Strong as Death

by Guy de Maupassant

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By Guy De Maupassant

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PART I

CHAPTER I

A DUEL OF HEARTS

Broad daylight streamed down into the vast studio through a skylight in the ceiling, which showed a large square of dazzling blue, a bright vista of limitless heights of azure, across which passed flocks of birds in rapid flight. But the glad light of heaven hardly entered this severe room, with high ceilings and draped walls, before

it began to grow soft and dim, to slumber among the hangings and die in the portieres, hardly penetrating to the dark corners where the gilded frames of portraits gleamed like flame. Peace and sleep seemed imprisoned there, the peace characteristic of an artist's dwelling, where the human soul has toiled. Within these walls, where thought abides, struggles, and becomes exhausted in its violent efforts, everything appears weary and overcome as soon as the energy of action is abated; all seems dead after the great crises of life, and the furniture, the hangings, and the portraits of great personages still unfinished on the canvases, all seem to rest as if the whole place had suffered the master's fatigue and had toiled with him, taking part in the daily renewal of his struggle. A vague, heavy odor of paint, turpentine, and tobacco was in the air, clinging to the rugs and chairs; and no sound broke the deep silence save the sharp short cries of the swallows that flitted above the open skylight, and the dull, ceaseless roar of Paris, hardly heard above the roofs. Nothing moved except a little cloud of smoke that rose intermittently toward the ceiling with every puff that Olivier Bertin, lying upon his divan, blew slowly from a cigarette between his lips.

With gaze lost in the distant sky, he tried to think of a new subject for a painting. What should he do? As yet he did not know. He was by no means resolute and sure of himself as an artist, but was of an uncertain, uneasy spirit, whose undecided inspiration ever hesitated among all the manifestations of art. Rich, illustrious, the gainer of all honors, he nevertheless remained, in these his later years, a man who did not know exactly toward what ideal he had been aiming. He had won the Prix of Rome, had been the defender of traditions, and had evoked, like so many others, the great scenes of history; then, modernizing his tendencies, he had painted living men, but in a way that showed the influence of classic memories. Intelligent, enthusiastic, a worker that clung to his changing dreams, in love with his art, which he knew to perfection, he had acquired, by reason of the delicacy of his mind, remarkable executive ability and great versatility, due in some degree to his hesitations and his

experiments in all styles of his art. Perhaps, too, the sudden admiration of the world for his works, elegant, correct, and full of distinctions, influenced his nature and prevented him from becoming what he naturally might have been. Since the triumph of his first success, the desire to please always made him anxious, without his being conscious of it; it influenced his actions and weakened his convictions. This desire to please was apparent in him in many ways, and had contributed much to his glory.

His grace of manner, all his habits of life, the care he devoted to his person, his long-standing reputation for strength and agility as a swordsman and an equestrian, had added further attractions to his steadily growing fame. After his Cleopatra, the first picture that had made him illustrious, Paris suddenly became enamored of him, adopted him, made a pet of him; and all at once he became one of those brilliant, fashionable artists one meets in the Bois, for whose presence hostesses maneuver, and whom the Institute welcomes thenceforth. He had entered it as a conqueror, with the approval of all Paris.

Thus Fortune had led him to the beginning of old age, coddling and caressing him.

Under the influence of the beautiful day, which he knew was glowing without, Bertin sought a poetic subject. He felt somewhat dreamy, however, after his breakfast and his cigarette; he pondered awhile, gazing into space, in fancy sketching rapidly against the blue sky the figures of graceful women in the Bois or on the sidewalk of a street, lovers by the water—all the pleasing fancies in which his thoughts reveled. The changing images stood out against the bright sky, vague and fleeting in the hallucination of his eye, while the swallows, darting through space in ceaseless flight, seemed trying to efface them as if with strokes of a pen.

He found nothing. All these half-seen visions resembled things that he had already done; all the women appeared to be the daughters or the sisters of those that had already been born of his artistic fancy; and the vague fear, that had haunted him for a year, that he had lost the power to create, had made the round of all subjects and

exhausted his inspiration, outlined itself distinctly before this review of his work—this lack of power to dream anew, to discover the unknown.

He arose quietly to look among his unfinished sketches, hoping to find something that would inspire him with a new idea.

Still puffing at his cigarette, he proceeded to turn over the sketches, drawings, and rough drafts that he kept in a large old closet; but, soon becoming disgusted with this vain quest, and feeling depressed by the lassitude of his spirits, he tossed away his cigarette, whistled a popular street-song, bent down and picked up a heavy dumb-bell that lay under a chair. Having raised with the other hand a curtain that draped a mirror, which served him in judging the accuracy of a pose, in verifying his perspectives and testing the truth, he placed himself in front of it and began to swing the dumb-bell, meanwhile looking intently at himself.

He had been celebrated in the studios for his strength; then, in the gay world, for his good looks. But now the weight of years was making him heavy. Tall, with broad shoulders and full chest, he had acquired the protruding stomach of an old wrestler, although he kept up his fencing every day and rode his horse with assiduity. His head was still remarkable and as handsome as ever, although in a style different from that of his earlier days. His thick and short white hair set off the black eyes beneath heavy gray eyebrows, while his luxuriant moustache—the moustache of an old soldier—had remained quite dark, and it gave to his countenance a rare characteristic of energy and pride.

Standing before the mirror, with heels together and body erect, he went through the usual movements with the two iron balls, which he held out at the end of his muscular arm, watching with a complacent expression its evidence of quiet power.

But suddenly, in the glass, which reflected the whole studio, he saw one of the portieres move; then appeared a woman's head—only a head, peeping in. A voice behind him asked:

“Anyone here?”

“Present!” he responded promptly, turning around. Then, throwing his dumb-bell on the floor, he hastened toward the door with an appearance of youthful agility that was slightly affected.

A woman entered attired in a light summer costume. They shook hands.

“You were exercising, I see,” said the lady.

“Yes,” he replied; “I was playing peacock, and allowed myself to be surprised.”

The lady laughed, and continued:

“Your concierge's lodge was vacant, and as I know you are always alone at this hour I came up without being announced.”

He looked at her.

“Heavens, how beautiful you are! What chic!”

“Yes, I have a new frock. Do you think it pretty?”

“Charming, and perfectly harmonious. We can certainly say that nowadays it is possible to give expression to the lightest textiles.”

He walked around her, gently touching the material of the gown, adjusting its folds with the tips of his fingers, like a man that knows a woman's toilet as the modiste knows it, having all his life employed his artist's taste and his athlete's muscles in depicting with slender brush changing and delicate fashions, in revealing feminine grace enclosed within a prison of velvet and silk, or hidden by snowy laces. He finished his scrutiny by declaring: “It is a great success, and it becomes you perfectly!”

The lady allowed herself to be admired, quite content to be pretty and to please him.

No longer in her first youth, but still beautiful, not very tall, somewhat plump, but with that freshness which lends to a woman of forty an appearance of having only just reached full maturity, she seemed like one of those roses that flourish for an

indefinite time up to the moment when, in too full a bloom, they fall in an hour.

Beneath her blonde hair she possessed the shrewdness to preserve all the alert and youthful grace of those Parisian women who never grow old; who carry within themselves a surprising vital force, an indomitable power of resistance, and who remain for twenty years triumphant and indestructible, careful above all things of their bodies and ever watchful of their health.

She raised her veil and murmured:

“Well, you do not kiss me!”

“I have been smoking.”

“Pooh!” said the lady. Then, holding up her face, she added, “So much the worse!”

Their lips met.

He took her parasol and divested her of her spring jacket with the prompt, swift movement indicating familiarity with this service. As she seated herself on the divan, he asked with an air of interest:

“Is all going well with your husband?”

“Very well; he must be making a speech in the House at this very moment.”

“Ah! On what, pray?”

“Oh—no doubt on beets or on rape-seed oil, as usual!”

Her husband, the Comte de Guilleroy, deputy from the Eure, made a special study of all questions of agricultural interest.

Perceiving in one corner a sketch that she did not recognize, the lady walked across the studio, asking, “What is that?”

“A pastel that I have just begun—the portrait of the Princesse de Ponteve.”

“You know,” said the lady gravely, “that if you go back to painting portraits of women I shall close your studio. I know only too well to what that sort of thing

leads!”

“Oh, but I do not make twice a portrait of Any!” was the answer.

“I hope not, indeed!”

She examined the newly begun pastel sketch with the air of a woman that understands the technic of art. She stepped back, advanced, made a shade of her hand, sought the place where the best light fell on the sketch, and finally expressed her satisfaction.

“It is very good. You succeed admirably with pastel work.”

“Do you think so?” murmured the flattered artist.

“Yes; it is a most delicate art, needing great distinction of style. It cannot be handled by masons in the art of painting.”

For twelve years the Countess had encouraged the painter's leaning toward the distinguished in art, opposing his occasional return to the simplicity of realism; and, in consideration of the demands of fashionable modern elegance, she had tenderly urged him toward an ideal of grace that was slightly affected and artificial.

“What is the Princess like?” she asked.

He was compelled to give her all sorts of details—those minute details in which the jealous and subtle curiosity of women delights, passing from remarks upon her toilet to criticisms of her intelligence.

Suddenly she inquired: “Does she flirt with you?”

He laughed, and declared that she did not.

Then, putting both hands on the shoulders of the painter, the Countess gazed fixedly at him. The ardor of her questioning look caused a quiver in the pupils of her blue eyes, flecked with almost imperceptible black points, like tiny ink-spots.

Again she murmured: “Truly, now, she is not a flirt?”

“No, indeed, I assure you!”

“Well, I am quite reassured on another account,” said the Countess. “You never will love anyone but me now. It is all over for the others. It is too late, my poor dear!”

The painter experienced that slight painful emotion which touches the heart of middle-aged men when some one mentions their age; and he murmured: “To-day and to-morrow, as yesterday, there never has been in my life, and never will be, anyone but you, Any.”

She took him by the arm, and turning again toward the divan made him sit beside her.

“Of what were you thinking?” she asked.

“I am looking for a subject to paint.”

“What, pray?”

“I don't know, you see, since I am still seeking it.”

“What have you been doing lately?”

He was obliged to tell her of all the visits he had received, about all the dinners and soirees he had attended, and to repeat all the conversations and chit-chat. Both were really interested in all these futile and familiar details of fashionable life. The little rivalries, the flirtations, either well known or suspected, the judgments, a thousand times heard and repeated, upon the same persons, the same events and opinions, were bearing away and drowning both their minds in that troubled and agitated stream called Parisian life. Knowing everyone in all classes of society, he as an artist to whom all doors were open, she as the elegant wife of a Conservative deputy, they were experts in that sport of brilliant French chatter, amiably satirical, banal, brilliant but futile, with a certain shibboleth which gives a particular and greatly envied reputation to those whose tongues have become supple in this sort of malicious small talk.

“When are you coming to dine?” she asked suddenly.

“Whenever you wish. Name your day.”

“Friday. I shall have the Duchesse de Mortemain, the Corbelles, and Musadieu, in honor of my daughter's return—she is coming this evening. But do not speak of it, my friend. It is a secret.”

“Oh, yes, I accept. I shall be charmed to see Annette again. I have not seen her in three years.”

“Yes, that is true. Three years!”

Though Annette, in her earliest years, had been brought up in Paris in her parents' home, she had become the object of the last and passionate affection of her grandmother, Madame Paradin, who, almost blind, lived all the year round on her son-in-law's estate at the castle of Roncieres, on the Eure. Little by little, the old lady had kept the child with her more and more, and as the De Guilleroys passed almost half their time in this domain, to which a variety of interests, agricultural and political, called them frequently, it ended in taking the little girl to Paris on occasional visits, for she herself preferred the free and active life of the country to the cloistered life of the city.

For three years she had not visited Paris even once, the Countess having preferred to keep her entirely away from it, in order that a new taste for its gaieties should not be awakened in her before the day fixed for her debut in society. Madame de Guilleroy had given her in the country two governesses, with unexceptionable diplomas, and had visited her mother and her daughter more frequently than before. Moreover, Annette's sojourn at the castle was rendered almost necessary by the presence of the old lady.

Formerly, Olivier Bertin had passed six weeks or two months at Roncieres every year; but in the past three years rheumatism had sent him to watering-places at some distance, which had so much revived his love for Paris that after his return he could not bring himself to leave it.

As a matter of custom, the young girl should not have returned home until autumn, but her father had suddenly conceived a plan for her marriage, and sent for her that she might meet immediately the Marquis de Farandal, to whom he wished her to be betrothed. But this plan was kept quite secret, and Madame de Guilleroy had told only Olivier Bertin of it, in strict confidence.

“Then your husband's idea is quite decided upon?” said he at last.

“Yes; I even think it a very happy idea.”

Then they talked of other things.

She returned to the subject of painting, and wished to make him decide to paint a Christ. He opposed the suggestion, thinking that there was already enough of them in the world; but she persisted, and grew impatient in her argument.

“Oh, if I knew how to draw I would show you my thought: it should be very new, very bold. They are taking him down from the cross, and the man who has detached the hands has let drop the whole upper part of the body. It has fallen upon the crowd below, and they lift up their arms to receive and sustain it. Do you understand?”

Yes, he understood; he even thought the conception quite original; but he held himself as belonging to the modern style, and as his fair friend reclined upon the divan, with one daintily-shod foot peeping out, giving to the eye the sensation of flesh gleaming through the almost transparent stocking, he said: “Ah, that is what I should paint! That is life—a woman's foot at the edge of her skirt! Into that subject one may put everything—truth, desire, poetry. Nothing is more graceful or more charming than a woman's foot; and what mystery it suggests: the hidden limb, lost yet imagined beneath its veiling folds of drapery!”

Sitting on the floor, a la Turque, he seized her shoe and drew it off, and the foot, coming out of its leather sheath, moved about quickly, like a little animal surprised at being set free.

“Isn't that elegant, distinguished, and material—more material than the hand? Show

me your hand, Any!”

She wore long gloves reaching to the elbow. In order to remove one she took it by the upper edge and slipped it down quickly, turning it inside out, as one would skin a snake. The arm appeared, white, plump, round, so suddenly bared as to produce an idea of complete and bold nudity.

She gave him her hand, which drooped from her wrist. The rings sparkled on her white fingers, and the narrow pink nails seemed like amorous claws protruding at the tips of that little feminine paw.

Olivier Bertin handled it tenderly and admiringly. He played with the fingers as if they were live toys, while saying:

“What a strange thing! What a strange thing! What a pretty little member, intelligent and adroit, which executes whatever one wills—books, laces, houses, pyramids, locomotives, pastry, or caresses, which last is its pleasantest function.”

He drew off the rings one by one, and as the wedding-ring fell in its turn, he murmured smilingly:

“The law! Let us salute it!”

“Nonsense!” said the Countess, slightly wounded.

Bertin had always been inclined to satirical banter, that tendency of the French to mingle irony with the most serious sentiments, and he had often unintentionally made her sad, without knowing how to understand the subtle distinctions of women, or to discern the border of sacred ground, as he himself said. Above all things it vexed her whenever he alluded with a touch of familiar lightness to their attachment, which was an affair of such long standing that he declared it the most beautiful example of love in the nineteenth century. After a silence, she inquired:

“Will you take Annette and me to the varnishing-day reception?”

“Certainly.”

Then she asked him about the best pictures to be shown in the next exposition, which was to open in a fortnight.

Suddenly, however, she appeared to recollect something she had forgotten.

“Come, give me my shoe,” she said. “I am going now.”

He was playing dreamily with the light shoe, turning it over abstractedly in his hands. He leaned over, kissed the foot, which appeared to float between the skirt and the rug, and which, a little chilled by the air, no longer moved restlessly about; then he slipped on the shoe, and Madame de Guilleroy, rising, approached the table, on which were scattered papers, open letters, old and recent, beside a painter's inkstand, in which the ink had dried. She looked at it all with curiosity, touched the papers, and lifted them to look underneath.

Bertin approached her, saying:

“You will disarrange my disorder.”

Without replying to this, she inquired:

“Who is the gentleman that wishes to buy your Baigneuses?”

“An American whom I do not know.”

“Have you come to an agreement about the Chanteuse des rues?”

“Yes. Ten thousand.”

“You did well. It was pretty, but not exceptional. Good-by, dear.”

She presented her cheek, which he brushed with a calm kiss; then she disappeared through the portieres, saying in an undertone:

“Friday—eight o'clock. I do not wish you to go with me to the door—you know that very well. Good-by!”

When she had gone he first lighted another cigarette, then he began to pace slowly to and fro in his studio. All the past of this liaison unrolled itself before him. He recalled all its details, now long remote, sought them and put them together,

interested in this solitary pursuit of reminiscences.

It was at the moment when he had just risen like a star on the horizon of artistic Paris, when the painters were monopolizing the favor of the public, and had built up a quarter with magnificent dwellings, earned by a few strokes of the brush.

After his return from Rome, in 1864, he had lived for some years without success or renown; then suddenly, in 1868, he exhibited his Cleopatra, and in a few days was being praised to the skies by both critics and public.

In 1872, after the war, and after the death of Henri Regnault had made for all his brethren, a sort of pedestal of glory, a Jocaste a bold subject, classed Bertin among the daring, although his wisely original execution made him acceptable even to the Academicians. In 1873 his first medal placed him beyond competition with his Juive d'Alger, which he exhibited on his return from a trip to Africa, and a portrait of the Princesse de Salia, in 1874, made him considered by the fashionable world the first portrait painter of his day. From that time he became the favorite painter of Parisian women of that class, the most skilful and ingenious interpreter of their grace, their bearing, and their nature. In a few months all the distinguished women in Paris solicited the favor of being reproduced by his brush. He was hard to please, and made them pay well for that favor.

After he had become the rage, and was received everywhere as a man of the world he saw one day, at the Duchesse de Mortemain's house, a young woman in deep mourning, who was just leaving as he entered, and who, in this chance meeting in a doorway, dazzled him with a charming vision of grace and elegance.

On inquiring her name, he learned that she was the Comtesse de Guilleroy, wife of a Normandy country squire, agriculturist and deputy; that she was in mourning for her husband's father; and that she was very intellectual, greatly admired, and much sought after.

Struck by the apparition that had delighted his artist's eye, he said:

“Ah, there is some one whose portrait I should paint willingly!”

This remark was repeated to the young Countess the next day; and that evening Bertin received a little blue-tinted note, delicately perfumed, in a small, regular handwriting, slanting a little from left to right, which said:

“MONSIEUR:

“The Duchesse de Mortemain, who has just left my house, has assured me that you would be disposed to make, from my poor face, one of your masterpieces. I would entrust it to you willingly if I were certain that you did not speak idly, and that you really see in me something that you could reproduce and idealize.

“Accept, Monsieur, my sincere regards.

“ANNE DE GUILLEROY.”

He answered this note, asking when he might present himself at the Countess's house, and was very simply invited to breakfast on the following Monday.

It was on the first floor of a large and luxurious modern house in the Boulevard Malesherbes. Traversing a large salon with blue silk walls, framed in white and gold, the painter was shown into a sort of boudoir hung with tapestries of the last century, light and coquettish, those tapestries a la Watteau, with their dainty coloring and graceful figures, which seem to have been designed and executed by workmen dreaming of love.

He had just seated himself when the Countess appeared. She walked so lightly that he had not heard her coming through the next room, and was surprised when he saw her. She extended her hand in graceful welcome.

“And so it is true,” said she, “that you really wish to paint my portrait?”

“I shall be very happy to do so, Madame.”

Her close-fitting black gown made her look very slender and gave her a youthful appearance though a grave air, which was belied, however, by her smiling face,

lighted up by her bright golden hair. The Count entered, leading by the hand a little six-year-old girl.

Madame de Guilleroy presented him, saying, “My husband.”

The Count was rather short, and wore no moustache; his cheeks were hollow, darkened under the skin by his close-shaven beard. He had somewhat the appearance of a priest or an actor; his hair was long and was tossed back carelessly; his manner was polished, and around the mouth two large circular lines extended from the cheeks to the chin, seeming to have been acquired from the habit of speaking in public.

He thanked the painter with a flourish of phrases that betrayed the orator. He had wished for a long time to have a portrait of his wife, and certainly he would have chosen M. Olivier Bertin, had he not feared a refusal, for he well knew that the painter was overwhelmed with orders.

It was arranged, then, with much ceremony on both sides, that the Count should accompany the Countess to the studio the next day. He asked, however, whether it would not be better to wait, because of the Countess's deep mourning; but the painter declared that he wished to translate the first impression she had made upon him, and the striking contrast of her animated, delicate head, luminous under the golden hair, with the austere black of her garments.

She came, then, the following day, with her husband, and afterward with her daughter, whom the artist seated before a table covered with picture-books.

Olivier Bertin, following his usual custom, showed himself very reserved. Fashionable women made him a little uneasy, for he hardly knew them. He supposed them to be at once immoral and shallow, hypocritical and dangerous, futile and embarrassing. Among the women of the demi-monde he had had some passing adventures due to his renown, his lively wit, his elegant and athletic figure, and his dark and animated face. He preferred them, too; he liked their free ways and frank

speech, accustomed as he was to the gay and easy manners of the studios and green-rooms he frequented. He went into the fashionable world for the glory of it, but his heart was not in it; he enjoyed it through his vanity, received congratulations and commissions, and played the gallant before charming ladies who flattered him, but never paid court to any. As he did not allow himself to indulge in daring pleasantries and spicy jests in their society, he thought them all prudes, and himself was considered as having good taste. Whenever one of them came to pose at his studio, he felt, in spite of any advances she might make to please him, that disparity of rank which prevents any real unity between artists and fashionable people, no matter how much they may be thrown together. Behind the smiles and the admiration which among women are always a little artificial, he felt the indefinable mental reserve of the being that judges itself of superior essence. This brought about in him an abnormal feeling of pride, which showed itself in a bearing of haughty respect, dissembling the vanity of the parvenu who is treated as an equal by princes and princesses, who owes to his talent the honor accorded to others by their birth. It was said of him with slight surprise: “He is really very well bred!” This surprise, although it flattered him, also wounded him, for it indicated a certain social barrier.

The admirable and ceremonious gravity of the painter a little annoyed Madame de Guilleroy, who could find nothing to say to this man, so cold, yet with a reputation for cleverness.

After settling her little daughter, she would come and sit in an armchair near the newly begun sketch, and tried, according to the artist's recommendation, to give some expression to her physiognomy.

In the midst of the fourth sitting, he suddenly ceased painting and inquired:

“What amuses you more than anything else in life?”

She appeared somewhat embarrassed.

“Why, I hardly know. Why this question?”

“I need a happy thought in those eyes, and I have not seen it yet.”

“Well, try to make me talk; I like very much to chat.”

“Are you gay?”

“Very gay.”

“Well, then, let us chat, Madame.”

He had said “Let us chat, Madame,” in a very grave tone; then, resuming his painting, he touched upon a variety of subjects, seeking something on which their minds could meet. They began by exchanging observations on the people that both knew; then they talked of themselves—always the most agreeable and fascinating subject for a chat.

When they met again the next day they felt more at ease, and Bertin, noting that he pleased and amused her, began to relate some of the details of his artist life, allowing himself to give free scope to his reminiscences, in a fanciful way that was peculiar to him.

Accustomed to the dignified presence of the literary lights of the salons, the Countess was surprised by this almost wild gaiety, which said unusual things quite frankly, enlivening them with irony; and presently she began to answer in the same way, with a grace at once daring and delicate.

In a week's time she had conquered and charmed him by her good humor, frankness, and simplicity. He had entirely forgotten his prejudices against fashionable women, and would willingly have declared that they alone had charm and fascination. As he painted, standing before his canvas, advancing and retreating, with the movements of a man fighting, he allowed his fancy to flow freely, as if he had known for a long time this pretty woman, blond and black, made of sunlight and mourning, seated before him, laughing and listening, answering him gaily with so much animation that she lost her pose every moment.

Sometimes he would move far away from her, closing one eye, leaning over for a searching study of his model's pose; then he would draw very near to her to note the slightest shadows of her face, to catch the most fleeting expression, to seize and reproduce that which is in a woman's face beyond its more outward appearance; that emanation of ideal beauty, that reflection of something indescribable, that personal and intimate charm peculiar to each, which causes her to be loved to distraction by one and not by another.

One afternoon the little girl advanced, and, planting herself before the canvas, inquired with childish gravity:

“That is mamma, isn't it?”

The artist took her in his arms to kiss her, flattered by that naïve homage to the resemblance of his work.

Another day, when she had been very quiet, they suddenly heard her say, in a sad little voice:

“Mamma, I am so tired of this!”

The painter was so touched by this first complaint that he ordered a shopful of toys to be brought to the studio the following day.

Little Annette, astonished, pleased, and always thoughtful, put them in order with great care, that she might play with them one after another, according to the desire of the moment. From the date of this gift, she loved the painter as little children love, with that caressing, animal-like affection which makes them so sweet and captivating.

Madame de Guilleroy began to take pleasure in the sittings. She was almost without amusement or occupation that winter, as she was in mourning; so that, for lack of society and entertainments, her chief interest was within the walls of Bertin's studio.

She was the daughter of a rich and hospitable Parisian merchant, who had died

several years earlier, and of his ailing wife, whose lack of health kept her in bed six months out of the twelve, and while still very young she had become a perfect hostess, knowing how to receive, to smile, to chat, to estimate character, and how to adapt herself to everyone; thus she early became quite at her ease in society, and was always far-seeing and compliant. When the Count de Guilleroy was presented to her as her betrothed, she understood at once the advantages to be gained by such a marriage, and, like a sensible girl, admitted them without constraint, knowing well that one cannot have everything and that in every situation we must strike a balance between good and bad.

Launched in the world, much sought because of her beauty and brilliance, she was admired and courted by many men without ever feeling the least quickening of her heart, which was as reasonable as her mind.

She possessed a touch of coquetry, however, which was nevertheless prudent and aggressive enough never to allow an affair to go too far. Compliments pleased her, awakened desires, fed her vanity, provided she might seem to ignore them; and when she had received for a whole evening the incense of this sort of homage, she slept quietly, as a woman who has accomplished her mission on earth. This existence, which lasted seven years, did not weary her nor seem monotonous, for she adored the incessant excitement of society, but sometimes she felt that she desired something different. The men of her world, political advocates, financiers, or wealthy idlers, amused her as actors might; she did not take them too seriously, although she appreciated their functions, their stations, and their titles.

The painter pleased her at first because such a man was entirely a novelty to her. She found the studio a very amusing place, laughed gaily, felt that she, too, was clever, and felt grateful to him for the pleasure she took in the sittings. He pleased her, too, because he was handsome, strong, and famous, no woman, whatever she may pretend, being indifferent to physical beauty and glory. Flattered at having been

admired by this expert, and disposed, on her side, to think well of him, she had discovered in him an alert and cultivated mind, delicacy, fancy, the true charm of intelligence, and an eloquence of expression that seemed to illumine whatever he said.

A rapid friendship sprang up between them, and the hand-clasp exchanged every day as she entered seemed more and more to express something of the feeling in their hearts.

Then, without deliberate design, with no definite determination, she felt within her heart a growing desire to fascinate him, and yielded to it. She had foreseen nothing, planned nothing; she was only coquettish with added grace, as a woman always is toward a man who pleases her more than all others; and in her manner with him, in her glances and smiles, was that seductive charm that diffuses itself around a woman in whose breast has awakened a need of being loved.

She said flattering things to him which meant “I find you very agreeable, Monsieur;” and she made him talk at length in order to show him, by her attention, how much he aroused her interest. He would cease to paint and sit beside her; and in that mental exaltation due to an intense desire to please, he had crises of poetry, of gaiety or of philosophy, according to his state of mind that day.

She was merry when he was gay; when he became profound she tried to follow his discourse, though she did not always succeed; and when her mind wandered to other things, she appeared to listen with so perfect an air of comprehension and such apparent enjoyment of this initiation, that he felt his spirit exalted in noting her attention to his words, and was touched to have discovered a soul so delicate, open, and docile, into which thought fell like a seed.

The portrait progressed, and was likely to be good, for the painter had reached the state of emotion that is necessary in order to discover all the qualities of the model, and to express them with that convincing ardor which is the inspiration of true

artists.

Leaning toward her, watching every movement of her face, all the tints of her flesh, every shadow of her skin, all the expression and the translucence of her eyes, every secret of her physiognomy, he had become saturated with her personality as a sponge absorbs water; and, in transferring to canvas that emanation of disturbing charm which his eye seized, and which flowed like a wave from his thought to his brush, he was overcome and intoxicated by it, as if he had drunk deep of the beauty of woman.

She felt that he was drawn toward her, and was amused by this game, this victory that was becoming more and more certain, animating even her own heart.

A new feeling gave fresh piquancy to her existence, awaking in her a mysterious joy. When she heard him spoken of her heart throbbed faster, and she longed to say—a longing that never passed her lips—"He is in love with me!" She was glad when people praised his talent, and perhaps was even more pleased when she heard him called handsome. When she was alone, thinking of him, with no indiscreet babble to annoy her, she really imagined that in him she had found merely a good friend, one that would always remain content with a cordial hand-clasp.

Often, in the midst of a sitting, he would suddenly put down his palette on the stool and take little Annette in his arms, kissing her tenderly on her hair, and his eyes, while gazing at the mother, said, "It is you, not the child, that I kiss in this way."

Occasionally Madame de Guilleroy did not bring her daughter, but came alone. On these days he worked very little, and the time was spent in talking.

One afternoon she was late. It was a cold day toward the end of February. Olivier had come in early, as was now his habit whenever she had an appointment with him, for he always hoped she would arrive before the usual hour. While waiting he paced to and fro, smoking, and asking himself the question that he was surprised to find himself asking for the hundredth time that week: "Am I in love?" He did not know,

never having been really in love. He had had his caprices, certainly, some of which had lasted a long time, but never had he mistaken them for love. To-day he was astonished at the emotion that possessed him.

Did he love her? He hardly desired her, certainly, never having dreamed of the possibility of possessing her. Heretofore, as soon as a woman attracted him he had desired to make a conquest of her, and had held out his hand toward her as if to gather fruit, but without feeling his heart affected profoundly by either her presence or her absence.

Desire for Madame de Guilleroy hardly occurred to him; it seemed to be hidden, crouching behind another and more powerful feeling, which was still uncertain and hardly awakened. Olivier had believed that love began with reveries and with poetic exaltations. But his feeling, on the contrary, seemed to come from an indefinable emotion, more physical than mental. He was nervous and restless, as if under the shadow of threatening illness, though nothing painful entered into this fever of the blood which by contagion stirred his mind also. He was quite aware that Madame de Guilleroy was the cause of his agitation; that it was due to the memories she left him and to the expectation of her return. He did not feel drawn to her by an impulse of his whole being, but he felt her always near him, as if she never had left him; she left to him something of herself when she departed—something subtle and inexpressible. What was it? Was it love? He probed deep in his heart in order to see, to understand. He thought her charming, but she was not at all the type of ideal woman that his blind hope had created. Whoever calls upon love has foreseen the moral traits and physical charms of her who will enslave him; and Madame de Guilleroy, although she pleased him infinitely, did not appear to him to be that woman.

But why did she thus occupy his thought, above all others, in a way so different, so unceasing? Had he simply fallen into the trap set by her coquetry, which he had long

before understood, and, circumvented by his own methods, was he now under the influence of that special fascination which gives to women the desire to please?

He paced here and there, sat down, sprang up, lighted cigarettes and threw them away, and his eyes every instant looked at the clock, whose hands moved toward the usual hour in slow, unhurried fashion.

Several times already he had almost raised the convex glass over the two golden arrows turning so slowly, in order to push the larger one on toward the figure it was approaching so lazily. It seemed to him that this would suffice to make the door open, and that the expected one would appear, deceived and brought to him by this ruse. Then he smiled at this childish, persistent, and unreasonable desire.

At last he asked himself this question: “Could I become her lover?” This idea seemed strange to him, indeed hardly to be realized or even pursued, because of the complications it might bring into his life. Yet she pleased him very much, and he concluded: “Decidedly I am in a very strange state of mind.”

The clock struck, and this reminder of the hour made him start, striking on his nerves rather than his soul. He awaited her with that impatience which delay increases from second to second. She was always prompt, so that before ten minutes should pass he would see her enter. When the ten minutes had elapsed, he felt anxious, as at the approach of some grief, then irritated because she had made him lose time; finally, he realized that if she failed to come it would cause him actual suffering. What should he do? Should he wait for her? No; he would go out, so that if, by chance, she should arrive very late, she would find the studio empty.

He would go out, but when? What latitude should he allow her? Would it not be better to remain and to make her comprehend, by a few coldly polite words, that he was not one to be kept waiting. And suppose she did not come? Then he would receive a despatch, a card, a servant or a messenger. If she did not come, what should he do? It would be a day lost; he could not work. Then? Well, then he would

go to seek news of her, for see her he must!

It was quite true; he felt a profound, tormenting, harassing necessity for seeing her. What did it mean? Was it love? But he felt no mental exaltation, no intoxication of the senses; it awakened no reverie of the soul, when he realized that if she did not come that day he should suffer keenly.

The door-bell rang on the stairway of the little hotel, and Olivier Bertin suddenly found himself somewhat breathless, then so joyous that he executed a pirouette and flung his cigarette high in the air.

She entered; she was alone! Immediately he was seized with a great audacity.

“Do you know what I asked myself while waiting for you?”

“No, indeed, I do not.”

“I asked myself whether I were not in love with you?”

“In love with me? You must be mad!”

But she smiled, and her smile said: That is very pretty; I am glad to hear it! However, she said: “You are not serious, of course; why do you make such a jest?”

“On the contrary, I am absolutely serious,” he replied. “I do not declare that I am in love with you; but I ask myself whether I am not well on the way to become so.”

“What has made you think so?”

“My emotion when you are not here; my happiness when you arrive.”

She seated herself.

“Oh, don't disturb yourself over anything so trifling! As long as you sleep well and have an appetite for dinner, there will be no danger!”

He began to laugh.

“And if I lose my sleep and no longer eat?”

“Let me know of it.”

“And then?”

“I will allow you to recover yourself in peace.”

“A thousand thanks!”

And on the theme of this uncertain love they spun theories and fancies all the afternoon. The same thing occurred on several successive days. Accepting his statement as a sort of jest, of no real importance, she would say gaily on entering: “Well, how goes your love to-day?”

He would reply lightly, yet with perfect seriousness, telling her of the progress of his malady, in all its intimate details, and of the depth of the tenderness that had been born and was daily increasing. He analyzed himself minutely before her, hour by hour, since their separation the evening before, with the air of a professor giving a lecture; and she listened with interest, a little moved, and somewhat disturbed by this story which seemed that in a book of which she was the heroine. When he had enumerated, in his gallant and easy manner, all the anxieties of which he had become the prey, his voice sometimes trembled in expressing by a word, or only by an intonation, the tender aching of his heart.

And she persisted in questioning him, vibrating with curiosity, her eyes fixed upon him, her ear eager for those things that are disturbing to know but charming to hear.

Sometimes when he approached her to alter a pose he would seize her hand and try to kiss it. With a swift movement she would draw away her fingers from his lips, saying, with a slight frown:

“Come, come—work!”

He would begin his work again, but within five minutes she would ask some adroit question that led him back to the sole topic that interested them.

By this time she began to feel some fear deep in her heart. She longed to be loved—but not too much! Sure of not being led away, she yet feared to allow him to

venture too far, thereby losing him, since then she would be compelled to drive him to despair after seeming to encourage him. Yet, should it become necessary to renounce this tender and delicate friendship, this stream of pleasant converse which rippled along bearing nuggets of love like a river whose sand is full of gold, it would cause her great sorrow—a grief that would be heart-breaking.

When she set out from her own home to go to the painter's studio, a wave of joy, warm and penetrating, overflowed her spirit, making it light and happy. As she laid her hand on Olivier's bell, her breast throbbed with impatience, and the stair-carpet seemed the softest her feet ever had pressed. But Bertin became gloomy, a little nervous, often irritable. He had his moments of impatience, soon repressed, but frequently recurring.

One day, when she had just entered, he sat down beside her instead of beginning to paint, saying:

“Madame, you can no longer ignore the fact that what I have said is not a jest, and that I love you madly.”

Troubled by this beginning and seeing that the dreaded crisis had arrived, she tried to stop him, but he listened to her no longer. Emotion overflowed his heart, and she must hear him, pale, trembling, and anxious as she listened. He spoke a long time, demanding nothing, tenderly, sadly, with despairing resignation; and she allowed him to take her hands, which he kept in his. He was kneeling before her without her taking any notice of his attitude, and with a far-away look upon his face he begged her not to work him any harm. What harm? She did not understand nor try to understand, overcome by the cruel grief of seeing him suffer, yet that grief was almost happiness. Suddenly she saw tears in his eyes and was so deeply moved that she exclaimed: “Oh!”—ready to embrace him as one embraces a crying child. He repeated in a very soft tone: “There, there! I suffer too much;” then, suddenly, won by his sorrow, by the contagion of tears, she sobbed, her nerves quivering, her arms

trembling, ready to open.

When she felt herself suddenly clasped in his embrace and kissed passionately on the lips, she wished to cry out, to struggle, to repulse him; but she judged herself lost, for she consented while resisting, she yielded even while she struggled, pressing him to her as she cried: “No, no, I will not!”

Then she was overcome with the emotion of that moment; she hid her face in her hands, then she suddenly sprang to her feet, caught up her hat which had fallen to the floor, put it on her head and rushed away, in spite of the supplications of Olivier, who held a fold of her skirt.

As soon as she was in the street, she had a desire to sit down on the curbstone, her limbs were so exhausted and powerless. A cab was passing; she called to it and said to the driver: “Drive slowly, and take me wherever you like.” She threw herself into the carriage, closed the door, sank back in one corner, feeling herself alone behind the raised windows—alone to think.

For some minutes she heard only the sound of the wheels and the jarring of the cab. She looked at the houses, the pedestrians, people in cabs and omnibuses, with a blank gaze that saw nothing; she thought of nothing, as if she were giving herself time, granting herself a respite before daring to reflect upon what had happened.

Then, as she had a practical mind and was not lacking in courage, she said to herself: “I am a lost woman!” For some time she remained under that feeling of certainty that irreparable misfortune had befallen her, horror-struck, like a man fallen from a roof, knowing that his legs are broken but dreading to prove it to himself.

But, instead of feeling overwhelmed by the anticipation of suffering, her heart remained calm and peaceful after this catastrophe; it beat slowly, softly, after the fall that had terrified her soul, and seemed to take no part in the perturbation of her mind.

She repeated aloud, as if to understand and convince herself: “Yes, I am a lost

woman.” No echo of suffering responded from her heart to this cry of her conscience.

She allowed herself to be soothed for some time by the movement of the carriage, putting off a little longer the necessity of facing this cruel situation. No, she did not suffer. She was afraid to think, that was all; she feared to know, to comprehend, and to reflect; on the contrary, in that mysterious and impenetrable being created within us by the incessant struggle between our desires and our will, she felt an indescribable peace.

After perhaps half an hour of this strange repose, understanding at last that the despair she had invoked would not come, she shook off her torpor and murmured: “It is strange: I am hardly sorry even!”

Then she began to reproach herself. Anger awakened within her against her own blindness and her weakness. How had she not foreseen this, not comprehended that the hour for that struggle must come; that this man was so dear to her as to render her cowardly, and that sometimes in the purest hearts desire arises like a gust of wind, carrying the will before it?

But, after she had judged and reprimanded herself severely, she asked herself what would happen next?

Her first resolve was to break with the painter and never to see him again. Hardly had she formed this resolution before a thousand reasons sprang up as quickly to combat it. How could she explain such a break? What should she say to her husband? Would not the suspected truth be whispered, then spread abroad?

Would it not be better, for the sake of appearances, to act, with Olivier Bertin himself, the hypocritical comedy of indifference and forgetfulness, to show him that she had effaced that moment from her memory and from her life?

But could she do it? Would she have the audacity to appear to recollect nothing, to assume a look of indignant astonishment in saying: “What would you with me?” to

the man with whom she had actually shared that swift and ardent emotion?

She reflected a long time, and decided that any other solution was impossible.

She would go to him courageously the next day, and make him understand as soon as she could what she desired him to do. She must not use a word, an allusion, a look, that could recall to him that moment of shame.

After he had suffered—for assuredly he would have his share of suffering, as a loyal and upright man—he would remain in future that which he had been up to the present.

As soon as this new resolution was formed, she gave her address to the coachman and returned home, profoundly depressed, with a desire to take to her bed, to see no one, to sleep and forget. Having shut herself up in her room, she remained there until the dinner hour, lying on a couch, benumbed, not wishing to agitate herself longer with that thought so full of danger.

She descended at the exact hour, astonished to find herself so calm, and awaited her husband with her ordinary demeanor. He appeared, carrying their little one in his arms; she pressed his hand and kissed the child, and felt no pang of anguish.

Monsieur de Guilleroy inquired what she had been doing. She replied indifferently that she had been posing, as usual.

“And the portrait—is it good?” he asked.

“It is coming on very well.”

He spoke of his own affairs, in his turn; he enjoyed talking, while dining, of the sitting of the Chamber, and of the discussion of the proposed law on the adulteration of food-stuffs.

