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PALOMA

Books by Mrs. Robert Henrey

THE LITTLE MADELEINE (*her girlhood*)

MADELEINE GROWN UP (*her love story and marriage*)

MADELEINE — YOUNG WIFE (*the birth of her son*)

LONDON (*with water colors by Phyllis Ginger*)

PALOMA (*a story of friendship*)



PALOMA

BY

MRS. ROBERT HENREY



E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY, INC.

NEW YORK, 1955

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FIRST EDITION

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Very affectionately for

Y A K Y

the

Begum Aga Khan

*If ever
you go to Saulieu (Côte d'Or) on
the fringe of the Burgundy country,
and climb the hill above the gray
town with its crooked streets, ask
to see the tomb of Marie Siller
(Saquet was her maiden name)
whose strange story, because I loved
her, I here tell.*

PALOMA

CHAPTER I

TOWARD the end of one of those interminable days in 1944, when we were expecting the invasion of France, hot, windy, keyed-up days spent queuing at food shops, and uselessly discussing the varying merits of opposing armies, I looked up from my sewing, and meeting the lifted eyes of my restless Pekingese, thrust needle and stuff aside, unhooked the harness from a nail in the kitchen, and fastening it on the overjoyed animal led him through Shepherd Market, up that dark narrow alley known as Whitehorse Street, across almost deserted Piccadilly, into the freshness of the Green Park.

How stupid of me not to have come out earlier! These May late afternoons were delicious. The park was full of life—women in deck chairs in what we termed the drawing room, soldiers sprawled on the grass, and dogs running in and out of the water sump. Emma, with her strong-jawed, heavy moving bulldog John, came across the lawn in the direction of Piccadilly, walking quickly, trying to tire the powerful animal so that he should keep reasonably quiet in her small flat during the night while she was out working at an American officers' club in Jermyn Street. This woman of forty had an exquisite silhouette, of which we who were younger were often jealous. Her neck arched, her stomach pulled in by a movement much practiced, she followed gracefully her ugly, affectionate, bandy-legged beast. I had hoped she would come back and sit with me, but she said:

"You can't imagine, darling"—she had a way of drawling out the word "darling" very fashionably—"what a day I've had! I used up my very last packet of soap flakes to wash this dress. Yes, my dear, this very one, more or less the only decent one left to my name, but you must admit there's something about Molyneux. His things are so wearable, always a little behindhand on fashion when you buy them, but never out of fashion afterward, not that there's really any fashion in the middle of a war, is there? Just look at this thing—four years old. Oh, I do wish the war was over so that I could buy another like it!"

She craned around to inspect what she could of the back, more satisfied with the dress than with herself, and added:

"No, darling, no really, I won't come and sit with you. The hem is still damp and I'd be sure to make a crease. Good-by, darling. See you tomorrow. Come along, John! Stop smelling that silly Chinaman."

I watched her turn into Piccadilly, the bulldog heaving, ready to lunge at smaller dogs. Her scarcely perceptible glide took her smoothly over the hot asphalt, her scarlet beret making a patch of vividness against the distant angle of the Ritz. I released my Pekingese, and made for the sump where mosquitoes were poised over damp camouflage nets, looking for somewhere to sit in the open-air drawing room, where deck chairs facing the gun site and glistening Buckingham Palace were set haphazardly on the grass. Plump Gabrielle was here with her poodle and the Pekingese with the blind eye, which did not prevent him from seeing everything with the other one.

Gabrielle, like my friend Emma, was in a dress, not a Molyneux model, but nevertheless an expensive kind from one of the better stores, neat, good material, but in places rather fussy. She broke out gushingly:

"My dear, what a beautiful day!" She was from one of the

gayer parts of Europe, a small woman full of vitality. "What were you saying to Emma just now? How she does keep her figure! If it weren't for the sunshine I'd feel like killing myself for envy."

"Nonsense," I answered. "You're looking much too healthy, and isn't this the first time I've seen that dress?"

She preened herself.

"It's the first time I've worn it. Do you really think it suits me? I bought it with six others from an American tenant in my block of flats who was in a hurry to go back to New York at the beginning of the war. She found them in one of those smart shops in Fifth Avenue. Between ourselves she was so flustered she gave them to me for almost nothing. Only there's a snag. As soon as I put one on, however much I have it cleaned, I carry the woman's odor about with me, and then I'm obliged to think about her which I find most disagreeable. I hate thinking about anybody when I go out for a walk. That's chiefly why I go out, to think about nothing. So if it wasn't that new dresses need coupons I'd sell all these for lots more than I paid for them and buy new ones."

Her poodle, chased around the sump by my Pekingese, now jumped against her, laying his head between her knees, pawing her, which put her in a temper and she cried:

"Get down! You'll spoil my dress!"

"There!" I exclaimed. "Why do you pretend you don't like your dress? At any rate you seem to prefer it to your poodle!"

She laughed and answered:

"It's not so much that but I'm thrifty, and I always was careful with my things."

"What's the point, I'd like to know, in being thrifty and careful?" sneered a voice.

How was it that I never noticed that my friend Gabrielle had a companion? Deck chairs were arranged in such a haphazard way that the woman seated next to her might just as

well have been a complete stranger. I now realized that I must have interrupted a conversation, and I decided, for the sake of politeness, to go on a few yards toward the wicker fence which, separating us from the deep shelters, gave our square of grass a private look. I would sit alone and knit, my dog curled under my chair. I therefore called him, but in doing so glanced at the owner of the voice.

She was a most curious woman, seated in a way that one's glance first rested on knees jerked up high, leather-gloved hands clasped on her lap. She, at least, had not troubled about finding a new dress for this sunny day. A long dark sack seemed to encase her tall, thin body, a shroud of black wool shining at the elbows, and fastened up the center from waist to collar by a zip reinforced at the neck by a large, old-fashioned cameo, having upon it a likeness of the Holy Virgin.

Thin lips, the lips of a jealous woman, were tightly drawn under scornful, almost wicked eyes, which peered inquisitively through thick black lashes at the intruder that I was.

"I'm off!" I exclaimed, "but first, Gabrielle, I must tell you I saw Huntley & Palmer's van in Shepherd Market just now, outside Hayward's stores, so don't accuse me tomorrow of not warning you that there'll be biscuits for sale. I know how greedy you are!"

"I'm not greedy for myself," she said, "but the dogs like a biscuit before they go to bed. By the way, how's the child?"

"Asleep," I answered. "The heat tires him."

"What sort of biscuits will they be?" suddenly asked the seated woman, adding quickly: "I'll tell you what, my little rat, bring me some here tomorrow at the same hour. I'll be waiting."

I looked at her unbelievably.

Gabrielle introduced:

"My friend, Mme Paloma."

"Paloma—Spanish for a dove, isn't it? Are you Spanish, madam?"

"No, I'm from Burgundy."

As she answered she slowly lifted her heavy lids after which—the moment seemed an age to me—she fixed me more intently than at our first contact, with all the translucency of her gaze. Her ivory skin, which had up to now lacked life, was suddenly bathed in a vital glow, but the narrow lips, though no longer pinched, were so curiously painted with a lipstick that was too red, and too hastily applied that the color ran as from a bursting river, making affluents over the adjoining skin. I asked myself: "What age can she be?"

"Well, then, is it a promise? You'll bring me the biscuits?"

She laughed freely, being amused at my surprise. Her teeth, though still white, overlapped curiously, fierce strong teeth ready to bite, and I remember thinking that alone the teeth and the eyes were still vigorous and young in this pale parchmentlike face surmounted by an incredible black hat made in the form of a halo which added stature to the uncanny zip line reinforced by the wide cameo under a long neck. Gabrielle began to discuss the war.

Mme Paloma bent down to stroke my Pekingese. There was a hole in one of the fingers of her glove, and I saw that zips fastened the sleeves of her dress. What a strange getup!

"War?" she queried, looking up into Gabrielle's face. "What would you know about war? Have you ever seen a battle? Have you the slightest idea what a battle looks like? It's not your business, nor mine."

"Nobody can quite keep out of a war!" snapped Gabrielle decisively in her shrill voice.

Paloma drew herself up rather magnificently (she really did look, with her burnt skin and fine nose, like a Spanish grandee, age giving her a male appearance), and glancing down at her friend with condescending pity, answered:

"I've no doubt my brother Pierre is still busy rolling his wine barrels along his cellars at Saulieu. My brother Pierre!" she added, with a far-off nostalgic smile. She was not momentarily taking much notice of Gabrielle or me. She was in her village in Burgundy. "My brother Pierre, with his leather apron rolling his barrels along. He will be taking one down to the station any day to send me. He never forgets at this time of year."

"Don't be so silly!" said Gabrielle. "There's a war on. You haven't received a barrel of wine from your brother these four years."

"I receive them just the same!" said Paloma grandly. "What's to stop my brother sending them or me receiving them?"

"Hitler, for one!" snapped Gabrielle.

Paloma raised her right hand deprecatingly, as if to show that the subject bored her, and that so did her friend. She said with a terrible finality:

"You can go now. Tomorrow I'll give you lunch at the Berkeley. The tall maître d'hôtel who lives in my street always sees to it that I get what I want. One o'clock my dear. Do please take good care of your sweet little dogs."

Gabrielle, thus dismissed by this incredible woman who seemed so perfectly sure of herself, gathered up her dogs, her parcels, and herself to the accompaniment of a great flow of excited words. She was going to the pictures with a friend, and it was time for her to leave anyway, but she hated to leave us alone guessing, with perfect accuracy, that as soon as she was gone we should start picking her to pieces.

She repeated several times the hour and place of the next day's rendezvous, promised to telephone during the evening about some dressmaker, and at last rolled herself toward the gravel path that leads to the Ritz, looking like a rotund pigeon on a pair of slim, fragile legs.

Paloma, having watched her disappear, turned upon me and said, with an upward movement of her dark neck:

"If it were not for the fact that poor Gabrielle is so jealous I would have invited you to join us for lunch. She didn't even want to introduce us. I saw that right away. Ah! But she's not clever enough!" Paloma's eyes shone with cruelty. "She thinks herself very superior with her war. You've very pretty stockings, my rat!"

"They are more or less the last," I said modestly. "In a few months, if the war goes on, I shall be going about barefeet. Even these are full of darns."

"That is a thing about this war," Paloma exclaimed. "I can never for the life of me find two stockings that match up. Look! I'm wearing one light and one dark! I've quantities at home, but no two are the same."

She laughed, letting herself go, a crystalline laugh, feminine, young, sensuous, almost vulgar. I laughed too, always easily touched off, and it *was* a droll thing to see her legs—one dark, one light. I could see also, looking up, the Virgin and Child on her cameo, bobbing up and down with each gay convulsion.

Suddenly she rose.

"I'm going home!" she said.

She was obviously not a woman who thought about anybody else's feelings, acting merely on personal impulses, instinctively certain that everybody around her would obey. She rose rhythmically, and explained as a sort of favor to me:

"My dear kind friend promised to telephone at eight, and I never keep him waiting. I shall take the bus. I adore taking the bus because the people inside look so silly. They help to pass the time. If I were to take a taxi I should see myself in the beastly little mirror behind the driver, and then it would be I who would have to stare at my silly reflection. Good-by, my little rat. What was it you were going to bring me tomor-

row? Stockings? Why, no, of course. Biscuits. Bring me some stockings instead, stockings that match up. My! Won't my legs be surprised! You don't need to worry about the money. I've plenty to pay for them. Good-by, my rat. See you tomorrow afternoon. I've a soft corner for you already, and won't Gabrielle be furious!"

I looked at her going, a tall figure as dark and gaunt as the trunks of the trees in the Green Park. I decided she was mad, and that I would not see her again.

CHAPTER II

BUT I did not stop thinking about her. I knew immediately that I had stumbled upon a woman with an amazing past, the unraveling of which would prove no easy matter. Her accent when she spoke French was very strange, but strange only to my ears. She rolled her r's and spoke languidly, and there were times when she introduced English words into French phrases. I surmised that she had lived a long time in London. How long? Well, I could not even reach a satisfactory opinion about her age. She was quite different from any other old person I had ever met. Though old, she was still beautiful, or was I mistaking nobility for beauty? No, I think it was beauty that had simply lost its fresh coloring, but was perpetuated in nut brown, like carved wood. But there was nobility also. Then I recalled suddenly the sand-brown statuette of Nefertiti that I had at home. But Nefertiti, when the cast was made, was young. What was there about this strange woman that made me think of her as very young when she was old?

Her accent was of Burgundy. I had heard it once on the radio when Colette, the distinguished French woman writer, was speaking, but I had not thought it very pretty. I repeat that Paloma's accent may have become tainted with a too long stay in England.

French women, however, who stay long in England are mostly humble people who live in Soho. They do not entertain at the Berkeley. They have more compelling reasons not to ride in taxis than not to see their reflections in the mirror behind the driver's back.

But if she was rich why did she wear such a dirty dress and gloves with holes in the fingers? I was bound to admit that her clothes were dirty. The war was not the only reason why she had one light stocking and the other dark. Obviously she did not care at all about her appearance. Perhaps she wore her dark dress of sacking with the zip to put mind above body like people in religious orders? There are poets and writers who do not care a snippet about clothes.

The fact that her brother Pierre rolled barrels of Burgundy wine along his cellar suggested that they were of peasant stock. Now what was this Burgundy peasant woman, with grand airs, doing on her chair in the Green Park? There were also those lapses in her memory. She had asked for biscuits and then forgotten all about them. Stockings she wanted. But clearly by now she had forgotten in turn about the stockings and, in truth, she seemed to be living in a world quite of her own. Perhaps she was mad, but it was my view that she was mad in a very unmad way, like that eccentric old lady who lived all alone in a house on Fifth Avenue, and was reputed to be the wealthiest and cleverest manipulator on Wall Street.

I have already said that our first meeting took place in the early summer of 1944. I had made quite a lot of friends in the Green Park. We gossiped and quarreled, but came together again because the war had stranded us like fellow passengers on a ship. Until Paloma came on the scene Gabrielle and Emma were the two I saw most often. Now I think of it they were strangely assorted, or let me rather say, we were all strangely assorted. Emma and her bulldog were very English *society*—Henley and the Fourth of June at Eton. She was lovely in her cart-wheel hats. The arrival of Paloma changed everything. The impact of our two characters was tremendous. I was to love and to hate her in turn, but the memory of her was to haunt me forever.

The day after my first meeting with Paloma I was quite certain that Gabrielle would telephone. She would try to discover what we had talked about. She had so much energy that she was forever trying to burn it up. I never liked her but I thought her interesting. She was a widow of the sort one finds most often in foreign watering places—ebullient and loquacious. She treated the Green Park as a substitute for the beflowered alleys that face the casino at Monte Carlo, and gave it a sort of picturesqueness. Her flat, with its wide balcony facing the green lawns and Buckingham Palace, was full of sunshine, air, and red velvet armchairs. She knitted woolen squares to put on the velvet so that visitors should not spoil the plush. Everything in her large flat was as it should be. If a crumb fell on the carpet she saw it at once, and down went her jeweled fingers to pick it up. No particle of dust floating in through the windows managed for long to stay on a piece of furniture. She would run to a Queen Anne commode, open a drawer, and bring out a duster to wipe away the offending molecule. In a word, she was a tidy woman, tidy in everything—her home, her person, and her mind. Not for her was the dress with the stain or the glove with a hole in a finger. She yapped to set my teeth on edge, but I respected her.

She had always been wealthy. As a child she had been dragged from luxury hotel to luxury hotel, and as a young woman she must have been pretty. One evening she had invited me to dinner, and after dinner we did the washing up. She had brought out the family silver, which we carefully put back in a chest the key of which she kept in a crochet purse thrust down in her brassière. She was suspicious of everybody. I was to pay for my dinner by writing a letter to her sister on the Continent. Actually I had to write two letters, one to a friend in Barcelona with the other enclosed. This was the only way of communicating with Occupied Europe.

She sat me down at a table, and brought me pen, ink, pad, and paper, just as they do in French cafés when you ask the waiter for “the wherewithal to write.” After a few lines she looked suspiciously over my shoulder, questioning me about the spelling of certain words. “Now read back!” she said.

I read back.

“It’s not that I can’t compose a pretty enough letter,” she explained, “but I occasionally hesitate over the spelling. When I see a word written I know by the look if it’s right.”

I think she was testing me, but she went on:

“And if I wrote my own letters and made just one mistake people would say I was illiterate, whereas I’m no fool. They don’t know me. I’m the only one to know myself. I’ve traveled all over the world and met lots of people. I can hold my own in any conversation. If you think I’m a fool just take a look at all the things in my flat. My linen is of the best. My bedspread is of pure Brussels lace. Do you know what that means to have a bedspread of Brussels lace? The Queen of England may have as good but she certainly has no better. There simply couldn’t be anything more regal. My china, my silver, my furniture, my carpets, are all of the very best. They can never go down in value. On the contrary, they go up and up like a bag of golden sovereigns. Only think of it! Everything you see here was bought in 1910! Those were the days when things were good. . . . 1910! Did I say 1910? I meant 1920!” She suddenly realized that she was giving away her age! “Every month I sell something, not merely for the fun of having the money but because it’s so amusing to sell with a big profit. I simply must do my little piece of business from time to time. I know what I paid for everything. I ask several times as much and get it. I’ve three pearl necklaces, two fur coats, a cupboard full of winter things and another full of summer things, and chests of drawers that bulge with lovely things. Of course, my diamonds are at the bank.”

"I hope it all makes you happy," I said with a touch of ill humor.

"Alas, no!" she answered. "The thing is I can never get a wink of sleep. I'm terrified of burglars, and then there are the bombs. Think if anything happened to my silver! And when I'm alone at night I'm so afraid to die."

"You could marry again?"

"Yes, I've thought of that, but if I were to marry a young man he might spend my money, whereas a man of my age is not what I specially want. I wouldn't like to nurse a lot of tiresome complaints collected during a lifetime in which I'd had no share."

On the table on which I was writing were some small ebony elephants on which my eyes had rested while she spoke. I thought they were pretty and took one in my hands. She said they were a present from somebody who had made a fortune in Indo-China, and it struck me that she must indeed have had a very full life, that in her own words she had seen many things and met a lot of interesting people. But I felt no desire to question her. She was too lively, too made up, too elegant, to be the sort of person to live in anything but the present, and I was certain she would quickly find another husband whom she would provoke to the most graceful attentions.

It was curious how the Green Park had thrown me with women older than myself. I can hardly believe this was entirely fortuitous. I like strange people, and for some reason the most interesting are always older than oneself. Gabrielle's slip about the things she had bought in 1910 gave me a clue to her age. This was more or less what I had expected. But what about her gaunt friend whose curious stained skin needed no make-up, and who dressed herself in a sack, and yet had a diabolical beauty? Why was I so convinced she was something out of the ordinary? It was as if I had seen her simultaneously in the past and in the present. There was none

of the repulsion of old age. She was as sound and supple as a forest tree and as pleasant to look upon. I knew instinctively that in her youth she must have been beautiful beyond words, though proud and cruel. She was still beautiful, still proud, and the cruel look in her eyes was one of the first things to strike me, almost to strike me with terror.

I was getting into the black skirt of my tailor-made when the telephone rang. I was so certain it was Gabrielle that I found myself praising my intuition. She said:

"Well, my dear, how are you this morning? I simply must know about that amazing woman I introduced you to yesterday. Between you and me she's mad, don't you think? Did you notice her dirty black dress with the zip up the front, and her old hat that looks like a bit of felt for a hot iron? Of course, she's not really a friend of mine. I just came across her by accident in the Green Park. Whatever you do don't buy her any biscuits. It would be an absolute waste. She'll never turn up this afternoon."

"I suppose not," I said.

My husband was away and I used to lunch hurriedly at a corner of the kitchen table. There were so many things to do. Sunshine streaming through the gauze curtains in the sitting room where I wrote and sewed made me take them down and plunge them into soapy water, which immediately became a green-black. I thought I would rub down the windows while I was about it and set to work with a chamois leather. As I lived on the ground floor facing the courtyard, the smart tenants of my block of flats could not help but see me when they came in and out, but most of them, to save me any embarrassment (I was rather hot and disheveled), looked quickly the other way. A German banker from Cologne, however, who had escaped before the war and was allowed to live quietly

in his flat, taking a little walk early each afternoon, returned just as I was finishing. Removing his light gray Homburg he wished me a Teutonically courteous good day to which I replied, a little flustered through the open window:

“You see I’m working like a nigger.”

“A very blond and charming nigger!” he answered.

This compliment, and the gracious bow that accompanied it, quite took away my fatigue, and a few minutes later I hurried off to the Green Park.

Having made myself comfortable I took a bottle of varnish from my bag and started to paint my nails. The sun was delightfully warm and the grass shimmered. A very little boy in a white cotton hat who had been playing alone by the sump came timidly to watch me. His inquiring head as I bent down was level with mine, and suddenly I saw his nostrils quiver. He had discovered the French perfume I had put behind my ears before coming out. He gave me a little shout of surprise and ran off across the grass.

I looked up to follow his flight, and saw about twenty yards distant a lean, tall figure making straight for me. As she came nearer I saw that she had changed her dress. The model was the same—a sack with a zip running up the front, but this time it was of bottle-green. She smiled, a smile that became larger and more cordial as she advanced, and with her gloved hand she waved to me in that rather theatrical way that one associates with tight waists and parasols. It was a dignified, unhurried salutation with a protective air about it. No ordinary person these days would have waved like that. I felt flattered to be the recipient, and wondered if the other people on the lawn were looking at me as at a royal garden party when a guest is singled out by a princess.

She sat down on the chair on which I had put my bag, seating herself without effort. Her long body with all its imperfections had the gracefulness of a bird. Then deposit-

ing a paper carrier bag on the grass at my feet, she said: "There, my little quail"—she used the words *Ma petite caille*—"I've brought you a bottle of wine, a bottle of Burgundy wine. Oh, no, please. Don't thank me. I can't stand anybody saying thank you."

"But really, madam, you are far too kind."

She looked at me archly and began to laugh. I laughed also because she was laughing and because I imagined she had noticed something amusing in the park. My questioning eyes went from her to the people round us. Then she said:

"No, no! I'm simply laughing because of what you must be feeling inside. Since yesterday I've thought of you, and bring you the proof of it, whereas you . . . Ha! Ha! Ha! Have you thought of me, little rat? Where are my biscuits? Where are my stockings?"

I hung my head and muttered a whole lot of worthless excuses. After an awkward pause I asked:

"Did you have a good lunch at the Berkeley?"

"Excellent, but it's lucky they know me there, for the portions are getting absurdly small. At least we drank a bottle of wine between us. My! Aren't I thirsty! What a pity there isn't a restaurant in the Green Park. Where were you born, my rat?"

"In Montmartre."

"What a pity! You ought to have been born in Burgundy. Just look at the way the girls in my province succeed in life. Of course, Paris is marvelous, though I was never rich in Paris, so I haven't got any particularly good memories of it when I was young. Well, what does that matter? Does youth really leave us any good memories? Any good memories, I mean, except our reflection in the mirror? At twenty one is so terribly afraid of mucking up one's life. Thank God, I was one of the lucky ones. The truth is that I took advantage of two sisters—the elder one, who was successful and helped me, and

the younger who made a flop of everything and was a warning. The first I imitated. The second taught me what not to do. My sister Josephine, as her name indicates, was a veritable empress, a queen, beautiful beyond words, knowing just how to dress, witty enough to make princes laugh, and oh, how daring! My younger sister Louise was only happy with little people, people who didn't matter. And she wasn't the least pretty ever, with a silly flattened-out nose that she inherited from heaven knows whom. Shy, and rather too fond of our Burgundy wine. The poor thing! It's she who looks after my house in Burgundy. Louise is a grandmother now, and doesn't have to worry any more about money. I see to all that. She lives between her cask of wine and her cat, a nice easy life. The dear good Louise!"

I was just beginning to be thoroughly interested when Emma and her bulldog came sailing toward us. She had a cart-wheel hat and a big, round wicker basket, in which there was a loaf of brown bread and a bag of crusts for her dog, and a great collection of holed stockings which, with a languid and graceful air, she began forthwith to mend, sitting on a chair beside us.

"I can't see well enough in my dark little flat to darn," she announced. "I just emptied the drawers into my wicker basket and came along. What a gorgeous day! I knew this morning when I was walking home from work that it would be a fine day!"

Paloma, intrigued, looked up. What on earth could the lady find to do at night. We explained, and Paloma shrugged her shoulders, saying that it was not she who would work so hard all night for so small a return. And clearly Paloma was irritated by my friend's Mayfair accent and talk. I sensed that the air was heavy.

Emma, having darned two stockings, put them around a very pretty neck, and still not seeing well enough took out

from a small but very full bag a pair of tortoise-shell spectacles. Then adroitly thrusting a cigarette between her lips she smoked and talked and darned, looking up from time to time to keep an eye on her bulldog.

Her husband was a captain in some regiment abroad. He was very good-looking, and she was always afraid he might fall for the charms of a foreign girl, but she was jealous in a sensible, affectionate way. When she had done her darning she read us his latest letter. She wanted to know in what corner of Europe or Africa he had tumbled, and we were given the clues and invited to guess. He spoke of a field of carrots and of strong but expensive red wine, at which Paloma became interested, saying that he must be in Algeria or Corsica, strong red wine only coming from these places.

John the bulldog, exhausted from having lumbered around the lake, came and rubbed himself against his mistress, who patted the great ugly thing affectionately. She arranged her life for her dog and her husband, needing nothing more herself than cigarettes. I promised John a leg of mutton bone in the morning at which Emma thanked me with a profusion of "darlings," saying that the American service club at which she worked never had any bones because the officers only liked steaks and chicken. Thanks to me, John, with a good leg of mutton bone between his heavy paws, would sleep all through at least one night. When he was restive all alone in her flat he was apt to be a nuisance to the other tenants. So off they were going immediately for a round of St. James's to tire him out before she went to work. Oh, and tomorrow she was going to wash her hair, and if there was any sun she would come for an hour in her curlers. The reason? A very important lunch at Claridge's with a woman who needed her help to choose a corset. "The thing is," she drawled confidentially, "I know a *corsetière* who is not merely a wizard, but tells the most stunning stories about the dieting and amorous adventures of

the wives and daughters of famous men." With this Emma thrust back her darned stockings with the brown loaf and all the other things into the wicker basket, and with a society drawl that floated over the summer grass, exclaimed:

"Good-by, darling. I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

Paloma waited till Emma and the bulldog had rounded the pond, and then said quietly:

"My little rat, that woman with her Gainsborough profile would do just as well to stay at home and smoke a little less. Her finances might even be up at the end of the week, and let's not talk about her health! Some women go out to work for the pleasure of it. Personally, I try to do as little as possible. For instance, tomorrow I might decide to stay in bed all day. Is there anything nicer than a day in bed, especially with a good book? Just now on my way down Charing Cross Road I picked up a secondhand novel at Foyle's, a thing I read when I was twenty, and if it pleases me as much as it did then you'll not see me till it's finished."

She stopped talking. I looked up and saw a dark woman, very pretty, standing over her. We were introduced, and after a few minutes I gathered that the newcomer was born in Soho of Italian parents. She spoke with a rather harsh Italian accent, but she had magnificent thick black hair, burning charcoal eyes, not big, but deep, a fine sensuous mouth, and very white teeth. I supposed her to be about thirty, and all three of us, as if we had known one another all our lives, were soon deep in that engrossing subject of love. Later we turned to clothes, and later yet I bethought me of an appointment I had made with the baker to fetch a warm loaf from the last baking, and I rose to say good-by. Paloma chose this moment to purse her thin lips and say:

"Well, good-by, madam."

Whereupon she turned her back on me deliberately and resumed the conversation with her friend.

I was so shocked by this unexpected insult that I stood hesitant a moment, and then walked back restraining with difficulty my tears. I had risen to say good-by with a heart warm with affection and she, knowing it, had hurt me for the fun of it! Almost as soon as I was back in the flat Gabrielle telephoned to know if Paloma had turned up at the park, and what she had said. You can imagine that in the state I was in I gave her a very full account of our parting. She was delighted, and exclaimed in her quivering, high-pitched voice:

"But, my dear, I told you she was mad! Mad, mad enough to put away, but oh, my dear, so very rich!"

"Oh, I see! That's it!"

"The truth is," said Gabrielle, "it struck me if ever I sold my silver . . . no, not what you saw at supper the other evening. My mother's silver in a bank in the city. Every time I have to pay the storage charges I go quite crazy. It's so stupid to pay money for something you never see. Things being what they are now I don't think we shall ever give dinner parties again. Well, never mind. I don't suppose I shall sell it after all. Who else was in the park?"

"Emma."

"Yes, and who else?"

"A very pretty Italian woman I've never seen before."

"There you are! That's another of my friends she's stolen from me! Oh, but I don't care any more about her. Her husband is the important one, and they are going to divorce. Paloma can have her!"

Having thus satisfied her curiosity Gabrielle bade me good night and rang off. Through the open window a violinist who stood every evening outside a popular bar began playing his repertoire of *Addio Bella Napoli*, *Sole Mio*, *Lili Marlene*, and *Parlez-moi d'Amour*. Cars raced down Hertford Street. The night life of the city had begun.

CHAPTER III

EMMA LIVED in a block of flats halfway between Jermyn Street and St. James's Square. She liked to be in the center of the town with the historic pieces all around her. Her very English beauty had something which toned with the street along which sauntered in the eighteenth century Sir Richard Steele with his fidgety Prue, and Dean Swift with his Stella. The inconvenience of Emma's lodging was the cat at the fishmonger's that went for John the bulldog, as soon as the lumbering animal put his head out of the front door.

On society occasions, like christenings or the trooping of the color, Emma would leave John for an hour with me. It thus happened that the very morning after my tiff with Paloma in the Green Park Emma arrived while I was having breakfast in bed. When she saw me in my nightdress she exclaimed:

"What a stroke of luck! You won't be dressed for hours! I've already told John he's going to be a good dog and wait quietly by the door."

John pushed his way into the kitchen, lapped up a bowl of water, inspected the bedroom where he covered a teddy bear with kisses, tried to thank me by knocking me over, and finally lay down with his head between his paws waiting for his mistress to return.

Just as I was getting into my bath the telephone rang. It was Paloma. Without making the slightest reference to her rudeness of the day before she asked me affectionately if I had slept well. I answered:

"Yes, thank you, Mme Paloma, very well."

She took no notice of my sarcasm, and went on:

"I've got the spleen this morning." She used the most exquisitely old-fashioned words. "Something last night must have set me thinking of my native Burgundy and of my sister Louise, and the war that never seems to finish. Then it struck me that you might be the nicest person to make me feel good again, and so if you're doing nothing come and lunch with me at the Golden Shoe in Frith Street. And take a taxi, my little rat. Don't worry about the expense—I'll pay."

What an extraordinary woman! It was no use trying to be angry with her. Luckily I had done my hands in the park yesterday, and in the evening I had washed my hair. And what a relief not to have any cooking to do!

I was just stepping out of my bath when the doorbell rang, and John started to bark the house down. I draped myself in a bathrobe, and there was Emma with the most splendid looking young man.

"My dear," she exclaimed, "we've just been to the wedding of that silly Lady X, such a rich woman, you know, who has the place near Liverpool, with a Guards officer. Everybody was in uniform except the bride and myself. I'll tell you all about it later, darling, but there's a taxi waiting in the courtyard, and you know how polite one must be to taxi drivers these days, and not keep them longer than a few minutes. We're off to Claridge's, but I'm afraid there won't be much to drink—only some scraps to eat. Oh, by the way, have you *really* got a leg of mutton bone for John? It would be too kind of you. The darling would sleep all night, and I wouldn't feel too bad about having gone to the wedding without him."

Still draped in my bathrobe I ran to the refrigerator, followed by Emma, her companion, and John. In the strong light of the kitchen her companion turned out to be just as good-looking as I had thought, but perhaps a trifle less young. He caught sight of the teddy bear that John had licked all over and said:

"My children are evacuated in Ireland. You can't think how bored I am without them! Hurry up, Emma. That taximan will let himself be picked up by an American, and then we shall have to walk to Claridge's."

Emma, between the door and her escort, curved her supple body like a snake. Her eyes shone and her nostrils quivered slightly. With her chin raised, as it always was to show off her profile, and her white teeth, she looked really pretty.

"Come," she said to her friend, "don't keep on pretending you're bored."

When I arrived at the Golden Shoe Paloma was sitting alone at a table very erect. She was next to the cash desk, and who should be presiding there but the pretty Italian woman I had met the previous evening in the park! The signora had her black hair done in an upward sweep, and all over it rested little satin bows like butterflies. The waitresses kept on bringing her little chits, which she dealt with deftly without ever breaking off her conversation with Paloma. On the wall behind her were shelves of Chianti and other wines, at her elbow bottles of Benedictine, Grand Marnier, and Chartreuse.

"How can she fail to please?" exclaimed Paloma maliciously, loud enough for the signora to hear. "She dispenses the sweets of life!"

But the signora merely smiled across her bottles. She was aware of Paloma's curious little ways, and was anxious to continue a story she had begun before my arrival. It was about a ring.

"I like it tremendously," she said. "Well, this is what I did. I took it to a pawnshop and pretended I wanted to get rid of it, but forty pounds was all they offered me. Tomorrow, if you like, after a good lunch we might go to Oxford Street together, and try one or two other places. You see, in my case, it's rather

important not to make a mistake. It really does represent quite a large slice of my savings."

She bent over the side of her desk until I could see the powder frosting her upper lip, and the nape of her neck down which her dark hair grew in thick tufts, and added:

"Between ourselves, I've never had a real ring—only my wedding ring."

A waiter came with something on a plate, and this was all I heard of the story. Paloma had ordered a magnificent lunch. Obviously nothing in the restaurant was too good for her. She was the spoiled customer. She bantered and bullied the *maître d'hôtel*, the waiters, and the waitresses (for it was a mixed service), and one had the impression they positively adored her. Sometimes for no reason at all she quite insulted them, but they showed no sign of minding. We had splendid *hors-d'oeuvres* with smoked salmon and Yorkshire ham and wine from the Touraine to go with them. She drank a glass or two of the wine, but she scarcely touched what was on her plate. Occasionally she would prod at a piece of ham, sliding it towards the rim of her plate, and say:

"Perhaps I'll take it away and have it for supper."

But a moment later the idea had slipped her mind. I said, referring to the signora:

"She seems worried about her ring?"

But Paloma merely made a gracious movement with her fork, a sort of grand, unhurried semicircle, saying very slowly and with an accent touched with compassion:

"The poor woman!"

At this moment the doors of the restaurant loudly opened, and in came Gabrielle with another woman. They seated themselves at our table, where two additional places were quickly laid, and were just in time to share the large roast chicken that was being brought in with all the attendant vegetables and sauces, from the kitchen.

Gabrielle was in a gay mood. She had taken her young married friend to visit the strong rooms in the city, where she kept her family silver.

"And," she said, sitting down in front of the chicken and arranging the napkin greedily over her skirt, "she has just bought one of my pearl necklaces."

We all looked at the young married woman who, in a dark gray tailor-made with two lovely sables, opened her jacket to show us her acquisition above her white blouse trimmed with Valenciennes. Complacently she allowed us to admire her, a little woman with an obvious taste for what was fine. "Though," she explained, "I never had much chance to indulge in it till I married my doctor husband. Now, I've already a house full of furniture, Irish linen, hardly any clothes to speak of, but a beginning of furs and jewels that people notice, I think. My husband has such a splendid practice! He loves me, and though he doesn't understand anything about my whims, he does everything I want him to." She added confidentially: "Until quite recently his practice was in London. That's where we met. But our house was blown up one night, and we went to the country where, would you believe it, he has an even finer practice than in town."

Paloma never said a word all this time but looked politely sarcastic. The young woman went on:

"You see, what I want is a solid foundation. With a solid foundation a woman can face the future. Motorcars, cocktail parties, and cigarettes only lead to jealous patients, and debts at the end of the year." Then turning to Gabrielle, she said: "In two or three months I shall consider buying your silver and the lovely bedspread of Brussels lace. And now, my friends," she said, pulling out her watch from a smart crocodile bag, "I've only just time to catch my train. I've done without a gardener so far to save money, and I want to go and dig up the new potatoes."

She smiled at all of us in turn, and was gone, having eaten less than a bird, and not even sipped her wine. Gabrielle, on the other hand, had a monstrous appetite.

"It's funny," she said, "I met her as I met you two in the Green Park. Everybody will have passed through the Green Park by the time this war is over—all sorts of people, and from every corner of the globe—Americans, Norwegians, French, Russians, Australians. Well, anyway, she had an hour to wait before catching the same train as she has gone off to catch now. I saw immediately what sort of a woman she was, so I got talking to her and made her promise to look me up next time she came to town. I only know her name—and for all I know it may not be her real one—and not once has she ever let slip the name of the town or the village where she lives with that doctor husband of hers, but I know the husband exists because I saw him once. She's pretty, isn't she? What age do you give her?"

We started guessing generously, anything between twenty-five and thirty-eight. Even the signora, from the height of her desk, broke into the discussion.

"I think she makes herself look rather plain in that gray coat and skirt!" she announced.

"She's a pert minx!" declared Paloma, with a grand air. "She'll come a cropper with all that luxury nonsense. If I were you, Gabrielle, I certainly wouldn't see her again."

Gabrielle pushed back her plate and broke into a merry laugh.

"That's all very pretty," she said, "but I'll give up seeing her when she's bought my silver and my bedspread of Brussels lace. I might even try to sell her my diamond solitaire. It's curious, but I don't care for jewels any longer, but I'm jolly glad I did care for them when I was young, for it's fun later on to sell them. Jewels are a woman's best friend. If you collect them while you're young, you won't starve when you're old."

Having expressed these sentiments she got up and threaded her way between the tables as far as the window, brazenly standing in front of two men bent in eager conversation over their coffee. On her return she said:

"I can stay another ten minutes. The queue for the horse meat is only as far as the baker's."

Paloma retired into critical silence, and every now and then, when Gabrielle said something, she would shrug her shoulders as if the matter was beneath her notice. She was busy with a piece of bread, biting off the crusty pieces with the happy air of a little girl just home from school and ravenous after a walk across the fields. Gabrielle wanted to offer us each a brandy, but Paloma announced:

"No, my dear, certainly not. I don't want your brandy."

Whereupon she drained a full glass of claret.

I thought this a good moment to thank Paloma for her hospitality, and to be going, but Gabrielle had returned to the window, and seeing the queue for the horse meat growing longer paid her bill and hurried off.

Paloma's features immediately relaxed, and ordering two Grands Marniers she said:

"That woman overpowers me with her buying and selling. She ought to set up business in Petticoat Lane. Whatever you do, my little rat, don't get mixed up in that sort of thing. Now drink up your liqueur. I'll ask for a taxi, and we'll have a cup of tea at my place. If you want to go for a walk later on we'll go into Russell Square, where that goose will never find us."

She called for the bill, and having delved into a cheap shiny bag, and brought out a fat wad of one-pound notes, all new and smelling of printer's ink, she began a sort of distribution to the more humble members of the restaurant staff. To a poor old woman washing dishes behind the signora's back, for instance, she cried:

"Here, you over there with the spectacles, come and see me!"

And when she arrived wiping her dripping hands on her pinafore, Paloma crumpled up a note and gave it her. The poor thing broke out into effusive thanks, whereupon the unpredictable Paloma said to me, though the unfortunate was still present:

"Of course, she's pleased! But why on earth can't she thank me in a dignified way without smiling and bowing like a Cheshire cat!"

Next it was the coffee woman, whose business it was, behind the scenes, to fill the pseudo-percolators with coffee from a huge enamel pot that was always simmering on the gas ring. The unsuspecting customer, seeing the percolator arrive, naturally thought the coffee had been freshly made for him. Her business was also to guard the sugar and count the lumps. She came blushing and simpering to receive her present. The *mâitre d'hôtel*, on the other hand, merely received a scolding.

It appears that the chicken might have been more succulent and a little plumper, and that the sauce had been hotted up which, everybody knows, quite ruins a sauce, and Paloma was not the last to know, for she was no fool when it came to sauces. The poor man dared not open his mouth. He would be more careful the next time, much more careful, so that madame, who rightly was so particular about her food, would have no possible reason to complain. In fact, if madame gave him enough warning he would go to market himself to choose the plump and succulent chicken, and watch over the cook when the sauce was being made.

"Enough!" cried Paloma. "You're a buffoon! A humbug! Stop pulling my leg!"

Imperturbably he helped her on with her coat, while I collected my handbag and a new string bag I had made myself the previous evening.

"You see," she said when we were in the taxi, "that man with the pink carnation in his buttonhole"—she meant the maître d'hôtel—"rubs me up the wrong way. I've taken a real dislike to him. It's a nuisance because he's quite a nice person, but it's the pink carnation that makes him look so silly. His round, oily face, the tie with the pearl pin, and then underneath . . . that beautiful tender flower! No, it revolts me! The miserable fellow even had to cut off all the stalk to satisfy his vanity!

"Ah, my little rat, pink carnations, white carnations, white roses, yellow roses, roses so red they were almost black, what masses I have received in my time! I remember a bouquet of carnations, so large, so large, with a young man behind it, and every evening when I came out there was the same young man and another bouquet. Carnations! They were always carnations, I love them so, carnations of different colors, but always carnations, no other sort of flower, and each time I refused them. It wasn't easy to refuse them. I only gave myself just the time to see them, to smell them, and be gone! No, it wasn't easy, my little rat, for they were equally lovely, the flowers and the young man, but I'd made a bet with the other girls that I'd turn him down every night for a week. What worried me was that he might get tired of bringing them to me and start making love to one of the others who were just as pretty as I was. Then I would have lost my bet, the flowers, and the young man! Heavens! We're here already! How time goes!"

She paid the cab, and while giving a last look inside suddenly remembered that in her haste to leave the restaurant she had forgotten a bag of provisions. Back she turned to the driver, giving him minute instructions to hurry and fetch it. He touched his cap and we saw him wheel around.

