew firmer, more masculine; but the gin on his breath made me think of a perfumed, powdered fairy, a cheap male prostitute.

Slowly he became a companion, a comrade; and then I felt once more that paternal support I had known in the early days. He raised his hand. Was he going to get rid of the lizard for me, for himself? The female slid inexorably toward the male and climbed the log. When they were quite near each other I began to feel wobbly, faint. I became frantic. "I'm going to piss blood . . . it's impossible to burn like this without pissing blood." The Governor took something from his pocket, his lighter perhaps, and threw it at them with a curse. The lizards disappeared in a rustle of leaves. But other lizards continued the dance of iron, fire, sulphur and ice.

"My poor friend," said the Governor.

He turned slowly.

"Who am I? That's your main question, isn't it? It eats you up inside—you think that if you knew that, you'd know everything."

He gave me a nervous pat on the neck, hurting me.

"A jailer!" he exclaimed. "Why not? There are jailers of every rank and every kind. A large-scale Mister O'Hara."

He forced himself to laugh, a raucous, ugly sound. Incredibly, his hand touched my chin, father forcing son's head up. I closed

my eyes. I suddenly feared his ravaged, deeply furrowed face. What judgment was that mouth about to utter?

"Look at me. I wish it."

His voice had changed. It was an order, thrown at me from the depths of despair, an order and also a kind of supplication.

"I wish it," he repeated.

I had grasped him by his icy wrist, but I could not free myself. He was filled with a curious strength against which Bentley himself could have done nothing. And yet for all his violence I felt he was vanquished, crushed by me . . . he became a haughty beggar.

"In your eyes, in all your eyes, there is the vision of a child." (He hiccuped.) "It is that child I wish to see, your child—who will come."

"What child? How can you force me to make a child? In that act at least I am free."

He gazed at me steadily, steadily. His glance was transparent—horrible and beautiful.

He waited, then screamed: "Are you listening to me?" He began to shake me furiously, and I fought against the insanity and absurdity of it. I did all I could to remain upright. I knew I would have a child, that he would insist on it, that he had some means of insisting on it, that I was on the Island only for that purpose. And I was ready, whatever might be the circumstances and the consequences, anything, *anything* in order to make love with Loa.

I opened my eyes; I had to. He would have strangled me. His eyes plunged deep into mine, even more disturbed than they had been when he was gazing at the sample of my blood. Receptive and so angrily profound.

"Unscathed!" he said. "An unscathed child! Ah, if you could understand . . ." [NOTE BY J. O'HARA: *I draw attention to what I wrote earlier; that the men of barracks number three were the first to be sacrificed.*] His eyes rolled. "Unscathed—not a monster."

His hand suddenly left my chin. He took a few steps to the left, toward the tree, as though to find shelter from the moon that was shining too brightly in his eyes. Had he said too much? Children? Monsters? The word crackled. For what atrocious circus? Witnesses perhaps of some future weapon of war? The idea of possible poisoning regained its former hold over me.

"Why children? Tell me! Tell me!"

"Silence!" he ordered with a kind of terror.

"If only you could understand me!" he continued, almost plaintively. "Understand how I am in prison and will never escape . . ."

"And what about us?" I cried.

A sham bravery came to me. Perhaps this was the moment to get things clear, a moment that would not come again.

He stopped short. Would he answer: "You are healthy and the barrier will be swept aside"? He hesitated and was silent.

I went on: "You have taken us from our prisons, but only to send us into some unspeakably filthy business."

"Perhaps," he murmured, still half-turned away. "Perhaps so, for the moment. But in prison you were rotting away without being of any use to any man. And here . . . here there will be something."

I flung myself upon him. I had to know what was going on in his mind. I had to know at last.

"You talk of your bad luck and of emptiness," I challenged. "But what about our lives? What is in your mind—why that fence? What is the meaning of all the analyses and questionnaires and every-

thing? Why did you send back Jeffy and the others? Oh yes, you're offering us life, are you? And love? You're a murderer!"

"You had forgotten that you were a man," he exclaimed.

He pushed me from him with a well-placed blow, then drew me to him again. His hands—both of them—were caressing and menacing.

"You had forgotten," he went on, almost with pride and enthusiasm, "and I gave your manhood back to you. I gave you back your heart and senses. I restored you."

Now I hit him. I dared to hit him and he did not react.

"And I?" he breathed. "Have I ever been a man, with a man's knowledge?"

His impotence destroyed him, I thought, growing calm. Loa was right in a way. He is not a fag—but a man crucified, who would like the world around him to be studded with thieves' crosses.

"You are among us in order to be avenged on yourself," I said. And all the metallic, rasping, scratching sounds of the night took up my words, all the lizards moved toward my belly in a new malediction, toward Loa's belly—the dishonored belly of the woman.

"Your own bad luck, your own misfortunes lead you on—admit it! You've promised yourself—'What life did to me, I'll do to others.' I don't know what it did do to you, but we others are paying—and *will* pay, and we'll be broken for it."

"No!"

"Admit it, now's the time . . ."

"I have my duty," he cried.

He was reeling.

"A duty . . . immense . . ."

"The duty of degrading men and women?"

"It is not them I am degrading. You cannot judge me."

"The children?"

I heard a muffled exclamation; he seemed to lose his breath for a moment.

"What in God's name do you want with children? What have you thought of for *them*?"

"I don't know," he muttered, all his violence suddenly gone.

"Leave me."

I seized him. I would have killed him had I not been stopped by sudden panic. Were there tears in his eyes, or was that only an effect of the moonlight? For an interminable minute he studied me from head to toe. There was no use in fighting; in my mouth was the tepid salt of his tears, and I was helpless.

"Leave me. . . . It is the *whole* of humanity that counts."

"You're drunk," I said.

He admitted it.

"Answer me. Are you aware of your words? Throw off your disguise. What about the children—and first of all . . . *what* children? How can you force us to have children?"

I found myself holding him up as he wavered.

"What is there in you—what ghosts of the past make you desire so much evil?"

He pushed me aside and stood back.

"Nothing," he said harshly. "Enough! Enough! There are no ghosts."

He had regained his outward calm.

"There is nothing but myself. And yet," he sighed, "a child used to laugh and sing in my head. You can say that again: he

used to laugh and sing and no one came to open a door to him . . . and there was no door . . . never any door . . .”

He dodged me, running. He tripped over a root, picked himself up and went on, zigzagging. I tried to catch him, but gave up. At each step I took in his direction the lizards arose by dozens, and the night rolled out heaps of eggs, all exploding like capsules.

CHAPTER XXII

I would

have said nothing about this to my comrades in any event. Even without the Malkin thunderbolt on the following day, which was to put them beyond hearing.

I am trying to be perfectly honest. I feared that rebellion on their part would have put an end to everything, and I wanted Loa at any price. In order to reassure myself about the Governor, I said to myself again and again: "Those were the words of a drunken man. They cannot possibly have the meaning I give them. If he were the king of the world, such a thing would not be in his power. Monster-children? How could he admit to such a thing?"

"Science can do everything today," a voice within me replied.

"Not that!" (I took refuge in a sneer.) "And what if it could? This would not be the first time I cheated love in order not to have a kid."

"If he didn't have the means to make himself obeyed, would he have ventured to defy you and be waiting for you at the end of his defiance?"

I tried cunning.

"Besides, what did I really understand? When I think about it, it was all very vague."

"I do not know," retorted the voice, very clearly. "Something unavoidable, at all events. Something that is coming, a shadow as old and sure as Satan, like the first smoke upon the earth."

"That we have been poisoned? And haven't I been sure of that for two days?"

The voice went back into silence, the sand carried it away. Suddenly my feet were firmer on the ground, the brief signal of a cure. That hypothetical child was no more than a distant eventuality, and I had always felt very free about distant demands—that was how I rationalized my cowardice. We'll soon see. Nothing is ever settled in advance. During the last few days I had been fighting an imminent and much more cruel fear, and a much more elemental one.

The voice returned from the sea, putting me on guard. There was a brutal gust of wind to which I refused to listen. Then I heard it again. I saw Loa pregnant. I saw her child, mine. Little, sharp, dry eyes that could not weep, that would never weep. And an inhuman cry—like the sound of the heat. I drove it off.

"Balls! You'll have a kid only if you agree to have one. There are plenty of ways of avoiding it!"

The image of Loa naked mercifully replaced the child's image—Loa naked and I on top of her. Only that dream existed and only that one would come true. "To hell with everything else. That's life. Even if it's only a moment of life I shall live it with all my strength, without caring about anything else."

"A monumental shadow is coming, and nothing will turn it aside. The shadow is as old and sure as Satan, like the first smoke upon the earth," repeated the voice.

I stopped my ears with my palms.

"Nothing counts for me except making love with Loa."

"It is bad luck, bad luck. . . . Endless bad luck that will never go away."

I handled myself, gnawed at by fear, and was astonished—I almost cried out with joy—to find myself still normal, healthy. Ah yes, I did that. I can still remember it with a shudder. I did it. Not like a pervert: I felt saved and I rejoiced in my salvation.

I did that, thought that. . . . I would have sung it if I had dared. Screamed it to the trees, the rocks, the sea.

I was damp, my skin was damp.

"Bad luck, endless bad luck . . ."

"Balls!"

"Bad luck . . . endless misfortune."

"Balls!"

On the left the child, the children with eyes of mica. And on the right, Loa, naked and ready. In front there was only the faint, trembling silhouette of the Governor, the Governor drunk, staggering, droning absurdities. I came back to myself from far off. I came back into my body with pleasure—and terror . . .

It was an extraordinary night. I avoided my companions' questions as best I could. The men of the two other barracks had come into ours to hear the news. They were almost yelping with excitement. Poor men! And I stifled my secret, trying to persuade myself that I was not committing a crime by doing so! They laughed and panted and aimed wild blows at each other. They thumped my shoulders and pushed me.

"He really promised you this time that the barrier will come down?"

"That's what I understood, yes."

"But did he *say* so?"

"Perhaps not in so many words, but . . ."

"Christ Almighty!"

I turned away. Was I breathing too fast? Weren't they going to grab me: "You're hiding something. Tell the truth!" Loa hastened to my aid, like calm rain. I would stand fast. No one would have my confession. No one would have the madness to rebel.

"Of course, he'll make conditions," I hesitated. Loa turned herself under me and I recovered my determination.

"Did he say what conditions?"

"What d'you think!"

"You're such a screwball—this might be some more of your ravings."

"No."

"Then all that rubbish of yours about poison. Are you finished with it? Satisfied?"

"Satisfied, yes." ("I love you," whispered Loa. "Our joy will be like no one else's in the world.")

"Hell! I've got a big piece of ice in my stomach—and hot coals right next to it."

The children cried out, and the lizards. A furious urge of the summertime of death. Their cries were deafening.

"Listen to me, boys. There's . . . there's something else."

I fell back. I reinforced myself. If only my nerve wouldn't go!

"Tell us. What is it?"

"I don't know that it matters. He was stewed to the ears . . . he talked a lot of crap . . ."

Once more my secret rose up in my throat, while I tried to suppress it, and Loa, wonderful, trembling and gentle, ran to help

me—and I was filled with terror and would not confess even to her.

“For what it’s worth—in my opinion, he’s a man who once lost his head over a kid . . . a kid he can never forget.”

“Is the kid dead?”

“No. A kid he didn’t have, get it? One he couldn’t make. Perhaps he’s never even had a woman. . . . He never stops thinking of it.”

The word had burst forth, the word that conditioned everything!

“Thinking of it and . . . and avenging himself.”

I was embarrassed. All those wide-open eyes fixed on me. I was afraid of seeing in them the red rebellion that would ruin everything, that would ship us away and throw me back into my desert.

“What do you mean—avenging himself?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you must have some idea. What the hell are you trying to say?”

“It just went through my mind. You know how I am. It’d be stupid to talk about it.”

“It’d be a damn sight better if you kept your mouth shut, that’s for sure,” Bentley growled.

For a moment he had been looking hard at me. He would not permit me to cast any shadow over the final period of waiting; he would knock me down first. Did he know that he spurred me on, that this was what I needed? I blessed my fear of blows. I was not ashamed. Come what may, as long as I could have Loa, and her body that my body called out for, nothing mattered, I should still be on the winning side.

. . . Bentley, threatening me . . . I ignored him. I lectured myself. What terrifying power all this presupposed in the Gover-

nor! How could it be, unless he held the highest possible responsibility? And even then! How could an American, a citizen of a country so religious and in fact so fundamentally healthy, so respectful of all forms of morality . . . ?

"Hiroshima," said the voice I had already heard.

"In spite of Hiroshima!"

"Hiroshima," repeated the voice, vibrant.

"No, no!"

"In an age when men dream of remaking God by their own power, everything is possible," the voice said. "Why not in America? Why not particularly in America? Atomic death was born in America and grew up there. This man has devoted all his dreams of glory to the crime that will free him, and he conceals it by patriotic and scientific excuses that are perfectly valid in his eyes."

"God! I must be mad! There is America, as I shall never stop saying, America, safe and good. In spite of Hiroshima, you hear? In spite of Hiroshima. None of this makes sense."

"You're always ready to shoot your mouth off," said Bentley, and I watched his clenched fists.

I was afraid of his fists and glad to be afraid. I plunged into my whirlpool and there I found Loa. We spun and spun and spun around. I was betraying her, too, just as I was betraying the others—even more than the others. But she forgave me; she could not do otherwise. The dizzy whirlpool in which we were was still happiness.

"Let me be!" (How strange my voice was suddenly, hard and deep.) "The fence will soon be ancient history. Ask yourselves your own questions. I'm going to bed."

"Sure thing," said Greenglass (and he exploded pink and red). "Don't worry, there aren't any questions."

"None," growled Bentley.

He left me. He was watching Hughes. Perhaps he was wondering if Hughes was thinking of Jeffy. Whenever Jeffy's name was mentioned, the mystery of Jeffy returned to haunt us.

"No questions! Questions are for jerks . . . since there can't be any answers."

I felt my belly. It was supple; it was life. Ah, God, life!

Malkin's madness, or what we heard about it the next morning, plunged me anew into terror at the very time that it increased my companions' exaltation. Now the chips were down. The news spread like wildfire in all three barracks at once, it seems.

Malkin had shot at the Governor, missed him, and had been overpowered with great difficulty.

Sergeant Malkin!

I was profoundly shaken. What was in store for us must certainly be as tragic as I had deduced—and irremediable! The women were once more decoys, just as they had been on the first evening, leading us down the road toward the Governor—an immense Governor, ruler of fire, and Malkin the animal had tried to bite him! And it was not we who were Malkin's target, but the authority under which he had always lived! The horror must be beyond words, cataclysmic.

I was silent. I continued obstinately silent, trembling. My companions stared at me with urgent eyes, sometimes savage, sometimes full of condescending contempt for what they called my "ravings." For them the event had a quite different and really beneficent significance. They had begun to *live* the end of the barrier with such passion that they would have torn me to pieces had I even tried to raise a minor question. They all retained with loathing their image of Malkin. "I can't see a dog pumping away at a

dog without kicking it." They had not forgotten. And now the man who clubbed and kicked had been kicked and clubbed and felled! What better sign could there be? Only I had caught a glimpse of kindness, however restrained, in Malkin. Only to me, his former scapegoat, had he shown any sort of cordiality—although it was aggressive—or pity. Now his name was a lighthouse shining on misfortune.

Who brought us the news? Who first spoke of it in our presence, or at what moment? Everything is confused.

"Is this true? Are you sure?"

"Why? It makes you feel bad?"

"Listen," said Bentley (said Greenglass, Williamson, Hughes, Schneider, nearly all of them), "listen, if you want details, go ask O'Hara. Don't bother us."

I can still see those suddenly reddened faces, those frowning foreheads, all at once quietly proud. They accompany me. And each one is at the top of a cross.

"Did you hear about Malkin? He's off his rocker . . ."

"He was always yelling: 'I'll be the barrier . . . I'll always be there . . .'"

"Today at last! After all the days we've had to wait!"

. . . Each one at the top of a cross.

. . . Bentley and Anna Sullivan, two crosses facing each other. Williamson and his Lucy, two crosses, Loa and I, two crosses. The others . . . The crosses draw near each other, mingle—the infernal love of the crosses—and the sand is like the caress of velvet. Anna sings, all the cat-footed scents of the morning sing in her words. And the birds' voices cling more closely to the tormented trunks of the mangroves.