This rather tiresome talk, which she usually endured amiably, now irritated her, and made her look with closer attention at the man who was vulgarly loquacious in his interest in such things; but she smiled as she listened, and replied pleasantly, more

gracious even than usual, more indulgent toward these banalities. As she looked at him she thought: “I have deceived him! He is my husband, and I have deceived him! How strange it is! Nothing can change that fact, nothing can obliterate it! I closed my eyes. I submitted for a few seconds, a few seconds only, to a man's kisses, and I am no longer a virtuous woman. A few seconds in my life—seconds that never can be effaced—have brought into it that little irreparable fact, so grave, so short, a crime, the most shameful one for a woman—and yet I feel no despair! If anyone had told me that yesterday, I should not have believed it. If anyone had convinced me that it would indeed come to pass, I should have thought instantly of the terrible remorse that would fill my heart to-day.”

Monsieur de Guilleroy went out after dinner, as he did almost every evening. Then the Countess took her little daughter on her lap, weeping over her and kissing her; the tears she shed were sincere, coming from her conscience, not from her heart.

But she slept very little. Amid the darkness of her room, she tormented herself afresh as to the dangers of the attitude toward the painter that she purposed to assume; she dreaded the interview that must take place the following day, and the things that he must say to her, looking her in the face meanwhile.

She arose early, but remained lying on her couch all the morning, forcing herself to foresee what it was she had to fear and what she must say in reply, in order to be ready for any surprise.

She went out early, that she might yet think while walking.

He hardly expected her, and had been asking himself, since the evening before, what he should do when he met her.

After her hasty departure—that flight which he had not dared to oppose—he had remained alone, still listening, although she was already far away, for the sound of her step, the rustle of her skirt, and the closing of the door, touched by the timid hand of his goddess.

He remained standing, full of deep, ardent, intoxicating joy. He had won her, her! That had passed between them! Was it possible? After the surprise of this triumph, he gloated over it, and, to realize it more keenly, he sat down and almost lay at full length on the divan where he had made her yield to him.

He remained there a long time, full of the thought that she was his mistress, and that between them, between the woman he had so much desired and himself, had been tied in a few moments that mysterious bond which secretly links two beings to each other. He retained in his still quivering body the piercingly sweet remembrance of that wild, fleeting moment when their lips had met, when their beings had united and mingled, thrilling together with the deepest emotion of life.

He did not go out that evening, in order to live over again that rapturous moment; he retired early, his heart vibrating with happiness. He had hardly awakened the next morning before he asked himself what he should do. To a cocotte or an actress he would have sent flowers or even a jewel; but he was tortured with perplexity before this new situation.

He wished to express, in delicate and charming terms, the gratitude of his soul, his ecstasy of mad tenderness, his offer of a devotion that should be eternal; but in order to intimate all these passionate and high-souled thoughts he could find only set phrases, commonplace expressions, vulgar and puerile.

Assuredly, he must write—but what? He scribbled, erased, tore up and began anew twenty letters, all of which seemed to him insulting, odious, ridiculous.

He gave up the idea of writing, therefore, and decided to go to see her, as soon as the hour for the sitting had passed, for he felt very sure that she would not come.

Shutting himself up in his studio, he stood in mental exaltation before the portrait, his lips longing to press themselves on the painting, whereon something of herself was fixed; and again and again he looked out of the window into the street. Every gown he saw in the distance made his heart throb quickly. Twenty times he believed

that he saw her; then when the approaching woman had passed he sat down again, as if overcome by a deception.

Suddenly he saw her, doubted, then took his opera-glass, recognized her, and, dizzy with violent emotion, sat down once more to await her.

When she entered he threw himself on his knees and tried to take her hands, but she drew them away abruptly, and, as he remained at her feet, filled with anguish, his eyes raised to hers, she said haughtily:

“What are you doing, Monsieur? I do not understand that attitude.”

“Oh, Madame, I entreat you—”

She interrupted him harshly:

“Rise! You are ridiculous!”

He rose, dazed, and murmured:

“What is the matter? Do not treat me in this way—I love you!”

Then, in a few short, dry phrases, she signified her wishes, and decreed the situation.

“I do not understand what you wish to say. Never speak to me of your love, or I shall leave this studio never to return. If you forget for a single moment this condition of my presence here, you never will see me again.”

He looked at her, crushed by this unexpected harshness; then he understood, and murmured:

“I shall obey, Madame.”

“Very well,” she rejoined; “I expected that of you! Now work, for you are long in finishing that portrait.”

He took up his palette and began to paint, but his hand trembled, his troubled eyes looked without seeing; he felt a desire to weep, so deeply wounded was his heart.

He tried to talk to her; she barely answered him. When he attempted to pay her some

little compliment on her color, she cut him short in a tone so brusque that he felt suddenly one of those furies of a lover that change tenderness to hatred. Through soul and body he felt a nervous shock, and in a moment he detested her. Yes, yes, that was, indeed, woman! She, too, was like all the others! Why not? She, too, was false, changeable, and weak, like all of them. She had attracted him, seduced him with girlish ruses, trying to overcome him without intending to give him anything in return, enticing him only to refuse him, employing toward him all the tricks of cowardly coquettes who seem always on the point of yielding so long as the man who cringes like a dog before them dares not carry out his desire.

But the situation was the worse for her, after all; he had taken her, he had overcome her. She might try to wash away that fact and answer him insolently; she could efface nothing, and he—he would forget it! Indeed, it would have been a fine bit of folly to embarrass himself with this sort of mistress, who would eat into his artist life with the capricious teeth of a pretty woman.

He felt a desire to whistle, as he did in the presence of his models, but realized that his nerve was giving way and feared to commit some stupidity. He cut short the sitting under pretense of having an appointment. When they bowed at parting they felt themselves farther apart than the day they first met at the Duchesse de Mortemain's.

As soon as she had gone, he took his hat and topcoat and went out. A cold sun, in a misty blue sky, threw over the city a pale, depressing, unreal light.

After he had walked a long time, with rapid and irritated step, elbowing the passers-by that he need not deviate from a straight line, his great fury against her began to change into sadness and regret. After he had repeated to himself all the reproaches he had poured upon her, he remembered, as he looked at the women that passed him, how pretty and charming she was. Like many others who do not admit it, he had always been waiting to meet the “impossible she,” to find the rare, unique,

poetic and passionate being, the dream of whom hovers over our hearts. Had he not almost found it? Was it not she who might have given him this almost impossible happiness? Why, then, is it true that nothing is realized? Why can one seize nothing of that which he pursues, or can succeed only in grasping a phantom, which renders still more grievous this pursuit of illusions?

He was no longer resentful toward her; it was life itself that made him bitter. Now that he was able to reason, he asked himself what cause for anger he had against her? With what could he reproach her, after all?—with being amiable, kind, and gracious toward him, while she herself might well reproach him for having behaved like a villain!

He returned home full of sadness. He would have liked to ask her pardon, to devote himself to her, to make her forget; and he pondered as to how he might enable her to comprehend that henceforth, until death, he would be obedient to all her wishes.

The next day she arrived, accompanied by her daughter, with a smile so sad, an expression so pathetic, that the painter fancied he could see in those poor blue eyes, that had always been so merry, all the pain, all the remorse, all the desolation of that womanly heart. He was moved to pity, and, in order that she might forget, he showed toward her with delicate reserve the most thoughtful attentions. She acknowledged them with gentleness and kindness, with the weary and languid manner of a woman who suffers.

And he, looking at her, seized again with a mad dream of loving and of being loved, asked himself why she was not more indignant at his conduct, how she could still come to his studio, listen to him and answer him, with that memory between them.

Since she could bear to see him again, however, could endure to hear his voice, having always in her mind the one thought which she could not escape, it must be that this thought had not become intolerable to her. When a woman hates the man who has conquered her thus, she cannot remain in his presence without showing her

hatred, but that man never can remain wholly indifferent to her. She must either detest him or pardon him. And when she pardons that transgression, she is not far from love!

While he painted slowly, he arrived at this conclusion by small arguments, precise, clear, and sure; he now felt himself strong, steady, and master of the situation. He had only to be prudent, patient, devoted, and one day or another she would again be his.

He knew how to wait. In order to reassure her and to conquer her once more, he practised ruses in his turn; he assumed a tenderness restrained by apparent remorse, hesitating attentions, and indifferent attitudes. Tranquil in the certainty of approaching happiness, what did it matter whether it arrived a little sooner, a little later? He even experienced a strange, subtle pleasure in delay, in watching her, and saying to himself, “She is afraid!” as he saw her coming always with her child.

He felt that between them a slow work of reconciliation was going on, and thought that in the Countess's eyes was something strange: constraint, a sweet sadness, that appeal of a struggling soul, of a faltering will, which seems to say: “But—conquer me, then!”

After a while she came alone once more, reassured by his reserve. Then he treated her as a friend, a comrade; he talked to her of his life, his plans, his art, as to a brother.

Deluded by this attitude, she assumed joyfully the part of counselor, flattered that he distinguished her thus above other women, and convinced that his talent would gain in delicacy through this intellectual intimacy. But, from consulting her and showing deference to her, he caused her to pass naturally from the functions of a counselor to the sacred office of inspirer. She found it charming to use her influence thus over the great man, and almost consented that he should love her as an artist, since it was she that gave him inspiration for his work!

It was one evening, after a long talk about the loves of illustrious painters, that she let herself glide into his arms. She rested there this time, without trying to escape, and gave him back his kisses.

She felt no remorse now, only the vague consciousness of a fall; and to stifle the reproaches of her reason she attributed it to fatality.

Drawn toward him by her virgin heart and her empty soul, the flesh overcome by the slow domination of caresses, little by little she attached herself to him, as do all tender women who love for the first time.

With Olivier it was a crisis of acute love, sensuous and poetic. It seemed to him sometimes that one day he had taken flight, with hands extended, and that he had been able to clasp in full embrace that winged and magnificent dream which is always hovering over our hopes.

He had finished the Countess's portrait, the best, certainly, that he ever had painted, for he had discovered and crystallized that inexpressible something which a painter seldom succeeds in unveiling—that reflection, that mystery, that physiognomy of the soul, which passes intangibly across a face.

Months rolled by, then years, which hardly loosened the tie that united the Comtesse de Guilleroy and the painter, Olivier Bertin. With him it was no longer the exaltation of the beginning, but a calm, deep affection, a sort of loving friendship that had become a habit.

With her, on the contrary, the passionate, persistent attachment of certain women who give themselves to a man wholly and forever was always growing. Honest and straight in adulterous love as they might have been in marriage, they devote themselves to a single object with a tenderness from which nothing can turn them. Not only do they love the lover, but they wish to love him, and, with eyes on him alone, they so fill their hearts with thoughts of him that nothing strange can thenceforth enter there. They have bound their lives resolutely, as one who knows

how to swim, yet wishes to die, ties his hands together before leaping from a high bridge into the water.

But from the moment when the Countess had yielded, she was assailed by fears for Bertin's constancy. Nothing held him but his masculine will, his caprice, his passing fancy for a woman he had met one day just as he had already met so many others! She realized that he was so free, so susceptible to temptation—he who lived without duties, habits, or scruples, like all men! He was handsome, celebrated, much sought after, having, to respond to his easily awakened desires, fashionable women, whose modesty is so fragile, women of the demi-monde of the theater, prodigal of their favors with such men as he. One of them, some evening after supper, might follow him and please him, take him and keep him.

Thus she lived in terror of losing him, watching his manner, his attitudes, startled by a word, full of anguish when he admired another woman, praised the charm of her countenance or her grace of bearing. All of which she was ignorant in his life made her tremble, and all of which she was cognizant alarmed her. At each of their meetings she questioned him ingeniously, without his perceiving it, in order to make him express his opinion on the people he had seen, the houses where he had dined, in short, the lightest expression of his mind. As soon as she fancied she detected the influence of some other person, she combated it with prodigious astuteness and innumerable resources.

Oh, how often did she suspect those brief intrigues, without depth, lasting perhaps a week or two, from time to time, which come into the life of every prominent artist!

She had, as it were, an intuition of danger, even before she detected the awakening of a new desire in Olivier, by the look of triumph in his eyes, the expression of a man when swayed by a gallant fancy.

Then she would suffer; her sleep would be tortured by doubts. In order to surprise him, she would appear suddenly in his studio, without giving him notice of her

coming, put questions that seemed naïve, tested his tenderness while listening to his thoughts, as we test while listening to detect hidden illness in the body. She would weep as soon as she found herself sure that some one would take him from her this time, robbing her of that love to which she clung so passionately because she had staked upon it all her will, her strength of affection, all her hopes and dreams.

Then, when she saw that he came back to her, after these brief diversions, she experienced, as she drew close to him again, took possession of him as of something lost and found, a deep, silent happiness which sometimes, when she passed a church, urged her go in and thank God.

Her preoccupation in ever making herself pleasing to him above all others, and of guarding him against all others, had made her whole life become a combat interrupted by coquetry. She had ceaselessly struggled for him, and before him, with her grace, her beauty and elegance. She wished that wherever he went he should hear her praised for her charm, her taste, her wit, and her toilets. She wished to please others for his sake, and to attract them so that he should be both proud and jealous of her. And every time that she succeeded in arousing his jealousy, after making him suffer a little, she allowed him the triumph of winning her back, which revived his love in exciting his vanity. Then, realizing that it was always possible for a man to meet in society a woman whose physical charm would be greater than her own, being a novelty, she resorted to other means: she flattered and spoiled him. Discreetly but continuously she heaped praises upon him; she soothed him with admiration and enveloped him in flattery, so that he might find all other friendship, all other love, even, a little cold and incomplete, and that if others also loved him he would perceive at last that she alone of them all understood him.

She made the two drawing-rooms in her house, which he entered so often, a place as attractive to the pride of the artist as to the heart of the man, the place in all Paris where he liked best to come, because there all his cravings were satisfied at the same

time.

Not only did she learn to discover all his tastes, in order that, while gratifying them in her own house, she might give him a feeling of well-being that nothing could replace, but she knew how to create new tastes, to arouse appetites of all kinds, material and intellectual, habits of little attentions, of affections, of adoration and flattery! She tried to charm his eye with elegance, his sense of smell with perfumes, and his taste with delicate food.

But when she had planted in the soul and in the senses of a selfish bachelor a multitude of petty, tyrannical needs, when she had become quite certain that no mistress would trouble herself as she did to watch over and maintain them, in order to surround him with all the little pleasures of life, she suddenly feared, as she saw him disgusted with his own home, always complaining of his solitary life, and, being unable to come into her home except under all the restraints imposed by society, going to the club, seeking every means to soften his lonely lot—she feared lest he thought of marriage.

On some days she suffered so much from all these anxieties that she longed for old age, to have an end of this anguish and rest in a cooler and calmer affection.

Years passed, however, without disuniting them. The chain wherewith she had attached him to her was heavy, and she made new links as the old ones wore away. But, always solicitous, she watched over the painter's heart as one guards a child crossing a street full of vehicles, and day by day she lived in expectation of the unknown danger, the dread of which always hung over her.

The Count, without suspicion or jealousy, found this intimacy of his wife with a famous and popular artist a perfectly natural thing. Through continually meeting, the two men, becoming accustomed to each other, finally became excellent friends.

CHAPTER II

TWIN ROSES FROM A SINGLE STEM

When Bertin entered, on Friday evening, the house of his friend, where he was to dine in honor of the return of Antoinette de Guilleroy, he found in the little Louis XV salon only Monsieur de Musadieu, who had just arrived.

He was a clever old man, who perhaps might have become of some importance, and who now could not console himself for not having attained to something worth while.

He had once been a commissioner of the imperial museums, and had found means to get himself reappointed Inspector of Fine Arts under the Republic, which did not prevent him from being, above all else, the friend of princes, of all the princes, princesses, and duchesses of European aristocracy, and the sworn protector of artists of all sorts. He was endowed with an alert mind and quick perceptions, with great facility of speech that enabled him to say agreeably the most ordinary things, with a suppleness of thought that put him at ease in any society, and a subtle diplomatic scent that gave him the power to judge men at first sight; and he strolled from salon to salon, morning and evening, with his enlightened, useless, and gossiping activity.

Apt at everything, as he appeared, he would talk on any subject with an air of convincing competence and familiarity that made him greatly appreciated by fashionable women, whom he served as a sort of traveling bazaar of erudition. As a matter of fact, he knew many things without ever having read any but the most indispensable books; but he stood very well with the five Academies, with all the savants, writers, and learned specialists, to whom he listened with clever discernment. He knew how to forget at once explanations that were too technical or were useless to him, remembered the others very well, and lent to the information thus gleaned an easy, clear, and good-natured rendering that made them as readily comprehensible as the popular presentation of scientific facts. He gave the impression of being a veritable storehouse of ideas, one of those vast places wherein

one never finds rare objects but discovers a multiplicity of cheap productions of all kinds and from all sources, from household utensils to the popular instruments for physical culture or for domestic surgery.

The painters, with whom his official functions brought him in continual contact, made sport of him but feared him. He rendered them some services, however, helped them to sell pictures, brought them in contact with fashionable persons, and enjoyed presenting them, protecting them, launching them. He seemed to devote himself to a mysterious function of fusing the fashionable and the artistic worlds, pluming himself on his intimate acquaintance with these, and of his familiar footing with those, on breakfasting with the Prince of Wales, on his way through Paris, or dining, the same evening, with Paul Adelmant, Olivier Bertin, and Amaury Maldant.

Bertin, who liked him well enough, found him amusing, and said of him: “He is the encyclopedia of Jules Verne, bound in ass's skin!”

The two men shook hands and began to talk of the political situation and the rumors of war, which Musadieu thought alarming, for evident reasons which he explained very well, Germany having every interest in crushing us and in hastening that moment for which M. de Bismarck had been waiting eighteen years; while Olivier Bertin proved by irrefutable argument that these fears were chimerical, it being impossible for Germany to be foolish enough to risk her conquest in an always doubtful venture, or for the Chancelor to be imprudent enough to risk, in the latter years of his life, his achievements and his glory at a single blow.

M. de Musadieu, however, seemed to know something of which he did not wish to speak. Furthermore, he had seen a Minister that morning and had met the Grand Duke Vladimir, returning from Cannes, the evening before.

The artist was unconvinced by this, and with quiet irony expressed doubt of the knowledge of even the best informed. Behind all these rumors was the influence of the Bourse! Bismarck alone might have a settled opinion on the subject.

M. de Guilleroy entered, shook hands warmly, excusing himself in unctuous words for having left them alone.

“And you, my dear Deputy,” asked the painter, “what do you think of these rumors of war?”

M. de Guilleroy launched into a discourse. As a member of the Chamber, he knew more of the subject than anyone else, though he held an opinion differing from that of most of his colleagues. No, he did not believe in the probability of an approaching conflict, unless it should be provoked by French turbulence and by the rodomontades of the self-styled patriots of the League. And he painted Bismarck's portrait in striking colors, a portrait a la Saint-Simon. The man Bismarck was one that no one wished to understand, because one always lends to others his own ways of thinking, and credits them with a readiness to do that which he would do were he placed in their situation. M. de Bismarck was not a false and lying diplomatist, but frank and brutal, always loudly proclaiming the truth and announcing his intentions. “I want peace!” said he. That was true; he wanted peace, nothing but peace, and everything had proved it in a blinding fashion for eighteen years; everything—his arguments, his alliances, that union of peoples banded together against our impetuosity. M. de Guilleroy concluded in a tone of profound conviction: “He is a great man, a very great man, who desires peace, but who has faith only in menaces and violent means as the way to obtain it. In short, gentlemen, a great barbarian.”

“He that wishes the end must take the means,” M. de Musadieu replied. “I will grant you willingly that he adores peace if you will concede to me that he always wishes to make war in order to obtain it. But that is an indisputable and phenomenal truth: In this world war is made only to obtain peace!”

A servant announced: “Madame la Duchesse de Mortemain.”

Between the folding-doors appeared a tall, large woman, who entered with an air of authority.

Guilleroy hastened to meet her, and kissed her hand, saying:

“How do you do, Duchess?”

The other two men saluted her with a certain distinguished familiarity, for the Duchess's manner was both cordial and abrupt.

She was the widow of General the Duc de Mortemain, mother of an only daughter married to the Prince de Salia; daughter of the Marquis de Farandal, of high family and royally rich, and received at her mansion in the Rue de Varenne all the celebrities of the world, who met and complimented one another there. No Highness passed through Paris without dining at her table; no man could attract public attention that she did not immediately wish to know him. She must see him, make him talk to her, form her own judgment of him. This amused her greatly, lent interest to life, and fed the flame of imperious yet kindly curiosity that burned within her.

She had hardly seated herself when the same servant announced:

“Monsieur le Baron and Madame la Baronne de Corbelle.”

They were young; the Baron was bald and fat, the Baroness was slender, elegant, and very dark.

This couple occupied a peculiar situation in the French aristocracy due solely to a scrupulous choice of connections. Belonging to the polite world, but without value or talent, moved in all their actions by an immoderate love of that which is select, correct, and distinguished; by dint of visiting only the most princely houses, of professing their royalist sentiments, pious and correct to a supreme degree; by respecting all that should be respected, by condemning all that should be condemned, by never being mistaken on a point of worldly dogma or hesitating over a detail of etiquette, they had succeeded in passing in the eyes of many for the finest flower of high life. Their opinion formed a sort of code of correct form and their presence in a house gave it a true title of distinction.

The Corbelles were relatives of the Comte de Guilleroy.

“Well,” said the Duchess in astonishment, “and your wife?”

“One instant, one little instant,” pleaded the Count. “There is a surprise: she is just about to come.”

When Madame de Guilleroy, as the bride of a month, had entered society, she was presented to the Duchesse de Mortemain, who loved her immediately, adopted her, and patronized her.

For twenty years this friendship never had diminished, and when the Duchess said, “Ma petite,” one still heard in her voice the tenderness of that sudden and persistent affection. It was at her house that the painter and the Countess had happened to meet.

Musadieu approached the group. “Has the Duchess been to see the exposition of the Intemperates?” he inquired.

“No; what is that?”

“A group of new artists, impressionists in a state of intoxication. Two of them are very fine.”

The great lady murmured, with disdain: “I do not like the jests of those gentlemen.”

Authoritative, brusque, barely tolerating any other opinion than her own, and founding hers solely on the consciousness of her social station, considering, without being able to give a good reason for it, that artists and learned men were merely intelligent mercenaries charged by God to amuse society or to render service to it, she had no other basis for her judgments than the degree of astonishment or of pleasure she experienced at the sight of a thing, the reading of a book, or the recital of a discovery.

Tall, stout, heavy, red, with a loud voice, she passed as having the air of a great lady because nothing embarrassed her; she dared to say anything and patronized the

whole world, including dethroned princes, with her receptions in their honor, and even the Almighty by her generosity to the clergy and her gifts to the churches.

“Does the Duchess know,” Musadieu continued, “that they say the assassin of Marie Lambourg has been arrested?”

Her interest was awakened at once.

“No, tell me about it,” she replied.

He narrated the details. Musadieu was tall and very thin; he wore a white waistcoat and little diamond shirt-studs; he spoke without gestures, with a correct air which allowed him to say the daring things which he took delight in uttering. He was very near-sighted, and appeared, notwithstanding his eye-glass, never to see anyone; and when he sat down his whole frame seemed to accommodate itself to the shape of the chair. His figure seemed to shrink into folds, as if his spinal column were made of rubber; his legs, crossed one over the other, looked like two rolled ribbons, and his long arms, resting on the arms of the chair, allowed to droop his pale hands with interminable fingers. His hair and moustache, artistically dyed, with a few white locks cleverly forgotten, were a subject of frequent jests.

While he was explaining to the Duchess that the jewels of the murdered prostitute had been given as a present by the suspected murderer to another girl of the same stamp, the door of the large drawing-room opened wide once more, and two blond women in white lace, a creamy Mechlin, resembling each other like two sisters of different ages, the one a little too mature, the other a little too young, one a trifle too plump, the other a shade too slender, advanced, clasping each other round the waist and smiling.

The guests exclaimed and applauded. No one, except Olivier Bertin, knew of Annette de Guilleroy's return, and the appearance of the young girl beside her mother, who at a little distance seemed almost as fresh and even more beautiful—for, like a flower in full bloom, she had not ceased to be brilliant, while

the child, hardly budding, was only beginning to be pretty—made both appear charming.

The Duchess, delighted, clapped her hands, exclaiming: “Heavens! How charming and amusing they are, standing beside each other! Look, Monsieur de Musadieu, how much they resemble each other!”

The two were compared, and two opinions were formed. According to Musadieu, the Corbelles, and the Comte de Guilleroy, the Countess and her daughter resembled each other only in coloring, in the hair, and above all in the eyes, which were exactly alike, both showing tiny black points, like minute drops of ink, on the blue iris. But it was their opinion that when the young girl should have become a woman they would no longer resemble each other.

According to the Duchess, on the contrary, and also Olivier Bertin, they were similar in all respects, and only the difference in age made them appear unlike.

“How much she has changed in three years!” said the painter. “I should not have recognized her, and I don't dare to tutoyer the young lady!”

The Countess laughed. “The idea! I should like to hear you say 'you' to Annette!”

The young girl, whose future gay audacity was already apparent under an air of timid playfulness, replied: “It is I who shall not dare to say 'thou' to Monsieur Bertin.”

Her mother smiled.

“Yes, continue the old habit—I will allow you to do so,” she said. “You will soon renew your acquaintance with him.”

But Annette shook her head.

“No, no, it would embarrass me,” she said.

The Duchess embraced her, and examined her with all the interest of a connoisseur.

“Look me in the face, my child,” she said. “Yes, you have exactly the same

expression as your mother; you won't be so bad by-and-by, when you have acquired more polish. And you must grow a little plumper—not very much, but a little. You are very thin."

"Oh, don't say that!" exclaimed the Countess.

"Why not?"

"It is so nice to be slender. I intend to reduce myself at once."

But Madame de Mortemain took offense, forgetting in her anger the presence of a young girl.

"Oh, of course, you are all in favor of bones, because you can dress them better than flesh. For my part, I belong to the generation of fat women! To-day is the day of thin ones. They make me think of the lean kine of Egypt. I cannot understand how men can admire your skeletons. In my time they demanded more!"

She subsided amid the smiles of the company, but added, turning to Annette:

"Look at your mamma, little one; she does very well; she has attained the happy medium—imitate her."

They passed into the dining-room. After they were seated, Musadieu resumed the discussion.

"For my part, I say that men should be thin, because they are formed for exercises that require address and agility, incompatible with corpulency. But the women's case is a little different. Don't you think so, Corbelle?"

Corbelle was perplexed, the Duchess being stout and his own wife more than slender. But the Baroness came to the rescue of her husband, and resolutely declared herself in favor of slimness. The year before that, she declared, she had been obliged to struggle with the beginning of embonpoint, over which she soon triumphed.

"Tell us how you did it," demanded Madame de Guilleroy.

The Baroness explained the method employed by all the fashionable women of the

day. One must never drink while eating; but an hour after the repast a cup of tea may be taken, boiling hot. This method succeeded with everyone. She cited astonishing cases of fat women who in three months had become more slender than the blade of a knife. The Duchess exclaimed in exasperation:

“Good gracious, how stupid to torture oneself like that! You like nothing any more—nothing—not even champagne. Bertin, as an artist, what do you think of this folly?”

“Mon Dieu, Madame, I am a painter and I simply arrange the drapery, so it is all the same to me. If I were a sculptor I might complain.”

“But as a man, which do you prefer?”

“I? Oh, a certain rounded slimness—what my cook calls a nice little corn-fed chicken. It is not fat, but plump and delicate.”

The comparison caused a laugh; but the incredulous Countess looked at her daughter and murmured:

“No, it is very much better to be thin; slender women never grow old.”

This point also was discussed by the company; and all agreed that a very fat person should not grow thin too rapidly.

This observation gave place to a review of women known in society and to new discussions on their grace, their chic and beauty. Musadieu pronounced the blonde Marquise de Lochrist incomparably charming, while Bertin esteemed as a beauty Madame Mandeliere, with her brunette complexion, low brow, her dusky eyes and somewhat large mouth, in which her teeth seemed to sparkle.

He was seated beside the young girl, and said suddenly, turning to her:

“Listen to me, Nanette. Everything that we have just been saying you will hear repeated at least once a week until you are old. In a week you will know all that society thinks about politics, women, plays, and all the rest of it. Only an occasional

change of names will be necessary—names of persons and titles of works. When you have heard us all express and defend our opinions, you will quietly choose your own among those that one must have, and then you need never trouble yourself to think of anything more, never. You will only have to rest in that opinion."

The young girl, without replying, turned upon him her mischievous eyes, wherein sparkled youthful intelligence, restrained, but ready to escape.

But the Duchess and Musadieu, who played with ideas as one tosses a ball, without perceiving that they continually exchanged the same ones, protested in the name of thought and of human activity.

Then Bertin attempted to show how the intelligence of fashionable people, even the brightest of them, is without value, foundation, or weight; how slight is the basis of their beliefs, how feeble and indifferent is their interest in intellectual things, how fickle and questionable are their tastes.

Warmed by one of those spasms of indignation, half real, half assumed, aroused at first by a desire to be eloquent, and urged on by the sudden prompting of a clear judgment, ordinarily obscured by an easy-going nature, he showed how those persons whose sole occupation in life is to pay visits and dine in town find themselves becoming, by an irresistible fatality, light and graceful but utterly trivial beings, vaguely agitated by superficial cares, beliefs, and appetites.

He showed that none of that class has either depth, ardor, or sincerity; that, their intellectual culture being slight and their erudition a simple varnish, they must remain, in short, manikins who produce the effect and make the gesture of the enlightened beings that they are not. He proved that, the frail roots of their instincts having been nourished on conventionalities instead of realities, they love nothing sincerely, that even the luxury of their existence is a satisfaction of vanity and not the gratification of a refined bodily necessity, for usually their table is indifferent, their wines are bad and very dear.

They live, as he said, beside everything, but see nothing and study nothing; they are near science, of which they are ignorant; nature, at which they do not know how to look; outside of true happiness, for they are powerless to enjoy it; outside of the beauty of the world and the beauty of art, of which they chatter without having really discovered it, or even believing in it, for they are ignorant of the intoxication of tasting the joys of life and of intelligence. They are incapable of attaching themselves in anything to that degree that existence is illumined by the happiness of comprehending it.

The Baron de Corbelle thought that it was his duty to come to the defense of society. This he did with inconsistent and irrefutable arguments, which melt before reason as snow before the fire, yet which cannot be disproved—the absurd and triumphant arguments of a country curate who would demonstrate the existence of God. In concluding, he compared fashionable people to race-horses, which, in truth, are good for nothing, but which are the glory of the equine race.

Bertin, irritated by this adversary, preserved a politely disdainful silence. But suddenly the Baron's imbecilities exasperated him, and, interrupting him adroitly, he recounted the life of a man of fashion from his rising to his going to rest, without omitting anything. All the details, cleverly described, made up an irresistibly amusing silhouette. Once could see the fine gentleman dressed by his valet, first expressing a few general ideas to the hairdresser that came to shave him; then, when taking his morning stroll, inquiring of the grooms about the health of the horses; then trotting through the avenues of the Bois, caring only about saluting and being saluted; then breakfasting opposite his wife, who in her turn had been out in her coupe, speaking to her only to enumerate the names of the persons he had met that morning; then passing from drawing-room to drawing-room until evening, refreshing his intelligence by contact with others of his circle, dining with a prince, where the affairs of Europe were discussed, and finishing the evening behind the scenes at the Opera, where his timid pretensions at being a gay dog were innocently

satisfied by the appearance of being surrounded by naughtiness.

The picture was so true, although its satire wounded no one present, that laughter ran around the table.

The Duchess, shaken by the suppressed merriment of fat persons, relieved herself by discreet chuckles.

“Really, you are too funny!” she said at last; “you will make me die of laughter.”

Bertin replied, with some excitement:

“Oh, Madame, in the polite world one does not die of laughter! One hardly laughs, even. We have sufficient amiability, as a matter of good taste, to pretend to be amused and appear to laugh. The grimace is imitated well enough, but the real thing is never done. Go to the theaters of the common people—there you will see laughter. Go among the bourgeoisie, when they are amusing themselves; you will see them laugh to suffocation. Go to the soldiers' quarters, you will see men choking, their eyes full of tears, doubled up on their beds over the jokes of some funny fellow. But in our drawing-rooms we never laugh. I tell you that we simulate everything, even laughter.”

Musadieu interrupted him:

“Permit me to say that you are very severe. It seems to me that you yourself, my dear fellow, do not wholly despise this society at which you rail so bitterly.”

Bertin smiled.

“I? I love it!” he declared.

“But then——”

“I despise myself a little, as a mongrel of doubtful race.”

“All that sort of talk is nothing but a pose,” said the Duchess.

And, as he denied having any intention of posing, she cut short the discussion by declaring that all artists try to make people believe that chalk is cheese.

The conversation then became general, touching upon everything, ordinary and pleasant, friendly and critical, and, as the dinner was drawing toward its end, the Countess suddenly exclaimed, pointing to the full glasses of wine that were ranged before her plate:

“Well, you see that I have drunk nothing, nothing, not a drop! We shall see whether I shall not grow thin!”

The Duchess, furious, tried to make her swallow some mineral water, but in vain; then she exclaimed:

“Oh, the little simpleton! That daughter of hers will turn her head. I beg of you, Guilleroy, prevent your wife from committing this folly.”

The Count, who was explaining to Musadieu the system of a threshing-machine invented in America, had not been listening.

“What folly, Duchess?”

“The folly of wishing to grow thin.”

The Count looked at his wife with an expression of kindly indifference.

“I never have formed the habit of opposing her,” he replied.

The Countess had risen, taking the arm of her neighbor; the Count offered his to the Duchess, and they passed into the large drawing-room, the boudoir at the end being reserved for use in the daytime.

It was a vast and well lighted room. On the four walls the large and beautiful panels of pale blue silk, of antique pattern, framed in white and gold, took on under the light of the lamps and the chandelier a moonlight softness and brightness. In the center of the principal one, the portrait of the Countess by Olivier Bertin seemed to inhabit, to animate the apartment. It had a look of being at home there, mingling with the air of the salon its youthful smile, the grace of its pose, the bright charm of its golden hair. It had become almost a custom, a sort of polite ceremony, like

making the sign of the cross on entering a church, to compliment the model on the work of the painter whenever anyone stood before it.

Musadieu never failed to do this. His opinion as a connoisseur commissioned by the State having the value of that of an official expert, he regarded it as his duty to affirm often, with conviction, the superiority of that painting.

“Indeed,” said he, “that is the most beautiful modern portrait I know. There is prodigious life in it.”

The Comte de Guilleroy, who, through hearing this portrait continually praised, had acquired a rooted conviction that he possessed a masterpiece, approached to join him, and for a minute or two they lavished upon the portrait all the art technicalities of the day in praise of the apparent qualities of the work, and also of those that were suggested.

All eyes were lifted toward the portrait, apparently in a rapture of admiration, and Olivier Bertin, accustomed to these eulogies, to which he paid hardly more attention than to questions about his health when meeting some one in the street, nevertheless adjusted the reflector lamp placed before the portrait in order to illumine it, the servant having carelessly set it a little on one side.

Then they seated themselves, and as the Count approached the Duchess, she said to him:

“I believe that my nephew is coming here for me, and to ask you for a cup of tea.”

Their wishes, for some time, had been mutually understood and agreed, without either side ever having exchanged confidences or even hints.

The Marquis de Farandal, who was the brother of the Duchesse de Mortemain, after almost ruining himself at the gaming table, had died of the effects of a fall from his horse, leaving a widow and a son. This young man, now nearly twenty-eight years of age, was one of the most popular leaders of the cotillion in Europe, for he was sometimes requested to go to Vienna or to London to crown in the waltz some

princely ball. Although possessing very small means, he remained, through his social station, his family, his name, and his almost royal connections, one of the most popular and envied men in Paris.

It was necessary to give a solid foundation to this glory of his youth, and after a rich, a very rich marriage, to replace social triumphs by political success. As soon as the Marquis should become a deputy, he would become also, by that attainment alone, one of the props of the future throne, one of the counselors of the King, one of the leaders of the party.

The Duchess, who was well informed, knew the amount of the enormous fortune of the Comte de Guilleroy, a prudent hoarder of money, who lived in a simple apartment when he was quite able to live like a great lord in one of the handsomest mansions of Paris. She knew about his always successful speculations, his subtle scent as a financier, his share in the most fruitful schemes of the past ten years, and she had cherished the idea of marrying her nephew to the daughter of the Norman deputy, to whom this marriage would give an immense influence in the aristocratic society of the princely circle. Guilleroy, who had made a rich marriage, and had thereby increased a large personal fortune, now nursed other ambitions.

He had faith in the return of the King, and wished, when that event should come, to be so situated as to derive from it the largest personal profit.

As a simple deputy, he did not cut a prominent figure. As a father-in-law of the Marquis of Farandal, whose ancestors had been the faithful and chosen familiars of the royal house of France, he might rise to the first rank.

The friendship of the Duchess for his wife lent to this union an element of intimacy that was very precious; and, for fear some other young girl might appear who would please the Marquis, he had brought about the return of his own daughter in order to hasten events.

Madame de Mortemain, foreseeing and divining his plans, lent him her silent

complicity; and on that very day, although she had not been informed of the sudden return of the young girl, she had made an appointment with her nephew to meet her at the Guilleroys, so that he might gradually become accustomed to visit that house frequently.

For the first time, the Count and the Duchess spoke of their mutual desires in veiled terms; and when they parted, a treaty of alliance had been concluded.

At the other end of the room everyone was laughing at a story M. de Musadieu was telling to the Baroness de Corbelle about the presentation of a negro ambassador to the President of the Republic, when the Marquis de Farandal was announced.

He appeared in the doorway and paused. With a quick and familiar gesture, he placed a monocle on his right eye and left it there, as if to reconnoiter the room he was about to enter, but perhaps to give those that were already there the time to see him and to observe his entrance. Then by an imperceptible movement of cheek and eyebrow, he allowed to drop the bit of glass at the end of a black silk hair, and advanced quickly toward Madame de Guilleroy, whose extended hand he kissed, bowing very low. He saluted his aunt likewise, then shook hands with the rest of the company, going from one to another with easy elegance of manner.

He was a tall fellow, with a red moustache, and was already slightly bald, with the figure of an officer and the gait of an English sportsman. It was evident, at first sight of him, that all his limbs were better exercised than his head, and that he cared only for such occupations as developed strength and physical activity. He had some education, however, for he had learned, and was learning every day, by much mental effort, a great deal that would be useful to him to know later: history, studying dates unweariedly, but mistaking the lesson to be learned from facts and the elementary notions of political economy necessary to a deputy, the A B C of sociology for the use of the ruling classes.

Musadieu esteemed him, saying: “He will be a valuable man.” Bertin appreciated his

skill and his vigor. They went to the same fencing-hall, often hunted together, and met while riding in the avenues of the Bois. Between them, therefore, had been formed a sympathy of similar tastes, that instinctive free-masonry which creates between two men a subject of conversation, as agreeable to one as to the other.

When the Marquis was presented to Annette de Guilleroy, he immediately had a suspicion of his aunt's designs, and after saluting her he ran his eyes over her, with the rapid glance of a connoisseur.

He decided that she was graceful, and above all full of promise, for he had led so many cotillions that he knew young girls well, and could predict almost to a certainty the future of their beauty, as an expert who tastes a wine as yet too new.

He exchanged only a few unimportant words with her, then seated himself near the Baroness de Corbelle, so that he could chat with her in an undertone.

Everyone took leave at an early hour, and when all had gone, when the child was in her bed, the lamps were extinguished, the servants gone to their own quarters, the Comte de Guilleroy, walking across the drawing-room, lighted now by only two candles, detained for a long time the Countess, who was half asleep in an armchair, to tell her of his hopes, to suggest the attitude for themselves to assume, to forecast all combinations, the chances and the precautions to be taken.

It was late when he retired, charmed, however, with this evening, and murmuring, “I believe that that affair is a certainty.”

CHAPTER III

A FLAME REKINDLED

“When will you come, my friend? I have not seen you for three days, and that seems a long time to me. My daughter occupies much of my time, but you know that I can no longer do without you.”

The painter, who was drawing sketches, ever seeking a new subject re-read the Countess's note, then, opening the drawer of a writing-desk, he deposited it on a heap of other letters, which had been accumulating there since the beginning of their love-affair.

Thanks to the opportunities given them by the customs of fashionable society, they had grown used to seeing each other almost every day. Now and then she visited him, and sat for an hour or two in the armchair in which she had posed, while he worked. But, as she had some fear of the criticisms of the servants, she preferred to receive him at her own house, or to meet him elsewhere, for that daily interview, that small change of love.

These meetings would be agreed upon beforehand, and always seemed perfectly natural to M. de Guilleroy.

Twice a week at least the painter dined at the Countess's house, with a few friends; on Monday nights he visited her in her box at the Opera; then they would agree upon a meeting at such or such a house, to which chance led them at the same hour. He knew the evenings that she did not go out, and would call then to have a cup of tea with her, feeling himself very much at home even near the folds of her robe, so tenderly and so surely settled in that ripe affection, so fixed in the habit of finding her somewhere, of passing some time by her side, or exchanging a few words with her and of mingling a few thoughts, that he felt, although the glow of his passion had long since faded, an incessant need of seeing her.