"I must tell you," she explained, "it's full of sugar, a present from my coffee merchant. Imagine how useful it would be to a restaurant! They'd steal it in no time. My little quail, there

are thieves and spongers all round me, and the trouble is that I'm appallingly forgetful. I can never remember what happened two minutes before. If I hadn't sent the driver back immediately by tomorrow the whole business would have escaped my mind."

She sighed.

"I suppose one may as well be forgetful. It probably makes it less difficult to die!"

We were just behind the British Museum, a district which at the beginning of the century was very fashionable for having a flat. In Paloma's mind it was still fashionable. She could imagine no valid reason for leaving it, not realizing that fashion had long since moved farther west, if, indeed, it had not disappeared altogether.

We climbed a flight of stairs. The building was not poor at all, simply out of date in a comfortable, nostalgic sort of way. One sensed cats on the hearth, canaries, and Edwardian furniture. Outside Paloma's door there was a fresh bottle of milk. From the depths of her handbag, after a great deal of juggling, she produced a key with a chain, and with this she turned two separate locks. The door, almost to my surprise, opened, and we came up against a brown plush curtain which, pushed aside, revealed a long corridor in the form of an L. I waited a moment while she busied herself relocking the door, and putting the safety catch on.

The corridor was dark and cold, and in spite of the carpet our heels echoed as I followed her to the drawing room, which was also where she took her meals. Here it was much warmer. There was a porcelain stove of a kind they use a good deal on the Continent, which burns night and day, keeping the room at an even temperature, and having a warm-looking window, through which one can see the glow of the anthracite. There was a big, deep, upholstered sofa in blue velvet, with lots of cushions among which I specially noticed two very square

ones like those one can still see from time to time in the homes of French doctors or lawyers, or in peasant homes. Facing this an equally comfortable armchair, a card table, and on the chimney piece a most terrible orange flower vase of the sort one used to buy or win at a country fair. Over the chimney piece a portrait in faded colors of Lady Hamilton, and, facing her, on the opposite wall, one of Ophelia floating down a Burne-Jones blue river, her long golden hair beautifully combed trailing among the water lilies. The mouth with its thin lips, the aquiline nose, the large eyes slightly tinted at the sides, evoked in a curious way the era 1880-1910. Ophelia's crown of flowers placed at a becoming angle over her forehead gave her in death a look of still wanting to be beautiful.

There was also a large mahogany dresser with a silver bowl full of fruit, some overripe, the rest not ripe enough. A radio stood in a corner, and then there was an enormous window in three parts, the paint work rather sooty, but having very fine gimp curtains which at one place (the window forming a sort of balcony) were tied back with a thick satin cord with tassels. A small table and a wicker chair piled high with cushions stood right in front of this naked pane. I was on the point of going over to this vantage place when Paloma exclaimed:

"That's my observation post. I sit there for hours looking at what goes on in the street. It's great fun. With a bottle of wine or the coffeepot on the table I rest happily while the poor devils below rush about getting tired!

"There!" she went on, "I'll put the kettle on the fire, and we'll pull our chairs up to the stove. I've no faith in these first days of May. Where I live in Burgundy this is the time when we often have our worst frosts."

She opened a common little table that might have been bought in any suburban high street and, arranging it by the stove, said:

“Open that thing behind you. You’ll find some cups and saucers. I’ll make the tea.”

While she was in the kitchen I explored the cupboard in question. There were several sets of no sort of value, some looking like products of Japanese or Czechoslovak dumping, others of a cheap French kind, all of them under thick dust. At the back, on a narrow shelf, I found some quite small cups that looked like gingham with their amusing check patterns. Some were blue, others green and red. Having made my choice I put them out, and was hunting round for some spoons when Paloma arrived with the teapot and cried:

“What funny cups you’ve chosen! Don’t put one out for me. I drink my tea in a thick white cup I’ve brought with me from the kitchen. The tea always seems to taste better in it, and I always do exactly what I please without bothering about anybody. That’s why I told you to find your own cup.”

“But these are so sweet, Paloma. They look like little girls with different colored aprons playing ring-around-a-rosy on a half-holiday!”

“Why, yes, they do rather remind me of my pinafores, or rather the pinafores that my sister Josephine had not time to wear out. I was always dressed in what was not made for me. Nothing ever fitted. I got those cups in a curious way. They belonged to an Italian priest who was interned in the Isle of Man at the beginning of the war. If you want one or two, a blue pinafore and a red pinafore, you’ve only got to say so.”

She was getting up to fetch them for me when she suddenly changed her mind and said:

“You better take the two you’ve put out on the table. Like that I shan’t have to wash yours up. I shan’t even have to put it away. What a stroke of luck!”

I laughed and she went on very seriously:

“I can’t stand putting crockery away. I always feel like throwing it out of the window. That’s why I go so often to the

restaurant. I'd eat far better at home, but I'd have to do the washing up.

"Yes," she continued, looking at the cups, "my mother never did like me, and she didn't even hide it. She said I was ugly and silly. My hair was too straight, my legs were too long and thin, my neck was scraggy as a chicken's . . . fool that she was! That neck she thought scraggy was responsible for my biggest successes! I tell you, my rat, in order to get on in life one must not remain a child too long. I hated being a child. One must leave one's parents early, especially one's mother. Mothers are never any good for their daughters. They forget they were just as ugly and silly and scraggy when they were little girls. They only tell you about their years of success, the years when they met your father. What a to-do catching just one man and bragging about it during an entire lifetime!"

"Oh, Paloma, some mothers are nice!"

"When I wore pinafores like the ones on your cups my eyes were open to everything. Mostly I used to watch my sister Josephine. How she did quarrel with my mother, but my mother could not accuse her of being ugly. There's never been a girl prettier than my sister Josephine. Our poor dear Josephine! A fine wench! The farmers used to say in our village, a fine wench growing up into a magnificent woman. The boys used to run after her. There was even a lawyer's eldest son, but Josephine had other ideas in her head!"

The doorbell rang, a long strident ring that made us both jump.

"Who the devil can it be?" exclaimed Paloma. "I do hope it isn't Gabrielle or the woman who brings my butter."

"Wouldn't you do better to go and find out instead of wondering?" I asked.

"You're certainly full of ideas!" she answered ironically. She rose in a dignified way, and reaching the corridor brushed aside the brown plush curtain as if she were acting a part on

the stage. After that I heard her slowly and suspiciously pulling back the latch.

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed. "Who do you think is here? It's our cabdriver who has come back with the bag I left at the restaurant. Thank you, my good man. Here's a pound note for you!"

The cabby started to thank her, but she closed the door on him, and brought the bag happily back to the fire, placing it on her knees and asking:

"I wonder what there can be inside? Suppose *you* open it?"

At this we both burst out laughing and started to peer inside. Right at the bottom we saw a packet of cheap tea and several grubby pieces of sugar that looked very much as if she had stolen them from the back of the signora's desk. I doubt if altogether the bag contained more than a shilling's worth of merchandise.

"My little quail," she said thoughtfully, "it wasn't really worth all the trouble and expense, and I'm afraid I've made a very bad bargain. What do you say?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"Come! Be frank! I can see by your funny smile, your smile of Marie Antoinette in front of the guillotine, that you're having a grand laugh at my expense. You think me a fool, don't you? Well, not nearly so much of a fool as I think myself. That's why I'm going to tuck this bag with its tea and sugar, the cups with the blue and red pinafores, and all my bad temper, at the bottom of your carrier—and then I shall forget all about it!"

I thought it a good moment to get her back to the subject of the young man with carnations, and I said:

"But tell me, Paloma, as your name is Marie—Marie Saquet, as I've heard some people call you—how comes this Spanish name of Paloma Garcia?"

"Where did you buy that string bag?" she asked, ignoring my question. "What's a thing like that worth?"

"I made it myself," I answered, "and if you like it you shall have one."

"That's nice of you," she answered, "but make it a little wider, my rat. One mustn't merely think of the things one intends to buy on a shopping expedition, but also those one gets landed with, and while you're about it make it a little deeper, the height of a bottle of Algerian wine. North African wine isn't comparable to Burgundy, but while the war is on it's better than nothing. On the whole I think it would be better if you made me two. You see that big box up against the wall? Open it. You'll find all the things I'm going to take back to Burgundy. So make me one bag for Soho and the other for France.

"Now come and see my bedroom. The bed's not made. Housework bores me. Who knows but oneself when the housework has not been done? If people call they are not to know if the bed is made, not unless one takes them into the bedroom. And what the devil does it matter to them anyway? And think, my rat, of the precious hours one can waste making a bed or dusting a lot of silly furniture, hours that would be so much nicer doing nothing! From time to time I have a charwoman, but I'm sure she robs me so I have her less and less. She comes to get the dirty linen ready. She's useful for that. I hate handling dirty linen. It looks so wretched and cold. I only like linen when it comes back clean from the laundry."

A big, wide bed occupied most of the room. There were large, square pillows and pink linen sheets. At the foot of the bed there was a Mme Récamier sofa with a pile of blankets on it. There was a dressing table by a window without curtains and an enormous wardrobe. I went to the dressing table in the hope of surprising all sorts of secrets. I discovered, what sur-

prised me most, an open deedbox overflowing with half-crowns and florins, and beside it a school pencil box like the one I had when I was a little girl with colored flowers on the lacquer lid. I asked permission to peep inside, and discovered on the tray a number of beautifully sharpened colored pencils. In the lower part was the prettiest platinum chain, fine as a thread, supporting a magnificent pear-shaped pearl.

"That reminds me," said Paloma, putting her long fingers into her bag, "what do you think of this ring?"

She handed me a ring with rather gray sapphires and some tiny diamonds. I inspected it without great interest, and said: "It's the pearl which is a beauty!"

"I'm not asking you about the pearl," she said. "I've known the pearl long enough not to need your opinion about it. I'm asking you about the ring."

Recalling just in time the homily of the Cardinal of Granada, and not wishing to fall into a trap, I answered guardedly:

"It's a ring with a personality."

"I'm not quite sure what you mean by that," she said. "It's the ring the signora wants to buy from me, but between ourselves that ring cost me quite a lot of money. I bought it from the husband of a girl friend. She led her husband a terrible dance, so I hadn't the heart to discourage him, the poor boy. The day he brought the ring along for me to see—I forgot to mention that he was in the jewelry trade"—she threw her head back and laughed sensually—"he said it was because of his wife. He had to find some excuse for coming to see me. In view of the fact that it was more an alibi than a ring, I couldn't very well argue about the price. I gave him what he said it was worth. Oh, and besides, I was getting tired of him, and his wife was really much nicer than I thought at the beginning. At all events, when the little signora saw me wearing it the other day she exclaimed: 'That's exactly the sort of ring I would like!' We were in the Green Park, and she plagued me

so much I half agreed. I even lent it to her for a couple of days. It was this ring she was giving back to me when you arrived for lunch. I really don't care a snippet about it, but if I gave it her for half what it cost me she wouldn't think it a fine ring any longer, whereas if I asked her the full price she would think I was robbing her, and then again, if I allowed her to pay me by installments I'd soon forget all about it. So tomorrow I think I shall go and throw it in the Thames with that broken hand mirror up against the corner of my dressing table. It's been there for months. I keep on forgetting to take it with me, or if I remember to take it I forget to go to the Thames!"

She was interrupted by a pigeon knocking with its beak against the window. It hit the pane so hard I thought it was going to break it.

"Oh, the bandits!" cried Paloma. "Can you hear my pigeons calling me? As soon as they see me in the bedroom they call for their rice."

"Rice?" I queried. "But with this war in Japan rice is like gold!"

"Bah!" she said.

In a moment a dozen had arrived on a drainpipe, while the chief of the gang continued to knock at the window.

"All right! All right!" called Paloma. "I'm coming!"

She went into the kitchen from which she returned with a bag of rice, and opening the window she poured quite a lot on the sill, saying:

"That's all for today!"

She watched them for a moment, and then putting down the blue bag on the dressing table said:

"I really believe they understand. They never ask twice. And now, my rat, you can go. I've had enough of you. I shall lie down a little and either sleep or read that novel I bought at Foyle's. Take half a crown from the box for your taxi."

“So you’re not going to finish the story about the carnations?” I asked, disappointed. I felt like a little girl robbed of her dessert, but she came to the door to say good-bye. When I was in the street I looked up at the bow window, and there I saw her again, tall and pale, smiling and waving her hand. I had become part of the street scene she so loved to watch. Having stopped a cab I looked up once more, but this time she had gone.

CHAPTER IV

I HAD in my sewing basket half a dozen picture postcards of London theatres taken in 1904. I had seen them for sale in a curiosity shop, and bought them for a few pence. There was Daly's, for instance, with that charming north side of Leicester Square which the photograph shows shimmering in hot summer with gentlemen in straw hats hurrying along the pavement from the direction of Piccadilly Circus, past the Empire where they were playing *High Jinks*. Superimposed on the road in front of Daly's the enterprising photographer had arranged figurines of actresses whose beauty was so fabulous that their names have been carried down to us, and even strike some emotion in the hearts of those who are far too young to have known them. On the photograph of Daly's, for instance, I found Adrienne Augarde, Pauline Chase, Madge Lessing, and Billie Burke. Gabrielle Ray was here also.

I remember when first handling these pictures in the shop looking closely at these women to discover if our elders had not exaggerated about the beauties of their youth. No, I was obliged to admit they were quite charming, and I recalled the words once said to me by a very great man of the theatre: "In those days there were fewer pretty women than now. Today almost every woman is pretty and clean, but they no longer make the heart of a nation beat. In my youth those who were beautiful were devastatingly so. Their grace was incomparable. The men who loved them stopped at nothing to prove their love. Many ruined themselves, and gladly, for women like that. No present was too costly. They were truly queens and the whole country talked of them."

Yes, indeed, as I looked at them again I found them more than charming. Even on these photographs a freshness seemed to sit upon their features, that we who rely on modern make-up have perhaps insufficiently realized. And the long hair that framed and crowned their faces, the straightness of their busts, the curves of their bodies, and those superb hats richly and airily garnished that even half a century ago cost sixty guineas in gold! What adorable creatures and how, indeed, must men have ruined themselves for them.

That immediately on my return from the British Museum I should go and dig up these photographs did not in any sense imply that I had discovered the secret of *Paloma*, but her story about the carnations was, at least, highly evocative of the days when the crowds at the stage door were one of London's sights. "I'd made a bet with the other girls that I'd turn him down every night for a week!" I remembered reading somewhere that Gabrielle Ray was once sent a complete vine growing in a half hoop over a gigantic basket. It had taken eight years to grow and, with its twenty bunches of black grapes, needed four men to carry it. And have not we who love our London been brought up on stories of Jupp, the stage-door keeper of the Gaiety, receiving bouquets containing diamond rings and bracelets for these superb young women who, with a froufrou of skirts, were taken by hansom cab after the show to sup at Romano's or Rule's?

The Gaiety was there also among my postcards with a little piece of the Strand and an open-topped omnibus drawn by two horses. How charming London must have been in those days! With what blinding force does the sun hit the curved façade of the Gaiety! Here is Gabrielle Ray again with different companions—Gertie Millar and Marie Studholme.

I put all these dreamy things back into my workbasket and went across to the mirror to take off my hat. *Paloma* had laughed at me for putting on a clean blouse every day.

"Why don't you copy me," she had asked, "and make yourself a long dress with a zip up the front?"

And when I had looked up at her in astonishment she said with a twinkle:

"Don't be so proud! You're young, but you'll come to it one day. You'll suddenly get tired of always doing the same thing. For instance, you'll add up the months and years that you've tidied up your flat—thirty-eight times three hundred and sixty-five—and you'll exclaim: 'Unless I stop soon I shall never have time to do anything else, to fall in love, for instance!' All right, you goose, laugh! It does one so much good to talk nonsense and to laugh! And if you don't believe what I say go on getting a sore back bending over your ironing board!"

The next morning I met Emma in the Green Park.

"I've come to the most shattering decision," she announced; "I'm going to let my apartment in Jermyn Street and live in my country cottage. I'm sick of night work, but it's been frightfully good for me. To work while people sleep, and to sleep while the shops are open, results in the most stupendous savings. I'm rich enough now to brighten up the cottage, and when my husband comes back from wherever he is he'll find a nice clean house and a good reserve of whisky. When a woman loves a man like I love my husband one flatters his comfort and his appetite, and even his little weaknesses. Just imagine his first day home—breakfast in bed, tea just as he likes it, lots and lots of bacon saved up over weeks and stored in the refrigerator, a hot bath, and cigarettes everywhere in the cottage. Then, roast beef for lunch and his favorite pudding!"

Enthusiasm lit her features. One might have supposed that the sky over the Green Park had opened and shown her a vision of her husband brought back to the cottage eating her raspberry jelly.

"And so, my dear," she went on, "I'm going to give the old flat a thorough spring clean before letting it—wash down the walls, even the ceiling if I can, put up new curtains, arrange the beds, count the linen, and the knives and forks, and try to find a few pieces of crockery. Let's telephone each other and if you get any more leg of mutton bones for John, do be an angel and let me know. I shall work much faster if I know he's happy with a bone! I hope to be gone in a week. Just imagine what I've got to do!"

She unfastened her coat to show me her long gray overall.

"You see, my dear, all I need is a duster around my hair and I'm ready to start. Good-by, darling. By the way, if you didn't hear from me for two or three days—if I didn't telephone, I mean, or you didn't see me in the park—I wish you'd come and look for me at the flat. I might so easily fall into the scrubbing pail and faint or slip off a ladder and break my leg. It's not about me I'm worried, but about John. It would be dreadful if he starved, and I've worked so long at nights now that most of the neighbors wouldn't even think of looking for me. Good-by, darling. I'm not joking. You will come, won't you? I'm so happy that I easily could have an accident, especially now I've told you that I'm happy!"

"Good by, Emma, don't forget to wear rubber gloves for scrubbing. Your hands are in a dreadful shape."

"I promise. If I wear gloves I can have lots of hot water and soda. Good-by, my dear!"

The weather was cooler, and I went home early. Gabrielle telephoned.

"What are you doing, my dear?"

"Nothing. I thought of making myself a cup of tea."

"Good! Then I'll dash in at the baker's and buy a brown loaf. You'll be able to cut bread and butter, though really I'm

supposed to be dieting. I've just been to a new doctor. He's frightfully good-looking. Put the kettle on. I'll be round."

A quarter of an hour later Gabrielle arrived with her dogs. Here she was all in black, impeccably black, a black hat with cock feathers, her face unbelievably made up. She used to keep her make-up on all night.

"My dear, I couldn't stand looking at myself in the morning when I'm without it. I'm so white! So white! Oh, no, I couldn't, especially when I'm so afraid of dying. It's silly, isn't it, to admit it, I mean, because really everybody is afraid of dying, but nobody admits it like I do. They think it doesn't show but you've only got to look how frightened they are even to cross the street. Well, I don't hide it. I'm afraid of bombs, I'm afraid of germs, and yet I simply adore life!"

She took off her beautifully cut midseason coat, which she folded carefully, putting it on a hook in my bedroom. Soon she was with me again in a black dress with pearls. She looked more than ever Monte Carlo or Nice, a real breath of Continental air. Talking like a bird, she eyed the food on the table.

"Two new pots of jam, my dear. However were you able?"

"The man said I was looking harassed," I answered. "Perhaps he was sorry for me."

I knew she would finish the best part of one pot for tea, and that I would have to give her the other unless I wanted to lose my reputation for generosity.

I went into the kitchen to fetch the kettle. She followed me. Then, propelled by her amazing energy, she went off again into the bedroom.

"My dear, though you've been home an hour from the Green Park your jacket is still lying on the bed. Why hasn't it been brushed and put away? And you should have changed your skirt. What sort of shape do you think it will have by tomorrow? It'll look like a sack!"

"There!" I countered. "Tea is ready."

She talked about her new doctor. He was to give her a series of injections, but it wasn't worth giving me his name. I had nothing wrong with me, and she didn't suppose he was my sort of doctor.

"And now," she said, "I've brought you a blouse that belonged to my sister. She left it behind on her last visit five years ago, and if she's got like me she'll never get into it. Look! Real Valenciennes, hand-stitched."

"Yes, it's lovely," I agreed. "How much do you want for it?"

"I'm not selling it. It's a present. But in exchange." She began to undo a parcel. "You are so clever with the needle I'd like you to try these petticoats on me and adjust the shoulder straps, and perhaps take them in a little at the hem. You understand . . . with all these visits to the doctor?"

She took off her black dress, and this fat little woman stood before me in her short slip. We set to work with the fittings—all these beautiful pieces of lingerie made by hand in Paris, and as fresh as spring flowers. The loveliness of the tender silk might have made an unhappy contrast with the plumpness of the other, but no, I was bound to admit that in this case there was something in the old saying that fine feathers make fine birds, and I reflected that many women even older than my friend Gabrielle are wrong to abandon their finery on the excuse that they are too old and that nobody will any longer appreciate their efforts. Gabrielle was indeed a wise woman, and if Emma who was graceful and pretty had been half so coquettish as Gabrielle . . . well, what was the use of supposing?

Here was Gabrielle already laughing at Paloma.

"My dear, she's quite mad! And yet would you believe it? She has still, at her age, a man who thinks she is the most wonderful person in the world! Only last night she invited me to supper at the Berkeley, and there he was. If I hadn't seen it all with my own eyes I would never have believed it. He just gazes at her, and when she turns her long lashes on him, as if

she were a princess, he's all ready to hide under the table, he's so afraid to displease her. Fancy, my dear, being admired like that! I tell you, there's something uncanny about her!"

Well, the next morning I was lucky with the shopping—biscuits at the baker's, an Irish stew from the butcher (with a bone that would be just right for John), and at the poulterer's, best of all, a magnificent chicken!

Having brought these treasures back to the flat I proceeded to arrange them in the refrigerator. I might have made the Irish stew for lunch, but stupidly I had forgotten the onions, so it would be wiser to roast the chicken. What a pity not to have a guest! Then I thought of Paloma, and how charming it would be if I could bring her along. When I tried her number the telephone rang for a long time in her flat and I was on the point of giving up when a voice answered that did not sound at all like hers. I gave my name, and then:

"Oh, it's you, my little rat! What a delightful surprise! I didn't want to talk to Gabrielle, that's why I was disguising my voice. It's a thing I learned to do when I was on the stage. Alas, my quail, I'm not at all well. I've a dreadfully sore throat, and I wouldn't be surprised if I were running a very high temperature."

"What a pity!" I said. "I managed to buy a wonderful chicken, and it's all ready to go into the oven. I was hoping you would lunch with me."

"But, my little rat, what a marvelous idea! I'll get up right away, snatch a bottle of claret, hail a taxi, and tumble into your open arms!"

There was some commotion at her end, and she went on:

"Wait a moment, my beauty, I'm just seeing if I've got your address properly written down. Yes, here it is. I'll be there before the chicken is ready."

She had started to talk to me in a tone of Sarah Bernhardt and ended up on the gay accent of a Burgundy peasant girl. I felt quite warmed. The sun came shining into my flat. The pots and pans started to hum on the stove. She loved braised chicory, loathed potatoes, had a liking for an apple tart, and took her coffee not too strong, but very freshly made.

The pie was made in a moment. The chicken started to turn golden and smell delicious. A lettuce salad was in the bowl with oil and vinegar, the French way.

Through the open windows of the dining room a taxi could be heard drawing up in the courtyard. I untied my apron, arranged my hair, and went to look. There she was engaged in conversation with the driver whose face was beaming. What an incredible picture she made! Thin and black as a winter tree, a deep net bag dangling from one arm, her hat like a halo had been knocked askew as she came out of the cab. At last, with a protective gesture of her free arm, she bade farewell to the cabby, smiled condescendingly at our very fine porter in his gold uniform, and was soon standing in my hall.

Her eyes shone like those of a little girl invited for the first time into a neighbor's flat. She put down her bags and advanced with interest. I followed, watching her carefully. Before long her lips puckered, her eyes hardened, and she exclaimed in her unkindest way:

"Well, you have got a luxurious home! How bored you must be in this skyscraper, with your tiny cells like a leper colony. I much prefer my British Museum."

I pushed her gently into the bedroom to take off her coat. What a nuisance! She was going to hate the place, and I knew that when she took a dislike to a person or to a place it was virulent. Disappointment came up like a lump in my throat. I had been so looking forward to bringing her into my flat.

Darkly she returned to the large room where lunch was

laid, and then suddenly she caught sight of a little old-fashioned French grammar that I used for my child.

"Oh, how lovely!" she exclaimed, her whole face becoming younger. "I had that same book at school!"

She turned the pages excitedly and went on:

"Yes, here's the piece about an old grandpa whose table manners were so bad that his family made him sit in a corner of the fireplace with a wooden porringer. One day the parents saw their young son carving something out with his pocket-knife. 'What are you doing?' asked his father. 'I'm making a porringer for you and mother when you're both grandpa's age,' answered the lad."

Paloma looked up and said:

"How I cried about that story! And as I read it again I can see all the words I couldn't spell. Oh! it's curious how all sorts of emotions are brought back to me by this book. Saulieu! And I a little girl at school! When I was a child this story was just a story, but as one grows older and one's childhood comes back it's dreadful to think of the cruel things one did to one's parents. I, for instance, with my poor father. You know, you should give me that grammar."

I had let her talk while I went backwards and forwards between the living room and the kitchen, and now that I arrived with the roast chicken in its earthenware tray, all steaming and golden, she looked up and said:

"Let me carve, my rat!"

I was happy again, and the sun filled the room. Then in the act of carving she held the knife high and asked:

"Aren't you curious to know what I've brought in the bag?"

"It's not easy to be curious with you," I answered, laughing. "Sometimes one gets rapped on the knuckles. I'd rather know what goes on in your head than what's in the bag."

"Stop being proud!" she answered, "and undo the things I've been dragging around the town."

The bag was so heavy I had trouble in lifting it. I brought out two bottles of wine, a magnificent bundle of English asparagus, some chicory, and a loaf.

"But it's a banquet. Hold on a moment and I'll put the asparagus in a pan."

"Not so," she answered. "You'll keep the asparagus till I'm gone. It'll make tomorrow's lunch with some of the white of the chicken that I'll put aside."

"Very well," I answered obediently, happy to obey.

She carved the bird expertly, with grace of movement. Everybody had a share, she, I, my child, and the dog. As in Soho, however, she merely nibbled, but she had taken over the direction of the meal. We all seemed to be her guests. She ate some dry bread, tearing at the crust with her teeth, and drank often and deep. Most of her chicken was pushed on the rim of her plate as if she could not decide whether to leave it or take it home in paper. Then she said:

"All the same, when I think that Gabrielle told me that you lived in a hovel in a back street she certainly was putting it on!"

I found no answer to this. She continued:

"It's true you've nothing very valuable in the house, but at least you've got a refrigerator and boiling water for the washing up—and central heating that will soon shrivel up your lungs and those of your child, but between now and the time it kills you you can at least wake up in the morning without shivering in your nightgown, as I do."

I was not very happy at this turn in the conversation, knowing well how acrimonious it could quickly become. I was even beginning to regret having asked her. I suddenly felt very sad. My child saved the situation by asking:

"Auntie Paloma, tell us about the wicked things you did to your father."

"Why, yes, of course," said Paloma. "Well, for instance.

Some friends of my father had several sheep, one of which had two lambs. It's difficult for a sheep to feed two lambs, so my father asked his friends to give him one of the lambs for his little Marie, for that's how I'm called in my village. I was overjoyed when my father brought the lamb home, for I've always loved animals. I fed him with a baby's bottle, and every night I took him to bed with me. When I had to leave in the morning to go to school I used to be in tears, and you may be sure that at four o'clock I was first out of the classroom. My lamb was called Louiset, and he understood everything. There never lived a nicer, more tenderhearted animal, and as he grew older so he became more affectionate, and because he liked to browse on tender young grass I used to take him along the country paths at the end of a string.

"I was always having trouble with my mother about Louiset. He wasn't clean about the house, and as you can well imagine I could not teach him to use the chamber under my bed. My mother discovered things that made her angry, and in the end Louiset was made to sleep on straw with the potatoes in the cellar. I agreed to everything rather than lose Louiset, but every evening I used to go down on tiptoe to the cellar and bring Louiset up to bed. As the messes went on I was accused of being a dirty girl.

"My father left home very early, for he was an engine driver on the railway, and sometimes when he was driving fast trains he would be away for two days at a time. When that happened my mother used to stay in bed till midday, and I had the place to myself. On the other hand my father would sometimes be given several days' holiday to make up for when he was away, and then, especially in spring, he would work in his garden.

"My father was a joyous man, delicious and vulgar. He used to whistle from morning till night, adored practical jokes, and drank rather a lot.

"Early one April when the days passed quickly, everybody

working, digging, sowing, arranging the borders, my father had one of his short holidays. The sap was rushing up the trees. The moon was consulted. Carrots, tomatoes, and turnips were being sown. All the gardeners worked till dusk. Well, anyway, my father had helped a friend to mend a cask, and the friend, to return his kindness, had given him two hundred tender young cabbages that had been forced in a greenhouse. What a to-do in our house! My father would be able to plant his cabbages before anybody else. So all one morning he dug up the ground to make ready for them.

“When I came back from school for lunch I saw him at work, and, as I was as gay as he was, while he whistled I sang. He started to plant his cabbages to the tune of that old nursery rhyme:

Savez vous planter les choux
A la mode, à la mode de chez nous?

and I went on:

On les plante avec les doigts,
A la mode, à la mode,
On les plante avec les doigts,
A la mode de chez nous.

And indeed that is how my father planted them, making holes in the earth with his finger, and then dropping in the tender plants, but what a long and tiring business it was! Think of it! Two hundred young cabbages in little rows!

“When I came running back at four o’clock I saw my mother sitting very straight on her chair by the window, but she hardly spoke to me. I went into the garden, and there I saw the patch of earth so full of neat little holes, without a single cabbage! Instead, there were the marks of Louiset’s pretty little hoofs.

“My father had discovered the crime after going into the

house to refresh himself. He had come out, wiping his mustaches, when suddenly there was Louiset greedily finishing the last row! He quite lost his self-possession, and seizing my darling pet took him straight to the butcher to have him killed.

"I was so upset that in the end my father cried with me. We both cried together. He would have given me the moon if he could have reached it, but I said bitterly:

"'Never, never shall I forgive you. I shall never kiss you again as long as I live.'

"For a week I went without food because Louiset was served up at every meal. My elder sister, Josephine, said I was silly, but the younger one cried with me, for she was gentle and sensitive.

"Fifteen years later, after a telegram that brought all three of us sisters hurriedly from Paris to my father's deathbed, each of us spent a short time by his side. The night before he died he said to me:

"'Well, my poor little Marie, haven't you yet forgiven me for your little lamb? I've never had a kiss from you since.'

"'I kissed you when I arrived, but you were asleep.'

"'Then be a good girl, Marie, and forgive me.'

"For me in my new life the story of Louiset had faded merely into a childhood memory, whereas for my father, whom at heart I loved, it had remained all this time a cause of poignant suffering. You see, it was necessary, for all three girls to go and fight our battles in Paris.

"And now that I'm rich I often get angry with my money, for it seldom buys you the things you want most—a few moments back with your parents, to spoil them and, even more, to smother them with kisses, to give them the kisses you so easily could have given them, the ones that were not given because of a quarrel, or because one was too proud, or because one imagined oneself too grown up to kiss any longer. Where's your coffee, my rat? What's the matter with you?"

With tears streaming down my cheeks I ran into the kitchen and brought her the coffeepot with the coffee freshly made, and smelling good.

“Listen!” she said. “While you’re doing the washing up I’ll take your child and your dog to the Green Park. When you’ve finished you can come and join us. The air will do us good.”

She put on her coat and kissed me. Then she said:

“I’ve been very happy to lunch with you, and I’ve thought it over—keep the grammar for the little one. And next time I come for lunch I’ll bring a piece of lamb.”

CHAPTER V

THEY WERE all in the Green Park waiting for me—Emma, Gabrielle, Paloma, the dog, and the child.

Emma looked quite exhausted. Her complexion had lost its color, and her hair was pushed back anyhow into her turban, but there was brightness in her eyes.

"I've already finished the living room!" she exclaimed. "I had such luck for the ceiling. The housekeeper's eldest son is on leave, and while he was washing it all down I went to the fishmonger's with John to get some salmon. We lunched together, the young soldier and I, sitting on a cabin trunk. It was delicious!"

She looked around the company and said meditatively:

"These young soldiers have a propensity for falling in love! It makes me wonder if it wouldn't do just as well to go out with them sometimes instead of staying with men of our own generation, who are often so tiresome these days. The young things are delightfully sincere. They've probably never told a lie yet, except to their mothers and their schoolmasters."

Gabrielle laughed.

"Perhaps you're right!" she exclaimed. "They see in us women of experience. There's always a certain amount of mystery in that!"

"You band of fools!" said Paloma decisively. "The only love is the love of a man who was twenty when you were. I, for instance! What could I talk about to some child who had never heard of the days of my glory? Who had never heard of *my* war? Or my fashions? After coffee my Stephen and I pull the

curtains, draw our chairs up to the stove, and journey back into the past, and like that, yes, my little rats, we go on loving each other. Time, far from making us sad, warms our hearts. It's lovely to have known so many things together. And when I think that on Thursday evening I even picked a quarrel with him about something he did in the First World War! Oh, but a violent quarrel! I was furious. He tried to defend himself but I had all the details. I remembered just how he looked, how he spoke. And when we had finished quarreling we made it up, and this morning he sent around his chauffeur with a bunch of flowers with a letter inside and a handful of bank notes!"

What could we say? She had established herself as the queen!

Emma rose and with a slight shiver drew her coat around her. She was tired and must try to get some rest. Gabrielle also got up, having an appointment with her new doctor. They left by separate paths, Emma languid and graceful, Gabrielle drawn forward rapidly on high heels by her two dogs that made her look like some performer in a circus.

There was a red brick shelter beyond the Cornish elms where Paloma and I decided to sit on the grass protected from the wind. The grass was already high, and there were marguerites in it. No chairs were placed here. People sat or lay on the grass. We almost tripped over a young man asleep who turned over blinking in the strong light.

We sparred for about half an hour, Paloma very much on the defensive. She began to inspect my shopping basket in which there was a loaf of bread and some oranges I had bought in the market on my way to the park.

"I've got an idea," she said suddenly. "Let's give the loaf to the birds!"

"Yes, but not all of it," I said. "The baker will be closed on my way back."

"You are selfish!" she exclaimed. "The sparrows are far more interesting than you and your brat!"

This was too much. Her words cut into my pride and I was furious.

"Keep calm!" she sneered. "All you women with kids are the same. You become tigresses!"

"Why not?" I retorted heatedly. "It's at least better than not having any!"

Paloma turned a look of hatred on me and said:

"Idiot!"

My eyes were full of tears, and making some hasty excuse I collected my parcels and made ready to leave.

I was hoping that she would say some word to prevent my going, but never had I seen her so calm or more exasperatingly indifferent. Her small, pale face, her burning eyes under high lids, her entire features were motionless and inscrutable. I fled, afraid and too proud to look back.

When I reached the baker's I found it still open. I could have had all the bread I wanted. In the front of a greengrocer's I saw more oranges. I suddenly had an idea. The end of this unfortunate afternoon should be spent making marmalade.

Toward evening the telephone rang.

"Well, is it you, little hothead?"

I answered with dignity that it was.

"Did you have the cold chicken for supper?"

"Of course not. You know quite well I'm keeping it to have with the asparagus for lunch tomorrow."

"I've changed my mind. You must have it tonight. Tomorrow you're lunching at my place."

I made no bones about accepting this invitation. She went on:

"You know the young man who was asleep in the long grass

at our feet, the one we nearly tripped over? Well, as soon as you had gone he woke up. He said he was something to do with the government, and that this was his last day in London.

“‘Why did you quarrel with the little blonde?’ he asked.

“‘I thought you were asleep,’ I said.

“‘No, I was trying to understand the language. I’m too young yet to have traveled, but I learned quite a lot at school. You amused me, you two! It was like going to a French film—one, so calm, the other like a volcano. Hasn’t the blonde got a temper! I felt like roaring with laughter.’

“‘Well!’ said Paloma, “and did I laugh! Did I laugh to imagine how we must have looked to the young man in the grass, but I must tell you the strangest part. Before catching his train he gave me all his rations for a month. So I rushed to Soho and bought a leg of lamb. That’s what we are going to eat tomorrow.”

We were a few minutes late by the time we reached her flat in Museum Street. The door opened and a tiny little woman with spectacles was there holding the plush curtain, and above her, very high, was the head of Paloma. The contrast was so amusing that I laughed, and they both seemed to think that I was mad. I entered, and going into the drawing room I saw that the table was laid in the bow window. The curtains were all changed and there were mauve and red tulips everywhere.

The lamb was in the oven smelling delicious.

“Go quickly and take your hat off!” said Paloma.

She had done her hair with an upward sweep, pulling it very tight, and I could see her tiny ears. She was quite covered by an enormous white apron that made her look different. She had put on a little lipstick, but the operation had clearly been done with such speed that only the lower lip had received at-

tention. As I was taking my hat off in the mirror I pointed this out to her. She looked over my shoulder and said:

"How curious! I expect the pigeons called me away. I can't get near my dressing table without that big fellow hitting the window with his beak. I'm a real slave to them."

"Can I help with the lunch?"

"Not a bit of it. You'd never find your way about the kitchen, and it's so hot in there!"

Besides the oven she had a very old-fashioned boiler to provide hot water for the washing up. She said it was not, of course, like my place, where I had boiling water at all times and a large refrigerator. The subject called for some reserve. To my relief the doorbell rang, and after a few moments I heard the voice of a gentleman addressing my child.

The gentleman proved to be Mr. Stephen. I admit that my heart beat quicker with interest at the sound of his name. Paloma was along the corridor in a moment to welcome him. After the most tender greeting we all went into the sitting room where Mr. Stephen served us with some wine.

"Well," he said, turning to me, "so you are Paloma's little friend? What a lot of things I've been hearing about you during the last month!"

I blushed, feeling highly flattered. He then turned to Paloma and asked:

"And how are you? Did you sleep better?"

"Yes," she replied, churlish but happy, "but come now, Stephen, carve the lamb."

He obeyed, handing the plates around, and then while eating but little, listened to Paloma, who, after a few minutes, warmed by the wine, began to tell us about her father and his locomotive. Mr. Stephen was enjoying himself immensely. These stories delighted him. Suddenly Paloma, indicating me with a warm sweep of her arm, asked Mr. Stephen to express some opinion about my person.

He looked at me benevolently, but it was clear that his opinion of me did not differ from my own modest opinion of myself. His gaze, inspecting me from my hair to my knees, upon which a napkin was stretched, embarrassed me considerably. In the end he said:

“She has the most beautiful hands!”

Paloma answered cuttingly:

“Bah! That’s all she does, look after her hands! She has absolutely nothing to do. Think of it! One of these modern apartments with boiling water night and day . . . !”

I hid my hands under the table like a schoolgirl told that they are too large and too red. There was a stupid pause, but soon Mr. Stephen had taken charge of things again. He said to Paloma:

“I’ve booked two stalls for a theatre tomorrow night. I think you’ll like it.”

Then turning to me:

“Every Thursday night we see a play, and then go out to supper. Did Paloma tell you that I first met her at the theatre?”

Paloma in her large white apron drew herself up and her eyes shone.

“Yes,” he went on. “She was number seven counting from left to right, the tallest with the smallest head and the prettiest neck in all the world, the neck of a dove. Eyes that laughed at anything, and a little round mouth that said something witty every time it opened. Proud too, she was. Proud as a queen, and can you wonder with all London at her feet!”

“At what theatre did you meet her?” I asked, afraid of my own voice, afraid she would break in with something harsh and stop the thoughts in Mr. Stephen’s mind.

“Oh,” he answered, “the Adelphi had just been done up, and very pretty it looked with its rose-colored upholstery. Why, yes, Mr. George Edwardes had transformed it altogether from the rather dim place where they had been play-

ing Conan Doyle's *The Speckled Band*. Conan Doyle! How he used to make us shiver! There was a snake in that piece that slid down a bell rope to kill a sleeping man. My goodness! The Strand was a very different place to what it is now. There were hansom cabs and top hats."

"Oh, Stephen!" said Paloma, not angrily, looking into her wine.

"So George Edwardes had taken over the Adelphi. His *Our Miss Gibbs* was just closing down at the Gaiety. Of course, you wouldn't remember *Yip I Addy I Ay*, and

Moon, moon, mischief-making moon,
What are you doing there?

Or

I'm such a silly when the moon comes out,
I hardly seem to know what I'm about.

"He had withdrawn his stars from the Gaiety to produce a new Tanner and Monckton musical comedy at the Adelphi. It was a Saturday night, a Saturday night in November, rather cold and misty. The Strand was crowded with very smart private cars that still somehow looked like carriages with their lanterns on either side, the footmen sitting very erect beside the chauffeurs, and their curves and awnings. The crowds were all there to see her, Gertie Millar as Prudence in *The Quaker Girl*."

"And Joseph Coyne and Mr. Carvey . . ." put in Paloma.

"And *she*, Paloma," mused Mr. Stephen, "was number seven counting from left to right. My dear, your coffee is delicious. I know nobody who makes coffee like you do. Well, my poor darling, I must leave you now. I have an appointment in the city."

He put on his overcoat and then kissed her affectionately. He also said good-by very nicely to me, adding:

"I hope I shall meet you again—perhaps in the Green Park."

The flat seemed quite empty when he had gone.

"I think he likes to be with women," I said to Paloma. "He was in raptures when you were talking about your father and his locomotives."

"Poor dear!" she said. "He never married. I wouldn't be surprised if it was because of me."

She said these last words very simply, without pride, without emphasis.