"Malkin changed after those lousy medics came here. Changed

completely, I swear. He knew things we still don't know. He was ashamed—he told me so. For a jailer to be ashamed, something really horrible must be happening. And now—when he tries to kill the Governor—do you think it's for nothing? Just like that? Just because he's been drinking?"

The crosses did not listen.

"You're making a celebration out of death."

Was I even listening to myself? I tried to stupefy myself. I slipped into the dance, I consented to return, lost, consumed, warm with lust or fever, I knew not which. "Malkin went mad because the time is drawing near, because it's here. Mad with disgust or mad with remorse or mad with anger, no one will tell me. So much the better. I shall have Loa . . . I shall live."

"We shall live," said Loa.

As on the night before, my secret was on the tip of my tongue. I clenched my teeth. Supposing I frightened her—supposing, afterwards, she were to refuse me?

"I thought this day of all days would never dawn," she said.

Who had said that he had a block of ice in his stomach? Mortenson? Schneider? Someone in another barracks? I, too, suddenly felt that stab of coldness—yet it intoxicated me. No, I would be silent. Indeed, I would be silent.

"How queer you are!"

"No, Loa, no. I have no shadow for you."

"You're not the same."

"I'm waiting for you."

My red lust drove me on. I unbuttoned my shirt, for I was stifling. Loa looked at my naked chest. Her eyes were narrower than usual. Could she see a lizard on my chest? I could see one at the

base of her neck. I chased it away with all my strength, all the power of my desire. But it would come back. Henceforth, forever, that was its chosen place.

“I’m waiting for you, Loa. I have no shadow for you, what are you seeking there?”

The crosses, all the crosses facing each other. Nothing between them but a river of time drying up. Nothing but a fugitive Palm Sunday.

CHAPTER XXIII

It must

have been half past one or two in the morning. Malkin, in a drunken stupor, was snoring in the room to which we had carried him. With Cartwright and Simmons I had checked for the last time—as we did every evening—the generators that fed the grille and the electrified section of the barrier. I had done it mechanically and was about to go to bed when the Governor came in from his walk. I thought I heard him sigh . . . the day's rain had made the air very thin. Then his heavy step, heavier than before, sounded on the stone staircase; his door creaked. "What did he go out for?" I wondered. "To speak to the men, to torture them? Or did he go over to the women's side for once? Or . . . no, he cannot have been weeping over the fate of these people! He is not the kind of man who has even momentary regrets."

I had promised myself when he had gone out: "On his return I will get him with his back to the wall. If I have made a mistake, if there is something on the way that's different from the horror we expect, I shall apologize. But if I am right, I want no further part in this." However, at the moment he came in, I gave up my

plan: it dissolved. The act of putting one foot before the other seemed impossible, one foot before the other on that staircase, toward a truth I guessed only too well. I convinced myself that it would be wiser to wait until the next day. At the beginning of the evening the Governor had come down to fetch a bottle of gin from the bar (Cartwright told me that), and he would now undoubtedly be in no condition to listen to reason.

I had had enough of drunks! Enough of him, who did not usually drink; enough of Malkin, who had to be watched, since he had become so irresponsible, so much a burden. I had had enough, too, of those men and women. They had done nothing to me; nor had I to them in a certain sense—nothing voluntarily. I needed peace and silence, for that night at least.

Then Malkin, awakened by accident or perhaps by hearing the Governor come in—he may have been keeping watch on him from the depths of his sleep—got up—and unfortunately I was not immediately aware of this. I myself was dozing off when he shouted the first cries of his delirium. He had three children, but only his younger son was married. And he was calling for his grandchildren, “the little ones,” Clancy and Helen, of whom he had often spoken to me; Clancy in particular, his favorite, who was exactly like him, he said. Malkin was bellowing.

He staggered out into the hall. I came out at the same moment, half asleep, with those who lived in the same wing, Goodwin, who was very fond of him, Forrestal and Simmons. Before we could stop him he armed himself from the rack, taking two revolvers. One he put in his pocket, the other he aimed at us. He would have fired had we made the slightest gesture. I am sure he no longer even recognized us. Then he shook his massive head several times, as if to clear it.

"Now, then, follow me. I must see him," he said (or something of the kind).

He had not shaved for three days, which helped to give him a brutal appearance.

"No, no!" he roared, as if he were declaiming. "I cannot! God will destroy the child in his vengeance. God will kill him, and Helen too. I shall pay through them."

"Calm yourself, George," I said. "Please! Be patient until tomorrow. Tonight you're in no state to intervene, you know that quite well."

He strode towards the door.

"For the sake of those people," Goodwin begged. "For the sake of the women and those guys, it'd be much better to wait. We'll all go together, George, that way we'll be stronger. We'll find a way. Let's figure out the best way to do it. Don't forget, we're under military law."

The effect of this was the reverse of what Goodwin expected. Instead of taking hold of himself, Malkin exploded. I had seized his wrist. He plunged his left hand into his pocket and took out the second revolver.

"Malkin," I said, as forcefully and loudly as I could, "if you do something stupid, how can it change the course of events? Think! You're drunk, you don't know what you're doing. We're bound by our contract. Only if we're firm and dignified do we have any chance of doing anything. The important thing is to act together. This won't serve any purpose."

"I'll kill him," Malkin growled.

And he called him.

"Governor!" he shouted. "Governor!"

The window remained shut, without a ray of light. He called

him again and again. Still the window did not open. I prayed that it would stay closed. I could practically see and hear the court-martial for Malkin—and perhaps for us, too, since we could not help being jointly responsible.

"If I kill him," he said, "I'll be a man again. The little ones will forgive."

"You'll bring them misery," I replied.

For a moment I thought he would let himself be disarmed.

"You'll bring your family misery," I insisted. "What will happen to you, do you think? He is more powerful than you . . . he is your country." (And at the same time I saw my own family, irretrievably sullied by me.)

Malkin banged on the door at the foot of the staircase. Then he hurled himself at it, once, twice. The noise must have been audible at the other end of the Island. I was terrified that the prisoners might hear it, might be triggered into rebellion. We were protected by the grille, of course, yet I still had the feeling that they would reach us and tear us to pieces.

"Let's go back," I said.

"What about the kids, for God's sake?"

His words cracked like gun shots.

"The kids?"

"Governor, come out," he roared again. "We'll settle matters now, here. That's the only way they will be settled."

I threw myself on him and we struggled. He was the stronger of us. Goodwin, Simmons and Forrestal were rooted to the spot. Or did they suddenly want "matters to be settled"?

"George, you're making a damn fool of yourself! You're going to make things worse for everyone."

"I have to get this done. It's the only way to be clean. Let me go."

He sent me spinning. I got up and found myself under the barrel of his revolver. And yet he liked me, I was his friend. But he did not want to live with his remorse. I was his superior officer, I was that remorse. As I rose slowly to my feet the revolver turned away from me.

"If you murder him, another man will come to take his place," I said. "And there'll be a court-martial as well. They'll go through with it, either with us or without us—with others. If you keep this up, the prisoners will attack. What can we tell them? If you tell them the truth they'll rebel, no matter how."

"To hell with it!" Malkin cried. "I'm thinking of the little ones. That's the only thought in my mind: my kids. All I want is that they be redeemed from the crime that's brewing—that no filth of the devil will fall on them to pay me back for my part in all this."

He was still shouting when the door opened, almost noiselessly and without illuminating the staircase, as though the Governor had been waiting behind it for some time. He appeared. I knew he was courageous, but I would not have believed that he could remain so haughty and calm in the face of a revolver brandished by a fanatic. He was overwhelming. The moon illuminated him with a slanting light. Not a muscle of his face moved, and his head was held high. He walked toward Malkin. He was unarmed, but Malkin recoiled.

For a moment I could sense that he was hesitating about what line to take. He was tempted to justify himself, but he obeyed the violence in his character—and attacked. Or perhaps his sincerity spoke—or his hatred of us.

"Malkin, it would be too unjust for your children, your bastards to be saved! If everything I have heard you men muttering among yourselves since the day before yesterday holds—yes, it would be too unjust."

He contemplated the subdued Malkin. And we were subdued too

by the mixture of absolute distress and absolute power that emanated from him.

"Unjust!"

We went in and Malkin went in. We would have been incapable of resisting. I repeat, he was overwhelming. He entered the room in his turn. He could have armed himself from the rack, but he did not. He did not need to. The moon had given him a mask of tranquillity but now, in the electric light, his face was ravaged. And yet I do not know whether he was suffering. If he was, it was in a different way from us. He seemed to have aged ten years since the departure of the Negro and his companions, but age gave him magnificence. Only his eyes were young.

He planted himself in front of Malkin, speaking in dry, jerky tones.

"Yes, sir. And I throw down a challenge, you hear, a challenge on behalf of those very people you pretend to pity, but whom you do not know, do not love. I am the only person here who knows them and loves them, even to what will come from them. I challenge you! And I say: those of whom you are thinking and on whom you are calling—if there be a divine, diabolical or elemental justice, may they find misery and may you pay through them for the dog's job that has been yours all your life and on this island."

Malkin looked at me. His eyes were red and there was murder in them—murder and terror.

"A dog—an ugly cur," the Governor continued. "On this job you have been no more than a dog trained to bite, that's all. A cur, and you treated those men as curs. A mangy dog. May your Clancy be a mangy dog, and the other one a mangy bitch. I pray God, if God exists, that it will happen. And let Him shorten my life for that prayer—if He wishes."

Again Malkin looked at me. But the Governor was also looking

at me, and I gave way before his will. Now I was far from that land, far from that cement hall: I was in the electric chair to which I had led three men in my lifetime, one as old as I was now, slightly stooped like myself, and two others in all the strength of their thirty years. He was moving the lever. I should never survive, never. "He is Satan," I thought, but immediately I corrected myself. "He is a reflection of both God and Satan."

"If there must be appalling mutations," he shouted, "if that will be true, why should your home be safe? It would be an unequal balance. You have been employed. I have employed you. The curse ought to form part of your salary, it ought to be a ransom you must pay."

He became more exalted with each phrase. His whole personality had passed into his voice. Goodwin—or was it Simmons?—made a movement toward his automatic, but checked himself summarily. I realized that this man was trying to exasperate us and then master us permanently. And he was succeeding. Henceforth we would be merely his docile echo.

"Listen to me carefully: I have always believed there is a law of exchange. And if it does not exist, nothing exists, and your scruples are futile. You have offered hatred, all during the voyage on the Bounty Pride and here too, until the day before yesterday. Don't deny it! Moreover, you embarked and disembarked and lived without any ideal, simply for a job, simply for money. A man must have an ideal in the midst of horror if he wants to be clean. You have nothing to show, nothing! If God does not punish you and your descendants" (he emphasized the words) "for your confusion before those sacrificed people, then . . . then God Himself is only a foetus without a face and I spit on Him."

My faith was outraged and yet I could not make a move. My

whole past life, my wife, my children hurled the affront at me and I could not make the slightest gesture.

Malkin raised his hand, still holding the revolver. The Governor shrugged his shoulders and the revolver sank. In Malkin's eyes fear replaced anger. At the same time anger entered and grew strong in the Governor's eyes—anger, or perhaps something else, the desperate mastery of that land and everything, of us.

"Swine," muttered Malkin.

The Governor came close enough to touch him.

"Swine," Malkin said again.

"A curse on you," said the Governor, with hardly any outward violence, and his very calm gave his words peculiar weight. "A curse on those you love! May those you love rot! What do you know of me and the task I am carrying out? Do you know what I am responsible for? Have you gone even one yard along the road I travel? I am preparing future peace for the world! By fear—so what? By fear. What do you know about fear? Those men and women will know it and live with it—so that others later will not suffer from it. That fear is theirs, theirs alone, and mine. Do not defile them with your wailings. You cannot experience such fear—you have passed the age. Then show the silence of respect for those in whom it is taking shape. I repeat: do not defile them."

He took a fresh breath and burst forth again.

"Of course you will leave here with clean hands, now that you have made your stupid little gesture of rebellion! Your consciences will be clear. Bravo! But I ask God to make you pay, to make your damned kids pay; I want them to be attacked more cruelly than by smallpox and leprosy. I want them to be objects of derision and shame, so that people who see them will say: 'They bear the mark of hell; the man who gave them life received the wages of hell.'

I hate you with my whole soul and body. I have never detested a man as much as you, or children as much as your grandchildren—I who have never had a child and whom life has throttled day after day. Remember, my friend, you will pay!"

Malkin fired twice. The first shot grazed the Governor's shoulder and entered the wall behind him. The second was lost in the ceiling—I had twisted his arm at the same time as Simmons, by a reflex for which I immediately blamed myself, for I wanted him to kill that man.

A kind of youth spread over the Governor's face. He put his hands in his pockets while Goodwin and Forrestal, suddenly aroused, seized Malkin and carried him away, prostrate and choking.

"Fool!" said the Governor.

He took a few paces and came to me.

"Do they really think they can get rid of me?" he went on. "By what miracle? No one can kill me. Even I have not been able to do that. At the most painful, the most empty, the most sordid times, no, I have never been able to do it."

The halo of youth that had surrounded him vanished. He went to the bar and helped himself, gulping down two large glasses of whiskey, one after the other.

"Mister O'Hara," he resumed, completely relaxed, "I shall be much obliged if you would remind your men, and if necessary yourself, too, as often as need be, that I am the representative here of the United States Army, that you are subject to absolute obedience toward me and liable to penalties for any violation of this rule. I thought I had already made myself clear."

He bowed to me with glacial irony and returned to his room.

Henceforth, with Malkin in a cell, we were dragged along by a tidal wave, as I said. There was fear of the Governor and fear of the

prisoners. The story of Malkin, as you have seen, had an extraordinary effect on them. They were in such a state of excitement—insolent, on the edge of violence—that nothing could have abated or even restrained it. The women were like harpies. I was, to some extent, in the situation mentioned by the prisoner: obliged to be silent out of self-preservation, obliged to compromise in spite of my conscience.

I am convinced that everything had been ready for D-day of the experiment, and that the Governor now put it off for seventy-two hours merely to make us feel humiliated and vanquished: we were accomplices and alone between two worlds—his and that of the convicts. It is true, I repeat, that there might have been other reasons, material reasons to do with the force of the wind, and physiological ones, too, concerning the women.

With death in my heart I carried out my daily task like an automaton. The filthy drugs . . . the hell of drugs.

I overcame

my torpor; it was the beginning of the evening. Night came painfully in spite of the moon, which had risen just after six, looming up, overtaking the sun, enormous and sudden among the feathery traces of fog. For a long time the colors of the dying day and the insistent, acutely precise twilight had fought against the night, and even against the air and the sky. But now it was night—and after that hectic hesitation above and below, it was an omen. To think of Loa, to breathe for her, to walk through the camp, picking up handfuls of sand and letting them trickle through my fingers on a stone (speaking of her to the stone), to break a little branch, or to wait for a miracle coming up from the sea—there were all so many new sensations binding me to life, at the same time as they made a prelude to the action of a general and dramatic possession. It was a resurrection. But it was watched from the horizon, carefully timed, destined to explode. What was going to happen? I could not doubt the coming event—my tense muscles, a weight on my chest and in my loins told me: the end of the barrier was momentarily to be announced. And yet it would be accompanied by other events and

would reach extremes of violence. With it the world would fall from its orbit, there would be an upheaval. Something in God Himself would change.

During the last three days—three days since the Malkin affair—I had been alive without living. I was wrapped in fever. And I trembled in fear that the guards would remove me to the infirmary. If the gate were opened while I was in bed, ill, someone would take Loa from me. Her senses were too aroused for her to resist and wait: Schneider, for example, so darkly menacing, a carbuncle swelling his neck. He watched her with goat's eyes, and never let an hour pass without trying to make trouble for me. . . .