The desire for family life, for a full and animated household, for the family table, for those evenings when one talks without fatigue with old friends, that desire for contact, for familiarity, for human intercourse, which dwells dormant in every human heart, and which every old bachelor carries from door to door to his friends, where he installs something of himself, added a strain of egoism to his sentiments of affection. In that house, where he was loved and spoiled, where he found everything,

he could still rest and nurse his solitude.

For three days he had not seen his friends, who must be very much occupied by the return of the daughter of the house; and he was already feeling bored, and even a little offended because they had not sent for him sooner, but not wishing, as a matter of discretion, to be the first to make an approach.

The Countess's letter aroused him like the stroke of a whip. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. He decided to go immediately to her house, that he might find her before she went out.

The valet appeared, summoned by the sound of Olivier's bell.

“What sort of weather is it, Joseph?”

“Very fine, Monsieur.”

“Warm?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“White waistcoat, blue jacket, gray hat.”

He always dressed with elegance, but although his tailor turned him out in correct styles, the very way in which he wore his clothes, his manner of walking, his comfortable proportions encased in a white waistcoat, his high gray felt hat, tilted a little toward the back of his head, seemed to reveal at once that he was both an artist and a bachelor.

When he reached the Countess's house, he was told that she was dressing for a drive in the Bois. He was a little vexed at this, and waited.

According to his habit, he began to pace to and fro in the drawing-room, going from one seat to another, or from the windows to the wall, in the large drawing-room darkened by the curtains. On the light tables with gilded feet, trifles of various kinds, useless, pretty, and costly, lay scattered about in studied disorder. There were little antique boxes of chased gold, miniature snuff-boxes, ivory statuettes, objects in dull

silver, quite modern, of an exaggerated severity, in which English taste appeared: a diminutive kitchen stove, and upon it a cat drinking from a pan, a cigarette-case simulating a loaf of bread, a coffee-pot to hold matches, and in a casket a complete set of doll's jewelry—necklaces, bracelets, rings, brooches, ear-rings set with diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, a microscopic fantasy that seemed to have been executed by Lilliputian jewelers.

From time to time he touched some object, given by himself on some anniversary; he lifted it, handled it, examining it with dreamy indifference, then put it back in its place.

In one corner some books that were luxuriously bound but seldom opened lay within easy reach on a round table with a single leg for a foundation, which stood before a little curved sofa. The Revue des Deux Mondes lay there also, somewhat worn, with turned-down pages, as if it had been read and re-read many times; other publications lay near it, some of them uncut: the Arts modernes, which is bought only because of its cost, the subscription price being four hundred francs a year; and the Feuille libre, a thin volume between blue covers, in which appear the more recent poets, called “les enerves.”

Between the windows stood the Countess's writing-desk, a coquettish piece of furniture of the last century, on which she wrote replies to those hurried questions handed to her during her receptions. A few books were on that, also, familiar books, index to the heart and mind of a woman: Musset, Manon Lescaut, Werther; and, to show that she was not a stranger to the complicated sensations and mysteries of psychology, Les Fleurs du Mal, Le Rouge et le Noir, La Femme au XVIII Siecle, Adolphe.

Beside the books lay a charming hand-mirror, a masterpiece of the silversmith's art, the glass being turned down upon a square of embroidered velvet, in order to allow one to admire the curious gold and silver workmanship on the back. Bertin took it up

and looked at his own reflection. For some years he had been growing terribly old in appearance, and although he thought that his face showed more originality than when he was younger, the sight of his heavy cheeks and increasing wrinkles saddened him.

A door opened behind him.

“Good morning, Monsieur Bertin,” said Annette.

“Good morning, little one; are you well?”

“Very well; and you?”

“What, are you not saying 'thou' to me, then, after all?”

“No, indeed! It would really embarrass me.”

“Nonsense!”

“Yes, it would. You make me feel timid.”

“And why, pray?”

“Because—because you are neither young enough nor old enough—”

The painter laughed.

“After such a reason as that I will insist no more.”

She blushed suddenly, up to the white brow, where the waves of hair began to ripple, and resumed, with an air of slight confusion:

“Mamma told me to say to you that she will be down immediately, and to ask you whether you will go to the Bois de Boulogne with us.”

“Yes, certainly. You are alone?”

“No; with the Duchesse de Mortemain.”

“Very well; I will go.”

“Then will you allow me to go and put on my hat?”

“Yes, go, my child.”

As Annette left the room the Countess entered, veiled, ready to set forth. She extended her hands cordially.

“We never see you any more. What are you doing?” she inquired.

“I did not wish to trouble you just at this time,” said Bertin.

In the tone with which she spoke the word “Olivier!” she expressed all her reproaches and all her attachment.

“You are the best woman in the world,” he said, touched by the tender intonation of his name.

This little love-quarrel being finished and settled, the Countess resumed her light, society tone.

“We shall pick up the Duchess at her hotel and then make a tour of the Bois. We must show all that sort of thing to Nanette, you know.”

The landau awaited them under the porte-cochere.

Bertin seated himself facing the two ladies, and the carriage departed, the pawing of the horses making a resonant sound against the over-arching roof of the porte-cochere.

Along the grand boulevard descending toward the Madeleine all the gaiety of the springtime seemed to have fallen upon the tide of humanity.

The soft air and the sunshine lent to the men a festive air, to the women a suggestion of love; the bakers' boys deposited their baskets on the benches to run and play with their brethren, the street urchins; the dogs appeared in a great hurry to go somewhere; the canaries hanging in the boxes of the concierges trilled loudly; only the ancient cab-horses kept their usual sedate pace.

“Oh, what a beautiful day! How good it is to live!” murmured the Countess.

The painter contemplated both mother and daughter in the dazzling light. Certainly, they were different, but at the same time so much alike that the latter was veritably a

continuation of the former, made of the same blood, the same flesh, animated by the same life. Their eyes, above all, those blue eyes flecked with tiny black drops, of such a brilliant blue in the daughter, a little faded in the mother, fixed upon him a look so similar that he expected to hear them make the same replies. And he was surprised to discover, as he made them laugh and talk, that before him were two very distinct women, one who had lived and one who was about to live. No, he did not foresee what would become of that child when her young mind, influenced by tastes and instincts that were as yet dormant, should have expanded and developed amid the life of the world. This was a pretty little new person, ready for chances and for love, ignored and ignorant, who was sailing out of port like a vessel, while her mother was returning, having traversed life and having loved!

He was touched at the thought that she had chosen himself, and that she preferred him still, this woman who had remained so pretty, rocked in that landau, in the warm air of springtime.

As he expressed his gratitude to her in a glance, she divined it, and he thought he could feel her thanks in the rustle of her robe.

In his turn he murmured: “Oh, yes, what a beautiful day!”

When they had taken up the Duchess, in the Rue de Varenne, they spun along at a swift pace toward the Invalides, crossed the Seine, and reached the Avenue des Champs-Elysees, going up toward the Arc de triomphe de l'Etoile in the midst of a sea of carriages.

The young girl was seated beside Olivier, riding backward, and she opened upon this stream of equipages wide and wondering eager eyes. Occasionally, when the Duchess and the Countess acknowledged a salutation with a short movement of the head, she would ask “Who is that?” Bertin answered: “The Pontaiglin,” “the Puicelci,” “the Comtesse de Lochrist,” or “the beautiful Madame Mandeliere.”

Now they were following the Avenue of the Bois de Boulogne, amid the noise and

the rattling of wheels. The carriages, a little less crowded than below the Arc de Triomphe, seemed to struggle in an endless race. The cabs, the heavy landaus, the solemn eight-spring vehicles, passed one another over and over again, distanced suddenly by a rapid victoria, drawn by a single trotter, bearing along at a reckless pace, through all that rolling throng, bourgeois and aristocratic, through all societies, all classes, all hierarchies, an indolent young woman, whose bright and striking toilette diffused among the carriages it touched in passing a strange perfume of some unknown flower.

“Who is that lady?” Annette inquired.

“I don't know,” said Bertin, at which reply the Duchess and the Countess exchanged a smile.

The leaves were opening, the familiar nightingales of that Parisian garden were singing already among the tender verdure, and when, as the carriage approached the lake, it joined the long file of other vehicles at a walk, there was an incessant exchange of salutations, smiles, and friendly words, as the wheels touched. The procession seemed now like the gliding of a flotilla in which were seated very well-bred ladies and gentlemen. The Duchess, who was bowing every moment before raised hats or inclined heads, appeared to be passing them in review, calling to mind what she knew, thought, or supposed of these people, as they defiled before her.

“Look, dearest, there is the lovely Madame Mandeliere again—the beauty of the Republic.”

In a light and dashing carriage, the beauty of the Republic allowed to be admired, under an apparent indifference to this indisputable glory, her large dark eyes, her low brow beneath a veil of dusky hair, and her mouth, which was a shade too obstinate in its lines.

“Very beautiful, all the same,” said Bertin.

The Countess did not like to hear him praise other women. She shrugged her shoulders slightly, but said nothing.

But the young girl, in whom the instinct of rivalry suddenly awoke, ventured to say: “I do not find her beautiful at all.”

“What! You do not think her beautiful?” said the painter.

“No; she looks as if she had been dipped in ink.”

The Duchess, delighted, burst into laughter.

“Bravo, little one!” she cried. “For the last six years half the men in Paris have been swooning at the feet of that negress! I believe that they sneer at us. Look at the Comtesse de Lochrist instead.”

Alone, in a landau with a white poodle, the Countess, delicate as a miniature, a blond with brown eyes, whose grace and beauty had served for five or six years as the theme for the admiration of her partisans, bowed to the ladies, with a fixed smile on her lips.

But Nanette exhibited no greater enthusiasm than before.

“Oh,” she said, “she is no longer young!”

Bertin, who usually did not at all agree with the Countess in the daily discussions of these two rivals, felt a sudden irritation at the stupid intolerance of this little simpleton.

“Nonsense!” he said. “Whether one likes her or not, she is charming; and I only hope that you may become as pretty as she.”

“Pooh! pooh!” said the Duchess. “You notice women only after they have passed the thirtieth year. The child is right. You admire only passee beauty.”

“Pardon me!” he exclaimed; “a woman is really beautiful only after maturing, when the expression of her face and eyes has become fully developed!”

He enlarged upon this idea that the first youthful freshness is only the gloss of riper

beauty; he demonstrated that men of the world were wise in paying but little attention to young girls in their first season, and that they were right in proclaiming them beautiful only when they passed into their later period of bloom.

The Countess, flattered, murmured: “He is right; he speaks as an artist. The youthful countenance is very charming, but it is always a trifle commonplace.”

The painter continued to urge his point, indicating at what moment a face that was losing, little by little, the undecided grace of youth, really assumed its definite form, its true character and physiognomy.

At each word the Countess said “Yes,” with a little nod of conviction; and the more he affirmed, with all the heat of a lawyer making a plea, with the animation of the accused pleading his own cause, the more she approved, by glance and gesture, as if they two were allied against some danger, and must defend themselves against some false and menacing opinion. Annette hardly heard them, she was so engrossed in looking about her. Her usually smiling face had become grave, and she said no more, carried away by the pleasure of the rapid driving. The sunlight, the trees, the carriage, this delightful life, so rich and gay—all this was for her!

Every day she might come here, recognized in her turn, saluted and envied; and perhaps the men, in pointing her out to one another, would say that she was beautiful. She noticed all those that appeared to her distinguished among the throng and inquired their names, without thinking of anything beyond the mere sound of the syllables, though sometimes they awoke in her an echo of respect and admiration, when she realized that she had seen them often in the newspapers or heard stories concerning them. She could not become accustomed to this long procession of celebrities; it seemed unreal to her, as if she were a part of some stage spectacle. The cabs filled her with disdain mingled with disgust; they annoyed and irritated her, and suddenly she said:

“I think they should not allow anything but private carriages to come here.”

“Indeed, Mademoiselle!” said Bertin; “and then what becomes of our equality, liberty and fraternity?”

Annette made a moue that signified “Don't talk about that!” and continued:

“They should have a separate drive for cabs—that of Vincennes, for instance.”

“You are behind the times, little one, and evidently do not know that we are swimming in the full tide of democracy. But, if you wish to see this place free from any mingling of the middle class, come in the morning, and then you will find only the fine flower of society.”

He proceeded to describe graphically, as he knew well how to do, the Bois in the morning hours with its gay cavaliers and fair Amazons, that club where everyone knows everyone else by their Christian names, their pet names, their family connections, titles, qualities, and vices, as if they all lived in the same neighborhood or in the same small town.

“Do you come here often at that hour?” Annette inquired.

“Very often; there is no more charming place in Paris.”

“Do you come on horseback in the mornings?”

“Yes.”

“And in the afternoon you pay visits?”

“Yes.”

“Then, when do you work?”

“Oh, I work—sometimes; and besides, you see, I have chosen a special entertainment suited to my tastes. As I paint the portraits of beautiful women, it is necessary that I should see them and follow them everywhere.”

“On foot and on horseback!” murmured Annette, with a perfectly serious face.

He threw her a sidelong glance of appreciation, which seemed to say: “Ah! you are witty, even now! You will do very well.”

A breath of cold air from far away, from the country that was hardly awake as yet, swept over the park, and the whole Bois, coquettish, frivolous, and fashionable, shivered under its chill. For some seconds it caused the tender leaves to tremble on the trees, and garments on shoulders. All the women, with a movement almost simultaneous, drew up over their arms and chests their wraps lying behind them; and the horses began to trot, from one end of the avenue to the other, as if the keen wind had flicked them like a whip.

The Countess's party returned quickly, to the silvery jingle of the harness, under the slanting red rays of the setting sun.

“Shall you go home?” inquired the Countess of Bertin, with whose habits she was familiar.

“No, I am going to the club.”

“Then, shall we set you down there in passing?”

“Thank you, that will be very convenient.”

“And when shall you invite us to breakfast with the Duchess?”

“Name your day.”

This painter in ordinary to the fair Parisians, whom his admirers christened “a Watteau realist” and his detractors a “photographer of gowns and mantles,” often received at breakfast or at dinner the beautiful persons whose feature he had reproduced, as well as the celebrated and the well known, who found very amusing these little entertainments in a bachelor's establishment.

“The day after to-morrow, then. Will the day after to-morrow suit you, my dear Duchess?” asked Madame de Guilleroy.

“Yes, indeed; you are charming! Monsieur Bertin never thinks of me when he has his little parties. It is quite evident that I am no longer young.”

The Countess, accustomed to consider the artist's home almost the same as her own,

replied:

“Only we four, the four of the landau—the Duchess, Annette, you and I, eh, great artist?”

“Only ourselves,” said he, alighting from the carriage, “and I will have prepared for you some crabs a l'alsacienne.”

“Oh, you will awaken a desire for luxury in the little one!”

He bowed to them, standing beside the carriage door, then entered quickly the vestibule of the main entrance to the club, threw his topcoat and cane to a group of footmen, who had risen like soldiers at the passing of an officer; mounted the broad stairway, meeting another brigade of servants in knee-breeches, pushed open a door, feeling himself suddenly as alert as a young man, as he heard at the end of the corridor a continuous clash of foils, the sound of stamping feet, and loud exclamations: “Touche!” “A moi.” “Passe!” “J'en ai!” “Touche!” “A vous!”

In the fencing-hall the swordsmen, dressed in gray linen, with leather vests, their trousers tight around the ankles, a sort of apron falling over the front of the body, one arm in the air, with the hand thrown backward, and in the other hand, enormous in a large fencing-glove, the thin, flexible foil, extended and recovered with the agile swiftness of mechanical jumping-jacks.

Others rested and chatted, still out of breath, red and perspiring, with handkerchief in hand to wipe off faces and necks; others, seated on a square divan that ran along the four sides of the hall, watched the fencing—Liverdy against Landa, and the master of the club, Taillade, against the tall Rocdiane.

Bertin, smiling, quite at home, shook hands with several men.

“I choose you!” cried the Baron de Baverie.

“I am with you, my dear fellow,” said Bertin, passing into the dressing-room to prepare himself.

He had not felt so agile and vigorous for a long time, and, guessing that he should fence well that day, he hurried as impatiently as a schoolboy ready for play. As soon as he stood before his adversary he attacked him with great ardor, and in ten minutes he had touched him eleven times and had so fatigued him that the Baron cried for quarter. Then he fenced with Punisimont, and with his colleague, Amaury Maldant.

The cold douche that followed, freezing his palpitating flesh, reminded him of the baths of his twentieth year, when he used to plunge head first into the Seine from the bridges in the suburbs, in order to amaze the bourgeois passers-by.

“Shall you dine here?” inquired Maldant.

“Yes.”

“We have a table with Liverdy, Rocdiane, and Landa; make haste; it is a quarter past seven.”

The dining-room was full, and there was a continuous hum of men's voices.

There were all the nocturnal vagabonds of Paris, idlers and workers, all those who from seven o'clock in the evening know not what to do and dine at the club, ready to catch at anything or anybody that chance may offer to amuse them.

When the five friends were seated the banker Liverdy, a vigorous and hearty man of forty, said to Bertin:

“You were in fine form this evening.”

“Yes, I could have done surprising things to-day,” Bertin replied.

The others smiled, and the landscape painter, Amaury Maldant, a thin little bald-headed man with a gray beard, said, with a sly expression:

“I, too, always feel the rising of the sap in April; it makes me bring forth a few leaves—half a dozen at most—then it runs into sentiment; there never is any fruit.”

The Marquis de Rocdiane and the Comte Landa sympathized with him. Both were older than he, though even a keen eye could not guess their age; clubmen, horsemen,

swordsmen, whose incessant exercise had given them bodies of steel, they boasted of being younger in every way than the enervated good-for-nothings of the new generation.

Rocdiane, of good family, with the entree to all salons, though suspected of financial intrigues of many kinds (which, according to Bertin, was not surprising, since he had lived so much in the gaming-houses), married, but separated from his wife, who paid him an annuity, a director of Belgian and Portuguese banks, carried boldly upon his energetic, Don Quixote-like face the somewhat tarnished honor of a gentleman, which was occasionally brightened by the blood from a thrust in a duel.

The Comte de Landa, a good-natured colossus, proud of his figure and his shoulders, although married and the father of two children, found it difficult to dine at home three times a week; he remained at the club on the other days, with his friends, after the session in the fencing-hall.

“The club is a family,” he said, “the family of those who as yet have none, of those who never will have one, and of those who are bored by their own.”

The conversation branched off on the subject of women, glided from anecdotes to reminiscences, from reminiscences to boasts, and then to indiscreet confidences.

The Marquis de Rocdiane allowed the names of his inamoratas to be guessed by unmistakable hints—society women whose names he did not utter, so that their identity might be the better surmised. The banker Liverdy indicated his flames by their first names. He would say: “I was at that time the best of friends with the wife of a diplomat. Now, one evening when I was leaving her, I said to her, 'My little Marguerite'”—then he checked himself, amid the smiles of his fellows, adding “Ha! I let something slip. One should form a habit of calling all women Sophie.”

Olivier Bertin, very reserved, was accustomed to declare, when questioned:

“For my part, I content myself with my models.”

They pretended to believe him, and Landa, who was frankly a libertine, grew quite

excited at the idea of all the pretty creatures that walked the streets and all the young persons who posed undraped before the painter at ten francs an hour.

As the bottle became empty, all these gray-beards, as the younger members of the club called them, acquired red faces, and their kindling ardor awakened new desires.

Rocdiane, after the coffee, became still more indiscreet, and forgot the society women to celebrate the charms of simple cocottes.

“Paris!” said he, a glass of kummel in his hand, “The only city where a man never grows old, the only one where, at fifty, if he is sound and well preserved, he will always find a young girl, as pretty as an angel, to love him.”

Landa, finding again his Rocdiane after the liqueurs, applauded him enthusiastically, and mentioned the young girls who still adored him every day.

But Liverdy, more skeptical, and pretending to know exactly what women were worth, murmured: “Yes, they tell you that they adore you!”

“They prove it to me, my dear fellow,” exclaimed Landa.

“Such proofs don't count.”

“They suffice me!”

“But, sacrebleu! they do mean it,” cried Rocdiane. “Do you believe that a pretty little creature of twenty, who has been going the rounds in Paris for five or six years already, where all our moustaches have taught her kisses and spoiled her taste for them, still knows how to distinguish a man of thirty from a man of sixty? Pshaw! what nonsense! She has seen and known too many of them. Now, I'll wager that, down in the bottom of her heart, she actually prefers an old banker to a young stripling. Does she know or reflect upon that? Have men any age here? Oh, my dear fellow, we grow young as we grow gray, and the whiter our hair becomes the more they tell us they love us, the more they show it, and the more they believe it.”

They rose from the table, their blood warmed and lashed by alcohol, ready to make

any conquest; and they began to deliberate how to spend the evening, Bertin mentioning the Cirque, Rocdiane the Hippodrome, Maldant the Eden, and Landa the Folies-Bergere, when a light and distant sound of the tuning of violins reached their ears.

“Ah, there is music at the club to-day, it seems,” said Rocdiane.

“Yes,” Bertin replied. “Shall we listen for ten minutes before going out?”

“Agreed.”

They crossed a salon, a billiard-room, a card-room, and finally reached a sort of box over the gallery of the musicians. Four gentlemen, ensconced in armchairs, were waiting there already, in easy attitudes, while below, among rows of empty seats, a dozen others were chatting, sitting or standing.

The conductor tapped his desk with his bow; the music began.

Olivier adored music as an opium-eater adores opium. It made him dream.

As soon as the sonorous wave from the instruments reached him he felt himself borne away in a sort of nervous intoxication, which thrilled body and mind indescribably. His imagination ran riot, made drunk by melody, and carried him along through sweet dreams and charming reveries. With closed eyes, legs crossed, and folded arms, he listened to the strains, and gave himself up to the visions that passed before his eyes and into his mind.

The orchestra was playing one of Haydn's symphonies, and when Bertin's eyelids drooped over his eyes, he saw again the Bois, the crowd of carriages around him, and facing him in the landau the Countess and her daughter. He heard their voices, followed their words, felt the movement of the carriage, inhaled the air, filled with the odor of young leaves.

Three times, his neighbor, speaking to him, interrupted this vision, which three times he began again, as the rolling of the vessel seems to continue when, after crossing

the ocean, one lies motionless in bed.

Then it extended itself to a long voyage, with the two women always seated before him, sometimes on the railway, again at the table of strange hotels. During the whole execution of the symphony they accompanied him, as if, while driving with him in the sunshine, they had left the image of their two faces imprinted on his vision.

Silence followed; then came a noise of seats being moved and chattering of voices, which dispelled this vapor of a dream, and he perceived, dozing around him, his four friends, relaxed from a listening attitude to the comfortable posture of sleep.

“Well, what shall we do now?” he asked, after he had roused them.

“I should like to sleep here a little longer,” replied Rocdiane frankly.

“And I, too,” said Landa.

Bertin rose.

“Well, I shall go home,” he said. “I am rather tired.”

He felt very animated, on the contrary, but he wished to go, fearing the end of the evening around the baccarat-table of the club, which unfortunately he knew so well.

He went home, therefore, and the following day, after a nervous night, one of those nights that put artists in that condition of cerebral activity called inspiration, he decided not to go out, but to work until evening.

It was an excellent day, one of those days of facile production, when ideas seem to descend into the hands and fix themselves upon the canvas.

With doors shut, far from the world, in the quiet of his own dwelling, closed to everyone, in the friendly peace of his studio, with clear eye, lucid mind, enthusiastic, alert, he tasted that happiness given only to artists, the happiness of bringing forth their work in joy. Nothing existed any more for him in such hours of work except the piece of canvas on which was born an image under the caress of his brush; and he experienced, in these crises of productiveness, a strange and delicious sensation

of abounding life which intoxicated him. When evening came he was exhausted as by healthful fatigue, and went to sleep with agreeable anticipation of his breakfast the next morning.

The table was covered with flowers, the menu was carefully chosen, for Madame de Guilleroy's sake, as she was a refined epicure; and in spite of strong but brief resistance, the painter compelled his guests to drink champagne.

“The little one will get intoxicated,” protested the Countess.

“Dear me! there must be a first time,” replied the indulgent Duchess.

Everyone, as the party returned to the studio, felt stirred by that light gaiety which lifts one as if the feet had wings.

The Duchess and the Countess, having an engagement at a meeting of the Committee of French Mothers, were to take Annette home before going to the meeting; but Bertin offered to take her for a walk, and then to the Boulevard Malesherbes; so both ladies left them.

“Let us take the longest way,” said Annette.

“Would you like to stroll about the Monceau Park?” asked Bertin. “It is a very pretty place; we will look at the babies and nurses.”

“Yes, I should like that.”

They passed through the Avenue Velasquez and entered the gilded and monumental gate that serves as a sign and an entrance to that exquisite jewel of a park, displaying in the heart of Paris its verdant and artificial beauty, surrounded by a belt of princely mansions.

Along the wide walks, which unroll their massive and artistic curves through grassy lawns, throngs of people, sitting on iron chairs, watch the passers; while in the little paths, deep in shade and winding like streams, groups of children crawl in the sand, run about, or jump the rope under the indolent eyes of nurses or the anxious

watchfulness of mothers. Two enormous trees, rounded into domes, like monuments of leaves, the gigantic horse-chestnuts, whose heavy verdure is lighted up by red and white clusters, the showy sycamores, the graceful plane-trees with their trunks designedly polished, set off in a charming perspective the tall, undulating grass.

The weather was warm, the turtle-doves were cooing among the branches, and flying to meet one another from the tree-tops, while the sparrows bathed in the rainbow formed by the sunshine and the spray thrown over the smooth turf. White statues on their pedestals seemed happy in the midst of the green freshness. A little marble boy was drawing from his foot an invisible thorn, as if he had just pricked himself in running after the Diana fleeing toward the little lake, imprisoned by the woods that screened the ruins of a temple.

Other statues, amorous and cold, embraced one another on the borders of the groves, or dreamed there, holding one knee in the hand. A cascade foamed and rolled over the pretty rocks; a tree, truncated like a column, supported an ivy; a tombstone bore an inscription. The stone shafts erected on the lawns hardly suggest better the Acropolis than this elegant little park recalled wild forests. It is the charming and artificial place where city people go to look at flowers grown in hot-houses, and to admire, as one admires the spectacle of life at the theater, that agreeable representation of the beauties of nature given in the heart of Paris.

Olivier Bertin had come almost every day for years to this favorite spot to look at the fair Parisians moving in their appropriate setting. “It is a park made for toilettes,” he would say; “Badly dressed people are horrible in it.” He would rove about there for hours, knowing all the plants and all the habitual visitors.

He now strolled beside Annette along the avenues, his eye distracted by the motley and animated crowd in the gardens.

“Oh, the little love!” exclaimed Annette. She was gazing at a tiny boy with blond curls, who was looking at her with his blue eyes full of surprise and delight.

Then she passed all the children in review, and the pleasure she felt in seeing those living dolls, decked out in their dainty ribbons, made her talkative and communicative.

She walked slowly, chatting to Bertin, giving him her reflections on the children, the nurses, and the mothers. The larger children drew from her little exclamations of joy, while the little pale ones touched her sympathy.

Bertin listened, more amused by her than by the little ones, and, always remembering his work, he murmured, “That is delicious!” thinking that he must make an exquisite picture, with one corner of this park and a bouquet of nurses, mothers and children. Why had he never thought of it before?

“You like those little ones?” he inquired.

“I adore them!”

He felt, from her manner of looking at them, that she longed to take them in her arms, to hug and kiss them—the natural and tender longing of a future mother; and he was surprised at this secret instinct hidden in this little woman.

As she appeared ready to talk, he questioned her about her tastes. She admitted, with pretty naivete, that she had hopes of social success and glory, and that she desired to have fine horses, which she knew almost as well as a horse-dealer, for a part of the farm at Roncieres was devoted to breeding; but she appeared to trouble her head no more about a fiance than one is concerned about an apartment, which is always to be found among the multitude of houses to rent.

They approached the lake, where two swans and six ducks were quietly floating, as clean and calm as porcelain birds, and they passed before a young woman sitting in a chair, with an open book lying on her knees, her eyes gazing upward, her soul having apparently taken flight in a dream.

She was as motionless as a wax figure. Plain, humble, dressed as a modest girl who has no thought of pleasing, she had gone to the land of Dreams, carried away by a

phrase or a word that had bewitched her heart. Undoubtedly she was continuing, according to the impulse of her hopes, the adventure begun in the book.

Bertin paused, surprised. “How beautiful to dream like that!” said he.

They had passed before her; now they turned and passed her again without her perceiving them, so attentively did she follow the distant flight of her thought.

“Tell me, little one,” said the painter to Annette, “would it bore you very much to pose for me once or twice?”

“No, indeed! Quite the contrary.”

“Look well at that young lady who is roaming in the world of fancy.”

“The lady there, in that chair?”

“Yes. Well, you, too, will sit on a chair, you will have an open book on your knee, and you will try to do as she does. Have you ever had daydreams?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Of what?”

He tried to confess her as to her aerial flights, but she would make no reply, evaded his questions, looked at the ducks swimming after some bread thrown to them by a lady, and seemed embarrassed, as if he had touched upon a subject that was a sensitive point with her.

Then, to change the conversation, she talked about her life at Roncieres, spoke of her grandmother, to whom she read aloud a long time every day, and who must now feel very lonely and sad.

As he listened, the painter felt as gay as a bird, gay as he never had been. All that she had said, all the doings, the trifling everyday details of the simple life of a young girl, amused and interested him.

“Let us sit down,” he said.

They seated themselves near the water, and the two swans came floating toward

them, expecting some fresh dainty.

Bertin felt recollections awakening within him—those faded remembrances that are drowned in forgetfulness, and which suddenly return, one knows not why. They surged up rapidly, of all sorts, and so numerous at the same time that it seemed to him a hand was stirring the miry depths of his memory.

He tried to guess the reasons of this rising up of his former life which several times already, though never so insistently as to-day, he had felt and remarked. A cause always existed for these sudden evocations—a natural and simple cause, an odor, perhaps, often a perfume. How many times a woman's draperies had thrown to him in passing, with the evaporating breath of some essence, a host of forgotten events. At the bottom of old perfume-bottles he had often found bits of his former existence; and all wandering odors—of streets, fields, houses, furniture, sweet or unsavory, the warm odors of summer evenings, the cold breath of winter nights, revived within him far-off reminiscences, as if odors kept embalmed within him these dead-and-gone memories, as aromatics preserve mummies.

Was it the damp grass or the chestnut blossoms that thus reanimated the past? No. What, then?

Was it his eye to which he owed this alertness? What had he seen? Nothing. Among the persons he had met, perhaps one might have resembled some one he had known, and, although he had not recognized it, it might have rung in his heart all the chords of the past.

Was it not a sound, rather? Very often he had heard by chance a piano, an unknown voice, even a hand-organ in the street playing some old air, which had suddenly made him feel twenty years younger, filling his breast with tender recollections, long buried.

But this appeal, continued, incessant, intangible, almost irritating! What was there near him to revive thus his extinct emotions?

“It is growing a little cool; we must go home,” he said.

They rose, and resumed their walk.

He looked at the poor people sitting on benches, for whom a chair was too great an expense.

Annette also observed them, and felt disturbed at the thought of their lives, their occupations, surprised that they should come to lounge in this beautiful public garden, when their own appearance was so forlorn.

More than ever was Olivier now dreaming over past years. It seemed to him that a fly was humming in his ear, filling it with a buzzing song of bygone days.

The young girl, observing his dreamy air, asked:

“What is the matter? You seem sad.”

His heart thrilled within him. Who had said that? She or her mother? Not her mother with her present voice but with her voice of long ago, so changed that he had only just recognized it.

“Nothing,” he replied, smiling. “You entertain me very much; you are very charming, and you remind me of your mother.”

How was it that he had not sooner remarked this strange echo of a voice once so familiar, now coming from these fresh lips?

“Go on talking,” he said.

“Of what?”

“Tell me what your teachers have taught you. Did you like them?”

She began again to chat pleasantly. He listened, stirred by a growing anxiety; he watched and waited to detect, among the phrases of this young girl, almost a stranger to his heart, a word, a sound, a laugh, that seemed to have been imprisoned in her throat since her mother's youth. Certain intonations made him tremble with astonishment. Of course there were differences in their tones, the resemblance of

which he had not remarked immediately, and which were in some ways so dissimilar that he had not confounded them at all; but these differences rendered all the more striking this sudden reproduction of the maternal speech. He had noted their facial resemblance with a friendly and curious eye, but now the mystery of this resuscitated voice mingled them in such a way that, turning away his head that he might no longer see the young girl, he asked himself whether it were not the Countess who was speaking thus to him, twelve years earlier.

Then when he had woven this hallucination, he turned toward her again, and found, as their eyes met, a little of the shy hesitation with which the mother's gaze had met his in the first days of their love.

They had already walked three times around the park, passing always before the same persons, the same nurses and children.

Annette was now inspecting the buildings surrounding the garden, inquiring the names of their owners. She wished to know all about them, asked questions with eager curiosity, seeming to fill her feminine mind with these details, and, with interested face, listening with her eyes as much as with her ears.

But when they arrived at the pavilion that separates the two gates of the outer boulevard, Bertin perceived that it was almost four o'clock.

“Oh,” he said, “we must go home.”

They walked slowly toward the Boulevard Malesherbes.

After the painter had left Annette at her home he proceeded toward the Place de la Concorde.

He sang to himself softly, longed to run, and would have been glad to jump over the benches, so agile did he feel. Paris seemed radiant to him, more beautiful than ever. “Decidedly the springtime revarnishes the whole world,” was his reflection.

He was in one of those periods of mental excitement when one understands

everything with more pleasure, when the vision is clearer and more comprehensive, when one feels a keener joy in seeing and feeling, as if an all-powerful hand had brightened all the colors of earth, reanimated all living creatures, and had wound up in us, as in a watch that has stopped, the activity of sensation.

He thought, as his glance took in a thousand amusing things: “And I said that there were moments when I could no longer find subjects to paint!”

He felt such a sensation of freedom and clear-sightedness that all his artistic work seemed commonplace to him, and he conceived a new way of expressing life, truer and more original; and suddenly he was seized with a desire to return home and work, so he retraced his steps and shut himself up in his studio.

But as soon as he was alone, before a newly begun picture, the ardor that had burned in his blood began to cool. He felt tired, sat down on his divan, and again gave himself up to dreaming.

The sort of happy indifference in which he lived, that carelessness of the satisfied man whose almost every need is gratified, was leaving his heart by degrees, as if something were still lacking. He realized that his house was empty and his studio deserted. Then, looking around him, he fancied he saw pass by him the shadow of a woman whose presence was sweet. For a long time he had forgotten the sensation of impatience that a lover feels when awaiting the coming of his mistress, and now he suddenly felt that she was far away, and he longed, with the ardor of a young man, to have her near him.

He was moved in thinking how much they had loved each other; and in that vast apartment he found once more, where she had come so often, innumerable reminders of her, her gestures, words, and kisses. He recalled certain days, certain hours, certain moments, and he felt around him the sweetness of her early caresses.

He got up, unable to sit quietly any longer, and began to walk, thinking again that, in spite of this intimacy that had so filled his life, he still remained alone, always alone.

After the long hours of work, when he looked around him, dazed by the reawakening of the man who returns to life, he saw and felt only walls within reach of his hand and voice. Not having any woman in his home, and not being able to meet the one he loved except with the precautions of a thief, he had been compelled to spend his leisure time in public places where one finds or purchases the means of killing time. He was accustomed to going to the club, to the Cirque and the Hippodrome, on fixed days, to the Opera, and to all sorts of places, so that he should not be compelled to go home, where no doubt he would have lived in perfect happiness had he only had her beside him.

Long before, in certain hours of tender abandon, he had suffered cruelly because he could not take her and keep her with him; then, as his ardor cooled, he had accepted quietly their separation and his own liberty; now he regretted them once more, as if he were again beginning to love her. And this return of tenderness invaded his heart so suddenly, almost without reason, because the weather was fine, and possibly because a little while ago he had recognized the rejuvenated voice of that woman! How slight a thing it takes to move a man's heart, a man who is growing old, with whom remembrance turns into regret!

As in former days, the need of seeing her again came to him, entering body and mind, like a fever; and he began to think after the fashion of a young lover, exalting her in his heart, and feeling himself exalted in his desire for her; then he decided, although he had seen her only that morning, to go and ask for a cup of tea that same evening.

The hours seemed long to him, and as he set out for the Boulevard Malesherbes he was seized with a fear of not finding her, which would force him still to pass the evening alone, as he had passed so many others.

To his query: “Is the Countess at home?” the servant's answer, “Yes, Monsieur,” filled him with joy.

He said, with a radiant air: “It is I again!” as he appeared at the threshold of the smaller drawing-room where the two ladies were working, under the pink shade of a double lamp of English metal, on a high and slender standard.

“What, is it you? How fortunate!” exclaimed the Countess.

“Well, yes. I feel very lonely, so I came.”

“How nice of you!”

“You are expecting someone?”

“No—perhaps—I never know.”

He had seated himself and now looked scornfully at the gray knitting-work that mother and daughter were swiftly making from heavy wool, working at it with long needles.

“What is that?” he asked.

“Coverlets.”

“For the poor?”

“Yes, of course.”

“It is very ugly.”

“It is very warm.”

“Possibly, but it is very ugly, especially in a Louis Fifteenth apartment, where everything else charms the eye. If not for your poor, you really ought to make your charities more elegant, for the sake of your friends.”

“Oh, heavens, these men!” said the Countess, with a shrug of her shoulders. “Why, everyone is making this kind of coverlets just now.”

“I know that; I know it only too well! Once cannot make an evening call now without seeing that frightful gray stuff dragged over the prettiest gowns and the most elegant furniture. Bad taste seems to be the fashion this spring.”

To judge whether he spoke the truth, the Countess spread out her knitting on a silk-covered chair beside her; then she assented indifferently:

“Yes, you are right—it is ugly.”

Then she resumed her work. Upon the two bent heads fell a stream of light; a rosy radiance from the lamp illumined their hair and complexions, extending to their skirts and their moving fingers. They watched their work with that attention, light but continuous, given by women to this labor of the fingers which the eye follows without a thought.

At the four corners of the room four other lamps of Chinese porcelain, borne by ancient columns of gilded wood, shed upon the hangings a soft, even light, modified by lace shades thrown over the globes.

Bertin took a very low seat, a dwarf armchair, in which he could barely seat himself, but which he had always preferred when talking with the Countess because it brought him almost at her feet.

“You took a long walk with Nane this afternoon in the park,” said the Countess.

“Yes. We chatted like old friends. I like your daughter very much. She resembles you very strongly. When she pronounces certain phrases, one would believe that you had left your voice in her mouth.”

“My husband has already said that very often.”

He watched the two women work, bathed in the lamplight, and the thought that had often made him suffer, which had given him suffering that day, even—the recollection of his desolate home, still, silent, and cold, whatever the weather, whatever fire might be lighted in chimney or furnace—saddened him as if he now understood his bachelor's isolation for the first time.

Oh, how deeply he longed to be the husband of this woman, and not her lover! Once he had desired to carry her away, to take her from that man, to steal her altogether.

To-day he was jealous of him, that deceived husband who was installed beside her forever, in the habits of her household and under the sweet influence of her presence. In looking at her he felt his heart full of old things revived, of which he wished to speak. Certainly, he still loved her very much, even a little more to-day than he had for some time; and the desire to tell her of this return of youthful feeling, which would be sure to delight her, made him wish that she would send the young girl to bed as soon as possible.

Obsessed by this strong desire to be alone with her, to sit near her and lay his head on her knee, to take the hands from which would slip the quilt for the poor, the needles, and the ball of wool, which would roll under a sofa at the end of a long, unwound thread, he looked at the time, relapsed into almost complete silence, and thought that it was a great mistake to allow young girls to pass the evening with grown-up persons.

Presently a sound of footsteps was heard in the next room, and a servant appeared at the door announcing:

“Monsieur de Musadieu.”

Olivier Bertin felt a spasm of anger, and when he shook hands with the Inspector of Fine Arts he had a great desire to take him by the shoulders and throw him into the street.

Musadieu was full of news; the ministry was about to fall, and there was a whisper of scandal about the Marquis de Rocdiane. He looked at the young girl, adding: “I will tell you about that a little later.”

The Countess raised her eyes to the clock and saw that it was about to strike ten.

“It is time to go to bed, my child,” she said to her daughter.

Without replying, Annette folded her knitting-work, rolled up her ball of wool, kissed her mother on the cheeks, gave her hand to the two gentlemen, and departed quickly, as if she glided away without disturbing the air as she went.

“Well, what is your scandal?” her mother demanded, as soon as she had gone.

It appeared that rumor said that the Marquis de Rocdiane, amicably separated from his wife, who paid to him an allowance that he considered insufficient, had discovered a sure if singular means to double it. The Marquise, whom he had had watched, had been surprised in flagrante delictu, and was compelled to buy off, with an increased allowance, the legal proceedings instituted by the police commissioner.

The Countess listened with curious gaze, her idle hands holding the interrupted needle-work on her knee.