"He's become a bit of an old bachelor though," she continued brightly as if it made her look younger. "However much he reads and keeps abreast of things I sometimes get the impression that he's quite old-fashioned. Oh, but, my little rat, when first I met him, how good-looking and witty he was! With his pockets full of gold sovereigns, his top hat at an angle, his cape resting lightly on his shoulders, and his white silk scarf tied carelessly round his neck, he was simply beautiful! One night, my dear, after the maddest supper at Romano's, we all trooped out heady with youth and champagne, none of us wanting to go to bed, afraid to lose a single moment of life. We were quite a crowd. Little Lord Jimmy, who was then my favorite flirt, led us all. An amazing boy! When he got on my nerves I would slap his face, whereupon he would say: 'Yes, my pretty darling. You're still more adorable when you're hateful!' That put me in a greater rage and I would get positively rude, but the ruder I was the more he loved me. It's funny that the men who have really admired me, men like Lord Jimmy, were those I treated the worst. The only thing my little Lord Jimmy never could stand was that I should say something flippant about his King Edward the Seventh whom, incidentally, I adored. Immediately his features would become quite grim, and he would exclaim: 'Mademoiselle, your disrespectful remarks about my monarch oblige me to leave

your home!’ Then he would throw his cape over his shoulder and march out!

“My dear, the first time he did that I thought he looked like something on the stage, and I roared with laughter. Later, when I wanted to get rid of him in the evening, I knew just what to do. The poor lamb would drape himself in his cape and disappear, but in the morning the house would be full of red roses with a little note to say he was sorry.

“The nastier I was the nicer things he thought up to placate me. We went to Paris. My sister Josephine, who was the pampered friend of the most famous actor of the Comédie Française, the man Rostand wrote his plays for, had a superb apartment in the Champs Elysées. She was in all her beauty, surrounded, flattered, feted. Lord Jimmy was radiantly funny. His dear monarch was also in Paris, and he used to meet him at the club. My sister and I drove to the Bois every morning in an open carriage, and we spent our nights at the Café de Paris. Josephine never went to bed, or at least not until most people get up. She had such a waist I could enclose it in my ten fingers. In my ten fingers, my little rat—do you realize what that means? When she came to London with her great actor she was quite worshiped, but she found the rooms too small, and the fog too black, and she used to say to me: ‘Paris smells of the Seine, red wine, and fried potatoes. I’m too accustomed to it to change. Besides, maybe it’s wiser for us to have our different spheres of activity. It’s not good for us to browse in the same orchard.’

“Mr. Stephen had only just joined us at that time, and I knew little about him except that I guessed that it was for me that he was with us. Actually he appeared to be flirting with Adrienne, another girl from Burgundy. Often he would try to catch my eye and then because a woman can never for long resist a man who is in love with her, I found myself laughing rather loudly at his jokes, and saying nasty things about Adri-

enne. I used to find faults in her looks, and even pick a quarrel with her in the middle of supper at Romano's. Oh, my poor rat, what am I telling you?"

"What happened to Lord Jimmy, Paloma?"

"The dear boy died."

The coffee was cold in our cups. My child was on the sofa turning the pages of a scrapbook which, Paloma said, she colored on winter evenings. The drawings and photographs had been cut from weekly magazines. A lady with a white dress the hem of which touched the floor, showing white, rather pointed shoes, was Irene Vanbrugh in a new play by Somerset Maugham. Here was Melba singing at the Queen's Hall, and a scene from the great sporting drama *The Whip* at Drury Lane. Four little girls with their auburn hair down their backs and satin sashes and a little boy in a sailor suit were in separate medallions. The little girls looked intelligent and gentle, the boy sad. The names underneath made me feel quite ill. They were all doomed to be murdered seven years later, with their unfortunate parents, the czar and the czarina, at Ekaterinburg! Oh, curious scrapbook! What whim, Paloma, made you keep all this?

The telephone rang. With long smooth steps she went along the corridor into the bedroom. On her return she said:

"It was Stephen. He wanted to know if I would be going to the Green Park later. I said yes. Meanwhile let's do the washing up."

As I bent over the sink, plunging the dishes into hot water, I asked:

"What about that evening when you all trooped out of Romano's?"

"It wasn't evening," she said, "it was four in the morning. We squeezed ourselves into two hansom cabs and then, at

Cambridge Circus, we got out to get some air. The idea was to see dawn break and have breakfast at my place. Yes, my girl, in this very flat where you and I are washing up like scullery maids! All the way down Shaftesbury Avenue and across New Oxford Street we sang and played the fool. Our dresses were very long and we held them up, pretending we were ballet dancers. The gentlemen in their magnificent evening clothes took up all the dustbins on the route, and emptied them in the middle of the road. They held them at arm's length in the funniest way. Windows opened and people insulted us in all sorts of languages. Then we picked up our skirts, and with yells and laughter ran away as fast as we could, expecting jugs of water or worse on our heads! As a matter of fact the women did most of the laughing. The men went on collecting dustbins with frightfully serious faces. Little Lord Jimmy worked harder than any. The road was quite littered with his efforts, and to think it was all just to win my heart! Like in fairy stories when they have to do all sorts of impossible feats to win the hand of the princess! Only one of the gentlemen remained at a prudent distance. For some reason he was not competing in the match, but in order to put him to some use we had all hung our long boas around his neck and as he walked they spiraled under his top hat. Poor boy! He was one of the first to be killed in 1914.

"But the face of my poor sister Louise when we arrived at the flat! For did I tell you or not that she was looking after me? She slept on a divan in the drawing room, and had only just fallen asleep, having waited up for me most of the night. Her hair, poor thing, having turned prematurely white, was gray and green in the dawn. She looked positively appalling, and I was terribly ashamed of her. It is a sudden reflex, a sudden blush, when a member of one's family fails to come up to scratch at the moment one most wants to make a good impression. Adrienne, who was no fool, and just as perceptive and

nasty as I, seeing how ashamed I was of my sister Louise, and, having good reason to get her own back on me, cried out:

“Well, Louise, this is obviously not the day to have your portrait painted!”

“I was angry, but Louise, dear soul, was quick to get over it, suggesting eggs and bacon and hot tea or onion soup, and in that way won the hearts of the gentlemen.

“One is so silly when young. If Louise had been a lovely girl we would certainly, my sister Josephine and I, have been jealous of her. As it was she served us humbly and we were ashamed of her. But though we were unkind we really loved her. She used to alternate between the Champs Elysées and the British Museum, sometimes helping Josephine till they had a tiff, sometimes keeping house for me till she would fall in love with the baker’s man, and I would send her back to Paris.

“But she would soon be back, turning up some fine morning just after six from the Dieppe-Newhaven night train. She would ring timidly, and I would find her on the doorstep.

“‘My little Marie,’ she would say, ‘here I am! Josephine is tired of me so, my little Marie, please take me back!’

“And she would twist her white handkerchief between fingers reddened by work, and she would cry gently, making herself uglier all the time. She wore her heart on her poor face. I used to bring her in and rant against Josephine, and make her tell me all Josephine’s secrets, and there I was, frightfully interested, jealous, furious, just longing to be told that Josephine was a trifle less pretty, or that her waist was not so slim, or that her face had turned the color of a ripe quince! And so poor Louise, after her long journey, would take off her hat and coat, and between sobs go to her kitchen. The next day the wooden trunk would arrive. Poor dear Louise!”

“No! no!” exclaimed Paloma, interrupting her story, as I stretched up for the dishcloth, “I never wipe the dishes—soap

and boiling water. If there's a thing I hate, it's crockery badly washed!

"Well, anyway," she resumed, "when we had arrived in the drawing room, Louisa's couch, all warm and slept in and undone, was soon hidden under the gentlemen's capes and shining top hats. Little Lord Jimmy quickly opened a card table and shuffled the cards, while we, my dear, ran into the bedroom to take off our high corsets that had tortured us since the previous afternoon. Soon in dressing gowns with flounces and lace we were back in the drawing room, comfortably resting in deep armchairs, our long hair unwound and reaching down to below our waists, and the men, looking up from their cards, would smile to see us in this new guise.

"A new day could come, but we had lost none of our freshness and our gaiety. It was wonderful, you see, to know how much we were admired—how much young men in those days appreciated women and horses and life!"

CHAPTER VI

A LIGHT breeze rustled the small thick leaves of the Cornish elms. Sparrows and pigeons hopped across the grass picking up crumbs that a group of American soldiers had scattered out of a bag. Paloma was in a deck chair, and with the sun striking full on her baked brown features she looked tired. The line of rouge on her lower lip burned her like a bar.

"What with those pigeons," I said, "you forgot all about making yourself up before lunch."

"So I did," she said, her hand shaking rather.

With cautious eyes I watched her bring out lipstick and mirror, and apply herself to rectifying her error, but it refused to be done, or else it just annoyed her, for she exclaimed petulantly:

"Oh, and what the hell!"

"Perhaps your lipstick is no good? Would you like to try mine?"

"Why, yes, that's an ideal!" she answered more gaily.

The new color delighted her to such an extent that, having done the work, with little apparent result, she appropriated the lipstick, saying:

"You can always buy another one."

I stifled a cry of resentment. What was the good of explaining that there was a quota and that I had waited two months for my lipstick? I should have guessed. She was becoming quite happy again, casting circular glances around the lawn. At last her eyes rested on a little woman all in brown, like a mouse, puffing at a cigarette, and she said:

"There's my butter woman. Stay here with my things. I must go and see what's in her bag."

She hurried across the grass, and having reached the woman, who was feeding cake to the sparrows, began to whisper.

Mr. Stephen now came slowly past the trees, and catching sight of me he sat in Paloma's chair, putting her things beside him on the grass. He, too, looked around, and seeing Paloma with the butter woman asked:

"What on earth is she doing with that little woman in brown?"

"I'm not sure," I answered, laughing. "She said something about her being a butter woman."

"She's incorrigible!" he exclaimed. "She has all she wants. This piling up of food with you women has become a sport, and the only thing one can say about it is that while you're hunting for it we men are left in peace, and the bills you run up are not large."

He laughed, and added:

"Women were much more exacting when I was a young man—there were the egret plumes and paradise feathers of 1910, for instance, those cruel, gaudy things women wore on their wide hats."

"Did she have so many?"

"It was not that she had so many, but she kept on exchanging them for those of her friends, and then when they didn't please her any longer she gave them to the first stranger in the street."

I was knitting a pull-over to go with my black skirt, and he went on:

"I like to see a woman knit or sew. I never could make Paloma do anything like that. I don't think she can even thread a needle. Her poor sister Louise did so spoil her! She could do anything. You know, you really have got the prettiest hands. They are about the rarest thing in a woman and one does see them all the time. How old are you?"

I told him. He unfolded his evening paper and settled him-

self comfortably in the deck chair. Airplanes passed overhead in tight little formations and the pigeons flew away. We looked up instinctively till we were satisfied the machines were ours. Then Mr. Stephen again consulted his headlines, and the pigeons came back.

Paloma suddenly returning looked suspiciously at Mr. Stephen as if she felt there was something guilty in so quietly reading a newspaper and asked sarcastically:

"Is the news really as interesting as all that? When a man tries so hard to look interested in the headlines you may be sure he's trying to hide something! Answer me! Is the news really so interesting?"

Mr. Stephen put his head around the paper, smiled, and answered:

"Yes, it is, rather. I've won some money on the four o'clock. Wouldn't it have been pleasant at the races this afternoon?"

"Still backing horses!" she exclaimed. Then turning to me: "He's always gambling—horses, cards, the stock exchange."

He smiled at her exaggeration and said affectionately:

"Some women wouldn't complain of that. What would you say if I had other pleasures?"

"I? But, Stephen, with my large hatpin, the one that you used to like with the head of a dog on it, I'd put your eyes out so that you could never look at another woman!"

The conversation was turning acid. Paloma was so obviously preparing for a quarrel, with me as witness, that I determined by all the means I disposed of to prevent her. I turned to Mr. Stephen and said:

"Won't you tell me, please, how you met Paloma for the first time?"

"Not sol" put in Paloma. "Madeleine's curiosity is insatiable. She made me talk all during washing up!"

"Why do you take that ill?" I asked. "Could there be any better proof of my affection?" Then turning to Mr. Stephen

again: "I think I've never met a more extraordinary character than Paloma!"

He seemed amused and flattered, though remaining somewhat on the defensive.

"She's never twice the same," he said. "She's not one woman, but several. Thank goodness she does not change in appearance."

He folded his newspaper like a man preparing to talk, and went on:

"Would you believe it if I told you that I never know when I ring at her door how she is going to receive me, what bitter reproaches will be flung at my person! I stand there, my legs shaking like those of a schoolboy on a first visit to his love!"

"That," cried I, "must be delicious!"

"Beware of what he says, my little rat," put in Paloma, now quite mollified, "men lie all the time."

She smiled, ready to let him go on speaking.

Mr. Stephen continued:

"She was, as I told you, the seventh from the left, the tallest and the darkest. She had little else to do but to shake her parasol, like the others. They were all exquisite. We who used to go there night after night would gaze first on one and then on another, and later, over supper, exchange our impressions. Some of my friends knew one or two of the girls by their Christian names, and occasionally the girls would nod in their direction, which made us blush with pride. You see, they got to know us, always seeing us in the same places. What a wonderful life! During the day I worked in my father's business for which I had some aptitude, but the nights were mine.

"The Gaiety girls, or the Adelphi girls, as they had become since George Edwardes had acquired his new theatre, used to travel down to Brighton on Sunday morning, spending the night there and coming back on Monday. Brighton was very gay and very elegant, and the Metropole, which was known

for its food and its wine cellar, was as gay and as rich and as elegant as Romano's in the Strand.

"My friends and I also took the Brighton train every Sunday morning, arriving very early at Victoria for the fun of standing on the platform and gazing at the girls. What a sight they were, laughing, jostling, shaking their feather boas, looking at us archly from under their wide hats and their veils as if to say: 'Hallo! There's Dicky or Georgel' They discussed us in their giggling way as we discussed them. They would hurry past with tiny steps, and make great play with lace handkerchiefs brought out from tiny bags that dangled at the end of long silken cords.

"Several of them, on this particular Sunday, having come halfway up the platform, collected outside a first-class carriage. One of them even climbed into the doorway where she stood framed like a portrait. She said: 'We'll have the whole compartment to ourselves! What a lark! I've put my sunshade on the seats. Come on in!' Then looking mockingly at us: 'I really can't see anything on the platform worth waiting for! Come on, girls, in you get!' And she pretended to whistle which made the others laugh.

"We were all delighted by this lovely girl's nonsense. She was a real pantomime—but suddenly I stopped laughing. A tall girl was gliding up the platform with slow, dignified steps. Under an immense hat was the prettiest head I have ever seen, a head held very erect, the neck like a turtledove's. Instead of a parasol she held against her chest with both hands one of those osier baskets with a lid on either side of the handle in which French peasant women used to take their ducks to market. On one side, pushing up the lid, were two wine bottles, and certainly the basket must have been heavy, otherwise she would not have held it in both hands. With this strange burden she continued gliding along the platform, neither faster nor slower, looking like some fabulous queen.

When the group at the carriage door caught sight of her they all cried out: 'Bravo, Paloma! How clever of you to have brought lunch!' I saw her smile condescendingly, and when she reached them she removed one of her gloved hands from the basket, and made a little sign to them as if she were raising her hand to bless them. She climbed into the compartment and all the girls followed her.

"What an impression she made on me! I stood there, on the platform, my heart thumping, staring at the door through which she had passed. I was already quite a spark, but from that moment I became more impetuous, more spirited, more mettlesome in my efforts to impress this magnificent creature, and I assure you I had to work hard, for I had powerful competitors equally dashing, some of them richer, and one at least the heir to one of the oldest and greatest titles in the land and in those days that was something. But though I was lucky in games of chance I was also to prove lucky in love . . . and I think I still am, don't you think so, my dear?"

She was sitting forward, her hands clasped around her knees, living over again with him this scene she must have heard from his lips a thousand times but recounted, on this occasion at least, with so much fervor that it might have taken place only yesterday. Suddenly he said:

"Well, well, it's all a long time ago now. Those were the good old days!" and he unfolded his newspaper. This time he seemed intent on reading—or perhaps he was merely trying to hide his emotion. Paloma put a hand on his knees, and at her contact he looked up and smiled.

CHAPTER VII

ONE MORNING about a week later Gabrielle telephoned. Her voice was heavy with tears, for she had just received news from her correspondent in Lisbon that her sister was seriously ill. She was anxious for me to compose a letter.

When I arrived she was filling a packing case with books. She was selling some and giving others away. She was obviously sad, and her make-up had white paths of washed-away powder.

"I've not been sleeping at nights," she explained. "It must have been my sister's letter making itself felt in advance, and then the new doctor isn't doing me any good. I think I get on his nerves, so I don't see why I should pay him for that, do you? He gave me some sleeping tablets, but I'm so terrified of taking too many that I haven't taken one yet, and the result is I go on having nightmares. So many people take overdoses of sleeping pills, don't they? One sees the most dreadful things in the papers. Really, my dear, what wouldn't I give to join my sister!"

She was running around the room, fetching books from the bookcases, packing them in the box, talking continually, sometimes in tears, sometimes gladdened by a sudden thought.

"I had a stroke of luck yesterday. I sold my bedspread to the doctor's little wife, and my silver candlesticks to Paloma!" Then, sobbing again:

"My poor Lucy"—it was her sister's name—"I do so fear that I shall fall ill of the same malady as she. When we were young I had prettier eyes, but her mouth was more shapely, and she had a splendid waist. For ten years, my dear, we were hardly

on speaking terms, and then suddenly we became inseparable. The war divided us. And now I'm quite distracted to know she's ill."

Somebody called her on the telephone. It might even have been Paloma. Gabrielle began to tell her story afresh, and cried again. I hurriedly wrote her letter, and as the sun had come out I left her and went to sit in the park.

The little woman in brown was there, and seeing me alone she came over for a talk.

She said I could call her Sally, and that she was worried because she had met a French soldier in the park the previous evening, to whom she had lent a pound. He was supposed to be coming this morning to pay her back, but so far there was no sign of him.

"Weren't you rather trusting?" I asked.

"Yes," she conceded, "but he was different. To begin with he hardly spoke any English, so I was sorry for him. He was in a jam. He fought an American G.I. who tore his cape. He would have got into trouble if he had gone back to barracks with a torn cape, so he took it to the menders, but it was going to cost him a pound. You see, they're going today, perhaps for the invasion, and his officers would have noticed if he had lost his cape."

She looked at her watch.

"He should have come by now, and I can't wait any longer. It's too bad, isn't it?"

She was on edge, puffing at her cigarette. It struck me that it is all nonsense about cigarettes calming people's nerves. I had a feeling she had something else she wanted to say, so I went on knitting quietly.

"How is it that your tall friend isn't here? Isn't she coming today?"

"Paloma?" I queried. "I don't know. She doesn't come every day."

"Oh, what a nuisance!" she exclaimed. "I wanted to see her also. She promised faithfully to come."

She looked over her shoulder, and then confided:

"I may as well tell you. I had a little package for her, and I can't very well take it back. Could I give it to you? If your friend turns up you can put it in her bag, but if she doesn't please keep it for yourself."

She slipped the package furtively under my knitting, emptied her carrier, which was full of cake crumbs for the birds, and repeating that she really must go, she rose and slid away through the crowd.

I was not at all pleased with my morning. I had wasted it in silly gossip, and I was angry with my unknown compatriot for robbing this poor woman of her pound. I dozed a little, being eventually awakened by the sun that was getting hot and by Big Ben sounding midday. My child was playing ball with two French soldiers sitting on the grass at my feet. One of them had a Breton accent and the other was from the south. The Breton looked up and said:

"I saw you yesterday with a tall dark woman. You're French, aren't you? I like to come in the park here. It's gay, and there are women and children. That's what we miss most. Tonight my friend and I are off to a camp, and I don't think it will be long now before we're back in France. You haven't seen a funny little woman with spectacles who was sitting here yesterday? I'd promised to meet her."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "Then you're the soldier with the torn capel! She was here half an hour ago, but she couldn't wait. I'll give her a message if you like. I'm bound to see her tomorrow."

He dug into a pocket and brought out a packet of cigarettes,

an envelope with his name on it, and his address in France, and two ten-shilling notes.

"I *am* glad!" I exclaimed. "I was so afraid you would let her down."

We talked for a while. He was of a good Breton family, and played with my child as if they had known each other always. Then just before lunch we parted to go in very different directions.

I came across Sally the next day and gave her the money. As I had suspected the package contained butter. I put it in my refrigerator and tasted some of it, which was excellent.

Poor Sally was very depressed.

"Always having to be there on time, always having to obey, always having to be polite when one feels like sending them to the devil. Oh, I'm sick of it! I work in a club—did I tell you? They have given me a lovely room right on top of the building. None of the members will sleep there because of the bombs. So I live in Mayfair, and I look over the roofs of London. Yes, and I have running water and a bathroom next door, and I'm all alone on the floor."

"Then it isn't so bad?" I said.

"But don't you understand that as soon as the war is over the members will want my room, and I'll have nowhere to go? The person I envy is Mme Paloma. There's a woman who holds her head high! I bet there's nobody on earth she's afraid of! It's amazing how strong money makes one, to be able to go into a bank and just nod in a condescending way to the clerk who hands you out a pile of clean new notes. I know what I'm saying. Last week, when I brought Mme Paloma the little parcel—the usual one, you know—she said quite suddenly: 'Well, Sally, come and have lunch with me in Soho!' and

as she had forgotten her money, she took me to the bank. You should have seen how polite they were to her, and how they counted out the money, and how she thanked them with a dignified flutter of her hand! That day I felt even poorer than before. But it was no use grumbling. We had a good bottle of wine and I felt better, but please don't think I'm jealous! I had my moment of glory in the twenties, but I was never able to make it pay dividends. We all have our moments of glory, but so few of us can turn them to account. About me! I was a ballet dancer, tiny to look at and pretty as a flower, but they used to poison our lives with exercises and rehearsals. We were always at it like tin soldiers—oh, it's not at all like being the chorus of the Gaiety! We worked for hours every day to be supple in the evening. My sister, who has taken to dressmaking in the midlands, was even better than I, but the ballet after the First World War had none of the enormous vogue it has now, and there were evenings when the audience booed us. My mother, who wasn't pretty, and who had no faith in herself, and therefore none in us, said it was silly to wait for prince charmings as in fairy tales and made us learn to sew. We practiced our steps, rehearsed at the theatre, and sewed during our time off. When they turn me out of my room at the club I shall have to go to the midlands and ask my sister for a job, and then I suppose I shall sleep on a couch in the living room and quarrel. Mine's just a wasted life, I suppose. I haven't a single gay memory. Love never made me a sign, or if it did I failed to grasp it. Just as in the ballet I was always afraid to make a false step, so in love I was always timorous, holding back, and now I spend every moment, every hour regretting, regretting. I ought to have been reckless. I should have taken the risk of having a child, of being abandoned. Bad luck doesn't last always, or at least I couldn't be worse off than I am now. Oh, consider, if you can, that I was young and pretty, dressed sometimes with the wings of a butterfly,

sometimes in the petals of a rose, or all in white like a swan, turning to the reds and gold of the footlights!"

Paloma and I came out of Woolworth's with our arms full of useless and delightful purchases, and made our way up Oxford Street. She had bought a hammer of the very heaviest kind and a lot of pint mugs. Thus we continued as far as Bond Street, where she exclaimed:

"Let's go to Bourne and Hollingsworth. It wasn't nearly so large when I came to England. One of my neighbors is a sales girl there. It would be fun to go and look at her working!"

With all our parcels this prospect was not particularly inviting, but suddenly Paloma said:

"Oh, and drat it! Let's go back to my place and have a cup of tea. I'm tired of seeing all these people running backwards and forwards like ants that somebody has walked on!"

She stopped a passing taxi and gave her address. Cabdrivers seemed to respect her by instinct, and her ways and nomenclatures amused them. Never once did I hear her talk of the British Museum other than the "Birtish Museum." She clung to these oddities in speech, though speaking fluent English. I laughed when I heard them, and then she, looking over her shoulder at me, would laugh also and say I was mad.

When we reached her flat we laid down our parcels, and made ourselves comfortable. She took off her shoes and put them in trees, saying:

"There's a thing, for instance, I've always been finicky about, putting shoes in trees as soon as I take them off. I like to keep them young without any wrinkles. My love of finery started with my shoes. I think it came from wearing clogs as a little girl. I hated them so much that you can be sure I made up for it when I had money of my own. I've kept nearly all my shoes. Look! I have dozens!"

She pulled back a curtain revealing tiers and tiers of shoes in trees.

"Sometimes," she said, "when I'm bored, I take them all down and rub them, and look at them, and I who have no memory left remember exactly how and where I bought each pair."

There were pink satin shoes and pointed shoes with *diamante* buckles and black satin shoes with high heels, but of Louis XV design, the soles very thin. Then there were court shoes and high-laced shoes in red leather that I remember the smart girls wearing in my street in Paris in 1917. Finally there were modern shoes with thick wood or rubber soles. It all looked rather like a museum or a theatrical wardrobe.

"It's a pity your feet are so much smaller than mine," she said acidly, "I'd have given you these horrible modern things. They give me the impression I'm off into the fields to ted the hay! Well, never mind, as you don't want them I'll take them to Burgundy with me. Somebody will be glad to have them."

On a shelf by themselves were a great quantity of trees waiting for shoes. I examined one or two, and found them made of fine wood, well polished.

"Take some! Take some!" she cried. "Take some with you! Anybody can see by the way you're shod that you're slovenly with your shoes! Look at yourself in the mirror, my rat! The ends turn up. You'll never get anywhere in life!"

"But if you're so particular about your shoes," I asked, stung by her criticism, "why are you so careless about everything else, about your stockings, for instance, that never match and have ladders in them?"

She looked at me in a superior way and answered:

"In my time men glanced at the tips of one's shoes, and then hesitantly moved their eyes upward. Do you suppose

we showed them our buttocks? Come along now and have a cup of teal”

We sat at the table in the bow window. All our parcels were piled on the sofa. It was nice to feel the glow of the fire and evening was beginning to fall.

She sat in her wicker arm chair, her long hands folded on her lap. She was calm and serene. Her eyes shone under lids partly closed. Her skin was dark and dull.

“It’s incredible,” she said, “how in growing older I pick up the attitudes and mannerisms of my poor mother! You may imagine her looking just as I look now. She spent hours seated by the window, her hands folded on her lap, quite still, as if she were sitting for her portrait. She was always dressed in black, grave and pale, and her hands, furrowed and fine, in which the blue veins stood out, emerged from long, tight sleeves, the lower part of which framed the backs of her hands in a point.

“She had been a widow for a long time.

“Josephine and I bought her the little house in which we were born, a little house amongst half a dozen, mostly farms, forming a hamlet above the town and overlooking blue undulating country, thickly wooded with fields partitioned like Irish fields with low stone walls, and distantly a cemetery with a very, very old church having a spire like a bent needle.

“When my father was still alive, and used to go off to drive his train, she would go and sit by the window, sometimes till evening, a basket full of holed socks beside her, but, of course, she never took one up, only stared out of the window. We girls went either barefoot or in clogs, and we didn’t have much to put on our backs, but she, our mother, was always very neat in a black dress with long sleeves, looking out of the window, and when she heard the whistle of my father’s locomotive, for there are only two trains a day on a single track, quickly she

would pretend to mend a sock or she would run to the stove and move the pots and pans about. But my father was up to her tricks, and coming through the door he would cry out: 'Don't pretend you're working, you idle woman!' and he would whistle a tune and cut himself a piece of lean from the smoked ham hanging up in the chimney, pour out a glass of wine, and go out into the garden where I would follow him.

"When long after that my sister Josephine and I would go to see my mother in the house we had bought for her, she no longer took any pains to hide the long hours she spent by the window, but she changed the position of her chair so that she could the better see the distant cemetery and its church with the needle spire, and she used to say:

"'Yes, my daughters, I am looking at your father, the poor man, and I've never loved him so much as since he's there under the spire. He was such a good whistler, and to think that it was because he whistled so nicely that I loved him and married him—for my unhappiness and his! Well, well, he's where he is.'

"And she would unclasp her hands and make a short tired gesture in the direction of the place where he lay.

"My poor Louise, it was she who had the hardest time. She had to leave the village because she was expecting a child of a man who naturally would have nothing to do with either of them. Happily my sister Josephine was already in Paris making her way toward success. So she went to Paris and I was the only one left at home. My mother never forgave Louise and they did not see each other again. Now Louise is a grandmother. The daughter she had in Paris, thanks to my sister Josephine, is married.

"It was at home before I left to join my sisters in Paris, that being always with my mother, who was so silent and unloving, and having no friends of my own age except Adrienne, who was in Dijon, I developed an affection for animals. In summer

as in winter I would be left alone, forgotten, eating what I could find in the kitchen garden, wandering wild about the woods, and I now think it a miracle that I wasn't raped by strange men, especially the charcoal burners. I was so chaste and innocent that at my first communion I believed the Virgin would come down from the stained-glass window.

"Still rather in this frame of mind I went to Paris. Josephine, who was only just beginning to do well for herself, had gone abroad. Louise was a domestic servant at Versailles. Her employers owned a chateau in Burgundy, and knew she had a little girl. They also gave her permission to put me up in her attic on the sixth floor. I spent a good deal of time in the kitchen, and when Louise climbed up to bed I went with her. But I still had the woods and fields in my blood, and I used to go for long walks in the park of Versailles. There, under the trees, far from everything, I met a boy of my own age, a gentle student on holiday, and we loved each other like young lovers in Roman days. Soon I lost my narrow waist. My poor Louise went out of her mind. I was taken to Baudolouque to have the baby, but at Baudolouque, as in quite a lot of Paris hospitals in those days, girls in my condition were made the butt of a survival of sixteenth-century sadism by the doctors. Not only did they refuse to lessen our pain, but they insulted us in their beastly medieval buildings.

"'You didn't yell like that, my girl, when the brat was being made!' shouted a doctor in the worst of my travail.

"Oh, my little rat, beware of our Latin doctors if your purse is empty! My sisters came to my help, but ten months later the baby died.

"I alone followed the coffin through the streets, alone except for the undertaker's assistant, who dropped behind to become repulsively familiar. What a miserable procession! Just the undertaker's man and myself. On the pavement two dogs

chased each other. It was spring and they were in love, courting.

“‘You see,’ said the undertaker’s man, ‘you’ll soon forget the little fellow in the box under the white cloth, and you’ll start again!’

“Well, I suppose he was right. What would I have done with the brat anyway?”

Paloma, I felt certain, had only told me part of this lamentable story, but I feared, because it had happened a score of times, that if I questioned her she would either abruptly change the conversation or brutally insult me. And on the whole I already knew too much. That tiny, delicate head of hers, the head of a dove, as the name implied, had cruel, cold eyes. Not a tear had she dropped for the child of her flesh. She had merely recounted the horrifying details of the dogs chasing each other on the pavement.

She made me feel uncomfortable. My throat was dry. I had a child who could at any moment be taken away from me, and that fear often kept me awake at night. At the slightest cold my anguish was unbelievable. I got up rather suddenly and taking my parcels from the sofa bade her good-by. Her hands remained clasped on her lap, and she never even looked my way.

CHAPTER VIII

I HAD forgotten all about Emma.

Suppose she really had fallen over a pail of soapy water and broken a leg? I hurried down Jermyn Street, turned to the right in the direction of St. James's Square, and there right in front of her building was a furniture van.

The door of the flat was open.

"Oh, darling, fancy you! How perfectly sweet of you to come! Would you believe it, I'm simply exhausted. I don't think I've had five minutes' sleep all night, and as I quite forgot to tell the removal people which day I wanted them, I waited in vain for the van. Yes, ten o'clock and nothing! Can you imagine? On a Saturday, too! Well, anyway, I telephoned to my little man at Maidenhead and explained that my tenant was moving in this evening. The angel set off at once. He's downstairs. Did you see him? You did? Isn't he a pet! Oh, but first I must show you the bedroom. I've already made the new tenant's bed."

The bedroom was quite changed. Clean curtains hung against newly washed walls. Gone was that odor of bulldog and face powder that I had known before. Anybody could see from the way she had arranged things that the new tenant was a man.

"Yes, my dear. What luck! A man—and he's single! Think of the trouble I would have had with a woman! The only thing is I do hope he gets a good first impression. That's so important, don't you think? The lady housekeeper is going to look after him. She'll make his bed, tidy up, and buy his rations. Oh, there she is calling me!"

Mrs. Dover, as thin as the broom in her hand, her feet hidden in vast carpet slippers, pushed open the door and announced:

"It's me, dearie!"

There followed some discussion about a pot of marmalade that Mrs. Dover had been able to acquire from the dairy in Jermyn Street, and which she was certain would win over the new tenant. Men of that kind, she said, do like sweet things. Marmalade for breakfast is important.

"Mrs. Dover," said Emma, putting a hand on my arm, "this is my friend, Mrs. Henrey, whose telephone number I gave you yesterday. Now first of all if something went wrong, and you couldn't reach me at my country cottage, please telephone to Mrs. Henrey, and, of course, there's another thing"—at this point Emma turned to me with the tenderest and most beseeching voice—"Mrs. Henrey would be sure to come and help you, my dear Mrs. Dover, if you were ill or overtired. You see, my dear, poor Mrs. Dover has had an operation."

"I have that," agreed Mrs. Dover.

"And you, love, could always buy the tenant's rations."

The furniture removers were waiting outside to know if there was anything else to take down.

"No," said Emma encouragingly, "except the brooms and the frying pan, and the wicker basket with the spout of the kettle sticking out. Take care of the basket, do, for there's a packet of tea, a bottle of milk, a pound of sugar, some cups and saucers, and a brown loaf."

As it was being removed Emma explained:

"I shall make tea as soon as we arrive. The place will be in a shocking mess. That's why I'm taking everything with me. Think of it! My tenants only vacated yesterday!"

"What train are you catching?" I asked.

"My darling," said Emma, "John and I are going with the furniture in the van. I shall sit in the new arm chair I bought

at Fortnum's, and John will be in his own bed with the blanket he likes best. We shall be very comfortable and I shall save an awful lot of money: the railway ticket, a taxi to Paddington, and another from the station to my cottage, and all the tips—fancy! Practically one can make up for the hire of the van, and then, when we arrive, I shall take the men into the cottage and give them tea and I expect they'll arrange all the furniture, which will be another saving."

"You're lucky to be going," I said. "In a month the strawberries will be ripe—and already I expect there'll be lots of flowers."

We all went downstairs, Emma, Mrs. Dover, and I. The men were there, seated at the back of the van with their legs dangling. At the sight of us they jumped down and produced a stool for Emma and John to climb on. She seated herself in the new arm chair with John at her feet. She looked out of breath and very tired, and I watched her feverishly light a cigarette.

One of the men pushed up the panel that hung down at the back and went to start the motor up. Now I could only see the top of Emma's head. She waved good-by and the van started off.

She was the first leaf to leave our branch. There only remained now in the Green Park Gabrielle, Paloma, and I—and, of course, Sally and the signora.

We were having the flying bombs and the V2's, those last convulsions before the end of the war. Often, in the day, when there were explosions very near, Gabrielle and I used to ring each other up and we were so relieved when the telephone answered. I think the nearest bomb was the one that fell in Hyde Park. Gabrielle rang me immediately, even before the last rumbling had died away. She really showed a great deal

of concern and affection for me, and then, after the first questions, she would talk about herself. She was sleeping in the shelters of her very luxurious block of flats, and by now, of course, she knew a great many of the tenants. She said they made a very joyous band, nearly all men, who were obliged to stay in town, and whose wives had gone off to the country. "They tell droll stories and play cards," she said, "and I almost forget to be afraid." But at heart I knew that she was dreadfully so.

Paloma also rang one morning. I had not seen or heard from her since she had told me the story about her baby's funeral. Now that the bombs were falling her voice was plaintive. I doubt if she was ever scared.

She began by informing me that the *Birtish* Museum had been completely destroyed, and that no building was left in Russell Square. Was I aware that she lived in the most dangerous corner of London, and that her chances of survival were of the smallest? Happily she always slept soundly, even though her friends, the Van Clocks, who lived above her, came in and settled for the night in her drawing room.

And the Van Clocks brought their friends.

The Italian priest who had sold her the cups and saucers with the colored pinafores, of which I now had two in my kitchen, had suddenly been released from the Isle of Man, where he had been incarcerated since Mussolini's declaration of war, and as the poor man's furniture had been scattered, and his house disposed of, he had come to lodge with the Van Clocks.

"They were all upstairs," Paloma said, "eating spaghetti, drinking red wine, and playing cards when the *Birtish* Museum went up. So they came to me, where I gave them a fresh bottle of red wine. There was also a Rabbi—the poor, dear, good soul. The Italian priest had made friends with him. Mme Van Clock, because of all these men of religion around her,

came to sleep on the Mme Récamier sofa at the foot of my bed. She carried a light blue moleskin bag in each hand, putting them down gently on my coverlet, and out of these jumped her two black cats. What will you, the poor woman cannot leave them upstairs! She takes them about with her everywhere. They curled up on my bed and went to sleep, but when a bomb fell their fur stood up, but they didn't move, whereas Mme Van Clock knelt on her couch with her hands together, exclaiming: 'Madonna mia! Santa Madre!'

Some days later, when Paloma and I had resumed our friendly relations, I met these Van Clocks. She had been a dancer, he designed stage scenery; and how she adored her Pépo, speaking to him only in Italian, delightfully lisping! All the other languages she knew were beginning to fade from her mind, but her native tongue remained clear and loving.

I believe Pépo was of a rich family and that he had defied a strict father to marry his little dancer, but as he was jealous he straightway made her leave the stage so that she would be for him only. They went from The Hague to Paris, and from Paris to London which neither would any longer leave, though they pined for the sun.

Their apartment was the same as Paloma's, except that what in her's was a spare room in which she kept her old corsets, her theatrical hats and parasols, and the onions and potatoes, served in the Van Clock flat to house the Italian priest. There was one room from which they practically never moved because it had a coal fire. The cats were either on top of the cupboards or on the window sill watching the pigeons that flew to Paloma's bedroom. The place smelt of spaghetti, tomatoes, and red wine, not altogether an unpleasant smell. Mamma, as Pépo called his little wife, sat in a high-backed

chair, her feet resting on a bar, and she went out as seldom as possible, nursing her arthritis. There was a little shelf with books written in many different languages, and when I remarked on them she said:

"Il mio Pépo est tellement intellizent! He reads in toutes les languazes. But it fatigues him, so when he does not read, he sleeps!"

Pépo used to be sent out to buy the provisions. Nothing entered the flat that was not of his choosing, and he was versed in all the *combinazioni* to obtain oil and meat. I used to come across him after this in Old Compton Street discussing the war with friends, looking at every pretty woman who passed, poking out his chest with a touch of bombast, but he was not ridiculous. He had a fine head carved out of ivory, dark, quick, mobile eyes, and he always wore an artist's black hat with a wide brim, and standing there looking at the women with a shopping bag at the end of his arm, he was not altogether undistinguished. His accent in French was charming, and in Italian had something of the hot sun. He loved to hear himself talk, and gave the impression that he knew all there was to be known. Perhaps he did know quite a lot about painting and the theatre. He was convinced that one day he would discover a Rubens or a Tintoretto, and be rich to the end of his days.

CHAPTER IX

GABRIELLE telephoned to say that her sister had died under the anesthetic. The news had reached her by way of Lisbon. Her correspondent added that she was to inherit the house and all that was in it.

She was terribly sad, but also very worried that she could not leave immediately to take possession of so many treasures. "There will be so many things to sell," she exclaimed, "and since these flying bombs prices have fallen enormously. Even the people with country houses don't feel quite so safe as they used to. And then there's the invasion!"

During the afternoon I looked in as usual at the Green Park, but there was practically nobody. The chair attendant had grouped his only customers near the shelters where the grass was tall and ripe. I was on the point of going home when Paloma's tall figure came slowly across the lawn.

"Oh, there you are!" I exclaimed.

"I lunched at the signora's," she answered. "I won't be boxed up in my flat and besides, Gabrielle has lost her sister, and as she was sad and afraid I took her out. Things are a little quieter now, though you should see my part of the world, and in the evenings the theatres are quite empty. Stephen and I were almost the only people in the stalls last night. It was Thursday, you know."

"Yes, of course."

"We still go out even in the raids. We always have done. There's something about London. One likes to go about. Dear Stephen! Dear London! I can understand people never wanting to leave it. The unkindest thing I ever did in my life was to my poor sister Louise."

"Ah?"

"Poor Louise! I thought of it just now in a roundabout way. After leaving Gabrielle I had a row with my butcher in Soho. He wouldn't give me what I wanted. He tried to saddle me with a bit of beef he had hacked off with a hatchet, to *me*, a customer of at least twenty years! He's mad! I'll never go back as long as I live. I've sworn it!"

She threw up a long black arm dramatically like Sarah Bernhardt, and continued:

"Oh, and let him go to the devil! I've had one up against him for years—on another score."

I held my breath not to interrupt, and she went on:

"It's a long time ago. I had gone down to Brighton with the other girls for a long week end. I quarreled with them the first afternoon, and to make them mad I left them in the middle of the street, saying I was going to the hotel to change my shoes, but instead I simply called for my things and took the next train back to town. They looked for me everywhere, thinking I had been drowned or kidnaped. Well, anyway, I got back to the Birtish Museum, and there I found my sister Louise in the arms of the butcher.

"I wasn't pleased. The idea that my flat was being used for a thing like that, all unknown to me, sent the mustard up my nose! But I couldn't say anything. I had given the slip to my friends at Brighton. I could hardly leave myself without a flat in town. So, as I say, I held my tongue, but I decided then and there to get rid of Louise.

"That summer when the streets were getting dusty we all

began discussing the holidays. Some were going to the seaside, others to Scotland, but I would go to Burgundy.

"My mother was dead, and I had already made a lot of alterations there, enlarging it, building a garden against the hillside, and hiding the view of the distant needle spire by the prettiest arbor of hornbeams in which, myself unseen through the cool foliage, I could sit and watch the people at the crossing of two country roads.

"The young men and the girls from the hamlet passed courting. The older ones stopped at the corner to gossip. Seldom did they move away without glancing up enviously at my house which was being improved every year. It was my plan to consolidate our interests at home. My brother Pierre, the image of myself, was already in the wine business, and besides the big house I bought for him in the town he used to come up to Montivent, the place where we were born.