Luckily there was no discipline whatsoever. Although the guards still ventured into the camp in the morning and afternoon for a show of inspection, they came only in groups of seven or eight, and armed to the teeth; and they did not linger. At present there was a kind of distant respect to be seen in them. Fear, too, was visible, and my companions took advantage of this and were not afraid to be insolent. "If only the prisoners don't revolt! If this goes on a few more days everything will end in a riot." Nervousness was increasing. On the women's side one night there was an hysterical outburst of curses against the jailers, and we joined in. The guards forced themselves not to listen—but an incident can occur so quickly! They would pass in silence, far from the barbed wire, finger to trigger; and in the dining hall they stood in a line, always armed, whereas formerly there had been only two or three of them, by turns. I would stand to attention the moment they appeared, presenting no opportunity for pity. I forced myself. Up, up! How difficult it was! Were they fooled? Wouldn't they take the opportunity I offered to prevent one man, at least, from being lost, in memory of their friend Malkin? Weren't they already gossiping about me? "That guy's

cracking up, we must do something!" My nose was constantly bleeding, which made me even weaker. I concealed the condition desperately. Would they listen to me if I explained: "I've always been like that, don't worry—leave me alone! It's nervous tension. At school my nose used to bleed when I was frightened or upset, and in the Army, too, the day I deserted and the napalm bombs were falling..." I used to bury my handkerchiefs as far away as possible under the mangroves, taking care to go there only after making several detours, in case they were spying on me. God help me, I prayed, I must get over my weakness! Not only because of the guards, but because of the other men, that gang of enemies. Enemies—because I did not yell with the madmen, because there was that child-monster I strangled ten times a day and which ten times a day lived again to howl in my head. Everyone was my enemy, even Loa, she perhaps knowingly. Ah, Loa!

"What's the matter with you? Every time I see you you look as if you were going to faint."

"Nothing's wrong."

"Are you ill?"

"Leave me alone, please."

"Schneider says I should forget you," she said, and her lips were narrow and blanched.

She resented my condition. But what could I say in answer to her questions? The truth? Anything but that! I hoped I was mistaken; in any event I could not say anything that might remove her from me.

"Have you seen the way Pat Schneider looks at me?" she continued, cruelly. "Everywhere I go, there he is."

I was silent, but everything was dirty now.

"Oh, don't worry yourself! I'm telling you the facts, that's all."

Was she trying to spur me on by jealousy, with that whore's look I wanted to obliterate?

"Listen, Loa, behave as though there was nothing the matter with me. Besides, nothing is."

"Pat tells anyone who'll listen that you're cracking up, that you'll never last to the end and that, besides . . ."

She paused, no doubt to give more effect to the end of her sentence.

"That, besides, you won't be able to do anything even when the barrier is down—that you don't even want it down."

Schneider passed us and then walked past again, slowly. But I didn't have the courage to challenge him now.

"Pat Schneider is a bastard."

"Of course! But he's not the only one. They all look at you that way, not only him but everyone. They call me 'the widow.'" (I had a sudden pain in the loins, which spread to my thighs.) "And Pat keeps saying, 'Why shouldn't I have two women? I did once, for more than a year, and they had no complaints. They were glad, those two—they said it gave them half a day's rest every three days.'"

"Schneider's a liar and a pig. He hates me. He'd kill me if he could. But I'll finish him off first."

He went by again. Each time he came nearer, laughing to himself.

"Shut up about Pat Schneider," I whispered in fury. "To hell with Pat Schneider!"

Schneider shrugged his shoulders, moved away and then returned. Oh God, give me back my strength! Permit me to punish him as he deserves! Prevent him from taking Loa away from me!

Later, when I returned to the barracks, I was the butt, the goat. Schneider had set them all against me, all except Hughes, who spent

hours dreaming in silence. He shook his head continually, a habit of his, and sighed. The others said I was sick, a weakling. They said I had influenced the Governor against us by my attitude of perpetual suspicion, and that I was at the bottom of this new delay in the taking away of the barrier. My talk of poisoning had annoyed him, they insisted. I tried to protest, but Schneider shut me up.

“Yes, you! You’re absolutely nutty, and we’ve got to figure on that. You never really told us what you said to him that night he talked to you. A lot of shit, of course, and he judges us by you. Look—I’ll ask the other guys—does this guy here look like a normal man? I think we ought to pull down his pants to be sure he’s even got something there!”

. . . I struggled as best I could. I killed the child with dry eyes. There. Now will you leave me in peace? But the child was born again of itself and they were a pack of hounds harassing me. On the morning of the third day I saw that Bentley carried a large stick. Was it for me? I was sure of it. My life hung by a hair. Whenever I went by he growled like an animal. I was barely reassured when I heard him mutter that at the first opportunity he would club one of the guards and get hold of his submachine gun—and that then we would revolt and reach the women at whatever cost. That was completely unthinkable! He was just trying to get me off guard. I was surprised that he took so long to act. I swore not to close my eyes again.

Suddenly, that evening, I became aware that an important event was about to take place—had, indeed, already started. Was it a distant rumbling, barely detected and yet insistent, that made me think so? Was it the moon? The moon dominated the whole

horizon, so powerful and so alive that the intoxicating warmth of the night seemed, by a perfect illusion, to emanate from it. I had to be prepared without delay, for the great creditor was coming and the moon was showing him the way. I was being hunted by the unknown and by the divine. By death? Although that was the first idea to come into my mind, it soon left me. On the contrary, life was surging toward me from every side, lifting me, vibrating and crackling within me. I saw seven or eight jailers go by toward the beach. They went in disorder, some of them gesticulating, their caps in their hands, the way they did when it was very hot and they stood sweating on their porch. What did this sudden agitation mean? They seemed to be fleeing from something—or going toward something. The rumbling neither approached nor withdrew. It sounded like a great battleship or airplane. I thought that perhaps a ship had entered the bay. I looked at the sea, but there was nothing for miles. One of the jailers glanced at me with unconcealed apprehension. I smiled at him! For the first time since I had been there I felt the need to smile at one of my jailers. Was I defying him? Or did this smile mark my return to existence? He turned away and one of his buddies dragged him on. I found out that I was stronger than he, stronger than all of them. With them or without them, whether influenced or not by the arrival of a ship, our destiny was reaching breaking point that night. Night would be the exclusive property of the prisoners. *Exclusive!* I repeated the word; it beat like a drum. I, too, ran—towards the barracks. This was not a time for solitude. No one could face these omens alone, nor that moon and its promise—promising something else as well, like naked violence. Besides, by all waiting together we would hasten the fall of the sky. It would fall and we would cease forever to be the men we had been before.

Once more, as I mingled with my companions, an impression of divinity surrounded me. The rumble became no louder and yet it gained in precision. Now it was walking over my skin and the moon was walking with it. It made my muscles peculiarly sensitive. The skin over them was like an insect's wing. We were huddled in front of the barracks, in the middle of the yard, shoulders touching. I noticed Williamson: a torch, a cry held back. Mortensen, Greenglass, Hughes, all of them. Bentley, too, even Schneider were shielded torches, the fervent ornaments of an altar. We were not impatient. We were now sure of triumphing at last. I thought only of my body. The sound of the ship or the plane, from the sea or the sky, bore us up, enlarged us to the scale of a possible approaching cataclysm. Was death announcing itself in these metallic tones? Perhaps, but death would strike us down only as *free men*. It had lost its own name and we were the May flies of a leaden August day: they too abolished real time and re-created another time belonging to them alone.

Yellowish at first, the moon whitened, lazily. When it was white, a knifelike purity over its whole circumference, then the impulse would be given from on high, from the mysterious mass which provoked and denied death at one and the same time. But around me everyone was preoccupied only with that insistent noise of engines. What did it mean? Why did it seem to be circling the Island, always keeping at the same distance? Were we afraid? Yes, certainly, but anything was preferable to nothing. My body reached toward the moon. I lived for it alone, listened to it, to the life beating, beating, beating within it. Before me and behind me people were talking. I listened. But what was said was of no interest to me. I had a rendezvous at the end of the moon's path—there alone.

"Listen! I'd swear it was louder and was coming toward us . . ."

"No—it's not."

"Yes! Yes! There wasn't that kind of stuttering sound before! Listen hard."

"You're crazy! That's the way it started."

"I tell you, it's coming nearer. Not much, but still . . ."

"That's just because it's passing to windward."

I repeated my guiding phrase: "When the moon is white and shows its whole circle clearly and time nestles in purity . . ." Suddenly my chest was broader and held riches, and there was a warm serpent along my spine. "When the moon is all white, at that moment . . ."

"Shut up!"

"They're planes," someone said. "It's not a boat, I'm sure of that."

"What the hell would airplanes be doing here?"

"If it were a ship, would the guards have gone down to the other end of the beach instead of to the jetty?"

I had recovered my body! An acid strength—and slightly oppressed breathing—as on the day I had ceased to be an adolescent and had become a man, in the act of a man. I wanted to shout. I felt I could knock down a wall merely by shouting. I loved my body, all at once, even more than I loved Loa. The lunar halo between her and me was gradually dispersing, and already within me everything was possession.

There was an astonishing silence ruling the murmur of the sea. Only we had the right to break it. A solid silence, attached to the moon and progressing with it. As the moon rose and became cleaner the silence settled in the smallest stone, the tiniest branch, in the sand, everywhere. The barrier flamed with silence. A few bats had passed; they had disappeared, as though absence of movement were also

obligatory—the silence of everything that was not ourselves. On the beach the jailers were standing almost in the water. Did they feel, like us, that something exceptional was about to happen? And did they think they would be protected there, by the great, calm petition of the ebbing tide?

“Well, what the hell are we just standing here for?” asked Green-glass after a moment.

He shook me. His hair was in his eyes and he smelled of violent, male flesh.

Someone else yelled: “Look—can you see the women? They’re signaling to us across the barrier.”

I think that up until then we had not *dared* venture toward them, not through fear of ruining everything by too much haste, but from something quite different—an instinctual animal fear of offending the holy moment through which we were living. We were the captives of a grandiose oscillation from death to life, life to death, and had to take our chance only at the right minute, the right second.

“Let’s go . . .”

“Look out! The jailers!” warned a man who had been standing alone at the opened door of the first barracks. “They’re coming back. Be ready for some lousy trick. Watch out!”

They were leaving the beach and had recovered a certain self-assurance. Now they were advancing in a single line of seven, and the four others were waiting for them in front of the barracks. They formed one group as they passed. They hesitated, and then entered the camp, but not on our side of the barbed wire fence—on the women’s side.

“What’s up? What do they want there?”

“There’s going to be trouble. . . . The bastards, the lousy bastards!”

Bentley pushed aside the men surrounding him. He ran twenty yards, thirty, fifty.

"If they touch a single one of them I don't know what I'll do. . . . I'll go over there and kill them! I'll get through—there's no current in the barrier tonight, I'm sure of that! They've had orders about it. But they won't admit they're beaten, they're trying to scare us. I swear, I'll kill them."

He brandished his stick, and we rushed to join him.

"Stay here, wait. They wouldn't dare. . . . Let's wait a minute. If we go over there we may start something."

"Where's the Governor?"

Everyone was asking at once: "Where's the Governor?" Why was he staying inside? Surely he should have been the first to come out?

"He's hiding," I said.

In my heart I thanked him, in my burning body. The smell of Greenglass, still at my side, made me drunk. I must have smelled the same way. I wanted to think of nothing but the coming love. The Governor would bring back fear if he appeared, even at his window. I forgave him everything on condition that I would not see him.

"Why should he hide?"

"What's it matter whether he's there or not?" I asked. "Tonight the moon decides."

"You're raving. . . ."

"The moon!" I yelled.

I needed it to occupy all space, at the summit of the world, dispersing every shadow, abolishing every threat. To it I confided the child-monster, and the moon called it away, burying it in ashes. I would never see that image again; I had been the victim of a bad

dream; the Governor had never told me any of the things I thought he had uttered.

"Supposing the guards have mutinied and are keeping him prisoner?" asked Bentley.

No, it was the guards who were the prisoners. They were struggling against a terror whose high priests, whether consciously or not, they had been. They defied us through the women, the other "us," fated to be their perpetual remorse. In their eyes we were already united. They were trying to substitute for the barbed-wire fence the barrier of their own will, to exculpate themselves *in extremis*. They quickened their pace. The women remained motionless. The jailers advanced a few dozen yards, then stopped. The leader, who was not O'Hara, made a movement toward his submachine gun. The others did the same. Bentley struck the air with his stick. He was about to leap forward. I cried out.

I shouted and shouted. I screamed.

Six years without a woman in my cry. A cry like a storm. All gallows; all prisons.

The jailers were startled; they turned. Two of them remained behind, holding the women in check, holding us in check through them. And the women, understanding the extraordinary power residing in them that evening, closed in a circle around the jailers as though tying a bow of red ribbon. The jailers retreated. The platoon formed again at the entrance to the barracks. Then, dividing up, the eleven jailers took up their positions in front of the machine guns. Would they fire? It was the decisive moment.

And meanwhile night had disembarked in the midst of all this. The moon had only a little way to go to become as white as I knew it must, as provocative as a prophecy. Silence persisted. My cry had respected the silence, which closed down around it, nursing it.

"Where's the Governor, for God's sake? Nothing will be done without him. Let's go to the grille. He must speak to the bastards, give them their orders."

I did not agree. They pushed me forward, but we were heading toward the women. I did not run fast enough and Greenglass spat at me.

"Get a move on, damn it!"

Already the women's caresses were stirring him; his glance was unbearable. When he looked at me, what did he see in my face? I was breathless.

"Hurry!"

Finally we reached the barrier. The women were so close that we might have expected to feel their breath on our faces. They had never been so beautiful, so frankly radiant.

"Loa? The time is near, Loa."

She left the others.

"No talk, Loa—no more talk about Schneider. Promise me."

Her love enveloped me. No one on the whole earth was loved as she was.

"You on your side of the barbed wire, we on ours . . . the Governor must give the signal. I'm no longer afraid of him."

It was true, I was no longer afraid.

"He must! Yell, yell as loud as you can. If this hour goes by without anything happening, nothing ever will." [NOTE BY J. O'HARA: *I shall say farther on what that afternoon and that extraordinary evening had been for us.*]

CHAPTER XXV

The moon was

on our right, slightly behind us. There were two of me. The moon gave life to my shadow; it was thinner than myself, and with the joy and freedom of life it stretched out toward Loa.

Each of us was two. We followed each other in Indian file along the barbed wire in order to offer the smallest possible target to the machine guns. All those shadows loved. They were persons. They moved with us and yet they escaped us. They had already crossed the barrier, they were with the women in the shuddering sanctity of the night. The sand wedded the sand, the stones the stones, and the sea was the tender, ardent widow of silence. Because of these things, everything was love. The guards could do nothing against us; they breathed and it was the breath of our passion they inhaled; they vouched for us, our thoughts, our movement. Through them we were no longer convicts. Henceforth nothing precarious defiled us. We would have those women, in a love like no other love—we would be legend! I touched my forehead and cheeks. They were smooth. The pimples that had gnawed at me during the past few days had disappeared. Life!

My shadow covered Loa's feet, and I quivered. Her desire for me filled my mind, emptied it of other images; her desire took form against the sky of my head. She came nearer to the barrier. Now my shadow enveloped her to the waist. Her desire assumed a taste for me. Fruit and coral. My need for her reached such a pitch that it became agonizing. We walked more slowly. The others crowded against us. They shouted prayers and curses; they called for the Governor. A woman began to laugh, just as on the day we had disembarked, perhaps the same woman defying again the tenseness of her nerves. Her laugh drove a needle into my loins; it excited me and gave a renewal of faith. She laughed again. She pressed her breasts and jumped up and down. They tried to calm her. Her laugh was covered over by exclamations. Suddenly she sobbed.

As we reached the spot where the barrier made a turn, just in front of the barracks, Loa and I were separated. My shadow fell to the ground. Something, a whitish, rapid line, streaked across it from side to side, then another. Lizards? Yes—the male and the female, since it was yet their mating season. But their spell would not paralyze me now. I was too warm for that—too alive this evening. I reached the grille and recovered Loa. Once more my shadow was on her feet, once more on her belly. Once more the taste of coral.

The last shred of mist left the moon. The moon conquered time; not a star was to be seen. A brutal paradise possessed me. I had to open my heart; otherwise it would suffocate me. I began to shout again. I shouted my love. I shouted blessings, like a happy drunkard. I blessed the jailers, the Governor, death, if only the barrier would at last be removed. My lips were dry, but my mouth was full of the joy of wet coral. I pleaded and gave thanks at the top of my voice. My companions listened to me; I was speaking for them. I spoke of my body. I told of all the thirst and sudden liberty there

was in it, the possible and impossible caresses, the offering, the timid happiness. I almost sang Loa's name. There was nothing but her in my eyes. God was she, my breathing was she, my hands and my breast. A wave of gesturing shadows submerged mine, and Loa disappeared among the band of women. But we continued to be together. We warmed and embraced each other. We were tireless.

"The Governor. . . . The Governor. . . . The Governor."

"Open the barrier, for God's sake!"

"Give the order! Open! . . ."

"That'll do," a jailer said coldly.

The guards were still standing by the machine guns, in a kind of meaningless alert. From fear of us, possibly.