Bertin, who was still more exasperated by Musadieu's presence since Annette had gone, was incensed at this recital, and declared, with the indignation of one who had known of the scandal but did not wish to speak of it to anyone, that the story was an odious falsehood, one of those shameful lies which people of their world ought neither to listen to nor repeat. He appeared greatly wrought up over the matter, as he stood leaning against the mantelpiece and speaking with the excited manner of a man disposed to make a personal question of the subject under discussion.

Rocdiane was his friend, he said; and, though he might be criticised for frivolity in certain respects, no one could justly accuse him or even suspect him of any really unworthy action. Musadieu, surprised and embarrassed, defended himself, tried to explain and to excuse himself.

“Allow me to say,” he remarked at last, “that I heard this story just before I came here, in the drawing-room of the Duchesse de Mortemain.”

“Who told it to you? A woman, no doubt,” said Bertin.

“No, not at all; it was the Marquis de Farandal.”

The painter, irritated still further, retorted: “That does not astonish me—from him!”

There was a brief silence. The Countess took up her work again. Presently Olivier said in a calmer voice: “I know for a fact that that story is false.”

In reality, he knew nothing whatever about it, having heard it mentioned then for the first time.

Musadieu thought it wise to prepare the way for his retreat, feeling the situation rather dangerous; and he was just beginning to say that he must pay a visit at the Corbelles' that evening when the Comte de Guilleroy appeared, returning from dining in the city.

Bertin sat down again, overcome, and despairing now of getting rid of the husband.

“You haven't heard, have you, of the great scandal that is running all over town this evening?” inquired the Count pleasantly.

As no one answered, he continued: “It seems that Rocdiane surprised his wife in a criminal situation, and has made her pay dearly for her indiscretion.”

Then Bertin, with his melancholy air, with grief in voice and gesture, placing one hand on Guilleroy's shoulder, repeated in a gentle and amicable manner all that he had just said so roughly to Musadieu.

The Count, half convinced, annoyed to have allowed himself to repeat so lightly a doubtful and possibly compromising thing, pleaded his ignorance and his innocence. The gossips said so many false and wicked things!

Suddenly, all agreed upon this statement: the world certainly accused, suspected, and calumniated with deplorable facility! All four appeared to be convinced, during the next five minutes, that all the whispered scandals were lies; that the women did not have the lovers ascribed to them; that the men never committed the sins they were accused of; and, in short, that the outward appearance of things was usually much worse than the real situation.

Bertin, who no longer felt vexed with Musadieu since De Guilleroy's arrival, was now very pleasant to him, led him to talk on his favorite subjects, and opened the sluices of his eloquence. The Count wore the contented air of a man who carries everywhere with him an atmosphere of peace and cordiality.

Two servants noiselessly entered the drawing-room, bearing the tea-table, on which the boiling water steamed in a pretty, shining kettle over the blue flame of an alcohol lamp.

The Countess rose, prepared the hot beverage with the care and precaution we have learned from the Russians, then offered a cup to Musadieu, another to Bertin, following this with plates containing sandwiches of pate de foies gras and little English and Austrian cakes.

The Count approached the portable table, where was also an assortment of syrups, liqueurs, and glasses; he mixed himself a drink, then discreetly disappeared into the next room.

Bertin found himself again facing Musadieu, and felt once more the sudden desire to thrust outside this bore, who, now put on his mettle, talked at great length, told stories, repeated jests, and made some himself. The painter glanced continually at the clock, the hands of which approached midnight. The Countess noticed his glances, understood that he wished to speak to her alone, and, with that ability of a clever woman of the world to change by indescribable shades of tone the whole atmosphere of a drawing-room, to make it understood, without saying anything, whether one is to remain or to go, she diffused about her, by her attitude alone, by the bored expression of her face and eyes, a chill as if she had just opened a window.

Musadieu felt this chilly current freezing his flow of ideas; and, without asking himself the reason, he felt a sudden desire to rise and depart.

Bertin, as a matter of discretion, followed his example. The two men passed through both drawing-rooms together, followed by the Countess, who talked to the painter all the while. She detained him at the threshold of the ante-chamber to make some trifling explanation, while Musadieu, assisted by a footman, put on his topcoat. As Madame de Guilleroy continued to talk to Bertin, the Inspector of Fine Arts, having waited some seconds before the front door, held open by another servant, decided to

depart himself rather than stand there facing the footman any longer.

The door was closed softly behind him, and the Countess said to the artist in a perfectly easy tone:

“Why do you go so soon? It is not yet midnight. Stay a little longer.”

They reentered the smaller drawing-room together and seated themselves.

“My God! how that animal set my teeth on edge!” said Bertin.

“Why, pray?”

“He took you away from me a little.”

“Oh, not very much.”

“Perhaps not, but he irritated me.”

“Are you jealous?”

“It is not being jealous to find a man a bore.”

He had taken his accustomed armchair, and seated close beside her now he smoothed the folds of her robe with his fingers as he told her of the warm breath of tenderness that had passed through his heart that day.

The Countess listened, surprised, charmed, and gently laid her hand on his white locks, which she caressed tenderly, as if to thank him.

“I should like so much to live always near you!” he sighed.

He was thinking of her husband, who had retired to rest, asleep, no doubt, in some neighboring chamber, and he continued:

“It is undoubtedly true that marriage is the only thing that really unites two lives.”

“My poor friend!” she murmured, full of pity for him and also for herself.

He had laid his cheek against the Countess's knees, and he looked up at her with a tenderness touched with sadness, less ardently than a short time before, when he had been separated from her by her daughter, her husband, and Musadieu.

“Heavens! how white your hair has grown!” said the Countess with a smile, running her fingers lightly over Olivier's head. “Your last black hairs have disappeared.”

“Alas! I know it. Everything goes so soon!”

She was concerned lest she had made him sad.

“Oh, but your hair turned gray very early, you know,” she said. “I have always known you with pepper-and-salt locks.”

“Yes, that is true.”

In order to dispel altogether the slight cloud of regret she had evoked, she leaned over him and, taking his head between her hands, kissed him slowly and tenderly on the forehead, with long kisses that seemed as if they never would end. Then they gazed into each other's eyes, seeking therein the reflection of their mutual fondness.

“I should like so much to pass a whole day with you,” Bertin continued. He felt himself tormented obscurely by an inexpressible necessity for close intimacy. He had believed, only a short time ago, that the departure of those who had been present would suffice to realize the desire that had possessed him since morning; and now that he was alone with his mistress, now that he felt on his brow the touch of her hands, and, against his cheek, through the folds of her skirt, the warmth of her body, he felt the same agitation reawakened, the same longing for a love hitherto unknown and ever fleeing him. He now fancied that, away from that house—perhaps in the woods where they would be absolutely alone—this deep yearning of his heart would be calmed and satisfied.

“What a boy you are!” said the Countess. “Why, we see each other almost every day.”

He begged her to devise a plan whereby she might breakfast with him, in some suburb of Paris, as she had already done four or five times.

The Countess was astonished at his caprice, so difficult to realize now that her

daughter had returned. She assured him that she would try to do it as soon as her husband should go to Ronces; but that it would be impossible before the varnishing-day reception, which would take place the following Saturday.

“And until then when shall I see you?” he asked.

“To-morrow evening at the Corbelles'. Come over here Thursday, at three o'clock, if you are free; and I believe that we are to dine together with the Duchess on Friday.”

“Yes, exactly.”

He arose.

“Good-by!”

“Good-by, my friend.”

He remained standing, unable to decide to go, for he had said almost nothing of all that he had come to say, and his mind was still full of unsaid things, his heart still swelled with vague desires which he could not express.

“Good-bye!” he repeated, taking her hands.

“Good-by, my friend!”

“I love you!”

She gave him one of those smiles with which a woman shows a man, in a single instant, all that she has given him.

With a throbbing heart he repeated for the third time, “Good-by!” and departed.

CHAPTER IV

A DOUBLE JEALOUSY

One would have said that all the carriages in Paris were making a pilgrimage to the Palais de l'Industrie that day. As early as nine o'clock in the morning they began to drive, by way of all streets, avenues, and bridges, toward that hall of the fine arts

where all artistic Paris invites all fashionable Paris to be present at the pretended varnishing of three thousand four hundred pictures.

A long procession of visitors pressed through the doors, and, disdaining the exhibition of sculpture, hastened upstairs to the picture gallery. Even while mounting the steps they raised their eyes to the canvases displayed on the walls of the staircase, where they hang the special category of decorative painters who have sent canvases of unusual proportions or works that the committee dare not refuse.

In the square salon a great crowd surged and rustled. The artists, who were in evidence until evening, were easily recognized by their activity, the sonorousness of their voices, and the authority of their gestures. They drew their friends by the sleeve toward the pictures, which they pointed out with exclamations and mimicry of a connoisseur's energy. All types of artists were to be seen—tall men with long hair, wearing hats of mouse-gray or black and of indescribable shapes, large and round like roofs, with their turned-down brims shadowing the wearer's whole chest. Others were short, active, slight or stocky, wearing foulard cravats and round jackets, or the sack-like garment of the singular costume peculiar to this class of painters.

There was the clan of the fashionables, of the curious, and of artists of the boulevard; the clan of Academicians, correct, and decorated with red rosettes, enormous or microscopic, according to individual conception of elegance and good form; the clan of bourgeois painters, assisted by the family surrounding the father like a triumphal chorus.

On the four great walls the canvases admitted to the honor of the square salon dazzled one at the very entrance by their brilliant tones, glittering frames, the crudity of new color, vivified by fresh varnish, blinding under the pitiless light poured from above.

The portrait of the President of the Republic faced the entrance; while on another wall a general bedizened with gold lace, sporting a hat decorated with ostrich

plumes, and wearing red cloth breeches, hung in pleasant proximity to some naked nymphs under a willow-tree, and near by was a vessel in distress almost engulfed by a great wave. A bishop of the early Church excommunicating a barbarian king, an Oriental street full of dead victims of the plague, and the Shade of Dante in Hell, seized and captivated the eye with irresistible fascination.

Other paintings in the immense room were a charge of cavalry; sharpshooters in a wood; cows in a pasture; two noblemen of the eighteenth century fighting a duel on a street corner; a madwoman sitting on a wall; a priest administering the last rites to a dying man; harvesters, rivers, a sunset, a moonlight effect—in short, samples of everything that artists paint, have painted, and will paint until the end of the world.

Olivier, in the midst of a group of celebrated brother painters, members of the Institute and of the jury, exchanged opinions with them. He was oppressed by a certain uneasiness, a dissatisfaction with his own exhibited work, of the success of which he was very doubtful, in spite of the warm congratulations he had received.

Suddenly he sprang forward; the Duchesse de Mortemain had appeared at the main entrance.

“Hasn't the Countess arrived yet?” she inquired of Bertin.

“I have not seen her.”

“And Monsieur de Musadieu?”

“I have not seen him either.”

“He promised me to be here at ten o'clock, at the top of the stairs, to show me around the principal galleries.”

“Will you permit me to take his place, Duchess?”

“No, no. Your friends need you. We shall see each other again very soon, for I shall expect you to lunch with us.”

Musadieu hastened toward them. He had been detained for some minutes in the hall

of sculpture, and excused himself, breathless already.

“This way, Duchess, this way,” said he. “Let us begin at the right.”

They were just disappearing among the throng when the Comtesse de Guilleroy, leaning on her daughter's arm, entered and looked around in search of Olivier Bertin.

He saw them and hastened to meet them. As he greeted the two ladies, he said:

“How charming you look to-day. Really, Nanette has improved very much. She has actually changed in a week.”

He regarded her with the eye of a close observer, adding: “The lines of her face are softer, yet more expressive; her complexion is clearer. She is already something less of a little girl and somewhat more of a Parisian.”

Suddenly he bethought himself of the grand affair of the day.

“Let us begin at the right,” said he, “and we shall soon overtake the Duchess.”

The Countess, well informed on all matters connected with painting, and as preoccupied as if she were herself on exhibition, inquired: “What do they say of the exposition?”

“A fine one,” Bertin replied. “There is a remarkable Bonnat, two excellent things by Carolus Duran, an admirable Puvis de Chavannes, a very new and astonishing Roll, an exquisite Gervex, and many others, by Beraud, Cazin, Duez—in short, a heap of good things.”

“And you?” said the Countess.

“Oh, they compliment me, but I am not satisfied.”

“You never are satisfied.”

“Yes, sometimes. But to-day I really feel that I am right.”

“Why?”

“I do not know.”

“Let us go to see it.”

When they arrived before Bertin's picture—two little peasant-girls taking a bath in a brook—they found a group admiring it. The Countess was delighted, and whispered: “It is simply a delicious bit—a jewel! You never have done anything better.”

Bertin pressed close to her, loving her and thanking her for every word that calmed his suffering and healed his aching heart. Through his mind ran arguments to convince him that she was right, that she must judge accurately with the intelligent observation of an experienced Parisian. He forgot, so desirous was he to reassure himself, that for at least twelve years he had justly reproached her for too much admiring the dainty trifles, the elegant nothings, the sentimentalities and nameless trivialities of the passing fancy of the day, and never art, art alone, art detached from the popular ideas, tendencies, and prejudices.

“Let us go on,” said he, drawing them away from his picture. He led them for a long time from gallery to gallery, showing them notable canvases and explaining their subjects, happy to be with them.

“What time is it?” the Countess asked suddenly.

“Half after twelve.”

“Oh, let us hasten to luncheon then. The Duchess must be waiting for us at Ledoyen's, where she charged me to bring you, in case we should not meet her in the galleries.”

The restaurant, in the midst of a little island of trees and shrubs, seemed like an overflowing hive. A confused hum of voices, calls, the rattling of plates and glasses came from the open windows and large doors. The tables, set close together and filled with people eating, extended in long rows right and left of a narrow passage, up and down which ran the distracted waiters, holding along their arms dishes filled with meats, fish, or fruit.

Under the circular gallery there was such a throng of men and women as to suggest a

living pate. Everyone there laughed, called out, drank and ate, enlivened by the wines and inundated by one of those waves of joy that sweep over Paris, on certain days, with the sunshine.

An attendant showed the Countess, Annette, and Bertin upstairs into a reserved room, where the Duchess awaited them. As they entered, the painter observed, beside his aunt, the Marquis de Farandal, attentive and smiling, and extending his hand to receive the parasols and wraps of the Countess and her daughter. He felt again so much displeasure that he suddenly desired to say rude and irritating things.

The Duchess explained the meeting of her nephew and the departure of Musadieu, who had been carried off by the Minister of the Fine Arts, and Bertin, at the thought that this insipidly good-looking Marquis might marry Annette, that he had come there only to see her, and that he regarded her already as destined to share his bed, unnerved and revolted him, as if some one had ignored his own rights—sacred and mysterious rights.

As soon as they were at table, the Marquis, who sat beside the young girl, occupied himself in talking to her with the devoted air of a man authorized to pay his addresses.

He assumed a curious manner, which seemed to the painter bold and searching; his smiles were satisfied and almost tender, his gallantry was familiar and officious. In manner and word appeared already something of decision, as if he were about to announce that he had won the prize.

The Duchess and the Countess seemed to protect and approve this attitude of a pretender, and exchanged glances of complicity.

As soon as the luncheon was finished the party returned to the Exposition. There was such a dense crowd in the galleries, it seemed impossible to penetrate it. An odor of perspiring humanity, a stale smell of old gowns and coats, made an atmosphere at once heavy and sickening. No one looked at the pictures any more,

but at faces and toilets, seeking out well-known persons; and at times came a great jostling of the crowd as it was forced to give way before the high double ladder of the varnishers, who cried: “Make way, Messieurs! Make way, Mesdames!”

At the end of ten minutes, the Countess and Olivier found themselves separated from the others. He wished to find them immediately, but, leaning upon him, the Countess said: “Are we not very well off as it is? Let them go, since it is quite natural that we should lose sight of them; we will meet them again in the buffet at four o'clock.”

“That is true,” he replied.

But he was absorbed by the idea that the Marquis was accompanying Annette and continuing his attempts to please her by his fatuous and affected gallantry.

“You love me always, then?” murmured the Countess.

“Yes, certainly,” he replied, with a preoccupied air, trying to catch a glimpse of the Marquis's gray hat over the heads of the crowd.

Feeling that he was abstracted, and wishing to lead him back to her own train of thought, the Countess continued:

“If you only knew how I adore your picture of this year! It is certainly your chef-d'oeuvre.”

He smiled, suddenly, forgetting the young people in remembering his anxiety of the morning.

“Do you really think so?” he asked.

“Yes, I prefer it above all others.”

With artful wheedling, she crowned him anew, having known well for a long time that nothing has a stronger effect on an artist than tender and continuous flattery. Captivated, reanimated, cheered by her sweet words, he began again to chat gaily, seeing and hearing only her in that tumultuous throng.

By way of expressing his thanks, he murmured in her ear: “I have a mad desire to embrace you!”

A warm wave of emotion swept over her, and, raising her shining eyes to his, she repeated her question: “You love me always, then?”

He replied, with the intonation she wished to hear, and which she had not heard before:

“Yes, I love you, my dear Any.”

“Come often to see me in the evenings,” she said. “Now that I have my daughter I shall not go out very much.”

Since she had recognized in him this unexpected reawakening of tenderness, her heart was stirred with great happiness. In view of Olivier's silvery hair, and the calming touch of time, she had not suspected that he was fascinated by another woman, but she was terribly afraid that, from pure dread of loneliness, he might marry. This fear, which was of long standing, increased constantly, and set her wits to contriving plans whereby she might have him near her as much as possible, and to see that he should not pass long evenings alone in the chill silence of his empty rooms. Not being always able to hold and keep him, she would suggest amusements for him, sent him to the theater, forced him to go into society, being better pleased to know that he was mingling with many other women than alone in his gloomy house.

She resumed, answering his secret thought: “Ah, if I could only have you always with me, how I should spoil you! Promise me to come often, since I hardly go out at all now.”

“I promise it.”

At that moment a voice murmured “Mamma!” in her ear.

The Countess started and turned. Annette, the Duchess, and the Marquis had just rejoined them.

“It is four o'clock,” said the Duchess. “I am very tired and I wish to go now.”

“I will go, too; I have had enough of it,” said the Countess.

They reached the interior stairway which divides the galleries where the drawings and water-colors are hung, overlooking the immense garden inclosed in glass, where the works of sculpture are exhibited.

From the platform of this stairway they could see from one end to the other of this great conservatory, filled with statues set up along the pathway around large green shrubs, and below was the crowd which covered the paths like a moving black wave. The marbles rose from this mass of dark hats and shoulders, piercing it in a thousand places, and seeming almost luminous in their dazzling whiteness.

As Bertin took leave of the ladies at the door of exit, Madame de Guilleroy whispered:

“Then—will you come this evening?”

“Yes, certainly.”

Bertin reentered the Exposition, to talk with the artists over the impressions of the day.

Painters and sculptors stood talking in groups around the statues and in front of the buffet, upholding or attacking the same ideas that were discussed every year, using the same arguments over works almost exactly similar. Olivier, who usually took a lively share in these disputes, being quick in repartee and clever in disconcerting attacks, besides having a reputation as an ingenious theorist of which he was proud, tried to urge himself to take an active part in the debates, but the things he said interested him no more than those he heard, and he longed to go away, to listen no more, to understand no more, knowing beforehand as he did all that anyone could say on those ancient questions of art, of which he knew all sides.

He loved these things, however, and had loved them until now in an almost

exclusive way; but to-day he was distracted by one of those slight but persistent preoccupations, one of those petty anxieties which are so small we ought not to allow ourselves to be troubled by them, but which, in spite of all we do or say, prick through our thoughts like an invisible thorn buried in the flesh.

He had even forgotten his anxiety over his little peasant bathers in the remembrance of the displeasing idea of the Marquis approaching Annette. What did it matter to him, after all? Had he any right? Why should he wish to prevent this precious marriage, already arranged, and suitable from every point of view? But no reasoning could efface that impression of uneasiness and discontent which had seized him when he had beheld Farandal talking and smiling like an accepted suitor, caressing with his glances the fair face of the young girl.

When he entered the Countess's drawing-room that evening, and found her alone with her daughter, continuing by the lamplight their knitting for the poor, he had great difficulty in preventing himself from saying sneering things about the Marquis, and from revealing to Annette his real banality, veiled by a mask of elegance and good form.

For a long time, during these after-dinner evening visits, he had often allowed himself to lapse into occasional silence that was slightly somnolent, and was accustomed to fall into the easy attitudes of an old friend who does not stand on ceremony. But now he seemed suddenly to rouse himself and to show the alertness of men who do their best to be agreeable, who take thought as to what they wish to say, and who, before certain persons, seek for the best phrases in which to express their ideas and render them attractive. No longer did he allow the conversation to lag, but did his best to keep it bright and interesting; and when he had made the Countess and her daughter laugh gaily, when he felt that he had touched their emotions, or when they ceased to work in order to listen to him, he felt a thrill of pleasure, an assurance of success, which rewarded him for his efforts.

He came now every time that he knew they were alone, and never, perhaps, had he passed such delightful evenings.

Madame de Guilleroy, whose continual fears were soothed by this assiduity, made fresh efforts to attract him and to keep him near her. She refused invitations to dinners in the city, she did not go to balls, nor to the theaters, in order to have the joy of throwing into the telegraph-box, on going out at three o'clock, a little blue despatch which said: “Come to-night.” At first, wishing to give him earlier the tete-a-tete that he desired, she had sent her daughter to bed as soon as it was ten o'clock. Then after one occasion when he had appeared surprised at this and had begged laughingly that Annette should not be treated any longer like a naughty little girl, she had allowed her daughter a quarter of an hour's grace, then half an hour, and finally a whole hour. Bertin never remained long after the young girl had retired; it was as if half the charm that held him there had departed with her. He would soon take the little low seat that he preferred beside the Countess and lay his cheek against her knee with a caressing movement. She would give him one of her hands, which he clasped in his, and the fever of his spirit would suddenly be abated; he ceased to talk, and appeared to find repose in tender silence from the effort he had made.

Little by little the Countess, with the keenness of feminine instinct, comprehended that Annette attracted him almost as much as she herself. This did not anger her; she was glad that between them he could find something of that domestic happiness which he lacked; and she imprisoned him between them, as it were, playing the part of tender mother in such a way that he might almost believe himself the young girl's father; and a new bond of tenderness was added to that which had always held him to this household.

Her personal vanity, always alert, but disturbed since she had felt in several ways, like almost invisible pin-pricks, the innumerable attacks of advancing age, took on a

new allurement. In order to become as slender as Annette, she continued to drink nothing, and the real slimness of her figure gave her the appearance of a young girl. When her back was turned one could hardly distinguish her from Annette; but her face showed the effect of this regime. The plump flesh began to be wrinkled and took on a yellowish tint which rendered more dazzling by contrast the superb freshness of the young girl's complexion. Then the Countess began to make up her face with theatrical art, and, though in broad daylight she produced an effect that was slightly artificial, in the evening her complexion had that charmingly soft tint obtained by women who know how to make up well.

The realization of her fading beauty, and the employment of artificial aid to restore it, somewhat changed her habits. As much as possible, she avoided comparison with her daughter in the full light of day, but rather sought it by lamplight, which, if anything, showed herself to greater advantage. When she was fatigued, pale, and felt that she looked older than usual, she had convenient headaches by reason of which she excused herself from going to balls and theaters; but on days when she knew she looked well she triumphed again and played the elder sister with the grave modesty of a little mother. In order always to wear gowns like those of her daughter, she made Annette wear toilettes suitable for a fully-grown young woman, a trifle too old for her; and Annette who showed more and more plainly her joyous and laughing disposition, wore them with sparkling vivacity that rendered her still more attractive. She lent herself with all her heart to the coquettish arts of her mother, acting with her, as if by instinct, graceful little domestic scenes; she knew when to embrace her at the effective moment, how to clasp her tenderly round the waist, and to show by a movement, a caress, or some ingenious pose, how pretty both were and how much they resembled each other.

From seeing the two so much together, and from continually comparing them, Olivier Bertin sometimes actually confused them in his own mind. Sometimes, when Annette spoke, and he happened to be looking elsewhere, he was compelled to ask:

“Which of you said that?” He often amused himself by playing this game of confusion when all three were alone in the drawing-room with the Louis XV tapestries. He would close his eyes and beg them to ask him the same question, the one after the other, and then change the order of the interrogations, so that he might recognize their voices. They did this with so much cleverness in imitating each other's intonations, in saying the same phrases with the same accents, that often he could not tell which spoke. In fact, they had come to speak so much alike that the servants answered “Yes, Madame” to the daughter and “Yes, Mademoiselle” to the mother.

From imitating each other's voices and movements for amusement, they acquired such a similarity of gait and gesture that Monsieur de Guilleroy himself, when he saw one or the other pass through the shadowy end of the drawing-room, confounded them for an instant and asked: “Is that you, Annette, or is it your mamma?”

From this resemblance, natural and assumed, was engendered in the mind and heart of the painter a strange impression of a double entity, old and young, wise yet ignorant, two bodies made, the one after the other, with the same flesh; in fact, the same woman continued, but rejuvenated, having become once more what she was formerly. Thus he lived near them, shared between them, uneasy, troubled, feeling for the mother his old ardor awakened, and for the daughter an indefinable tenderness.

PART II

CHAPTER I

A WILLING ENVOY

“Paris, July 20, 11 P. M.

“MY FRIEND: My mother has just died at Roncieres. We shall leave here at midnight. Do not come, for we have told no one. But pity me and think of me. YOUR ANY.”

“July 21, 12 M.

“MY POOR FRIEND: I should have gone, notwithstanding what you wrote, if I had not become used to regarding all your wishes as commands. I have thought of you with poignant grief ever since last night. I think of that silent journey you made, sitting opposite your daughter and your husband, in that dimly-lighted carriage, which bore you toward your dead. I could see all three of you under the oil lamp, you weeping and Annette sobbing. I saw your arrival at the station, the entrance of the castle in the midst of a group of servants, your rush up the stairs toward that room, toward that bed where she lies, your first look at her, and your kiss on her thin, motionless face. And I thought of your heart, your poor heart—that poor heart, of which half belongs to me and which is breaking, which suffers so much, which stifles you, making me suffer also at this moment.

“With profound pity, I kiss your eyes filled with tears.

“OLIVIER.”

“Roncieres, July 24.

“Your letter would have done me good, my friend, if anything could do me good in the horrible situation into which I have fallen. We buried her yesterday, and since her poor lifeless body has gone out of this house it seems to me that I am alone in the world. We love our mothers almost without knowing or feeling it, for such love is as natural as it is to live, and we do not realize how deep-rooted is that love until the moment of final separation. No other affection is comparable to that, for all others come by chance, while this begins at birth; all the others are brought to us later by the accidents of life, while this has lived in our very blood since our first day

on earth. And then, and there, we have lost not only a mother but our childhood itself, which half disappears, for our little life of girlhood belonged to her as much as to ourselves. She alone knew it as we knew it; she knew about innumerable things, remote, insignificant and dear, which are and which were the first sweet emotions of our heart. To her alone I could still say: 'Do you remember, mother, the day when—? Do you remember, mother, the china doll that grandmother gave me?' Both of us murmured to each other a long, sweet chapter of trifling childish memories, which no one on earth now knows of but me. So it is a part of myself that is dead—the older, the better. I have lost the poor heart wherein the little girl I was once still lived. Now no one knows her any more; no one remembers the little Anne, her short skirts, her laughter and her faces.

“And a day will come—and perhaps it is not far away—when in my turn I too shall go, leaving my dear Annette alone in the world, as mamma has left me to-day. How sad all this is, how hard, and cruel! Yet one never thinks about it; we never look about us to see death take someone every instant, as it will soon take us. If we should look at it, if we should think of it, if we were not distracted, rejoiced, or blinded by all that passes before us, we could no longer live, for the sight of this endless massacre would drive us mad.

“I am so crushed, so despairing, that I have no longer strength to do anything. Day and night I think of my poor mamma, nailed in that box, buried beneath that earth, in that field, under the rain, whose old face, which I used to kiss with so much happiness, is now only a mass of frightful decay! Oh, what horror!

“When I lost papa, I was just married, and I did not feel all these things as I do to-day. Yes, pity me, think of me, write to me. I need you so much just now.

“ANNE.”

“Paris, July 25.

“MY POOR FRIEND: Your grief gives me horrible pain, and life no longer seems

rosy to me. Since your departure I am lost, abandoned, without ties or refuge. Everything fatigues me, bores me and irritates me. I am ceaselessly thinking of you and Annette; I feel that you are both far, far away when I need you near me so much.

“It is extraordinary how far away from me you seem to be, and how I miss you. Never, even in my younger days, have you been my all, as you are at this moment. I have foreseen for some time that I should reach this crisis, which must be a sun-stroke in Indian summer. What I feel is so very strange that I wish to tell you about it. Just fancy that since your absence I cannot take walks any more! Formerly, and even during the last few months, I liked very much to set out alone and stroll along the street, amusing myself by looking at people and things, and enjoying the mere sight of everything and the exercise of walking. I used to walk along without knowing where I was going, simply to walk, to breathe, to dream. Now, I can no longer do this. As soon as I reach the street I am oppressed by anguish, like the fear of a blind man that has lost his dog. I become uneasy, exactly like a traveler that has lost his way in the wood, and I am compelled to return home. Paris seems empty, frightful, alarming. I ask myself: 'Where am I going?' I answer myself: 'Nowhere, since I am still walking.' Well, I cannot, for I can no longer walk without some aim. The bare thought of walking straight before me wearies and bores me inexpressibly. Then I drag my melancholy to the club.

“And do you know why? Only because you are no longer here. I am certain of this. When I know that you are in Paris, my walks are no longer useless, for it is possible that I may meet you in the first street I turn into. I can go anywhere because you may go anywhere. If I do not see you, I may at least find Annette, who is an emanation of yourself. You and she fill the streets full of hope for me—the hope of recognizing you, whether you approach me from a distance, or whether I divine your identity in following you. And then the city becomes charming to me, and the women whose figures resemble yours stir my heart with all the liveliness of the streets, hold my attention, occupy my eyes, and give me a sort of hunger to see you.

“You will consider me very selfish, my poor friend, to speak to you in this way of the solitude of an old cooing pigeon when you are shedding such bitter tears. Pardon me! I am so used to being spoiled by you that I cry 'Help! Help!' when I have you no longer.

“I kiss your feet so that you may have pity on me.

“OLIVIER.”

“Roncieres, July 30.

“MY FRIEND: Thanks for your letter. I need so much to know that you love me! I have just passed some frightful days. Indeed, I believed that grief would kill me in my turn.

“It was like a block of suffering in my breast, growing larger and larger, stifling me, strangling me. The physician that was called to treat me for the nervous crisis I was enduring, which recurred four or five times a day, injected morphine, which made me almost wild, and the great heat we have had aggravated my condition and threw me into a state of over-excitement that was almost delirium. I am a little more calm since the great storm of Friday. I must tell you that since the day of the funeral I could weep no more, but during the storm, the approach of which upset me, I suddenly felt the tears beginning to flow from my eyes, slow, small, burning. Oh, those first tears, how they hurt me! They seemed to tear me, as if they had claws, and my throat was so choked that I could hardly breathe. Then the tears came faster, larger, cooler. They ran from my eyes as from a spring, and came so fast that my handkerchief was saturated and I had to take another. The great block of grief seemed to soften and to flow away through my eyes.

“From that moment I have been weeping from morning till night, and that is saving me. One would really end by going mad or dying, if one could not weep. I am all alone, too. My husband is making some little trips around the country, and I insisted that he should take Annette with him, to distract and console her a little. They go in

the carriage or on horseback as far as eight or ten leagues from Roncieres, and she returns to me rosy with youth, in spite of her sadness, her eyes shining with life, animated by the country air and the excursion she has had. How beautiful it is to be at that age! I think that we shall remain here a fortnight or three weeks longer; then, although it will be August, we shall return to Paris for the reason you know.

“I send to you all that remains to me of my heart.

“ANY.”

“Paris, August 4th.

“I can bear this no longer, my dear friend; you must come back, for something is certainly going to happen to me. I ask myself whether I am not already ill, so great a dislike have I for everything I used to take pleasure in doing, or did with indifferent resignation. For one thing, it is so warm in Paris that every night means a Turkish bath of eight or nine hours. I get up overcome by the fatigue of this sleep in a hot bath, and for an hour or two I walk about before a white canvas, with the intention to draw something. But mind, eye, and hand are all empty. I am no longer a painter! This futile effort to work is exasperating. I summon my models; I place them, and they give me poses, movements, and expressions that I have painted to satiety. I make them dress again and let them go. Indeed, I can no longer see anything new, and I suffer from this as if I were blind. What is it? Is it fatigue of the eye or of the brain, exhaustion of the artistic faculty or of the optic nerve? Who knows? It seems to me that I have ceased to discover anything in the unexplored corner that I have been permitted to visit. I no longer perceive anything but that which all the world knows; I do the things that all poor painters have done; I have only one subject now, and only the observation of a vulgar pedant. Once upon a time, and not so very long ago, either, the number of new subjects seemed to me unlimited, and in order to express them I had such a variety of means the difficulty of making a choice made me hesitate. But now, alas! Suddenly the world of half-seen subjects has become

depopulated, my study has become powerless and useless. The people that pass have no more sense for me. I no longer find in every human being the character and savor which once I liked so much to discern and reveal. I believe, however, that I could make a very pretty portrait of your daughter. Is it because she resembles you so much that I confound you both in my mind? Yes, perhaps.

“Well, then, after forcing myself to sketch a man or a woman who does not resemble any of the familiar models, I decide to go and breakfast somewhere, for I no longer have the courage to sit down alone in my own dining-room. The Boulevard Malesherbes seems like a forest path imprisoned in a dead city. All the houses smell empty. On the street the sprinklers throw showers of white rain, splashing the wooden pavement whence rises the vapor of damp tar and stable refuse; and from one end to the other of the long descent from the Parc Monceau to Saint Augustin, one sees five or six black forms, unimportant passers, tradesmen or domestics. The shade of the plane-trees spreads over the burning sidewalks, making a curious spot, looking almost like liquid, as if water spilled there were drying. The stillness of the leaves on the branches, and of their gray silhouettes on the asphalt, expresses the fatigue of the roasted city, slumbering and perspiring like a workman asleep on a bench in the sun. Yes, she perspires, the beggar, and she smells frightfully through her sewer mouths, the vent-holes of sinks and kitchens, the streams through which the filth of her streets is running. Then I think of those summer mornings in your orchard full of little wild-flowers that flavor the air with a suggestion of honey. Then I enter, sickened already, the restaurant where bald, fat, tired-looking men are eating, with half-opened waistcoats and moist, shining foreheads. The food shows the effect of heat—the melon growing soft under the ice, the soft bread, the flabby filet, the warmed-over vegetables, the purulent cheese, the fruits ripened on the premises. I go out, nauseated, and go home to try to sleep a little until the hour for dinner, which I take at the club.

“There I always find Adelmans, Maldant, Rocdiane, Landa, and many others, who

bore and weary me as much as hand-organs. Each one has his own little tune, or tunes, which I have heard for fifteen years, and they play them all together every evening in that club, which is apparently a place where one goes to be entertained. Someone should change my own generation for my benefit, for my eyes, my ears, and my mind have had enough of it. They still make conquests, however, they boast of them and congratulate one another on them!

“After yawning as many times as there are minutes between eight o'clock and midnight, I go home and go to bed, and while I undress I think that the same thing will begin over again the next day.

“Yes, my dear friend, I am at the age when a bachelor's life becomes intolerable, because there is nothing new for me under the sun. An unmarried man should be young, curious, eager. When one is no longer all that, it becomes dangerous to remain free. Heavens! how I loved my liberty, long ago, before I loved you more! How burdensome it is to me to-day! For an old bachelor like me, liberty is an empty thing, empty everywhere; it is the path to death, with nothing in himself to prevent him from seeing the end; it is the ceaseless query: 'What shall I do? Whom can I go to see, so that I shall not be alone?' And I go from one friend to another, from one handshake to the next, begging for a little friendship. I gather up my crumbs, but they do not make a loaf. You, I have You, my friend, but you do not belong to me. Perhaps it is because of you that I suffer this anguish, for it is the desire for contact with you, for your presence, for the same roof over our heads, for the same walls inclosing our lives, the same interests binding our hearts together, the need of that community of hopes, griefs, pleasures, joys, sadness, and also of material things, that fills me with so much yearning. You do belong to me—that is to say, I steal a little of you from time to time. But I long to breathe forever the same air that you breathe, to share everything with you, to possess nothing that does not belong to both of us, to feel that all which makes up my own life belongs to you as much as to me—the glass from which I drink, the chair on which I sit, the bread I eat and the

fire that warms me.

“Adieu! Return soon. I suffer too much when you are far away.

“OLIVIER.”

“Roncieres, August 8th.

“MY FRIEND: I am ill, and so fatigued that you would not recognize me at all. I believe that I have wept too much. I must rest a little before I return, for I do not wish you to see me as I am. My husband sets out for Paris the day after to-morrow, and will give you news of us. He expects to take you to dinner somewhere, and charges me to ask you to wait for him at your house about seven o'clock.

“As for me, as soon as I feel a little better, as soon as I have no more this corpse-like face which frightens me, I will return to be near you. In all the world, I have only Annette and you, and I wish to offer to each of you all that I can give without robbing the other.

“I hold out my eyes, which have wept so much, so that you may kiss them.

“ANY.”

When he received this letter announcing the still delayed return, Olivier was seized with an immoderate desire to take a carriage for the railway station to catch a train for Roncieres; then, thinking that M. de Guilleroy must return the next day, he resigned himself, and even began to wish for the arrival of the husband with almost as much impatience as if it were that of the wife herself.

Never had he liked Guilleroy as during those twenty-four hours of waiting. When he saw him enter, he rushed toward him, with hands extended, exclaiming:

“Ah, dear friend! how happy I am to see you!”

The other also seemed very glad, delighted above all things to return to Paris, for life was not gay in Normandy during the three weeks he had passed there.

The two men sat down on a little two-seated sofa in a corner of the studio, under a

canopy of Oriental stuffs, and again shook hands with mutual sympathy.

“And the Countess?” asked Bertin, “how is she?”

“Not very well. She has been very much affected, and is recovering too slowly. I must confess that I am a little anxious about her.”

“But why does she not return?”

“I know nothing about it. It was impossible for me to induce her to return here.”

“What does she do all day?”

“Oh, heavens! She weeps, and thinks of her mother. That is not good for her. I should like very much to have her decide to have a change of air, to leave the place where that happened, you understand?”

“And Annette?”

“Oh, she is a blooming flower.”

Olivier smiled with joy.

“Was she very much grieved?” he asked again.

“Yes, very much, very much, but you know that the grief of eighteen years does not last long.”

After a silence Guilleroy resumed:

“Where shall we dine, my dear fellow? I need to be cheered up, to hear some noise and see some movement.”

“Well, at this season, it seems to me that the Cafe des Ambassadeurs is the right place.”

So they set out, arm in arm, toward the Champs-Elysees. Guilleroy, filled with the gaiety of Parisians when they return, to whom the city, after every absence, seems rejuvenated and full of possible surprises, questioned the painter about a thousand details of what people had been doing and saying; and Olivier, after indifferent

replies which betrayed all the boredom of his solitude, spoke of Roncieres, tried to capture from this man, in order to gather round him that almost tangible something left with us by persons with whom we have recently been associated, that subtle emanation of being one carries away when leaving them, which remains with us a few hours and evaporates amid new surroundings.

The heavy sky of a summer evening hung over the city and over the great avenue where, under the trees, the gay refrains of open-air concerts were beginning to sound. The two men, seated on the balcony of the Cafe des Ambassadeurs, looked down upon the still empty benches and chairs of the inclosure up to the little stage, where the singers, in the mingled light of electric globes and fading day, displayed their striking costumes and their rosy complexions. Odors of frying, of sauces, of hot food, floated in the slight breezes from the chestnut-trees, and when a woman passed, seeing her reserved chair, followed by a man in a black coat, she diffused on her way the fresh perfume of her dress and her person.

Guilleroy, who was radiant, murmured:

“Oh, I like to be here much better than in the country!”

“And I,” Bertin replied, “should like it much better to be there than here.”

“Nonsense!”

“Heavens, yes! I find Paris tainted this summer.”

“Oh, well, my dear fellow, it is always Paris, after all.”

The Deputy seemed to be enjoying his day, one of those rare days of effervescence and gaiety in which grave men do foolish things. He looked at two cocottes dining at a neighboring table with three thin young men, superlatively correct, and he slyly questioned Olivier about all the well-known girls, whose names were heard every day. Then he murmured in a tone of deep regret:

“You were lucky to have remained a bachelor. You can do and see many things.”

But the painter did not agree with him, and, as a man will do when haunted by a persistent idea, he took Guilleroy into his confidence on the subject of his sadness and isolation. When he had said everything, had recited to the end of his litany of melancholy, and, urged by the longing to relieve his heart, had confessed naively how much he would have enjoyed the love and companionship of a woman installed in his home, the Count, in his turn, admitted that marriage had its advantages. Recovering his parliamentary eloquence in order to sing the praises of his domestic happiness, he eulogized the Countess in the highest terms, to which Olivier listened gravely with frequent nods of approval.