"You can imagine in surroundings like that what I had to listen to! On one occasion I was inside my arbor and two old busybodies were looking up at my house, the one saying to the other:

"'Just think of it, my dear! One has London at her feet and the other has Paris at her feet! Well, I hope for their sake it lasts! I hope it lasts!'"

"I was so furious, my rat, I could have thrown a chamber pot at their ugly faces, and all that day I heard the words repeated in my ears: 'I hope for their sake it lasts! I hope it lasts!'

"Toward evening I shrugged my shoulders and went back to my arbor with a bottle of good wine. Then I went into the house and inspected the beds and the cupboards full of linen. I went down to the cellar and looked at the barrels which Pierre had put down, and I took a walk in my garden, my garden that was so much more beautiful than when Louiset, my lamb, had eaten all my father's young cabbages. There was a fine wall and peach trees. And still the venomous words kept

drumming in my ears: 'I hope it lasts for them! I hope it lasts!' Come, thought I, stop being angry with those witches. Don't waste your breath on them, but see to it, see to it as long as there's breath in your body, that it *does* last! And it will last! And, my rat, unless the Germans have taken everything, it has lasted!

"Well, now, about my sister Louise. I had planned, as you see, to spend my summer holidays at Montivent, so one day in July I said to her:

"The season is over, and, as you notice, all my friends have gone away. It would not do me any good to be seen any longer in town. So pack the trunks and let's go and drink a bottle of our brother's wine.'

"So she packed the trunks and we set off. She sat in front of me in the railway carriage, very demure and slightly ridiculous with her turned-up nose.

"My little Marie,' she said to me, 'will you swear that it's really for a holiday that you're taking me to Burgundy, just for a holiday and nothing else?'

"Look at the fat cows in the fields,' I said. 'What we need at home is an orchard with a cow.'

"I don't doubt it,' answered Louise. 'It would be a fine thing to have a cow in an orchard and a big garden full of fruit and vegetables, and more wine than even our brother has, but, my little Marie, promise that you'll bring me back to London. The cows can wait till I'm old!'

"Open your basket of provisions, Louise, and show me what you've brought.'

"Oh,' she exclaimed, 'you'll not be disappointed!'

"And she put out a white napkin and put the food on it, but between every mouthful she repeated like a child:

"Promise me, my sister, that you'll take me back with you to London!'

"I was too proud and far too wicked. My mind was made up,

and it amused me to see her so anxious, so unhappy, and yet so childish and hungry. When we had finished eating, and after she had put everything carefully away in her basket, seeing that she could get nothing out of me, and being quite exhausted, she sidled up into her corner and fell fast asleep. And then, do you know what I did? I looked at her and cried.”

CHAPTER X

THE FLYING bombs were finished, Paris was liberated, and Paloma received her first letter from Louise.

"Read it aloud," she said.

"'My little Marie,'" wrote Louise, "'I love you so, so much!'" Oh, thought I, it's nothing more nor less than a love letter. How well this girl who has been so abominably treated conjugates the verb "to love," but I went on reading: "'Your house is all right, and there's still some wine in the cellar, but there's not a lump of sugar in the cupboard, and we spend our days chopping wood.'"

There followed a list of neighbors. Hooligans had shaved off a young woman's hair because she had been friendly with a German. "'And our brother Pierre has become the acting mayor because the real mayor was accused falsely, our brother says, of wrong things, but as I like him I agree with Pierre, and I'm sure he's innocent.'"

"There!" broke in Paloma, "the good, kind girl. She loves him and so he can do no wrong! She was never angry with me for the things I did to her!"

I continued:

"'Adrienne often came over to see me at the beginning of the war from her house near Dijon. It was easy as long as she had gasoline, but afterwards it became more difficult, and there were German officers quartered in her house, but when she could come we drank a glass of wine to your health, and we thought of you during the air raids. And now there's something else, my sister, that I must tell you, something I must

confess to you, for I've been unhappy ever since. At the beginning of the war, when Paris fell, our poor friend Celia, who had that little shop in Paris, came and asked me to hide her. You remember that she was a Jewess, and in growing older she looked more and more like one. She asked for you, and when I told her you were in London she implored me to help her. She had escaped out of Paris by car, but it broke down and she finished the journey on foot. She had walked nearly a hundred miles and was quite exhausted. Well, my little Marie, I committed a base and cowardly crime. I confess it to you as I have confessed it before God. I was afraid to have her in the house, and I turned her away, And yet with Pierre in the town hall he could perhaps have given her false papers, but I expect he would have been frightened also. I watched her go—yes, it seems incredible, but I stood at the door and watched her go down the hill, wild-eyed, old, abandoned, disappointed, but resigned. To think they did that to Jesus and we blame those who did it to Him. My little Marie, will you ever be able to call me your good Louise again? No, the words would jar against my ears. She said she would try to reach Switzerland, but so many people were found dead along the lovely roads of France, dead of exhaustion or drowned, that I am sure, my dear sister, she never reached safety.' ”

“Well?” asked Paloma aggressively, “what would you have done if you had been Louise? Before you came I asked myself that question. What would I have done if instead of being in London I had been at Montivent? Fright, my little rat, might well have made me a coward like her. And you with your brat in your arms? What would you have done? Ah, it's not a pretty world.”

“Who was she?” I asked.

“When she was young a magnificent girl with ravishing eyes. She sang and danced, and had a really kind heart. Money meant nothing to her. She was always giving it away to those

who were less lucky. And then when she grew older she gave it all up and left London for Paris, where she opened that little shop in the Rue St. Florentin. She was still pretty in the face, though fat in the body. Whenever I went to Paris I was glad to look her up, but as soon as I entered her shop I could sense she was saying to herself: 'Will she buy something or has she only come here to gossip? Or is she going to invite me to go to a theatre with her tonight?' My dear, I was so sure she was asking herself all these questions that not to disappoint her I used to do all three. We talked a little about the old days, I bought a whole lot of things for which I had absolutely no use, and I took her out in the evening. And then good-by till the next time.

"I used to stay at the Grand Hotel in an apartment on the first floor that was so noisy that anybody would have thought the buses were going through my bedroom. I used to sit by the open window looking at everything in the street. There was nothing funnier than to see all the people crossing each time the gendarme blew his whistle—and then sometimes a latecomer would run after the crowd like a poor frightened sheep separated from the fold. Oh, and what an important air the gendarme gave himself! Why should I have tired myself walking through the streets of Paris to see the same faces everywhere? I like to take things easily. I want to live to a good age. You, for example, you won't live long. You're already all used up. You don't know how to walk. You run. I watched you cross the road the other day, and you might have been struggling against the four winds of heaven. You pay far too much importance to the small things of life; they are the ones that will tire you out much more than an illness or a big sorrow. Illness and sorrow mend and disappear, but life goes on. It's like your eternal knitting. You never finish with it. I hate to tire myself unnecessarily. If something displeases me I don't look at it. If it doesn't smell good I throw it away.

When people bore me I turn my back on them. When I'm tired I go to bed, and if I want a fire in August I light one. Oh, I've been jealous! I still am, but that also is getting less, for I find it tiring and silly. By the way, when you've finished knitting that scarf you might start knitting another for my dear, good Louise. I'll give you ten shillings to buy the wool!"

CHAPTER XI

AND THERE I was the very next day knitting a scarf for her dear, good Louise! I suppose I should have felt less pity for her now she had turned away the unfortunate Celia, but the war had made us all much less willing to judge others and there was a simpleness about her confession that made me feel like crying.

The bust of Nefertiti stood on my writing table, and whenever I looked at it I thought of Paloma, but a Paloma who, in spite of her desert-brown and mysterious eyes, was inextricably mixed up with the London of Edwardian days, when the hansom cab was only just beginning to give way to the motorcar.

I also found myself, as I went about my housework, singing a song that I had caught from Paloma, and which Georges Carvey, with whom all the women were apparently in love, used to sing in *The Quaker Girl*:

Say, will you not come to the ball?
Who will not answer the call,
Join in the maze of the waltz that whirls
Gallant young lovers and laughing girls?
All of you come to the ball,
There will be welcome for all,
Chance for a dance and romance
At the ball, at the ball.

The chance of romance? Perhaps it was that angle of Edwardian times that was so intriguing. Paloma loved and hated in an unreasonable feminine way, but most women have secretly dreamed of having the sort of success that happened

to Gabrielle Ray or Denise Orme, or to Paloma, prettier, if we can believe Mr. Stephen, than all of them, whose admirers filled the stage door with different colored carnations.

I was still surprisingly ignorant about the important phases of her life. I was reasonably certain that at one time she had married a wealthy Viennese hotel owner, who had died in America. Had she gone to America herself? I think not, and yet even now I am not sure. It never struck me that she had gone much further than across the Channel till on this particular afternoon.

I rang at the door, and after a long time she opened it.

"Ah, it's you! Come in!"

She spoke without friendliness, though I was obviously not unwelcome. She looked interminably tall in a bright blue dressing gown, her skin rather yellow, but her eyes bright. She added:

"I'm going back to bed."

The gas fire was full on, and in front of it stood a table with a napkin and the remains of lunch for two. A woman in stockinged feet with a small dog beside her was sitting on the Mme Récamier sofa. She had kicked off her shoes that were on the carpet.

Her name was Mrs. Jarvis.

She had been staying at the flat, I learned, for several days already, sleeping on the big sofa in the bow-windowed room. The visit was an annual one. She lived in the north of England, where her husband was a modest jeweler and watch repairer. While I was being told all this she put on her shoes, took the lunch things into the kitchen, came back again, opened the window, and said:

"I'll be back in time to make tea."

"That's right," laughed Paloma, "to come back with tea is a sure way to my heart."

As soon as she had gone Paloma made herself comfortable against the big pillows and said:

"Well, what did you think of Mrs. Jarvis?"

"She looks very comfortable and honest," I answered, "and a really nice sort of Englishwoman. I'm sure she must make her little watchmaker very happy, but for the moment I can't quite see the bridge between your world and hers."

"She makes excellent pastry."

"I don't doubt it."

"And though I try to spoil her when she comes to stay she pays me back in the kindest ways. She brings me tea and toast, for instance, in bed."

"Was she pretty?"

"Yes, but not deliriously like her sister."

"Oh! Who was her sister?"

"The chorus girl on my left in *The Quaker Girl*. Her name was Grazia, not her real name, of course, but in those days we used all to adopt exotic names, Grazia, Paloma. . . . It looked better on the programs. Actually she came from Macclesfield or Wigan, I wouldn't know—some place like that in the midlands or in the north—but she was very dark, and could pass for the Spanish type. We were no friends, and so when I say she was one of the prettiest girls I have ever seen it gives me no pleasure, but it's the truth. She and I received more flowers than all the others together. Then one day, at the height of her success, having as many suitors as years to her age, she married a coffee planter from Brazil, and disappeared.

"She wrote to us quite often but nobody believed what she said. So many things happened in those days. Especially when girls went off with foreigners. There was the one who married an Italian count who turned out to be a fraud. Grazia went on writing for a long time. She said she had a son, then a second, then a third. We used to laugh at her, saying that she must have fallen on bad times, and that with all those brats she was

simply trying to put a brave face on things. But when we wrote and told her so she answered: 'There's no need to pity me. I've a house with a lot of servants, and I'm far better off than you girls!'

"She worked us up into such a state that between shows I took a liner and went to Brazil."

"To Brazil just for that?"

"Why not, as I wanted to know?"

"Well?"

"Grazia was waiting for me on the quayside. I had only to take one look at her husband to recognize in him the most persistent of all her stage-door admirers, the one who gave the largest bouquets of carnations. Here he was, fatter, in the full heaven of delight, adoring, and holding by the hand his three little brats all dressed like princes.

"I would have turned back immediately but I was surrounded, fêted, and taken off to a carriage by the whole family talking partly French, partly English, and partly Brazilian, laughing, black as niggers under their white hats.

"Their house, my dear? It was a palace! I never saw much of the country around. I used to stay with Grazia in a huge wicker chair sipping cold drinks or drinking black coffee just the way I like it. The only thing that surprised me was the way night fell suddenly.

"I didn't stay very long. She had succeeded better, so far, than any of us. She was happy, a mother, and loved by all her family. Oh, I know what you're thinking, my little rat! That I was jealous? Of course I was, a little, and I was sore to have laughed so much at her, and then to find that she was the cleverest. So, you see, when English girls say: 'Those sort of fairy tales don't happen to us, only to foreigners!' you need only tell them about Grazia.

"Her sister, the one you've just seen, never profited by Grazia's good fortune, and, in a way, perhaps it's as well. One

needs to be cut out on a grand scale by nature to grasp certain situations, and to lead them to a successful conclusion. My sister Josephine was born to be a great lady. If I had not been ruthless, a defect or quality you blame in me, I would not be where I am. A woman does not succeed with half measures any more than a man does in his business. My poor Louise was a saint, but she could never have walked into a restaurant under our big hats without taking fright. She was not born for it. The first time I had to do it I was horribly nervous, but the sort of men who invited us out in those days were instinctively kind and bighearted. My first admirer was one of the greatest merchant bankers in the city, who took great delight in the conversation of women, and was never vexed or bored by their quarrels and their jealousies. He kept open table at Romano's and Gatti's, and when any of the girls found themselves with a broken rendezvous or an evening to spare they were certain of a wonderful time at the great banker's table. I was the newest and the youngest, the freshest, and hardly free yet of my Burgundian accent which he liked to say was redolent of Chablis. He it was who taught me all the finer points of the table, and I was intelligent enough to be an alert and willing pupil. He called me his young peasant girl, and he spoke French—though he was from the north of England—perfectly, and knew France much better than I shall ever know it. He ended by falling in love with me, and he used to say: 'Ask what you like of me. Say all that passes through your head, little peasant girl, but never call me an old man. You must not insult the years that God has allowed me to live. Be intelligent, little peasant girl, and remember that beauty without wit leads nowhere.'

"He died several years later, and he did not forget his peasant girl. Also, no day passes when I am not glad to profit by his lessons."

CHAPTER XII

NOW THAT the war was over, Gabrielle and Sally were the next two leaves to fly away from the branch. Gabrielle, with a light heart and a great longing for sunshine, left for the gay part of Europe whence she came, whereas Sally arrived under the Cornish elms with tears down her pale cheeks.

Everything was going badly for poor Sally.

The members of the club were calling for accommodations, and the housekeeper had seized upon the hitherto unwanted top floor. She was off that night for the midlands, where she would spend a month with her sister to see if she could earn her living as a seamstress.

Meanwhile Paloma received a letter from Adrienne with the Dijon postmark saying that she was on her way to London. She had owned a very fine house here before the war, and still had the furniture and some money in the bank. A day or two later Paloma telephoned to say that Adrienne had arrived by the Dieppe-Newhaven service, having made a long and exhausting journey through the newly swept Channel between the mine fields. I was invited to come and meet her, and found a plump little woman with a fresh, open face, hair dyed with henna, gay, malicious eyes, and a great deal of fun and liveliness in her talk. She was perched on high wooden soles, and wore a hat as tall as the Eiffel Tower. Paloma said that when Mr. Stephen had taken them both out to supper at the Berkeley everybody had tittered at this as yet unknown Paris

fashion, but Adrienne said it was just as strange for her to walk back into the fashions of 1939.

Seated in a deep armchair with her back very straight, Adrienne talked with great gusto, making gestures with her hands. Her wrists were weighed down with chains and bracelets of gold, whose redness shone in the evening sun. We both admired these ornaments, and were told that in Paris things made of gold were then all the rage, but Paloma, in order to bring back the conversation to herself, said:

"Of course what I like best are bracelets made in the form of serpents with emerald eyes."

"My poor rat," exclaimed Adrienne compassionately, "you're talking of forty years ago. They were made to go with long dresses with draperies."

Paloma crossed her hands and set her lips. She was hurt and resentful, waiting for the moment when she could get her own back. Adrienne went on:

"How wonderful to be back in London! How I dreamed of it during these six years buried in my country house in Burgundy! Of course, I've come to live here. I'll just go back to Burgundy for a few weeks every summer."

Paloma unwound her long fingers, and said slowly:

"A fine idea if you can find somewhere to live. You'll see how easy that is!"

Having given Adrienne this depressing information Paloma went into the kitchen to make the tea. Her friend bent over the cups and saucers put out on the tea table, and blowing away a thin layer of dust murmured:

"She's just the same as ever. Mad as a March hare. But how old she has become, quite dried up and wizened. I can't tell you how lovely she was, sparkling like a fire with something unearthly like a goddess." Adrienne put the cup down with almost an air of relief and added: "How jealous I used to be of her! Well, it's finished now!"

Paloma came back with the teapot and looked at us suspiciously. I sensed that my presence was suddenly a source of irritation to her. She didn't like Adrienne talking to me behind her back, and Adrienne's greater youthfulness, at least in appearance and mind, though much less striking to look at, tended to put Paloma on occasion at a disadvantage. She was still smarting under the affair of the bracelet, and everything Adrienne said about Paris was so different from Paloma's preconceived notions (as, indeed, was the case with all of us who had spent our war in London) that her whole conversation quickly annoyed her. Paloma lived in a dream world of her own. Sometimes she just idly thought back to the days and nights when her remarkable beauty brought the rich and the brilliant to her feet, at other times she liked to glide through Soho with a shopping basket and her wallet filled with pound notes which she distributed like some Roman empress visiting the bustling streets of the capital in disguise, giving either to those in need or to people she had known during her career. She had never been unaware of the war but it often escaped her memory. She was often genuinely surprised to learn that her favorite cheese was unobtainable because nothing any longer came from France. She was unreasonable, but so quickly turned to praise and generosity that you will still hear her name mentioned with fervor in shops like King Bomba, and I think it would be no exaggeration to say that of all the ghosts in Soho hers remains the grandest and most vivid. Adrienne had undoubtedly proved herself a far better businesswoman; only later did I learn that her house near Dijon was a considerable estate. She was much more in touch with the world than Paloma and, as I have already tried to convey, her cheeks were still bright and rosy with life instead of being the sunken parchment of an Egyptian mummy like Paloma's. But I never thought that Paloma could be judged by ordinary standards. During her moments of lofty dreaming she gave

proof of a profound philosophy and a very deep knowledge of human nature. Her conversation often consisted of a series of maxims which surprised one by their unexpectedness. One knew that they must be the result of long reflection, and I occasionally had the strange impression of listening to the poet Ovid declaiming the rhythmic lines of his Art of Love. Her complete contempt for money often made me wonder if her reserves would last out, but in this, of course, I was completely wrong. She could comfortably continue buying bundles of asparagus and baskets of strawberries, and then give them away to the first person she met because she had changed her mind about wanting them, to the end of her days. She had managed that thing which so few of us ever attain to, a sufficiency of money for all our desires. In this she was fully as happy as Socrates.

She had invited Adrienne to stay with her, but Adrienne, having managed a country estate, was in the habit of getting up early, running into the garden to give instructions to the gardener, then down to the cellar to inspect her wine, and so forth, untiringly through the day. So at seven precisely Adrienne was already up and making coffee in Paloma's kitchen, with the radio full on.

"Quick! Quick!" Paloma exclaimed on the telephone one afternoon. "May she find a place of her own! Think of it! I who never wake till ten."

After a week end at Brighton Adrienne decided she would take a flat there. She had, like Paloma, so many happy memories of Brighton, and during her six years in Burgundy she had never had a glimpse of the sea. For a fortnight, helped by a charwoman, Adrienne scrubbed the floors and washed down the walls of an apartment overlooking the front, and when Paloma, eaten up with curiosity, went down to see her, she found her friend gay as a linnet because she had become slimmer in the waist with so much work, and was at last in a

place of her own. For a month we heard no more of Adrienne. Already Paloma was beginning to think about a trip to Burgundy. She spoke more often of Louise. But the journey was always being put off. Was it because Adrienne would be in England while Paloma was in France? Did she think that Adrienne had designs on Mr. Stephen!

Then one day Adrienne came up to town, and I found her with Paloma in the park. She appeared less certain about wanting to live in England.

Paloma folded her hands contentedly and asked:

"Is it that things are not all you would wish them to be in your apartment at Brighton?"

"My apartment at Brighton is charming," answered Adrienne, "but when I've done the housework I've nothing more to do. At home in Burgundy I plant apricot-trees, I graft, I'm always in the garden. It quite breaks my heart to go and buy vegetables in Brighton when there must be so many in my kitchen garden. After six years of country life a flat, even in Brighton, is a small place to live in. I shall go back to Burgundy for a holiday and then I shall decide."

She left us to go to the hairdresser, and Paloma said:

"You see, my rat, Adrienne thought she was going to find the Brighton she remembered twenty years ago, and I who want to go to Burgundy hope I shall find everything as it was when my mother had just died. But when I hear Adrienne talking about a thousand francs as if it were only worth a few shillings it makes me wonder if I shan't find things very strange. Still, I must go and see my house and Louise. When I consider that at one time of my life I used to go home every year. Adrienne and I often went off together.

"Adrienne was grand fun. I'm always remembering little things that we did, and then I laugh all by myself. It's not that we ever did anything important. This urge always to do important things is quite modern. People like you who tire your-

selves out writing, or knitting, or sewing would probably think our amusements were rather trivial, but if we succeeded in life it wasn't altogether by accident, and I dare say our lines of endeavor were just directed differently. You over-serious people remind me of Adrienne's niece, Pauline, who was so angry that day at the Paris railway station."

"You haven't told me anything about her yet," I said.

"We were going back for our holidays and Adrienne had sent her a telegram to meet us at the station. You know what I am with string bags and parcels! Going into a restaurant or driving through Hyde Park I had a far better deportment than all your so-called ladies today, but there were little traits of peasant character that would come popping out, and one of them was to surround myself on the slightest journey with baskets and parcels. I might have been going to market at Beaune with a goose under one arm and a bundle of carrots under the other. Adrienne was just the same. On this particular journey we had more than usual. There were no passports or customs in those days, and as soon as one arrived anywhere porters came running up to help. We had bought presents for all our relations and friends, so that when we arrived in our respective villages nobody would think us mean.

"When Pauline saw us stepping onto the platform in Paris with all the produce of Soho, some of it in carrier bags, she exclaimed: "Oh, Aunt Adrienne, how can you! People will take you both for unsuccessful emigrants!" She refused to kiss her, and when we reached the barrier hung back, pretending not to know us.

"Adrienne was not at all pleased. She remembered that it was with her money that Pauline was receiving a brilliant education in Paris, and was hoping to take an honors degree at the Sorbonne, and so, turning round, she smacked her on both cheeks, saying:

"Take that, you silly wench! And that, *snobinette!*"

"This punishment in front of all the people at the barrier made Pauline more ashamed of us than ever, and the poor young girl didn't know where to look.

"We had so many parcels that we had to take two cabs. Adrienne traveled with the parcels and I followed with Pauline. When we all arrived at the Grand Hotel in front of the superb uniformed porter we discovered that Adrienne's parcels had multiplied. She had spent the journey maliciously rearranging the things we had bought, making two parcels out of one. We laughed our heads off, and Adrienne began to count every parcel with the strongest Burgundy accent. Suddenly we looked down and saw poor little Pauline in tears. Adrienne left all her parcels on the pavement and put her arms around her. The next day, when we were ready to leave, Adrienne had done up all her things in beautiful traveling bags so that her niece should no longer be ashamed to travel in our company. And the funny thing is that nearly all Adrienne's prettiest gifts were for the sweet silly girl."

Paloma unfolded her hands and continued:

"It wasn't only because we were on holiday or not in England. Everybody felt the need to relax sometimes and play the fool. London was just as amusing. An evening out in the West End had not its equal anywhere. It wasn't considered wrong in those days to be lighthearted, or for Gertie Millar, the queen of us all, to pass bejeweled, and in her most costly dress, through the adoring crowds outside the stage door. Talking about Adrienne reminds me. One Saturday evening—it must have been before *Our Miss Gibbs*—a band of us had spent an evening at the Bodega around a bottle of port. Then we had gone on to the Café Royal for a rump steak and a bottle of champagne. Earlier in the evening Adrienne and I, possessed by the devil, had bought ourselves some colored felt slippers lined with swansdown. We carried our treasures around with us in a paper bag and still had them with us at

one in the morning when we said good-by to the other girls in Piccadilly Circus.

"Adrienne and I, arm in arm, walked down Shaftesbury Avenue. The pavements were still crowded, and London had no thought yet of going to bed. Suddenly Adrienne said to me:

"'Aren't your feet beginning to pinch in these high heels?'

"'Why, yes,' I answered, 'now you speak of it, I think they do.'

"'Well,' said Adrienne, 'what do you say to putting our slippers on?'

"'A good ideal' said I, and there we were, leaning up against the side of a pub, taking off our shoes and trying on our colorful slippers.

"Down Shaftesbury Avenue we went in our immense hats, wearing felt slippers. It was magnificent. One needs to be a woman to know the relief of slippers after shoes that pinch! But suddenly Adrienne stopped and asked:

"'Aren't you tired of wearing the same color? I am. You give me a blue shoe and I'll give you a pink—but, be careful, we must each have a pink shoe on the outside.'

"And there we were outside the Palace Theatre changing shoes again."

She stopped suddenly, as if vexed at having said too much and exclaimed:

"It all sounds so silly now, doesn't it? But there was something in the London of those days that will grow up, with time, into a legend."

Adrienne came back from the hairdresser, her hair beautifully set. I seemed to see her through quite different eyes. She said to us:

"My children, I have taken a great decision. I shall get rid of my furniture, settle my affairs, and go back home in time for the grape harvest."

Then turning to Paloma, in her long black dress fastened up the center, with the cameo of the Virgin at her throat, she said:

“And you, my rat, if you want to enjoy your house in Burgundy, see the flowers in your garden, and eat the jam which your poor Louise has filled your cupboards with, and drink the wine your brother Pierre has put down in your cellar, you’d better think about going too.”

CHAPTER XIII

RATHER late in the afternoon there was a ring at the door and I found Sally, looking very small, with a sewing machine in her arms.

"Sally!" I exclaimed.

She entered softly, like a mouse, and having put down the sewing machine sat down and said nothing.

"When did you come back?" I asked.

At this her lips trembled and she began to sob quietly. At last she said:

"Six days ago."

"How is it that I didn't see you in the park?"

"I saw you several times, but I didn't feel like talking to anybody. I was too miserable."

"Come and have a cup of tea," I said. "Did you have any lunch?"

"No, but it doesn't matter."

"Then I'll fry you some eggs and bacon. That will be better than nothing."

She followed me obediently and sat herself in an armchair in the kitchen, and with the tears still flowing said:

"I went to my sister's in the midlands but I couldn't do it. Sewing all day in a stuffy room full of damp from the irons, smelling of moist wool and dyes, and other people's perspiration—no, I couldn't stand it any longer. I want to get up and shout when I'm enclosed in a small space. Whatever will become of me! I was so happy during the war!"

"Where are you staying?"

"With a girl I worked with at the club. She and her husband have a flat in Pimlico. It's awfully small and I have to sleep on a divan in the kitchen. I pay a pound a week, but as the husband is a cook, and comes home for two or three hours in the afternoon, I have to go out so that he can be in the kitchen. Besides, I wouldn't like to be in the place alone with him. They smoke all my cigarettes and eat my rations, and as he spends all his money on the dogs I brought away my sewing machine thinking they would try to sell it. If you don't mind terribly I could leave it here for a few days."

"What do you do in the evenings?"

"Last night wasn't too bad. We all went to the pictures, but as I had to pay for them my savings won't last very long."

"Have you seen Paloma?"

"Yes, I went to her flat with an umbrella I had borrowed one rainy day before I left for my sister's. Would you believe it? She insulted me for having kept her umbrella so long. She said I had tried to steal it, and she had asked her solicitor to write to me about it. I would never have thought her so cruel!"

"Paloma is of peasant stock. She was brought up on the soil. You should read Zola to understand the peasant mind."

"I don't need to read Zola to understand that now I'm without a job and haven't a place I can call my own she doesn't want to see me again."

Sally disposed of the eggs and bacon. She dried her tears and became quite bright again.

"Let's go and look at the sewing machine!" I said.

We put it on the table, but it was such a very old model that I could not make it work. Sally also tried without success.

"But, Sally," I said, "you must have used it. Can't you remember?"

"No," she answered. "I've never used it. I bought it at Brixton market one day thinking it might come in useful during

afternoons at the club, but every time I put it out I saw the tops of the trees in the Green Park, and then I thought of the birds and how much they must be longing for some crumbs. So off I went. The Green Park is so pretty, isn't it? The air is so sweet. I used to meet Mme Paloma or you, and in no time I had forgotten all my troubles. Oh, it's lovely living in the middle of town! I wish I could sell this sewing machine!"

"You may not get much for it."

"I don't mind. Even if I only make a few shillings it will be money in my purse, and will at least save me the trouble of storing it."

"Where shall we take it?"

"I don't mind," she answered, "but let's go on a bus!"

She was laughing at the idea of a ride on a bus.

"I don't think we ought to go to an ordinary dealer," I said. "They might only give you a few pence. I think we ought to go to a theatrical shop. A sewing machine like this might come in useful for a play or a film."

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed, like a child. "That's a wonderful idea. Let's go to Covent Garden!"

Twenty minutes later we offered the sewing machine to a dealer off Long Acre. Sally was very anxious, hoping nobody would ask her if it worked. She kept her fingers crossed. Would he buy it? Would he not? Yes, he said he would buy it, and gave her two pounds. An assistant came along to try it and made it work perfectly. I was quite covered with shame, but Sally was delighted. She had two unexpected pounds in her purse, and was full of new hope for the future.

CHAPTER XIV

ADRIENNE had left, and Paloma was quite decided to follow her. I think Mr. Stephen had also brought his influence to bear. He saw her growing very old, and thought it wise that she should spend her last years among her own people in Burgundy. The peasant girl would return to the soil after nearly half a century spent in London.

She busied herself with her preparations in a strangely aloof and forgetful way. She was very sad, and I used often to go and comfort her. It thus happened that while emptying the contents of a wardrobe, she pulled out a long coat of fine black cloth, all braided, and having the prettiest cape. You cannot imagine what a lovely thing it was. She held it up for me to examine and said:

"My sister Josephine lent me that one day in Paris when I was cold. I had got it all ready to send back to her. Then she died."

I had never been able to discover anything about her sister's death. Did she die happy or unhappy, loved or in despair? Only Adrienne could have told me, but I was never left long enough alone with her to ask this question. We closed the cupboard and the boxes and took the coffeepot into the drawing room to sit for a while in the bow window. When she was seated like her mother, erect, and with her hands on her lap, I asked:

"Were you terribly sad when you lost your sister Josephine?"

"Yes, terribly," answered Paloma. "She was so full of life that I had never imagined she could die."

While still remaining reticent on the thing I most wanted to know, she went on:

"She had been resting for rather more than a year in a Paris cemetery when I suddenly felt a great desire to take her home to Burgundy to be with our parents in the churchyard that my mother used to gaze at from her cottage window. Sitting in my arbor at the crossroads I had heard people talk. There was always somebody to say that the reason she was buried in Paris was that she had died shamefully or, at any rate, alone and penniless. As if it mattered the least what the old witches said! But I took it to heart, and in spite of the expense I decided to bring her back.

"My brother Pierre was not very pleased with the idea. He wanted to be left alone, and he was getting a little tired of the bickering and jealousies and notoriety of his three sisters, living or dead, only he forgot, the dear man, that if he had a flourishing wine business it was thanks to Josephine and me. But he was married, the only one of us to be married, and had his eye on the mayor's parlor. That doubtless was another reason why he didn't want a lot of fuss about Josephine.

"As you know when I want anything it generally gets done, and the mere fact that it was going to annoy my brother Pierre seemed an extra reason for doing it. He was obliged to give way, and a date was fixed for Josephine's funeral in our native village.

"I spent several days in Paris dressed in full mourning making the necessary arrangements. Actually I was wearing the coat you've just been looking at, the coat that belonged to her, and on the appointed day Josephine and I, she in her rich coffin, I in her black coat with the cape, took the train for Burgundy.

“It’s a difficult journey. One takes a fast train to the junction at Laroche-Migennes, but from there on, for a matter of four hours, one bumps along a single track through the most beautiful country you can imagine.

“I was looking out of the window of a first-class compartment at the head of the train. She was in a wagon just behind the tender. We were almost next door to each other. I was alone, not very gay, but not terribly sad either. She had already been dead a year, and I was getting used to the idea. Besides there’s so much to see out of a railway train, and when the woods and the rivers and the trees are those of one’s own province, so close to the place in which one was born, and when one is still young one doesn’t remain sad very long.

“I was just thinking that it was a pity she could not be seated in front of me reading the names of the little stations—Maison Dieu, St.-André-en-Terre-Pleine, Sincey-les-Rouvray—when there was a great commotion, and I found myself with my nose in the cushions of the seat opposite. When I got up and righted my hat with the black veil I noticed that the wagon was hanging over to one side. We had gone off the rails, and it was a wonder that we had not fallen quite sideways. I got out carefully. Some men were running down the embankment. Josephine’s coffin had slid out of its van and lay snugly at the foot of a hedge. It looked very small all alone with the trees and the sky above.

“We stayed on the track in the middle of this magnificent open country in the spring, with the violets and primroses everywhere, and as there were only a handful of passengers and we had two hours to wait we began to talk to one another. People wanted to know who was in the coffin, and when they learned that it was my sister Josephine they asked me a hundred questions, and I became quite a celebrity. At last everything was put right and the coffin carried back to the wagon.

“My brother Pierre and all the notables of the village were waiting for us at the station. He gave me a very cold welcome, and exclaimed:

“‘Living or dead, those hussies have always made me lose my time! Two hours we’ve waited like a lot of idiots on this platform and do you realize that before I can get down to rolling my barrels again we’ve still got to bury her?’

“After this he became quite calm, and the procession passed slowly through the village street.”

CHAPTER XV

THE CHAIR attendant came for his twopenny ticket. He said:

"You're about the only one of the regulars left, ma'am. You and the tall lady in black."

"She's going tomorrow," I said.

"Go on!" he said meditatively. He looked disappointed. Many times I had seen Paloma crumple up a ten-shilling note and put it into his hand.

The Green Park was very crowded, but, as the chair attendant had pointed out, the customers were not the same. One felt they had come back from safer zones to see how many of us were left alive.

I was about to take some sewing out of my bag when a small, spectacled woman arrived stealthily from behind my chair.

"You gave me quite a fright, Sally!" I exclaimed.

"I was making signs at you," she said breathlessly, "but you never saw."

"But why don't you take a seat and sit down?"

"No, no," she said, "I don't want to meet anybody but you. I've made a decision. The cook and his wife have been fighting. I'm afraid to stay with them any longer. I've an aunt who lives in a weaver's cottage. I'm going to stay with her, and perhaps I can find some work. This time I thought I'd never see you again. I've quite come to the end of my savings and I'm leaving on the night train."

I gave her the notes in my bag and said:

"Can't you stay a moment or two?"

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, "I must go. It's hard enough to leave all this as it is."

She looked around desperately at the people lying on the grass, at the dark foliage above them, at the birds drinking on the fringe of the lake. A Union Jack was flying from a white pole above the glistening façade on the Ritz. The distant traffic in Piccadilly made the sound of breakers.

"I'll write," she said hoarsely. Then she squeezed my hand and was gone.

Paloma came with long steps through the trees. She was also making her last visit to the Green Park.

"You're still young," she said flatly, after crossing her hands and looking fixedly in the direction of Buckingham Palace. "You can come and go, but for me a departure is a good-bye forever. It's no longer like it was when I used to say to my sister Louise at the station at Saulieu: 'So long! I'll be seeing you next year!'"

She said nothing more for a few minutes, and then suddenly:

"Do you see the man sitting on a broken-down chair to the left of the nearest tree—the man who looks rather like the King of Spain?"

"There isn't any King of Spain," I answered; "he's dead."

"Well, the dead one," she snapped. "Alphonso. Do you see him?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's never taken his eyes off you. He's fallen for you, my rat!"

"I'm afraid it's not a great compliment," I laughed, examining him in more detail.

"Fool that you are!" said Paloma. "What's in the cut of a coat? Admiration is the same whether it comes from a rich

man or a poor man. And if that one over there thinks you've got an amusing face, if he's noticed it, my rat, it's a compliment all the same. Nowadays when anybody looks at me I merely think my hat must be crooked!"

I let her go on like this for a moment. Then she exclaimed:

"Take another look at your admirer! He's like an old cat waiting outside a hole for a mouse. I bet he loathes me. Just to play him a dirty trick I shall walk home with you, and you shall make me a cup of china tea. You could even tell my fortune! I shall see if you're clever enough to spot a long journey in my cards! Come along now! If you refuse I shall know that you're interested in the King of Spain!"

We got up and crossed Piccadilly.

When we were almost at my door, she suddenly stopped and said:

"Go home! You can keep your tea, my rat!"

She had hailed a passing taxi, and I heard her giving the address: "It's behind the British Museum!"

This nomenclature invariably made me laugh, but for once, for the first time, the joke didn't come off. I felt horribly sad.

CHAPTER XVI

WITH ONE thing and another, the war had been over five years before I was able toward the end of March to visit Paloma in her native Burgundy. Those of us who had known her wrote several times without receiving any answer. Some conjectured she was dead, but King Bomba told us from behind his spaghetti in Soho that she had been in communication with a London merchant about some wine, possibly on behalf of her brother Pierre, whom she had always pictured as rolling his barrels between his cellar and the station.

I knew practically nothing about what Michelet describes as the "amiable and viniferous Burgundy" which, in his opinion, should be seen in this very month of March, when the vines, withered and leafless, are indistinguishable from the brown stakes that support their narrow arms. I set aside a week for this visit, and without any warning set forth for the Gare de Lyon one cold sunny afternoon after an excellent lunch with friends at a *brasserie* in Montmartre.

The journey was a difficult one. Saulieu, though an important relay on the old coaching route between Paris and the Riviera, is considerably to the west of the main railway line which runs through Dijon. Rich people who winter in Monte Carlo or Nice run their cars into the various posting inns to enjoy the famous culinary specialities like meat pies and snails. The shining long-distance motor coaches, whose seats are upholstered like armchairs, and which take one to and from the land of tangerines and mimosa also make a point of

stopping there, but the little railway sleeps on the edge of a forest, and has only a single track. If one misses the eight o'clock train out of Paris in the morning there is nothing but the one after lunch that arrives at Saulieu when most of its citizens have retired for the night.

My visit to Paloma accordingly took on all the aspects of an adventure. The first two hours of the journey was by the Paris-Lyons express in the luxury of its warm coaches, looking out on the prettiest riverside scenes of the Seine, one's person tingling with enjoyment at the thought of this romantic journey south. Soon the Seine gave place to the Yonne, famous for its trout, and then evening fell, and the heavy train pulled up at the junction of Laroche-Migennes, where we were to change into what the French call an *autorail*, a narrow steel car painted red, in which all the passengers are seated together as in an omnibus. Two of these cars, smelling of diesel oil, were coupled together, the extreme front having a wide expanse of glass which to those seated behind, gave an uninterrupted view of the track ahead. Here then I took my place, the driver hidden I know not where, and soon the headlights were put on, and the car vibrated forward, steel against steel, the rails and framing country swept by the two powerful beams that plunged through the night, blinding a multitude of insects and sending rabbits scurrying across the sleepers.

This was the first time I had looked out on a ribbon of steel as a car driver peers at the road in front of him. We cut through deep forests in which glowed the braziers of charcoal burners. Between forests there were hills on which the vine stretched bleak and naked. Rivers flowed torrentially. Halts and stations had picturesque Burgundian names. Castles and farms with stone walls and nail-studded double doors were caught in the sweeping light of our head lamps. Inside our dimly lit car passengers sat very erect with baskets on

their knees and parcels piled above them. They talked as Paloma talked, slurring their a's into e's and enlivening their conversation with unusual and pungent epithets. A little girl on the seat transversally behind me, after much exertion, brought her face level with my cheek. I looked around into the depth of her black eyes whereupon, frightened, she ran to her mother's knee.

After two hours, having reached Vermenton, and it being very dark without a moon, we changed *autorails* for the third and longest part of our journey. The names of the stations seemed almost friendly from the number of times I had heard Paloma speak of them—Lacy-sur-Cure-Bessy, Arcy-sur-Cure, Vezelay, and Vault-de-Lugny-Sermizelles—but by now I was so shaken up by the vibration of the steel coach, so tired and hungry, that I began to examine the possibility of breaking my journey for the night. I was now seated in front of a young sailor and his girl. They told me they were going to Avallon, where they both came from, and that there were excellent posting houses where the food and lodging were renowned.

They had no trouble to win me over to the beauties of their town and I left the train with them. The night smelled of newly sawn logs, and the air was so clear and strong that it made one almost giddy. I found myself in a wide tree-lined avenue about half a mile long, lit by the warm red glow of lamps in windows. This in turn opened out into a promenade or mall, once belonging to a monastery, at the end of which was the main street with a choice of very fine posting inns. After supper and a fair night's rest, and with a most succulent breakfast of steaming coffee and brioches oozing with butter, I left my lodging while it was still dark to catch the early train for Saulieu. Dawn broke over marshaling yards, filled with newly sawn wood, and distant fringes of forest. I minded less in daylight the shaking of the *autorail* speeding ahead on

painted gold, but to my surprise I saw no vineyards, the most famous being to the north and southwest. This part of Burgundy borders on the Morvan and is so rugged and cold in winter that the wolf and wild boar come down from the hills. Spring arrives three weeks late. The sun shone on orchards with high hedges. Hay was strewn over the short winter grass for the cattle. Silver water lay over the lower fields. Pussy willow was breaking from soft velvet bud into flower. The little stations came and went. Here were St.-André-en-Terre-Plaine and Sincey-les-Rouvray. Somewhere along this single track Josephine's train had derailed, sending her coffin between the roots of the willows where the primroses and violets were not yet out. Paloma had sat by the edge of the rail feeling suddenly important because of the questions put to her by her fellow passengers. I knew now that the things she had told me were true, and I gazed eagerly out of the window as if the fleeting countryside held in some strange way the essence of her soul.