"The storm is over your heads and yet you shout?" another guard cried.

His voice trembled.

"Poor shits!"

O'Hara came forward. His confusion was obvious. He stopped one step from the grille. He was about to speak to us, then gave it up. He shrugged his shoulders, rejoined his men and calmed them with an almost craven gesture.

"That'll do, I say! That'll do! I can't stand any more," the guard repeated.

Why did O'Hara feel his belt and do no more? Why didn't he draw his revolver? Why didn't he and his colleagues fire the machine guns, the thing to do if they thought we were rebelling?

"They won't fire," someone said. "They're through."

A shout of victory burst from all our throats at once. The women's screams were more sustained than ours, but not more acid. There was something female in our voices. For too long we had not been men. The guards did not react. O'Hara walked up and down in

front of them, as though to prevent them from taking some irreparable step.

Had the job of knocking us over been given to other men? The rumbling became clearer. It was the characteristic throb of a large plane—a B-29. I had known too many of them in Korea to be mistaken. This was the major event. And yet, as just now, even more than just now, I told myself that death would reach us only when we were free, purified, the conquerors of separation—or else our stay here would be meaningless. My obsession with poison disappeared as the rumbling grew louder. It did not return. In one way I was cured. My eyes did not leave Loa. I knew I would not attack God through her, as I had feared. On the contrary I would die of her, of having loved her. I would be the martyr of my love and not the more or less conscious performer of a diabolical judgment. And does one not always hope to escape judgment, by some unimaginable means, through the image of a woman one loves, because she is so beautiful, and summons harmony to help you?

Pushed, almost forced by his companions or by the woman he desired—by a sudden and necessary pride—a man from the first barracks, Wyndham, the same man who had kept apart from us for a while, seized the hot wire of the grille with both hands. Triumph! That evening the grille was only an illusion—there was no current passing through it. He turned around, trembling in reaction, but he was hilarious. I have never seen anyone before or since in such a state. His laugh was not a laugh, but something different—a manifestation of absolute pride, no longer the glory of a human being who knows that everything is relative, but of a great wild beast that has just exposed a trap and with whom the forest rejoices in a thousand drumbeats. He danced from one foot to the other. His laugh sounded like a hiccup. Had his shoulders always been

so round and solid, his neck a block of strength like the trunk of a birch? He went on laughing. He was our liberator—our leader, too, of whom we were jealous. If the wire was not electrified the barrier was a barrier no longer, and thanks to him we now knew this. He stretched out his arms theatrically, protective in his effusion, ready to embrace the comrade nearest him.

Then he changed his mind. He walked with slow steps to the barbed wire while we remained in a half circle some distance away. Didn't he deserve to be alone, and respected, in front of his woman, if only for a moment? He seemed like a king returning to his queen from a crusade. He stuck out his chest and yet he was not ridiculous. When he was before her he suddenly stopped laughing. Shyness took hold of him. His trembling, which had lessened, became stronger. At last he conquered it, then murmured something, we could not tell what. It was animal speech, just as his satisfaction had been animal.

Like everyone else I envied him. What he had dared I should have been able to force myself to do. I would then have been that wonderful animal. Would Loa despise me for not having been the one? What was she thinking of me? We now moved toward the barrier—Wyndham had had time to savor his high deed. I was appeased, gratitude sang within me, once more my shadow married Loa and she loved me and would never prefer another to me.

I threw myself on one of the posts that supported the barbed wire. I tried to pull it up, as though that were possible! I could wait no longer. The hum of the plane had become elemental. It was the approach of a typhoon, with all the contradictions that awakens in you: appetite, need to live and to hide at once, religious terror. I was, at last, the same animal as Wyndham. I pawed the ground and growled softly. We were all alike, and yet there was a

division. Whereas some, like myself, attacked the barrier, others rushed to the wire, trying to climb it. The women ran from one group to the other. Beneath the moon their eyes filled their faces. I left the barbed wire in order to lend a hand to the men attacking the barrier. Seven or eight, sweating, panting, were climbing painfully up the tall iron stems of the fence. Cries that smelled of death, tinged with blood, rang out. Then one of the guards fired. Life seemed to ebb from my hands and feet. The eight men scrambled down together. Now the women called for death for the guards. Then one of them, in a tone of acute expectation, called out the name of her love and the others imitated her. We crazed ourselves with our names piercing the night. They were on fire. We could no longer be the same now as yesterday, as we had been a quarter of an hour earlier.

How much time had gone by since the jailer's warning shot when the Governor sat down to his piano? A strange, strange music, so slow and so full of portent! Something out of the skies and stars swooped down on me. I was smashed and magnified, as we must all have been. All were motionless, and all the women were motionless and extraordinarily pure. As we loved, so the night loved us. The music traversed our ranks, striking our backs and our faces in turn. It was interpreted silence, multiformed, an indicator of twenty different paths. . . .

"The child . . . those children who will be born to you." Never since it had been uttered had the Governor's curious threat died in me. At moonrise it had simply become muffled. It rang out and immediately drew off. Now I was really free of it for the first time. I gained confidence. The event would bring quite a different ending. The music was weaving a net and I was within it. *I was gentle.*

Today I think of all this. I am trying to relate the event as it

took place for me, with my changes of feeling as they came, not always explicable. Sometimes I even lose my own way. But that was how it was, and that music and that moon were certainly necessary. With the Governor nothing happened by accident. He needed that music—for himself as well as for us. For himself; it is impossible that he did not despise himself, particularly at that stage of his “experiment.” He needed to forget himself in his consolation. And he needed that music for us, because it was really a way for him to manipulate us to the heart of that surprising night, harmonize us with his will, instill in us an almost magical ferment that would continue to work at the densest moment of fear. The moon and the music: the two made a circle around us.

He was playing. Over my blue shadow was an impalpable cloak of blue, and on my shoulders, on my chest that throbbing of the plane about which I no longer wondered. Was this the chosen moment? I vaguely asked myself He grew exalted. His music hardened, a rain of arrowheads. I needed air. I sought Loa with my eyes but could not see her at first. My glance was caught by the jailers. They seemed to have come from the sky, summoned by the sound of the aircraft. They had left their machine guns and had assembled farther off, just in front of the barracks hall.

There was a light in the west—reddish-orange, enormous.

A broken sun, and half the night flamed with it.

It went out. The sea reflected it for the fraction of a second longer. The moon drowned it and immediately afterwards the shock came, a disturbance in the sky, barely at the level of the eucalyptus trees or of the peak perhaps, like an iron man asleep who turns over from one side to the other.

Nothing more . . . whatever I say, however much I want to convince myself that it must have been more impressive. No, nothing

more. Had I known worse in Korea? That shell exploding so near me that I was unable to control my nerves for ten days? Perhaps. Or was I in the power of that music that had never stopped? Or have I forgotten already? I am sure that the explosion has no more reality in the memory of my comrades. What followed was the only thing that would matter, what we were waiting for, for which the way was now open. The light had blinded me. I had received the shock in my eyes. They became reaccustomed to the night and the moon; nothing had changed. When it happened a woman cried out—one little voice, too deep, too broken. Only one. The silence buried it. The silence and the piano. The moon. And the unique terror born from the moon that grew dimmer, the moon that seemed to be pursued by a round cloud.

My blood was becoming impossibly heavy. It seemed to have doubled in weight, and I could not make the least gesture. Was I going to die? Were we all going to die? I saw Loa at last; I had looked for her in vain when it happened. She was too far away for my body; I could no longer drag myself to the meeting place where there is no meeting. I wanted to call to her. No sound came from my throat. Loa, Loa? I called her with my death. A vile and radiant miracle took place: my death met hers, they embraced; that would be our only union. They spoke of the round death, the round cloud the moon was dragging after itself the way a bitch in heat drags a gang of dogs. Our deaths were small and tender, incredibly light for such weighty beings. They caressed each other. Loa's death had breasts that just fitted into my hands. My death fondled them and shivered, intoxicated. Loa's death moaned like the life in love, those harsh, almost cruel moans that increase desire. I moaned in my turn. My death had nervous gestures that hurt her. The piano grew softer, grew louder. Our deaths separated. Each returned to the body

from which it issued. The cloud had come more than half way toward us. It had grown. Still inflexibly round. Black at the beginning of its course, the moon had blistered it with bluish, broken veins. It was coming toward us with its poison. But the moon, triumphant for a moment, was closely followed and in a few seconds would be overtaken. The bluish wounds gradually healed. Only one remained, near the center. Under the west wind the cloud contracted and the moon disappeared. My heart was beating in my throat. I had lived and hoped for nothing. I breathed charged air. My lungs were painful The piano stopped.

Who first mentioned an atomic cloud? One of us, or one of the guards? The word was already in the air; it settled and cursed everything. The moon seemed to fall. It was extinguished. Loa was extinguished; each of the women, each man, was alone. Even the Governor's lighted window became a thing of the past. It alone had protected us from annihilation, and now it had ceased to be. Call—call! But my mouth was spitting cotton. The tops of the trees disappeared, then the trunks, then the barrier. My nearest companions, whom I could almost have touched, were half-consumed shadows. The smoke, the gases—what word can I use?—the torrid fog grew rapidly thicker. I could no longer see the guards, but I could hear them all talking at once and very far away, on the threshold of the secret. O'Hara's voice broke through at moments, a nasal voice I did not recognize as his. I sank, my knees went slack.

And yet, in the cotton-wool, in a little channel opened between the waves of cotton-wool, I tried to go to Loa. I staggered toward the barrier. Others did the same, cautiously. But others were running in circles, no longer ruled by their brains. Were they running away? They collided, fell back on each other and set off again. Someone howled, like a stuck pig. Be quiet! Be quiet! I felt I was on the

point of howling myself. There was refuge in that cry. Be quiet! I would not be that conquered animal, I would not. . . .

I stood still. I was stronger that way. But the clamor mounted within me, went on mounting. Another man howled, then a woman, two, ten. Other men. I . . . would . . . hold . . . out! I would die like a human being, not like a pig, more dignified than our guards, who were beating on the door to the Governor's staircase. As they grew more panic-stricken I regained a measure of hope. It was inconceivable that they should be sacrificed with us; what would become, then, of the rights of society and of order? Death, then, was not coming to us in that cloud. They were saving us for something else. What would be the meaning of our death here, on two sides of a barbed-wire fence? It would be absurd. America does not pay good money for absurdity. We were the witnesses of a new weapon, that was it, and we would bear witness only when together, men with women, by and in our union. I saw once more the child-monster that had haunted me and I thanked it for existing. Its very horror brought me back to life. It was the sign not only that we would emerge alive from this night of apocalypse, but also that this night would show us the promised land. As on the day before, on the four preceding days, I swore to keep silent through everything about what I knew. This gave me renewed vigor. Accomplice! Culprit! It was like strong drink. The child would be born—I accepted that. It would be born and would suffer. It would pay for my sensations, my ecstasy. I should hate myself later through it, but tonight it allowed me to live.

Shadows, men, zigzagging, shuffling, pressed in groups against the wire. The guards ranted, ran, like wandering, purposeless tornadoes. I was hot, terribly hot, and yet I was not sweating. I set off again to look for Loa in the welter of confusion.

The wind was still in the west. After having settled on everything

the cloud began to break up. It clung less, and collected only in hollows. On the side of the peak the island was resuming its shape, and here and there eucalyptus trees stood out. The moon rose again from obscurity. It was reddish and truncated. It shone only from the depths of our memory. It relieved the atmosphere. At last most of my companions became calm, and at the same time the guards got some grip on themselves.

Loa was in a group of six or seven, almost twenty yards from the rest of the women. Like the moon, her presence pierced the mist. She raised her arm and I replied to her signal. She approached the barbed wire. She was alone, confident. Yet I did not hurry toward her, but toward the wire. The Governor had finally shown himself! He was standing at the door. The light from the staircase lit him from behind—his high shoulders were folded wings. He advanced sideways for a few steps and stood in the light falling from the window. I could see his face clearly. My God, how he had changed! Another soul had taken the place of that old one, at once cruel and humble. He was the same man, of course, but he had undoubtedly been hard hit, and his face was darkened by it.

The guards let him pass. There was not a sound, not even a murmur, from them or from us. A gust of wind sent long, knotted streamers coiling toward them; snakes—cloud snakes, disappearing, reappearing. The jailers walked slowly but resolutely toward the Governor. He had not moved. He was still upright, his shoulders back. Then he shuddered, a perceptible shudder throughout his whole body. He put his hands in his pockets and turned as the guards reached him. Their eyes defied each other. After a short moment of hesitation O'Hara and his men surrounded him. What would be the outcome of this silent struggle on which our fate depended? That there was a combat I could not help knowing,

and I knew also and only too well what motives impelled the jailers to oppose his will. With my whole heart I ranged myself against them. If I had been armed I would have fired on them. The barrier *must* be opened for us! Nothing else mattered.

One of the jailers moved forward as if to seize him. The Governor shook his head and said something. The guard stood with his arms half raised, impotent and grotesque. Again the Governor shook his head and uttered a sentence I could not catch.

“You’re a madman! A madman . . .” O’Hara cried.

O’Hara was so unconvincing! He threw us an anxious, hunted glance. He knew we were ready for anything! He pulled his men back and stood in front of the Governor. For a moment he dominated the Governor from his lean height. Obviously he had no idea what to do—he could not make up his mind. There was a violent struggle taking place within him. Should he yield to his duty as a man or to a discipline he had accepted for all time? He grumbled, led his men away. The Governor followed him for a moment with his eyes. Then he approached the wire. He had changed completely. He was a volcano, his forehead furrowed with wrinkles and a perpetual twitch agitating his cheeks. His mouth was hard, but distress hovered in his eyes. He was a tormented man. For him, too, for him as for us, life after this night would never be the same. He controlled creation, and creation, the world, had taken a new course. What could he say, what could he tell us? Nothing could stagger me any more, but what about my comrades? If he spoke to them as he had spoken to me, what would happen? “Keep your mystery, I beg you! Come what may . . .” I drew nearer; he had to read my prayer—it would strengthen him. I was in warm gases up to my belly. The women were still altogether immersed in it. “Don’t say what must not be said! I shall keep silent, I promise you.” I was

alone, ahead of them all. O'Hara stepped out from the group of jailers. Was he going to interfere? I took a step aside.

"There you are, it's over . . ." said the Governor.

"It's over," he repeated. (He hesitated.) "I have led you where I had to lead you. Now the thing is done. What had to take place has taken place without trouble."

He expressed himself with difficulty. His lie was a weight on him; he did not know how to lie. He lacked conviction.

"The barrier?" cried Greenglass.

Greenglass had joined me. Behind us the others were pressing forward.

"Yes, the barrier," the Governor murmured, without the least warmth, with indifference.

Greenglass' face was bathed in tears. He turned toward the women, howling. "Implore him, beg him, all of you, or all's lost forever." An extraordinary lamentation broke out. It was the women, but the night, too, weeping, demanding. Love in the night, the birds and their broods, the hidden beasts, the sand, the eucalyptus trees, the whole accumulation of despair and agonized waiting on both sides of the barrier—the cross of Christ and the heart of Mary Magdalene.

"The barrier . . . the barrier . . ."

The heart of Mary Magdalene.

A sudden impulse brought the Governor to the door in the barbed wire. He seemed all at once heavier and taller.

"I owe you the truth," he cried, "the truth . . ."

"No!" I bellowed.

The guards came running, but he had already opened the door. He was among us. Greenglass had fallen on his knees before him, trying to seize his hands. The Governor sent him spinning. He was beside himself. It was perhaps I who calmed him, with that pleading

complicity he could see in my eyes—encouragement and supplication. I lowered my gaze. He had unburdened half his crime on me. I was sharing the future with him. I had brought him the consent of his victims. He could give it back to me at any time. I would be the witness for the defense, continuously called upon and hardly less guilty than the guilty.

By the time I raised my head he had recovered. At the barbed wire a breath of calm blew over the jailers.

“The truth? After all, what truth? Do you really need the truth? If I gave it to you, what would you do with it? Isn’t *life* what you want, to live free and together with the women?”

A ray of light struck him, dawn slowly furrowing the forehead of night.

“You have been guinea pigs.”

He came toward me and clapped me on the shoulder. I struggled as best I could not to sink down. Could he see that I was wavering? So he was setting an official seal on the complicity I had offered him, he was establishing it firmly for all that would follow!