Happy to hear her spoken of, but jealous of that intimate happiness which Guilleroy praised as a matter of duty, the painter finally murmured, with sincere conviction:

“Yes, indeed, you were the lucky one!”

The Deputy, flattered, assented to this; then he resumed:

“I should like very much to see her return; indeed, I am a little anxious about her just now. Wait—since you are bored in Paris, you might go to Roncieres and bring her back. She will listen to you, for you are her best friend; while a husband—you know——”

Delighted, Olivier replied: “I ask nothing better. But do you think it would not annoy her to see me arriving in that abrupt way?”

“No, not at all. Go, by all means, my dear fellow.”

“Well, then, I will. I will leave to-morrow by the one o'clock train. Shall I send her a telegram?”

“No, I will attend to that. I will telegraph, so that you will find a carriage at the station.”

As they had finished dinner, they strolled again up the Boulevard, but in half an hour the Count suddenly left the painter, under the pretext of an urgent affair that he had

quite forgotten.

CHAPTER II

SPRINGTIME AND AUTUMN

The Countess and her daughter, dressed in black crape, had just seated themselves opposite each other, for breakfast, in the large dining-room at Roncieres. The portraits of many ancestors, crudely painted, one in a cuirass, another in a tight-fitting coat, this a powdered officer of the French Guards, that a colonel of the Restoration, hung in line on the walls, a collection of deceased Guilleroys, in old frames from which the gilding was peeling. Two servants, stepping softly, began to serve the two silent women, and the flies made a little cloud of black specks, dancing and buzzing around the crystal chandelier that hung over the center of the table.

“Open the windows,” said the Countess, “It is a little cool here.”

The three long windows, reaching from the floor to the ceiling, and large as bay-windows, were opened wide. A breath of soft air, bearing the odor of warm grass and the distant sounds of the country, swept in immediately through these openings, mingling with the slightly damp air of the room, inclosed by the thick walls of the castle.

“Ah, that is good!” said Annette, taking a full breath.

The eyes of the two women had turned toward the outside and now gazed, beneath the blue sky, lightly veiled by the midday haze which was reflected on the meadows impregnated with sunshine, at the long and verdant lawns of the park, with its groups of trees here and there, and its perspective opening to the yellow fields, illuminated as far as the eye could see by the golden gleam of ripe grain.

“We will take a long walk after breakfast,” said the Countess. “We might walk as far

as Berville, following the river, for it will be too warm on the plain."

"Yes, mamma, and let us take Julio to scare up some partridges."

"You know that your father forbids it."

"Oh, but since papa is in Paris!—it is so amusing to see Julio pointing after them. There he is now, worrying the cows! Oh, how funny he is, the dear fellow!"

Pushing back her chair, she jumped up and ran to the window, calling out: "Go on, Julio! After them!"

Upon the lawn three heavy cows, gorged with grass and overcome with heat, lay on their sides, their bellies protruding from the pressure of the earth. Rushing from one to another, barking and bounding wildly, in a sort of mad abandon, partly real, partly feigned, a hunting spaniel, slender, white and red, whose curly ears flapped at every bound, was trying to rouse the three big beasts, which did not wish to get up. It was evidently the dog's favorite sport, with which he amused himself whenever he saw the cows lying down. Irritated, but not frightened, they gazed at him with their large, moist eyes, turning their heads to watch him.

Annette, from her window, cried:

"Fetch them, Julio, fetch them!"

The excited spaniel, growing bolder, barked louder and ventured as far as their cruppers, feigning to be about to bite them. They began to grow uneasy, and the nervous twitching of their skin, to get rid of the flies, became more frequent and protracted.

Suddenly the dog, carried along by the impetus of a rush that he could not check in time, bounced so close to one cow that, in order not to fall against her, he was obliged to jump over her. Startled by the bound, the heavy animal took fright, and first raising her head she finally raised herself slowly on her four legs, sniffing loudly. Seeing her erect, the other two immediately got up also, and Julio began to

prance around them in a dance of triumph, while Annette praised him.

“Bravo, Julio, bravo!”

“Come,” said the Countess, “come to breakfast, my child.”

But the young girl, shading her eyes with one hand, announced:

“There comes a telegraph messenger!”

Along the invisible path among the wheat and the oats a blue blouse appeared to be gliding along the top of the grain, and it came toward the castle with the firm step of a man.

“Oh, heavens!” murmured the Countess; “I hope he does not bring bad news!”

She was still shaken with that terror which remains with us a long time after the death of some loved one has been announced by a telegram. Now she could not remove the gummed band to open the little blue paper without feeling her fingers tremble and her soul agitated, believing that from those folds which it took so long to open would come a grief that would cause her tears to flow afresh.

Annette, on the contrary, full of girlish curiosity, was delighted to meet with the unknown mystery that comes to all of us at times. Her heart, which life had just saddened for the first time, could anticipate only something joyful from that black and ominous bag hanging from the side of the mail-carrier, who saw so many emotions through the city streets and the country lanes.

The Countess ceased to eat, concentrating her thoughts on the man who was approaching, bearer of a few written words that might wound her as if a knife had been thrust in her throat. The anguish of having known that experience made her breathless, and she tried to guess what this hurried message might be. About what? From whom? The thought of Olivier flashed through her mind. Was he ill? Dead, perhaps, too!

The ten minutes she had to wait seemed interminable to her; then, when she had torn

open the despatch and recognized the name of her husband, she read: “I telegraph to tell you that our friend Bertin leaves for Roncieres on the one o'clock train. Send Phaeton station. Love.”

“Well, mamma?” said Annette.

“Monsieur Olivier Bertin is coming to see us.”

“Ah, how lucky! When?”

“Very soon.”

“At four o'clock?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, how kind he is!”

But the Countess had turned pale, for a new anxiety had lately troubled her, and the sudden arrival of the painter seemed to her as painful a menace as anything she might have been able to foresee.

“You will go to meet him with the carriage,” she said to her daughter.

“And will you not come, too, mamma?”

“No, I will wait for you here.”

“Why? That will hurt him.”

“I do not feel very well.”

“You wished to walk as far as Berville just now.”

“Yes, but my breakfast has made me feel ill.”

“You will feel better between now and the time to go.”

“No, I am going up to my room. Let me know as soon as you arrive.”

“Yes, mamma.”

After giving orders that the phaeton should be ready at the proper hour, and that a room be prepared, the Countess returned to her own room, and shut herself in.

Up to this time her life had passed almost without suffering, affected only by Olivier's love and concerned only by her anxiety to retain it. She had succeeded, always victorious in that struggle. Her heart, soothed by success and by flattery, had become the exacting heart of a beautiful worldly woman to whom are due all the good things of earth, and, after consenting to a brilliant marriage, with which affection had nothing to do, after accepting love later as the complement of a happy existence, after taking her part in a guilty intimacy, largely from inclination, a little from a leaning toward sentiment itself as a compensation for the prosaic hum-drum of daily life, had barricaded itself in the happiness that chance had offered her, with no other desire than to defend it against the surprises of each day. She had therefore accepted with the complacency of a pretty woman the agreeable events that occurred; and, though she ventured little, and was troubled little by new necessities and desires for the unknown; though she was tender, tenacious, and farseeing, content with the present, but naturally anxious about the morrow, she had known how to enjoy the elements that Destiny had furnished her with wise and economical prudence.

Now, little by little, without daring to acknowledge it even to herself, the vague preoccupation of passing time, of advancing age, had glided into her soul. In her consciousness it had the effect of a gnawing trouble that never ceased. But, knowing well that this descent of life was without an end, that once begun it never could be stopped, and yielding to the instinct of danger, she closed her eyes in letting herself glide along, that she might retain her dream, that she might not be seized with dizziness at sight of the abyss or be made desperate by her impotence.

She lived, then, smiling, with a sort of factitious pride in remaining beautiful so long, and when Annette appeared at her side with the freshness of her eighteen years, instead of suffering from this contrast, she was proud, on the contrary, of being able to command preference, in the ripe grace of her womanhood, over that blooming young girl in the radiant beauty of first youth.

She had even believed that she had entered upon the beginning of a happy, tranquil period when the death of her mother struck a blow at her heart. During the first few days she was filled with that profound despair that leaves no room for any other thought. She remained from morning until night buried in grief, trying to recall a thousand things of the dead, her familiar words, her face in earlier days, the gowns she used to wear, as if she had stored her memory with relics; and from the now buried past she gathered all the intimate and trivial recollections with which to feed her cruel reveries. Then, when she had arrived at such paroxysms of despair that she fell into hysterics and swooned, all her accumulated grief broke forth in tears, flowing from her eyes by day and by night.

One morning, when her maid entered, and opened the shutters after raising the shades, asking: “How does Madame feel to-day?” she answered, feeling exhausted from having wept so much: “Oh, not at all well! Indeed, I can bear no more.”

The servant, who was holding a tea-tray, looked at her mistress, and, touched to see her lying so pale amide the whiteness of the bed, she stammered, in a tone of genuine sadness: “Madame really looks very ill. Madame would do well to take care of herself.”

The tone in which this was said pierced the Countess's heart like a sharp needle, and as soon as the maid had gone she rose to go and look at her face in her large dressing-mirror.

She was stupefied at the sight of herself, frightened by her hollow cheeks, her red eyes, the ravages produced in her by these days of suffering. Her face, which she knew so well, which she had often looked at in so many different mirrors, of which she knew all the expressions, all the smiles, the pallor which she had already corrected so many times, smoothing away the marks of fatigue, and the tiny wrinkles at the corners of the eyes, visible in too strong a light—her face suddenly seemed to her that of another woman, a new face that was distorted and irreparably

ill.

In order to see herself better, to be surer with regard to this unexpected misfortune, she approached near enough to the mirror to touch it with her forehead, so that her breath, spreading a light mist over the glass, almost obscured the pale image she was contemplating. She was compelled to take a handkerchief to wipe away this mist, and, trembling with a strange emotion, she made a long and patient examination of the alterations in her face. With a light finger she stretched the skin of her cheeks, smoothed her forehead, pushed back her hair, and turned the eyelids to look at the whites of her eyes. Then she opened her mouth and examined her teeth which were a little tarnished where the gold fillings shone, and she was disturbed to note the livid gums and the yellow tint of the flesh above the cheeks and at the temples.

She was so lost in this examination of her fading beauty that she did not hear the door open, and was startled when her maid, standing behind her, said:

“Madame has forgotten to take her tea.”

The Countess turned, confused, surprised, ashamed, and the servant, guessing her thoughts continued:

“Madame has wept too much; there is nothing worse to spoil the skin. One's blood turns to water.”

And as the Countess added sadly: “There is age also,” the maid exclaimed: “Oh, but Madame has not reached that time yet! With a few days of rest not a trace will be left. But Madame must go to walk, and take great care not to weep.”

As soon as she was dressed the Countess descended to the park, and for the first time since her mother's death she visited the little orchard where long ago she had liked to cultivate and gather flowers; then she went to the river and strolled beside the stream until the hour for breakfast.

She sat down at the table opposite her husband, and beside her daughter, and remarked, that she might know what they thought: “I feel better today. I must be less

pale."

"Oh, you still look very ill," said the Count.

Her heart contracted and she felt like weeping, for she had fallen into the habit of it.

Until evening, and the next day, and all the following days, whether she thought of her mother or of herself, every moment she felt her throat swelling with sobs and her eyes filling with tears, but to prevent them from overflowing and furrowing her cheeks she repressed them, and by a superhuman effort of will turned her thoughts in other directions, mastered them, ruled them, separated them from her sorrow, forced herself to feel consoled, tried to amuse herself and to think of sad things no more, in order to regain the hue of health.

Above all, she did not wish to return to Paris and to receive Olivier Bertin until she had become more like her former self. Realizing that she had grown too thin, that the flesh of women of her age needs to be full in order to keep fresh, she sought to create appetite by walking in the woods and along the roads; and though she returned weary and not hungry she forced herself to eat a great deal.

The Count, who wished to go away, could not understand her obstinacy. Finally, as her resistance seemed invincible, he declared that he would go alone, leaving the Countess free to return when she might feel so disposed.

The next day she received the telegram announcing Olivier's arrival.

A desire to flee seized her, so much did she fear his first look. She would have preferred to wait another week or two. In a week, with care one may change the face completely, since women, even when young and in good health, under the least change of influence become unrecognizable from one day to another. But the idea of appearing in broad daylight before Olivier, in the open fields, in the heat of August, beside Annette, so fresh and blooming, disturbed her so much that she decided immediately not to go to the station, but to await him in the half-darkened drawing-room.

She went up to her room and fell into a dream. Breaths of warm air stirred the curtains from time to time; the song of the crickets filled the air. Never before had she felt so sad. It was no more the great grief that had shattered her heart, overwhelming her before the soulless body of her beloved old mother. That grief, which she had believed incurable, had in a few days become softened, and was now but a sorrow of the memory; but now she felt herself swept away on a deep wave of melancholy into which she had entered gradually, and from which she never would emerge.

She had an almost irresistible desire to weep—and would not. Every time she felt her eyelids grow moist she wiped them away quickly, rose, paced about the room, looked out into the park and gazed at the tall trees, watched the slow, black flight of the crows against the background of blue sky. Then she passed before her mirror, judged her appearance with one glance, effaced the trace of a tear by touching the corner of her eye with rice powder, and looked at the clock, trying to guess at what point of the route he must have reached.

Like all women who are carried away by a distress of soul, whether real or unreasonable, she clung to her lover with a sort of frenzy. Was he not her all—all, everything, more than life, all that anyone must be who has come to be the sole affection of one who feels the approach of age?

Suddenly she heard in the distance the crack of a whip; she ran to the window and saw the phaeton as it made the turn round the lawn, drawn by two horses. Seated beside Annette, in the back seat of the carriage, Olivier waved his handkerchief as he saw the Countess, to which she responded by waving him a salutation from the window. Then she went down stairs with a heart throbbing fast but happy now, thrilled with joy at knowing him so near, of speaking to him and seeing him.

They met in the antechamber, before the drawing-room door.

He opened his arms to her with an irresistible impulse, and in a voice warmed by

real emotion, exclaimed: “Ah, my poor Countess, let me embrace you!”

She closed her eyes, leaned toward him and pressed against him, lifted her cheek to him, and as he pressed his lips upon it, she murmured in his ear: “I love thee!”

Then Olivier, without dropping the hands he clasped in his own, looked at her, saying: “Let us see that sad face.”

She felt ready to faint.

“Yes, a little pale,” said he, “but that is nothing.”

To thank him for saying that, she said brokenly,

“Ah, dear friend, dear friend!” finding nothing else to say.

But he turned, looking behind her in search of Annette, who had disappeared.

“Is it not strange,” he said abruptly, “to see your daughter in mourning?”

“Why?” inquired the Countess.

“What? You ask why?” he exclaimed, with extraordinary animation. “Why, it is your own portrait painted by me—it is my portrait. It is yourself, such as you were when I met you long ago when I entered the Duchess's house! Ah, do you remember that door where you passed under my gaze, as a frigate passes under a cannon of a fort? Good heavens! when I saw the little one, just now, at the railway station, standing on the platform, all in black, with the sun shining on her hair massed around her face, the blood rushed to my head. I thought I should weep. I tell you, it is enough to drive one mad, when one has known you as I have, who has studied you as no one else has, and reproduced you in painting, Madame. Ah, I thought that you had sent her alone to meet me at the station in order to give me that surprise. My God! but I was surprised, indeed! I tell you, it is enough to drive one mad.”

He called: “Annette! Nane!”

The young girl's voice replied from outside, where she was giving sugar to the horses:

“Yes, yes, I am here!”

“Come in here!”

She entered quickly.

“Here, stand close beside your mother.”

She obeyed, and he compared the two, but repeated mechanically, “Yes, it is astonishing, astonishing!” for they resembled each other less when side by side than they did before leaving Paris, the young girl having acquired a new expression of luminous youth in her black attire, while the mother had for a long time lost that radiance of hair and complexion that had dazzled and entranced the painter when they met for the first time.

Then the Countess and Olivier entered the drawing-room. He seemed in high spirits.

“Ah, what a good plan it was to come here!” he said. “But it was your husband's idea that I should come, you know. He charged me to take you back with me. And I—do you know what I propose? You have no idea, have you? Well, I propose, on the contrary, to remain here! Paris is odious in this heat, while the country is delicious. Heavens! how sweet it is here!”

The dews of evening impregnated the park with freshness, the soft breeze made the trees tremble, and the earth exhaled imperceptible vapors which threw a light, transparent veil over the horizon. The three cows, standing with drooping heads, cropped the grass with avidity, and four peacocks, with a loud rustling of wings, flew up into their accustomed perch in a cedar-tree under the windows of the castle. The barking of dogs in the distance came to the ear, and in the quiet air of the close of day the calls of human voices were heard, in phrases shouted across the fields, from one meadow to another, and in those short, guttural cries used in driving animals.

The painter, with bared head and shining eyes, breathed deeply, and, as he met the Countess's look, he said:

“This is happiness!”

“It never lasts,” she answered, approaching nearer.

“Let us take it when it comes,” said he.

“You never used to like the country until now,” the Countess replied, smiling.

“I like it to-day because I find you here. I do not know how to live any more where you are not. When one is young, he may be in love though far away, through letters, thoughts, or dreams, perhaps because he feels that life is all before him, perhaps too because passion is stronger than pure affection; at my age, on the contrary, love has become like the habit of an invalid; it is a binding up of the soul, which flies now with only one wing, and mounts less frequently into the ideal. The heart knows no more ecstasy, only selfish wants. And then I know quite well that I have no time to lose to enjoy what remains for me.”

“Oh, old!” she remonstrated, taking his hand tenderly.

“Yes, yes, I am old,” he repeated. “Everything shows it, my hair, my changing character, the coming sadness. Alas! that is something I never have known till now—sadness. If someone had told me when I was thirty that a time would come when I should be sad without cause, uneasy, discontented with everything, I should not have believed it. That proves that my heart also has grown old.”

The Countess replied with an air of profound certainty:

“Oh, as for me, my heart is still young. It never has changed. Yes, it has grown younger, perhaps. Once it was twenty; now it is only sixteen!”

They remained a long while thus, talking in the open window, mingled with the spirit of evening, very near each other, nearer than they ever had been, in this hour of tenderness, this twilight of love, like that of the day.

A servant entered, announcing:

“Madame la Comtesse is served.”

“Have you called my daughter?” the Countess asked.

“Mademoiselle is in the dining-room.”

All three sat down at the table. The shutters were closed, and two large candelabra with six candles each illumined Annette's face and seemed to powder her hair with gold dust. Bertin, smiling, looked at her continually.

“Heavens, now pretty she is in black!” he said.

And he turned toward the Countess while admiring the daughter, as if to thank the mother for having given him this pleasure.

When they returned to the drawing-room the moon had risen above the trees in the park. Their somber mass appeared like a great island, and the country round about like a sea hidden under the light mist that floated over the plains.

“Oh, mamma, let us take a walk,” said Annette.

The Countess consented.

“I will take Julio.”

“Very well, if you wish.”

They set out. The young girl walked in front, amusing herself with the dog. When they crossed the lawn they heard the breathing of the cows, which, awake and scenting their enemy, raised their heads to look. Under the trees, farther away, the moon was pouring among the branches a shower of fine rays that fell to earth, seeming to wet the leaves that were spread out on the path in little patches of yellow light. Annette and Julio ran along, each seeming to have on this serene night, the same joyful and unburdened hearts, the gaiety of which expressed itself in graceful gambols.

In the little openings, where the wave of moonlight descended as into a well, the young girl looked like a spirit, and the painter called her back, marveling at this dark vision with its clear and brilliant face. Then when she darted away again, he took the

Countess's hand and pressed it, often seeking her lips as they traversed the deeper shadows, as if the sight of Annette had revived the impatience of his heart.

At last they reached the edge of the plain, where they could just discern, afar, here and there, the groups of trees belonging to the farms. Through the milky mist that bathed the fields the horizon appeared illimitable, and the soft silence, the living silence of that vast space, so warm and luminous, was full of inexpressible hope, of that indefinable expectancy which makes summer nights so sweet. Far up in the heavens a few long slender clouds looked like silver shells. Standing still for a few seconds, one could hear in that nocturnal peace a confused, continuous murmur of life, a thousand slight sounds, the harmony of which seemed like silence.

A quail in a neighboring field uttered her double cry, and Julio, his ears erect, glided furtively toward the two flute-like notes of the bird, Annette following, as softly as he, holding her breath and crouching low.

“Ah,” said the Countess, standing alone with the painter, “why do moments like this pass so quickly? We can hold nothing, keep nothing. We have not even time to taste what is good. It is over already.”

Olivier kissed her hand, and replied, smiling:

“Oh, I cannot philosophize this evening! I belong to the present hour entirely.”

“You do not love me as I love you,” she murmured.

“Ah, do not—”

“No,” she interrupted, “in me you love, as you said very truly before dinner, a woman who satisfies the needs of your heart, a woman who never has caused you a pain, and who has put a little happiness into your life. I know that; I feel it. Yes, I have the good consciousness, the ardent joy of having been good, useful, and helpful to you. You have loved, you still love all that you find agreeable in me, my attentions to you, my admiration, my wish to please you, my passion, the complete gift I made to you of my whole being. But it is not I you really love, do you know?

Oh, I feel that as one feels a cold current of air. You love a thousand things about me—my beauty, which is fast leaving me, my devotion, the wit they say I possess, the opinion the world has of me, and that which I have of you in my heart; but it is not I—I, nothing but myself—do you understand?"

He laughed in a soft and friendly way.

"No, I do not understand you very well. You make a reproachful attack which is quite unexpected."

"Oh, my God! I wish I could make you understand how I love you! I am always seeking, but cannot find a means. When I think of you—and I am always thinking of you—I feel in the depths of my being an unspeakable intoxication of longing to be yours, an irresistible need of giving myself to you even more completely. I should like to sacrifice myself in some absolute way, for there is nothing better, when one loves, than to give, to give always, all, all, life, thought, body, all that one has, to feel that one is giving, to be ready to risk anything to give still more. I love you so much that I love to suffer for you, I love even my anxieties, my torments, my jealousies, the pain I feel when I realize that you are not longer tender toward me. I love in you a someone that only I have discovered, a you which is not the you of the world that is admired and known, a you which is mine, which cannot change nor grow old, which I cannot cease to love, for I have, to look at it, eyes that see it alone. But one cannot say these things. There are no words to express them."

He repeated softly, over and over:

"Dear, dear, dear Any!"

Julio came back, bounding toward them, without having found the quail, which had kept still at his approach; Annette followed him, breathless from running.

"I can't run any more," said she. "I will prop myself up with you, Monsieur painter!"

She leaned on Olivier's free arm, and they returned, walking thus, he between them, under the shadow of the trees. They spoke no more. He walked on, possessed by

them, penetrated by a sort of feminine essence with which their contact filled him. He did not try to see them, since he had them near him; he even closed his eyes that he might feel their proximity the better. They guided him, conducted him, and he walked straight before him, fascinated by them, with the one on the left as well as the one on the right, without knowing, indeed, which was on the left or which on the right, which was mother, which was daughter. He abandoned himself willingly to the pleasure of unpremeditated and exquisite sensuous delight. He even tried to mingle them in his heart, not to distinguish them in his thought, and quieted desire with the charm of this confusion. Was it not only one woman beside him, composed of this mother and daughter, so much alike? And did not the daughter seem to have come to earth only for the purpose of reanimating his former love for the mother?

When he opened his eyes on entering the castle, it seemed to him that he had just passed through the most delicious moments of his life; that he had experienced the strangest, the most puzzling, yet complete emotion a man might feel, intoxicated with the same love by the seductiveness emanating from two women.

“Ah, what an exquisite evening!” said he, as soon as he found himself between them in the lamplight.

“I am not at all sleepy,” said Annette; “I could pass the whole night walking when the weather is fine.”

The Countess looked at the clock.

“Oh, it is half after eleven. You must go to bed, my child.”

They separated, and went to their own apartments. The young girl who did not wish to go to bed was the only one that went to sleep at once.

The next morning, at the usual hour, when the maid, after opening the curtains and the shutters, brought the tea and looked at her mistress, who was still drowsy, she said:

“Madame looks better to-day, already.”

“Do you think so?”

“Oh, yes. Madame's face looks more rested.”

Though she had not yet looked at herself, the Countess knew that this was true. Her heart was light, she did not feel it throb, and she felt once more as if she lived. The blood flowing in her veins was no longer coursing so rapidly as on the day before, hot and feverish, sending nervousness and restlessness through all her body, but gave her a sense of well-being and happy confidence.

When the maid had gone she went to look at herself in the mirror. She was a little surprised, for she felt so much better that she expected to find herself rejuvenated by several years in a single night. Then she realized the childishness of such a hope, and, after another glance, resigned herself to the knowledge that her complexion was only clearer, her eyes less fatigued, her lips a little redder than on the day before. As her soul was content, she could not feel sad, and she smiled, thinking: “Yes, in a few days I shall be quite myself again. I have gone through too much to recover so quickly.”

But she remained seated a very long time before her toilet-table, upon which were laid out in graceful order on a muslin scarf bordered with lace, before a beautiful mirror of cut crystal, all her little ivory-handled instruments of coquetry, bearing her arms surmounted by a coronet. There they were, innumerable, pretty, all different, destined for delicate and secret use, some of steel, fine and sharp, of strange shapes, like surgical instruments for operations on children, others round and soft, of feathers, of down, of the skins of unknown animals, made to lay upon the tender skin the caresses of fragrant powders or of powerful liquid perfumes.

She handled them a long time with practised fingers, carrying them from her lips to her temples with touches softer than a kiss, correcting imperfections, underlining the eyes, beautifying the eyelashes. At last, when she went down stairs, she felt almost sure that the first glance cast upon her would not be too unfavorable.

“Where is Monsieur Bertin?” she inquired of a servant she met in the vestibule.

“Monsieur Bertin is in the orchard, playing tennis with Mademoiselle,” the man replied.

She heard them from a distance counting the points. One after the other, the deep voice of the painter and the light one of the young girl, called: “Fifteen, thirty, forty, vantage, deuce, vantage, game!”

The orchard, where a space had been leveled for a tennis-court, was a great, square grass-plot, planted with apple-trees, inclosed by the park, the vegetable-garden, and the farms belonging to the castle. Along the slope that formed a boundary on three sides, like the defenses of an intrenched camp, grew borders of various kinds of flowers, wild and cultivated, roses in masses, pinks, heliotrope, fuchsias, mignonnette, and many more, which as Bertin said gave the air a taste of honey. Besides this, the bees, whose hives, thatched with straw, lined the wall of the vegetable-garden, covered the flowery field in their yellow, buzzing flight.

In the exact center of this orchard a few apple-trees had been cut down, in order to make a good court for tennis, and a tarry net, stretched across this space, separated it into two camps.

Annette, on one side, with bare head, her black skirt caught up, showing her ankles and half way up to her knee when she ran to catch a ball, dashed to and fro, with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, tired, out of breath with the sure and practised play of her adversary.

He, in white flannels, fitting tightly over the hips, a white shirt, and a white tennis cap, his abdomen somewhat prominent in that costume, awaited the ball coolly, judged its fall with precision, received and returned it without haste, without running, with the elegant pose, the passionate attention, and professional skill which he displayed in all athletic sports.

It was Annette that spied her mother first.

“Good morning, mamma!” she cried, “wait till we have finished this play.”

That second's distraction lost her the game. The ball passed against her, almost rolling, touched the ground and went out of the game.

Bertin shouted “Won!” and the young girl, surprised, accused him of having profited by her inattention. Julio, trained to seek and find the lost balls, as if they were partridges fallen among the bushes, sprang behind her to get the ball rolling in the grass, seized it in his jaws, and brought it back, wagging his tail.

The painter now saluted the Countess, but, urged to resume the game, animated by the contest, pleased to find himself so agile, he threw only a short, preoccupied glance at the face prepared so carefully for him, asking:

“Will you allow me, dear Countess? I am afraid of taking cold and having neuralgia.”

“Oh, yes,” the Countess replied.

She sat down on a hay-stack, mowed that morning in order to give a clear field to the players, and, her heart suddenly touched with sadness, looked on at the game.

Her daughter, irritated at losing continually, grew more animated, excited, uttered cries of vexation or of triumph, and flew impetuously from one end of the court to the other. Often, in her swift movements, little locks of hair were loosened, rolled down and fell upon her shoulders. She seized them with impatient movements, and, holding the racket between her knees, fastened them up in place, thrusting hairpins into the golden mass.

And Bertin, from his position, cried to the Countess:

“Isn't she pretty like that, and fresh as the day?”

Yes, she was young, she could run, grow warm, become red, let her hair fly, brave anything, dare everything, for all that only made her more beautiful.

Then, when they resumed their play with ardor, the Countess, more and more

melancholy, felt that Olivier preferred that game, that childish sport, like the play of kittens jumping after paper balls, to the sweetness of sitting beside her that warm morning, and feeling her loving pressure against him.

When the bell, far away, rang the first signal for breakfast, it seemed to her that someone had freed her, that a weight had been lifted from her heart. But as she returned, leaning on his arm, he said to her:

“I have been amusing myself like a boy. It is a great thing to be, or to feel oneself, young. Ah, yes, there is nothing like that. When we do not like to run any more, it is all over with us.”

When they left the table the Countess, who on the preceding day had for the first time omitted her daily visit to the cemetery, proposed that they should go there together; so all three set out for the village.

They were obliged to go through some woods, through which ran a stream called “La Rainette,” no doubt because of the frogs that peopled it; then they had to cross the end of a plain before arriving at the church, situated in the midst of a group of houses that sheltered the grocer, the baker, the butcher, the wine-merchant, and several other modest tradesmen who supplied the needs of the peasants.

The walk was made in thoughtful silence, the recollection of the dead weighing on their spirits. Arrived at the grave, the women knelt and prayed a long time. The Countess, motionless, bent low, her handkerchief at her eyes, for she feared to weep lest her tears run down her cheeks. She prayed, but not as she had prayed before this day, in a sort of invocation to her mother, a despairing appeal penetrating under the marble of the tomb until she seemed to feel by the poignancy of her own anguish that the dead must hear her, listen to her, but a simple, hesitating, and earnest utterance of the consecrated words of the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria. She would not have had that day sufficient strength and steadiness of nerve necessary for that cruel communion that brought no response with what remained of that being

who had disappeared in the tomb where all that was left of her was concealed. Other anxieties had penetrated her woman's heart, had agitated, wounded, and distracted her; and her fervent prayer rose to Heaven, full of vague supplications. She offered her adoration to God, the inexorable God who has made all poor creatures on the earth, and begged Him to take pity on her as well as on the one He had recalled to Himself.

She could not have told what she had asked of God, so vague and confused were her fears still; but she felt the need of Divine aid, of a superhuman support against approaching dangers and inevitable sorrows.

Annette, with closed eyes, having also murmured the formulas, sank into a reverie, for she did not wish to rise before her mother.

Olivier Bertin looked at them, thinking that he never had seen a more ravishing picture, and somewhat regretful that it was out of the question for him to be permitted to make a sketch of the scene.

On their way back they talked of human life, softly stirring those bitter and poetic ideas of a tender but pessimistic philosophy, which is a frequent subject of conversation between men and women whom life has wounded a little, and whose hearts mingle as they sympathize with each other's grief.

Annette, who was not ripe for such thoughts, left them frequently to gather wild flowers beside the road.

But Olivier, desiring to keep her near him, nervous at seeing her continually darting away, never removed his eyes from her. He was irritated that she should show more interest in the colors of the plants than in the words he spoke. He experienced an inexpressible dissatisfaction at not being able to charm her, to dominate her, as he had captivated her mother; and he felt a desire to hold out his hand and seize her, hold her, forbid her to go away. He felt that she was too alert, too young, too indifferent, too free—free as a bird, or like a little dog that will not come back, will

not obey, which has independence in its veins, that sweet instinct of liberty which neither voice nor whip has yet vanquished.

In order to attract her he talked of gayer things, and at times he questioned her, trying to awaken her feminine curiosity so that she would listen; but one would think that the capricious wind of heaven was blowing through Annette's head that day, as it blew across the undulating grain, carrying away and dispersing her attention into space, for she hardly uttered even the commonplace replies expected of her, between her short digressions, and made them with an absent air, then returned to her flowers. Finally he became exasperated, filled with a childish impatience, and as she ran up to beg her mother to carry her first bouquet so that she could gather another, he caught her by the elbow and pressed her arm, so that she could not escape again. She struggled, laughing, pulling with all her strength to get away from him; then, moved by masculine instinct, he tried gentler means, and, not being able to win her attention he tried to purchase it by tempting her coquetry.

“Tell me,” said he, “what flower you prefer, and I will have a brooch made of it for you.”

She hesitated, surprised.

“What, a brooch?”

“In stones of the same color; in rubies if it is the poppy; in sapphires if it is the cornflower, with a little leaf in emeralds.”

Annette's face lighted up with that affectionate joy with which promises and presents animate a woman's countenance.

“The cornflower,” said she, “it is so pretty.”

“The cornflower it shall be. We will go to order it as soon as we return to Paris.”

She no longer tried to leave him, attracted by the thought of the jewel she already tried to see, to imagine.

“Does it take very long to make a thing like that?” she asked.

He laughed, feeling that he had caught her.

“I don't know; it depends upon the difficulties. We will make the jeweler do it quickly.”

A dismal thought suddenly crossed her mind.

“But I cannot wear it since I am in deep mourning!”

He had passed his arm under that of the young girl, and pressed it against him.

“Well, you will keep the brooch until you cease to wear mourning,” said he; “that will not prevent you from looking at it.”

As on the preceding evening, he was walking between them, held captive between their shoulders, and in order to see their eyes, of a similar blue dotted with tiny black spots, raised to his, he spoke to them in turn, moving his head first toward the one, then toward the other. As the bright sunlight now shone on them, he did not so fully confound the Countess with Annette, but he did more and more associate the daughter with the new-born remembrances of what the mother had been. He had a strong desire to embrace both, the one to find again upon cheek and neck a little of that pink and white freshness which he had already tasted, and which he saw now reproduced as by a miracle; the other because he loved her as he always had, and felt that from her came the powerful appeal of long habit. He even realized at that moment that his desire and affection for her, which for some time had been waning, had revived at the sight of her resuscitated youth.

Annette went away again to gather more flowers. This time Olivier did not call her back; it was as if the contact of her arm and the satisfaction of knowing that he had given her pleasure had quieted him; but he followed all her movements with the pleasure one feels in seeing the persons or things that captivate and intoxicate our eyes. When she returned, with a large cluster of flowers, he drew a deep breath, seeking unconsciously to inhale something of her, a little of her breath or the

warmth of her skin in the air stirred by her running. He looked at her, enraptured, as one watches the dawn, or listens to music, with thrills of delight when she bent, rose again, or raised her arms to arrange her hair. And then, more and more, hour by hour, she evoked in him the memory of the past! Her laughter, her pretty ways, her motions, brought back to his lips the savor of former kisses given and returned; she made of the far-off past, of which he had forgotten the precise sensation, something like a dream in the present; she confused epochs, dates, the ages of his heart, and rekindling the embers of cooled emotions, she mingled, without his realizing it, yesterday with to-morrow, recollection with hope.

He asked himself as he questioned his memory whether the Countess in her brightest bloom had had that fawn-like, supple grace, that bold, capricious, irresistible charm, like the grace of a running, leaping animal. No. She had had a riper bloom but was less untamed. First, a child of the city, then a woman, never having imbibed the air of the fields and lived in the grass, she had grown pretty under the shade of the walls and not in the sunlight of heaven.

When they reentered the castle the Countess began to write letters at her little low table in the bay-window; Annette went up to her own room, and the painter went out again to walk slowly, cigar in mouth, hands clasped behind him, through the winding paths of the park. But he did not go away so far that he lost sight of the white facade or the pointed roof of the castle. As soon as it disappeared behind groups of trees or clusters of shrubbery, a shadow seemed to fall over his heart, as when a cloud hides the sun; and when it reappeared through the apertures in the foliage he paused a few seconds to contemplate the two rows of tall windows. Then he resumed his walk. He felt agitated, but content. Content with what? With everything.

The air seemed pure to him, life was good that day. His body felt once more the liveliness of a small boy, a desire to run, to catch the yellow butterflies fluttering

over the lawn, as if they were suspended at the end of elastic threads. He sang little airs from the opera. Several times he repeated the celebrated phrase by Gounod: “Laisse-moi contempler ton visage,” discovering in it a profoundly tender expression which never before he had felt in the same way.

Suddenly he asked himself how it was that he had so soon become different from his usual self. Yesterday, in Paris, dissatisfied with everything, disgusted, irritated; to-day calm, satisfied with everything—one would say that some benevolent god had changed his soul. “That same kind god,” he thought, “might well have changed my body at the same time, and rejuvenated me a little.” Suddenly he saw Julio hunting among the bushes. He called him, and when the dog ran up to put his finely formed head, with its curly ears, under his hand, he sat down on the grass to pet him more comfortably, spoke gentle words to him, laid him on his knees, and growing tender as he caressed the animal, he kissed it, after the fashion of women whose hearts are easily moved to demonstration.

After dinner, instead of going out as on the evening before, they spent the hours in the drawing-room.

Suddenly the Countess said: “We must leave here soon.”

“Oh, don't speak of that yet!” Olivier exclaimed. “You would not leave Roncieres when I was not here; now what I have come, you think only of going away.”

“But, my dear friend,” said she, “we three cannot remain here indefinitely.”

“It does not necessarily follow that we need stay indefinitely, but just a few days. How many times have I stayed at your house for whole weeks?”

“Yes, but in different circumstances, when the house was open to everyone.”

“Oh, mamma,” said Annette, coaxingly, “let us stay a few days more, just two or three. He teaches me so well how to play tennis. It annoys me to lose, but afterward I am glad to have made such progress.”

Only that morning the Countess had been planning to make this mysterious visit of her friend's last until Sunday, and now she wished to go away, without knowing why. That day which she had hoped would be such a happy one had left in her soul an inexpressible but poignant sadness, a causeless apprehension, as tenacious and confused as a presentiment.

When she was once more alone in her room she even sought to define this new access of melancholy.

Had she experienced one of those imperceptible emotions whose touch has been so slight that reason does not remember it, but whose vibrations still stir the most sensitive chords of the heart? Perhaps? Which? She recalled, certainly, some little annoyances, in the thousand degrees of sentiment through which she had passed, each minute having its own. But they were too petty to have thus disheartened her. “I am exacting,” she thought. “I have no right to torment myself in this way.”

She opened her window, to breathe the night air, and leaned on the window-sill, gazing at the moon.

A slight noise made her look down. Olivier was pacing before the castle. “Why did he say that he was going to his room?” she thought; “why did he not tell me he was going out again? Why did he not ask me to come with him? He knows very well that it would have made me so happy. What is he thinking of now?”

This idea that he had not wished to have her with him on his walk, that he had preferred to go out alone this beautiful night, alone, with a cigar in his mouth, for she could see its fiery-red point—alone, when he might have given her the joy of taking her with him; this idea that he had not continual need of her, that he did not desire her always, created within her soul a new fermentation of bitterness.

She was about to close the window, that she might not see him or be tempted to call to him, when he raised his eyes and saw her.

“Well, are you star-gazing, Countess?”

“Yes,” she answered. “You also, as it appears.”

“Oh, I am simply smoking.”

She could not resist the desire to ask: “Why did you not tell me you were going out?”

“I only wanted to smoke a cigar. I am coming in now.”

“Then good-night, my friend.”

“Good-night, Countess.”

She retired as far as her low chair, sat down in it and wept; and her maid, who was called to assist her to bed, seeing her red eyes said with compassion:

“Ah, Madame is going to make a sad face for herself again to-morrow.”

The Countess slept badly; she was feverish and had nightmare. As soon as she awoke she opened her window and her curtains to look at herself in the mirror. Her features were drawn, her eyelids swollen, her skin looked yellow; and she felt such violent grief because of this that she wished to say she was ill and to keep her bed, so that she need not appear until evening.

Then, suddenly, the necessity to go away entered her mind, to depart immediately, by the first train, to quit the country, where one could see too clearly by the broad light of the fields the ineffaceable marks of sorrow and of life itself. In Paris one lives in the half shadow of apartments, where heavy curtains, even at noontime, admit only a softened light. She would herself become beautiful again there, with the pallor one should have in that discreetly softened light. Then Annette's face rose before her eyes—so fresh and pink, with slightly disheveled hair, as when she was playing tennis. She understood then the unknown anxiety from which her soul had suffered. She was not jealous of her daughter's beauty! No, certainly not; but she felt, she acknowledged for the first time that she must never again show herself by Annette's side in the bright sunlight.

She rang, and before drinking her tea she gave orders for departure, wrote some telegrams, even ordering her dinner for that evening by telegraph, settled her bills in the country, gave her final instructions, arranged everything in less than an hour, a prey to feverish and increasing impatience.

When she went down stairs, Annette and Olivier, who had been told of her decision, questioned her with surprise. Then, seeing that she would not give any precise reason for this sudden departure, they grumbled a little and expressed their dissatisfaction until they separated at the station in Paris.