The station was quite small and I was the only person to get out. The name Corbigny on the front of a ramshackle omnibus in the courtyard reminded me of a story in that dictation book which Paloma had found in my flat the day she came to lunch. Alphonse Daudet, I think, described market day at Corbigny with the cattle, the fruit, and the vegetables, and as a little girl his rich sentences made me dream.

Here I was in the Avenue de la Gare, very straight, bordered here and there by small houses, but often merely flanked by open fields. Behind the wide window of the little Café de la Gare was an orange tree the size of a man from whose dark branches hung a mass of golden fruit, belying the cold wind that smote my face, giving an extraordinary welcome to this little town that lay still unseen ahead of me.

At the top of the avenue the main road ran at right angles.

There was a ruined tower of imposing strength, the Tour d'Auxois, with a wide pond formed by part of the moat. Opposite the pond, on the other side of the road were three old coaching inns—the Hôtel du Petit Marguery, the Hôtel de la Côte d'Or, and the Hôtel de la Poste. This last, the Hotel de la Poste, was slightly out of alignment so that one viewed it from an angle. Great double doors led to the courtyard. The windows were prettily curtained and the half-timbering shone in the sun. A former chef of the London Savoy had until recently been connected with it, and one could see immediately that it ranked among the most renowned hostelries of Europe.

I was very politely greeted and taken to a room full of gay chintzes on the first floor with a bathroom attached to it. This little apartment was warm, smelled of beeswax, and was charmingly lit. The chambermaid had come to attend to my wants, and I began to question her, asking her what sort of winter the hotel had enjoyed and if business was good.

"Oh, no, madam," she answered, "things have been quiet on the Riviera, but perhaps they will pick up at Easter."

Her Morvan accent struck me agreeably, and I asked her where she was born.

"But no further away than Saulieu!" she answered.

"Then," said I, "perhaps you know a Mme Saquet, a tall dark lady who lived for many years in England?"

"You mean Mme Siller," she corrected, "whose brother M. Pierre Saquet lives twenty yards from here next to the Hôtel du Petit Marguery?"

"Exactly," I exclaimed, having no doubt that Paloma Garcia, Marie Saquet, and Mme Siller were all the same person. "How far is Montivent from here?"

She went to the window, and pointing to the street leading to the town told me that Montivent lay about a mile above us in open country, and that I could easily walk there in twenty minutes. I felt greatly relieved. Paloma was in good health,

and I would soon be with her. Then a shadow crossed my mind, and I asked:

"The person I am a little anxious about is her sister Louise?"

"Oh, madam, poor Mme Louise was taken to the hospital several weeks ago."

"In Dijon?" I asked.

"Oh, no, madam. Here, in Saulieu."

As soon as she was gone I unpacked my bags and made a little parcel of the chocolate and the tea I had brought from London for Paloma, and though it was only half-past nine I decided to set off immediately for Montivent. Trucks thundered almost continually along the main road that ran past the front of the hotel, many carrying vegetables from the hot *Midi* for the markets in Paris. They followed one another like express trains between the castle bastion and the three hotels. The sun was now rising in a clear blue sky as if urging passengers to continue their journey to a hotter sun and even bluer skies on the Riviera. High above the castle wall stood a lone pine tree and a cross of black wood with a gold figure of Christ on it.

The road which the chambermaid had pointed out to me was at right angles to the one along which the trucks were speeding, and clearly led up into the town. Wide, with big paving stones and flanked by picturesque old houses with red brick roofs, it was charming and sleepy. A few white cats slept on the sunny side, and a blacksmith was shoeing a horse. Further up hundreds of long dried sausages were hanging by short strings from the ceiling of a pork butcher's shop, and the window of a pastry cook's was filled with buttery brioches and chocolate cakes.

The town itself was very old, and the shopping street, which was very narrow and pitted with trap doors in the pavements leading to cellars, encompassed it in a semicircle like a rainbow. Farmers came in for farming implements, or

to have their hair cut, making it a world quite apart from the modernized coaching inns and busy main road at the other end of the town.

A climb of barely five minutes led me to the last houses on the hillside. The little town nestled underneath; fields and woods emerging out of winter into spring, scintillating in the cold air under the bluest sky, stretched up to where a hamlet crowned the hill, the narrow white road leading over the top of it. This was Montivent.

Over the brow of the hill and down toward me came an old man behind a donkey. When we came level with one another I asked him which of the houses belonged to Mme Siller. He was very old, and there was white hair on his wrinkled face, making him look like a native of Tibet. He had a round, woolen cap and a scarf of many colors, and he looked at me for a moment or two with kindly blue eyes. Then he turned around, and pointing up the hill to a long low house, or what from where we stood gave the impression of being several houses, with whitewashed walls and a black roof, like the old coast-guard cottages on the cliffs between Rottingdean and Newhaven, said:

“That’s the one with the arbor in front.”

“Ah!” cried I. “The arbor! I was forgetting the arbor!”

He seemed surprised at this outburst and continued to make things even clearer.

“There’s a path that turns off to the right by the cattle pond.”

I thanked him, and he prodded his beast and went on down towards the outskirts of Saulieu. This low white house with its black roof was not at all like the one I had pictured. I had imagined it tall and square with high red chimneys. This one was more countrified, more peasantlike. I thought it prettier than my dream. Soon, to my left, the pond appeared with a black goat tethered to a stake and, to the right, a path that

after passing Paloma's house zigzagged back in the direction of the town.

There was a slender white gate, a letter box, and a bell that tinkled prettily, but not loud enough to disturb anybody. I pushed open the white gate, making a little more noise with the bell, and down a sloping path came an Alsatian that started to bark, though not ferociously, and then at the top of a flight of three white steps, having an iron rail on either side, against the dark interior of the cottage, she appeared.

Very tall, very thin, her delicate masklike features above her black dress, with the zip, her neck still as gracious as a bird's, a hand poised on a rail, she remained a moment motionless with surprise. Then she cried:

"Oh, would you believe it! Would you believe it! Oh, my little rat. What a lovely surprise! Come in quickly. I was just going down to lunch in the town."

I was quite shaken, not only by seeing her again, but also because I had feared she would either not recognize me at all or wish to turn her face from everybody and everything connected with her past. Her first words and the bright look on her face fully reassured me. I followed her through a narrow corridor into a room on the right. By the door hung a Union Jack, and the room in which there was a porcelain stove and a settee was more reminiscent of her flat near the British Museum, both by its general appearance and furniture, than of a cottage in Burgundy. Pinned to the wall was a photograph of myself. So she must occasionally have thought of me during these five years! The picture whose edges were beginning to fade told me all I wished to know. My heart beat with joy.

"Isn't my little house just too comfortable for words!" she exclaimed. "Go and warm yourself. I swear you must be frozen! Everything is just as you knew it in London: the same

stove, the same settee, the same cushions, and here you are, as large as life, to make the picture complete!"

"I wrote to you so often," I exclaimed, "and you never answered."

She threw up an arm deprecatingly and sighed.

"They all did," she said, "but you ought to know that I never answer letters. All the same, I liked getting yours. I read them to my brother Pierre. See, here they are!"

She opened a small writing desk by the window, the same window by which her mother presumably sat, waiting for Paloma's father to come back from driving his train, looking out across those fields surrounded by low stone walls toward the needle spire of the cemetery church which, true enough, was visible to the right of the town.

While I was searching for these landmarks made familiar by her stories, she had squeezed behind the sofa, and was bending over something which I surmised was a safe. I knew her well enough to guess that she was filling her purse with money to give me a real Burgundian lunch, but I carefully refrained from turning around. She had broken into the chorus of 'Will you not come to the ball?' to give herself a countenance, and closing the safe came back to me, saying: "Now what on earth was I looking for in that corner?" Being too experienced to fall into the trap I said blandly:

"Perhaps you dropped something on the floor?"

"Oh, well," she answered, "you know how bad my memory is! Don't let's bother any more about it!"

With her black bag under her arm she went out into the corridor, saying:

"You may as well see the rest of the house, but hurry! My brother doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Circumventing her writing desk I saw open on the top of

it a cheap pad on which she had scrawled in a childish hand:

MY DEAR STEPHEN,

I have not seen you for such a long time! I am sure you have replaced me with a younger woman, but beware, she is bound to be greedy and hard. You will never find anybody who loves you as I do. Good-bye, my dear Stephen, I was only telling my brother Pierre yesterday that I was sure you had fallen into the hands of an intriguing hussy. My poor Louise is in hospital. Do you realize, my dear Stephen, how lonely I am? I love you.

Your

PALOMA

I hurried into the corridor after her, where she stood waiting for me under the Union Jack fluttering in the draught. There were some fox-hunting scenes and a humorous colored plate, very popular thirty years ago, of a hen whose eggs had all produced ducklings. The cock was surveying its new family with surprise and anger, while the hen hung her head in shame. We laughed at this very old joke, and she said:

"It proves that even in the animal world the unfaithful get found out!"

She gave me her bag to hold while she unhooked her black Persian lamb coat. The bag which we had bought together in Bond Street for a great price during the war was already worn and greasy. When it was new she had lent it me for my first trip to liberated Paris. I had worn it on a visit to Mme Schiaparelli, whose daughter Gogo gave me a bottle of "Shocking," which upset in it. When I gave the bag back to Paloma she sniffed it and said: "This is an amazing bag, my rat. Smell it! I have never smelled anything so good! It must be made out

of the skin of a sacred calf!" And she added: "Don't laugh. You're much too young to know!"

I now saw that her house did indeed consist of three small cottages made into one. Each had its own front door, each its own kitchen, all leading into one another like the apartments in Kensington Palace. The center room, rather dark and musty, had a four-poster with cretonne hangings, a grandfather's clock, and a huge peasant wardrobe made of carved black wood.

"In this room," said Paloma grandly, "we were all born. Yes, my rat, in that double four-poster bed."

"And is this where you sleep?" I asked. "I see the bed is unmade."

"No," she answered, making another of those helpless gestures, "it's since my poor Louise is in hospital. I've never had the patience to make a bed. My poor Louise! It's sad but I pay a lot of money for her. She's treated like a queen. This next cottage is hers. Yes, nobody has made her bed either since she's gone. This is English furniture. I sent it to her long ago from a shop in Tottenham Court Road. Three houses, my rat! Three entrances and three exits—one for me, one for my mother, and one for Louise. I haven't time to show you everything. Let's close the doors and windows and go down to lunch!"

As she went to close the window Louise's black cat that had wandered miserably about the house since his mistress had gone to hospital, jumped into the room. Paloma addressed him as Tommy, saying it was wise to show up because she had forgotten all about him. The cat let himself be stroked, putting up his tail and looking at her timorously with split yellow eyes, but at the approach of the Alsatian he put himself on the defensive.

"Come!" said Paloma, soliloquizing, as was her custom. "If I shut you up in the house you'll want to go out, and if

I put you out you'll catch a chill with the cold wind! Ah! This wind!

"Le vent souffle dans les ramures,
Dans les ramures et dans les roseaux,
Entendez vous ce doux murmure?
C'est la chanson du ruisseau."

This very old French song must have been sung by her mother. We went out by Louise's kitchen, the door of which she closed with care, giving her key a double turn, though the two other doors, those of her mother's house and of her own, were wide open. We now found ourselves at the extremity of a rather wide gravel platform, several feet above the level of the lane which led down to the first houses of Saulieu. At the other end of this platform, opposite Paloma's own door, was the famous arbor whose leaves, brown and curly, clung to the wire frame. Inside was a broken garden chair, like the ones we used to sit on in the Green Park. A well with a hand pump and a lilac tree in bud completed the terrace, which now sloped down to the slender white gate, with its letter box and tinkling bell, which had first attracted my attention from the road.

Here we were in the lane, stopping every now and again to exchange a few words with the neighbors whose gossip Paloma used to overhear from her hiding place in the arbor. A very old woman was climbing painfully up the path with an arm through a wreath-shaped loaf of bread. She told us that she had been washing in the stream all the morning and that the water was icy cold. We had scarcely left the old body when Paloma, looking back over her shoulder, exclaimed:

"Now what did I close just now in Louise's house? Was it her window or her door? I remember quite well closing something. I don't forget doing things. No, what I forget is why I did them. Now let me think a moment! Oh, yes, there was

the cat. It must have been the window. I'd better go back and close the door."

"Come, Paloma. You turned the key twice in the door."

"Do you really think so? Oh! And what the hell! Let's go and eat and drink!"

A little woman passed us with a white terrier.

"Good morning, Mme Siller," she said.

"Good morning," answered Paloma condescendingly, like the lady of the manor, "I'm glad to see that for once you're letting your poor dog run loose." Then, when she had passed: "She doesn't deserve any pity, my rat. She keeps her little dog tied up all day. Ah, and here's my Lucie, who is only three, but is sent out into the hedgerows to pick dandelion salads for her mother! Good morning, Lucie!"

Lucie looked up with large round eyes. She had a smocked pinafore and a pointed knife between her rosy fingers, with which she dug the roots out of the mossy ground.

The road went down steeply, and now there were cottages on either side. A very old woman with a black knitted shawl, spectacles, and tufts of white hair on her chin, stopped for a little talk, but she mumbled so, having no teeth, that I understood nothing. "Poor woman!" said Paloma softly. Then, defiantly: "But it's her fault! She's a lazybones!"

"But, surely, at her age?" I objected.

Paloma waved her arm in the direction of a brick building and said:

"That's the slaughterhouse, my poor rat. I can hear the cries of the unfortunate animals from my house. Even if somebody offered me a palace here I wouldn't have it. The poor little lambs. Just look at the pretty field all round their place of torture! If you only knew how sad it is to see them frolicking so happily, eating the tender grass, and all to be murdered the next day!"

Paloma stretched her delicate neck and sighed. We came

upon a tannery with skins hanging in the yard, and an acrid smell hid the lovely country air.

"That's all that is left of the poor beasts," said Paloma, in a rich plaintive voice. "The bandits make the prettiest buttons with their hoofs and their horns."

Now we were entering the oldest part of the town. A door opened and a bevy of little girls came tumbling out of school, their clogs echoing over the paving stones. Narrow crooked streets with medieval houses nodding toward each other greeted us. The kennel, as Gay and Pope would have said, ran down the center of the street with trickling water smelling of drains. Wide-open trap doors at the foot of each pretty house showed immense cellars full of merchandise and wine, into which one was always on the point of falling head first.

We turned into a street which, if possible, looked even older than the others and across which, from window to window, washing was hung out to dry. The corner house had a pillbox tower like a castle, and in an alcove was a carved figure in stone of the Virgin. A woman was rinsing sheets in a tub. She looked at us coming, unwilling to make any sign of recognition till we were level with her, and her hands beat the water unnaturally, for she was self-conscious. When we were quite near Paloma cried good day, and after this greeting the woman, obviously relieved, went on gaily with her work.

"In that house, my little rat," said Paloma, "a long, long time ago, there lodged a beautiful girl. She lived on the first floor, and made the prettiest picture as she leaned out to tend the flowers in her window box and her canary in its cage. Everybody knew her, and the street had never been so full of men walking up and down as since she had come to lodge here. They used to arrive from both ends of the street—you see how short it is—and when they would look up and make a sign, an almost bestial sign, like this . . ." And suddenly Paloma laughed thickly and threw her loins forward as I had

seen men do in the rue des Violettes at Blois (a similar street to this one) when I was a little girl.

"Rich men and poor men, beggar men and thieves, old and young," Paloma went on, "good-looking or hunchbacks, they all came down the street. Then . . ."

She looked at the carved figure of the Virgin in the pillbox tower and said:

"What stories that statue could tell!"

"What happened to the pretty girl?" I asked.

"She died," said Paloma. "She was too kindhearted, and nobody had taught her to say no. But what a lovely girl! Of course, all the prettiest girls are country girls. It's in places like this you find them, but woe to those who don't fly away, who try to build their nests in the country!"

Well, certainly, Paloma must know about that. We left the street of love and came upon a small haberdasher's, in the window of which was some cheap lingerie hung on cardboard mannequins.

"Look at all this lingerie," cried Paloma suddenly. "You can buy it for next to nothing. They don't know the value of things here. They haven't traveled like you and me. I don't suppose they even realize that money buys less than it did before the war!"

I looked at her incredulously, and I think she must have realized that I found it hard to swallow so much naïveté. She continued abruptly:

"Here's a baker. I'd better buy some bread!"

We had reached the shopping street that, curving around, hemmed in the old church. Having entered the baker's and chosen a long French loaf, Paloma turned the money in her purse and offered the bakeress the smallest coin she could find.

"Forty francs!" said the bakeress stiffly.

Paloma, who a moment earlier had imagined that the people of Saulieu had not yet waked up to the fact of rising

prices, was now incensed that bread no longer cost what it had done before the 1914 war.

"Thieves! All of you, thieves!" she exclaimed, putting back the loaf. "I'll have my brother buy my bread."

A moment later she had dragged me into the grocer's where she was received with great politeness.

"And how are you, my dear Mme Siller? I've just had a consignment of the very best sardines and some biscuits from Nantes made with Normandy butter." He put his finger and thumb delicately to his lips, his eyes glistening, and added:

"I don't need to say anything else, do I? Not to a gourmet like you, Mme Siller!"

"Very well," said Paloma gaily, "put a tin of each in my bag, you ruffian!"

Then going up to him in a confidential way she whispered something in his ear.

"Certainly, Mme Siller! Certainly!" he answered. "You can have a hundredweight if you like!"

He handed her a carton of sugar, which for the last three years had been a free market in France, but Paloma could never quite believe it, and she resorted each time to the same pantomime as in London during the war. Soon her shopping bag was so full that she decided to leave it with the grocer and pick it up on her return. The butcher was at his door, and the Alsatian nearly knocked him over to get into the shop but, like the grocer, the butcher, at the sight of Paloma and her dog, became the most affable of men.

"Can I tempt you with a little calves' liver, Mme Siller?" he asked, bowing. "It's really superb today!"

"I can't stop now," she answered importantly. "I've a friend who has come all the way from England to see me, and I'm taking her to lunch, but cut me two nice slices and I'll pick them up on my way home."

We walked on over uneven paving stones, she dragging

her feet a little, and suddenly passing her arm in mine as she used to when we went off on our grand tours of Oxford Street, looking into Woolworth's. She talked rather loud, stopped from time to time, expecting perhaps to see a London taxi rounding the end of the street, but instead would come a peasant woman or a group of children. She seemed to know many of them, but there was none who did not know her. Her legend had spread to every corner of the town. All greeted her: "Good day, Mme Siller," and some who might not otherwise have dared to talk to her, used her sister's illness as an excuse to do so. Everywhere she went people asked her: "How is your good sister Louise?" and invariably she answered: "But she is very well, I assure you. Just think of it! She has nothing else to do but let herself be pampered!"

Old women in black peered at us from behind windows decorated with gay geraniums. The little town struck me as immensely picturesque though exclusively inhabited by old people and children.

"Here is the church of St. Andoche," said Paloma. "I was baptized here. It dates from the Emperor Charles the Great in the eighth century, and down the street, my rat, walked our Saviour Jesus Christ."

I looked at her dumbfounded. Clearly the church was very old. By a freak of memory she had placed the Emperor Charles in his proper century. There might be some connection between the emperor and St. Andoche. As for our Saviour walking through the streets of her native town, why should she not believe it? To the good Christian is not Christ everywhere? But so rapidly did her mind jump from one subject to the other that she was next asking me:

"Aren't you thirsty, my rat?"

"I can well wait till lunch," said I.

"Not a bit of it," she answered. "I must introduce you to Fifine Bizot, a buxom young woman who owns a wineshop at

the corner of this street. My brother is not expecting us to lunch till half-past twelve. Follow me!"

Narrow paved streets twisted and forked into each other mysteriously all with their gaping trap doors and escutcheoned fronts, so that in the end one had the impression of following a chapter in *The Three Musketeers*. Opposite an old curiosity shop, whose wrought-iron work cluttered up half the street down which no modern traffic rolled, was the wineshop on whose curtained and beflowered façade one could read the name Bizot. As we pushed open the door a bell tinkled faintly as if disturbed from a long sleep. A young fox terrier leaped around Paloma's Alsatian. A zinc bar had a collection of pewter jugs, a barded pitcher, newly spun cobwebs between tall ferns. Beyond this bar which gave little impression of being used was a long room with tall windows at the far end, through which one could see a picturesque courtyard, the backs of medieval houses, shrubs, and queer gargoyles. The room had ocher-colored walls, with calendars and posters, a number of long pine-wood tables, and a great collection of singing birds in cages. One smelled potatoes frying, and in front of the fire sat an old woman eating.

Fifine Bizot was a peroxide blond with blue eyes. She wore dark blue slacks and a beige pull-over with a rolled-up neck like a racing motorist's, and as she came forward to meet us she and Paloma embraced each other theatrically. The old lady eating was her mother. I was introduced as the lady from England. I think Paloma was pleased to show me off.

"Just think! She has come all the way from London to see me!"

This information was imparted languidly but with clear enunciation. Then turning to the aged mother Paloma asked breezily:

"What's that you're eating? Beef?"

"Oh, no, not beef. Never again, Marie, will I eat beef as

long as I live! During the war, my dear Marie, we had a clandestine slaughterhouse and ate beef till we were sick of it. Rump steaks every day!"

She shook her frail limbs at the thought of so much suffering, and opened a toothless mouth to get on with what she was eating. Suddenly Fifine looked at Paloma's tennis socks and exclaimed:

"Oh, Marie, you're out in those dreadful things that you use for pottering about the house! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Paloma snapped her fingers.

"Don't talk like a fashion magazine," she said. "Why should I worry! The man I love is over the sea and far away, tra-la-la, tra-la-la! Keep your silly terrier from annoying my dog and give us a gin and vermouth! and you, mother Bizot, stop looking at me and get on with your pittance. You'll be eating cold!"

The dogs came to lie down at her feet, Fifine went to uncork a bottle of gin, and the old lady bent down over her plate. There was a moment's silence during which one could hear a lovebird breaking a seed with its sharp beak. Then Paloma's voice rang out:

"My little rat, Fifine is longing to get married, so if ever you come across an Englishman . . ."

This joke was not much to Fifine's liking, but at any rate Paloma had avenged the poisoned arrow about her tennis socks. The old lady, obediently eating, laughed rather stupidly. Paloma, as usual, had emerged the victor. She finished her drink, and handing her purse, full of thousand-franc notes, to Fifine said grandly:

"Here! Take what money you need!"

And she turned her back on her to show that in money matters she could be superb. People robbed her, of course, and on occasion, when this happened, I am convinced she

knew all about it, but she was always too proud to flicker an eyelid, content to reserve for herself the more glorious role. Fifine took a one-thousand-franc note and scrupulously counted the change. It was perhaps her way of avenging the barb about the English husband. They parted with a thousand compliments.

"Poor girl," said Paloma, when we were alone in the street, "she didn't like it when I told you she was longing to get married, but I've no pity for her. She was one of those difficult girls. No man was ever good enough for her, and now she's left high and dry! An old, old story,"

We had reached a rather picturesque square bordered with trees. Merry-go-rounds from Autun were being put up in preparation for Easter, and there were some beautiful caravans with the most luxurious fittings, plugged in to the town's electric supply so that the ambulating show people could cook on their very modern electric stoves.

Now suddenly, ahead of us, I recognized the three coaching hotels that faced the ruined castle—the Tour d'Auxois. Paloma asked me where I lodged, and when I told her she said it was very good, but that she and her brother always lunched at the Hôtel du Petit Marguery, which was owned by a friend of theirs who had once worked at the restaurant of that name in Paris. She pointed out the house on the opposite corner where her brother lived, and she said rather majestically (we were on higher ground and looking down):

"Yes, my little rat, that corner house is mine also. I bought it many years ago with pieces of gold."

She sighed, and with her arm still outstretched added:

"It's exactly as I tell you. I own the richest site in Saulieu."

The house where Pierre and his wife lived was indeed a very beautiful house, and I supposed the terrain must be worth a fortune.

"Yes, indeed, several thousand francs," said Paloma, reck-

oning in money of half a century ago. We now resumed our descent and crossed the main road. The Petit Marguery had an enclosed terrace, with some shrubs in green tubs and a gay awning. The restaurant was not nearly so luxurious as the one at the Hôtel de la Poste, but it was very crowded with people who looked as if they were natives of the town, and they were obviously both critical and appreciative of their food. Paloma, taller by a head than the bowing, rotund owner, sailed through the restaurant, where the clatter of knives and forks made a curious symphony and penetrated into a second room, smaller than the first and presumably reserved for the more important guests. In a corner sat a distinguished little man with a beard, his napkin tucked into his collar and spread over his chest, who rose politely greeting Paloma. He was a magistrate.

“Good morning, Mme Siller,” said he; “the wind is from the north, but it’s not such an ill one since it brings you to lunch today.”

Paloma acknowledged these polite words with infinite grace. The magistrate and the former chorus girl who had been loved so desperately by noblemen and merchant bankers radiated an exquisite courtesy.

Now suddenly into the room came a tall, thin man with dark, shining eyes, a small nose, tiny ears, sallow cheeks, and the same skin of burned sand as Paloma. Very erect and dignified, he wore a long shepherd’s cape that, fastened by a clasp under his chin, flowed behind him almost touching the ground.

Paloma introduced us. His small brown hand took mine, and almost immediately, as if he had been a magician, the table was covered with appetizing and rare things to eat—excellent hors-d’oeuvres, thin slices of Saulieu dried sausage, goose *pâté*, and hard-boiled eggs in an unbelievably good mayonnaise. The wine went round and warmed us, making us

all feel extraordinarily happy. Pierre knew all about me. His sister must have discussed us all at length. I kept on looking at him with fresh interest. Though his collar was frayed, and his suit, once black, had worn green in places, Pierre was full of distinction. He had lordly manners, and talked in a quiet voice making much use of old proverbs and country sayings so that it was clear that Paloma's nobility, though undoubtedly polished in Edwardian society, had at least a foundation of peasant charm. Never had I seen people less affected. I no longer recall in what connection he said suddenly: "Our time on earth is momentary, is it not?" He had ordered a most delicious lunch, the most tender chicken, a saddle of lamb, a succulent salad, though neither he nor his sister ate more than a few morsels. Straight as oak trees, they played gracefully with their forks. On the other hand, they drank deeply like people accustomed to wine.

Since our arrival the road between the three hotels and the pond at the foot of the Tour d'Auxois had become very animated. Four of the most luxurious motor coaches you can imagine were drawn up by the low stone wall, and quite an elegant crowd of visitors could be seen through the window taking counsel as to where they would lunch. Several fine private cars had also arrived, some bearing British number plates, others American, Italian, and Spanish. We had thus become as in stagecoach days a relay for traffic between Paris and the Mediterranean, and soon we could hear around us a great number of languages.

I understood now why Paloma liked to lunch in this restaurant, which bridged the distance between her cottage in the depths of Burgundy, wooded and lonely, and the bustle of the great capitals of Europe, London, Paris, Madrid, and Nice and Monte Carlo. Her Alsatian (for whom she had taken two slices of lamb from her plate wrapped up in paper, and stowed with her money in her bag) went inquisitively and greedily from

table to table. While we were drinking brandy poured out of a bottle, in which there was a bull carved in wood—the *tau-reau Pompom*—a woman wearing a wide-brimmed black velvet hat, no longer young and much made up, explained to us after some prefatory remarks about the dog, that she was on her way to Nice, where she had a villa. Drawn out by Paloma, who liked to hear others talk, she said that business was bad on the Riviera.

“Only the South Americans have any money,” she said. “Times are hard and we, in Paris, merely work for the income tax and our stomachs. Ah, madam, gone are the days of maids, cooks and chauffeurs! Look at me, for instance. I prepare the meals at home and do the washing up. On the other hand, I was lucky to let my villa at Nice for much more money than I expected. There’s enough to pay for my flat in Paris and make this journey south. And then, as I didn’t let the whole of my villa, but kept two rooms and a spare kitchen for myself, I shall have a splendid holiday and only need to pay for my food. Well, good-by, madam, are you going south also?”

“No,” said Paloma with her aloof air, “I live here.”

She lifted her glass of brandy, enjoyed the aroma, and when the traveler had gone said:

“There’s a greedy woman for you, and always on the look out for a stroke of business, just like Adrienne or Gabrielle. Those women can never keep still. Anybody would think they had swallowed the multiplication tables, and all the additions and subtractions of their schooldays. What a lot of to-do in order to make sixpence! But there it is, they must try to look clever and in the know, the silly geese!”

“But I think they are quite right, Marie,” said her brother Pierre softly. “Not that I’m so very keen about money myself, only I must own it’s very satisfactory to take a little pile of notes and increase it month by month by the work of one’s

brain. It's so much easier to make money that way than by digging the ground, or standing behind a saucepan, or rolling a barrel of wine. For instance," he continued, turning to me, "when I was young I was apprenticed to a cook, so that when I went to Paris, as we all have to do here when we are poor, I got a job in a restaurant near the Bourse. Our customers were all members of the stock exchange. The owner's son was the maître d'hôtel. He left the change on the customers' plates to the waiters. Tips on shares, that's what he was after, and occasionally he passed them on to me. It's not that I ever gambled in a big way, but I repeat, it's very satisfactory to make a little money with one's brains."

"That wouldn't suit me at all," said Paloma. "It would require a deal too much reflection and would, as likely as not, prevent me from sleeping at nights!"

"No, indeed, Marie," objected her brother, "it was thus that I became a wine merchant."

"Of course," she agreed indulgently, "and now pour me out another glass of wine, and ask the waiter to bring us a fresh pot of coffee."

An old woman arrived selling papers, threading her way between the tables, offering her wares unsuccessfully. She came up to Paloma, whom she must have known always, stroked the Alsatian, and watched Paloma's eyes hopefully as Paloma's dog watched her when it had hopes of being rewarded with pieces of food. After a moment or two Paloma took a magazine from her tray and gave it to me.

"Here's something for you to read, my rat!"

Then she opened her purse and gave her a hundred francs. The magazine was three weeks old and I had read it already, but I thanked her warmly. The old woman talked very fast not to have to give back the change. Paloma, who was no dupe, dismissed her, saying:

“Off with you, hussy, and don’t go thinking you’ve had the best of me. I can read into your heart, and if I wanted my change I’d have asked you for it.”

The old woman slunk away. Pierre called for the bill, which I presume was very large, for he paid with several blue notes. Then he helped Paloma to put on her coat, and taking down his shepherd’s cape rolled himself into the rough wool with the most graceful movement in the world.

CHAPTER XVII

ON LEAVING the restaurant our cheeks were beaten by the wind. Hard indeed is the climate of the Morvan, but the sun was strong and the sky blue. The motor coaches were off on their next stage to Nice, and no sign of the visitors remained by the low wall at the foot of the gray Tour d'Auxois. Birds were chirping noisily in the ivy and on the fringe of the pond.

We followed Pierre, who was taking us to his house on the opposite corner of the Avenue de la Gare. The front room, very large and tiled, must at one time have been used as a wineshop or a restaurant. There were ferns on the tables and a map on one of the walls. Cool and dark, it was obviously not lived in. We had scarcely been there a moment when a door opened at the far end and a little woman in black, like a peasant, with a tiny wrinkled face, steel-rimmed spectacles on the tip of her nose, and the kindest expression imaginable, came forward to meet us accompanied by a very old white terrier, as fat as a sucking pig, that began immediately to fuss and bark around the Alsatian.

Paloma and the little woman in black embraced each other with a great show of affection, and I was introduced to Pierre's wife, Augustine. I own to have been somewhat surprised at finding Pierre married to this very old lady. Was it that Pierre had never struck me as being old himself? Both he and his sister seemed so very ageless, as if time had not been able to do more than highly polish their features, yellow and glazed like marble. Pierre, still with his shepherd's cape, led us into a long, narrow kitchen, from which one looked out over a multitude of small red roofs (the ground sloping prodigiously), on which walked gingerly several large, well-fed cats.

By the window of this long, narrow room was a long, narrow table covered with a piece of American oilcloth with white and red diamonds, and seated in front of a basket full of socks to mend was a woman who appeared even older than Augustine, a toothless old lady, very red in the face, with wisps of white hair on the upper lip and chin, her head enveloped in a black woolen shawl, bent, but not frail, and with eyes full of kindness and fun. At our approach she rose from her mending, arranging chairs to make us comfortable. She was Maria, Augustine's sister, and the one wizened and spectacled, the other red and expansive, made the friendliest couple, the most homely sisters.

The other end of the room was mostly taken up by a big kitchen range, shining black and glowing in the hearth, a scene one associates with Victorian houses. The thin master of the house peered into the fire as soon as he arrived and put some more wood in. A chair with an old blanket on it was placed right up against the oven, and on to this jumped immediately the fat terrier. She was in season and her name was Follette. Nobody seemed to remember her age. She was apparently very susceptible to the cold, and her master and mistress could always tell the state of the fire in the range by her proximity to it. When it was low she lay almost in it.

As soon as Pierre Saquet had attended to the fire he took leave of us. Augustine explained that while we had been at lunch a customer had called for some wine, and that he had gone to the cellar to bottle it. Maria made some coffee, and fetched a large bottle of vieux marc de Bourgogne. Next to the table there was a very tall cupboard, reaching almost to the ceiling, made of that dark, highly polished wood that has the effect of mingling this peasant furniture with the very walls of the house, and I think I had not even noticed its presence till Augustine pointed up to her favorite cat that was perched on the summit, looking down at us like a sphinx.

"She's a lady," said Augustine, "and spring is on the way. The cats you see on the roof are her suitors, but just now she's ruffled by your Alsatian, and I'm afraid she'll stay up there till you're gone."

I was beginning to revise my ideas about the French being cruel to animals. Under a row of hanging pots and pans was an osier basket with a fat hen in it. I said I supposed she was sitting on some eggs, and that she had been put there, near the warmth of the stove, for the chicks to hatch out the sooner, but "Oh, not at all!" exclaimed Augustine. "The poor thing must have been bitten by a rat. Her right leg was half severed. We ought to have eaten her, I suppose, but I hadn't the heart, so for the last three weeks I've been bathing the wound every day with ether, and now I think she's on the mend."

Augustine bent over the basket, and picked up a wooden eggcup which she held up smiling to the light.

"Oh, yes, she's eaten much better today. Really, I believe her appetite is coming quite back. I gave her a little braised beef this morning. I thought it would be fortifying, and, as you see, she's eaten it all! The great thing is for her to keep her spirits up. That's half the battle in a serious illness, don't you think?"

"Yes, indeed," I answered as gravely as if she had asked my opinion about an ailing child. "A good appetite is everything."

"That's what I say," said Maria softly. "And Augustine deserves to see her hen get better, for she has been quite wonderful with it. The first time she tried to put the bandage on the bird was furious, and pecked for all she was worth, but now, when she sees my sister arriving with the cotton wool and the ether, she looks at her with big round eyes, and doesn't move. Isn't that clever of her?"

The cat on the top of the cupboard continued to look down on us as if keenly interested in our conversation. Augustine covered her hen with a blanket so that she should go to sleep,

thinking it was night, and the white terrier bitch stole nearer to the fire in the black kitchen range. Suddenly Paloma woke up from a lengthy silence.

"Where's Pierre?" she asked in a voice full of annoyance.

"But you heard me explain," answered Augustine in a soft, reasoning murmur. "He's had to go to the cellar to get some wine for a customer."

"Bother the customer!" said Paloma. "Go and fetch him! I've never heard of such manners!" She added petulantly: "I want to go home!"

"Very well, my little Marie," answered Augustine. "Please don't get angry. I'll run down and fetch him."

But suddenly Pierre himself appeared in the doorway. He looked at his sister and said calmly:

"Here I am, Marie! I'll take you back to Montivent, and then if your friend from London would like to meet our sister Louise, she could come with me to the hospital."

A few minutes later Paloma, Pierre, and I were standing in the sunshine in front of Pierre's house, looking across to the caravans and the merry-go-round.

"Go about your business," said Paloma to her brother suddenly: "I don't need you to take me home. I'm going to have a sleep."

She left us as if we no longer counted in her life, and was soon sailing like a tall black ship across the square. Then Pierre turned to me, asking anxiously:

"How do you find her? In the head, I mean? Do you think she's very changed?"

He tapped his forehead meaningly.

"I think she's wonderful!" I answered. "Life in the country seems to have done her a lot of good. She was never more charming nor full of life!"

"I know! I know!" he said. "That's not exactly what I mean. You don't think she's become—queer?"

"But, my dear M. Saquet, ever since I've known her—that was during the war—ever since then, I say, she has been unreasonable, sarcastic, cruel, and jealous. On the other hand, she can be disarmingly tender and generous beyond belief. What I like about her is that she never has the reactions one can expect in normal people. She is adorable and extraordinary. Her strange personality is indeed unlike anybody else's, and judged by that alone, yes, I suppose she is queer."

"I was thinking," he pursued in his low, quiet voice, "that the bombardments you had in London might be the reason for her having become somewhat deranged. If it's not that then perhaps it's her age. She appears to forget entire chapters in her life."

"Yes," I agreed, "as far as I am concerned her past is largely a matter of guesswork. One day I think I understand, then I get hold of a new clue and I have to start all over again. I'm never sure whether there are blanks in her memory or if she has such a hold upon herself that though we spent days and days together she could prevent herself from saying what she wishes to keep secret."

"You are the only person who doesn't get on her nerves," he said.

"I know," I answered; "she once told me that."

"We are going to see Louise," he went on. "Age has robbed her of robustness, but she has a sweet and kind heart."

We had come to a large square in the center of which was a life-sized statue of a bull—the same *taureau Pompom* whose effigy I had seen in the bottle of brandy at lunch. This square had been built by the Germans who had pulled down half a dozen houses to widen the road for their tanks.

"Yes," said Pierre reflectively, "we saw some heavy traffic pass through here. First the Germans, then the Americans. I was deputy mayor at that time, and there was quite a bit of fighting where you saw the merry-go-rounds, but by a stroke

of luck the *maquis* never swooped down on Saulieu. A lot of books have been written about the *maquis* but, believe me, wherever it passed, towns were burned from end to end and more French people were killed than Germans. I had my time cut out, after the fighting was over, preventing the hotheads in the town from shaving the heads of women they claimed had been friendly with the Germans. What sort of wars are these in which hooligans are let loose to settle old scores? Personal vengeance. That was our so-called resistance!"

He said all this without once raising his voice, but now and again his words would be stressed by a thin brown hand emerging from the folds of his cape and stroking the air.

"Happily," said he, "the war is only a distant memory now. Who cares any longer about collaborators or *maquis*?"

We had reached the hospital. The building was in two parts, like the wings of a bird in flight. The façade was in that powdery gray which, in French architecture, suggests the eighteenth century, the roof was of russet tiles, all except a piece in the middle which was black, and over this black part towered a weathercock. The building was set in what must once have been a very pretty park and, indeed, it still was, though the low stone wall which surrounded it had been blown up in several places, these gaping wounds now covered picturesquely with moss and evergreens. As we walked along the crunching gravel path we came toward a glass-covered promenade, into which was set the main entrance. Immediately there came to our nostrils the smell of chloroform, and nuns could be seen, their white headdresses sailing through the air like swans. I noticed a mattress on the floor and an aged man lying on it. His hair was cropped short and his beard was more white than gray. The ample skirts of the nuns swished around him. I wondered what he was doing there. He looked as if he had been put there to die.

Nobody took any particular notice of us, and Pierre seemed

to know his way about quite well. He opened a door and we were suddenly in a ward. It was a longish room, with very tall, narrow windows high up at the far end, the sort of windows that strengthened my feeling that the building must have dated from the French kings. The immediate impression was of a prison, or at least of a charitable institution before Dickensian times, rather than of a place where sick people were taken in our own day.

There must have been about half a dozen beds down each side of the ward, but at the end by the window, two or three very old women with white bonnets, as in Victorian story-books, were seated on rocking chairs, reading or just staring into space. The beds had black iron frames in the form of four-posters, and I thought back to my convent where at night the nun in charge withdrew into one of these things and drew the curtains.

Some of the beds had white canvas around them, even the tops were covered; others had no canvas at all. One merely was the iron rods at the four corners and across the top. Down the aisle stood little trolleys with various medicines and syringes, not very clean.

Pierre went straight up to the second bed on the left of the door. There were no curtains around this one, merely a walking stick dangling from one of the cross rods at the top of the four-poster. He bent down and said:

"Louise, this is Paloma's friend from England. She has come all that way specially to see us."

"Oh, how kind of her," exclaimed a lively voice, rolling her r's like the real natives of Burgundy. "All those parcels she sent me when things were difficult at the end of the war!"

Pierre beckoned me to the bedside, and I saw a little woman so frail that a breath might have blown her away.

"But it was a pleasure," I said, more for the sake of saying something, anything, than to pursue this matter of the parcels.

I had bent over the bed and kissed her. She was little better than a skeleton. Her poor thin arms showed the bone, the veins on her hands flowed like dark rivers, her cheeks were hollow, but her dark eyes, though filled with tears, glowed from deep in their sockets. I was very moved, perhaps not only because this was Louise of whom I had heard so much from Paloma, but also because I was in the presence of a dying woman, within hospital walls, and that I know of no sight more moving. I held her hand in mine, and she said:

"Oh, madame, how happy I am! And you are just as I expected you would be from your photograph! It was I who pinned up your photograph on the wall at Montivent."

"Yes," I said, wiping my eyes, "I saw it. I was very touched to find it there."

"Your letters, madame, gave us such pleasure. You must love us very much to have written so often and never to have received an answer! I tried several times to make her write. I used to say to her: 'Come, Paloma! Take up your pen and write a tiny letter, just a tiny one!' But she used to say: 'Stop worrying me. She knows me too well to expect an answer.'"

"She was right," I answered, trying to smile. "And the proof is that I came to fetch my own answer. If she had written perhaps I would not have made such a long journey."

Louise looked from me to her brother and said plaintively:

"My little Pierre, I've got so thin that my spine aches when it touches the mattress. In the cupboard in our mother's room there's an air cushion that Adrienne gave me. I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't necessary. There's only one here for the whole ward, and the good nun can't take it away from one to give it to another. If only you knew how I suffered! Would you try to find my air cushion, Pierre, or ask Marie for it?"

"I'll try," he promised, "but you know Marie as well as I do. She'll probably tell me it's not there any longer. And maybe

it won't be! She may have given it to the first stranger who called at her house. She's like that!"