“What truth?” (His voice had regained assurance.) “You thought you were poisoned, didn’t you? That was not the truth. You thought all sorts of things, multiplying fears and suspicions. The only truth is that you have just escaped death. Yes, really. You have escaped, and death was there. You might have died. Logically, if the scientist in me had not protected you, you would have died. Today, *now*, was the poison and the death. Do not reproach me, since I ran the same risks. I was with you. You are saved and I am saved with you. If you had been destroyed I would have been too . . .”

He had shouted the last words, proudly. But he was trembling.

“Guinea pigs! Some people would willingly put you in a zoo now!”

With a little gesture he halted the movement—was it an offensive?

—toward him. He knew he would conquer, in the barrier and through the barrier.

"The barrier will be opened now," he said slowly. "Did you despair of it? I had decided that from the beginning. It is fair and it will be a proof of my victory to see you live, really live. No longer as prisoners."

Around him was a roaring sea—a roaring tide, full and happy—on the turn. How easily my companions accepted his explanation! They were brutalized to the point of not even being dogs—which at least have a nose with which to smell emotions; they were brutalized and diminished. Were they listening? And I . . . I?

I felt the stirrings of rebellion—an impulse I tried in vain to master. Perhaps it was God protesting within me. And so I detested God. I detested myself. I looked for help in the Governor's glance, in the unbridled demands of his glance. But I did not see it. There was a red veil before my eyes.

"You're lying!" I said.

The veil was torn. Ah, what furious, murderous attention they all gave me! Another word and they would have killed me. They were already growling and restless. I was making them lose time.

"Now, now," said the Governor gently.

He gave me a friendly slap.

"Not one fibre in your body will have been altered, believe me . . ."

His will surrounded me, as warm as the cloud had been. What was the good of struggling? All rebellion was useless and could only be injurious. I seemed to hear the muffled breathing of the women—of Loa, who was so close; Loa, who would be given to me.

And then that thirst . . . that thirst for her, that anxious thirst for you, Loa! That mist which threw a hundred glorious arches over the land. Schneider? Had Pat Schneider pricked up his ears? Oh

yes, of course; he was weighing his chances, he saw himself taking you away from me, far away, praising you and loving you.

"Mister O'Hara and his men will make it their duty to open the barrier for you. It has lasted as long as was necessary—long enough for me to harden and fortify you . . . think of that, please . . . to forge an armor of life for you. Everything, for the last six weeks, has been done for that. I can order the guards to open the barrier, and they will obey, they are completely loyal officers, but I am quite sure they would prefer you to ask them yourselves."

He added, too low for them to hear, perhaps: "The guards claim to judge; will they reverse their judgment?"

He stepped back. We surged toward the jailers. No herd of buffalo ever surged more blindly. The women urged us on with their piercing cries. I was at the head of the herd, yes, I! Each step carried me away from my phantom, the phantom that was always at my heels; it could not catch up with me. I had to reach Loa before it did. I meant to deserve her, in the presence of all of them, to squelch in Schneider the least inclination to fight me for her—and to destroy in her any unavowed temptation for him. I was shouting. How can I ever forget the faces of the jailers—the face of O'Hara? The disgust that appeared there! And something more searing than pity, greater than terror. We howled, swore, rushed on and howled again. O'Hara yielded. How could he resist? He already had the keys in his pocket. With his men he took the path toward the barrier. He was his own enemy, an enemy born of himself.

Shortly after noon,

that day, the Governor called us together, coming to meet us in the hall. Since the Malkin affair he had not addressed a word to us, and we were continuing our daily existence only by making a common effort not to see him either. He left his room merely to eat—very little!—and to walk on the beach without, however, leaving the vicinity of the barracks. This was contrary to his former custom. Did he need to feel himself protected should the occasion arise?

He was very much master of himself, very cool, in spite of the extreme heat. He asked formally for news of Malkin and begged me to tell Malkin that the incident would have no unpleasant consequences and that he would not even mention it in his reports. After all, our colleague had merely had "a human reflex for which he could not be blamed." The Governor added that he would like to be forgiven for his own impulse of anger and for his "stupid imprecations" and that, if he were not afraid of finding our comrade in no state to listen, he would have gone in person to make his excuses and say that he had the kindest wishes in

the world for Malkin's grandchildren. It was not always easy for him to control his nerves, as we must understand. He was alone; he had accepted this solitude, of course, but it was sometimes unbearable.

He repeated his excuses, emphasizing his regrets about Malkin. Yet a certain cutting tone contradicted his remarks. Why did he detest those children so much (which I did not doubt), perhaps even more now than on that evening when he had called all kinds of misery down on their heads? There was death in him the moment he spoke of them.

We restrained our bad tempers with difficulty, but it was all a mockery. Were we not his flock? We would follow him like sheep, whatever the circumstances.

He made a prolonged gesture toward us, almost of friendship, certainly of need, then hardened immediately.

"There will be other children . . ."

The phrase rang out. Suddenly the hall was one vast echo. He repeated it.

"They will be truly cursed in their bodies, and I cannot help it," he continued. "I shall love them but shall be able to do nothing for them. I shall have created their hell. I! Because it must be so. I, facing future ages. In order to redeem an infinity of other children, whose tragic, despised saviors they will be."

He broke off and moved away—without abruptness. But in spite of the calm he continued to display, I think he would have collapsed at a sound from any one of us; his legs would no longer have supported him. Not even a cry of menace or hate, just simple distress. We were silent. It was not, of course, because we agreed. It was because we were at the end of our rope.

Our silence allowed the Governor to recover himself. Now he had overcome his weakness.

"The science of homicide is progressing fast," he said, "faster than any other science, and it progresses as though by contagion, as you are aware, with somewhat the same movement as an epidemic. Unveil a secret of destruction . . . it is at once in the air for others. What is today a Russian weapon will tomorrow be an American weapon. What is today an American weapon will without doubt, in six months or a year, be an implacable Russian weapon, and our duty toward our country is not to let those six or twelve months go by without putting our advantage in concrete form. War might break out tomorrow, who can say? It might, tomorrow, fall on the heads of your wives and children. If you wish for peace, prepare for war—but that is an outdated statement. If you wish for peace strike terror, terrify yourself in a mirror, make your enemy the mirror of your terror.

"Have you guessed that I am an atomic scientist?" he went on, raising his voice. "It is time you knew it."

He corrected himself.

"Atomic, and if I may express myself in these words, anti-atomic. Yes, that is truer, anti. Through fear. . . . Fear is the great queen of our time, you know. Fear is greater than death, for it is multiple death, daily commerce not only with death for oneself but for the whole world—with death as the foundation, so to speak. And she spurs you on, the red queen! She makes you invent a remedy against evil at the very moment when evil, victorious, comes to you in your laboratories. That is what happened for me and that is what will happen here. . . . The attempt—the experiment—will bear a double aspect. If the wind continues favorable, that is if it does not blow too strongly or too slowly, a bomb will explode this evening in the vicinity, far enough away for the explosion to spare us, near enough for the radioactivity to be worthy of interest."

Sweat formed on my forehead, an icy sweat. My temples were beating like drums. Why did it seem so important for me to remain unmoved before my colleagues? Stand straight! Don't wipe your forehead! Don't give way! We have these stupid, sordid little bursts of courage; we call it by that name in order to have the illusion that we ourselves can control what will happen. My men were watching me. I became their focus. What I did they would do. They looked at me, then lowered their eyes. After all, each one of them could think only of himself! So that was what the sand had been breeding for us!

"If you please, do not give way," the Governor said slowly. "You will not run the risks you imagine. No."

He must have measured the immense advantage he had gained over us. Plunging us into terror, then raising our heads slightly above the black water, he could not help becoming a kind of all-powerful ally.

"You know that one of the effects of atomic radiation is to bring about sterility. On that level alone—setting aside destruction and so on—can such radiations constitute a weapon of war? In other words, can one conceive of bombs of low explosive power that would leave a country standing, preserve its setting, its face of stones, trees and history, while gradually annihilating it from below? Yes and no. That weapon would be slow in assuring its victory and, considered from the psychological angle, I fear that its results would be too delayed. . . . Man can accustom himself very well to not transmitting life and to becoming merely a little portion of living death." (His eyes—green flame danced in his eyes; it devoured him.) "Picture something else. Imagine 'controlled' radiations—I am trying to put it simply, call them what you like—radiations that would respect already existing life, which would not bring about

sterility either, but which all the same would have grave effects on the system, which would progress to a certain stage and no farther, which would ruin without destroying. Do you understand? Which would make of each pregnancy and each birth the very weapon of the enemy, which would substitute a deformity for a face—and would do nothing else.”

I heard him through a roar, like steam escaping from a burst boiler, of everything around me. I was witnessing not only the death of a world, but the birth of another world. I was confronting energy itself, against which I was powerless, against which I was unable to rebel. For at the same time as he plunged me into horror, that man, as I said, was a guarantee against that horror in so far as it concerned me, myself. As long as he was among us, since the danger was the same for him as for us, there would not be that hell he was predicting, at least not tonight, not here.

I started to understand him again, in the middle of a sentence.

“There was a very thorough investigation made before you were chosen—I had to have wardens here, as you will admit. We wanted you all to be fathers. I stress this: fathers—grandfathers, you will say—well, of course! . . . Perhaps so that you would feel freer in your minds when faced with this event. You understand? So that you would realize that nothing is taken away from you, you for whom paternity has for a long time been no temptation, to whom it has given its fortunate fruits. Do you follow me?”

The flame in his eyes glittered more brightly.

“The investigation also concerned your wives. It was absolutely necessary that they should have passed the age of childbearing and that there should be not the slightest doubt about that, so that everything should be saved for you and for them even before you were menaced. . . . Today, then, a bomb will explode and men will

forget their natures and their laws. They will procreate. Six weeks of patience—and God knows what patience, coming after years in prison—will have given them a furious need for the supreme act of life, without stratagems, like animals.

"They will produce monsters."

He folded his hands. His hands were trembling. My hands were trembling.

"Some will escape. About a third of the strength. I think so—I hope so, rather. It will be very important for my colleagues and myself to know which third and to decide whether our plan of protection has been effective. What is human in them will not be lost—at least not entirely. But the others?"

He shouted that he loved them. All his violence had returned. He was quite sincere, I am sure. He said he loved and pitied them and was defiling himself in them.

"Which among you, among them, could measure the abyss of my life?"

He almost threw himself at us. "You will survive, I repeat. I say it again. But I, I will be in each of those men."

"A third spared!" he yelled. "A third—but it will never be more than a third of the world. I shall live in the others. For once it will be on my orders and by my desire that love will be followed by life."

Suddenly he calmed down. He could not have stood the tension much longer.

He explained to us—at length and, from then on, calmly—that this bomb was of a new type, that it would have nothing of the terrifying aspect of thermonuclear bombs, that we would perhaps be contaminated, although this seemed improbable at our age, certain products having been inoculated into us in the guise of

vaccines when we left San Diego. On our return to the United States we would be separated from our families for two or three months, as a precautionary measure. As for the women who were here, for the most part, the children they would conceive that night or during the following days would show striking malformations, sometimes going so far as the negation of all human appearance. Subsequently the men would be kept under observation and after a determined time they would procreate again, with other women, so that the virulence and persistence of the poison on human beings of their vitality could be correctly estimated.

Would we have struggled, however faintly, if Malkin's futile rebellion had not emptied us of all energy? I have claimed this, but I was deceiving myself. No, it was all too late. Only the lowest instinct of self-preservation moved us now. Our duty was clear; everything must be done, more than ever, to keep the prisoners in ignorance of their fate, under pain of a rebellion that we could put down only with bloodshed, if it did not finally overcome us.

I shall add nothing to the account of that night as the prisoner saw it. When the rumbling of the plane was heard—that signal!—it is true that we tried to stand as a curtain between the prisoners of both sexes, it is true that later the machine guns were aimed. It was the last kindling of our spirit. For a moment we thought ourselves ready for anything to prevent the crime, but only for a moment! So when that unhappy man imagines that our intervention near the Governor, at the moment of the radioactive fallout, was charity—flaming up—"I knew too well what motive urged the guards to oppose his will"—alas, it was fear. Fear of the Governor's appetite for violence, destruction, defiance. Would he not, even on his own authority, wish to demonstrate his power over his victims, wish to perform some miracle, show them the open abyss and order

them to cast themselves into it? And that at the risk of his life and ours!

Exculpate myself! What an impossible dream . . .

"O'Hara with his men went toward the barrier," writes the prisoner. "He was his own enemy, an enemy born of himself."

CHAPTER XXVII

It did not

happen immediately. We broke through, and the women came forward. But almost at once we stopped. We were standing in a compact group, little less confused than on the day of our disembarkation. A few of us giggled foolishly. Everything seemed unreal, deceptive. We huddled together, we were too fragile for the miracle. Once more the impression of divinity tormented us. Certainly something strange was about to happen, something even stranger than had just happened. God was seething in what remained of the clouds and gases and mist; God was there in the distorted landscape. Was it because of Him that we felt so overwhelmed? Perhaps. But there were also the complexes born of our patience and impatience, carried over each day from the day before. We had cast down the obstacle—the material obstacle—but we could not find ourselves. Part of us had remained behind, here or there, near the sea or near the peak where for so long we had summoned the impossible. We had to find it again, for it was truth and love, it was man of the first paradise—but it was not making haste.

We were fighting against a formless anxiety, against ourselves,

against that transformed landscape, against everything. We looked at each other without recognition; we looked at those women as though they were strangers. We could not make up our minds to take the last steps, nor could they, as though the earth in front of us were studded with mines and booby traps, or as though by assuming our new reality too quickly we would fuse into blades of white fire, and then vanish, a mystery in the surrounding mystery. The still tepid fog wreathed us. Now my comrades lived the Governor's words and repeated them in their minds: death was watching them. It rose from those who had carried it in their bones all that evening without knowing it. They were waiting for it to disperse; death was still mingled intimately with their breath. And then—and then there was too much passion; it had been too constantly stifled. We did not feel free in our freedom. We were still moles huddled in molehills. We had to take possession of ourselves, re-create ourselves muscle by muscle. Each man was digging his pathway toward fulfilment, shoulder to shoulder with his companions and yet far from them, digging a tunnel without end and constantly turning.

We did not speak to each other; that helped to paralyze us. We could not speak. What would we have said? All words were false. They belonged to that other world we had left, and were of no use in this one. They did not designate, they carried no meaning. We had only the language of our eyes, but eyes themselves are not loyal allies. Was Loa the Loa of yesterday and before? No, she was more widely separated from me than she had ever been. She was offered, but in quite a different way from any I had imagined—present and absent. I could not succeed in building a house in her life. I was more tortured, ten times more tortured than happy.

Because of my secret, would imminent remorse infallibly over-

take me? Was I tempted, for the last time, to cry out my truth? I would lie if I said that I was! Such courage did not even touch me. I was waiting, that is all. I was waiting for one of those men, or one of those women, to make the liberating gesture that the rest of us could copy—and after which there would be no possible return. I was waiting for death to fall from these shoulders or from those shoulders, and for the visitation of naked beauty to a face. But we were adolescents on our first adventure. We were all in straitjackets. Not one single hard, strong body—not even Bentley, not even Schneider. I hung on to Schneider's presence, to the jealousy that kept me alert. It was enough to lull any desire for confession. I watched Schneider, and I conquered my secret and readied myself and congratulated myself on my silence. . . .

I had the whole sea, and all that mist, too, in my throat, and the whole moon. Someone took the Step. There was a sigh, something of an anxious moan—but also the harsh growl of an animal in quest of his mate . . . Greenglass!