The Countess, holding out her hand to the painter, said: “Will you dine with us to-morrow?”

“Certainly, I will come,” he replied, rather sulkily. “All the same, what you have done was not nice. We were so happy down there, all three of us.”

CHAPTER III

A DANGEROUS WARNING

As soon as the Countess was alone with her daughter in her carriage, which was taking her back to her home, she suddenly felt tranquil and quieted, as if she had just passed through a serious crisis. She breathed easier, smiled at the houses, recognized with joy the look of the city, whose details all true Parisians seem to carry in their eyes and hearts. Each shop she passed suggested the ones beyond, on a line along the Boulevard, and the tradesman's face so often seen behind his show-case. She felt saved. From what? Reassured. Why? Confident. Of what?

When the carriage stopped under the arch of the porte-cochere, she alighted quickly and entered, as if flying, the shadow of the stairway; then passed to the shadow of her drawing-room, then to that of her bedroom. There she remained standing a few moments, glad to be at home, in security, in the dim and misty daylight of Paris,

which, hardly brightening, compels one to guess as well as to see, where one may show what he pleases and hide what he will; and the unreasoning memory of the dazzling glare that bathed the country remained in her like an impression of past suffering.

When she went down to dinner, her husband, who had just arrived at home, embraced her affectionately, and said, smiling: “Ah, ha! I knew very well that our friend Bertin would bring you back. It was very clever of me to send him after you.”

Annette responded gravely, in the peculiar tone she affected when she said something in jest without smiling:

“Oh, he had a great deal of trouble. Mamma could not decide for herself.”

The Countess said nothing, but felt a little confused.

The doors being closed to visitors, no one called that evening. Madame de Guilleroy passed the whole of the following day in different shops, choosing or ordering what she needed. She had loved, from her youth, almost from her infancy, those long sittings before the mirrors of the great shops. From the moment of entering one, she took delight in thinking of all the details of that minute rehearsal in the green-room of Parisian life. She adored the rustle of the dresses worn by the salesgirls, who hastened forward to meet her, all smiles, with their offers, their queries; and Madame the dressmaker, the milliner, or corset-maker, was to her a person of consequence, whom she treated as an artist when she expressed an opinion in asking advice. She enjoyed even more to feel herself in the skilful hands of the young girls who undressed her and dressed her again, causing her to turn gently around before her own gracious reflection. The little shiver that the touch of their fingers produced on her skin, her neck, or in her hair, was one of the best and sweetest little pleasures that belonged to her life of an elegant woman.

This day, however, she passed before those candid mirrors, without her veil or hat, feeling a certain anxiety. Her first visit, at the milliner's, reassured her. The three

hats which she chose were wonderfully becoming; she could not doubt it, and when the milliner said, with an air of conviction, “Oh, Madame la Comtesse, blondes should never leave off mourning” she went away much pleased, and entered other shops with a heart full of confidence.

Then she found at home a note from the Duchess, who had come to see her, saying that she would return in the evening; then she wrote some letters; then she fell into dreamy reverie for some time, surprised that this simple change of place had caused to recede into a past that already seemed far away the great misfortune that had overwhelmed her. She could not even convince herself that her return from Roncieres dated only from the day before, so much was the condition of her soul modified since her return to Paris, as if that little change had healed her wounds.

Bertin, arriving at dinner-time, exclaimed on seeing her:

“You are dazzling this evening!”

And this exclamation sent a warm wave of happiness through her being.

When they were leaving the table, the Count, who had a passion for billiards, offered to play a game with Bertin, and the two ladies accompanied them to the billiard-room, where the coffee was served.

The men were still playing when the Duchess was announced, and they all returned to the drawing-room. Madame de Corbelle and her husband presented themselves at the same time, their voices full of tears. For some minutes it seemed, from the doleful tones, that everyone was about to weep; but little by little, after a few tender words and inquiries, another current of thought set in; the voices took on a more cheerful tone, and everyone began to talk naturally, as if the shadow of the misfortune that had saddened them had suddenly been dissipated.

Then Bertin rose, took Annette by the hand, led her under the portrait of her mother, in the ray of light from the reflector, and said:

“Isn't this stupefying?”

The Duchess was so greatly surprised that she seemed dazed; she repeated many times: “Heavens! is it possible? Heavens! is it possible? It is like someone raised from the dead. To think that I did not see that when I came in! Oh, my little Any, I find you again, I, who knew you so well then in your first mourning as a woman—no, in your second, for you had already lost your father. Oh, that Annette, in black like that—why, it is her mother come back to earth! What a miracle! Without that portrait we never should have perceived it. Your daughter resembles you very much, but she resembles that portrait much more.”

Musadieu now appeared, having heard of Madame de Guilleroy's return, as he wished to be one of the first to offer her the “homage of his sorrowful sympathy.”

He interrupted his first speech on perceiving the young girl standing against the frame, illumined by the same ray of light, appearing like the living sister of the painting.

“Ah, that is certainly one of the most astonishing things I ever have seen,” he exclaimed.

The Corbelles, whose convictions always followed established opinions, marveled in their turn with a little less exuberant ardor.

The Countess's heart seemed to contract, little by little, as if all these exclamations of astonishment had hurt it. Without speaking, she looked at her daughter standing by the image of herself, and a sudden feeling of weakness came over her. She longed to cry out: “Say no more! I know very well that she resembles me!”

Until the end of the evening she remained in a melancholy mood, having lost once more the confidence she had felt the day before.

Bertin was chatting with her when the Marquis de Farandal was announced. As soon as the painter saw him enter and approach the hostess he rose and glided behind her armchair, murmuring: “This is delightful! There comes that great animal now.” Then, making a detour of the apartment, he reached the door and departed.

After receiving the salutations of the newcomer, the Countess looked around to find Olivier, to resume with him the talk in which she had been interested. Not seeing him, she asked:

“What, has the great man gone?”

“I believe so, my dear,” her husband answered; “I just saw him going away in the English fashion.”

She was surprised, reflected a few moments, and then began to talk to the Marquis.

Her intimate friends, however, discreetly took their leave early, for, so soon after her affliction, she had only half-opened her door, as it were.

When she found herself again lying on her bed, all the griefs that had assailed her in the country reappeared. They took a more distinct form; she felt them more keenly. She realized that she was growing old!

That evening, for the first time, she had understood that, in her own drawing-room, where until now she alone had been admired, complimented, flattered, loved, another, her daughter, was taking her place. She had comprehended this suddenly, when feeling that everyone's homage was paid to Annette. In that kingdom, the house of a pretty woman, where she will permit no one to overshadow her, where she eliminated with discreet and unceasing care all disadvantageous comparisons, where she allows the entrance of her equals only to attempt to make them her vassals, she saw plainly that her daughter was about to become the sovereign. How strange had been that contraction of her heart when all eyes were turned upon Annette as Bertin held her by the hand standing before the portrait! She herself felt as if she had suddenly disappeared, dispossessed, dethroned. Everyone looked at Annette; no one had a glance for her any more! She was so accustomed to hear compliments and flattery, whenever her portrait was admired, she was so sure of eulogistic phrases, which she had little regarded but which pleased her nevertheless, that this desertion of herself, this unexpected defection, this admiration intended

wholly for her daughter, had moved, astonished, and hurt her more than if it had been a question of no matter what rivalry under any kind of conditions.

But, as she had one of those natures which, in all crises, after the first blow, react, struggle, and find arguments for consolation, she reasoned that, once her dear little daughter should be married, when they should no longer live under the same roof, she herself would no longer be compelled to endure that incessant comparison which was beginning to be too painful for her under the eyes of her friend Olivier.

But the shock had been too much for her that evening. She was feverish and hardly slept at all. In the morning she awoke weary and overcome by extreme lassitude, and then within her surged up an irresistible longing to be comforted again, to be succored, to ask help from someone who could cure all her ills, all her moral and physical ailments.

Indeed, she felt so ill at ease and weak that she had an idea of consulting her physician. Perhaps she was about to be seriously affected, for it was not natural that in a few hours she should pass through those successive phases of suffering and relief. So she sent him a telegram, and awaited his coming.

He arrived about eleven o'clock. He was one of those dignified, fashionable physicians whose decorations and titles guarantee their ability, whose tact at least equals mere skill, and who have, above all, when treating women, an adroitness that is surer than medicines.

He entered, bowed, looked at his patient, and said with a smile: “Come, this is not a very grave case. With eyes like yours one is never very ill.”

She felt immediate gratitude to him for this beginning, and told him of her troubles, her weakness, her nervousness and melancholy; then she mentioned, without laying too much stress on the matter, her alarmingly ill appearance. After listening to her with an attentive air, though asking no questions except as to her appetite, as if he knew well the secret nature of this feminine ailment, he sounded her, examined her,

felt of her shoulders with the tips of his fingers, lifted her arms, having undoubtedly met her thought and understood with the shrewdness of a practitioner who lifts all veils that she was consulting him more for her beauty than for her health. Then he said:

“Yes, we are a little anemic, and have some nervous troubles. That is not surprising, since you have experienced such a great affliction. I will write you a little prescription that will set you right again. But above all, you must eat strengthening food, take beef-tea, no water, but drink beer. I will indicate an excellent brand. Do not tire yourself by late hours, but walk as much as you can. Sleep a good deal and grow a little plumper. This is all that I can advise you, my fair patient.”

She had listened to him with deep interest, trying to guess at what his words implied. She caught at the last word.

“Yes, I am too thin,” said she. “I was a little too stout at one time, and perhaps I weakened myself by dieting.”

“Without any doubt. There is no harm in remaining thin when one has always been so; but when one grows thin on principle it is always at the expense of something else. Happily, that can be soon remedied. Good-bye, Madame.”

She felt better already, more alert; and she wished to send for the prescribed beer for her breakfast, at its headquarters, in order to obtain it quite fresh.

She was just leaving the table when Bertin was announced.

“It is I, again,” said he, “always I. I have come to ask you something. Have you anything particular to do this afternoon?”

“No, nothing. Why?”

“And Annette?”

“Nothing, also.”

“Then, can you come to the studio about four o'clock?”

“Yes, but for what purpose?”

“I am sketching the face of my Reverie, of which I spoke to you when I asked you whether Annette might pose for me a few moments. It would render me a great service if I could have her for only an hour to-day. Will you?”

The Countess hesitated, annoyed, without knowing the reason why. But she replied:

“Very well, my friend; we shall be with you at four o'clock.”

“Thank you! You are goodness itself!”

He went away to prepare his canvas and study his subject, so that he need not tire his model too much.

Then the Countess went out alone, on foot, to finish her shopping. She went down to the great central streets, then walked slowly up the Boulevard Malesherbes, for she felt as if her limbs were breaking. As she passed Saint Augustin's, she was seized with a desire to enter the church and rest. She pushed open the door, sighed with satisfaction in breathing the cool air of the vast nave, took a chair and sat down.

She was religious as very many Parisians are religious. She believed in God without a doubt, not being able to admit the existence of the universe without the existence of a creator. But associating, as does everyone, the attributes of divinity with the nature of the created matter that she beheld with her own eyes, she almost personified the Eternal God with what she knew of His work, without having a very clear idea as to what this mysterious Maker might really be.

She believed in Him firmly, adored Him theoretically, feared Him very vaguely, for she did not profess to understand His intentions or His will, having a very limited confidence in the priests, whom she regarded merely as the sons of peasants revolting from military service. Her father, a middle-class Parisian, never had imposed upon her any particular principles of devotion, and she had lived on thinking little about religious matters until her marriage. Then, her new station in life indicating more strictly her apparent duties toward the Church, she had

conformed punctiliously to this light servitude, as do so many of her station.

She was lady patroness to numerous and very well known infant asylums, never failed to attend mass at one o'clock on Sundays, gave alms for herself directly, and for the world by means of an abbe, the vicar of her parish.

She had often prayed, from a sense of duty, as a soldier mounts guard at a general's door. Sometimes she had prayed because her heart was sad, especially when she suspected Olivier of infidelity to her. At such times, without confiding to Heaven the cause for her appeal, treating God with the same naïve hypocrisy that is shown to a husband, she asked Him to succor her. When her father died, long before, and again quite recently, at her mother's death, she had had violent crises of religious fervor, and had passionately implored Him who watches over us and consoles us.

And, now behold! to-day, in that church where she had entered by chance, she suddenly felt a profound need to pray, not for some one nor for some thing, but for herself, for herself alone, as she had already prayed the other day at her mother's grave. She must have help from some source, and she called on God now as she had summoned the physician that very morning.

She remained a long time on her knees, in the deep silence of the church, broken only by the sound of footsteps. Then suddenly, as if a clock had struck in her heart, she awoke from her memories, drew out her watch and started to see that it was already four o'clock. She hastened away to take her daughter to the studio, where Olivier must already be expecting them.

They found the artist in his studio, studying upon the canvas the pose of his Reverie. He wished to reproduce exactly what he had seen in the Parc Monceau while walking with Annette: a young girl, dreaming, with an open book upon her knees. He had hesitated as to whether he should make her plain or pretty. If she were ugly she would have more character, would arouse more thought and emotion, would contain more philosophy. If pretty, she would be more seductive, would diffuse

more charm, and would please better.

The desire to make a study after his little friend decided him. The Reveuse should be pretty, and therefore might realize her poetic vision one day or other; whereas if ugly she would remain condemned to a dream without hope and without end.

As soon as the two ladies entered Olivier said, rubbing his hands:

“Well, Mademoiselle Nane, we are going to work together, it seems!”

The Countess seemed anxious. She sat in an armchair, and watched Olivier as he placed an iron garden-chair in the right light. He opened his bookcase to get a book, then asked, hesitating:

“What does your daughter read?”

“Dear me! anything you like! Give her a volume of Victor Hugo.”

“'La Legende des Siecles?'”

“That will do.”

“Little one, sit down here,” he continued, “and take this volume of verse. Look for page—page 336, where you will find a poem entitled 'Les Pauvres Gens.' Absorb it, as one drinks the best wines, slowly, word by word, and let it intoxicate you and move you. Then close the book, raise your eyes, think and dream. Now I will go and prepare my brushes.”

He went into a corner to put the colors on his palette, but while emptying on the thin board the leaden tubes whence issued slender, twisting snakes of color, he turned from time to time to look at the young girl absorbed in her reading.

His heart was oppressed, his fingers trembled; he no longer knew what he was doing, and he mingled the tones as he mixed the little piles of paste, so strongly did he feel once more before this apparition, before that resurrection, in that same place, after twelve years, an irresistible flood of emotion overwhelming his heart.

Now Annette had finished her reading and was looking straight before her.

Approaching her, Olivier saw in her eyes two bright drops which, breaking forth, ran down her cheeks. He was startled by one of those shocks that make a man forget himself, and turning toward the Countess he murmured:

“God! how beautiful she is!”

But he remained stupefied before the livid and convulsed face of Madame de Guilleroy. Her large eyes, full of a sort of terror, gazed at her daughter and the painter. He approached her, suddenly touched with anxiety.

“What is the matter?” he asked.

“I wish to speak to you.”

Rising, she said quickly to Annette; “Wait a moment, my child; I have a word to say to Monsieur Bertin.”

She passed swiftly into the little drawing-room near by, where he often made his visitors wait. He followed her, his head confused, understanding nothing. As soon as they were alone, she seized his hands and stammered:

“Olivier! Olivier, I beg you not to make her pose for you!”

“But why?” he murmured, disturbed.

“Why? Why?” she said precipitately. “He asks it! You do not feel it, then yourself? Why? Oh, I should have guessed it sooner myself, but I only discovered it this moment. I cannot tell you anything now. Go and find my daughter. Tell her that I am ill; fetch a cab, and come to see me in an hour. I will receive you alone.”

“But, really, what is the matter with you?”

She seemed on the verge of hysterics.

“Leave me! I cannot speak here. Get my daughter and call a cab.”

He had to obey and reentered the studio. Annette, unsuspicious, had resumed her reading, her heart overflowing with sadness by the poetic and lamentable story.

“Your mother is indisposed,” said Olivier. “She became very ill when she went into

the other room. I will take some ether to her."

He went out, ran to get a flask from his room and returned.

He found them weeping in each other's arms. Annette, moved by "Les Pauvres Gens," allowed her feelings full sway, and the Countess was somewhat solaced by blending her grief with that sweet sorrow, in mingling her tears with those of her daughter.

He waited for some time, not daring to speak; he looked at them, his own heart oppressed with an incomprehensible melancholy.

"Well," said he at last. "Are you better?"

"Yes, a little," the Countess replied. "It was nothing. Have you ordered a carriage?"

"Yes, it will come directly."

"Thank you, my friend—it is nothing. I have had too much grief for a long time."

"The carriage is here," a servant announced.

And Bertin, full of secret anguish, escorted his friend, pale and almost swooning, to the door, feeling her heart throb against his arm.

When he was alone he asked himself what was the matter with her, and why had she made this scene. And he began to seek a reason, wandering around the truth without deciding to discover it. Finally, he began to suspect. "Well," he said to himself, "is it possible she believes that I am making love to her daughter? No, that would be too much!" And, combating with ingenious and loyal arguments that supposititious conviction, he felt indignant that she had lent for an instant to this healthy and almost paternal affection any suspicion of gallantry. He became more and more irritated against the Countess, utterly unwilling to concede that she had dared suspect him of such villainy, of an infamy so unqualifiable; and he resolved, when the time should come for him to answer her, that he would not soften the expression of his resentment.

He soon left his studio to go to her house, impatient for an explanation. All along the way he prepared, with a growing irritation, the arguments and phrases that must justify him and avenge him for such a suspicion.

He found her on her lounge, her face changed by suffering.

“Well,” said he, drily, “explain to me, my dear friend, the strange scene that has just occurred.”

“What, you have not yet understood it?” she said, in a broken voice.

“No, I confess I have not.”

“Come, Olivier, search your own heart well.”

“My heart?”

“Yes, at the bottom of your heart.”

“I don't understand. Explain yourself better.”

“Look well into the depths of your heart, and see whether you find nothing there that is dangerous for you and for me.”

“I repeat that I do not comprehend you. I guess that there is something in your imagination, but in my own conscience I see nothing.”

“I am not speaking of your conscience, but of your heart.”

“I cannot guess enigmas. I entreat you to be more clear.”

Then, slowing raising her hands, she took the hands of the painter and held them; then, as if each word broke her heart, she said:

“Take care, my friend, or you will fall in love with my daughter!”

He withdrew his hands abruptly, and with the vivacity of innocence which combats a shameful accusation, with animated gesture and increasing excitement, he defended himself, accusing her in her turn of having suspected him unjustly.

She let him talk for some time, obstinately incredulous, sure of what she had said.

Then she resumed:

“But I do not suspect you, my friend. You were ignorant of what was passing within you, as I was ignorant of it until this morning. You treat me as if I had accused you of wishing to seduce Annette. Oh, no, no! I know how loyal you are, worthy of all esteem and of every confidence. I only beg you, I entreat you to look into the depths of your heart and see whether the affection which, in spite of yourself, you are beginning to have for my daughter, has not a characteristic a little different from simple friendship.”

Now he was offended, and, growing still more excited, he began once more to plead his loyalty, just as he argued all alone in the street.

She waited until he had finished his defense; then, without anger, but without being shaken in her conviction, though frightfully pale, she murmured:

“Olivier, I know very well all that you have just said to me, and I think as you do. But I am sure that I do not deceive myself. Listen, reflect, understand. My daughter resembles me too much, she is too much what I was once when you began to love me, that you should not begin to love her, too.”

“Then,” he exclaimed, “you dare to throw in my face such a thing as that on this simple supposition and ridiculous reasoning: 'He loves me; my daughter resembles me; therefore he will love her'!”

But seeing the Countess's face changing more and more, he continued in a softer tone:

“Now, my dear Any, it is precisely because I do find you once more in her that this young girl pleases me so much. It is you, you alone, that I love when I look at her.”

“Yes, and it is just that from which I begin to suffer, and which makes me so anxious. You are not yet aware of what you feel, but by and by you will no longer be able to deceive yourself regarding it.”

“Any, I assure you that you are mad.”

“Do you wish proofs?”

“Yes.”

“You had not come to Roncieres for three years, in spite of my desire to have you come. But you rushed down there when it was proposed that you should come to fetch us.”

“Oh, indeed! You reproach me for not leaving you alone down there, knowing that you were ill, after your mother's death!”

“So be it! I do not insist. But look: the desire to see Annette again is so imperious with you that you could not pass this day without asking me to take her to your studio, under the pretext of posing her.”

“And do you not suppose it was you I wished to see?”

“At this moment you are arguing against yourself, trying to convince yourself—but you do not deceive me. Listen again: Why did you leave abruptly, the night before last, when the Marquis de Farandal entered? Do you know why?”

He hesitated, very much surprised, disturbed, disarmed by this observation. Then he said slowly:

“But—I hardly know—I was tired, and then, to be candid, that imbecile makes me nervous.”

“Since when?”

“Always.”

“Pardon me, I have heard you sing his praises. You liked him once. Be quite sincere, Olivier.”

He reflected a few moments; then, choosing his words, he said:

“Yes, it is possible that the great love I have for you makes me love so much everything that belongs to you as to modify my opinion of that bore, whom I might

meet occasionally with indifference, but whom I should not like to see in your house almost every day.”

“My daughter's house will not be mine. But this is sufficient. I know the uprightness of your heart. I know that you will reflect deeply on what I have just said to you. When you have reflected you will understand that I have pointed out a great danger to you, while yet there is time to escape it. And you will beware. Now let us talk of something else, will you?”

He did not insist, but he was much disturbed; he no longer knew what to think, though indeed he had need for reflection. He went away after a quarter of an hour of unimportant conversation.

CHAPTER IV

SWEET POISON

With slow steps, Olivier returned to his own house, troubled as if he had just learned some shameful family secret. He tried to sound his heart, to see clearly within himself, to read those intimate pages of the inner book which seemed glued together, and which sometimes only a strange hand can turn over by separating them. Certainly he did not believe himself in love with Annette. The Countess, whose watchful jealousy never slept, had foreseen this danger from afar, and had signaled it before it even existed. But might that peril exist to-morrow, the day after, in a month? It was the frank question that he tried to answer sincerely. It was true that the child stirred his instincts of tenderness, but these instincts in men are so numerous that the dangerous ones should not be confounded with the inoffensive. Thus he adored animals, especially cats, and could not see their silky fur without being seized with an irresistible sensuous desire to caress their soft, undulating backs and kiss their electric fur.

The attraction that impelled him toward this girl a little resembled those obscure yet innocent desires that go to make up part of all the ceaseless and unappeasable vibrations of human nerves. His eye of the artist, as well as that of the man, was captivated by her freshness, by that springing of beautiful clear life, by that essence of youth that glowed in her; and his heart, full of memories of his long intimacy with the Countess, finding in the extraordinary resemblance of Annette to her mother a reawakening of old feelings, of emotions sleeping since the beginning of his love, had been startled perhaps by the sensation of an awakening. An awakening? Yes. Was it that? This idea illumined his mind. He felt that he had awakened after years of sleep. If he had loved the young girl without being aware of it, he should have experienced near her that rejuvenation of his whole being which creates a different man as soon as the flame of a new desire is kindled within him. No, the child had only breathed upon the former fire. It had always been the mother that he loved, but now a little more than recently, no doubt, because of her daughter, this reincarnation of herself. And he formulated this decision with the reassuring sophism: “One loves but once! The heart may often be affected at meeting some other being, for everyone exercises on others either attractions or repulsions. All these influences create friendship, caprices, desire for possession, quick and fleeting ardors, but not real love. That this love may exist it is necessary that two beings should be so truly born for each other, should be linked together in so many different ways, by so many similar tastes, by so many affinities of body, of mind, and of character, and so many ties of all kinds that the whole shall form a union of bonds. That which we love, in short, is not so much Madame X. or Monsieur Z.; it is a women or a man, a creature without a name, something sprung from Nature, that great female, with organs, a form, a heart, a mind, a combination of attributes which like a magnet attract our organs, our eyes, our lips, our hearts, our thoughts, all our appetites, sensual as well as intellectual. We love a type, that is, the reunion in one single person of all the human qualities that may separately attract us in others.”

For him, the Comtesse de Guilleroy had been this type, and their long-standing liaison, of which he had not wearied, proved it to him beyond doubt. Now, Annette so much resembled physically what her mother had been as to deceive the eye; so there was nothing astonishing in the fact that this man's heart had been surprised, if even it had not been wholly captured. He had adored one woman! Another woman was born of her, almost her counterpart. He could not prevent himself from bestowing on the latter a little tender remnant of the passionate attachment he had had for the former. There was no harm nor danger in that. Only his eyes and his memory allowed themselves to be deluded by this appearance of resurrection; but his instinct never had been affected, for never had he felt the least stirring of desire for the young girl.

However, the Countess had reproached him with being jealous of the Marquis! Was it true? Again he examined his conscience severely, and decided that as a matter of fact he was indeed a little jealous. What was there astonishing in that, after all? Are we not always being jealous of men who pay court to no matter what woman? Does not one experience in the street, at a restaurant, or a theater, a little feeling of enmity toward the gentleman who is passing or who enters with a lovely girl on his arm? Every possessor of a woman is a rival, a triumphant male, a conqueror envied by all the other males. And then, without considering these physiological reasons, if it was natural that he should have for Annette a sympathy a little excessive because of his love for her mother, was it not natural also that he should feel in his heart a little masculine hatred of the future husband? He could conquer this unworthy feeling without much trouble.

But in the depths of his heart he still felt a sort of bitter discontent with himself and with the Countess. Would not their daily intercourse be made disagreeable by the suspicion that he would be aware of in her? Should he not be compelled to watch with tiresome and scrupulous attention all that he said and did, his very looks, his slightest approach toward the young girl? for all that he might do or say would

appear suspicious to the mother. He reached his home in a gloomy mood and began to smoke cigarettes, with the vehemence of an irritated man who uses ten matches to light his tobacco. He tried in vain to work. His hand, his eye, and his brain seemed to have lost the knack of painting, as if they had forgotten it, or never had known and practised the art. He had taken up to finish a little sketch on canvas—a street corner, at which a blind man stood singing—and he looked at it with unconquerable indifference, with such a lack of power to continue it that he sat down before it, palette in hand, and forgot it, though continuing to gaze at it with attention and abstracted fixity.

Then, suddenly, impatience at the slowness of time, at the interminable minutes, began to gnaw him with its intolerable fever. What should he do until he could go to the club for dinner, since he could not work at home? The thought of the streets tired him only to think of, filled him with disgust for the sidewalks, the pedestrians, the carriages and shops; and the idea of paying visits that day, to no matter whom, aroused in him an instantaneous hatred for everyone he knew.

Then, what should he do? Should he pace to and fro in his studio, looking at the clock at every turn, watching the displacement of the long hand every few seconds? Ah, he well knew those walks from the door to the cabinet, covered with ornaments. In his hours of excitement, impulse, ambition, of fruitful and facile execution, these pacings had been delicious recreation—these goings and comings across the large room, brightened, animated, and warmed by work; but now, in his hours of powerlessness and nausea, the miserable hours, when nothing seemed worth the trouble of an effort or a movement, it was like the terrible tramping of a prisoner in his cell. If only he could have slept, even for an hour, on his divan! But no, he should not sleep; he should only agitate himself until he trembled with exasperation. Whence came this sudden attack of bad temper? He thought: “I am becoming excessively nervous to have worked myself into such a state for so insignificant a cause.”

Then he thought he would take a book. The volume of La Legende des Siecles had remained on the iron chair where Annette had laid it. He opened it and read two pages of verse without understanding them. He understood them no more than if they had been written in a foreign tongue. He was determined, however, and began again, only to find that what he read had not really penetrated to his mind. “Well,” said he to himself, “it appears that I am becoming imbecile!” But a sudden inspiration reassured him as to how he should fill the two hours that must elapse before dinner-time. He had a hot bath prepared, and there he remained stretched out, relaxed and soothed by the warm water, until his valet, bringing his clothes, roused him from a doze. Then he went to the club, where he found the usual companions. He was received with open arms and exclamations, for they had not seen him for several days.

“I have just returned from the country,” he explained.

All those men, except Musadieu, the landscape painter, professed a profound contempt for the fields. Rocdiane and Landa, to be sure, went hunting there, but among plains or woods they only enjoyed the pleasure of seeing pheasants, quail, or partridges falling like handfuls of feathers under their bullets, or little rabbits riddled with shot, turning somersaults like clowns, going heels over head four or five times, showing their white bellies and tails at every bound. Except for these sports of autumn and winter, they thought the country a bore. As Rocdiane would say: “I prefer little women to little peas!”

The dinner was lively and jovial as usual, animated by discussions wherein nothing unforeseen occurs. Bertin, to arouse himself, talked a great deal. They found him amusing, but as soon as he had had coffee, and a sixty-point game of billiards with the banker Liverdy, he went out, rambling from the Madeleine to the Rue Taitbout; after passing three times before the Vaudeville, he asked himself whether he should enter; almost called a cab to take him to the Hippodrome; changed his mind and

turned toward the Nouveau Cirque, then made an abrupt half turn, without motive, design, or pretext, went up the Boulevard Malesherbes, and walked more slowly as he approached the dwelling of the Comtesse de Guilleroy. “Perhaps she will think it strange to see me again this evening,” he thought. But he reassured himself in reflecting that there was nothing astonishing in his coming a second time to inquire how she felt.

She was alone with Annette, in the little back drawing-room, and was still working on her coverlets for the poor.

She said simply, on seeing him enter: “Ah, is it you, my friend?”

“Yes, I felt anxious; I wished to see you. How are you?”

“Thank you, very well.”

She paused a moment, then added, significantly:

“And you?”

He began to laugh unconcernedly, as he replied: “Oh. I am very well, very well. Your fears were entirely without foundation.”

She raised her eyes, pausing in her work, and fixed her gaze upon him, a gaze full of doubt and entreaty.

“It is true,” said he.

“So much the better,” she replied, with a smile that was slightly forced.

He sat down, and for the first time in that house he was seized with irresistible uneasiness, a sort of paralysis of ideas, still greater than that which had seized him that day as he sat before his canvas.

“You may go on, my child; it will not annoy him,” said the Countess to her daughter.

“What was she doing?”

“She was studying a fantaisie.”

Annette rose to go to the piano. He followed her with his eyes, unconsciously, as he always did, finding her pretty. Then he felt the mother's eye upon him, and turned his head abruptly, as if he were seeking something in the shadowy corner of the drawing-room.

The Countess took from her work-table a little gold case that he had given her, opened it, and offered him some cigarettes.

“Pray smoke, my friend,” said she; “you know I like it when we are alone here.”

He obeyed, and the music began. It was the music of the distant past, graceful and light, one of those compositions that seem to have inspired the artist on a soft moonlight evening in springtime.

“Who is the composer of that?” asked Bertin.

“Schumann,” the Countess replied. “It is little known and charming.”

A desire to look at Annette grew stronger within him, but he did not dare. He would have to make only a slight movement, merely a turn of the neck, for he could see out of the corner of his eye the two candles lighting the score; but he guessed so well, read so clearly, the watchful gaze of the Countess that he remained motionless, his eyes looking straight before him, interested apparently in the gray thread of smoke from his cigarette.

“Was that all you had to say to me?” Madame de Guilleroy murmured to him.

He smiled.

“Don't be vexed with me. You know that music hypnotizes me; it drinks my thoughts. I will talk soon.”

“I must tell you,” said the Countess, “that I had studied something for you before mamma's death. I never had you hear it, but I will play it for you immediately, as soon as the little one has finished; you shall see how odd it is.”

She had real talent, and a subtle comprehension of the emotion that flows through

sounds. It was indeed one of her surest powers over the painter's sensibility.

As soon as Annette had finished the pastoral symphony by Mehul, the Countess rose, took her place, and awakened a strange melody with her fingers, a melody of which all the phrases seemed complaints, divers complaints, changing, numerous, interrupted by a single note, beginning again, falling into the midst of the strains, cutting them short, scanning them, crashing into them, like a monotonous, incessant, persecuting cry, an unappeasable call of obsession.

But Olivier was looking at Annette, who had sat down facing him, and he heard nothing, comprehended nothing.

He looked at her, without thinking, indulging himself with the sight of her, as a good and habitual possession of which he had been deprived, drinking her youthful beauty wholesomely, as we drink water when thirsty.

“Well,” said the Countess, “was not that beautiful?”

“Admirable! Superb!” he said, aroused. “By whom?”

“You do not know it?”

“No.”

“What, really, you do not know it?”

“No, indeed.”

“By Schubert.”

“That does not astonish me at all,” he said, with an air of profound conviction. “It is superb! You would be delightful if you would play it over again.”

She began once more, and he, turning his head, began again to contemplate Annette, but listened also to the music, that he might taste two pleasures at the same time.

When Madame de Guilleroy had returned to her chair, in simple obedience to the natural duplicity of man he did not allow his gaze to rest longer on the fair profile of the young girl, who knitted opposite her mother, on the other side of the lamp.

But, though he did not see her, he tasted the sweetness of her presence, as one feels the proximity of a fire on the hearth; and the desire to cast upon her swift glances only to transfer them immediately to the Countess, tormented him—the desire of the schoolboy who climbs up to the window looking into the street as soon as the master's back is turned.

He went away early, for his power of speech was as paralyzed as his mind, and his persistent silence might be interpreted.

As soon as he found himself in the street a desire to wander took possession of him, for whenever he heard music it remained in his brain a long time, threw him into reveries that seemed the music itself in a dream, but in a clearer sequel. The sound of the notes returned, intermittent and fugitive, bringing separate measures, weakened, and far off as an echo; then, sinking into silence, appeared to leave it to the mind to give a meaning to the themes, and to seek a sort of tender and harmonious ideal. He turned to the left on reaching the outer Boulevard, perceiving the fairylike illumination of the Parc Monceau, and entered its central avenue, curving under the electric moons. A policeman was slowly strolling along; now and then a belated cab passed; a man, sitting on a bench in a bluish bath of electric light, was reading a newspaper, at the foot of a bronze mast that bore the dazzling globe. Other lights on the broad lawns, scattered among the trees, shed their cold and powerful rays into the foliage and on the grass, animating this great city garden with a pale life.

Bertin, with hands behind his back, paced the sidewalk, thinking of his walk with Annette in this same park when he had recognized in her the voice of her mother.

He let himself fall upon a bench, and, breathing in the cool freshness of the dewy lawns, he felt himself assailed by all the passionate expectancy that transforms the soul of youth into the incoherent canvas of an unfinished romance of love. Long ago he had known such evenings, those evenings of errant fancy, when he had allowed

his caprice to roam through imaginary adventures, and he was astonished to feel a return of sensations that did not now belong to his age.

But, like the persistent note in the Schubert melody, the thought of Annette, the vision of her face bent beside the lamp, and the strange suspicion of the Countess, recurred to him at every instant. He continued, in spite of himself, to occupy his heart with this question, to sound the impenetrable depths where human feelings germinate before being born. This obstinate research agitated him; this constant preoccupation regarding the young girl seemed to open to his soul the way to tender reveries. He could not drive her from his mind; he bore within himself a sort of evocation of her image, as once he had borne the image of the Countess after she had left him; he often had the strange sensation of her presence in the studio.

Suddenly, impatient at being dominated by a memory, he arose, muttering: “Any was stupid to say that to me. Now she will make me think of the little one!”

He went home, disturbed about himself. After he had gone to bed he felt that sleep would not come to him, for a fever coursed in his veins, and a desire for reverie fermented in his heart. Dreading a wakeful night, one of those enervating attacks of insomnia brought about by agitation of the spirit, he thought he would try to read. How many times had a short reading served him as a narcotic! So he got up and went into his library to choose a good and soporific work; but his mind, aroused in spite of himself, eager for any emotion it could find, sought among the shelves for the name of some author that would respond to his state of exaltation and expectancy. Balzac, whom he loved, said nothing to him; he disdained Hugo, scorned Lamartine, who usually touched his emotions, and fell eagerly upon Musset, the poet of youth. He took the volume and carried it to bed, to read whatever he might chance to find.

When he had settled himself in bed, he began to drink, as with the thirst of a drunkard, those flowing verses of an inspired being who sang, like a bird, of the

dawn of existence, and having breath only for the morning, was silent in the arid light of day; those verses of a poet who above all mankind was intoxicated with life, expressing his intoxication in fanfares of frank and triumphant love, the echo of all young hearts bewildered with desires.

Never had Bertin so perfectly comprehended the physical charm of those poems, which move the senses but hardly touch the intelligence. With his eyes on those vibrating stanzas, he felt that his soul was but twenty years old, radiant with hopes, and he read the volume through in a state of youthful intoxication. Three o'clock struck, and he was astonished to find that he had not yet grown sleepy. He rose to shut his window and to carry his book to a table in the middle of the room; but at the contact of the cold air a pain, of which several seasons at Aix had not cured him, ran through his loins, like a warning or a recall; and he threw aside the poet with an impatient movement, muttering: “Old fool!” Then he returned to bed and blew out his light.

He did not go to see the Countess the next day, and he even made the energetic resolution not to return there for two days. But whatever he did, whether he tried to paint or to walk, whether he bore his melancholy mood with him from house to house, his mind was everywhere harassed by the preoccupation of those two women, who would not be banished.

Having forbidden himself to go to see them, he solaced himself by thinking of them, and he allowed both mind and heart to give themselves up to memories of both. It happened often that in that species of hallucination in which he lulled his isolation the two faces approached each other, different, such as he knew them; then, passing one before the other, mingled, blended together, forming only one face, a little confused, a face that was no longer the mother's, not altogether that of the daughter, but the face of a woman loved madly, long ago, in the present, and forever.

Then he felt remorse at having abandoned himself to the influence of these

emotions, which he knew were powerful and dangerous. To escape them, to drive them away, to deliver his soul from this sweet and captivating dream, he directed his mind toward all imaginable ideas, all possible subjects of reflection and meditation. Vain efforts! All the paths of distraction that he took led him back to the same point, where he met a fair young face that seemed to be lying in wait for him. It was a vague and inevitable obsession that floated round him, recalling him, stopping him, no matter what detour he might make in order to fly from it.

The confusion of these two beings, which had so troubled him on the evening of their walk at Roncieres, rose again in his memory as soon as he evoked them, after ceasing to reflect and reason, and he attempted to comprehend what strange emotion was this that stirred his being. He said to himself: “Now, have I for Annette a more tender feeling than I should have?” Then, probing his heart, he felt it burning with affection for a woman who was certainly young, who had Annette's features, but who was not she. And he reassured himself in a cowardly way by thinking: “No, I do not love the little one; I am the victim of a resemblance.”

However, those two days at Roncieres remained in his soul like a source of heat, of happiness, of intoxication; and the least details of those days returned to him, one by one, with precision, sweeter even than at the time they occurred. Suddenly, while reviewing the course of these memories, he saw once more the road they had followed on leaving the cemetery, the young girl plucking flowers, and he recollected that he had promised her a cornflower in sapphires as soon as they returned to Paris.

All his resolutions took flight, and without struggling longer he took his hat and went out, rejoiced at the thought of the pleasure he was about to give her.

The footman answered him, when he presented himself:

“Madame is out, but Mademoiselle is at home.”

Again he felt a thrill of joy.

“Tell her that I should like to speak to her.”

Annette appeared very soon.

“Good-day, dear master,” said she gravely.

He began to laugh, shook hands with her, and sitting near her, said:

“Guess why I have come.”

She thought a few seconds.

“I don't know.”

“To take you and your mother to the jeweler's to choose the sapphire cornflower I promised you at Roncieres.”

The young girl's face was illumined with delight.

“Oh, and mamma has gone out,” said she. “But she will return soon. You will wait for her, won't you?”

“Yes, if she is not too long.”

“Oh, how insolent! Too long, with me! You treat me like a child.”

“No, not so much as you think,” he replied.

He felt in his heart a longing to please her, to be gallant and witty, as in the most successful days of his youth, one of those instinctive desires that excite all the faculties of charming, that make the peacock spread its tail and the poet write verses. Quick and vivacious phrases rose to his lips, and he talked as he knew how to talk when he was at his best. The young girl, animated by his vivacity, answered him with all the mischief and playful shrewdness that were in her.

Suddenly, while he was discussing an opinion, he exclaimed: “But you have already said that to me often, and I answered you—”

She interrupted him with a burst of laughter.

“Ah, you don't say 'tu' to me any more! You take me for mamma!”

He blushed and was silent, then he stammered:

“Your mother has already sustained that opinion with me a hundred times.”

His eloquence was extinguished; he knew no more what to say, and he now felt afraid, incomprehensibly afraid, of this little girl.

“Here is mamma,” said she.

She had heard the door open in the outer drawing-room, and Olivier, disturbed as if some one had caught him in a fault, explained how he had suddenly bethought him of his promise, and had come for them to take them to the jeweler's.

“I have a coupe,” said he. “I will take the bracket seat.”

They set out, and a little later they entered Montara's.