"Oh, I know!" answered his sister. Then looking at me again: "Do please tell me how you found her?"

"Mme Madeleine thought she looked slightly better on the whole," Pierre answered quickly, forestalling me, "but she also said that she has always found Marie a little strange."

"I find her no different here than in London," I put in. "Here it's less important than there. At all events I'm always very happy to be in her company. And that's not saying she isn't often bad-tempered, but no matter, I'm genuinely fond of her."

"The she-devil!" exclaimed Louise. "And wicked as she is she finds people to love her, yes, and to love her more than if she were good and kind! That's the amazing part of it. Take me, for example. Do you think I haven't loved her? Have I not served her like a dog, like a slave? Oh, I admit she's helped us. She has helped us all. Thanks to her we've never wanted for anything. We've known a sort of luxury, for at times she's very generous. When it suits her. But in return I've given her all the best of my life, every bit of energy, and now I'm finished. During the long nights when I can't sleep in this ward I often wonder if I didn't pay too high a price for the ease and money she gave us. She has made us all suffer, and not only us but all those who ever came in contact with her!"

I was rather taken aback by these words from frail, dying lips. I hardly knew what to say. Pierre stood there, dark-eyed, silent, agreeing, his biblical cape buttoned under his chin. We were both looking at the white-haired woman in the bed.

Then Louise continued:

"There was a man called—I've forgotten his name, and it doesn't matter anyway. How she made him suffer! Why should I suddenly think of that one in particular? I don't know that either. I suppose it's just lying in bed thinking. He was a man

with a big reputation, a hard man in business from all accounts. One was always reading about him in the papers, doing this or buying that. Well, Mme Madeleine, I saw him for weeks on end crying like a child on account of her. I reminded her about that man not so long ago. I said to her: 'Marie, I'm sure you'll go to hell for the martyrdom you imposed on that unfortunate man whose name I can't even remember!' She laughed like the sorceress she is and began to sing!

"Where exactly do you live in London, Mme Madeleine? Somewhere in Piccadilly, isn't it, overlooking the Green Park? I know Piccadilly. Oh, London! What an adorable city! What fine people, the English! How happy I was in England! Soho! Old Compton Street! The coal merchants who pour your coal out of black sacks into holes in the pavement! And the lovely cups of tea! There was Adrienne, too. Though she also came from Burgundy it was in London that we first met. I was the one Adrienne liked. Marie never got on with her. She's still jealous of Adrienne. As soon as Adrienne heard I had been taken to hospital she came to see me. I feel sure she will come again. Are you going to see her when you leave us? No? It is rather difficult to get to if you haven't got a car, but it's a pity all the same. She's so kind and lives in a big house in a park. Thank you so much, Mme Madeleine, for coming. In the future when I think about you I shall know what you look like."

She smiled at me bravely, and then the head sank back on the pillow, and she closed her eyes. Her hair was quite white, and there was really nothing of her. The walking stick, with the piece of rubber at the end, swung gently in a draught from the thin iron rod across the top of the four-poster. Some people had come to visit a patient on the other side of the aisle. They were talking too loud, pathetically trying to look gay.

Pierre put his hand on my elbow and we stole out of the ward.

As we crossed the square with the statue of the bull Pom-pom a heavy farm cart came slowly toward us. A man whose whip was curled around his shoulders led the horse by the reins and as we came level with him Pierre said:

"Hallo, there's Martha's husband!"

"Martha—Louise's daughter?" I queried. "Her husband?"

"Yes," he said. Then, addressing the man: "This is a friend of Marie's from England. We've just been to the hospital."

The man stopped his horse and took off his cap clumsily.

"I thought I would take madame to see your daughter Gaby," Pierre went on. "Gaby's generally at home in the afternoons with the little girl."

"Yes, I expect she'll be at home," said the man.

He looked at us without finding anything else to say, and then put on his cap and, after the usual greeting, went off.

We crossed the town diagonally and took the road to Château-Chinon, steep and powdery. First, on our right, was the very ancient church of St. Saturin with the needle spire, and all around it the gray tombstones of the cemetery that could be seen distantly from Montivent.

From here we came almost immediately into open country, the road climbing prettily. Pierre, walking slowly, his cape flowing behind him, began to speak of his sisters.

"I was the youngest of the children," he said, "and I'm seventy-three."

He paused a moment as if to give me time to realize just what this meant, and then with quiet precision: "My poor Louise is seventy-nine, and Marie is halfway between us."

"I've often tried to puzzle out her age," I answered. "Sometimes I did think she might be very old, but then she seemed so robust. It was only just now at the hospital, seeing Louise, that——"

"That you became suspicious?" he queried.

"Yes," I answered. "To begin with, Paloma doesn't look old. She merely looks like a young person who has dried up in a hot Egyptian sun, and then she never talks in an old way. I've never once heard her say: 'I'm too old for this!' On the contrary, she lives in a sort of dream in which her years are not taken into account. She has mummified her age like her looks."

"That's true," said Pierre. "It's wonderful to create such a complete world of one's own, but sometimes she makes her family appear rather silly. When you consider that Louise is a great-grandmother, and that I am now taking you to see her granddaughter, and her great-granddaughter! I think Marie still sees herself the age our sister Josephine was when she died before the first war, the one of 1914."

As we climbed the road had a sort of balustrade on the left. Looking over this one could see a great distance toward violet hills on the horizon. The single-track railway line shimmered away, between rich fields to the south. Along it engine driver Saquet must have brought home his train at night, whistling when a few hundred yards from the station so that his wife, looking out of the window at Montivent, should know that he was coming. I thought the country charming. Below us a market gardener was walking between rows of bell glasses, reminding me of the wonderful scene in Hector Malot's *Sans Famille*, when a hailstorm fell on the hyacinths, ruining the market gardener and sending him to the debtors' prison. On the opposite side of the road was a newly built white house standing in a large garden. This was Gaby's house.

She was a very modern young woman wearing nylons. Her brown hair was cut short. Running down the white steps of a terrace she invited us into her drawing room.

Everything was gay and bright like her. Her furniture was of the period Paris Exhibition, 1937. Gaby sat on the edge of an armchair and exclaimed:

"Oh, so you lunched with aunt, and after coffee she gave

you all the slip to go back to Montivent and sleep! She's the limit, isn't she? Before Christmas Mr. Stephen came from London to see her. He brought his car and his chauffeur, and one day aunt decided she wanted to go to Dijon, but on the way Mr. Stephen was rash enough to say: 'Surely we're not far from Adrienne's place? Let's all go and pay her a surprise visit!' That did it! Aunt blew his head off. She would not let us go, and we had to rush around Dijon in a quarter of an hour. I don't believe she opened her mouth once except to say something nasty about Adrienne."

She paused, out of breath. So Mr. Stephen had been to see her! He hadn't been able to resist seeing this woman Louise called the she-devil. How faithful he was to her! Gaby went on joyously:

"Oh, madame, if you had seen the state in which her things arrived from London five years ago! She had thrown everything pell-mell into the packing cases—china, silverware, cooking utensils, and an old pail with holes in the bottom. My grandmother was obliged to throw almost everything away. Some of the things were only fit for the rag-and-bone man; the plates and cups were smashed to bits. Mr. Stephen told us he had offered to have everything done by experts, but she refused. She said she wouldn't have strange people poking their ugly noses into her business. As for her clothes, I think they must have been lost on the way. Or perhaps she got rid of them before leaving London."

"Oh, you mustn't think she had a big wardrobe," I said, trying to pacify her. "As long as I've known her she has only worn two dresses, one black, one bottle-green, with zips up the front. This morning she wore the dress she had on when I first met her in the Green Park. One seems never to look at her dress. It's her one looks at. You, Mme Gaby, who are her grandniece, how do you find her?"

Gaby was up in a moment, snatching a framed photograph

from a small round table. I now saw a Paloma that hitherto I had only imagined. Her hair was done in the 1914-18 way, tightly pressed to the forehead with a velvet ribbon. The eyes were magnificent. Gaby was saying:

"That's my earliest recollection of aunt. That's how she was when I was a very little girl. Pretty, but so proud, so full of mockery, so careless with her things. She wasn't a bit like Adrienne, who is such a good businesswoman. She was just a bundle of whims and fancies. But all the same, what a life she has had!"

Gaby's eyes were sparkling. One felt that she was comparing any ordinary life to that of her aunt.

A child began crying upstairs. Gaby flew off and returned with a little girl, whose arms were tightly pressed around her neck. All thoughts of her aunt now left Gaby. The child's tender cheek against hers was all that mattered. We remained for a few moments exchanging polite conversation. Gaby told me her husband was a builder. He was doing very nicely and was kind to her. They had a motorcar, but he used it so often for his business that he dirtied the upholstery. When they were richer he would buy her another. Of course, her dream was to leave this uninteresting little town and go to Paris. Yes, Paris was the place to go. She took Paloma's photograph with her free hand (the other was still holding her little girl), and put it back on the round table. It struck me that she gave it a final envious look. She repeated:

"I shan't be happy till I go to live in Paris!"

She took us to the garden gate. Then Pierre and I walked back along the white road past the bell glasses, on which the last streaks of sun were shining.

We parted in front of the Hôtel de la Poste. A cold wind was coming down from the hills, and I was glad to be in my warm bedroom with the chintz curtains and a reading lamp throwing a soft and inviting light by my pillow. I had brought some

work to do and planned to sit up late, but the journey, the strong air, and a day so full of happenings soon put me to sleep. Toward midnight I was wakened by the grind and roar of traffic. I went to the window. The main road at this point was narrow and twisting. Five-ton trucks sweeping the medieval houses with their powerful head lamps flowed below me, flowed toward the Tour d'Auxois with its crucifix and moat, dark shadows in the night.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BREAKFAST was just as good as the one at Avallon, the coffee very hot, the *croissants* full of butter, and on the tray was an envelope on which was written my name and a request that it should be delivered as soon as I was awake. I tore it open and read:

MADAME,

My sister asks that you should go to see her at Montivent this morning as soon as you have breakfasted. She is looking forward to a nice long talk. Afterwards we shall all lunch at the Petit Marguery as we did yesterday.

Very respectfully,

PIERRE SAQUET.

The sun was shining, but the air was strong and cold, and while I was dressing the town crier stood outside my window rolling his drum. When he had announced the day's news he laid down his drumsticks and began a long conversation with a very old man who must have been deaf, for he shouted so loudly into his ear that from time to time I heard what he was saying. The country, still in winter's nudity, was grand and desolate, though from time to time one came on a farmer leading his cattle through a narrow lane. The farm buildings were built picturesquely of stone, and the doors which were very old were ogival.

The gravel of Paloma's terrace crunched underfoot. The door was open. I climbed the white steps and called out: "Where are you?"

She was in the kitchen attending to her beauty, applying a heavy stick of brown make-up to her eyelids. On the table was a rabbit's paw to put her powder on with, and all the paints and greases of a stage dressing room during the war of 1914-18; not that she often used them except to darken her lids, which was very effective, but it probably never struck her that make-up had changed at all since the days of her success.

She was draped in a rugged, brown dressing gown, that made her look like a monk. Her hair was already done, but she stroked the stray ones upward from her temples, and changed the position of the comb in her bun, during which movements I was again obliged to admire her slender neck and tiny ears.

"Go and sit by the fire in the drawing room," she said as my reflection appeared in the small mirror fastened to the wall. Her quick eyes had caught the interest in mine. Perhaps she thought I was criticizing her. "Be gone!" she repeated. "It won't take a moment to put my dress on. You'll find it warmer by the fire. Do just what you want. Sit in the armchair or prowl around the room. Touch anything you like. I don't care a tinker's cuss what you do! Amuse yourself!"

She joined me a few minutes later in her usual dress. The stove was beautifully warm.

"That reminds me," she said, looking at it. "This morning when I came to shake the cinders out a mouse came and trotted round. She must come to my bed and watch me sleeping, for she wasn't a bit afraid. I expect she knows me. What do you say?"

Above us was a framed print of the famous picture which shows the composer Rouget de l'Isle singing his *Marseillaise* for the first time at Strasbourg. She said:

"My father and I were vaguely in favor of the separation of Church and State whereas my brother Pierre's family were always deeply religious. It led to some quarrels at the begin-

ning, but it's all so far away now. You know, my little rat, I'm jealous of you still living in London."

"You could always come back on a visit," I said.

"Bah!" she exclaimed. "What good would that do me? Most of the people I knew are dead now—or gone, the devil knows where. The Van Clocks have gone. She wrote me a letter. I don't know what I've done with it. And poor Louise, who is surely going to die in hospital! They are so old. They have worked so hard. They never could keep still. My little rat, take a tip from me. You never need to hurry in life. If you haven't time to do something or go somewhere, do as I do, go to bed and sleep, and when you wake up you'll discover that what you thought was so important doesn't matter in the slightest, or if you still want to do it you can be sure there'll be plenty of time. Life is just a journey. To sleep and to eat are great compensations. Yes, we were talking about London. If you only knew, my rat, what a time I had with those packing cases! And the thieves! Why, nearly all my crockery was stolen. I clearly remember packing it in a pail, but whenever I look for my cups and saucers there's not one to be seen in my cupboard. Never mind! Patience! I've time in front of me, and the thieves will be caught!"

I said innocently:

"Louise tells me she is often in great pain. It's her back that hurts her. If only you could remember what she did with an air cushion?"

"How should I know where it is?" exclaimed Paloma. "Besides, Adrienne gave her that air cushion, so you can be sure the thing is no good!"

Paloma's face was set in hard lines. I decided to talk quickly about something else.

"How lovely and warm it is in here," I said. "I wouldn't mind betting that sometimes you spend the night on this comfortable sofa?"

"Never!" she answered. "I couldn't sleep a wink if I wasn't in a big, honest double bed. Come and see my bedroom. I must change my bag for lunch."

She took me into a small, dark room on the other side of the corridor. The window was masked by a red cotton blind of the same kind and color that country gamps were made of in the old days, and the morning light, filtering through this, bathed everything in a red glow.

There was an enormous walnut bedstead with a country eiderdown, red like the blind and, of course, the bed was not made. Above it hung a superb cut-glass chandelier, like those at Versailles or in Vienna, but as Paloma had taken all the bulbs out of it, one by one, whenever she needed any for the rest of the house, nothing happened when one turned on the switch. High up near the window was a bracket lamp, which she alone knew how to put on, and which gave a pale yellow light obliquely across the glass-fronted cupboard to the bed. On the wall near the door I now noticed a large framed photograph of a young woman with a wide hat trimmed with an ostrich feather. The square décolleté of the blouse, the lace front, and the whale-boned neck showed wonderfully the swanlike grace of Paloma at the very height of her beauty. She was all that I expected. No, she was even more wonderful! I stood and stared fascinated, for in truth I had never seen such a superb creature.

"Oh, Paloma, how lovely you must have been!"

She smiled in a shrewd, subtle way, as if satisfied that at last I should have this visual proof of her legendary beauty.

"Then, really, my rat, you're not disappointed?"

"Disappointed!"

My voice quivered with emotion. The finely drawn lips, the round small cheeks, the laughing, dark, expressive eyes full of vigor even with the lids partly closed, staggered me. I think she was flattered at my emotion, for she said:

"That was in 1908, just before I married M. Siller. No, not in Vienna. In a small village not far from here. I liked him well enough, and he took me to Austria, but we only stayed a short time. I think I told you, he was a naturalized American."

"Yes, you said he died in New York."

She raised her hand in a fatalistic gesture, as if to say: "It happens to all of us!"

This period of 1908 was a blank as far as my knowledge of her was concerned. She was in all her beauty, had married M. Siller, and made a trip with him to Vienna. When in London she had talked to us about her husband, we had never quite believed her. After all, was she not known in England either by her stage name, Paloma Garcia, or by her maiden name, Marie Saquet? Only here in Burgundy was she officially known by her married name of Mme Siller. I was beginning to learn that she never told an untruth. She had just as much right to call herself Mme Garcia, as Mme Saquet, or Mme Siller. After the war I had occasion to spend a winter in Vienna, and one evening some friends with whom I was dining spoke of the great family of Sillers, who had always been in the café and restaurant business, and one of them, perhaps a brother or a cousin, had just bought a famous hotel off the Kärntnerstrasse. I asked if there had been a Siller, an American citizen, who had died in New York before the war of 1914, and I was told that this was indeed the case, and that he had married a young Frenchwoman of amazing beauty.

Had Paloma gone with him to America? She never mentioned such a journey, and she was not the sort of person to whom one could put a direct question. She would have thought it rude and would have made one feel small and inquisitive. I think I have already said that she did not boast. She only once mentioned her journey to South America—I have recounted it exactly as it happened—and I do not believe the question would ever have come up had it not been that I

found the girl's sister in her flat that afternoon. Thus one had the feeling that all sorts of exciting things had happened to her that one would never hear of unless something kindled the memory in her brain. I knew from chance remarks that she had once done some modeling for a famous fashion house in Regent Street. Was this at the birth of the century when she would have been twenty-five? Several of the most famous Gaiety girls, girls who later married into the peerage, combined modeling with stage work. What now appeared certain was that Paloma was already a Gaiety girl, and perhaps had been for some time, when M. Siller married her in 1908.

I must add that though Paloma never lied about anything (she was far too proud a character to resort to this subterfuge, a subterfuge of the weak), she acted in many respects like an autocratic monarch, the great Catherine, for instance. When Louise was in disgrace Paloma banished her from court, and sent her back to the fields and woods of Burgundy just as courtiers were sent back to the estates which gave them their names. While Louise was at Montivent, Pierre Saquet lived with his wife in a fine house owned by Paloma. So he also became in a way her vassal. Most of her family appeared to live on small estates which she had purchased at some time of her remarkable career. Whenever I looked at her the thought always came to me that though her head was tiny, the schemes she resolved were always on a vast pattern. Certainly no single person knew everything about her life.

She changed her bag, and we went back to the living room a moment. While we were sitting by the stove I asked her if she had ever fallen unreasonably in love.

"I mean," said I, "did you ever love a man against your better judgment? To succeed, as you have succeeded, argues a very calculating mind."

She said that it had very nearly happened during the run of *The Quaker Girl*.

"Georges Carvey," she explained, "the man who sang *Will you not come to the ball?*, was a great favorite with the women, and did not hide his successes. On the contrary, he boasted of them, and in those days nobody thought him silly for putting on airs. Society women and chorus girls laid their hearts at his feet. Gertie Millar used to say to us: 'You're a lot of silly geese. He's got fourteen attachments already. Do you want to be the fifteenth?'" Paloma laughed ironically. "One gets over these things like hay fever—and anyway he was an incredibly selfish man!"

Her astrakhan coat was on the settee. She began to put it on, then threw it down, and took up an old brown one lying across the back of a chair. She went on talking in a low monologue, which I let her do, knowing that at any moment she might tell me something interesting.

"I had this coat made in Baker Street," she said. "There was a dressmaker called Mme Vaudry, whose husband was a chef at Romano's at the time of my marriage. The most famous people in London used to send for him. He came from a village just over the hill here, so whenever I was a guest at the restaurant he used to send me up little delicacies—sometimes a goose *pâté* or a special sauce. He became old, and between the wars his wife employed him to cook for her workgirls in Baker Street. Often during a fitting I used to smell the good odors from his kitchen. As he had time on his hands he played dominoes and became a champion or something. They had a son who was rather good-looking, and his mother's darling, but so timid that every time one looked at him he ducked his head like a bad swimmer. He took part in the landing, but no sooner set foot in Normandy than he was killed. Mme Vaudry went on as usual with her dressmaking, but her eyes were always full of tears and she became the most miserable woman I ever knew. Well, this is the coat she made! Now all I need is a scarf and a pair of gloves!"

She began turning around, looking for these things, and singing an old song her father, the engine driver, sang on his footplate:

L'amour est menteur, garde ton cœur,
Garde ton cœur, ma jolie Madeleine,
Quand il est parti, tout est fini. ¹

"You still have a lovely voice," I whispered.

"I had a lot of trouble to learn," she said. "I never could start at the same time as the other girls and then I was often out of tune. I was obliged to take lessons. The first thing was to get hold of a piano. I began by hiring one, an upright, like the ones you see everywhere in England. I put it in the room with the bow window, and it looked so nice that I bought it. The next thing was to find a teacher. There was a poor Italian woman who lived in a tiny room in Soho. She was so gentle and patient that I soon learned everything I needed to. She used to stay for supper on Sundays. You know what it is! She seldom ate a square meal, and I was sorry for her. One night when we were alone she told me in her quietest voice that she was the sister of the notorious Lucheni, who had assassinated the Empress Elizabeth of Austria in Switzerland. I shuddered with fright, but she added so pathetically: 'The poor boy! He was always unlucky. You see, Mme Garcia, they had drawn lots, and he was the one to be chosen. If it hadn't been for that he would still be alive.'

"Then there was the piano. Before coming to Burgundy for my summer holidays one year I let my flat with the piano in it to another girl from the theatre. It wasn't to make a profit. She was merely going to pay the rent. We arranged that I should send her a telegram two or three days before I was coming

¹ Love is a liar, keep your heart,
Keep your heart, my pretty Madeleine.
When your heart is gone, all is over.

back, and that she would clear out and leave the key with the porter. When I came home there was no key, and the porter had a funny look. I ended by having to break in. The piano was gone, and the neighbors lost no time in telling me that the girl had sold it, and was now so afraid of meeting me that she was hiding with friends. I was furious, and all *my* friends said: 'You must see a solicitor and take her to court!' But between ourselves, my little rat, I was dead beat after the journey and so, as usual, I went to bed and had a good sleep. Next morning, after a late breakfast, I went into the living room. It did strike me that something was different. 'What's missing?' I asked myself. I had forgotten all about the piano, but when I suddenly realized that it was the piano that was missing it struck me that my living room was far prettier without that ugly thing taking up all the room. Why the devil should I waste my time going to some dingy solicitor's chambers to ask for a piece of furniture I didn't want back at any price! Besides, supposing that instead of stealing my piano she had stolen my lover! You can't think how good I felt after that! I went back to the kitchen and brewed another cup of coffee, and when I saw the girl again I never even mentioned my piano. I tell you, it was she who felt silly, not I. Oh, good old London! I really would like to go back!"

She put on her scarf and took up her bag.

"Let's walk down and meet Pierre," she said.

We went to the grocer's where she discovered to her great surprise the bag of provisions that she had forgotten to take home the previous afternoon. When he brought it to her, bowing and smiling, she said: "Thank you, thank you, my good man, but what would you have me do with it now? I'll try to think of it one of these days." The grocer accepted these remarks with the utmost good humor, and returning the bag behind the counter said:

"Any time you please, Mme Siller. It's a pleasure, I assure you."

Three motor coaches bound for the Riviera were already drawn up by the Tour d'Auxois, and the Petit Marguery was again very full and animated. The waiters hurried through the large room, heavy trays balanced on the tips of their fingers, serving the travelers, but all lifted their chins over the plates and dishes thus held high, and greeted Paloma, saying:

"Good morning, Mme Siller. Your brother is waiting for you at the usual table."

Pierre rose as we entered. There were flowers in a centerpiece, fruit and nuts and a chocolate cake, which he had ordered specially in the town. Clearly this dignified host intended to make his welcome even richer than the day before.

"If you want to see Louise again," said Paloma after lunch, "go by yourself. Pierre will see me home and carry my provisions."

The sun shone brightly through the glass-covered veranda. A nun, picturesque with her headdress of starched white wings, her thick outer skirt picked up and gathered into the girdle, from which hung a rosary, was bending over a long table, an electric iron in her plump hand, a great pile of sheets in a basket at her feet. The electric iron and the medieval dress made a strange contrast.

Louise smiled pathetically as I entered the ward.

"Oh, madame, how kind of you to come! The doctor made me get up for an hour this morning, and I think my leg was a little better. Did you all lunch at the same place? And how is my she-devil of a Marie? She won't come to see me any more. It's because I'm so thin. I frighten her. And now, I suppose, she has gone back to Montivent to sleep! Nothing prevents

Marie from sleeping, and yet, Mme Madeleine, how I worry about her even though Pierre climbs up the hill every morning to make her breakfast and put the house in order! She's so untidy and forgetful. As often as not she dirties three spoons to stir her coffee with, and you may be sure she won't wash any of them. Those chocolates you brought me yesterday, Mme Madeleine, were delicious but, oh, how my back aches. Pierre never brought my air cushion. I suppose he knew it was no good asking her for it."

"It was I who asked her for it, but she said that as Adrienne had given it you it could not be any good. Tomorrow morning when I go to see her I'll look for it myself. I promise you that if it's there I'll find it."

A young priest stood self-consciously on the threshold of the ward. Then, very timidly, he started going from bed to bed, speaking in a low voice. When he reached us he said:

"Good afternoon, Mme Saquet, how is the leg?"

Louise introduced me: ". . . a friend of Marie's, who has come all the way from England. . . ." Then she told him about the doctor making her get up for an hour in the morning.

"And you felt a little better? Then my prayers have been answered. Spring is on the way, Mme Saquet. The first primroses will soon be out, and then you will be going back to join your sister at Montivent."

These words were said in a voice that the young abbé tried to make authoritative, in the sonorous, fatherly style that he had admired in older priests. His youth was endearing, but showed signs of poverty and lack of attention. His health was clearly of the poorest, his cloth was shiny and frayed, and one felt that this visit to a women's ward must be an ordeal during which he was obliged to battle for every word.

"Have you listened to the birds singing in the park, M. l'Abbé?" asked Louise. "They sound as if they are having a fine time!"

A nun arrived with a hot-water bottle, which she slipped between the sheets of a patient. Then, seated on a very high cane chair in a corner, she began to knit a black stocking. The young abbé left us to continue his visit down the ward. I looked down from his short cassock to his heavy boots, but curiously enough he made hardly any noise in walking across the highly polished floor. The nun had dropped her knitting on her lap, and her head was gently nodding.

Pierre, having seen Paloma safely back to Montivent, now arrived. He smiled enigmatically, and began to arrange a thermos of soup and some oranges on his sister's table. He had also brought a bottle of wine, which he proceeded to uncork.

"There," he said to Louise, "Marie is having her nap, and Augustine is dressing the chicken's bad leg."

"Oh, my poor Pierre," she said. "Your hen is like me. I don't think either of us will recover."

"Don't be foolish, Louise," said her brother gently. "My hen has a fine appetite, and so have you."

He smiled at me, and came to sit by the bed.

CHAPTER XIX

I SET OUT for Montivent the next morning determined to find the air cushion.

Ten o'clock had just struck, and in the cobbled street that led up to the little town from my hotel the sun shone against the slate gray houses with their red roofs. The blacksmith, wearing a leather apron, was silhouetted against his anvil and the embers of his fire. He gave me a friendly good morning. I was Mme Siller's friend who had come all the way from England, and not only the smith but also the butcher, the grocer, and the baker smiled at me whenever I walked along the curved shopping street. Large numbers of blood oranges had arrived from Spain, splashing their vivid color against the general grayness so characteristic of this part of France. There were cauliflowers from Brittany and pyramids of chocolate.

Here was Fifine Bizot's wineshop with an azalea in the curtained window and geraniums outside. The old curiosity shop on the other side of the road had arranged on the pavement, among other things, a superb cast-iron plate with fleurs-de-lis and a crown for putting in just such a deep wide chimney as I possessed in my farm in Normandy. Alas, its weight was such that I was afraid to send it so long a distance by rail and besides, like so many heavy things, it was brittle. I looked at it with envy.

When I arrived at Montivent, Paloma, who claimed that her brother Pierre had only just waked her, was wandering about in her monk's dressing gown.

"You know," she said to me as I sat on a corner of the divan by the fire, "I really think I shall be obliged to go to London to pounce on Mr. Stephen. I must turn up suddenly, without

warning. That's what I used to do in the old days when I came back from holidays. Ting-a-ling-a-ling—a ring at the front door and it was I! He wasn't always at home. Sometimes it was his man. I used to rush in, my nose quivering, ready for battle. I smelled all the peculiar smells of the house which I had half forgotten during my absence and then, sitting down in his study, I would keep his man talking to prevent him from rushing off to telephone to Mr. Stephen. Little by little, however, seeing that everything was just as I remembered it, I would feel better, and soon I would start wondering what the devil I was doing, wasting my time in his house, talking to his servant. I would rush out in a whirl just as I had come in, and go back to my own place to wait for him. In half an hour he was sure to arrive, smelling of tobacco and honey and flowers, his good, kind face all covered with smiles, and to tell the truth I was a bit ashamed of having suspected him, but what will you, my rat, it's in my nature to be jealous! Besides, when he used to go up north for his business I know he was just as jealous of me. At this very moment I'm sure he's atrociously jealous. After all, why shouldn't he be? I would only need to lift a little finger . . . but I prefer to have a good sleep!"

"Paloma," I said coaxingly, "could you look in your mother's cupboard for that thing I promised to bring Louise?"

"There is nothing in my mother's cupboard," said Paloma, "that ever belonged to Adrienne."

"Paloma, poor Louise is terribly frail, and her back aches horribly. For my sake, as well as hers, let us have a look in your mother's cupboard. At least my conscience will be satisfied."

"Then come," said Paloma, "though it's a pity to leave a nice warm fire to look for something which I know is not there."

We went to the great double-doored wardrobe in her mother's darkened house. This ancient piece of furniture, black with age and so tall that it rubbed against the ceiling, had de-

signs in bronze around the gaping keyhole. Paloma owned the key which at first she pretended to have mislaid, but suddenly standing on her toes and stretching up an arm, she produced it from a hiding place three-quarters of the way up.

"There!" she exclaimed, handing it to me, "see what you can do."

I put the key into the keyhole, but the wardrobe was not locked. I pointed this out to her, and she said:

"Oh, you know what it is! A lock should usually be locked. That's what a lock is made for. The man who made that one, for instance, would be furious if he thought I didn't use it. Well, even though I may have forgotten to lock it, you at least took a key to open it with so he can't accuse us of taking no notice of what probably took him several weeks to make. His old bones, that must be pretty white by now in the cemetery under the spire, will be satisfied. Between us we had quite a good time playing with his silly mechanism. I wonder what sort of man he was. Whether he was old or young. Oh, and what the deuce! We shall never know."

I began to inspect the shelf that was level with my eyes. There was a pile of fine linen sheets, embroidered but slightly yellowed with age, and carelessly folded. A quantity of yellow dusters were tied with a ribbon as if they had been the most valuable lace. Biscuits, some of them gnawed, and several pieces of sugar cluttered up a corner. I expected to see a mouse dart out.

"Look everywhere! Look to your heart's content!" she cried, and went off to wind up the grandfather clock.

Glass, linen and dishcloths were arranged on another shelf with some things we had bought together at Woolworth's, but what specially intrigued me was a doll's chair lying on its back.

"Oh, the pretty little doll's chair!" I cried. "Where did you find it?"

"I bought it in the market place at Dijon," she said. "I just

thought it pretty, that little doll's chair, so I bought it. I was with Louise, who imagined I had bought it for her granddaughter, the little girl you saw clinging to Gaby's neck the other day. That's why she never said anything when I was buying it, but as soon as we got home she began asking me questions: 'Who are you going to give it to?'

"'I bought it for me because I like it,' I said to Louise. 'What's more, I intend to keep it. Why shouldn't I buy a toy as much as a scarf or a bag or a ring for my finger? I've had dozens of scarves and bags and rings in my time, but I've never had a doll's chair. So mind you don't touch it. I like it just where it is.'"

Her warning to Louise was no less a warning to me. I carefully kept my hands off the doll's chair. Beside it was a casket.

"That, my rat, contains the finest silver in the world!"

But it struck me there might be more valuable contents than silver in the casket. I felt sure it was full of love letters. Further along was a bedspread made of crochet work, a masterpiece of somnolent hours spent by the fireside on winter nights, but nowhere was the thing I was searching for.

"I told you," said Paloma, "that there was nothing in my cupboard that ever belonged to Adrienne, but as you look, you silly goose, on the verge of tears I'll take you up into my attic and perhaps we shall find something there."

Followed by her Alsatian, who had already eaten three of the biscuits I had found in her cupboard, we went through the kitchen and up some stairs to a secret door, which swung open at a touch of her hand.

Light and full of the song of birds nesting in the eaves, this magnificent studio had broad windows through which the sun, if there had been any, would have streamed. The entire floor was superbly tiled in a warm red. I was quite lost in admiration, and I could see that Paloma was flattered at my enthusiasm.

"You see," she explained, "though my house is the same as those I gave to my mother and to my sister Louise, yet I wanted it to be the queen of the three, and as I grew richer so I made my house finer. Don't think it came easily, but when I really began going up in the world I just went on going, and it is natural that my attic, which was the last thing I did, should be as pretty as my living room!"

Paloma made one see things through her eyes, and I agreed it was a clever idea.

A rampart about a foot tall ran around the floor, closing up the gaps made by the roof as it came down like a hat over the walls. Paloma's attic was therefore snug and free from draughts. One could have lived happily in it.

Several cords were stretched from side to side and over one of these were a number of evening dresses, hanging limply but realistically like the waxwork figures of Bluebeard's over-inquisitive wives. One I recognized in particular, a blue one made of net, or as the French call it tulle, with long, wide, transparent sleeves, which she had worn until the very last in London when going out in the evening with Mr. Stephen. On each side of the blue dress were others of varying colors and age. Paloma, passing along the line, stroked them with flattering words.

"To think," she said to me, "that they have all been to the Savoy and to the Berkeley. Every one has been to at least half a dozen first nights. They have all laughed happily, their bottoms on comfortable chairs. They have drunk champagne and watched young people dancing and old ones trying to look young! They are all good friends of mine, every one of them made by poor Mme Vaudry!"

Sitting on the rampart, like Humpty Dumpties, were hat-boxes from John Lewis, Harrods, and Bourne & Hollingsworth. Then there were long white boxes from Bradleys and Jay's

which had once contained evening dress and costly furs. My eyes became quickly used to seeing these things that in the London flat had been squeezed into the spare room beyond the kitchen. Suddenly I let out a cry of pleasure. There, on the rampart, hidden up to now by a lovely evening dress of the Edwardian period, was the air cushion, partly blown up, absolutely new!

Paloma looked at me with kindness in her dark eyes, but also with a touch of mockery.

"You see that it was not in my mother's cupboard as Louise told you," she said. "Learn that most people are terribly unreliable. What they tell you is seldom correct. Check everything, my rat. Don't take anything for granted. But between you and me I knew where it was all the time. As soon as Louise went to hospital I rearranged things the way I like them!"

She watched me tuck the air cushion under my arm, and added:

"Let's go down now but, honestly, I'm delighted you like my red tiles!"

The trap door had closed behind us and would not open again.

The Alsatian was sitting on his hind legs waiting for the door to open, and seemed surprised to see us hesitate.

"I really do believe we're locked in," said Paloma. "It would be a nuisance because nobody ever comes here, and Pierre is waiting for us at the restaurant. The wind must have closed the trap."

We tried again. Paloma was increasingly calm. She placed her hands gently on the panels as if we were looking for a secret opening on the threshold of Aladdin's cave. From top to bottom, from side to side, she gently pushed, quietly searched, and then suddenly, showing neither surprise nor relief, she discovered a latch and the door swung open. The

Alsatian leaped forward. We followed him. Only when we were downstairs again did Paloma show any emotion. She laughed and said:

"Come, I must find you a string bag to put your aircushion in, and look, here is a bottle of the white wine Louise likes!"

We were back in her mother's house, and while she was searching around I stopped to examine some books. There was a very fine edition of Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, several volumes of Alfred de Musset and Émile Zola, some children's schoolbooks, a prayer book, and the framed photograph of a woman wearing a piped bonnet, a black dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves, and the bodice so tight against the body that it looked like a piece of armor. The lines of the face were delicate and fine, the neck encased in boned lace, the ears particularly small, and the eyes dark but restful. I thought her charming, and though she was far from young in this picture, she had much beauty, and when one looked at her her eyes seemed to follow one.

"If you want a book," said Paloma suddenly, "take what you please."

"I would like the prayer book," I answered. "It has Josephine's name written in it. It will make up in a way for my never having known her."

"Take it," said Paloma.

"And I would like the French grammar you had when you were little."

"Yes, take that too," said Paloma.

When we were seated by the warm stove again Paloma got up suddenly and went to fetch her jewels from the safe behind the settee. One of these she liked particularly, a square emerald of great beauty. When she had it on her little hand seemed full of new life.

"I like it," she said, "because it looks like the eye of a snake, and I adore snakes. When I was in Brazil I was never afraid of them, and if I had stayed there longer I think I would have ended by charming them. I have such a love for animals, and even reptiles, that I can never imagine that any of them will do me any harm."

In the palm of her hand she held a large drop pearl fastened to a slender platinum chain. The chain was broken, and she told me to put the whole thing in my bag and to run in with it to the jeweler's on our way down to lunch. "It's no good my taking it," she said. "I'm sure to forget." Her jewel box was lying open. There was a silly mother-of-pearl penguin mounted on gold in the form of a brooch that I gave her after my first visit to Paris after the war. I was flattered to see she had brought it with her, and even more so when she said:

"You gave me this, my little rat!"

"I'm afraid it's little more than a toy!"

"I don't care what it is," she said, "I like it. Isn't that enough for you? Adrienne and Gabrielle treated their jewelry as investments. They bought and sold diamonds of the best quality which, of course, have become increasingly valuable over the last thirty years. I can't accuse them of being unwise. No, they were very clever and must have made a lot of money. I simply wasn't like that. What tempted me were acres of land with houses and fruit trees and, perhaps, a bit of wood or a plowed field. That was the only form of investment I understood. The earth and the fullness thereof. The jewels in front of you are just the ones I happened to like, not that I think jewels are in themselves very likeable things. Some of them remind one of happy moments, but most represent sorrow, and as I never was the sort of person to waste my time on sad memories, I used to exchange my jewels with the other girls or else I simply sold them."

Yes, indeed, she had not kept the contents of her jewel case

entirely because of their value. There was my penguin, for instance, which was a mere trinket, and here . . . ah, but how very curious!

The thing that drew from me this low exclamation of surprise was a cheap silver bracelet, about three inches deep, which opened on hinges. The safety clasp was broken.

One afternoon toward the end of the war, after a quarrel that had kept us apart for four or five days, I had filled my basket with biscuits and chocolate, and things she rather liked, and set out for the British Museum. She came to the door wearing a sky-blue cotton dressing gown and a lemon-colored scarf, and said:

"You're laughing at me, you little pest! I can see it in your eyes. I suppose I look like a parrot in this outfit, but for once I really have got a sore throat. You go into the kitchen and make a pot of tea while I nip back into bed."

When I arrived with the tray she said:

"Draw the curtains. I want to see the daylight. When you have gone I shall get up and go for a walk."

The sun had come out after a shower, and the windows were covered with raindrops. The pigeons were on the sill.

I had seen the silver bracelet on her dressing table. I said something about it being amusing. With her customary generosity, perhaps to thank me for coming, she had said:

"It's yours, my rat. Take it home!"

Several days later she came to take tea with me. I had been wearing the bracelet quite a lot, as one does with something new, but on that particular afternoon I had taken it off and put it on the table where I write. The safety clasp was broken and kept catching on my sleeve. Paloma had quite recovered from her sore throat, and seemed rather gay except that many of her jokes were pointedly at my expense. At last she gathered up her things and said:

"Thanks for the tea, though it was a bit weak. You should learn to make it better. If you want me I shall be in the Green Park."

That night, when I was ready for bed, clearing up the papers on my table, I missed the silver bracelet. I looked for it everywhere, and even wondered if I had not put it on after all and lost it in the street. I worried stupidly about it, and never knew what to answer when Paloma asked me, as she frequently did, why I did not wear it.

Now that it was here before me in Montivent I understood. She must have taken it from my table when I was in the kitchen, making the tea. I said calmly, without apparent interest:

"There's a bracelet, Paloma, that I swear has no great value!"

"You've never said a truer thing," she answered. "Half a crown, not a penny more. There were two of them, one for each wrist. I was with a girl friend in the lower part of Charing Cross Road, where Cranbourn Street runs into Leicester Square, and we were looking into the window of a pawnshop. We both wanted the silver bracelets, but as there were two, and we were good friends, we bought the pair for five shillings, and we each wore one.

"She was a queer girl—oh, a fine wench, blond and fat, and fair-haired. A real German who had been in London three or four years, and had taken a liking to it. The outbreak of the 1914 war caught me here in Saulieu. I don't know if Pierre told you but the neighbors, knowing I had been married to a Viennese, had me locked up for a night in jail. What the silly fools didn't realize was that M. Siller was an American citizen. The police had to release me the next morning and make what excuses they could. I had an American passport! I came back quietly to London, and my little adventure made me think

immediately of my blond girl friend who by then was probably in an internment camp. I rang her up and was quite surprised to hear her voice on the phone.

“‘Don’t worry about me,’ she said, ‘I’m British. Come round and have lunch with me, and I’ll tell you all about it.’

“She was wearing her bracelet, the fellow to this one.

“‘Immediately after Sarajevo,’ she said, ‘I got all worked up. The important thing was not to be interned if Germany declared war.’

“In a way I sympathized with her. She had a wonderful flat with the most beautiful things in it, and, after all, England was the place where she was happy and had made her money. The evening after Sarajevo she was going past the Palace Theatre when she noticed a young man looking at the photographs of the play. She stopped and looked over his shoulder.

“‘It’s rather good, I’m told,’ she said after a moment. ‘Have you seen it?’

“‘No,’ he answered, ‘I’ve seen nothing. I’ve never been in London until tonight. I’m from the Midlands.’”

“‘Well, I haven’t seen it either,’ she said. ‘What would you say to having a bit of dinner and seeing it together?’

“They made a night of it, and she did her stuff so well that the next day he married her. A week later he was in khaki. I think he was killed on the Somme.”

I put the bracelet on while she was talking, and liked it rather better now I knew its history, but she was careful not to offer it to me a second time. I took it off and put it back in her jewel case with some earrings and a rosary.