Greenglass became enormous in my eyes . . . Greenglass, with his little ferret's face deprived of vivacity by misfortune. The gnawing became more intense, was transformed. Now he was a moon-colored animal, a moon feline moving forward, still uncertainly, stealthily looking to left and right, wondering if he was not destroying the order of the world and if punishment would not follow in his footsteps. But he was heavy, too, and satisfied. He did not lose an inch of his height. Again he uttered his call to lust. He turned. He needed to know that we were still in the same place, a screen between the barracks and himself. Finally Maud Walker left the group of women. The moon made her, too, softly white, and she too hesitated. She was seeking support from her companions, for someone to help her, to follow her—seeking the

sound of a voice at least. When she and Greenglass at last faced each other they stood motionless and as though indifferent for a moment. They did not dare touch each other. Then they loved each other like children. Maud laid her head on her lover's shoulder. For seconds and seconds they stayed like that. A man behind me breathed heavily twice—as in love. Had Maud and Greenglass heard? They embraced each other convulsively! Their bodies went wild. All of us made a brutal lunge forward—like the eagle of wind and rain on the first day of the monsoon. The two groups broke up. A stampede, without an exclamation, without even a word! Only the child-monster cried out in the womb of Time. But death ripped itself from the sand about me, from the posts of the barrier, the plants, the flat shade of the trees, it rose up and submerged the child. I would get by, all right! I would tell Loa just what was necessary, a little and not too much, just what was necessary. Besides, wasn't she already suspicious, without our even having spoken of it, since the doctors' visit? Certainly! But I felt such an absolute need of the elemental and the real! Would I resist? Life, the act of total life! It was that need which the music had described; and the moon had recorded the echo of the music and sent it tirelessly back to me. That need was shining larger and clearer than ever. A single road without walls, free. I listened: the child had definitely renounced existence. Fool that I was! Loa might be sterile after all! Oh yes? Would the Governor have kept her here in that case? Think of something else, buddy! I swore at myself. Think of something else! Me, perhaps—maybe *I* was sterile. Perhaps that was why the sterile man had chosen me as his confidant—because I was like him! Not that either! The truth was that he had made me worse than himself, that I was bearing at once his unhappiness and the curse he had hurled at all humanity in order to avenge

himself. Loa, Loa, all the same I must tell you. . . . Schneider passed me. I gripped him by the collar. He would not have Loa, never! I would pay the price.

I pushed him as violently as I could. I was on fire and icy cold at the same time.

"Watch out!" I raged. "I'll kill you if I have to, Pat, I swear it."

"You shit!" he said. "If you knew how I crap on your whore and on you."

He was panting. He stretched out his arm. His woman approached.

"Shit! Worse than shit!"

His neck was enormous. He must have been suffering. I loathed him and it cured me. I overtook him. Loa at first was like a vapor of life in that poisoned vapor. It was when I put my arms around her, when she gave a little captive cry, that she became a body. Ah, so much the worse for humanity!

Do you remember, Loa? Do you remember, my wife, whom I thought I had won forever from death? Everything is extinguished. Ah! remember, remember; there is no other pardon. Restore to me the taste of you, I should like to die with my eyes full of tears. No one else was for me that mountain spring in which once a lamb was reflected, where one drinks up innocence and peace. I was the pine tree in the wind; the rivulet was calm. I kissed you, you were a witness of the passage of God on the earth. I kissed you and kissed you. God has not returned since; He has been exiled. And you loved me. Tell me that your love still endures. I call you and I am that mute stone. I call you virtue, the way, light, caress—kind death. Tell me you hear me, Loa. I tell you that during that night I found *everything*. The whiteness of the snow and the warmth of grass mown in summertime, honey and reverie . . . and myself. I loved you with my body, with my heart and with what God has

put of Himself into every man. With my childhood, Loa, with the first flower through which I learned to appreciate the passage of order and serenity. I remember and I tremble. In the life after death I shall still desire you, in my body after resurrection, with my muscles and my bones and my carnal flesh. I cry your name to myself. I clothe myself in your name—Loa, Loa, Loa—and my whole skin is perfumed. I stand up and your name is a body, and it demands my love and I come to it. I shall always come. Always and everywhere. I love you. Always.

I did not say all this to you then. I did not know how to say it. Perhaps I could not.

For a long, long moment we remained together, couple by couple. For nothing in the world would we have separated. We needed first to receive the protection of that land, of that moon, to feel that the land and the moon had become accustomed to our new faces. Until this time we had to stay in a group. Someone was watching us, patient and intractable and hidden, held at bay only by the strength of our numbers. The sand bore the marks of a giant with a club.

We walked in a circle, slowly, near the iron door. A mob without a voice. No more than just now did anyone dare to speak, to tell their love. This reserve was a kind of safeguard. It was already such a breach of what was the norm to have our women with us. We had to advance carefully along the road, by stages. We strove to disguise and hide the happiness within us, to present only a very thin target to the outraged order of things. I caressed Loa furtively, I breathed her presence, but I was silent. I must not provoke the night, no, nor the mist, nor the Governor's lighted window, nor the unusual silence in the barracks of the guards.

How long did that bewildered pause last? Bentley broke it.

"Anna, for God's sake, Anna . . ."

Something like that, and with a hard voice. Those nearest him drew away, and I, too. He was shivering. It was the defiance I spoke of—and also fear; it was a call for help. It was double or nothing—and we were all playing.

"I can't stand it any more, no! No more, Anna . . ."

His voice had become even harder. Anna Sullivan lowered her eyes. This was her defense against the moon that illuminated her too crudely, that linked death and love. Loa hung on my neck more in a demand for protection than with passion. What would happen? What storm would break over Bentley and his companion, what shower of stars? Bentley staggered; he panted and Anna breathed a weak cry. Now they were alone, facing the future; the moon threw an infinity between them and us. Whatever happened, we would not go to their aid.

Bentley huskily whispered a long sentence I did not hear. He was saying it to himself rather than to us—to Death, in order to keep it at a distance.

Then, as though in haste, he tore Anna's dress.

She did not struggle. Bentley picked her up, holding her tight against his chest, seeking a place where he might set her on the sand, apart from the thorny plants, and lie with her.

He noisily kissed her breasts, her belly, her neck; he raised his head and went on looking. He came toward us, carrying her. We recoiled; he was the danger. Then in sudden decision, he stopped at a hollow, gently lowering Anna Sullivan to the sand. Almost immediately I heard their spasms. Loa started to burn. Her nails dug into my shoulders.

"Come . . ."

It was no longer my voice; it echoed like the shattering of crystal.

And that very gentleness, that purity filled me with anguish. Everything was too wonderful to last.

“Come . . .”

At the same moment each of the couples chose a path. We separated rapidly—on tiptoe, one might say, so as to leave no traces. Bentley and Anna sat up. Would they follow us? With a strong, brutal gesture, a bear’s paw, he pushed his woman back on the sand. They must have been visible half a mile off, black spots, spots of life on pale silver.

It was a rut. . . .

At last we were masters of death, at least for that night. Bentley and Anna Sullivan had thrown down the gauntlet and death had not replied. The silence had not been shattered by an iron footstep.

Without noticing what path we were taking, moving as though in a cloud, Loa and I stopped at the place where she used to sit, during all those weeks, facing me. And I found “my” place, on the other side of the barbed wire, a little in front of that thickset tree where a cardinal nested. Why were we there? What had urged us on? Were we acting from an instinct like that of certain animals—birds, for example, who have their “provinces” and live, nest and feed there exclusively and sing nowhere else? From the same impulses as that cardinal, who thus became my brother and companion? We were no exception. All the couples, or nearly all, had done the same thing, and all remained in what had been until then the women’s camp. We would never return to our own side. Inescapable misfortune would await us there and we would be caught in a trap.

There was a great void on our right, a bare space devoured by the moon. It was there, in what seemed a very far away time, that Jeffy and June Toynbee . . . I saw a man from barracks number

two arrive there, Whitney and his woman, their arms about each other. She began to undress, but did not finish. She laughed while making love. It was sacrilege.

I never knew how old Loa was, never knew what her life had been before her conviction, before the Island. As I have already said, I did not question her, and for me she remains a child. She was very young that night as she gave herself, and it was always the same. I had known several women, but she reinvented the gift of happy flesh. Everything was humble. Because of her, God could not be a judge. With me, the world began again. Not an impulse, not a gesture in which there was not something *innocent*. She loved naturally—she loved as the plant grows in its season, and I was reborn from my past, it was abolished; I was clean. . . . Yet there was in her the blood that burns and is not extinguished, and the muscular animal hidden in the loins that prances and cries and creates a whole springtime of shocks, and that belly perpetually offered and fleeing like a net full of live fish drawn toward the shore. There was all that, but all that was fresh and new, all that returned from the exile of habit.

I said: "My love . . ." Love was a Christmas traveler crossing a snowy pass.

I said: "I love you, Loa. I have never loved anyone like you." And over her skin ran a fragrance and an intoxication and her breasts were as candid as a child's wonder.

"I have never loved anyone but you, Loa . . . but you . . ." Already she was all light. Already the trill of April, of the tree. The little song of desire at the base of the neck, the open veins of desire in the wrists. . . . The thighs like a warm evening.

"I can't wait for you any longer," she said.

Her voice was the high ground of a meadow which sees itself

reflected in a lake, astonished at its own peacefulness, discovering that the gentlest of ash-grey herons is nesting on its back.

"I can't wait any longer."

"Loa, I must tell you something . . ."

"If you knew," she murmured, "behind that barrier, all those weeks."

"I know."

"No, because I said nothing. I was obliged to be silent. And even now!"

I listened to her voice. But I was also listening to the hidden language of her life, the sheltered words of her armpits. And even her ankles spoke of love and were wedded to my ankles. Even her nails were singing.

"Loa, I implore you to hear me. . . . It's too serious, too important."

"Never mind."

"Listen, darling."

"We must forget everything that went before."

Over there Whitney and his woman were acting like a whole flock of sheep and rams coupled at once. Loa spoke and the flock found access to the heart of God. She spoke with her skin and I answered her with my skin.

"Forget everything, everything that went before."

"I was insane, you're right."

"I love you," she said. "I love you, I love you . . ."

On the meadow of her voice, at the most polished surface of the lake, the heron was leading a flight of fragile feather-puffs, as downy and as light as the thought of foam. They were his chicks—and they dissipated the storm. Her thighs beneath me were the double vein of a mine of gold. All the suns received by the earth

over a thousand years, guarded and hidden like a heritage, rose from her body toward me, and all the whiteness of dispersed sheepfolds and all the recovered feathers of phoenixes and all the rough diamonds of redress. I had been dead. For weeks I had knocked at the door of my resurrection. It was opening, the dark stone was rolling away. I was re-entering life. But coming from so far I needed, you needed, total life, is that not so, Loa? We could not be content with a semblance of life. Perhaps that is my excuse. We had to make that mystic and carnal truth our own.

Her hands clutched at my shoulder blades and my shoulder blades were two wounds in a tree. The gold of her thighs was long, flexible bars. Then her thighs were bathed in oil, the belly like a net full of fish drawn suddenly on to the shore and in her breasts was the prayer on a funeral pyre. . . . Everything became calm. Silence and innocence refashioned their limbos. Everything began again. Love, that Christmas traveler, again. Ah, Loa! Loa! Love, that Christmas traveler and his gourd of water from Bethlehem in his mouth. . . . And it was that which they mutilated, he whom they seared! It was that water they dried up. . . .

"You'll never think of Schneider any more?"

"I never did, you know that quite well."

Why did I ask that? She had never sought him. She loved only me.

"If only we could be sure of not being separated, if we could be sure of that, Loa! To live without wondering what tomorrow will bring. Even at the price they'll make us pay."

She uttered a cry.

"Why do you crush me like that? You're hurting me!"

I was trying to protect myself from the child. Was it not already within her? I conquered myself.

"I love you, Loa . . ."

That was the archangel word. It hovered above us with a palm branch. The Governor, the child, disintegrated. My terror had no meaning. It was quite simply sterility that had come to us in the bomb and the cloud. Had I not read that sterility was the secondary death of every atomic explosion? We were destined to be the supreme proof. And then would not the moment of love become an eternal flame with no ashes?

Loa, Loa, Loa . . .

It was in the morning that I saw the big lizard again. It had been there all night. It had watched us then as it was now watching us, with the same slightly lethargic obstinacy. The sun fell aslant its eyes, and the mica glowed. It was warm; it darted its tongue now without moving. Loa was asleep. For a long time I watched the lizard. It was on a hillock of sand, no more than six feet away, and the sand seemed at once to animate it and to burn beneath it. I got up. Only yesterday I would have been incapable of the least movement, I would have submitted. It was Loa who gave me strength. The peacefulness of her sleep galvanized me. I had that flaxen pleasure to defend.

I advanced toward the left—toward a stone. The eyes did not follow me. Left again, and they ignored me. They remained fixed on Loa naked, on her belly, with something of emotion, yes, truly, and in vain I told myself it was impossible. With a kind of sustained—and obscene—interest. The lizard cried out. It was almost muted, tender. What was it expressing by this outlandish cry? What was it calling? What had it begun to desire? Satan! . . . There was a river of fire in my arm. I picked up the stone. This time I knew I would reach it, that I had to reach it. The stone crushed the

lizard and drove it half into the sand. It struggled, its head waving, wobbling, waving in green and blue flashes. Then it was still. Approaching death transformed it. Death had appeased the sand around it and death was slowly penetrating it. What joy to see it become an animal again! The whole diabolical legend I had built up was gone in the contortions of a reptile! Kind death, sister death, death who seals eyes so well, even those eyes! I blessed the shadow that made them grow pale and at last moistened them a little.

I took some time to make up my mind; I enjoyed that death agony almost sexually. The lizard was now watching nothing but its reflection on the silence. If I had had a nail I would have nailed it to a tree to dry in the wind. I needed something else. I slid a flat stone under it, to serve as an anvil, and hit it twice with another stone. It burst. I turned it over. Was that the heart, that little pink object beating? That? That deformed egg? I touched it with the tip of my shoe, with a shudder. It adhered to my shoe and still beat, beat, beat. I would have liked to feel it beat like that for hours, tamed, in my possession. I was suddenly so free! The morning air played in my head. I wiped the tip of my shoe carefully against a root and went to lie down beside Loa. . . . When she opened her eyes again everything was Easter.

We wandered

about all that day and a good part of the evening. Were we watchful of each other? I refused to sleep—even for a few minutes. Schneider was not my only enemy; there was this man, that man, all of them.

What, after all, did I know about my companions? New men had appeared—the prisoners of the day before had ceased to exist. And although Pat Schneider was still the direct threat, could I trust those men from barracks one and two, whom I had never really known? Life had taken possession of us too entirely, in too demanding a fashion, for temptation not to be present.

I did not leave Loa. I did not let go of her body for one instant. When we met someone I turned aside at once. That breath, that body were too precious to me, they were worth more than my life. I would have been less fearful had I been armed with a knife, some kind of weapon. But I had only my fists, and my strength was small. What could I have done against a Bentley, or even a Schneider? Watchfulness—care—my only weapons. In spite of myself my eyes kept closing and I fought to remain awake. Toward

evening I was tired, and my head felt as if a spike had been driven through it. From time to time Loa dozed. I watched, standing beside her. At the most I would sit down, and at the end of a quarter of an hour I would awaken her. We had to move elsewhere. Wherever we were, the sand, the leaves became dangerous. They announced the approach of threat—whether from the men, the guards, the Governor, death, or the unhappiness of separation. The threat was less urgent when I was walking. I was like those people who cannot bear a storm when indoors, and have a morbid need to go out.

I had got it into my head to seek refuge on the peak; I hoped no one would follow us there. I had to abandon the idea. The barrier, even without current, was impassable. So when the night was already well advanced, we went toward the sea. The mangroves received us and closed about us. Murky presences swarmed there, but they were friendly. Their life was like ours, hidden and secret; they were the witness-guardians of a damp place, they gave me assurance that the lizards would not venture near us. The presences were made evident by persistent little scratchings. But even the noises sounded damp. . . .

From my lair—what other word can I use?—I saw several of my companions pass, always the man and woman clinging together, far from the others, enemies of the others, and with the man always on the alert. In particular I noticed Bentley and Anna. Such a miserably anxious Bentley! He too was seeking the security of some protected spot. Like myself he wanted shelter from men and from the sky, from an invisible hunter observing him from far reaches of the sky. Even Bentley!

It was the beginning of an overwhelming night. We were exhausted with fatigue and hunger. We had eaten nothing since the morning before, living only by our love. Which was the support and

which the plant? Each was both, and it was because we were really only one that we managed not to give way. Strength came now from Loa and now from me. I experienced that miraculous communion with as much despair as exaltation—a despair of the bones and muscles. When we were separated from each other (as we would be) what would remain? Death itself would be empty, God Himself. There would be no survival.

All day we had hardly spoken to each other. We did not need to. The dialogue took place between our sweat, beneath the sun. Sometimes it broke off and then there was a brief sentence from her or from me—as though to grant our bodies a little silence and repose. At once they found each other again. A new gift reunited them, as new as on the day before. The jellyfish and the sea, the sea and the jellyfish revealing the search of the sea for the light.

As the moon was about to set I ventured for a moment outside my hiding place. There was no one on the shore, no one near the barbed wire or the big barracks. Apparently the others, like myself, were hiding in the tall grass and undergrowth. It did me no good to tell myself that my fear was shared; this only increased it. There must have been many ominous signs threading the air around us. The guards' barracks were lit, and so was the Governor's room. Why, so late at night? Was something under way?