Having passed all his life in the intimacy, observation, study, and affection of women, having always occupied his mind with them, having been obliged to sound and discover their tastes, to know the details of dress and fashion as they knew them, being familiar with the minute details of their private life, he had arrived at a point that enabled him often to share certain of their sensations, and he always experienced, when entering one of the great shops where the charming and delicate accessories of their beauty are to be found, an emotion of pleasure that almost equaled that which stirred their hearts. He interested himself as they did in those coquettish trifles with which they set forth their beauty; the stuffs pleased his eyes; the laces attracted his hands; the most insignificant furbelows held his attention. In jewelers' shops he felt for the showcases a sort of religious respect, as if before a sanctuary of opulent seduction; and the counter, covered with dark cloth, upon which the supple fingers of the goldsmith make the jewels roll, displaying their precious reflections, filled him with a certain esteem.

When he had seated the Countess and her daughter before this severe piece of furniture, on which each, with a natural movement, placed one hand, he indicated what he wanted, and they showed him models of little flowers.

Then they spread sapphires before him, from which it was necessary to choose four. This took a long time. The two women turned them over on the cloth with the tips of their fingers, then lifted them carefully, looked through them at the light, studying them with knowing and passionate attention. When they had laid aside those they had chosen, three emeralds had to be selected to make the leaves, then a tiny diamond that would tremble in the center like a drop of dew.

Then Olivier, intoxicated with the joy of giving, said to the Countess:

“Will you do me the favor to choose two rings?”

“I?”

“Yes. One for you, one for Annette. Let me make you these little presents in memory of the two days I passed at Roncieres.”

She refused. He insisted. A long discussion followed, a struggle of words and arguments, which ended, not without difficulty, in his triumph.

Rings were brought, some, the rarest, alone in special cases; others arranged in similar groups in large square boxes, wherein all the fancifulness of their settings were displayed in alignment on the velvet. The painter was seated between the two women, and began, with the same ardent curiosity, to take up the gold rings, one by one, from the narrow slits that held them. He deposited them before him on the cloth-covered counter where they were massed in two groups, those that had been rejected at first sight and those from which a choice would be made.

Time was passing, insensibly and sweetly, in this pretty work of selection, more captivating than all the pleasures of the world, distracting and varied as a play, stirring also an exquisite and almost sensuous pleasure in a woman's heart.

Then they compared, grew animated, and, after some hesitation, the choice of the three judges settled upon a little golden serpent holding a beautiful ruby between his thin jaws and his twisted tail.

Olivier, radiant, now arose.

“I will leave you my carriage,” said he; “I have something to look after, and I must go.”

But Annette begged her mother to walk home, since the weather was so fine. The Countess consented, and, having thanked Bertin, went out into the street with her daughter.

They walked for some time in silence, enjoying the sweet realization of presents received; then they began to talk of all the jewels they had seen and handled. Within their minds still lingered a sort of glittering and jingling, an echo of gaiety. They walked quickly through the crowd which fills the street about five o'clock on a summer evening. Men turned to look at Annette, and murmured in distinct words of admiration as they passed. It was the first time since her mourning, since black attire had added brilliancy to her daughter's beauty, that the Countess had gone out with her in the streets of Paris; and the sensation of that street success, that awakened attention, those whispered compliments, that little wake of flattering emotion which the passing of a pretty woman leaves in a crowd of men, contracted her heart little by little with the same painful feeling she had had the other evening in her drawing-room, when her guests had compared the little one with her own portrait. In spite of herself, she watched for those glances that Annette attracted; she felt them coming from a distance, pass over her own face without stopping and suddenly settle upon the fair face beside her own. She guessed, she saw in the eyes the rapid and silent homage to this blooming youth, to the powerful charm of that radiant freshness, and she thought: “I was as pretty as she, if not prettier.” Suddenly the thought of Olivier flashed across her mind, and she was seized, as at Roncieres, with a longing to flee.

She did not wish to feel herself any longer in this bright light, amid this stream of people, seen by all those men who yet did not look at her. Those days seemed far

away, though in reality quite recent, when she had sought and provoked comparison with her daughter. Who, to-day, among the passers, thought of comparing them? Only one person had thought of it, perhaps, a little while ago, in the jeweler's shop. He? Oh, what suffering! Could it be that he was thinking continually of that comparison? Certainly he could not see them together without thinking of it, and without remembering the time when she herself had entered his house, so fresh, so pretty, so sure of being loved!

“I feel ill,” said she. “We will take a cab, my child.”

Annette was uneasy.

“What is the matter, mamma?” she asked.

“It is nothing; you know that since your grandmother's death I often have these moments of weakness.”

CHAPTER V

A WANING MOON

Fixed ideas have the tenacity of incurable maladies. Once entered in the soul they devour it, leaving it no longer free to think of anything, or to have a taste for the least thing. Whatever she did, or wherever she was, alone or surrounded by friends, she could no longer rid herself of the thought that had seized her in coming home side by side with her daughter. Could it be that Olivier, seeing them together almost every day, thought continually of the comparison between them?

Surely he must do it in spite of himself, incessantly, himself haunted by that unforgettable resemblance, accentuated still further by the imitation of tone and gesture they had tried to produce. Every time he entered she thought of that comparison; she read it in his eyes, guessed it and pondered over it in her heart and in her mind. Then she was tortured by a desire to hide herself, to disappear, never to

show herself again beside her daughter.

She suffered, too, in all ways, not feeling at home any more in her own house. That pained feeling of dispossession which she had had one evening, when all eyes were fixed on Annette under her portrait, continued, stronger and more exasperating than before. She reproached herself unceasingly for feeling that yearning need for deliverance, that unspeakable desire to send her daughter away from her, like a troublesome and tenacious guest; and she labored against it with unconscious skill, convinced of the necessity of struggling to retain, in spite of everything, the man she loved.

Unable to hasten Annette's marriage too urgently, because of their recent mourning, she feared, with a confused yet dominating fear, anything that might defeat that plan; and she sought, almost in spite of herself, to awaken in her daughter's heart some feeling of tenderness for the Marquis.

All the resourceful diplomacy she had employed so long to hold Olivier now took with her a new form, shrewder, more secret, exerting itself to kindle affection between the young people, and to keep the two men from meeting.

As the painter, who kept regular hours of work, never breakfasted away from home, and usually gave only his evenings to his friends, she often invited the Marquis to breakfast. He would arrive, spreading around him the animation of his ride, a sort of breath of morning air. And he talked gaily of all those worldly things that seem to float every day upon the autumnal awakening of brilliant and horse-loving Paris in the avenues of the Bois. Annette was amused in listening to him, acquired some taste for those topics of the days that he recounted to her, fresh and piquant as they were. An intimacy of youth sprang up between them, a pleasant companionship which a common and passionate love for horses naturally fostered. When he had gone the Countess and the Count would artfully praise him, saying everything necessary to let the young girl know that it depended only upon herself to marry him

if he pleased her.

She had understood very quickly, however, and reasoning frankly with herself, judged it a very simple thing to take for a husband this handsome fellow, who would give her, besides other satisfactions, that which she preferred above all others, the pleasure of galloping beside him every morning on a thoroughbred.

They found themselves betrothed one day, quite naturally, after a clasp of the hand and a smile, and the marriage was spoken of as something long decided. Then the Marquis began to bring gifts, and the Duchess treated Annette like her own daughter. The whole affair, then, had been fostered by common accord, warmed over the fire of a little intimacy, during the quiet hours of the day; and the Marquis, having many other occupations, relatives, obligations and duties, rarely came in the evening.

That was Olivier's time. He dined regularly every week with his friends, and also continued to appear without appointment to ask for a cup of tea between ten o'clock and midnight.

As soon as he entered the Countess watched him, devoured by a desire to know what was passing in his heart. He gave no glance, made no gesture that she did not immediately interpret, and she was tortured by this thought: “It is impossible that he is not in love with her, seeing us so close together.”

He, too, brought gifts. Not a week passed that he did not appear bearing two little packages in his hands, offering one to the mother, the other to the daughter; and the Countess, opening the boxes, which often held valuable objects, felt again that contraction of the heart. She knew so well that desire to give which, as a woman, she never had been able to satisfy—that desire to bring something that would give pleasure, to purchase for someone, to find in the shops some trifle that would please.

The painter had already been through this phase, and she had seen him come in many times with that same smile, that same gesture, a little packet in his hand. That

habit had ceased after awhile, and now it had begun again. For whom? She had no matter of doubt. It was not for her!

He appeared fatigued and thin. She concluded that he was suffering. She compared his entrances, his manner, his bearing with the attitude of the Marquis, who was also beginning to be attracted by Annette's grace. It was not at all the same thing: Monsieur de Farandal admired her, Olivier Bertin loved! She believed this at least during her hours of torture; then, in quieter moments she still hoped that she had deceived herself.

Oh, often she could hardly restrain herself from questioning him when she was alone with him, praying, entreating him to speak, to confess all, to hide nothing! She preferred to know and to weep under certainty than to suffer thus under doubt, not able to read that closed heart, wherein she felt another love was growing.

That heart, which she prized more highly than her life, over which she had watched, and which she had warmed and animated with her love for twelve years, of which she had believed herself sure, which she had hoped was definitely hers, conquered, submissive, passionately devoted for the rest of their lives, behold! now that heart was escaping her by an inconceivable, horrible, and monstrous fatality! Yes, it had suddenly closed itself, upon a secret. She could no longer penetrate it by a familiar word, or hide therein her own affection as in a faithful retreat open for herself alone. What is the use of loving, of giving oneself without reserve, if suddenly he to whom one has offered her whole being, her entire existence, all, everything she had in the world, is to escape thus because another face has pleased him, transforming him in a few days almost into a stranger?

A stranger! He, Olivier? He spoke to her, as always, with the same words, the same voice, the same tone. And yet there was something between them, something inexplicable, intangible, invincible, almost nothing—that almost nothing that causes a sail to float away when the wind turns.

He was drifting, in fact, drifting away from her a little more each day, by all the glances he cast upon Annette. He himself did not attempt to see clearly into the depths of his heart. He felt, indeed, that fermentation of love, that irresistible attraction; but he would not understand, he trusted to events, to the unforeseen chances of life.

He had no longer any other interest than that of his dinners and his evenings between those two women, separated from the gay world by their mourning. Meeting only indifferent faces at their house—those of the Corbelles, and Musadieu oftener—he fancied himself almost alone in the world with them; and as he now seldom saw the Duchess and the Marquis, for whom the morning and noontimes were reserved, he wished to forget them, suspecting that the marriage had been indefinitely postponed.

Besides, Annette never spoke of Monsieur de Farandal before him. Was this because of a sort of instinctive modesty, or was it perhaps from one of those secret intuitions of the feminine heart which enable them to foretell that of which they are ignorant?

Weeks followed weeks, without changing this manner of life, and autumn came, bringing the reopening of the Chamber, earlier than usual because of certain political dangers.

On the day of the reopening, the Comte de Guilleroy was to take to the meeting of Parliament Madame de Mortemain, the Marquis, and Annette, after a breakfast at his own house. The Countess alone, isolated in her sorrow, which was steadily increasing, had declared that she would remain at home.

They had left the table and were drinking coffee in the large drawing-room, in a merry mood. The Count, happy to resume parliamentary work, his only pleasure, talked very well concerning the existing situation and of the embarrassments of the Republic; the Marquis, unmistakably in love, answered him brightly, while gazing at Annette; and the Duchess was almost equally pleased with the emotion of her

nephew and the distress of the government. The air of the drawing-room was warm with that first concentrated heat of newly-lighted furnaces, the heat of draperies, carpets, and walls, in which the perfumes of asphyxiated flowers was evaporating. There was in this closely shut room, filled with the aroma of coffee, an air of comfort, intimate, familiar, and satisfied, when the door was opened before Olivier Bertin.

He paused at the threshold, so surprised that he hesitated to enter, surprised as a deceived husband who beholds his wife's crime. A confusion of anger and mingled emotion suffocated him, revealing to him the fact that his heart was worm-eaten with love! All that they had hidden from him, and all that he had concealed from himself appeared before him as he perceived the Marquis installed in the house, as a betrothed lover!

He understood, in a transport of exasperation, all that which he would rather not have known and all that the Countess had not dared to tell him. He did not ask himself why all those preparations for marriage had been concealed from him. He guessed it, and his eyes, growing hard, met those of the Countess, who blushed. They understood each other.

When he was seated, everyone was silent for a few seconds, his unexpected entrance having paralyzed their flow of spirits; then the Duchess began to speak to him, and he replied in a brief manner, his voice suddenly changed.

He looked around at these people who were now chatting again, and said to himself: “They are making game of me. They shall pay for it.” He was especially vexed with the Countess and Annette, whose innocent dissimulation he suddenly understood.

“Oh, oh! it is time to go,” exclaimed the Count, looking at the clock. Turning to the painter, he added: “We are going to the opening of Parliament. My wife will remain here, however. Will you accompany us? It would give me great pleasure.”

“No, thanks,” replied Olivier drily. “Your Chamber does not tempt me.”

Annette approached in a playful way, saying: “Oh, do come, dear master! I am sure that you would amuse us much more than the deputies.”

“No, indeed. You will amuse yourself very well without me.”

Seeing him discontented and chagrined, she insisted, to show that she felt kindly toward him.

“Yes, come, sir painter! I assure you that as for myself I cannot do without you.”

His next words escaped him so quickly that he could nether check them as he spoke nor soften their tone:

“Bah! You do well enough without me, just as everyone else does!”

A little surprised at his tone, she exclaimed: “Come, now! Here he is beginning again to leave off his 'tu' to me!”

His lips were curled in one of those smiles that reveal the suffering of a soul, and he said with a slight bow: “It will be necessary for me to accustom myself to it one day or another.”

“Why, pray?”

“Because you will marry, and your husband, whoever he may be, would have the right to find that word rather out of place coming from me.”

“It will be time enough then to think about that,” the Countess hastened to say. “But I trust that Annette will not marry a man so susceptible as to object to such familiarity from so old a friend.”

“Come, come!” cried the Count; “let us go. We shall be late.”

Those who were to accompany him, having risen, went out after him, after the usual handshakes and kisses which the Duchess, the Countess, and her daughter exchanged at every meeting as at every parting.

They remained alone, She and He, standing, behind the draperies over the closed door.

“Sit down, my friend,” said she softly.

But he answered, almost violently: “No, thanks! I am going, too.”

“Oh, why?” she murmured, entreatingly.

“Because this is not my hour, it appears. I ask pardon for having come without warning.”

“Olivier, what is the matter with you?”

“Nothing. I only regret having disturbed an organized pleasure party.”

She seized his hand.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “They were just about to set out, since they were going to be present at the opening of the session. I intended to stay at home. Contrary to what you said just now, you were really inspired in coming to-day when I am alone.”

He sneered.

“Inspired? Yes, I was inspired!”

She seized his wrists, and looking deep into his eyes she murmured very low:

“Confess to me that you love her!”

He withdrew his hands, unable to control his impatience any longer.

“But you are simply insane with that idea!”

She seized him again by the arm and, tightening her hold on his sleeve, she implored:

“Olivier! Confess, confess! I would rather know. I am certain of it, but I would rather know. I would rather—Oh, you do not comprehend what my life has become!”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“What would you have me do? Is it my fault if you lose your head?”

She held him, drawing him toward the other salon at the back, where they could not be heard. She drew him by his coat, clinging to him and panting. When she had led him as far as the little circular divan, she made him let himself fall upon it; then she sat down beside him.

“Olivier, my friend, my only friend, I pray you to tell me that you love her. I know it, I feel it from all that you do. I cannot doubt it. I am dying of it, but I wish to know it from your own lips.”

As he still resisted, she fell on her knees at his feet. Her voice shook.

“Oh, my friend, my only friend! Is it true that you love her?”

“No, no, no!” he exclaimed, as he tried to make her rise. “I swear to you that I do not.”

She reached up her hand to his mouth and pressed it there tight, stammering: “Oh, do not lie! I suffer too much!”

Then, letting her head fall on this man's knees, she sobbed.

He could see only the back of her neck, a mass of blond hair, mingled with many white threads, and he was filled with immense pity, immense grief.

Seizing that heavy hair in both hands he raised her head violently, turning toward himself two bewildered eyes, from which tears were flowing. And then on those tearful eyes he pressed his lips many times, repeating:

“Any! Any! My dear, my dear Any!”

Then she, attempting to smile, and speaking in that hesitating voice of children when choking with grief, said:

“Oh, my friend, only tell me that you still love me a little.”

He embraced her again, even more tenderly than before.

“Yes, I love you, my dear Any.”

She arose, sat down beside him again, seized his hands, looked at him, and said

tenderly:

“It is such a long time that we have loved each other. It should not end like this.”

He pressed her close to him, asking:

“Why should it end?”

“Because I am old, and because Annette resembles too much what I was when you first knew me.”

Now it was his turn to close her sad lips with his fingers, saying:

“Again! I beg that you will speak no more of that. I swear to you that you deceive yourself.”

“Oh, if you will only love me a little,” she repeated.

“Yes, I love you,” he said again.

They remained a long time without speaking, hands clasped in hands, deeply moved and very sad. At last she broke the silence, murmuring:

“Oh, the hours that remain for me to live will not be gay!”

“I will try to make them sweet to you.”

The shadow of the clouded sky that precedes the twilight by two hours was darkening the drawing-room, burying them little by little in the gray dimness of an autumn evening.

The clock struck.

“It is a long time since we came in here,” said she. “You must go, for someone might come, and we are not calm.”

He arose, clasped her close, kissing her half-open lips, as he used to do; then they crossed the two drawing-rooms, arm in arm, like a newly-married pair.

“Good-by, my friend.”

“Good-by, my friend.”

And the portiere fell behind him.

He went downstairs, turned toward the Madeleine, and began to walk without knowing what he was doing, dazed as if from a blow, his legs weak, his heart hot and palpitating as if something burning shook within his breast. For two or three hours, perhaps four, he walked straight before him, in a sort of moral stupor and physical prostration which left him only just strength enough to put one foot before the other. Then he went home to reflect.

He loved this little girl, then. He comprehended now all that he had felt near her since that walk in the Parc Monceau, when he found in her mouth the call from a voice hardly recognized, the voice that long ago had awakened his heart; then all that slow, irresistible renewal of a love not yet extinct, not yet frozen, which he persisted in not acknowledging to himself.

What should he do? But what could he do? When she was married he would avoid seeing her often, that was all. Meantime, he would continue to return to the house, so that no one should suspect anything, and he would hide his secret from everyone.

He dined at home, which he very seldom did. Then he had a fire made in the large stove in his studio, for the night promised to be very cold. He even ordered the chandeliers to be lighted, as if he disliked the dark corners, and then he shut himself in. What strange emotion, profound, physical, frightfully sad, had seized him! He felt it in his throat, in his breast, in all his relaxed muscles as well as in his fainting soul. The walls of the apartment oppressed him; all his life was inclosed therein—his life as an artist, his life as a man. Every painted study hanging there recalled a success, each piece of furniture spoke of some memory. But successes and memories were things of the past. His life? How short, how empty it seemed to him, yet full. He had made pictures, and more pictures, and always pictures, and had loved one woman. He recalled the evenings of exaltation, after their meetings, in this same studio. He had walked whole nights with his being on fire with fever. The joy

of happy love, the joy of worldly success, the unique intoxication of glory, had caused him to taste unforgettable hours of inward triumph.

He had loved a woman, and that woman had loved him. Through her he had received that baptism which reveals to man the mysterious world of emotions and of love. She had opened his heart almost by force, and now he could no longer close it. Another love had entered, in spite of him, through this opening—another, or rather the same relighted by a new face; the same, stronger by all the force which this need to adore takes on in old age. So he loved this little girl! He need no longer struggle, resist, or deny; he loved her with the despairing knowledge that he should not even gain a little pity from her, that she would always be ignorant of his terrible torment, and that another would marry her! At this thought constantly recurring, impossible to drive away, he was seized with an animal-like desire to howl like chained dogs, for like them he felt powerless, enslaved, imprisoned. Becoming more and more nervous, the longer he thought, he walked with long strides through the vast room, lighted up as if for a celebration. At last, unable to tolerate longer the pain of that reopened wound, he wished to try to calm it with the recollection of his early love, to drown it in evoking his first and great passion. From the closet where he kept it he took the copy of the Countess's portrait that he had made formerly for himself, then he put it on his easel, and sitting down in front of it, gazed at it. He tried to see her again, to find her living again, such as he had loved her before. But it was always Annette that rose upon the canvas. The mother had disappeared, vanished, leaving in her place that other face which resembled hers so strangely. It was the little one, with her hair a little lighter, her smile a little more mischievous, her air a little more mocking; and he felt that he belonged body and soul to that young being, as he never had belonged to the other, as a sinking vessel belongs to the waves!

Then he arose, and in order to see this apparition no more he turned the painting around; then, as he felt his heart full of sadness, he went to his chamber to bring into the studio the drawer of his desk, wherein were sleeping all the letters of the mistress

of his heart. There they lay, as if in a bed, one upon the other, forming a thick layer of little thin papers. He thrust his hands among the mass, among all that which spoke of both of them, deep into that bath of their long intimacy. He looked at that narrow board coffin in which lay the mass of piled-up envelopes, on which his name, his name alone, was always written. He reflected that the love, the tender attachment of two beings, one for the other, were recounted therein, among that yellowish wave of papers spotted by red seals, and he inhaled, in bending over it, the old melancholy odor of letters that have been packed away.

He wished to re-read them, and feeling in the bottom of the drawer, he drew out a handful of the earlier ones. As soon as he opened them vivid memories emerged from them, which stirred his soul. He recognized many that he had carried about on his person for whole weeks, and found again, throughout the delicate handwriting that said such sweet things to him, the forgotten emotions of early days. Suddenly he found under his fingers a fine embroidered handkerchief. What was that? He pondered a few minutes, then he remembered! One day, at his house, she had wept because she was a little jealous, and he had stolen and kept her handkerchief, moist with her tears!

Ah, what sad things! What sad things! The poor woman!

From the depths of that drawer, from the depths of his past, all these reminiscences rose like a vapor, but it was only the impalpable vapor of a reality now dead. Nevertheless, he suffered and wept over the letters, as one weeps over the dead because they are no more.

But the remembrance of all his early love awakened in him a new and youthful ardor, a wave of irresistible tenderness which called up in his mind the radiant face of Annette. He had loved the mother, through a passionate impulse of voluntary servitude; he was beginning to love this little girl like a slave, a trembling old slave on whom fetters are riveted that he never can break. He felt this in the depths of his

being, and was terrified. He tried to understand how and why she possessed him thus. He knew her so little! She was hardly a woman as yet; her heart and soul still slept with the sleep of youth.

He, on the other hand, was now almost at the end of his life. How, then, had this child been able to capture him with a few smiles and locks of her hair? Ah, the smiles, the hair of that little blonde maiden made him long to fall on his knees and strike the dust with his head!

Does one know, does one ever know why a woman's face has suddenly the power of poison upon us? It seems as if one had been drinking her with the eyes, that she had become one's mind and body. We are intoxicated with her, mad over her; we live of that absorbed image and would die of it!

How one suffers sometimes from this ferocious and incomprehensible power of a certain face on a man's heart!

Olivier Bertin began to pace his room again; night was advancing, his fire had gone out. Through the window-panes the cold air penetrated from outside. Then he went back to bed, where he continued to think and suffer until daylight.

He rose early, without knowing why, nor what he was going to do, agitated by his nervousness, irresolute as a whirling weather-vane.

In seeking some distraction for his mind, some occupation for his body, he recollected that on that particular day of the week certain members of his club had the habit of meeting regularly at the Moorish Baths, where they breakfasted after the massage. So he dressed quickly, hoping that the hot room and the shower would calm him, and he went out.

As soon as he found himself in the street, he felt the cold air, that first crisp cold of the early frost, which destroys in a single night the last trances of summer.

All along the Boulevards fell a thick shower of large yellow leaves which rustled down with a dry sound. As far as could be seen, they fell from one end of the broad

avenue to the other, between the facades of the houses, as if all their stems had just been cut from the branches by a thin blade of ice. The road and the sidewalks were already covered with them, resembling for a few hours the paths in the woods at the beginning of winter. All that dead foliage crackled under the feet, and massed itself, from time to time, in light waves under the gusts of wind.

This was one of those days of transition which mark the end of one season and the beginning of another, which have a savor or a special sadness—the sadness of the death-struggle or the savor of rising sap.

In crossing the threshold of the Moorish Baths, the thought of the heat that would soon penetrate his flesh after his walk in the cold air gave a feeling of satisfaction to Olivier's sad heart.

He undressed quickly, wrapping around his body the light scarf the attendant handed to him, and disappeared behind the padded door open before him.

A warm, oppressive breath, which seemed to come from a distant furnace, made him pant as if he needed air while traversing a Moorish gallery lighted by two Oriental lanterns. Then a negro with woolly head, attired only in a girdle, with shining body and muscular limbs, ran before him to raise a curtain at the other end; and Bertin entered the large hot-air room, round, high-studded, silent, almost as mystic as a temple. Daylight fell from above through a cupola and through trefoils of colored glass into the immense circular room, with paved floor and walls covered with pottery decorated after the Arab fashion.

Men of all ages, almost naked, walked slowly about, grave and silent; others were seated on marble benches, with arms crossed; others still chatted in low tones.

The burning air made one pant at the very entrance. There was, within that stifling and decorated circular room, where human flesh was heated, where black and yellow attendants with copper-colored legs moved about, something antique and mysterious.

The first face the painter saw was that of the Comte de Landa. He was promenading around like a Roman wrestler, proud of his enormous chest and of his great arms crossed over it. A frequenter of the hot baths, he felt when there like an admired actor on the stage, and he criticised like an expert the muscles of all the strong men in Paris.

“Good-morning, Bertin,” said he.

They shook hands; then Landa continued: “Splendid weather for sweating!”

“Yes, magnificent.”

“Have you seen Rocdiane? He is down there. I was at his house just as he was getting out of bed. Oh, look at that anatomy!”

A little gentleman was passing, bow-legged, with thin arms and flanks, the sight of whom caused the two old models of human vigor to smile disdainfully.

Rocdiane approached them, having perceived the painter. They sat down on a long marble table and began to chat quite as if they were in a drawing-room. The attendants moved about, offering drinks. One could hear the clapping of the masseurs' hands on bare flesh and the sudden flow of the shower-baths. A continuous pattering of water, coming from all corners of the great amphitheater, filled it also with a sound like rain.

At every instant some newcomer saluted the three friends, or approached them to shake hands. Among them were the big Duke of Harrison, the little Prince Epilati, Baron Flach, and others.

Suddenly Rocdiane said: “How are you, Farandal?”

The Marquis entered, his hands on his hips, with the easy air of well-made men, who never feel embarrassed at anything.

“He is a gladiator, that chap!” Landa murmured.

Rocdiane resumed, turning toward Bertin: “Is it true that he is to marry the daughter

of your friend?”

“I think so,” said the painter.

But the question, before that man, in that place, gave to Olivier's heart a frightful shock of despair and revolt. The horror of all the realities he had foreseen appeared to him for a second with such acuteness that he struggled an instant or so against an animal-like desire to fling himself on Farandal.

He arose.

“I am tired,” said he. “I am going to the massage now.”

An Arab was passing.

“Ahmed, are you at liberty?”

“Yes, Monsieur Bertin.”

And he went away quickly in order to avoid shaking hands with Farandal, who was approaching slowly in making the rounds of the Hammam.

He remained barely a quarter of an hour in the large quiet resting-room, in the center of a row of cells containing the beds, with a parterre of African plants and a little fountain in the center. He had a feeling of being pursued, menaced, that the Marquis would join him, and that he should be compelled, with extended hand, to treat him as a friend, when he longed to kill him.

He soon found himself again on the Boulevard, covered with dead leaves. They fell no more, the last ones having been detached by a long blast of wind. Their red and yellow carpet shivered, stirred, undulated from one sidewalk to another, blown by puffs of the rising wind.

Suddenly a sort of roaring noise glided over the roofs, the animal-like sound of a passing tempest, and at the same time a furious gust of wind that seemed to come from the Madeleine swept through the Boulevard.

All the fallen leaves, which appeared to have been waiting for it, rose at its

approach. They ran before it, massing themselves, whirling, and rising in spirals up to the tops of the buildings. The wind chased them like a flock, a mad flock that fled before it, flying toward the gates of Paris and the free sky of the suburbs. And when the great cloud of leaves and dust had disappeared on the heights of the Quartier Malesherbes, the sidewalks and roads remained bare, strangely clean and swept.

Bertin was thinking: “What will become of me? What shall I do? Where shall I go?” And he returned home, unable to think of anything.

A news-stand attracted his eye. He bought seven or eight newspapers, hoping that he might find in them something to read for an hour or two.

“I will breakfast here,” said he, as he entered, and went up to his studio.

But as he sat down he felt that he could not stay there, for throughout his body surged the excitement of an angry beast.

The newspapers, which he glanced through, could not distract his mind for a minute, and the news he read met his eye without reaching his brain. In the midst of an article which he was not trying to comprehend, the name of Guilleroy made him start. It was about the session of the Chamber, where the Count had spoken a few words.

His attention, aroused by that call, was now arrested by the name of the celebrated tenor Montrose, who was to give, about the end of December, a single performance at the Opera. This would be, the newspaper stated, a magnificent musical solemnity, for the tenor Montrose, who had been absent six years from Paris, had just won, throughout Europe and America, a success without precedent; moreover, he would be supported by the illustrious Swedish singer, Helsson, who had not been heard in Paris for five years.

Suddenly Olivier had an idea, which seemed to spring from the depths of his heart—he would give Annette the pleasure of seeing this performance. Then he remembered that the Countess's mourning might be an obstacle to this scheme, and

he sought some way to realize it in spite of the difficulty. Only one method presented itself. He must take a stage-box where one may be almost invisible, and if the Countess should still not wish to go, he would have Annette accompanied by her father and the Duchess. In that case, he would have to offer his box to the Duchess. But then he would be obliged to invite the Marquis!

He hesitated and reflected a long time.

Certainly, the marriage was decided upon; no doubt the date was settled. He guessed the reason for his friend's haste in having it finished soon; he understood that in the shortest time possible she would give her daughter to Farandal. He could not help it. He could neither prevent, nor modify, nor delay this frightful thing. Since he must bear it, would it not be better for him to try to master his soul, to hide his suffering, to appear content, and no longer allow himself to be carried away by his rage, as he had done?

Yes, he would invite the Marquis, and so allay the Countess's suspicions, and keep for himself a friendly door in the new establishment.

As soon as he had breakfasted, he went down to the Opera to engage one of the boxes hidden by the curtain. It was promised to him. Then he hastened to the Guilleroys'.

The Countess appeared almost immediately, apparently still a little moved by their tender interview of the day before.

“How kind of you to come again to-day!” said she.

“I am bringing you something,” he faltered.

“What is it?”

“A stage-box at the Opera for the single performance of Helsson and Montrose.”

“Oh, my friend, what a pity! And my mourning?”

“Your mourning has lasted for almost four months.”

“I assure you that I cannot.”

“And Annette? Remember that she may never have such an opportunity again.”

“With whom could she go?”

“With her father and the Duchess, whom I am about to invite. I intend also to offer a seat to the Marquis.”

She gazed deep into his eyes, and a wild desire to kiss him rose to her lips. Hardly believing her ears, she repeated: “To the Marquis?”

“Why, yes.”

She consented at once to this arrangement.

He continued, in an indifferent tone: “Have you fixed the date of their marriage?”

“Oh, yes, almost. We have reasons for hastening it very much, especially as it was decided upon before my mother's death. You remember that?”

“Yes, perfectly. And when will it take place?”

“About the beginning of January. I ask your pardon for not having told you of it sooner.”

Annette entered. He felt his heart leap within him as if on springs, and all the tenderness that drew him toward her suddenly became bitter, arousing in his heart that strange, passionate animosity into which love changes when lashed by jealousy.

“I have brought you something,” he said.

“So we have decided to say 'you'?” she replied.

He assumed a paternal tone.

“Listen, my child, I know all about the event that is soon to occur. I assure you that then it will be indispensable. Better say 'you' now than later.”

She shrugged her shoulders with an air of discontent, while the Countess remained silent, looking afar off, her thoughts preoccupied.

“Well, what have you brought me?” inquired Annette.

He told her about the performance, and the invitations he intended to give. She was delighted, and, throwing her arms around his neck with the manner of a little girl, she kissed him on both cheeks.

He felt ready to sink, and understood, when he felt the light caresses of that little mouth with its sweet breath, that he never should be cured of his passion.

The Countess, annoyed, said to her daughter: “You know that your father is waiting for you.”

“Yes, mamma, I am going.”

She ran away, still throwing kisses from the tips of her fingers.

As soon as she had gone, Olivier asked: “Will they travel?”

“Yes, for three months.”

“So much the better,” he murmured in spite of himself.

“We will resume our former life,” said the Countess.

“Yes, I hope so,” said he, hesitatingly.

“But do not neglect me meanwhile.”

“No, my friend.”

The impulse he had shown the evening before, when seeing her weep, and the intention which he had just expressed of inviting the Marquis to the performance at the Opera, had given new hope to the Countess.

But it was short. A week had not passed ere she was again following the expression of this man's face with tortured and jealous attention, watching every stage of his suffering. She could ignore nothing, herself enduring all the pain that she guessed at in him; and Annette's constant presence reminded her at every moment of the day of the hopelessness of her efforts.

Everything oppressed her at the same time—her age and her mourning. Her active, intelligent, and ingenious coquetry, which all her life had given her triumph, found itself paralyzed by that black uniform which marked her pallor and the change in her features, while it rendered the adolescence of her daughter absolutely dazzling. The time seemed far away, though it was quite recent, when, on Annette's return to Paris, she had proudly sought similar toilets which at that time were favorable to her. Now she had a furious longing to tear from her body those vestments of death which made her ugly and tortured her.

If she had felt that all the resources of elegance were at her service, if she had been able to choose and use delicately shaded stuffs, in harmony with her coloring, which would have lent a studied power to her fading charms, as captivating as the inert grace of her daughter, she would no doubt have known how to remain still the more charming.

She knew so well the influences of the fever-giving costume of evening, and the soft sensuousness of morning attire, of the disturbing deshabille worn at breakfast with intimate friends, which lend to a woman until noontime a sort of reminiscence of her rising, the material and warm impression of the bed and of her perfumed room!

But what could she attempt under that sepulchral robe, that convict's dress, which must cover her for a whole year? A year! She must remain a year imprisoned in that black attire, inactive and vanquished. For a whole year she would feel herself growing old, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, under that sheath of crape! What would she be in a year if her poor ailing body continued to alter thus under the anguish of her soul?

These thoughts never left her, and spoiled for her everything she might have enjoyed, turned into sadness things that would have given her joy, leaving her not a pleasure, a contentment, or a gaiety intact. She was agitated incessantly by an exasperating need to shake off this weight of misery that crushed her, for without

this tormenting obsession she would still have been so happy, alert, and healthy! She felt that her soul was still fresh and bright, her heart still young, the ardor of a being that is beginning to live, an insatiable appetite for happiness, more voracious even than before, and a devouring desire to love.

And now, all good things, all things sweet, delicious and poetic, which embellish life and make it enjoyable, were withdrawing from her, because she was growing old! It was all finished! Yet she still found within her the tenderness of the young girl and the passionate impulses of the young woman. Nothing had grown old but her body, that miserable skin, that stuff over the bones, fading little by little like the covering of a piece of furniture. The curse of this decay had attached itself to her, and had become almost a physical suffering. This fixed idea had created a sensation of the epidermis, the sensation of growing old, continuous and imperceptible, like that of cold or of heat. She really believed that she felt an indescribable sort of itching, the slow march of wrinkles upon her forehead, the weakening of the tissues of the cheeks and throat, and the multiplication of those innumerable little marks that wear out the tired skin. Like some one afflicted with a consuming disease, whom a continual prurience induces to scratch himself, the perception and terror of that abominable, swift and secret work of time filled her soul with an irresistible need of verifying it in her mirrors. They called her, drew her, forced her to come, with fixed eyes, to see, to look again, to recognize incessantly, to touch with her finger, as if to assure herself, the indelible mark of the years. At first this was an intermittent thought, returning whenever she saw the polished surface of the dreaded crystal, at home or abroad. She paused in the street to gaze at herself in the shop-windows, hanging as if by one hand to all the glass plates with which merchants ornament their facades. It became a disease, an obsession. She carried in her pocket a dainty little ivory powder-box, as large as a nut, the interior of which contained a tiny mirror; and often, while walking, she held it open in her hand and raised it to her eyes.

When she sat down to read or write in the tapestried drawing-room, her mind, distracted for the time by a new occupation, would soon return to its obsession. She struggled, tried to amuse herself, to have other ideas, to continue her work. It was in vain; the prick of desire tormented her, and soon dropping her book or her pen, her hand would steal out, by an irresistible impulse, toward the little hand-glass mounted in antique silver that lay upon her desk. In this oval, chiseled frame her whole face was inclosed, like a face of days gone by, a portrait of the last century, or a once fresh pastel now tarnished by the sun. Then after gazing at herself a long time, she laid, with a weary movement, the little glass upon the desk and tried to resume her work; but ere she had read two pages or written twenty lines, she was again seized with the invincible and torturing need of looking at herself, and once more would extend her hand to take up the mirror.

She now handled it like an irritating and familiar toy that the hand cannot let alone, used it continually even when receiving her friends, and made herself nervous enough to cry out, hating it as if it were a sentient thing while turning it in her fingers.

One day, exasperated by this struggle between herself and this bit of glass, she threw it against the wall, where it was broken to pieces.

But after a time her husband, who had it repaired, brought it back to her, clearer than ever; and she was compelled to take it, to thank him, and resign herself to keep it.

Every evening, too, and every morning, shut up in her own room, she resumed, in spite of herself, that minute and patient examination of the quiet, odious havoc.

When she was in bed she could not sleep; she would light a candle again and lie, wide-eyed, thinking how insomnia and grief hasten irremediably the horrible work of fleeting time. She listened in the silence of the night to the ticking of the clock, which seemed to murmur, in its monotonous and regular tic-tac: “It goes, it goes, it goes!” and her heart shrank with such suffering that, with the sheet gripped between

her teeth, she groaned in despair.

Once, like everyone else, she had some notion of the passing years and of the changes they bring. Like everyone else, she had said to herself every winter, every spring, and every summer, “I have changed very much since last year.” But, always beautiful, with a changing beauty, she was never uneasy about it. Now, however, suddenly, instead of admitting peacefully the slow march of the seasons, she had just discovered and understood the formidable flight of the minutes. She had had a sudden revelation of the gliding of the hour, of that imperceptible race, maddening when we think of it—of that infinite defile of little hurrying seconds, which nibble at the body and the life of men.

After these miserable nights, she had long periods of somnolence that made her more tranquil, in the warmth of her bed, when her maid had opened the curtains and lighted the morning fire. She lay there tired, drowsy, neither awake nor asleep, in the torpor of thought which brings about the revival of that instinctive and providential hope which gives light and life to the hearts of men up to their last days.

Every morning now, as soon as she had risen from her bed, she felt moved by a powerful desire to pray to God, to obtain from Him a little relief and consolation.

She would kneel, then, before a large figure of Christ carved in oak, a gift from Olivier, a rare work he had discovered; and, with lips closed, but imploring with that voice of the soul with which we speak to ourselves, she lifted toward the Divine martyr a sorrowful supplication. Distracted by the need of being heard and succored, naïve in her distress, as are all faithful ones on their knees, she could not doubt that He heard her, that He was attentive to her request, and was perhaps touched at her grief. She did not ask Him to do for her that which He never had done for anyone—to leave her until death all her charm, her freshness and grace; she begged only a little repose, a little respite. She must grow old, of course, just as she must die. But why so soon? Some women remain beautiful so long! Could He not grant

that she should be one of these? How good He would be, He who had also suffered so much, if only He would let her keep for two or three years still the little charm she needed in order to be pleasing.

She did not say these things to Him, of course, but she sighed them forth, in the confused plaint of her being.

Then, having risen, she would sit before her toilet-table, and with a tension of thought as ardent as in her prayer, she would handle the powders, the pastes, the pencils, the puffs and brushes, which gave her once more a plaster-like beauty, fragile, lasting only for a day.

CHAPTER VI

THE ASHES OF LOVE

On the Boulevard two names were heard from all lips: “Emma Helsson” and “Montrose.” The nearer one approached the Opera, the oftener he heard those names repeated. Immense posters, too, affixed to the Morris columns, announced them in the eyes of passers, and in the evening air could be felt the excitement of an approaching event.

That heavy monument called the National Academy of Music, squatted under the black sky, exhibited to the crowd before its doors the pompous, whitish facade and marble colonnade of its balcony, illuminated like a stage setting by invisible electric lights.

In the square the mounted Republican guards directed the movement of the crowds, and the innumerable carriages coming from all parts of Paris allowed glimpses of creamy light stuff and fair faces behind their lowered windows.

The coupes and landaus formed in line under the reserved arcades, and stopped for a moment, and from them alighted fashionable and other women, in their

opera-cloaks, trimmed with fur, feathers, and rare laces—precious bodies, divinely set forth!

All the way along the celebrated stairway was a sort of fairy flight, an uninterrupted mounting of ladies dressed like queens, whose throats and ears scattered flashing rays from their diamonds, and whose long trains swept the stairs.

The theater was filling early, for no one wished to lose a note of the two illustrious artists; and throughout the vast amphitheater, under the dazzling electric light from the great chandelier, a throng of people were seating themselves amid an uproar of voices.