CHAPTER XX

IT WAS late afternoon and the inhabitants of the little town were behind their flowered windows. The narrow streets were incredibly gray. Two young soldiers were walking ahead of me, their metal-studded boots striking the pavement stones. Their voices were raised high. They gesticulated, hit each other playfully like overgrown boys, and laughed a good deal, but one guessed that in spite of their youth the day was beginning to drag. A young woman hurried past us, clear skinned, her hair tidily rolled up at the back, all in black, but stepping lightly like a college girl. She murmured a quick good evening as our eyes met, and I recognized the pretty wife of our hotel manager. I watched her disappear through a dark porch in which a nun was standing, and I guessed that the building was a convent, and that she was going to fetch her daughter from school. The whole road seemed full of very old convents. Two old men were trying to back a donkey cart into a medieval courtyard. The donkey, its legs wide apart and muscles strained, refused to budge, and I had the strange impression that it winked at me as I looked at it and laughed. This was the road we had taken to call on Gaby and her daughter. To my right was a tall door surmounted by a black cross. It led to the cemetery.

We had stayed talking rather late after lunch, and I would be obliged to put off going to see Louise till tomorrow. Tightly clasped under my arm was a string bag containing the precious air cushion, Paloma's girlhood grammar, and the prayer book with Josephine's name in it. This prayer book had given me an idea. Paloma had gone back to Montivent to sleep. Her

brother Pierre was drawing wine in his cellar. As usual at this late hour of the day, about an hour before sunset, I was left to myself. I was anxious to visit the cemetery to see if I could find Josephine's grave. I felt a curious attachment for this beautiful girl I had never seen. I think also, at the back of my mind, I hoped to lift the curtain a little more by reading on her tombstone the exact date on which she had died.

A bitter wind blew down the hill between the graves. The stone church with its needle tower, extremely old and picturesquely small, had its door wide open. One had the impression of a chapel of ease rather than a church where people went to worship each Sunday. Perhaps it was merely used for funeral services. The pews were short and of unpolished wood, and I had the horrible impression they were coffin lids. The damp of evening ran down my spine, and after a frightened prayer I hastened out into the central alley, where my steps crunched against the gravel.

At first the tombstones were very old and covered with moss so that on occasions when one could read a date it was before Napoleon. Gradually the years shortened. The avenue up the hill was long. I climbed higher and higher as in a nightmare, not seeing the end. The wind became colder and the sun disappeared, taking away the last illusion of warmth. I put up the collar of my astrakhan coat and tried to hurry, but though I was carried forward more or less independently of my will, I realized how hopeless my search had become.

Suddenly from a side path came the black and broken figure of a very old woman. As she hobbled towards me, her features neither sad nor inquisitive, I noticed that she had a hand on her hip like the witches who in fairy stories meet young princesses on the road and set them tasks to do. Would she ask me to carry a bundle of faggots, or pick nettles for her from the rich earth manured from human remains around the graves? I said to her:

"Pardon me, madam, I am looking for the grave of the Saquet family."

"The Saquet family? Let me think! Why, yes, of course. Follow me!"

Leaving the gravel path she threaded her way quickly between marble monuments, familiarly, as if they held no terror for her, and then, turning around, said:

"Here they are!"

Before I could thank her she had gone.

I did not discover Josephine's name among those engraved on the vault. I did not even find the mother who used to sit looking out of her window, or the whistling engine driver who had taken Marie's lamb to the butcher. There was a Saquet, but which I could not tell. The old woman must have pointed out the wrong tomb. I thought of running after her, but night was closing in and I was horribly afraid. And anyway did it matter so very much? Alas, one day soon Paloma would suddenly be struck down, as lightning breaks a tall oak, and she would be put here in this damp, depressing place where the cold winds of March blow across the hills, and be forgotten.

Already she had outlived her time. Did not Goethe write to the Duchess of Stolberg:

"To live long is to outlive one's time. We outlive those we love, those we hate, those who are indifferent to us. We outlive kingdoms and capitals. We even live longer than certain forests, and we see die the trees that we have planted in our youth. We outlive ourselves, and great is our good fortune if we can remain physically and morally sound."

Oh, Paloma, what kingdoms and capitals have you already outlived! The Edwardian era has gone. Gone almost the memory of George Edwardes and his fabulous Gaiety girls. Gone so many who remember the First World War, and faint the memory of the era between wars. Since you were born at Montivent kingdoms have disappeared, capitals have been

altered, regimes have come and gone, dictators have followed kings and emperors, and, in turn, been murdered or burned. Outdated are your ideas, my dear good Paloma, and yet . . . if this is so, what is the secret of your charm?

CHAPTER XXI

IT WAS my last day. We had spent the morning talking, as usual, by the stove, and now it was time for me to bid farewell to Montivent. Paloma put a bottle of her brother's white wine and some pieces of sugar into my basket, saying: "You'll find these useful in London, my little rat!" and I dared not refuse.

She stuffed her purse with one-thousand-franc notes from the safe behind the settee, and with long elastic steps went to fetch her coat in the hall. Her hat hung on a peg like a man's. She took it down, pulling it over her eyes without any thought of inspecting herself in the mirror, and gave a condescending pat to the Alsatian who was jumping up against her.

I was now quite at home in the three houses, and wandered at will through the old-fashioned dark rooms of her mother's house and Louise's house that, like museums, were furnished, but not lived in. Only Tommy, Louise's black cat, inhabited them. His golden eyes stared at one, and his fur stood up defensively. He resented the noisiness of the Alsatian, and seemed to blame us because his mistress was in hospital. Beautiful was this cat, proud, accusing, full of secrets. Pierre brought food for him, every morning when he came to prepare breakfast for Paloma. I stroked the cat and kissed his pretty head, and said good-by to the black cupboard that reached to the ceiling, to the bookcase, and to the four-poster bed, for when I had closed the door and left all this it would be forever.

Lunch at the Petit Marguery was less gay. Pierre told us that his wife Augustine had prepared a cake and coffee to bid me farewell. She came hurrying toward us as soon as he opened the street door. I can still see her kindly little face, her steel-

rimmed spectacles, and the afternoon sun shining on the azaleas. Her sister Maria was standing behind her.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" I exclaimed. "Yesterday I asked after you, and they told me you were ill."

"No," she answered, beaming, "not ill, but nowadays I spend every other day in bed so that when I do get up I can be agile and bright. It's no good being tired and going through life with a sour face, is it? I build up energy. I had a delicious rest yesterday, Mme Madeleine, and today I feel half my age. And there is so much to be thankful for. The hen is a little better, and then you've come to have cake and coffee with us. You'll tell us some more about London, won't you, Mme Madeleine?"

But even in the warmth of the kitchen, with the animals around us, we were not altogether gay. Pierre was tired, or perhaps he had something on his mind. Paloma drank her coffee silently. Something that I could not guess had obviously vexed her. She was never very friendly after lunch, being quite overcome at this hour by her desire to sleep, but I was determined to take the air cushion to Louise, and as I watched the gathering anger on Paloma's brow I decided I would find an excuse and go early. With this intention I chose the right moment to whisper my excuses to Augustine, saying that I would come and see her early in the morning on my way to the station. I added that I would bring her the bottle of white wine which Paloma had thrust into my basket, and with which I would otherwise be condemned to walk about forever. She laughed understandingly, and a few moments later found a pretext for breaking up the party. As soon as we were in the street Paloma exclaimed:

"How tiresome those old people are, my little rat! I'm going home to have a good sleep. I can't keep my eyes open a moment longer."

"I'll go a little way with you," I said.

The wind came down cold from the hills, but there was a

feeling of spring about. I was careful not to talk at first. A long cart drawn by a team of oxen came toward us with the wheels straining and creaking. The driver, walking beside his animals, touched his forehead and said:

"A very good day to you, Mme Siller!"

She answered with that queenly gesture that was hers by instinct. Never had I seen her more noble. When the man was out of hearing she said:

"I wonder who he was!"

We had reached the hospital, and slipping my arm through hers I pleaded:

"Come in a moment, for my sake, Paloma. This is my last day. Don't be in such a hurry to leave me. You'll have lots of time to sleep."

I could feel her wavering, and I added:

"Just five minutes. Then I'll walk home with you."

"No," she answered suddenly, "it's not possible. They wouldn't let me in the hospital. I've got the dog with me."

I unwound the scarf from my neck and exclaimed:

"Take this for a lead!"

Unwillingly she ran it through the animal's collar, and thus we passed through the park. There was a stone bench by the entrance door, and on this she sat down, saying:

"I shall wait here with the dog while you go and see Louise, and then you can hold it for a few moments while I go in."

She seemed to have recaptured her early good humor, and smiled at a nun who happened to pass us. The birds were singing all around her. I ran quickly into the ward. Louise was waiting for me, her eyes turned eagerly to the door, but in truth she could not have looked at anything else, for her body had slipped and lay obliquely across the bed.

Her dark eyes greeted me with kindness, and she wished me good afternoon before I had time to wish it to her. I had

become accustomed to her white hair and sunken cheeks, but I could not look at her arms without shuddering.

"There!" I cried, taking the air cushion from my basket, "I found it after all."

Her eyes were full of grateful tears, and she asked that I should put it immediately behind her back, for she had suffered cruelly since my last visit.

"At night," she said, "I watch the nun sleeping on her high chair, and during the day I keep my eyes on the door, hoping that somebody I know will come to see me."

I lifted her gently up. There was no weight to her, and I was horribly afraid to break a rib, but when I excused myself, saying that I was very clumsy and quite the most awkward nurse, she smiled and muttered bravely:

"Don't be nervous, Mme Madeleine. Too much kindness never hurts!"

She wore a very long linen night gown, that covered her like a shroud. I slipped the cushion under her back, and as I did so caught a glimpse of her legs that were very swollen. Indeed one might have thought that all that was left of her, all the blood and flesh, had taken refuge here, fleeing from the remainder of her body. To give myself courage I said quickly:

"I haven't told you that Marie is here. I left her outside, holding the dog."

"What!" she exclaimed, her face lighting up, "my she-devil is here! Oh, but how happy I am! Really, Mme Madeleine, what miracles you do accomplish!" She winked and added: "My darling she-devil!"

"Well," said I, "I won't keep you any longer on tenterhooks. I'll go and fetch her."

"Yes," she said, less gaily, "but you're going home tomorrow. I had so many things I wanted to talk to you about—about Piccadilly and Cambridge Circus. How happy I was in London! What a beautiful thing is a big city."

She was now quite in tears. They fell, large and round and shiny, down her sunken cheeks, and then cascaded over the collar of her linen nightdress. I had been told that old people do not easily cry, that to shed a multitude of tears is our lot in youth and middle age when our sensitivity is at its most marked, but Louise was always in tears, tears of joy or tears of sorrow. The very name of London had conjured them up in waves.

I arranged the bed sheets and told her that I would come back for a moment to say a final good-by, but that I feared that unless I went to find Paloma immediately she would get tired of waiting and go back to Montivent. This thought put my poor Louise in a great to-do, and she said:

“Oh, yes, Mme Madeleine, do go, I pray you, and prevent my dear she-devil from running away. It would do me so much good to see her!”

I hurried toward the door, and as I opened it Louise was saying to her neighbor:

“Isn’t it wonderful! My sister Marie has arrived!”

The Alsatian was stretched out on the gravel path with its nose between its paws. I gave a sigh of thankfulness. At least she was still here, my stubborn Paloma. Yes, there she was, on the bench where I had left her, talking to an old lady. At the sight of me she rose and said:

“I’ll go and see Louise.”

I sat on the bench next to the old lady, but as we had not been introduced I began by talking to the dog, glancing from time to time at my companion. Her bare feet were tucked into light blue moccasins, and her knees were crossed as if she were posing for her photograph. Cautiously I lifted my eyes. The face was old but retained a suspicion of coquetry. The hair which was combed back and kept in place with heavy

combs had still some life in it. She wore a wine-colored dressing gown, that did not quite hide a rose cotton nightdress. Around her neck were some thick pieces of amber, through which shone the evening light, staining her skin. She had gray eyes that met mine. Then she said:

"I'm much better now. They won't keep me long in hospital. Not now I'm up!" She looked triumphantly happy. Clearly she had taken great pains to make herself look nice for this half-hour under the trees in the hospital park. She added: "Arthritis of the knee and a wrong diagnosis by a doctor, who told me to take as much exercise as possible. The result was seven months in hospital, my dear madam, but now we're in spring, and I'm up! So from what I hear you are a friend of Mme Marie Siller! You doubtless came to see our poor Mme Louise Saquet? And I expect you know M. Pierre Saquet? The dear man brings a jug of broth to his sister every day. Worn out, that's what she was when she came to us three weeks ago. A real slave!"

The old lady put a very white hand on her walking stick, and slowly uncrossed her knees. Then nodding her head:

"I gather you knew Mme Marie in England? Ah, that must have been interesting! Now what would you say if I told you we had been to school together!"

"Here, in Saulieu?"

"Of course, but from the way she spoke to me just now one might have supposed she had forgotten all about it. She said it was hard at my age to suffer so much. At *my* age, if you please! What age does she think she is?"

"She doesn't consider herself at all old," I said.

The old lady was looking at my hands.

"I see you are married. How I envy you! How wise you were! I threw away all my chances, and by the time I understood, why, it was too late! When I was a young woman there lived in our little town of Saulieu some rich people who had a fine estate, and as I wasn't rich, and gold coins don't grow

between our paving stones, I went into service and followed them to Paris. They were newly married, and children were born. I stayed to look after the children, and soon I became one of the family. They liked me and I liked them. I ate at their table, and when the parents were abroad, as they often were, I was virtually the mother of the children. In me they confided their secrets and their nonsense, and the years went by all too agreeably. The children married, and went to the colonies. I found myself suddenly alone with the parents who had become old. I was surprised to see how old they were, but at least they were two, two together, while I was alone. I was no longer very necessary to them. Happily I had put some money aside, enough to come back here and set up as a laundrywoman, just for handmade stuff, the very best, like the lace bonnets of the rich farmers' wives and the baptism dresses, and wonderful it was to see the beautiful lace and fine materials come to life under the spell of my irons and tongs. Yes, one would have thought that they were sailing boats in which the wind had filled and blown the sails. Gold pieces clinked in my purse, but I was still alone. You see, my little lady, getting married is not merely a question of being pretty or clever. The most important thing is to set about getting married. At what age were you married?"

"At twenty-two," I answered.

"You were only just in time," she said. "You had already lost four years at least. Tell me, in the name of heaven, what on earth were you thinking about between eighteen and twenty-two?"

A very aged nun came toward us carrying a basket full of washing. She looked at me and said:

"Open the door for me, my little lady. Thank you. There's a good girl!"

My companion went on:

"I do love to have a nice talk. How kind of you to listen to

me so patiently. The trouble about being in the hospital a long time is that one has soon told one's life to everybody, and then it becomes so dull. It's a rare treat to fall on somebody new. Now what was I going to say? Oh, I know. That I'm rich, that I pay for all my own expenses in the hospital, that I don't need to rely on anybody. As soon as I'm cured I shall go back home but I shall still be alone. Yes, Marie Siller and I were at school together. She has enriched all her family but, of course, she has had a fabulous life. They say she has traveled across the globe and has sat down with kings and millionaires. A sort of legend has grown up around her, but she lies about her age!"

The nun, having deposited her washing basket, came back and said to my companion:

"Have you walked a little? Do you feel better? Good! You must go back to bed soon, for the sun is going in, and I can smell the soup for supper."

The old lady looked at the Alsatian and said:

"People and children I love, but not animals. Funny, isn't it? And just to look at that dog I know I shall never change!"

The Alsatian showed no sign of caring. Suddenly he pricked up his ears. The veranda door opened and Paloma, her face beaming, arrived.

"I've just been to see Louise," she told us, as if we did not know. "She has become very old and very feeble. Poor, good Louise!"

"Wait a moment," I said, "I must go and say good-by to her."

I gave her the dog, still bridled with my scarf, and ran into the ward where I discovered Louise quite transfigured.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "She came! Do you know that she came? How I love her, my big, dark, she-devil!"

"We all love her," I said. "And now you must get well quickly, for I shall come back and see you in the summer, not here, but in your house at Montivent, with the black cat and all the things you like to have around you."

I kissed her, and ran away quickly, not to see her tears. Paloma was standing up by the stone bench, saying good-by to her friend. I took the dog from her. The same nun who had already passed twice came back across the lawn. Paloma said something to her, and slipped a note in her hand. It might have been ten francs or a thousand! As soon as the nun had gone Paloma said to me:

"One has to grease those old bodies from time to time. They are always knitting black stockings, and you can't imagine, my little rat, what a skein of wool costs these days. Come! Let's get out of this place and breathe some good fresh air. You're not crying, are you, my little rat?"

"A little," I answered; "I'm sad to leave Louise. Though I have only known her a few days it is like leaving somebody I have always known."

"You won't get a chance of knowing her any more," said Paloma.

I looked up, shocked at the cold objectiveness in her voice, but the Alsatian almost made us trip as he pulled us toward the main road. The merry-go-rounds had begun to play and children out from school were crowding around the nougat stalls. The birds were singing, and the air was crisp and sweet smelling.

"Shall we take your pearl to the jeweler?" I asked suddenly.

"No," she snapped. "I want to go back to Montivent and sleep. All those old women get on my nerves. Take the pearl for me."

"Paloma," I said, "I'm going back to London tomorrow. Do you know that?"

We were in a pretty square by the post office. There were little houses all around.

"Look at that window," she said, pointing to one with geraniums on the sill. "When I was twelve I was apprenticed to a seamstress there. The choristers had their school in the house

opposite. It was very gay. But my little rat, it's terribly boring to sew!"

We now reached the church of St. Andoche, near the covered market. Suddenly Paloma looked at me and said:

"Besides, if you're going, for heaven's sake, go! God be with you, my little rat!"

She kissed me, and calling the dog went off, but when she had gone a little way she turned and waved to me as a person waves good-by from a departing liner, over the deck rail waving a handkerchief, the sea between ship and land growing wider. I was suffocated with surprise and tears. She turned a last time, crying "Adieu!" and then she was swallowed up by the medieval streets, and it was finished.

CHAPTER XXII

I RETURNED to London the next day and was soon caught up in the things every woman does at home. I did not try to keep up with Paloma except for a short letter enclosed in a box of chocolates I ordered from her favorite shop in Bond Street. Pierre thanked me very prettily and there the matter ended.

In November of that year I went to stay with friends in Holland, and when on Sunday, the nineteenth, I arrived home my correspondence was waiting for me on my sewing table. I had crossed by The Hook, and feeling untidy was anxious to take a bath and change my dress. My mind was full of the picturesque of my journey, the kindness of a young married friend at The Hague, the crates of hothouse grapes we had passed on the quayside, and the butter and eggs and nylons I had brought back. It was not till I had bathed and done my hair that I began to open my letters.

I left to the last one from Normandy, in which my mother wrote about the cows, the cats, the price of cider apples, the rain, and the usual village ceremony on the eleventh of November. She ended by saying: "The enclosed arrived for you yesterday." I picked up a paper that had fallen on my lap, unfolded it, and shuddered a little at the sight of the black edging and heavy black cross, but the instinctive feeling of fear at the announcement of a yet unknown death was fol-

lowed by a sudden panic as I read the following words in large type:

MADAME VEUVE JEAN SILLER
(née Marie Saquet)

The funeral will take place on Sunday, 12th November, at the church of St. Saturin, Saulieu, Côte d'Or. Mourners will meet at her house, Montivent, at two in the afternoon.

PRAY FOR HER !

Today was the nineteenth. She had thus lain in the earth seven days!

It was to Stephen that I eventually turned for information, but this took time, for he had caught influenza, and was obliged during these poignant days to stay in bed. But he sent me two letters which I now translate as accurately as I can.

Louise Saquet to Stephen

Montivent,

15th, November, 1950.

DEAR STEPHEN,

In truth, our sorrow is great. My sweet good sister left us with appalling suddenness, and now there is a great feeling of emptiness in the house. This is how it happened. She kept to her room for three days, getting up from time to time, afterwards going back to bed. The third day she came to my kitchen and stayed there till three. Then she said: "It's funny. I feel something numb inside me." But it passed off, and at five Gaby came to pay her a visit. After a few moments Gaby said: "Aunt doesn't seem at all well!" She appeared to have no pain, but she looked at us without saying a word as if she were unable to summon up the power of speech. We were

afraid and went to fetch a doctor and a priest. When we returned she was dead.

Oh, my sweet little sister! How I loved her! What sorrow is mine! I cannot believe she is gone for ever. She remained beautiful right until the day of her funeral. I was not able to accompany our poor Marie to her grave, for I had only been out of the hospital eight days and I was not cured. It was she who insisted I should come home. I think she was bored and wanted me back. Unfortunately my stay in the hospital doesn't appear to have done me any good. I can't walk any better than before and I'm always in pain.

Oh, my darling sister! Who would have expected it? One never felt she could be ill that way. One was accustomed to think of her as being a little weak in the head, but not in the body! In the head, yes. She did, without knowing it, the queerest things. What she did was often topsy-turvy, or, at least, so it appeared to us.

You will, I suppose, settle her affairs in London. The draft her English bankers sent her arrived on the day of her death so nobody can touch it and, as it happens, there is no cash left in the house. She wasted her money dreadfully, and lately, of course, because I was in hospital I couldn't keep an eye on her. She was one of those rare persons who seemed to have no interest in money, and was always distributing it to anybody who happened to be passing. Lots of people took advantage of her. None of us dared say anything. She would have bitten our heads off! The tradesmen to whom she owed money are sending their bills in, but you must not blame her if there were a few unpaid bills. Her brains were tired, and I don't suppose she knew.

Adrienne was at the funeral.

You remember Marie's Alsatian dog? He is looking for

her everywhere, and whines all night. How sad and changed everything is! Good-bye for the present,

Your,

LOUISE.

Pierre Saquet to Stephen

Saulieu,

19th, November, 1950.

DEAR SIR,

It was on Tuesday morning, 7th November, that Marie first felt unwell. Ever since she came back from London after the war I used to climb up the hill to Montivent early every morning to prepare her breakfast. On this particular day she said she felt rather giddy and had no appetite. I told her to stay quietly in bed. It was no good sending for a doctor. She was not the sort of woman to let a doctor come into her house till there was a real need for it.

As you probably know, Louise had left hospital a few days earlier and was back in her part of the house, and so I didn't return to Montivent that day. The next morning Marie said she felt a little better. Louise had made her a cup of tea, but she had not drunk half of it. She stayed in bed till one and then got up. Our niece Gabrielle came at five, and it was then that Marie felt suddenly worse. We went to fetch a doctor and a priest, but when they arrived she was dead, such was the speed with which this unknown illness struck her down.

She left no will, for though she often spoke of making one it was like everything else. Her plans were seldom put into effect. She was always talking about going back to London, for instance, but I doubt if she was serious.

Will your health and your business allow you to come

to see us? We urgently need your presence. Her jewels are here, but I believe she had some stocks and shares in London. Do you know what they consist of?

Yours respectfully,

PIERRE SAQUET,

Wine merchant at Saulieu, Burgundy.

A few days later I received this letter from Louise in answer to one from me:

Montivent,

24th, November, 1950.

DEAR MME MADELEINE,

I am indeed grateful to you for what you write about my good and kind sister. Each time anybody mentions her name I break into tears. Consider she was ill for less than an hour!

Thank you for your offer to send me some stockings and a quarter of a pound of tea. I accept both gratefully, especially the tea. Before she died Marie used up all we had in the house.

I can only walk now with the help of two sticks. Presumably I have only a few more months to live, but who would have guessed that my darling she-devil would go before me?

I will send you a photograph of her taken in London when we first went there—in about 1907, I suppose. Yes, you are right. She had a heart of gold.

Your most unhappy,

LOUISE.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE STORY of Paloma did not seem to have been brought to a complete end. One could not be sure with this amazing woman. I kept on telling myself that I ought to visit her tomb.

The journey was what really put me off, and the fact that I was not particularly anxious, sensitive as I am, to work myself up into a fine state of emotion by climbing those long paths lined with gravestones. I should probably lose myself and be wakened at night by hideous dreams. I was bound to fall again under her spell and think about her to the detriment of all my other business.

I took the decision suddenly one summer evening in Paris, but I would not go by train. I remembered too vividly the lurching and bumping of the steel *autorail* along its single track from Laroche-Migennes, and being entirely feminine I find no delight in trains. I thought I would try one of the express motor coaches that follow the Gallo-Roman road that leads through Sens, Avallon, Autun to Lyons and the Riviera. You will recall that I watched them draw up outside the restaurant of the Petit Marguery when in March of the previous year I had lunched with Paloma and Pierre.

It was not that I had any better opinion of long-distance motor coaches. They would bump me just the same. It was the idea of arriving in time to watch again that scene at the Petit Marguery that tipped the scales in their favor. I wanted to be transported suddenly into a view of Pierre's house, the corner one by the Avenue de la Gare, that tall gray house, with the geraniums in the windows, that Paloma had bought

so many years ago with pieces of gold. Had I some curious belief that I should see her ghost crossing the road to join her brother for lunch?

The next morning I was up early. A heat mist hung over Paris, and there was not a cab in sight. My coach was due to leave the Rue de l'Arcade at 7:30, and I think if I had missed it I should have lost that fervor which now caused me to run like a madwoman down the Faubourg St. Honoré, tripping up on my high heels, perspiring in my tailor-made, scanning the horizon for a cab. None came. I cannot help thinking that at this moment some occult hand took a part in the game facilitating my journey. The bells of Paris began striking the half-hour, and still there was no cab in sight. I was on the point of giving everything up and returning quietly to England by the next plane. After all, what business had I at the start of this hot June day to be wanting to cross half France merely to read a name on a tombstone? A little woman in a tight skirt with her hat awry is a silly sight. I hated myself for managing things so badly. Why are women so frightfully incompetent? But I was still half walking, half running, caught up in a panic, when a gentleman standing beside a lamppost, obviously waiting for somebody or something, looked up at me with an air of cool amazement. I mean by this that he had not run as I had. He was a picture of unruffled, meditative assurance. But the panic written all over my person must have surprised him. I then saw that he was standing beside a car.

"Sir," said I breathlessly, in a voice that I could scarcely recognize as my own, "it depends entirely on you whether I reach my destination in Burgundy by lunchtime."

He smiled and answered without the least sign of hesitation:

"Madame, one of my chief pleasures in life is to help people in distress—especially ladies."

And so fate rushed me to the waiting coach, fate in the per-

son of this complete stranger who liked to help people, especially ladies, in distress.

The coach driver stood impatiently beside the bonnet of his coach. He looked at me and then at the list in his hand. What, I wondered, had inspired him to give me, against the regulations, three minutes grace?

"Madame," he said, "I was on the point of starting without you."

The other passengers had unfolded large-scale maps, which they spread across their knees. There was a strangely familiar smell of Virginia tobacco. I suddenly realized that I had fallen among English people. Doors were closed. Our driver adjusted his dark spectacles, and we were soon hurrying across the streets of Paris.

I was now really on my way to Saulieu.

This journey, without any doubt, was the result of some powerful urge dragging me forward. I was mad to want to go there. What should I find? Would Louise be still alive? My seat was at the very back of the coach and already I was being bumped and bruised. And to think I would be obliged to endure this discomfort for five hours! Five hours in a coach under a broiling sun!

There were moments of respite. The forest of Fontainebleau was full of cool shadows, and on an obelisk I read in passing the name of Marie-Antionette, Queen of France. The sight of her august name gave me courage. How beautiful is this land!

Now the road to Lyons stretched white and magnificent in front of us. In the villages we passed school children in black pinafores swinging their satchels, for it was really only breakfast time, and the school bells were still gaily ringing. The hot sun, hidden as we roared through village streets, broke out again on fertile country scenes where women in the fields tedded sweet-smelling hay. Thus we reached Sens, drawing up under the plane trees in sight of the cathedral.

The hours passed and I gave up hope of ever arriving. I no longer troubled to look at my watch. What good did it do? Then suddenly I read on a signpost the words: "To Saulieu—30 kilometers," and I wondered if it could really be true. Thirty kilometers! Then it was quite possible we should arrive! How long did a coach take to cover thirty kilometers? What did it make in miles? The railroad track came winding toward us, and we should have to stop because the gates of the level crossing were against us. This was the first time during the entire journey that we had been obliged to stop at a level crossing. The driver brought us to a grinding standstill, and puffs of country air came in through the open windows. If the train did not arrive too quickly I would have time to arrange my hair and do my face. How hot it must have been! My skirt was all creased. My body ached all over. What a state I would be in at lunch! But where would I lunch? Would Pierre Saquet be at home?

I felt better for the powder and the lipstick. A steel *autorail* flashed past, and the gates of the level crossing swung up. The smell of newly cut hay came in through the windows stronger than ever. The country was truly enchanting. We passed forests and rivers, lakes and farms with tall double doors.

I fell into a sort of reverie, drunk with movement and country air. What was this building in two parts, like the wings of a bird in flight, the façade powdery gray with a roof of russet tiles? The weathercock seemed familiar and two beds put out on the lawn. But surely this was Louise's hospital? Was I dreaming? But no, through another window I now saw the stone bull, the famous *taureau Pompom*, dazzling and magnificent on its pedestal in the center of the square. We were cutting like a keen-edged wind into the very heart of Saulieu along the Gallo-Roman road.

I looked urgently for a first glimpse of Pierre's house. I

remembered it as tall and gray, the corner house by the Avenue de la Gare. Geraniums and azaleas had stood in pots, other flowers also perhaps, in the big front room which must once have been a café. The walls were ochre tinted. Nobody used it much. They all lived in the back kitchen. There would be Pierre pottering about with his kegs of Burgundy wine, and his wizened and spectacled wife Augustine, who was such a dear, kind soul. And how about Maria with her red and expansive face? Would it be her day in bed or her day for fussing around in the kitchen, keeping an eye on the black kitchen range, unless they let the fire out in summer. Would Follette, the terrier, be having more puppies? Would the cat be sitting on the very top of the tall cupboard so that when it arched its back it touched the ceiling? And how about the fat hen in the osier basket?

Where was the house?

Surely we must be upon it at any moment?

Augustine liked to put a kitchen chair on the pavement by the front door so that she could watch the people coming down from the higher part of the town. She might be there at this very moment, and I could not get it out of my head that I would see Pierre crossing the road, his fine head erect, his shepherd's cape over his shoulders.

Ah, here it was!

But what had happened to it?

My heart was beating against my ribs, for the house was being pulled down and a great piece of calico was stretched across what remained of the façade bearing the following words:

BOUGHT BY THE HOTEL—FOR ITS NEW ANNEX

The coach was going so fast that I only had a rapid glimpse of the Avenue de la Gare. Then gently our driver pulled up

between the Tour d'Auxois and the beflowered café terrace of the Hôtel du Petit Marguery. Other coaches, as luxurious as ours, were parked along the moat, and there was much coming and going between the various hotels. Our driver stood up and shouted:

"Saulieu! Seventy minutes' wait!"

We all tumbled out, and from the direction of the town came the sound of a clock striking. St. Andoche (in front of which, according to Paloma, Jesus had walked) was marking the hour.

I clutched my bag and went across the road to the Hôtel de la Poste, but I kept on repeating the words: "The cornerstone . . . the cornerstone is gone." I suppose I was trying to tell myself that because Pierre Saquet's house was being pulled down all the Saquet family was crumbling. "And so," I went on to myself, "it must be." If Louise were alive she could only be dragging herself about with one foot in the grave. They were all so very old. Half a year had gone past since Paloma was buried . . . hard winter and cold spring. In this part of France the spring was cruel cold.

If I had been a man I think I might have gone to Pierre Saquet's house and tried to gather something, but I could not see myself interviewing stones. Why did I attach so much importance to it being the corner house? Yes, of course, the association came from various texts in the Bible. My Protestant upbringing always tended to make me search for texts. ". . . that our daughters may be as cornerstones, polished after the similitude of a palace," wrote the psalmist. "The one hundred and forty-fourth psalm," I said to myself as I walked into the Hôtel de la Poste and heard a woman saying to me:

"Can I help madame? Would madame like to lunch?"

Of course, that exactly describes her! She held up all her

family. Everybody depended on her. This daughter of Sau-lieu, beautiful, polished, proud, had ruled her little world like a sun-baked Egyptian princess. It made one terribly glad to be a woman. One could not quite help wanting to imitate her. She was the only one in the family who had ever given orders. Montivent had been beautified with her money. She bought the corner house with her London earnings. Pierre Saquet's wine business was hers. She had set him up in it to bolster his self-respect.

"Can I put madame's bag in the office while she lunches?"

I looked down at her, this very polite and businesslike manager's wife. She was different from the one I had become friendly with on my last visit. The previous one had a little girl.

"Are you new here?"

"Yes, madame."

"I would like a room for the night," I said, "and then I'll come down for lunch."

She rang a bell, gave my bag to a groom, and took me up the old-fashioned staircase to the first floor where she ushered me into the very same room I had occupied in March of the previous year. I said:

"How curious!"

"What's curious, madame?"

"Nothing. This will do very well. I'll tidy myself up and be down in five minutes."

Green chintzes and dark furniture, a table and two windows . . . two beds with reading lamps, and quite a luxurious bathroom partitioned off by a slender wall. The only difference I could see from the first time was that begonias and pansies made splashes of color in window boxes.

" . . . that our daughters may be as cornerstones."

What so catches the imagination in a poor girl making a success of her life? How many years ago was it that the daugh-

ter of the engine driver had set off to make a name for herself in Paris and in London, dining at the tables of the famous? Men can so much more easily succeed. But for a woman to become a legendary figure . . . !

Oh, it's much more fun being a woman!

I stood by a window looking at the medieval houses on the opposite side of the narrow steep highway. And in all the windows there were pots of flowers. On the narrow pavement in front of her door sat a very old woman wearing a black straw hat, and in that delicious, though harsh, Burgundy accent she was discussing with an employee of our hotel the previous night's storm, and listening to her I suddenly recaptured not only the words and expressions of Paloma, but that sort of cussedness that was so characteristic of her. I suddenly realized I was hungry, and tidying myself quickly I went out into the passage where I discovered the maid with whom I had talked that March morning in my first endeavor to find out about Paloma. The informative chambermaid was kneeling on the stairs, polishing the parquet where it was not covered by carpet, and we smiled at one another like old friends, but something warned me that I should not question her on this occasion, but discover things for myself.

It never even entered my head to look in at the Petit Marguery. The sight of Pierre's house in ruins quite put me off trying to recapture a picture I knew could no longer exist. I would eat in my own hotel and indeed as I came down to the entrance hall the maître d'hôtel was waiting for me, a very imposing menu in his hand. I suppose I had been pointed out to him by the manager's wife as a guest from London who was making her second visit here, a woman worth fussing over. I therefore allowed myself to be taken in hand, but without much enthusiasm, and after partaking of what was put in front of me, a fresh trout and a glass of Chablis, decided without wasting another moment to make my way to Montivent.

CHAPTER XXIV

LEAVING the motor highway behind me I took the paved road leading up to the heart of the town, a wide road with real paving stones cruel to those of us who wear high heels. Here on my right was the village smithy striking mighty blows on the red-hot horseshoe held by tongs on the anvil while a group of little girls and boys watched the age-old picture. Everything was just as I remembered it, except that the trees with their summer foliage were apt to confuse me. Little women dressed severely in black crossed from one side of the street to the other, going into shops, and as they opened and closed the shop doors one heard the tinkling of doorbells . . . ding . . . ding. I, too, crossed and recrossed, recognizing landmarks—a dried-sausage shop, a grocer's, an antique dealer's, a small hairdresser's. And then I must have taken a wrong turning, for things became less familiar. I could no longer be sure. The town seemed too quickly to turn into country. Instead of cobblestones there were country lanes, and finally grass grew high in ditches. This was certainly not the road we had usually taken with Paloma, but then when I had been with Paloma I never took much notice of the road. I followed her blindly.

The heat was stifling, and I was not dressed for the country, being still in the blouse and the tight skirt with which I had set out so early in Paris, and the jacket pinched at the waist. A bird flew up from a hedge, and country smells filled my nostrils. I was beginning to suffer from the tiredness of the journey, and my shoes pinched. At a turn of the lane I came

across a child playing ball, but as soon as he saw me he stopped playing and put the ball under his arm, standing by the ditch to watch me pass. I asked him if I was on the right road for Montivent, but without answering he ran off as fast as he could. A few moments later, however, he came back dragging by the hand an old gentleman in a Panama hat, who looked as if he might have been a retired civil servant. The Panama was raised, and we now made a group in the middle of the lane, the old gentleman respectfully bareheaded, the townswoman, and the little country boy. I explained once more that I wanted to go to Montivent, but had lost my way.

"The easiest is to take the path at the back of my garden," said the old gentleman, pointing to his cottage. "You will need ten good minutes, but I venture to think you will not find the way long, for it is pretty, and the trees will give you shade."

He bowed very graciously and put on his hat again. I thanked both him and the little boy, who had not ceased holding the old gentleman by his left hand.

The garden was large and surrounded by a fine old wall, and beyond this there was a farm. Sheep bleated and a watchdog barked, straining on its leash. A moment later I came upon the road which was indeed pretty, with tall trees for shade.

The storm of the previous night had left little puddles in the cart ruts. Frogs hurried off at the sound of my steps, and their passage made ripples in the water in which was reflected the blue of the sky. Thick bushes of hazel, growing sometimes into trees, lined the road to my left, while to the right I could see fields and farms stretching across rising ground.

I was once more wondering if I had not lost myself when the road revealed a long black roof which, because of the unevenness of the countryside, appeared to die away amidst the long tufted grass. Then a white goat, trying to approach me, and yet afraid to do so, danced at the end of a string. And now I suddenly remembered standing on this same spot

when on my first visit I had seen the old man and his donkey appear over the brow of the hill, that very old man whose face covered with white hair made him look like a native of Tibet.

A moment later I was looking up at Montivent, the three low houses made into one, with the terrace and the arbor and the three steps going up to the gate.

I pulled the iron bell, and at the sound of it an Alsatian came out barking just like the first time. But there was no Paloma framed in the door, only her dog that, not recognizing me, showed his teeth and growled. A young woman shaking a carpet out of a window of Paloma's house called to me across the terrace:

"Come in!"

"I am afraid of the dog," I answered.

Then she cried:

"Riquet! Riquet! Come here, Riquet!"

He turned toward her and I pushed open the iron gate.

Like Juliet at her balcony the young girl answered my various queries:

"M. Pierre Saquet? Yes, he's here. And Mme Louise? Why, yes, she's here also. You'll find her in the third house."

The terrace was full of newly sawn wood, packing cases, and pieces of furniture.

"Oh," thought I, "they are going to desert it like the corner house in the town."

I looked around uncomfortably as if the house would suddenly tell me its story, but I saw nothing but a tall thin man crossing the far end of the terrace. He was in his shirt sleeves, and his face was hidden by a wide yellow straw hat, what appeared to be a woman's hat, from which the riband would have been torn off, and while I was still wondering about this he was gone.

I went straight to the last house. The door was wide open. There were just two white steps to climb, whereupon, framed

in the doorway, the sunny courtyard behind me, I peered into the long narrow kitchen trying to accustom my eyes to the beauty of the dim interior.

Sitting on a tall backed chair beside a round table, one hand poised on the top of an ivory walking stick, the other across her lap, palm upward, her feet resting on the rung of a *prie-dieu*, or kneeling stool, was a thin tall woman with white hair, whose dark, shining eyes were slowly raised toward me.

My heart ceased suddenly to beat, for this apparition was Paloma touched by the softness of old age.

Her face was triangular like the head of an adder, and the skin was the color of burned sand tightly drawn across the bones as it had been with Paloma. In this case, however, one gasped at the contrast between the darkness of the eyes and the delicate white hair plaited to form a halo, and topped in the prettiest way with a black velvet ribbon.

I remained for a moment in speechless contemplation, and then, stepping forward, put my arms around the frail shoulders. She allowed me to kiss her, but the next moment her hand, blue with veins, was raised in a gesture of rebuff and she said:

“Who are you? What are you doing?”

And as if she were still searching for an explanation, she went on:

“But you are not Fifine Bizot?”

This quite put me off, and it was a moment before I exclaimed:

“Come! Come! I am Madeleine. Don’t you remember me last March at the hospital?”

But even as I spoke I modulated my voice, almost finishing in a whisper, fearing that perhaps she might have lost her memory. Eighteen months is a long, long time for an old person to remember, but now it all came rushing back to her, and she said:

"Mme Madeleine! Why, yes, of course, you are Mme Madeleine! And to think that my dear little sister is no longer here to welcome you. Oh, how unhappy I am! She died, she died so quickly, that she never even had time to speak to me!"

The large black eyes filled with tears, which dropped down the ocher skin of her sallow cheeks like raindrops one after the other, falling on the black wool skirt till they burst at the fold of the knees.

But suddenly her face lit up with joy and she exclaimed:

"Oh, what a lovely surprise! I who thought you were Fifine Bizot! But it's you, my little rat! You have come back! What a joyful surprise! How did you come? How is everything in London? So you arrived by the coach, but, my poor little rat, you must have had an atrocious journey! Every bone in your body must be aching, and you have done all that just to pay us a visit, and to think that only yesterday, only yesterday, my little rat, we were saying, Pierre and I, that now that Marie is dead nobody would ever stop off at Saulieu again to come and see us! They made for a lot of gaiety, those visits Marie received. And here you are—you! You! And you have come specially, just to see us! That makes one really believe in friendship, my little rat!"

I had dropped down on the rush seat of the kneeling stool, and my arms were around her knees, and my head was laid on her lap, and my heart beat with an unbelievable joy to be there, listening to her talking. When she laughed one felt that her laugh came straight from her soul, but her lean body remained very tense and upright. She wore a coarsely knitted black cardigan, so much too large for her that it was gathered here and there with big safety pins right up to the neck at which point on her dress I saw the large, old-fashioned cameo, having upon it the likeness of the Holy Virgin, which Paloma wore the first day I met her in the Green Park.

Her left hand was still poised on the silver knob of the tall

black walking stick, while the other hand which lay palm upward across her lap was under my cheek. This way of holding her hand across her lap was very typical of Paloma, and they had both inherited it, I believe, from their mother.