My nerves were on edge. I came back to Loa. She was sleeping—at last. For a few moments I watched her sleep. Was it me, a dream of me, that she seemed still to embrace? Would that be all that was left of me when the farewells were over? I was seized with panic. Her sleep was a departure I could not allow. I desired her more violently than ever. It was no longer possession I was seeking, but survival.

I woke her with treasures of tenderness. "You must not sleep,

darling, you must live. Every minute counts and it will never be the same twice." I did not say this, but she must have understood. Her eyes opened, I kissed the charitable night and her mouth had a savor of all fruits and her breasts were a grave, solemn festival.

"Yes," she said, "yes, every moment . . ."

It was peaceful, calm. But in fact there was a harmony between that slow love and the slow life of the mangroves. There was a pact between nature and ourselves. Everything that was calm and green would defend us, and God was there. And we would also be protected against Time by those insignificant animals whose destiny was merely to advance from silence to silence and over whom, on that account, Time had no hold, who were immortal, reborn of themselves by a simple contraction of silence. Would there be a tomorrow for us, Loa? She was silent. Answer! The animals gave me no reply either. But their scratchings had not stopped; we entered with them, among them, into the country where one stagnates indefinitely.

"Will there be a tomorrow for us, Loa? Do you think that the Governor, the guards? . . ."

"Don't think of it. Forget them . . . forget. I love you."

It was a child's life, in which moments are called years. . . . I slept at last. My two arms were about her; I would not lose a moment, even in sleep.

I got up. Dawn was approaching. There was an obligation I could not avoid. Hunger? Yes, of course, we were hungry, we had to eat. But that was not all. We felt a dramatic need to leave that undergrowth. Because all manifestation of life around us had ceased and we were *alone*? Because the little blue-green phosphorus was shining, close at hand, in the seaweed on the shore, the last

ray, suddenly excruciatingly lucid, of the look of Death—before morning? Loa was already on her feet. She stretched her hands to me. Her hands were cold; mine, as she remarked, were hardly less so. She tried to laugh. "Do you know I'm really starving?" But she watched the shore, the seaweed, the falsely indifferent widening of the eyes of Death on us.

We set off.

We did not go directly to the center of the Island. I was careful to take the longest path. She did not protest. Perhaps, like myself, she feared the moment when we would rejoin our companions. Hunger had also surely chased them from their hiding places. How would the men react among themselves and the women among themselves? Life would not be picked up where we had left it, that was impossible. At present each one had something to defend or to envy; each might at any moment feel himself provoked, if he were in the least jealous or if his nerves betrayed him. . . . Or we may have been afraid of the guards, conscious that our need to eat was perhaps their strongest weapon against us, if they had decided to humiliate us. "If you want to eat, you sons of bitches, break up . . . that's the condition."

I saw Greenglass and his woman, then, a little later, Wyndham and finally Williamson. Like us they were climbing toward the barracks, toward the protection of numbers and the hope of food. None of them made me the least sign of friendship, not even a gesture toward cooperation. They ignored me, just as I wished to ignore them. They went on, indifferent to everything that was not their woman, their hunger. Wyndham continued to display a grotesque self-satisfaction. His daring at the grille had made a hero of him and he intended to remain one. He walked stiffly and quickly. His woman could barely keep up with his pace. He was

visibly less considerate than Williamson, Greenglass or myself. Did he love less? Or did that dawn of menace and need strike him less heavily?

Gradually other presences were revealed. From the direction of the peak a group of ten or twelve was coming down. I could not put names to those vague silhouettes. I did seem to recognize Schneider. A certain irritation took hold of me. Had Loa recognized him too? Was she pleased to see him again? I looked at her and she smiled at me. I had already forgotten Schneider. The rapid pace of those people disquieted me. I said to myself: "Maybe they saw a ship from the little hill at the foot of the peak, and that is why they are hurrying." They were almost running. Was it only hunger urging them on like that?

People were converging on the barracks from every side. Some word must have gone out! Why that sudden, shared surge? Was it frantic flight? I calmed myself, because of Loa. I was attributing to the event a meaning it did not hold. Quite simply—one man had seen another emerge from his retreat and had followed him—and gradually everyone had done the same. To eat! Eat and drink.

Seven couples were already waiting on the porch when we arrived, each couple standing apart. They moved nearer with distaste, only in order to make room for the new arrivals. One might have thought they could not stand each other. Some were grumbling, the men as well as their women. When Bentley climbed the steps they drew back. He looked angry. As for Anna Sullivan, she wore an air of defiance; she belonged to the strongest man and was not going to let it be forgotten. A few women looked at her with malicious envy. She felt this, and whispered something in Bentley's ear. He took her in his arms, lifted her and gave her a loud kiss. Then, as though to avenge herself for Anna's proud self-assurance,

one woman said: "The guards have turned the current on again. I saw them. They've separated it from the barrier by cutting the connections. What's the idea? Why this precaution if they're not up to some dirty trick? They must want us to die of hunger while they sit by and watch us die."

"For Christ's sake!" Bentley snarled.

He left Anna. The woman whined on.

"Yes, that's what they're waiting for. I suspected it. It would be something to watch. They've had no amusements for over six weeks."

The woman laughed and laughed, full of hate, or perhaps only nervous. "What do you say, Anna? They want to know if we can really live on love and water! What do you say?"

"Shut up!"

"Are you as hungry as that?" the woman went on, contemptuously. "So hungry that your man isn't enough for you?"

"D'you hear that?" she went on, turning to Bentley, at once eager and satirical. "You're not enough for her! She doesn't hide it, she's frank, your girl friend. . . . With what I have and what I shall have I'm satisfied. I might be so dried up with hunger that I had no spit left, but I'd still lay down with my guy. We'd have ourselves a ball."

Her companion had slipped between her and Bentley. His eyes went aggressively from one to the other. He was a tall, lean man from barracks number one, his hair coming down nearly to his eyebrows.

The woman pushed him back, gently but firmly. She took her stand in front of Bentley.

"Bitch!" Anna yelled.

"Go to hell," said Bentley. "I want to eat. Those sons of bitches

aren't going to treat us like dogs. Is that their idea? To make us die of hunger and madness, two by two?"

"Two by two, yes," said the woman, who was shaking with fever. "Two by two. Just to see how long love will hold out. You know—when animals are in the muck, there's no longer any male or female—only mouths. They claw and kill and hate each other. Ask her . . ." (She had jumped toward Anna—to prevent Anna from throwing herself on Bentley's neck.) "Go on, Bentley, ask her if she'll always be the same with you, when hunger is burning like raw alcohol in her stomach! Ask her if she won't shove off, if she won't let anyone mount her who offers her something to put in her stomach."

"Shut your mouth, I tell you," growled Bentley. He seized her by the hair. She trembled and moaned, but it was more from a kind of joy than from anything else. Then Bentley shoved her aside again.

"Go on, ask her!" the woman insisted, while her man tried in vain to make her keep quiet.

"That's enough!" Anna cried. "Speak for yourself, you filthy whore!" There were tears in her voice. She freed herself.

The other woman made animal noises of derision. Her man raised his hand, as if he were about to swat a fly.

Then he controlled himself. He could not hit a woman—it was Bentley with whom he had to quarrel.

"Bastard," muttered Bentley. "We've got something else to do besides breaking each other's jaw. We've got to get together and do something—we have to eat. Did anybody else see the guards turn on the current? Is that true? Did you see it?"

"At the end of the afternoon," said the man. "Yes. Jessie was already hungry."

His Jessie cackled again: "Some people would do anything for a bar of chocolate—wouldn't you, Anna?"

"Shut up, will you!" the man cried, losing his temper. Then he went on: "Jessie was already hungry. We went to the mess hall. That's when I saw the guards. There were several of them working on the wire, but there were others near the machine guns."

I heard him without paying attention. I was thinking of Loa. Would she be tempted, sooner or later, to leave me for some luckier man (did one ever know?) who offered her an old biscuit or half a sardine? I watched Schneider from the corner of my eye. He was resourceful, that bastard.

"I'm hungry," Loa said.

She was heavy in my arms.

"I'm hungry," she repeated. "So hungry, if you only knew!"

Almost at the same moment someone shouted that the guards were coming out. I did not react at once. The voice came to me from the other end of the world. It was false and without reality.

"They've got their mobile kitchen and the provision wagon," the voice continued. "They're going to the mess hall."

I overcame my torpor. Were we at last going to eat, eat freely? My mouth watered and I swallowed greedily. I kissed Loa. Her mouth was suddenly once more so cool!

It was not until long after the jailers had returned to their barracks that we risked going to the mess hall—and this was only because we felt our women slipping away from us. We wondered whether some kind of trap had been set there, so near the barracks, the machine guns and the Governor's house. . . . We grabbed all we could carry, helping ourselves in a deep and unexpected spirit of equality, and then went back to our retreats. Now that we were about to be cured of our hunger, now that we could once

more become men and women, we were again filled with the need for solitude.

Several days passed in this way. Twelve days. Each day, at sunset, the jailers put our food for the following day at the entrance to the mess. As though by common consent, we never met.

CHAPTER XXIX

Those days!

Those are the days I want to bring to life again, awaking them each time I awaken, clothing myself in them. But they are mirages; they hover and I try to reach them, but I fall back at once. It is that happiness I wish to recover—and that *love*. Only love could one day pardon me for my child. In spite of the horror of its soul, in the remembrance of those days it would feel the effect of a fulfilled creator . . . Words have no foundation, my breath and my heart are lost. And so there is only a monster without inheritance, not even gentleness deep in those eyes that cannot weep.

Those days! I have been told that they were interspersed with quarrels, often full of violence. I saw nothing of that. I loved Loa, I lived in her presence, blind to anything that was not my woman. At first we would change our burrow each evening; I believed this to be common prudence. But after three days, we no longer felt the need to move and hide. About fifty yards from us were Greenglass and Maud Walker and, still at the edge of the beach, to our left, Hughes and his woman. Our friendship of former days had been revived. I was not suspicious of them, nor they of me. All

six of us always went together to meals. Like all Negroes, Hughes was full of a slightly smug self-confidence. It was his racial possession, and he shared it with us. Every morning I went to see him, or else he came to me. He was the assurance of a calm day.

In spite of that I had my moments of terror. The dream could not last, it was impossible. Loa very quickly restored my courage. Life began once more—pure life began again. Who would despise himself enough to restore us to misery? Would we be left here, or taken elsewhere? At all events we would not be separated. They could not separate us. We had been married forever.

Ten times a day I scanned the horizon, automatically, and at the same times each day—the regular arrival of anxiety. Greenglass to my right and Hughes on the other side did the same. Like Loa, their women remained hidden—our buried treasure. I was sure that all over the Island others were on the lookout. That was the sole threat—from the sea.

Ah, but there was one other threat! Every time we entered the mess hall . . . but the fear of that trap dwindled as the days went by . . .

How can I explain my sudden renunciation of my anguish—my anguish for the child—since it had hitherto driven me so hard? I do not know, though I seek the answer. The hope rises—and immediately vanishes—that nothing of all that doom ever existed; that the body, in the sureness of its instinct, triumphed over the fantasies of a mind under too much strain to remain lucid.

. . . Then shall I believe the promise made to us that our women will be restored to us at the end of our cure? But if that is the case, why this interminable cure? Why these incessant examinations, this torture of total oblivion? Why a prison still more crush-

ing than the one before, if we have remained healthy men? I know that everything happened as I have written it, that we were poisoned forever by the atomic cloud, that deep within us we have been divorced from the divine likeness, from that which creates the face and the soul.

Yet the other Why remains. Why, and above all how, was I so pacified?

Perhaps the optimism of the others was contagious; perhaps I was more convinced than I now think that I would die in the explosion and the cloud—and that, being saved from death, I thought myself saved from everything!

Perhaps I needed happiness without questions; perhaps I wore happiness like a mask—and ended by being like my mask.

Perhaps . . . who will disperse the “perhaps”?

Perhaps Loa kept me safe even more than I have said. Her love, her faith? And since, besides, everything had already happened!

I try to establish a setting, to take my place there and feel at home in it. A vain effort. Have I no longer the right to that? Memory fails . . . the days sink, slip below the surface. Sometimes, but ever more rarely, I recapture them for a few moments; then they disappear. There is something apart from the rest, an archipelago of blue rocks in a lagoon, a peace interrupted by brute terrors that arose, spread and vanished in a moment. Because of the shadowy outline of a branch, suddenly different from usual, because of this man’s or that man’s sudden glance toward the sea, a quick look that becomes an intense staring . . . *could he see a ship that I did not yet distinguish?* My heart seemed to stop. Because of the tropic-birds flying too low one morning, or an unusual noise in the night, or a sudden agitation on the part of the guards—immediately translated by us into a warning.

They never ventured beyond their electrified wire grille, except at night; and then they went no farther than the mess hall, with their wagon of tins and bottles—unloaded hastily, without letting go of their guns. Only once I saw them close at hand. With Greenglass and Hughes I was there early for the food distribution. Loa was a stone on my arm. It was not she, it was someone else in her body, the Loa of imminent absence. I wanted to flee; I could not. My glance stopped at O'Hara. He had become frightfully thin and his eyes were feverish. He drew near. What made me invent that besotted joy—so that he would suffer in seeing us united, be offended in his dignity and morality? The moment soon passed, however. A sad light illuminated his face. Suddenly he patted my shoulder once or twice. As quickly as he had approached me he moved away. He jerked his head at his men. His glance, more wretched than ever, came back to me, enveloped me. He shrugged his shoulders, a way he had, and made a strong effort not to speak. He went away with his men. What message had he been trying to convey?

All night we were on the alert. Every hour I left the undergrowth and inspected the open sea. Hughes and Greenglass had joined me. We constantly changed our observation post. When dawn washed over the ocean—the deserted ocean—a triple anxiety arose and died beneath the song of the birds. The catastrophe could not arise in daylight! This day would pass without any accidents. We had to live, however, to give the day the desire to let us live. I took Loa on to the beach. Would not love in front of the sea disarm the sea? Love-defiance? I cast off all shame. When we climbed the little path up the dune on our return, Greenglass' eyes were strangely alight.

At the beginning of the second week the weather grew bad. For a long time, the sky was red lead with booted angels striding

over it; then it began to thunder and rain. There was a deluge. We were up to our ankles in water, but we did not take refuge in one of the camp buildings; we would not have done that in any circumstances. We contented ourselves, Hughes, Greenglass and myself, with meeting once more. It was our prayer and our defense. For the four or five hours during which the thunder rolled its powder barrels and fuses right onto the Island we formed a close group. Those strings of explosions, so near, that wind, that heaving ocean filled us with joy. It was impossible for a ship to anchor in such weather, and the typhoon would disturb the sea for several days more.

On the following morning, when it was still raining heavily, we were joined by two other couples. They had taken shelter from the storm in the women's barracks but when day came they could not stand it, they had felt hunted. They spent part of the day with us. Toward evening, as the horizon was becoming calmer, they left us. They said that when the thunder was at its worst the Governor had wandered through the camp. He had gone as far as the door of the barracks, had changed his mind and had not entered.

"What did he want?"

"How do we know?" one of the women replied. "All I can say is that he's no longer the same. His face is completely distorted by a sort of frozen grin."

"Bah!" said Hughes. "Never mind that. Forget it."

He was right. We must not think of that man.

"It looked like he wanted to speak to us," the woman went on. "Yes, really, that's what it looked like. He stayed for a long time at the top of the steps . . ."

"Forget it, I say!" cried Hughes.

He was menacing. His expression, usually like that of a friendly dog's, changed. Then his woman smiled at him and he softened. The two other couples went down to the beach. They moved off, uncertain of their destination, and disappeared behind a little rocky promontory.

As for us, we never met the Governor. Sometimes we heard his piano, but at the height of a piece of music he would break off, as though he were tired or in despair. At the beginning I frequently watched his window, but he never showed himself. What was he doing? What was he thinking? *Who* was he now?

Two weeks.

Days, hours, now simple and smooth, now harassed by the sea . . .

They even stole our farewells from us. There were no warnings, no signs, nothing. It was early afternoon and I fell asleep. I wanted with all my strength to stay awake—the worst was on its way. But I was slipping. Loa too was falling and falling, but we were not falling together. I called her and she did not reply, and a blinding light broke over me. I know now why we had not been given our food the night before, why we had been forced to wait until noon, becoming desperately hungry and thirsty. They wanted to be sure of our appetites, sure that we would eat, drink and lose consciousness at the same time. In the bottle of soda or perhaps in the rice pudding, drugs were waiting. Drugs that would make us sleep and sleep and sleep.