She seemed surprised about something, and said:

“I can’t understand why Pierre doesn’t come.”

I lifted my head from her lap, and my eyes wandered to the round table beside her, on which lay an open book and a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles. I wanted to know what she was reading, and pulled the book toward me. It was a life of Queen Christine of Sweden.

“How very odd!” I exclaimed. “Do you like biographies?”

“I’m too old for novels,” she answered, smiling. “At my age one likes to read about real people. Novels are more for when one is a young woman. Books about real people are packed with events of a more vital character. There’s plenty of love and intrigue and often a murder or two. This particular book has been here for years. Marie read it several times, and Pierre has read it, and I’m now reading it for the second or third time. It doesn’t matter how often I read it because I forget it each time, and if I do happen to remember certain passages I’m always glad to come across them again. The important thing is to know when one starts a book one has read before that it’s worth reading. In the end one almost believes it has something to do with one’s own family.”

At this moment Pierre arrived.

He proved to be the figure I had seen crossing the terrace in the wide straw hat, but as he stood framed in the doorway, as I had been, I thought he was much thinner than a year ago. Without paying any attention to me he went slowly to his sister who asked in surprise:

“Well, haven’t you anything to say to Madeleine?”

“Madeleine?” he queried. “What Madeleine?”

He turned and looked at me full in the face, still without

the slightest sign of recognition. I was terribly disappointed, and started without much conviction:

"Don't you remember . . . last year? I came to see your sister. . . ."

But even as I spoke courage failed me to go on. It did not seem to matter. He had changed so much himself. Suddenly he uncovered his head and murmured:

"Yes, of course. Of course. So you've come back to Burgundy. It's very good of you, but it's a long journey just to visit a tomb."

Louise was not listening. She broke in:

"Pierre, will you please help me to get up. I want to fetch something in my room."

He took her arm while her fingers tightened over the knob of the cane. I watched her body rising to its full height. She was tall. I was surprised to see how tall she was. Last year she had seemed so little as she lay on her hospital bed. Riquet, the Alsatian, who after barking so angrily at me at the gate had slept so contentedly beside us, now ran out into the terrace. Louise said to me:

"I want to fetch something for you, a little souvenir. No, don't help me. I can manage by myself now that Pierre has put me on my feet."

She had Paloma's back, a waistless back that merged into the hips, all the curves having long since disappeared. Her long black skirt hung about her legs listlessly like a sail robbed of wind. She climbed a stone step leading to her bedroom, and we heard her opening the mirrored door of her wardrobe. Pierre, turning to me, said in a voice that now showed his friendship:

"I expect you saw what is happening to my house—her house, but the one in which I lived forty-five years. We had to sell it. Think, Mme Madeleine, how times have changed since she bought it. She paid thirty thousand francs for it, and we

sold it for several millions. They are going to make a popular restaurant for folk who pull up in the long-distance coaches. The most valuable site in all Saulieu, she called it. The yard at the back where we kept our chickens and rabbits and my vats is to become something magnificent. They are going to spend twenty millions on transforming it! The house we lived in is being pulled down stone by stone, and every time I pass it a little more has gone, but what will you?" Pierre stretched out his arm in a slow majestic sweep. "What does it matter to us any more? She's dead. The government wants the death duties. By the time Louise and I, her direct heirs, get anything we shall be ready to die ourselves, and so the government won't have to wait long for another lot of death duties. Then what will be left for *our* heirs? Believe me, Mme Madeleine, with her everything came to an end!"

Louise hobbled back with a black leather handbag, which she gave me, saying:

"This is Stephen's last present to her. The clasp is rather difficult. I can't manage it myself. I would like you to take the bag to England as a souvenir, little Madeleine. It will almost be a little of Marie going back with you to the London she loved."

She was fussing round her chair trying to hide her emotion, looking for a new subject of conversation. Pinned to the wall, next to a calendar, was a photograph of myself torn out of a newspaper. I wondered if Stephen had sent it to her.

"You've changed the way you do your hair," said Louise pensively. "That's why I didn't recognize you at once when you arrived. I was so accustomed to the way you did it in the photograph. I talk to you for hours when I'm alone in the kitchen."

She laughed in case I should think her silly.

Paloma's bag was as bright as the day Stephen gave it to her. I opened it. The lining was pretty and fresh, but the purse

and mirror that are generally to be found inside a bag had gone. There was a large black hairpin of the kind she used to wear and a prayer book. Louise was talking, talking. I stayed there with the bag in my hands listening to her. She had sat down again and was telling me about the prayer book. Pierre's wife, Augustine, had given it to Paloma on All Saints' Day to attend mass at St. Andoche on her way to lunch at the Marguery, "for, my little rat, Marie, though she ate less than a bird, would not break herself of the habit of going to the Marguery every day. Nothing would stop her—not the rain, nor the wind, the mud, nor the appetizing things Pierre offered to cook for her. She gave the orders. There was no disobeying her. But she was so delightfully gay. When she was not asleep she was singing. And often she would go off along the white country road alone except for Riquet and the birds. The birds always followed her. They seemed to know she gave them bread. And I stayed here in my kitchen reading my book or looking at the photographs on the wall, or what it said on the calendar. Of course, it never really matters to me what day of the week it is. My poor legs get no better whether it's Monday or Friday or Sunday. And so when Marie was out walking I stayed behind thinking or reading or writing her letters, and the time passed quickly enough. I was always surprised to see her come back so soon. She came back merely to sleep. She would go through my house and our mother's house into her own, and then I would put the kettle on to make her a nice cup of tea, and when I brought it to her she would say:

"What? You here again, my little Louise? You are much too good to your old she-devill"

"With that we would laugh. Laughing does one such a lot of good. I would sit on the edge of her bed and we would discuss things that we knew about. We were unbelievably fond

of each other in our own strange way between quarrels and tears and kisses.”

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears, and she asked:

“When are you going to the cemetery?”

I was about to answer her when Pierre asked me to come and see his wife Augustine.

Louise froze up at this. Clearly she resented the presence of Augustine and Augustine’s sister Marie in the house. Pierre threw back his head as if to show he was the master now, and said:

“Everything is very untidy. We haven’t finished arranging the furniture from the house in town. I expect you noticed the packing cases on the terrace. It’s amazing how much furniture one accumulates during forty-five years. You’d think it hides in odd places for the fun of keeping out of sight!”

We passed through Louise’s apartments to the house in the middle, which had belonged to their mother—that center room which I remembered as being rather dark and musty, having a four-poster with cretonne hangings, a grandfather clock, and that tall wardrobe of carved black wood, in which I had made Paloma search for the air cushion. It was in this room, you will remember, that Pierre, Paloma, and Louise were born.

The grandfather clock, whose copper pendulum shone like the sun, had stopped. The four-poster bed was made. Pierre, the man of the family, slept in his mother’s bed, and it was covered with his own eiderdown of royal blue. The only important change was that the tall black wardrobe had disappeared. The photograph of their mother wearing her piped bonnet and tight bodice was pushed a little further back on the bookshelf with Chateaubriand’s *Memoires d’outre-tombe*, and the incomplete works of Alfred de Musset, and to these were newly added a great number of devotional books.

Around a table in the middle of this room sat Augustine, Maria, and two ladies with monumental-sized hats, who looked as if they had stepped out of a painting by Manet. They were mother and daughter, I gathered, but they were so alike with ample bosoms, and short arms, and faces deprived of age and sex that had it not been for the tenor of their conversation I should hardly have known which was which. They sat at a genteel distance from the table, very upright on straw-plaited chairs, and their sentences all began with the words: "In view of the importance of our situation . . ." to which Augustine and Maria answered in unison: "Of course! Of course!"

My arrival was the signal for the two visitors to announce their departure which drew from Augustine and Maria many polite invitations to come again. Maria, toothless, her wisps of white hair on the upper lip and chin more flourishing than ever, her red cheeks redder, but no shawl over her head, received in turn many compliments from the visiting mother and daughter: "In view of your great age, Maria . . ." "In view of your new installation so far from the center of the town . . ."

Pierre looked with amused eyes at all these females dressed in black, and good-humoredly shrugged his narrow shoulders. He, the man, magnificently dominated them, and when the farewells and kisses began he stood proudly to one side as if afraid "in view of his sex" to be kissed and said good-by to by mistake.

The females all went off in single file toward Paloma's house. Then Pierre said to me:

"Let's follow them. It will give you an opportunity to inspect the rest of the apartments."

Paloma's kitchen was now enriched by the shining black range that I had seen in the house of the Avenue de la Gare, and Pierre whispered in my ear that his wife Augustine would never have had the courage to leave it behind.

"It's rather as if a portion of her heart were locked up in that long kitchen range," he said. "She says it reminds her of when she was a young married woman."

The kitchen sink was still there, but gone was the broken mirror by the narrow window, that jagged piece of looking glass in which Paloma used to peer at herself when painting her cavernous eyelids with theatrical make-up, and suddenly at the mere thought of it I saw her again in the rough brown dressing gown like a monk's robe, her feet naked, and there came back to my mind the tune of a waltz she had sung:

Sur les grands flots bleus . . .

A waltz that had seemed so very old-fashioned to me, but in her mind deliciously conjured up memories of London at the beginning of the century, of quarrels with her best friends, of bouquets of pink carnations at the stage door of the Adelphi, of delightful journeys abroad.

We were now in the narrow corridor in which she had hung a Union Jack. The flag had gone, removed by the usurpers who had taken possession of the three houses from the dead woman, and from Louise, who could scarcely hobble on crutches out of her kitchen. I glanced at the door leading to the attic in which Paloma, the dog, and I had so nearly been imprisoned. How Paloma had filled this corridor with her laughter!

Pierre opened another door—the one leading to her bedroom.

No new hand had dared remove her picture which faced one the very moment one entered the room. The ugly red cotton blind had gone, and the window was wide open, but the big walnut bed, instead of being near the window, was now by her portrait.

"They had to change it," Pierre whispered. "My wife and Maria sleep here now, and they were always seeing her dead. Personally, Mme Madeleine, I wouldn't be impressed by that sort of thing but (with all due respects) you know what women are! Some of them are nervous and silly. They couldn't rid themselves of the sight of Marie on her deathbed. She seemed to mock them from beyond the grave. She had such a personality. Augustine and Maria were afraid of her. They felt that unless they changed the position of the bed she would go on ruling the house, the whole house, the three together. They don't realize that the dead can no longer do any harm, that only the living can hurt."

"So Augustine and Maria sleep together in her bed?"

"For the moment, yes, they sleep in her bed. They are not brave enough yet to sleep alone. They mumble their litanies in an effort to drive her ghost away."

At our approach a kitten jumped down from the bed, and the mother cat put itself on the defensive, its claws out and its fur bristling. I recognized the animal that was so afraid of Riquet, the Alsatian, that it had flown for safety to the top of the tall cupboard in the old house in the town. Paloma's death now obliged it to live under the same roof as its enemy, and it only went out, so Pierre told me, at night.

The cut-glass chandelier was gone from Paloma's bedroom. There was really nothing left of her but her portrait, with its enigmatic smile and the beautiful hat with the ostrich feathers.

And now we were in her tiny drawing room with the leather settee from Tottenham Court Road and the print of Rouget de l'Isle, at Strasbourg, singing *La Marseillaise*. Several pieces of her furniture had disappeared, and the huge safe stood wide open by itself in a corner revealing nothing but a work basket with some skeins of somber colored wool.

The room facing her drawing room on the other side of the corridor, the one to the left as one first entered Paloma's house, was being made ready for Maria when she would no longer be afraid of sleeping alone. Out of its window had leaned, like Juliet, the girl who called Riquet off when I rang at the garden gate. She had been helping to arrange the house, and this part of it in particular. Pierre had himself repapered the walls, but it was not yet dry, and in places where he had put too much paste there were bubbles. Augustine and Maria, who by now had said good-by to their bosomy friends, waving to them till they were out of sight down the road leading past the terrace wall, had now come back to us, and after paying me fresh compliments took Pierre to task for his lack of skill in papering the walls of Maria's future bedroom.

"*Ouatte!*" he exclaimed, drawing himself up and snapping his fingers. "You asked for wallpaper. You've got wallpaper."

His wife and sister-in-law could only wield a limited influence over him. There seemed to come a moment when he took pleasure in sending his plaguy females about their business, and they dutifully slunk away. We were thus again left alone in the room. Pictures of various saints, a statuette of the Virgin, and a framed photograph of the pope had already been brought here by the sisters.

"My wife Augustine had nineteen statuettes hidden away in our old bedroom in the town," said Pierre. "I knew nothing about them. They came to light when I moved the furniture. She and her sister, between them, form a regular convent."

He snapped his fingers again, using that expression "*Ouatte!*" that Paloma also liked to employ, and went on:

"There must be religion in the world. It's merely that I haven't felt the need of it. I thought it might come to me as I grew older—the fear of dying, the end of the road, but, *Ouatte!*—it all seems too terribly simple!"

He raised his arm and made a wide circular movement like a man sweeping everything before him away.

"What can there be afterwards but oblivion?" he asked.

Too fundamentally religious myself to accept this viewpoint I shivered as if a cold wind had suddenly blown in through the window. We went out into the sunshine. Maria was hanging up some clothes on a line. Pierre took up a saw. There was already an immense pile of newly sawn wood, which the various members of the household, sufficiently valid to do so, were obviously anxious to take indoors log by log, but this work was always being interrupted because of another idea entering the mind of Augustine, or Maria, or the young maid, and so one saw logs left about in all the rooms, and what with this coming and going the three doors of the three houses were continually wide open.

I decided to go back to Louise.

Still sitting very upright in her chair she was examining with childish delight my pictorial silk scarf, one of those frivolous affairs portraying the famous shops in Paris and their fabulous merchandise—the most costly perfumes, jewelry, hats, stockings, and dresses of the Place Vendôme, the Rue de la Paix, and the Faubourg St. Honoré. It amused her to see in me a woman of contemporary fashion. Her she-devil had never recognized anything more recent than what prevailed in Edwardian days. She was also intrigued by the softness of the material.

"What lovely silk!" she said, stroking it gently. "Since I have become an invalid, my little Madeleine, sitting all day in my chair like a duchess, my hands are white and soft. Two years ago my fingers would have rasped your pretty silk, whereas now . . . By the way, what do you think about the mess they are making next door? I remain quietly in my own

house with my memories, surrounded by my own belongings. Those two old women want to change everything. They've settled in as if they owned the place! My word! Were *she* to come back, my rat, what a row there would be!"

She laughed, a wickedly happy laugh, at the mere thought.

CHAPTER XXV

WITH Paloma's bag pressed tightly against me I set off for the town with Pierre. He led me down the steep road she liked to take, swinging his long, thin body as she did. When he spoke it was softly. His features remained inscrutable but never cold. His eyes alone often gave away his thoughts.

I tried to keep up with him on my high heels, but the road was full of stones. He may have interpreted my difficulties as a slight reluctance to pass by the slaughterhouse, for he said:

"Marie didn't like it either. You know what she was with animals. But she took this road all the same because of the school down here on the left. When the boys and girls came running out they would call: 'Good day, Mme Siller!' and that's what she liked."

We went on walking like this for a few moments when we came upon Gaby.

"Oh, what a lovely surprise, Mme Madeleine!"

We embraced each other. I was flattered that she had recognized me so quickly, and of course, we talked about Paloma. I think she was on her way to Montivent. Riquet was running around us.

"Do be careful of the dog," said Gaby with a tenderness I had not expected to find in her. "Granny loves him so. Good-by, Mme Madeleine. How sweet of you to have come so far to see us."

These few words exchanged with a woman of my own age made me feel, more than anything else perhaps, that I was really among friends. At every step now people called out:

"Good evening, M. Saquet. Here's fine weather for the hay-makers!" and the greeting was prolonged while keen eyes were turned upon me inquisitively. Who was I? Whence had I come? Pierre ended by introducing me and adding:

"She's a friend of my sister—my lately demised sister."

This explanation increased their interest. They must have seen something sinister in this woman of Paris or London who once had been friendly with the fabulous Paloma, but even haymaking weather is not a subject that can be pursued forever, and we passed on, leaving it that even though thunder was in the air, the next day was almost certain to be fine, and soon we reached the first shops of the town.

Here was the butcher's shop where Paloma used to take Riquet, but Riquet made no effort to go inside, merely (was it spite or contempt?) sullyng the façade. The grocer's shop had a new owner from Dijon. Flowers still gaily decorated the window boxes of Fifine Bizot's wineshop.

Pierre pushed opened the door and the bell tinkled faintly.

Fifine, her blond hair contrasting with the dark walls of her bar, came forward to meet us wearing a very smart dark brown skirt, with a pleat at the back, a fashion which my women's magazines described as "The ship's stern line." With this she wore a yellowy gold pull-over cut low in the neck. I thought she looked infinitely prettier dressed as a woman, and not as a man. The trousers and racing motorist's sweater she wore on our first meeting had really not done her justice.

She was, in fact, still very attractive, with an agreeable fresh skin visible under her powder, buxom arms, and a fine pair of legs. Her face was full of smiles, and her welcome most friendly. We went through the bar into the long room, where her mother was seated at the same table by the courtyard window, but not having dinner this time. Fifine Bizot, having seen to the wants of her various customers, said to Pierre:

"You are heaven-sent, M. Pierre. I'm terribly worried about

my barrel of white wine. The wine is all cloudy, and I can't even get at another barrel to replace it."

"Calm yourself," said Pierre; "I shall go and see."

He had the air of a doctor called urgently to a sick person, and lighting a torch went down into the cellar.

Fifine Bizot had put a kettle on to make us a cup of tea, and while it was on the gas she came to sit with her mother and me.

"Yes," she said, reverting to Paloma, "it was a great shock. We never expected it would be her. We thought it would be Louise. You know what hospitals are. They so often send them home to die.

"Marie had come to see us only two days before she died. She was just the same as usual except that she had taken to complaining about the heat and the cold, which was unlike her, for as long as we knew her she had never before seemed to notice what the weather was like."

Fifine's mother put in:

"She was sitting where you're sitting, Mme Madeleine, and she and I were talking about something or other that had happened when we were both at school, for we were girls at school together. Suddenly she said to me: 'At our age, at nearly sixty . . . ' 'It seems to me, my little Marie,' I exclaimed, 'that you've mislaid a good twenty years along the road!' 'And supposing I have,' answered she, 'let them catch up with me if they're not a lot of laggards!'"

Fifine Bizot said:

"She was very lovely on her deathbed."

Then she added as an afterthought, in a tone that was almost one of relief:

"But she's dead all the same!"

Pierre came up from the cellar, put his torch on the table, and told us what he had discovered.

"Your barrel," he said to Fifine Bizot, "is now standing up. It would have rotted on its side. You must fill a few bottles with what is left in it, cork them tightly, and let them rest. The wine will clear itself in a few days, and you needn't be afraid to serve it. As for the new barrel you will find it all ready to be drawn."

The two women had listened to him with every mark of respect. In a matter of five minutes he had, all by himself, turned one barrel over, rolled another from one side of the cellar to the other, opened it, and in short done a whole lot of things that terrify our sex. He was once again basking in the importance of being a man. Fifine Bizot thanked him with all her heart. She went to make the tea, and when it was ready poured him out the first cup. He now told us how he was laying in stocks of wood for the winter. Year by year, he said, logs would become more valuable. This was bound to happen because coal would soon be worth more than diamonds. He had just sawn one lot of wood and he had ordered a fresh lot from the merchant.

"It is in summer that we must think of winter," he said sententiously.

"Perhaps, Mother," said Fifine Bizot, "we should do the same?"

"You have already left it late," put in the oracle. "Soon all the forests of the Morvan will have been used up in our stoves. I read in some newspaper that nowadays they cut down a thousand trees at a time. My only problem is to know where to store the wood I buy. I shall have to put some in the attic."

"In your attic!" exclaimed Mme Bizot. "Allow me, my dear M. Saquet, to tell you that nothing could be more dangerous. You must not think just because you were born in a house that it could never fall on your head. Supposing your house were to collapse, what good would it do you to own so much firewood?"

Mme Bizot had now become the oracle. Pierre agreed that she was right. He even listened while his audience of three females suggested other ways of storing his wood. But as a sex we can seldom keep our advantage for longer than a few moments. Mme Bizot placed her hand against her heart, and talked about her liver. She was subject to attacks. Pierre, seizing this opportunity, became doctoral once more. He, the man, said:

"For the liver there's nothing so good as lettuce soup. The lettuce has medicinal properties. The lettuce is a beneficent plant. Up at Montivent all my women are on a lettuce regime."

He paused and then went on:

"These biscuits are excellent. This one, for instance, is perfect."

Old Mme Bizot looked at Pierre, then at the biscuit, then at her daughter, as if she were asking for her opinion. Should she also eat a biscuit? Overcoming a temptation to do so she said:

"I shall not take one. I might rue it later."

"You are wise," said her daughter, "but have a little weak tea. That will compensate for the biscuit."

The old lady's eyes twinkled with malice and greed.

"Not too weak," she said as her daughter peered into the pot. "It's not every day we drink tea."

The shop door rang, and Fifine Bizot rose to serve the new customer. We heard voices in the bar. Fifine hurried across the room with a bottle of wine and a glass. Riquet, whom we had left in the street, had arrived on the heels of the customer, and a small cat in a box, seeing the Alsatian bounding toward it between the tables, began to arch its back and spit. Fifine Bizot, who saw everything that happened in her establishment, caught up the box, and placed it on the top of a dresser, from where the cat looked down contemptuously at the bellucose Riquet. Then when Fifine had finished serving her customer she came back to us.

Pierre pulled out his wallet, and removing a one-thousand-franc note placed it very gracefully and delicately on the table in front of Fifine Bizot, saying:

"Pray allow me, Mlle Fifine, to pay you for this very excellent pot of tea."

At this mother and daughter joined in violent protestation. Had he not honored them by bringing to tea the little lady from London? Was not their joy at seeing me sufficiently evident? It was my turn to blush. I declared that the very moment I returned to England I would send Mme Bizot a pound of Indian tea.

"We shall keep it against the winter," she answered with simplicity.

"But we are in high summer," I objected. "Last week was the feast of St. John. The farmers are only just beginning to cut the hay."

"The hay is against the winter also," she said, "as the wheat will be when the ears are golden."

I looked at her in amazement. There was something biblical about her.

Leaving the wineshop Pierre and I walked on the uneven paving stones of the narrow, tortuous, picturesque street along which Paloma had told me with such an air of conviction that Jesus had passed. Here was the Burgundy Virgin carved on the corner house, and here the beflowered window at which sat the pretty girl who smiled so winningly at the men who came that way.

"And now," said Pierre, "I will take you to my sister's grave."

He did not speak again till we were on the road to Château-Chinon. Then he said suddenly:

"So here we are at last going to see her. There, to your left, is a convent school for little girls. We are very religious in this

town. I count that a good thing, for though I haven't yet brought myself to believe, I would not have my women be of the same mind as myself. A man can be responsible to himself for his actions. He can weigh things up with his conscience. Women are different. They are all the better for being religious, though I'm of the opinion that mine go a bit far!"

Two gendarmes stood at the gates of the cemetery. They touched their caps as we entered, and Pierre grumbled:

"What do the police think they can do in the kingdom of the dead? Those who rest here have no need of gendarmes. Let us not rack our brains, Mme Madeleine. Those two men can only be on the lookout for unimportant things."

The chapel of ease, with its needle spire, which had appeared so sinister to me on my first visit, was now bathed in evening sunshine. Pierre took me inside. Alas, it had retained the damp cold of a sepulcher.

"On that November day when we buried her," whispered Pierre, "it was terrible. I cannot describe the cold, the rain, and the mud. It was not at all the sort of day to begin being dead."

I shuddered and said:

"Please take me out. The cold is going through me."

We went out into the evening air, and began to climb between the graves, silently, occupied with our thoughts, till at last Pierre stopped in front of a shapeless edifice of gray marble.

"It's here," he said.

I searched vainly for her name and an epitaph. The tomb seemed so very impersonal. There was nothing to enlighten the pilgrim but these words carved on the stone: "SILLER-SAQUET." I was too dazed to cry. How many of them were heaped under this monument? Her sister Josephine, her father, her mother, and Paloma, the queen? So it was she who

during the height of her reign had caused to be built this city for her dead!

The marble rose in the evening light like a pyramid.

"It's terrible," I whispered. "I've come without any flowers. I don't even remember having seen a florist in the town."

His silence surprised me. I looked up into his face, but as usual it was inscrutable. Then, seeing me so undone, he said:

"Don't worry, Mme Madeleine. Will it do her any good to let flowers wither on her tomb?"

And so, thought I, in death she has kept her secret. I shall never know for certain the year when she was born. She remains a legend like an Egyptian queen.

Pierre Saquet, however, was doubtless thinking of the day, which could not be very distant, when he would rest with his sister. One could see where a stone was let in under the tall cross. It performed the function of the stone that was rolled against the sepulcher door.

"Let us envisage these things with dignity," he said suddenly. "If there is anything enviable about these magnificent chestnut trees you can see beyond the cemetery wall, it is that trees are supposed to live longer than men. Look what an orgy of green they make!"

We went to the end of the path and leaned over the low stone wall. Some women were sitting on a bench on the grass, their children playing at their feet. Though most of the trees were chestnuts there were also some elms and a few oak trees.

"People talk about oak trees living a hundred years or more," Pierre went on, "but a forty-year-old tree is already an old tree—and consider that Louise is eighty, Marie was to have been seventy-eight this year, and I am seventy-four. . . ."

He seemed, as he spoke, to be writing his own epitaph.

CHAPTER XXVI

"WELL," ASKED Louise, who on our return to Montivent was still sitting on the high-backed chair in her kitchen, "so you went to see her, my little rat?"

Gaby's two little girls were playing at her feet. Once again I had that curious impression of light and shade as in a painting of the Dutch school. Where was Gaby?

Louise, having inquired of my pilgrimage, sent me out into her garden to see if an old man to whom she had given a hundred francs had finished hoeing her potatoes.

"I can't see what he's up to!" she exclaimed peevishly. "You go, my rat!"

Her features had assumed that suspicious look that crossed Paloma's face each time she talked about her charwoman.

I went into the garden. It was small and pretty. Louise was drinking a bowl of lettuce soup when I returned.

"Your garden reminds me of a presbytery garden," I said. "Everything is so neat."

She laughed, and I thought I caught a resemblance between the grandmother and the graceful little girls playing on the floor. What sort of women would Gaby's girls turn into? Would they become unusual women, women of genius like Paloma?

At this moment Gaby came into the kitchen.

Her hands were stained with floor polish, and she exclaimed:

"Oh, if you only knew the trouble I'm having to get that floor clean!"

"What floor?" I asked as she poured some water into a basin and started to soap her hands and arms.

"The floor of the room where we laid out aunt," she said. "Think of it! The entire town filed past her. It took them two days. They all had to see her. The Saquet girl who had made her fortune in London! She had grown into a myth. She had shocked them, but they had to see her. Dukes had left her money. She was a toast of Edwardian England. She has grown into a legend like her sister Josephine, who had made such a fabulous career for herself in Paris. What career exactly? How was anybody to know? One had done it in Paris, the other in London. They had achieved success. They had plunged their fingers into sacks of gold and the gold had stuck to their fingers. They had conquered the two greatest capitals in Europe, and come back to where they were born. And so the whole town had to come and see the great Paloma. They tramped up here in jack boots, in clogs, and in nailed boots through the November mud, and then they filed past her, endlessly dragging their feet on the polished floor.

"The amazing thing is that she had become suddenly pretty again, and the story went around that she looked just as she had looked when she was thirty. Imagine! I wasn't born then! But I can tell you that true enough she looked like a woman of thirty. She looked lovely, I tell you! No wonder the people kept tramping past her. It was like a miracle. But it didn't stop at that. Just because it was so uncanny all sorts of other rumors flew around. Aunt died in an old yellow pull-over I had knitted for her before the war. It was the sort one passes over one's head. Do you remember telling me, Mme Madeleine, that you once found it at the bottom of a packing case in which she kept her potatoes at her flat in London, and that you had washed it so that she could wear it again? Well, that was the one. It looked so ragged and old that when it came to decking her out so that the people could see her I decided to take it off

her. I had nobody to help me. My mother and I were the only two relatively young women in the family, but mother (you have not met her, I think) had not the heart to come. My grandmother Louise here was quite broken up, and as you know she can hardly move, and as for Pierre's wife, Augustine, all she could do was to pray. So I went to fetch a woman in the town who is accustomed to that sort of work. She is always being called in by the neighbors. You would never guess what a job we had taking aunt's yellow pull-over off. We had to tug and tug. It seemed the proper thing to deck her out in a dress. I found a blue one. It wasn't easy to put that on. She was so tall. It was then that all of a sudden she became radiantly pretty. Forty years disappeared from her face, and there she was as her photographs show her at thirty!

"Meanwhile the woman who had helped me to deck aunt out went off to the public washhouse to spread the strange tale, and she said I was so mean that I had made her take aunt's yellow pull-over off because wool was going up in price and I wanted to use it for something else. I who had burned it! That wasn't everything. As aunt died a few days after All Saints' Day, and was to be buried on Armistice Day, there was not a flower left in the town, and then because we put off the funeral the rumor went around that we had been refused permission to bury her. When at last we did bury her there were still no flowers. Finding the shops empty we tried private gardens, but nothing grows in gardens in November except chrysanthemums, and those had been picked for Armistice Day. Adrienne brought a wreath from Dijon, but the weather was so bitter cold and wet that by the time she arrived the flowers were nearly dead. That there were so few flowers, and such poor ones, was due to nothing else but the strangest turn of fate, but people whispered. Why had we not bought flowers? Had not aunt been fabulously rich? Did she not order provisions at all the shops in the town, and then forget to call

for them? Had she not stocks and shares in London and the richest property in town? Could the family not even place fresh flowers on her tomb?"

"My sweet, kind she-devil," said Louise, pushing away the bowl of lettuce soup.

"Her being sweet and kind does not alter the fact that though aunt has been dead for eight months," said Gaby, rinsing the soap out of her hands, "I still can't get the mud off the floor boards. Thousands of people must have tramped past her! Thousands! You would have thought that some of them might have brought her flowers."

"Stephen gave her flowers," said Louise. "When Stephen came after his illness he gave her more flowers than he could carry. He strewed the ground in front of her grave with flowers. How pleased she would have been! But then Stephen was always so kind to her!"

Louise closed her eyes, dreaming of the gay, romantic days and nights in London which the mere name of Stephen evoked in her mind, and the sun sinking beyond the needle spire of the distant cemetery of St. Saturnin at the close of this hot June day threw a soft delicate light on the cameo of the Virgin that fastened the neck of her long black dress.

CHAPTER XXVII

PIERRE came in to tell me that supper was ready, and Louise with whom at that moment I was alone—Gaby and her two little girls having gone off to some other part of the house—wished me good appetite. I therefore followed Pierre into his mother's room, now his own, where between his four-poster bed and the grandfather clock a round table was laid for the evening meal. A large china soup tureen with flower decorations stood in the middle of the white cloth, and the last rays of the evening sun came in through the window. All this gave the table a family air, but only two chairs were drawn up. Pierre must have noticed my surprise, for he said:

“No, the women will not be eating with us. They all have their different whims and fancies. They will serve the meal.”

When I remarked on the goodness of the soup, Pierre answered:

“Few things are as beneficent for the liver as sorrel and lettuce. Sorrel by itself is excellent, but the addition of lettuce increases its admirable properties.”

He spoke like a monk of the order of St. Benedict who might have discovered a new assemblage of herbs that would make his name forever famous.

Maria came in from the direction of her own apartments, and following her was a fine golden hen that ran this way and that across the tiled floor looking for grain. The old lady went

to the window, where she stood very erect, her bony hands crossed, moving her head very slowly up and down as she watched us eat, while I suddenly became aware of Augustine, Pierre's wife, standing at the kitchen door in the same attitude, ready to obey our slightest command. I asked her what had happened to the unfortunate hen she was nursing by the black stove in their corner house at Saulieu during my last visit, and she exclaimed:

"Oh, the dear sweet thing! She perished! One morning her leg came off—a sharp crack and away it fell, the bone quite destroyed by gangrene. The poor bird died two or three days later. It's very difficult to nurse sick animals and birds, but my hens are very happy here. They go wherever they wish—in the house and out of it, and then I can keep a cock here which I never could do in town for fear of it waking up the neighbors when it crowed in the morning."

Through the open door leading out on the terrace I could see the hand pump and the lilac tree, and the famous arbor whose leaves, now a dark green, covered the wire frame. It was from this arbor, you will remember, that *Paloma* used to overhear the gossip of her neighbors standing on the dusty road, but now it had become a home for Augustine's hens, Pierre having cut down some hazel sticks and nailed them from one side to the other for the birds to roost.

The two old ladies had removed the soup, and now brought us boiled eggs. The hen that had arrived in the room with Maria wandered out into the terrace through the open door; other birds looked in, walked solemnly around the table, and then departed. Riquet, the Alsatian, fussed between Pierre and me, but Follette, the old white terrier, as fat as a suckling pig, had a chair with a cushion on it, and remained there till Maria brought in a ham and a fresh salad seasoned with chervil and tarragon, whereupon she jumped heavily down, settling herself at my feet.

"Soup, a boiled egg, a ham, and a green salad," said Pierre. "That is our menu every day now. That is what we have come down to. The days of elaborate sauces are over. A man's tastes, as he grows old, become very simple."

Augustine's tiny wrinkled face showed approbation. Her eyes behind her steel-rimmed spectacles gleamed with affection for Pierre. I thought she looked proud of him. The toothless Maria also beamed with the satisfaction of running about. They were both enjoying the humility of serving us. Their individual whims and fancies were not the real cause of their absence from our table. This was their way of honoring the master and his guest. Their delicate natures feared to lessen our appetite by the smallness of their own. There was something biblical in their abnegation.

"Yes," said Augustine, as if in answer to my thoughts, "I am happy. It will be very nice to get the house in order, but on the other hand I shall be so far from the church of St. Andoche. It's a great wrench only going there on Sundays. And then I miss my neighbors. They used to be such nice young married women. There was one, for instance, who asked me how to make quince jelly, and I explained everything to her very clearly, and she in turn showed me how she did her washing in the modern way—in an electric washing machine, if you please! I thought it most interesting. She did in an hour what took me a whole afternoon. It's a very pleasant thing when the young and the old are willing to exchange their knowledge. Oh, and there's something else I miss up here. I miss my dead. When I had a bad night I knew at once what it meant. My dead, thought I, are not pleased because I haven't been to see them lately. So I would hurry over the housework and go to see my dead at the cemetery and immediately I would feel at peace again."

Pierre looked at his wife with eyes full of kindness, and said:

"It is a very enviable thing to have such simple and comforting thoughts. Yes, a very enviable thing.

He slowly undid the string of a cardboard box and brought out an almond cake. This was a sign for the two women to disappear, one through the door leading to the terrace, the other into the kitchen, and as soon as they had gone Pierre took a knife and cut two slices of cake. I found it excellent, but Pierre said:

"They don't make them so well as they used to. The pastry cook's art is a highly skilled one, and then much depends on the freshness of the butter and cream, and how the almonds are ground for the paste."

He cut a third slice, and fed it to Riquet, not, I think, out of any particular affection for the Alsatian, but because he knew that Paloma would have done so and he was loyal to her. Riquet, of course, was delighted, and I, feeling sorry for Follette, broke off a piece from my slice and dropped it under the table, whereupon Pierre said, smiling:

"Justice on the table, justice under the table."

Then, his mind reverting to the quality of the cake:

"In my youth the pastry shop owner was nearly always a bad-tempered man. Half the day his cheeks burned in front of his oven, and the other half he was worried to death lest his cakes would not sell fast enough, for cakes with fresh cream don't keep. Yes, indeed, the pastry cook's is a delicate trade. When people quickly buy the masterpieces out of his window there remain only the less good ones to tempt in the passers-by, but when the window stays full a hot sun curdles the cream, and that means there will be no money in his till."

Pierre then set about explaining to me in the clearest possible way how a cake of the kind we were eating was made, and soon he had become quite enthralled in his subject, reviewing in turn all the other cakes he had been taught to make

like the "Succulent" and the "Progressive," until I was tempted to ask him how to make that very light form of puff paste into which one slips a brand-new farthing on Twelfth Night to crown the king or queen.

"That's easy!" he exclaimed, taking up a piece of buttered paper from under the cake, and folding it into a square to represent the paste which he then proceeded to knead and to roll, finally placing it on the edge of the table, saying: "You must now let it rest for several hours!" At that moment Riquet, mistaking the buttered paper for another piece of the almond cake, snapped it up and swallowed it. Pierre, quite unconcerned, then took up his napkin, with which he continued his demonstration, teaching me the various movements required to make the pastry light enough. When at last I had understood the lesson, in came Augustine to ask us if we would like lime tea or camomile or, perhaps, an infusion of verbena leaves, or orange blossom, but "Come!" exclaimed Pierre, "I am sure that Mme Madeleine would prefer coffee. Infusions are not for a young woman!" Then turning to me he added: "You must excuse us. We have almost forgotten that people drink coffee in the evening."

"That's all the more reason," I said, "for drinking something different tonight. I am very fond of orange blossom, for instance."

"You are wise," said Pierre. "Orange tea is a soothing drink."

A great number of hens had suddenly come into the room in search of crumbs and particles of cake, and then Gaby arrived with her two little girls to say good-by, having undressed her grandmother and put her to bed. Pierre said to her:

"By the way, Gaby, take a look at that hatbox at the foot of the four-poster. I found it this morning while rummaging among Marie's things. She kept her straw hats in it. I intend to keep the wide-brimmed one from which I've torn the rib-

bon. I rather like it. It keeps the sun away from my eyes when I'm sawing logs in the yard. But if you would fancy the others you are welcome to them. They are made of real Italian straw, and have kept magnificently."

Gaby went to fetch the box, and laid the beautiful hats out on the table. I could easily imagine Paloma with one of these graceful things on her head walking down the road to the town, or sitting in her arbor like a princess in her tower looking at the passers-by. Then I recalled seeing Pierre wearing the ribbonless one as he had passed silently across the terrace a few minutes after my arrival, but Gaby showed no enthusiasm for her aunt's relics. She merely said:

"Well, I'll think about it, but I find them a bit old-fashioned."

Whereupon she told her daughters to say good night to Pierre.

I also thought it time to go. The inhabitants of Montivent were certainly accustomed to retiring early, and then there was Louise who might, if I left it too long, fall into her first sleep, and it would be a crime to wake her out of it.

I rose from the supper table, and going out into the terrace garden entered Louise's apartments by the front door. The chair in which I had first seen her sitting so erect was now empty, and her book, still open, lay face downward on the table. Queen Christine had fallen into a humble palace—a matter of small surprise, I thought, for this wandering and unhappy queen! The real palace and the kingdom she lost had always paled in comparison to her love story.

Louise was lying on her side, her frail head with its billowy white hair hardly marking the surface of the pillow. Here was the Louise of the hospital ward. How small and weak she looked!

"Have you supped well, my little rat?" she asked.

Her voice was the same as when, in hospital, she had asked

if I had lunched well with Paloma, who had left me for her afternoon nap.

"Very well," I answered. Then, in order to lessen as much as possible the sadness of our parting, I told her how Pierre had discoursed to me on the pastry cook's art.

"And so you are going to make pastry?" she said. "I was rather good at it myself."

We remained looking into each other's eyes for a few moments. At last she said with a forced smile:

"My great-grandchildren have gone. I do love them so. I who began my life so unhappily have ended up richer in many ways than Marie, don't you think? Marie had her houses. I had my child and my grandchildren. Martha, my daughter, is sixty. Gaby, my grandchild, is nearly forty. See, how the years have passed!"

Tears began to fall down her cheeks and onto her pillow.

"And you, my little rat, are going back to England! It was like this when Marie used to go back to London after the holidays, and every time she went I used to ask myself whether I should see her again. I did see her again but now she's gone, gone. . . .

"You must tell Mr. Stephen how much we think of him. You must tell him also that I love him. He has always been so good to me. He's such a—such a *gentleman*. Has Soho changed a lot? Marie told me it had changed a good deal since the war. My little Madeleine, my little rat, I forgot to thank you for the woolen stockings and the tea, but I love you. . . ."

"But I also love you, Louise," I said, stroking her white silken hair. "You are what Paloma left me. I feel as if I belonged to your family. Strange folk whose cupboards are never locked, whose clocks never work, whose doors are always wide open! Good-by, Louise, my dear Louise!"

"I wish you success and happiness," she said. "Good-by, my little rat!"

Pierre was waiting for me by the slender white gate at the end of the terrace. Maria said tearfully:

"It's no good pretending we shall see each other again. No, it would not be possible."

The bells of St. Andoche came up from the town and Augustine whispered:

"You have given us great joy, Mme Madeleine."

And like a good fairy she added:

"I wish you happiness, success, and health."

Thus, running toward Pierre, who was waiting at the white gate, I left the women of Montivent in their three houses, one in her bed, the two others waving at their respective doors, and with the dog following us Pierre and I walked down the road to the town.

"How brave and good are the women of Montivent!" I said to him after a while.

"Yes," he answered thoughtfully, "but they are all too old by thirty years!" He laughed at this, after which we went on in silence till we reached the corner house in which he had lived for half a century. The workmen had gone, and the house stood out in the evening light, rid for a few hours of the men who were demolishing it brick by brick.

All around us I felt the presence of Paloma. Was not her dog barking at our heels? Pierre and I stopped in the empty square. The big hotels were half asleep. There were no long-distance coaches. The heavy trucks bringing vegetables from the Midi to Paris and London had not yet begun their pounding of the Roman road.

"Well, here we are," said Pierre. "Your short visit is at an end. I wish you a safe journey. My thoughts—the thoughts of all my family—will accompany you."

Then suddenly:

"Would you allow me to kiss you, Mme Madeleine?"

He took off his cap and bent his head down. I put an arm

around his neck, and we kissed each other twice on each cheek after which he set off home. When he had nearly reached the top of the street he turned to wave for a last time, making that grand semicircular gesture which Paloma always made with her right hand.

And that was all.