The only salvation, the only chance of salvation, was to vomit! But I hadn't even the strength to stick my finger down my throat. Obviously—a ship would now drop anchor, and we were being prepared for embarkation, for separation with no disturbance. So

much silence under Loa's forehead! I had moved away from her in my hasty attempt to vomit. My only aim now was to find her again. I could not move, my head was too heavy. I bent myself into an arc. My sandals fell off—I had untied them a few moments before on the first sensations of that seemingly innocent sleep . . .

CHAPTER XXX

There, Elsie,

it's over, it's the final act and it had to be played out with you. Every day you have to come to me, every evening, too faithfully, and every evening I have told myself that things would end this way. Why did you want to take Loa's place, why? You were crazy and I was defending myself. Today I could not do so.

Poor Elsie! She uttered a little cry, the sort of sound a rabbit might make when it was being crushed—hardly audible. Was it my name, that snapped thread of sound? Ah yes, it must have been that—that is my name in God henceforth, my name for Judgment Day. And yet I killed her without hate.

Strange, those hands closing about a neck! A woman's neck is so fragile and so taut! The soft muscles and nerves like threads of silk, and the pulsing of the blood that suddenly quickens and suddenly stops . . . and then there is an apparent transference—that blood becomes your blood, you are wedded to that body, you are infinitely loved by it. You leave it, you smoke a cigarette, quickly, quickly, as though someone were calling you. Then you come back to it, for in fact a voice is calling you. Perhaps your soul, perhaps the air growing

colder, perhaps that part of you that will forever be your treasury of passion. And you are naked before it, modest, respectful of your own nudity.

I pressed her neck hard, but it is her belly I wanted to destroy. Her belly is untouched, for I drew back. It is white, very pure. It no longer lives—and it still lives. If I could efface my passage into her belly in God's eyes!

I laid Elsie out. I did so with care and tenderness. Why don't her hands stay crossed on her breast? Why do her dead hands fall toward her belly, as though to protect the life in it? For the third time I have put them back! No more! I must keep them between mine until rigor mortis takes over. But I shall persist. My fear will be stronger than I am. I shall end by mutilating that woman—in my terror. I have no right to attack her face. Didn't they do that to me, through my child?

Elsie on the bed; and me, near the bed, hoping for what? Waiting for what hope? For how many days can I bear this corpse? Three, four, or more? Where shall I go when I am chased out by the smell, if the people in the building have not by then already betrayed me? Mr. O'Hara, I curse you! If you had been willing to listen to me, this would not have happened. I begged you, again and again, and you did not reply. You could have kept me from doing this, you could have taken me to the Governor, you could have saved me. I curse you! That girl was spying on me—or was not spying on me, what does it matter! It was not for that I killed her. It was because she had been under me, had lain with me at last, and the consequences—the child—must not happen! Because of pity for her and for it, and because of charity toward God.

She came in, as she did every evening, but I was so far from Loa that evening that I was sleeping. Did she say: "We're going to sleep

together, my love . . . oh, you know quite well what I mean! I love you, you know, I want you terribly. You can't refuse. I want so much to be in your arms, and no one shall separate us." The very thing she should not have said! "No one, no one shall separate us."

My whole body shuddered, as never before in her presence. Did I persuade myself, because I was afraid of the police for whom I believed she was working—poor Elsie!—that I would disarm her by making her my wife for a moment? Or did I dream that I would find Loa again in her, a little of Loa at that very moment on the Island when absence fell between us? Or was it, in fact, in spite of my resolution, simply incontrovertible need for a woman?

She sat down and lit a cigarette. She smoked for a moment without seeming to pay attention to me, and then she arose. "Don't touch me, Elsie, I am hell!" It was my soul crying out to her. But my body was calling her. She had come just at the moment when she knew I would call her, in a kind of inevitable repetition, because it was the moment, in memory, when I would fall asleep, when I would call, call for the lost love of a body.

"Get out!"

"D'you really want me to? You're lying."

"Yes, I'm lying."

"I knew it."

She took off her blouse. She undressed without haste. There is such a true gift in the slowness of certain gestures. I repeated: "I'm lying." Her brassiere appeared, her full, heavy breasts. She was in profile. Did she hear me breathe faster than usual? She turned. She had stepped out of her underthings proudly—like the sun rising over a newly-mown field.

"I've waited so long for this! What I gave you I gave willingly,

God knows. The room and everything, the cigarettes, the papers, all of that—but I was waiting for this. I said to myself: 'Today he must understand. I've been nice to him, I've been like his sister, but I'm on earth for something else, and that's to love with real love.'

("What else is there on earth but for us to love with real love?" Loa murmurs through her . . . and immediately afterwards her eyes closed, and we would never see each other again.)

She grasped at my shirt, and in trying hastily to unbutton it she tore it. That small area of bare flesh against bare flesh dizzied me. I put my arms around her shoulders and clasped her until she gasped for air. She uttered a slight cry. I also heard a sound like metal filings shaken in a bag.

"It's the lizards. They must be here!"

"What lizards?" she cried. "You're always talking about them. Where are there any lizards? Are you drunk?"

She was afraid of my face and drew back.

"You're drunk."

"They're everywhere now, they are the witnesses. Everywhere when a man and a woman make love. They have eyes of mica—they haunt the children."

"Oh, you're babbling—you're drunk. I should never bring you any whiskey. You drink, and then you don't know what you're saying."

"Witnesses, Elsie."

"Be quiet! How awful you look!"

She twined her arms around my neck; we fell to the bed.

"Stop babbling . . . stop talking nonsense."

Suddenly I no longer thought of the past; I thought of nothing but of her and myself. I caressed her thighs. It was as though she had gooseflesh, and yet they were warm and responsive. The

lizard sounds stopped. Was I free? Her thighs, her breasts. Her thighs, her breasts . . . Her thighs, her breasts. . . .

"Take me."

I don't want to forget!

She moaned softly, that was her only reaction. I was satisfied with it. And yet, no—I would not be that kind of assassin! Better to kill her, better for me, better for her!

"I was on an island, Elsie. We were convicts and there were women with us. They submitted us to an abominable experiment. They spoiled as one spoils grain. They did what God Himself would not have dared to do . . . And then one day they put drugs in our food—we were separated, I woke up on a ship, and then I was in a hospital for months and months. I escaped. I could never have lasted there to the end."

It was to protect myself from her, to protect her, too, from myself, and in spite of herself. To try, too, to keep myself for Loa and for my child. So that they would be present here, if only in my words.

"I don't want to forget, Elsie. That atrocious, horrible, beloved little head. The little head that cannot sleep, that will never sleep. Loa will sing lullabies and I will weep in vain."

"But what Loa?"

She was impatient. Her belly—her belly was under me.

"The wife and mother. The wife and mother crucified forever. Get out!"

"I love you."

That body, moving and moving beneath me. I was born again.

It is a ship. Everything is shaking. Loa? Where is Loa? It is like the *Bounty Pride*, and yet it is not the *Bounty Pride*, it is

more spacious and the electric bulbs are shaded. My friends are there. A memory blinks—is it really a memory? It seemed to me through my sleep that I tried to get overboard to follow another ship that was sailing away, that I was captured and then bound. But there is no mark on my feet or hands, only a reddish trace on my right wrist. Who will tell me the truth? I yell and yell and yell. The alleyways echo my cry. People come running; not our usual guards, but military police. In spite of them I continue to shout. I want to see the second ship. I shall shout until it stops, or I shall throw myself into the sea. Suddenly the recollection becomes clearer; I have already tried to jump overboard! I have no doubt of it. That mark on my wrist is the mark of a rope. They rush at me, five, six, ten of them, and beat me while I shout. The pacification process has already begun, and it is the same thing all through the voyage. And the same thing in the hospital. Blows, drugs, injections, comas lasting two days from which I emerge with more and more difficulty and after which, each time, a little of me is trapped and disappears without a trace.

“Oh, it’s so good to be under you, so good!” Elsie murmurs. “Oh God, I want you! *Now* . . . don’t wait.”

She was bathed in sunny water. My skin stuck to hers, my whole body was sucked toward her body, into her body. She groaned and quivered. Suddenly I saw all the lizards, a thousand pale throats that yelled and throbbed and throbbed. Loa called me and hated me in that offered flesh. She told me that she *was* that woman, that everything was beginning again, the appalling conception of a monster . . .

And while she warned and admonished, there was that burning seed, my loins nearly breaking. There! I could have done otherwise, outside her. But I wanted it to be the same, a memory and un-

acknowledged vengeance. The whole world was around me, the world of kids. They were calling me demon and damning me, they were calling me guinea pig and monster.

"A monster, Elsie! You played with fire. It's your fault. What did you want with me? You were paid for this, weren't you?"

She looked at me, staring, steadily, too steadily. Was it a confession? Her pupils were transparent; I seemed to see right into her head.

"I was traced! Right? And I thought I was safe! Confess! The guinea pig was traced and a female sent to him. Answer me, for God's sake! Tell me—tell me . . . you were not told the whole truth, that's impossible, you were not told everything, were you? You did not know . . ."

When I clasped my hands around her neck I felt a fresh pleasure. I made love again. . . .

Elsie, Elsie, forgive me. There must be no child. No! Not twice. Do you understand? Not twice! It is the Governor who killed you—not I. I could still hear myself alive in her—the filings of the lizards. My hands were shaking. I loved her.

A little harder.

A little more.

A little . . .

Where are you, Elsie? Where? Where? Where?

And then there was that rabbit's cry.

I opened the window. A wide, free night. It is bearing my name toward the Island, it is carrying the rabbit's cry. A white bird turns above the barrier. Perhaps others like Loa, like myself—other Elsies—have taken our place and the Governor is coming and going among them with the same measured steps. Or is there only the

silence of empty days? Who will tell me? I close the window. I come back to Elsie. Sometimes I should like her to wake up and move and ask me once more. Sometimes I tremble with horror at her.

Her belly. . . .

There are other bellies, ah yes, I know, I know. Here and there other bellies waiting, so that the circle around me will never be broken. At the hospital or elsewhere. Other females for other pregnancies. Didn't I try to escape this stud farm? Escape for the sake of my child? But I also wanted to live.

Help me, my God!

Out of the depths, my God! I beseech You and I rend myself. Where is the Spirit, the Spirit You promised would float forever on the waters? I seek. There is no Spirit on the waters of time, nothing! Satan has become tangible; he was made flesh at Hiroshima, and every day strengthens and fattens him. Lord, Lord? . . . Will You at least grant me a good death, I who have become immortal, I who defy you each time I give proof of life, I from whom Satan has created Satan and who will not even have the courage to try to destroy myself? I, whom shortly, *tomorrow*, they will let loose again upon the world?

CHAPTER XXXI

Yes, he is alive,

as he writes, and one realizes too clearly what that means—and he is my child now, more to me than my sons, my lost child. Taken back alive, full of his youthful blood, back where his fate as the new Adam awaits him, never ending, reborn from each of his desires as a man. This guinea pig's cage will never be opened, I know. He will be carefully tended; he will have doctors, medicines, strong nourishment. He will remain vigorous and young, so that the sin of each copulation will be greater for being the negation of a fine body. If necessary, if his memory resists his past and he rebels, if they do not succeed in overwhelming him with oblivion, he will be tortured. He will give up with a revolver at his back—if not, he will be committing suicide. He is now a national possession. On her knees, the nation adores her blessed flock; it assures her power. Until every country in the world has the same sheepfold of fear, and the world is shared by innocent monsters.

I promised myself that I would remain silent. Anger and wailing do not become me. When has one seen an assassin plead innocent, even an assassin by omission? But I cannot be silent. The old man within me, the old father within me cannot be silent.

And yet my part was over at this point, I was coming to the end of my testimony. A few words and I would have withdrawn. Well, then . . .

There were twelve long, last days on the Island, as we have read. They ended on 15 March 1957 with that sleep like a footstep of God. A ship anchored, followed quickly by another, just as we had come to the Island—two ships. The couples were separated, but not by us, the guards—rather, by military police. For nothing in the world would we have touched one of those women.

During those twelve days, pity entered me only once, on the evening when I tried to show the prisoner something besides a jailer's face. Yet so pale a face! And I wonder if I even have the right to speak of pity, if we were not entirely possessed by disgust, a panic-disgust, for the women even more than the men, those women and what they bore within them, that brood of Cain in their bellies. It seems to me that if one them had fallen at my feet, I would have been unable to pick her up, physically unable.

The couples were sleeping. None of them separated. I heard the Governor say so. He was pale and heavy. His four doctors surrounded him on the last step of the jetty. His hands were filled with papers and records—and he shuffled them like a minor bureaucrat. He left them to supervise the transport of his piano.

We had distributed the drugs in bottles of Coca-Cola, in an almost dangerous dose. For the first time we obeyed an order with relief. The nightmare was ending and would vanish without incident. We would turn our backs on that dreadful daily task of provisioning. We would no longer have to make that trip every day outside the barrier, into a world no longer belonging to humanity, in which we struggled against our wives and our children, so that they should not accompany us to the abysses of our thoughts. We would be cured.

We embarked in one of the destroyers with the men, and on board the other ship were the Governor and the women—and the doctors. We were sent forward and were strictly forbidden to communicate with our former prisoners. We were almost prisoners ourselves. On several occasions I heard yells in the gangways. I must admit that those sounds left me indifferent, and yet I knew who was yelling and why, and why there was something of the wounded animal in that clamor. I stopped my ears. I thought my soul would return to me when all that was over. I tried to pray . . .

Carefully examined, scrutinized, interrogated by machines, still more fully lectured, paid, having signed a declaration by which we acknowledged ourselves guilty of high treason if we broke our oath of silence, after three months we left the barracks in Massachusetts to which we had been sent. Henceforth we had nothing to fear, so we were assured (and besides, we had passed the age of fear). We could return home in peace, the country was grateful to us. Were they lying? What does it matter? I already cared little whether I was healthy or not; I effaced myself in the fate of other men, so much more tragic than mine. I had already written to my wife that we would never see each other again. Through shame. Perhaps as a punishment. I clung to that idea; it gave me some comfort. The 32nd anniversary of our marriage was approaching, and I was about to be a grandfather for the seventh time—my two sons had six children and my daughter was expecting her firstborn. But I did not want to meet anyone. I envied Malkin, taken to an asylum. At least he possessed the treasure of having no more conscience. He had finished out his time and no doubt he was being given liquor, his death was being generously drowned in drink. But for me time remains, a little time, a little more lucid terror.

I loved my wife. I should like that to be known. I love her now.

We were approaching the end of the road peacefully together. Now we were separated and night had come. One can settle down comfortably in the night. I convinced myself I had been punished enough. I did not weep, there is only one age for tears. I wanted to finish my days somewhere with my secret, like a monk, if possible far from the United States, but they had taken away our right to a passport . . . And then I received these pages. Their author had sent them to me, through the Atlanta Times, before giving himself up to the police. Was he chased from his room by Elsie's rotting corpse, or was he mysteriously summoned by his fate—by some new odor of woman surrounding his executioners? I do not know. I only know that everything will begin again for him, forever, until nature, not his will, fails in him. That the Island was only a prefiguration of another island that will grow very quickly and will become the whole world. Perhaps I shall not see that myself. But those who follow me, my grandchildren, my children even, my daughter who was the light of my later life? In them I shall continue. I shall never lose this sight.

Everything will begin again, has probably begun again. I feel it. Fear now comes to me on the wind, freely . . .

Be silent? Ah yes, of course, I should be silent—I shall soon be gone. But I am afraid, and I weep and I weep. What will happen from now on? That man, those men, were they only forerunners? Did I understand, then, very clearly, that they were? Now every man is waiting to be shattered. We live in that reign of terror suggested to us by the Governor (I never knew his name, I want to say that to clear myself with the prisoner). Terror lives even in children's eyes. Look at them! Where is yesterday's gleam, like the faint odor of carnations? Night has slipped over it like a cataract,

their eyes are blind! Fear is in the eyes of all men, all women; it is a second mother in all mothers.

Fear. . . .

We have entered the day of the Third Testament. Man has fallen into the power of the Beast. But enough! Enough!

I ask for mercy, my God, if there is still time, mercy for others and for my own. But can there be mercy for me?