From the stage-box, already occupied by the Duchess, Annette, the Count, the Marquis, Bertin and Musadieu, one could see nothing but the wings, where men were talking, running about, and shouting, machinists in blouses, gentlemen in evening dress, actors in costume. But behind the great curtain one heard the deep sound of the crowd, one felt the presence of a mass of moving, over-excited beings, whose agitation seemed to penetrate the curtain, and to extend even to the decorations.

They were about to present Faust.

Musadieu was relating anecdotes about the first representatives of this work at the Theatre Lyrique, of its half success in the beginning followed by brilliant triumph, of the original cast, and their manner of singing each aria. Annette, half turned toward him, listened with that eager, youthful curiosity with which she regarded the whole world; and at times she cast a tender glance at her fiance, who in a few days would be her husband. She loved him, now, as innocent hearts love; that is to say she loved in him all the hopes she had for the future. The intoxication of the first feasts of life, and the ardent longing to be happy, made her tremble with joy and expectation.

And Olivier, who saw all, and knew all, who had sounded all the depths of secret,

helpless, and jealous love, down in the furnace of human suffering, where the heart seems to crackle like flesh over hot coals, stood in the back of the box looking at them with eyes that betrayed his torture.

The three blows were struck, and suddenly the sharp little tap of a bow on the leader's desk stopped short all movement, all coughing and whispering; then, after a brief and profound silence, the first measure of the introduction arose, filling the house with the invisible and irresistible mystery of the music that penetrates our bodies, thrills our nerves and souls with a poetic and sensuous fever, mingling with the limpid air we breathe a wave of sound to which we listen.

Olivier took a seat at the back of the box, painfully affected, as if his heart's wounds had been touched by those accents. But when the curtain rose he stood up again, and saw Doctor Faust, lost in sorrowful meditation, seated in his alchemist's laboratory.

He had already heard the opera twenty times, and almost knew it by heart, and his attention soon wandered from the stage to the audience. He could see only a small part of it behind the frame of the stage which concealed their box, but the angle that was visible, extending from the orchestra to the top gallery, showed him a portion of the audience in which he recognized many faces. In the orchestra rows, the men in white cravats, sitting side by side, seemed a museum of familiar countenances, society men, artists, journalists, the whole category of those that never fail to go where everyone else goes. In the balcony and in the boxes he noted and named to himself the women he recognized. The Comtesse de Lochrist, in a proscenium box, was absolutely ravishing, while a little farther on a bride, the Marquise d'Ebelin, was already looking through her lorgnette. “That is a pretty debut,” said Bertin to himself.

The audience listened with deep attention and evident sympathy to the tenor Montrose, who was lamenting over his waning life.

Olivier thought: “What a farce! There is Faust, the mysterious and sublime Faust

who sings the horrible disgust and nothingness of everything; and this crowd are asking themselves anxiously whether Montrose's voice has not changed!" Then he listened, like the others, and behind the trivial words of the libretto, through that music which awakens profound perception in the soul, he had a sort of revelation as to how Goethe had been able to conceive the heart of Faust.

He had read the poem some time before, and thought it very beautiful without being moved by it, but now he suddenly realized its unfathomable depth, for it seemed to him that on that evening he himself had become a Faust.

Leaning lightly upon the railing of the box, Annette was listening with all her ears; and murmurs of satisfaction were beginning to be heard from the audience, for Montrose's voice was better and richer than ever!

Bertin had closed his eyes. For a whole month, all that he had seen, all that he had felt, everything that he had encountered in life he had immediately transformed into a sort of accessory to his passion. He threw the world and himself as nourishment to this fixed idea. All that he saw that was beautiful or rare, all that he imagined that was charming, he mentally offered to his little friend; and he had no longer an idea that he did not in some way connect with his love.

Now he listened from the depths of his soul to the echo of Faust's lamentations, and the desire to die surged up within him, the desire to have done with all his grief, with all the misery of his hopeless love. He looked at Annette's delicate profile, and saw the Marquis de Farandal, seated behind her, also looking at it. He felt old, lost, despairing. Ah, never to await anything more, never to hope for anything more, no longer to have even the right to desire, to feel himself outside of everything, in the evening of life, like a superannuated functionary whose career is ended—what intolerable torture!

Applause burst forth; Montrose had triumphed already. And Labarriere as Mephistopheles sprang up from the earth.

Olivier, who never had heard him in this role, listened with renewed attention. The remembrance of Aubin, so dramatic with his bass voice, then of Faure, so seductive with his baritone, distracted him a short time.

But suddenly a phrase sung by Montrose with irresistible power stirred him to the heart. Faust was saying to Satan:

“Je veux un tresor qui les contient tous— Je veux la jeunesse.”

And the tenor appeared in silken doublet, a sword by his side, a plumed cap on his head, elegant, young, and handsome, with the affectations of a handsome singer.

A murmur arose. He was very attractive and the women were pleased with him. But Olivier felt some disappointment, for the poignant evocation of Goethe's dramatic poem disappeared in this metamorphosis. Thenceforth he saw before him only a fairy spectacle, filled with pretty little songs, and actors of talent whose voices were all he listened to. That man in a doublet, that pretty youth with his roulades, who showed his thighs and displayed his voice, displeased him. This was not the real, irresistible, and sinister Chevalier Faust, who was about to seduce the fair Marguerite.

He sat down again, and the phrase he had just heard returned to his mind:

“I would have a treasure that embraces all—Youth!”

He murmured it between his teeth, sang it sadly in the depths of his soul, and, with eyes fixed always upon Annette's blonde head, which rose in the square opening of the box, he felt all the bitterness of that desire that never could be realized.

But Montrose had just finished the first act with such perfection that enthusiasm broke forth. For several minutes, the noise of clapping, stamping, and bravos swept like a storm through the theater. In all the boxes the women clapped their gloved hands, while the men standing behind them shouted as they applauded.

The curtain fell, but it was raised twice before the applause subsided. Then, when

the curtain had fallen for the third time, separating the stage and the interior boxes from the audience, the Duchess and Annette continued their applause a few moments, and were specially thanked by a discreet bow from the tenor.

“Oh, he looked at us!” said Annette.

“What an admirable artist!” said the Duchess.

And Bertin, who had been leaning over, looked with a mingled feeling of irritation and disdain at the admired actor as he disappeared between two wings, waddling a little, his legs stiff, one hand on his hip, in the affected pose of a theatrical hero.

They began to talk of him. His social successes had made him as famous as his talent. He had visited every capital, in the midst of feminine ecstasies of those who, hearing before he appeared that he was irresistible, had felt their hearts throb as he appeared upon the stage. But it was said that he appeared to care very little for all this sentimental delirium, and contented himself with his musical triumphs. Musadieu related, in veiled language because of Annette's presence, details of the life of this handsome singer, and the Duchess, quite carried away, understood and approved all the follies that he was able to create, so seductive, elegant, and distinguished did she consider this exceptional musician! She concluded, laughing: “And how can anyone resist that voice!”

Olivier felt angry and bitter. He did not understand how anyone could really care for a mere actor, for that perpetual representation of human types which never resembled himself in the least; that illusory personification of imaginary men, that nocturnal and painted manikin who plays all his characters at so much a night.

“You are jealous of them!” said the Duchess. “You men of the world and artists all have a grudge against actors because they are more successful than you.” Turning to Annette, she added: “Come, little one, you who are entering life and look at it with healthy eyes, what do you think of this tenor?”

“I think he is very good indeed,” Annette replied, with an air of conviction.

The three strokes sounded for the second act, and the curtain rose on the Kermesse.

Helsson's passage was superb. She seemed to have more voice than formerly, and to have acquired more certainty of method. She had, indeed, become the great, excellent, exquisite singer, whose worldly fame equaled that of Bismarck or De Lesseps.

When Faust rushed toward her, when he sang in his bewitching voice phrases so full of charm and when the pretty blonde Marguerite replied so touchingly the whole house was moved with a thrill of pleasure.

When the curtain fell, the applause was tremendous, and Annette applauded so long that Bertin wished to seize her hands to make her stop. His heart was stung by a new torment. He did not speak between the acts, for he was pursuing into the wings, his fixed thought now become absolute hatred, following to his box, where he saw, putting more white powder on his cheeks, the odious singer who was thus over-exciting this child!

Then the curtain rose on the garden scene. Immediately a sort of fever of love seemed to spread through the house, for never had that music, which seems like the breath of kisses, been rendered by two such interpreters. It was no longer two illustrious actors, Montrose and Helsson; they became two beings from the ideal world, hardly two beings, indeed, but two voices: the eternal voice of the man that loves, the eternal voice of the woman that yields; and together they sighed forth all the poetry of human tenderness.

When Faust sang:

“Laisse-moi, laisse-moi contempler ton visage,”

in the notes that soared from his mouth there was such an accent of adoration, of transport and supplication that for a moment a desire to love filled every heart.

Olivier remembered that he had murmured that phrase himself in the park at Roncieres, under the castle windows.

Until then he had thought it rather ordinary; but now it rose to his lips like a last cry of passion, a last prayer, the last hope and the last favor he might expect in this life.

Then he listened no more, heard nothing more. A sharp pang of jealousy tore his heart, for he had just seen Annette carry her handkerchief to her eyes.

She wept! Then her heart was awakening, becoming animated and moved, her little woman's heart which as yet knew nothing! There, very near him, without giving a thought to him, she had a revelation of the way in which love may overwhelm a human being; and this revelation, this initiation had come to her from that miserable strolling singer!

Ah, he felt very little anger now toward the Marquis de Farandal, that stupid creature who saw nothing, who did not know, did not understand! But how he execrated that man in tights, who was illuminating the soul of that young girl!

He longed to throw himself upon her, as one throws himself upon a person in danger of being run over by a fractious horse, to seize her by the arm and drag her away, and say to her: “Let us go! let us go! I entreat you!”

How she listened, how she palpitated! And how he suffered. He had suffered thus before, but less cruelly. He remembered it, for the stings of jealousy smart afresh like reopened wounds. He had first felt it at Roncieres, in returning from the cemetery, when he felt for the first time that she was escaping from him, that he could not control her, that young girl as independent as a young animal. But down there, when she had irritated him by leaving him to pluck flowers, he had experienced chiefly a brutal desire to check her playful flights, to compel her person to remain beside him; to-day it was her fleeting, intangible soul that was escaping. Ah, that gnawing irritation which he had just recognized, how often he had experienced it by the indescribable little wounds which seem to be always bruising a loving heart. He recalled all the painful impressions of petty jealousy that he had endured, in little stings, day after day. Every time that she had remarked, admired,

liked, desired something, he had been jealous of it; jealous in an imperceptible but continuous fashion, jealous of all that absorbed the time, the looks, the attention, the gaiety, the astonishment or affection of Annette, for all that took a little of her away from him. He had been jealous of all that she did without him, of all that he did not know, of her going about, her reading, of everything that seemed to please her, jealous even of a heroic officer wounded in Africa, of whom Paris talked for a week, of the author of a much praised romance, of a young unknown poet she never had seen, but whose verses Musadieu had recited; in short, of all men that anyone praised before her, even carelessly, for when one loves a woman one cannot tolerate without anguish that she should even think of another with an appearance of interest. In one's heart is felt the imperious need of being for her the only being in the world. One wishes her to see, to know, to appreciate no one else. So soon as she shows an indication of turning to look at or recognize some person, one throws himself before her, and if one cannot turn aside or absorb her interest he suffers to the bottom of his heart.

Olivier suffered thus in the presence of this singer, who seemed to scatter and to gather love in that opera-house, and he felt vexed with everyone because of the tenor's triumph, with the women whom he saw applauding him from their boxes, with the men, those idiots who were giving a sort of apotheosis to that coxcomb!

An artist! They called him a artist, a great artist! And he had successes, this paid actor, interpreter of another's thought, such as no creator had ever known! Ah, that was like the justice and the intelligence of the fashionable world, those ignorant and pretentious amateurs for whom the masters of human art work until death. He looked at them, applauding, shouting, going into ecstasies; and the ancient hostility that had always seethed at the bottom of his proud heart of a parvenu became a furious anger against those imbeciles, all-powerful only by right of birth and wealth.

Until the end of the performance he remained silent, a prey to thought; then when

the storm of enthusiasm had at last subsided he offered his arm to the Duchess, while the Marquis took Annette's. They descended the grand stairway again, in the midst of a stream of men and women, in a sort of slow and magnificent cascade of bare shoulders, sumptuous gowns, and black coats. Then the Duchess, the young girl, her father, and the Marquis entered the same landau, and Olivier Bertin remained alone with Musadieu in the Place de l'Opera.

Suddenly he felt a sort of affection for this man, or rather that natural attraction one feels for a fellow-countryman met in a distant land, for he now felt lost in that strange, indifferent crowd, whereas with Musadieu he might still speak of her.

So he took his arm.

“You are not going home now?” said he. “It is a fine night; let us take a walk.”

“Willingly.”

They went toward the Madeleine, in the mist of the nocturnal crowd possessed by that short and violent midnight excitement which stirs the Boulevards when the theaters are being emptied.

Musadieu had a thousand things in his mind, all his subjects for conversation from the moment when Bertin should name his preference; and he let his eloquence loose upon the two or three topics that interested him most. The painter allowed him to run on without listening to him, and holding him by the arm, sure of being able soon to lead him to talk of Annette, he walked along without noticing his surroundings, imprisoned within his love. He walked, exhausted by that fit of jealousy which had bruised him like a fall, overcome by the conviction that he had nothing more to do in the world.

He should go on suffering thus, more and more, without expecting anything. He should pass empty days, one after another, seeing her from afar, living, happy, loved and loving, without doubt. A lover! Perhaps she would have a lover, as her mother had had one! He felt within him sources of suffering so numerous, diverse, and

complicated, such an afflux of miseries, such inevitable tortures, he felt so lost, so far overwhelmed, from this moment, by a wave of unimaginable agony that he could not suppose anyone ever had suffered as he did. And he suddenly thought of the puerility of poets who have invented the useless labor of Sisyphus, the material thirst of Tantalus, the devoured heart of Prometheus! Oh, if they had foreseen, if they had experienced the mad love of an elderly man for a young girl, how would they had expressed the painful and secret effort of a being who can no longer inspire love, the tortures of fruitless desire, and, more terrible than a vulture's beak, a little blonde face rending a heart!

Musadieu talked without stopping, and Bertin interrupted him, murmuring almost in spite of himself, under the impulse of his fixed idea:

“Annette was charming this evening.”

“Yes, delicious!”

The painter added, to prevent Musadieu from taking up the broken thread of his ideas: “She is prettier than her mother ever was.”

To this the other agreed absent-mindedly, repeating “Yes, yes, yes!” several times in succession, without his mind having yet settled itself on this new idea.

Olivier endeavored to continue the subject, and in order to attract his attention by one of Musadieu's own favorite fads, he continued:

“She will have one of the first salons in Paris after her marriage.”

That was enough, and, the man of fashion being convinced, as well as the Inspector of Fine Arts, he began to talk wisely of the social footing on which the Marquise de Farandal would stand in French society.

Bertin listened to him, and fancied Annette in a large salon full of light, surrounded by men and women. This vision, too, made him jealous.

They were now going up the Boulevard Malesherbes. As they passed the Guilleroys'

house the painter looked up. Lights seemed to be shining through the windows, among the openings in the curtains. He suspected that the Duchess and the Marquis had been invited to come and have a cup of tea. And a burning rage made him suffer terribly.

He still held Musadieu by the arm, and once or twice attempted to continue, by contradicting Musadieu's opinions, the talk about the future Marquise. Even that commonplace voice in speaking of her caused her charming image to flit beside them in the night.

When they arrived at the painter's door, in the Avenue de Villiers, Bertin asked: “Will you come in?”

“No, thank you. It is late, and I am going to bed.”

“Oh, come up for half an hour, and we'll have a little more talk.”

“No, really. It is too late.”

The thought of staying there alone, after the anguish he had just endured, filled Olivier's soul with horror. He had someone with him; he would keep him.

“Do come up; I want you to choose a study that I have intended for a long time to offer you.”

The other, knowing that painters are not always in a giving mood, and that the remembrance of promises is short, seized the opportunity. In his capacity as Inspector of Fine Arts, he possessed a gallery that had been furnished with skill.

“I am with you,” said he.

They entered.

The valet was aroused and soon brought some grog; and the talk was for some time all about painting. Bertin showed some studies, and begged Musadieu to take the one that pleased him best; Musadieu hesitated, disturbed by the gaslight, which deceived him as to tones. At last he chose a group of little girls jumping the rope on

a sidewalk; and almost at once he wished to depart, and to take his present with him.

“I will have it taken to your house,” said the painter.

“No; I should like better to have it this very evening, so that I may admire it while I am going to bed,” said Musadieu.

Nothing could keep him, and Olivier Bertin found himself again alone in his house, that prison of his memories and his painful agitation.

When the servant entered the next morning, bringing tea and the newspapers, he found his master sitting up in bed, so pale and shaken that he was alarmed.

“Is Monsieur indisposed?” he inquired.

“It is nothing—only a little headache.”

“Does not Monsieur wish me to bring him something?”

“No. What sort of weather is it?”

“It rains, Monsieur.”

“Very well. That is all.”

The man withdrew, having placed on the little table the tea-tray and the newspapers.

Olivier took up the Figaro and opened it. The leading article was entitled “Modern Painting.” It was a dithyrambic eulogy on four or five young painters who, gifted with real ability as colorists, and exaggerating them for effect, now pretended to be revolutionists and renovators of genius.

As did all the older painters, Bertin sneered at these newcomers, was irritated at their assumption of exclusiveness, and disputed their doctrines. He began to read the article, then, with the rising anger so quickly felt by a nervous person; at last, glancing a little further down, he saw his own name, and these words at the end of a sentence struck him like a blow of the fist full in the chest: “The old-fashioned art of Olivier Bertin.”

He had always been sensitive to either criticism or praise, but, at the bottom of his

heart, in spite of his legitimate vanity, he suffered more from being criticised than he enjoyed being praised, because of the uneasiness concerning himself which his hesitations had always encouraged. Formerly, however, at the time of his triumphs, the incense offered was so frequent that it made him forget the pin-pricks. To-day, before the ceaseless influx of new artists and new admirers, congratulations were more rare and criticism was more marked. He felt that he had been enrolled in the battalion of old painters of talent, whom the younger ones do not treat as masters; and as he was as intelligent as he was perspicacious he suffered now from the least insinuations as much as from direct attacks.

But never had any wound to his pride as an artist hurt him like this. He remained gasping, and reread the article in order to grasp its every meaning. He and his equals were thrown aside with outrageous disrespect; and he arose murmuring those words, which remained on his lips: “The old-fashioned art of Olivier Bertin.”

Never had such sadness, such discouragement, such a sensation of having reached the end of everything, the end of his mental and physical being, thrown him into such desperate distress of soul. He sat until two o'clock in his armchair, before the fireplace, his legs extended toward the fire, not having strength to move, or to do anything. Then the need of being consoled rose within him, the need to clasp devoted hands, to see faithful eyes, to be pitied, succored, caressed with friendly words. So he went, as usual, to the Countess.

When he entered Annette was alone in the drawing-room, standing with her back toward him, hastily writing the address on a letter. On a table beside her lay a copy of Figaro. Bertin saw the journal at the moment that he saw the young girl and was bewildered, not daring to advance! Oh, if she had read it! She turned, and in a preoccupied, hurried way, her mind haunted with feminine cares, she said to him:

“Ah, good-morning, sir painter! You will excuse me if I leave you? I have a dressmaker upstairs who claims me. You understand that a dressmaker, at the time

of a wedding, is very important. I will lend you mamma, who is talking and arguing with my artist. If I need her I will call her for a few minutes."

And she hastened away, running a little, to show how much she was hurried.

This abrupt departure, without a word of affection, without a tender look for him who loved her so much—so much!—quite upset him. His eyes rested again on the Figaro, and he thought: "She has read it! They laugh at me, they deny me. She no longer believes in me. I am nothing to her any more."

He took two steps toward the journal, as one walks toward a man to strike him. Then he said to himself: "Perhaps she has not read it, after all. She is so preoccupied to-day. But someone will undoubtedly speak of it before her, perhaps this evening, at dinner, and that will make her curious to read it."

With a spontaneous, almost unthinking, movement he took the copy, closed it, folded it, and slipped it into his pocket with the swiftness of a thief.

The Countess entered. As soon as she saw Olivier's convulsed and livid face, she guessed that he had reached the limit of suffering.

She hastened toward him, with an impulse from all her poor soul, so agonized also, and from her poor body, that was itself so wounded. Throwing her hands upon his shoulders, and plunging her glance into the depths of his eyes, she said:

"Oh, how unhappy you are!"

This time he did not deny it; his throat swelled with a spasm of pain, and he stammered:

"Yes—yes—yes!"

She felt that he was near weeping, and led him into the darkest corner of the drawing-room, toward two armchairs hidden by a small screen of antique silk. They sat down behind this slight embroidered wall, veiled also by the gray shadow of a rainy day.

She resumed, pitying him, deeply moved by his grief:

“My poor Olivier, how you suffer!”

He leaned his white head on the shoulder of his friend.

“More than you believe!” he said.

“Oh, I knew it! I have felt it all. I saw it from the beginning and watched it grow.”

He answered as if she had accused him: “It is not my faulty, Any.”

“I know it well; I do not reproach you for it.”

And softly, turning a little, she laid her lips on one of Olivier's eyes, where she found a bitter tear.

She started, as if she had just tasted a drop of despair, and repeated several times:

“Ah, poor friend—poor friend—poor friend!”

Then after a moment of silence she added: “It is the fault of our hearts, which never have grown old. I feel that my own is full of life!”

He tried to speak but could not, for now his sobs choked him. She listened, as he leaned against her, to the struggle in his breast. Then, seized by the selfish anguish of love, which had gnawed at her heart so long, she said in the agonized tone in which one realizes a horrible misfortune:

“God! how you love her!”

Again he confessed: “Ah, yes! I love her!”

She reflected a few moments, then continued: “You never have loved me thus?”

He did not deny it, for he was passing through one of those periods in which one speaks with absolute truth, and he murmured:

“No, I was too young then.”

She was surprised.

“Too young? Why?”

“Because life was too sweet. It is only at our age that one loves despairingly.”

“Does the love you feel for her resemble that which you felt for me?” the Countess asked.

“Yes and no—and yet it is almost the same thing. I have loved you as much as anyone can love a woman. As for her, I love her just as I loved you, since she is yourself; but this love has become something irresistible, destroying, stronger than death. I belong to it as a burning house belongs to the fire.”

She felt her sympathy wither up under a breath of jealousy; but, assuming a consoling tone, she said:

“My poor friend! In a few days she will be married and gone. When you see her no more no doubt you will be cured of this fancy.”

He shook his head.

“Oh, I am lost, lost, lost!”

“No, no, I say! It will be three months before you see her again. That will be sufficient. Three months were quite enough for you to love her more than you love me, whom you have known for twelve years!”

Then, in his infinite distress, he implored: “Any, do not abandon me!”

“What can I do, my friend?”

“Do not leave me alone.”

“I will go to see you as often as you wish.”

“No. Keep me here as much as possible.”

“But then you would be near her.”

“And near you!”

“You must not see her any more before her marriage.”

“Oh, Any!”

“Well, at least, not often.”

“May I stay here this evening?”

“No, not in your present condition. You must divert your mind; go to the club, or the theater—no matter where, but do not stay here.”

“I entreat you—”

“No, Olivier, it is impossible. And, besides, I have guests coming to dinner whose presence would agitate you still more.”

“The Duchess and—he!”

“Yes.”

“But I spent last evening with them.”

“And you speak of it! You are in a fine state to-day.”

“I promise you to be calm.”

“No, it is impossible.”

“Then I am going away.”

“Why do you hurry now?”

“I must walk.”

“That is right! Walk a great deal, walk until evening, kill yourself with fatigue and then go to bed.”

He had risen.

“Good-by, Any!”

“Good-by, dear friend. I will come to see you to-morrow morning. Would you like me to do something very imprudent, as I used to do—pretend to breakfast here at noon, and then go and have breakfast with you at a quarter past one?”

“Yes, I should like it very much. You are so good!”

“It is because I love you.”

“And I love you, too.”

“Oh, don't speak of that any more!”

“Good-by, Any.”

“Good-by, dear friend, till to-morrow.”

“Good-by!”

He kissed her hands many times, then he kissed her brow, then the corner of her lips. His eyes were dry now, his bearing resolute. Just as he was about to go, he seized her, clasped her close in both arms, and pressing his lips to her forehead, he seemed to drink in, to inhale from her all the love she had for him.

Then he departed quickly, without turning toward her again.

When she was alone she let herself sink, sobbing, upon a chair. She would have remained there till night if Annette had not suddenly appeared in search of her. In order to gain time to dry her red eyelids, the Countess answered: “I have a little note to write, my child. Go up-stairs, and I will join you in a few seconds.”

She was compelled to occupy herself with the great affair of the trousseau until evening.

The Duchess and her nephew dined with the Guilleroys, as a family party. They had just seated themselves at table, and were speaking of the opera of the night before, when the butler appeared, carrying three enormous bouquets.

Madame de Mortemain was surprised.

“Good gracious! What is that?”

“Oh, how lovely they are!” exclaimed Annette; “who can have sent them?”

“Olivier Bertin, no doubt,” replied her mother.

She had been thinking of him since his departure. He had seemed so gloomy, so tragic, she understood so clearly his hopeless sorrow, she felt so keenly the counter-stroke of that grief, she loved him so much, so entirely, so tenderly, that her

heart was weighed down by sad presentiments.

In the three bouquets were found three of the painter's cards. He had written on them in pencil, respectively, the names of the Countess, the Duchess, and Annette.

“Is he ill, your friend Bertin?” the Duchess inquired. “I thought he looked rather bad last night.”

“Yes, I am a little anxious about him, although he does not complain,” Madame de Guilleroy answered.

“Oh, he is growing old, like all the rest of us,” her husband interposed. “He is growing old quite fast, indeed. I believe, however, that bachelors usually go to pieces suddenly. Their breaking-up comes more abruptly than ours. He really is very much changed.”

“Ah, yes!” sighed the Countess.

Farandal suddenly stopped his whispering to Annette to say: “The Figaro has a very disagreeable article about him this morning.”

Any attack, any criticism or allusion unfavorable to her friend's talent always threw the Countess into a passion.

“Oh,” said she, “men of Bertin's importance need not mind such rudeness.”

Guilleroy was astonished.

“What!” he exclaimed, “a disagreeable article about Olivier! But I have not read it. On what page?”

The Marquis informed him: “The first page, at the top, with the title, 'Modern Painting.'”

And the deputy ceased to be astonished. “Oh, exactly! I did not read it because it was about painting.”

Everyone smiled, knowing that apart from politics and agriculture M. de Guilleroy was interested in very few things.

The conversation turned upon other subjects until they entered the drawing-room to take coffee. The Countess was not listening and hardly answered, being pursued by anxiety as to what Olivier might be doing. Where was he? Where had he dined? Where had he taken his hopeless heart at that moment? She now felt a burning regret at having let him go, not to have kept him; and she fancied him roving the streets, so sad and lonely, fleeing under his burden of woe.

Up to the time of the departure of the Duchess and her nephew she had hardly spoken, lashed by vague and superstitious fears; then she went to bed and lay there long, her eyes wide open in the darkness, thinking of him!

A very long time had passed when she thought she heard the bell of her apartment ring. She started, sat up and listened. A second time the vibrating tinkle broke the stillness of the night.

She leaped out of bed, and with all her strength pressed the electric button that summoned her maid. Then, candle in hand, she ran to the vestibule.

Through the door she asked: “Who is there?”

“It is a letter,” an unknown voice replied.

“A letter! From whom?”

“From a physician.”

“What physician?”

“I do not know; it is about some accident.”

Hesitating no more, she opened the door, and found herself facing a cab-driver in an oilskin cap. He held a paper in his hand, which he presented to her. She read: “Very urgent—Monsieur le Comte de Guilleroy.”

The writing was unknown.

“Enter, my good man,” said she; “sit down, and wait for me.”

When she reached her husband's door her heart was beating so violently that she

could not call him. She pounded on the wood with her metal candlestick. The Count was asleep and did not hear.

Then, impatient, nervous, she kicked the door, and heard a sleepy voice asking: “Who is there? What time is it?”

“It is I,” she called. “I have an urgent letter for you, brought by a cabman. There has been some accident.”

“Wait! I am getting up. I'll be there,” he stammered from behind his bed-curtains.

In another minute he appeared in his dressing-gown. At the same time two servants came running, aroused by the ringing of the bell. They were alarmed and bewildered, having seen a stranger sitting on a chair in the dining-room.

The Count had taken the letter and was turning it over in his fingers, murmuring: “What is that? I cannot imagine.”

“Well, read it, then!” said the Countess, in a fever.

He tore off the envelope, unfolded the paper, uttered an exclamation of amazement, then looked at his wife with frightened eyes.

“My God! what is it?” said she.

He stammered, hardly able to speak, so great was his emotion: “Oh, a great misfortune—a great misfortune! Bertin has fallen under a carriage!”

“Dead?” she cried.

“No, no!” said he; “read for yourself.”

She snatched from his hand the letter he held out and read:

“MONSIEUR: A great misfortune has just happened. Your friend, the eminent artist, M. Olivier Bertin, has been run over by an omnibus, the wheel of which passed over his body. I cannot as yet say anything decisive as to the probable result of this accident, which may not be serious, although it may have an immediate and fatal result. M. Bertin begs you earnestly and entreats Madame la Comtesse de Guilleroy

to come to him at once. I hope, Monsieur, that Madame la Comtesse and yourself will grant the desire of our friend in common, who before daylight may have ceased to live.

“DR. DE RIVIL.”

The Countess stared at her husband with great, fixed eyes, full of terror. Then suddenly she experienced, like an electric shock, an awakening of that courage which comes to women at times, which makes them in moments of terror the most valiant of creatures.

Turning to her maid she said: “Quick! I am going to dress.”

“What will Madame wear?” asked the servant.

“Never mind that. Anything you like. James,” she added, “be ready in five minutes.”

Returning toward her room, her soul overwhelmed, she noticed the cabman, still waiting, and said to him: “You have your carriage?”

“Yes, Madame.”

“That is well; we will take that.”

Wildly, with precipitate haste, she threw on her clothes, hooking, clasping, tying, and fastening at hap-hazard; then, before the mirror, she lifted and twisted her hair without a semblance of order, gazing without thinking of what she was doing at the reflection of her pale face and haggard eyes.

When her cloak was over her shoulders, she rushed to her husband's room, but he was not yet ready. She dragged him along.

“Come, come!” said she; “remember, he may die!”

The Count, dazed, followed her stumblingly, feeling his way with his feet on the dark stairs, trying to distinguish the steps, so that he should not fall.

The drive was short and silent. The Countess trembled so violently that her teeth rattled, and through the window she saw the flying gas-jets, veiled by the falling

rain. The sidewalks gleamed, the Boulevard was deserted, the night was sinister. On arriving, they found that the painter's door was open, and that the concierge's lodge was lighted but empty.

At the top of the stairs the physician, Dr. de Rivil, a little gray man, short, round, very well dressed, extremely polite, came to meet them. He bowed low to the Countess and held out his hand to the Count.

She asked him, breathing rapidly as if climbing the stairs had exhausted her and put her out of breath:

“Well, doctor?”

“Well, Madame, I hope that it will be less serious than I thought at first.”

“He will not die?” she exclaimed.

“No. At least, I do not believe so.”

“Will you answer for that?”

“No. I only say that I hope to find only a simple abdominal contusion without internal lesions.”

“What do you call lesions?”

“Lacerations.”

“How do you know that there are none?”

“I suppose it.”

“And if there are?”

“Oh, then it would be serious.”

“He might die of them?”

“Yes.”

“Very soon?”

“Very soon. In a few minutes or even seconds. But reassure yourself, Madame; I am

convinced that he will be quite well again in two weeks."

She had listened, with profound attention, to know all and understand all.

"What laceration might he have?"

"A laceration of the liver, for instance."

"That would be very dangerous?"

"Yes—but I should be surprised to find any complication now. Let us go to him. It will do him good, for he awaits you with great impatience."

On entering the room she saw first a pale face on a white pillow. Some candles and the firelight illumined it, defined the profile, deepened the shadows; and in that pale face the Countess saw two eyes that watched her coming.

All her courage, energy, and resolution fell, so much did those hollow and altered features resemble those of a dying man. He, whom she had seen only a little while ago, had become this thing, this specter! "Oh, my God!" she murmured between her teeth, and she approached him, palpitating with horror.

He tried to smile, to reassure her, and the grimace of that attempt was frightful.

When she was beside the bed, she put both hands gently on one of Olivier's, which lay along his body, and stammered: "Oh, my poor friend!"

"It is nothing," said he, in a low tone, without moving his head.

She now looked at him closely, frightened at the change in him. He was so pale that he seemed no longer to have a drop of blood under his skin. His hollow cheeks seemed to have been sucked in from the interior of his face, and his eyes were sunken as if drawn by a string from within.

He saw the terror of his friend, and sighed: "Here I am in a fine state!"

"How did it happen?" she asked, looking at him with fixed gaze.

He was making a great effort to speak, and his whole face twitched with pain.

“I was not looking about me—I was thinking of something else—something very different—oh, yes!—and an omnibus knocked me down and ran over my abdomen.”

As she listened she saw the accident, and shaking with terror, she asked: “Did you bleed?”

“No. I am only a little bruised—a little crushed.”

“Where did it happen?” she inquired.

“I do not know exactly,” he answered in a very low voice; “it was far away from here.”

The physician rolled up an armchair, and the Countess sank into it. The Count remained standing at the foot of the bed, repeating between his teeth: “Oh, my poor friend! my poor friend! What a frightful misfortune!”

And he was indeed deeply grieved, for he loved Olivier very much.

“But where did it happen?” the Countess repeated.

“I know hardly anything about it myself, or rather I do not understand it at all,” the physician replied. “It was at the Gobelins, almost outside of Paris! At least, the cabman that brought him home declared to me that he took him in at a pharmacy of that quarter, to which someone had carried him, at nine o'clock in the evening!” Then, leaning toward Olivier, he asked: “Did the accident really happen near the Gobelins?”

Bertin closed his eyes, as if to recollect; then murmured: “I do not know.”

“But where were you going?”

“I do not remember now. I was walking straight before me.”

A groan that she could not stifle came from the Countess's lips; then oppressed with a choking that stopped her breathing a few seconds, she drew out her handkerchief, covered her eyes, and wept bitterly.

She knew—she guessed! Something intolerable, overwhelming had just fallen on

her heart—remorse for not keeping Olivier near her, for driving him away, for throwing him into the street, where, stupefied with grief, he had fallen under the omnibus.

He said in that colorless voice he now had: “Do not weep. It distresses me.”

By a tremendous effort of will, she ceased to sob, uncovered her eyes and fixed them, wide open, upon him, without a quiver of her face, whereon the tears continued slowly to roll down.

They looked at each other, both motionless, their hands clasped under the coverlet. They gazed at each other, no longer knowing that any other person was in the room; and that gaze carried a superhuman emotion from one heart to the other.

They gazed upon each other, and the need of talking, unheard, of hearing the thousand intimate things, so sad, which they had still to say, rose irresistibly to their lips. She felt that she must at any price send away the two men that stood behind her; she must find a way, some ruse, some inspiration, she, the woman, fruitful in resources! She began to reflect, her eyes always fixed on Olivier.

Her husband and the doctor were talking in undertones, discussing the care to be given. Turning her head the Countess said to the doctor: “Have you brought a nurse?”

“No, I prefer to send a hospital surgeon, who will keep a better watch over the case.”

“Send both. One never can be too careful. Can you still get them to-night, for I do not suppose you will stay here till morning?”

“Indeed, I was just about to go home. I have been here four hours already.”

“But on your way back you will send us the nurse and the surgeon?”

“It will be difficult in the middle of the night. But I shall try.”

“You must!”

“They may promise, but will they come?”

“My husband will accompany you and will bring them back either willingly or by force.”

“You cannot remain here alone, Madame!”

“I?” she exclaimed with a sort of cry of defiance, of indignant protest against any resistance to her will. Then she pointed out, in that authoritative tone to which no one ventures a reply, the necessities of the situation. It was necessary that the nurse and the surgeon should be there within an hour, to forestall all accident. To insure this, someone must get out of bed and bring them. Her husband alone could do that. During this time she would remain near the injured man, she, for whom it was a duty and a right. She would thereby simply fulfil her role of friend, her role of woman. Besides, this was her will, and no one should dissuade her from it.

Her reasoning was sensible. They could only agree upon that, and they decided to obey her.

She had risen, full of the thought of their departure, impatient to know that they were off and that she was left alone. Now, in order that she should commit no error during their absence, she listened, trying to understand perfectly, to remember everything, to forget nothing of the physician's directions. The painter's valet, standing near her, listened also, and behind him his wife, the cook, who had helped in the first binding of the patient, indicated by nods of the head that she too understood. When the Countess had recited all the instructions like a lesson, she urged the two men to go, repeating to her husband:

“Return soon, above all things, return soon!”

“I will take you in my coupe,” said the doctor to the Count. “It will bring you back quicker. You will be here again in an hour.”

Before leaving, the doctor again carefully examined the wounded man, to assure himself that his condition remained satisfactory.

Guilleroy still hesitated.

“You do not think that we are doing anything imprudent?” he asked.

“No,” said the doctor. “He needs only rest and quiet. Madame de Guilleroy will see that he does not talk, and will speak to him as little as possible.”

The Countess was startled, and said:

“Then I must not talk to him?”

“Oh, no, Madame! Take an armchair and sit beside him. He will not feel that he is alone and will be quite content; but no fatigue of words, or even of thoughts. I will call about nine o'clock to-morrow morning. Good-bye, Madame. I salute you!”

He left the room with a low bow, followed by the Count who repeated:

“Do not worry yourself, my dear. Within an hour I shall return, and then you can go home.”

When they were gone, she listened for the sound of the door below being closed, then to the rolling wheels of the coupe in the street.

The valet and the cook still stood there, awaiting orders. The Countess dismissed them.

“You may go now,” said she; “I will ring if I need anything.”

They too withdrew, and she remained alone with him.

She had drawn quite near to the bed, and putting her hands on the two edges of the pillow, on both sides of that dear face, she leaned over to look upon it. Then, with her face so close to his that she seemed to breathe her words upon it, she whispered:

“Did you throw yourself under that carriage?”

He tried to smile still, saying: “No, it was that which threw itself upon me.”

“That is not true; it was you.”

“No, I swear to you it was it!”

After a few moments of silence, those instants when souls seem mingled in glances,

she murmured: “Oh, my dear, dear Olivier, to think that I let you go, that I did not keep you with me!”

“It would have happened just the same, some day or another,” he replied with conviction.

They still gazed at each other, seeking to read each other's inmost thoughts.

“I do not believe that I shall recover,” he said at last. “I suffer too much.”

“Do you suffer very much?” she murmured.

“Oh, yes!”

Bending a little lower, she brushed his forehead, then his eyes, then his cheeks with slow kisses, light, delicate as her care for him. She barely touched him with her lips, with that soft little breath that children give when they kiss. This lasted a long time, a very long time. He let that sweet rain of caresses fall on him, and they seemed to soothe and refresh him, for his drawn face twitched less than before.

“Any!” he said finally.

She ceased her kissing to listen to him.

“What, my friend?”

“You must make me a promise.”

“I will promise anything you wish.”

“If I am not dead before morning, swear to me that you will bring Annette to me, just once, only once! I cannot bear to die without seeing her again. . . . Think that . . . to-morrow . . . at this time perhaps I shall have . . . shall surely have closed my eyes forever and that I never shall see you again. I . . . nor you . . . nor her!”

She stopped him; her heart was breaking.

“Oh, hush . . . hush! Yes, I promise you to bring her!”

“You swear it?”

“I swear it, my friend. But hush, do not talk any more. You hurt me frightfully—hush!”

A quick convulsion passed over his face; when it had passed he said:

“Since we have only a few minutes more to remain together, do not let us lose them; let us seize them to bid each other good-by. I have loved you so much——”

“And I,” she sighed, “how I still love you!”

He spoke again:

“I never have had real happiness except through you. Only these last days have been hard. . . . It was not your fault. . . . Ah, my poor Any, how sad life is! . . . and how hard it is to die!”

“Hush, Olivier, I implore you!”

He continued, without listening to her: “I should have been a happy man if you had not had your daughter. . . .”

“Hush! My God! Hush! . . .”

He seemed to dream rather than speak.

“Ah, he that invented this existence and made men was either blind or very wicked. . . .”

“Olivier, I entreat you . . . if you ever have loved me, be quiet, do not talk like that any more!”

He looked at her, leaning over him, she herself so pale that she looked as if she were dying, too; and he was silent.

Then she seated herself in the armchair, close to the bed, and again took the hand on the coverlet.

“Now I forbid you to speak,” said she. “Do not stir, and think of me as I think of you.”

Again they looked at each other, motionless, joined together by the burning contact of their hands. She pressed, with gentle movement, the feverish hand she clasped, and he answered these calls by tightening his fingers a little. Each pressure said something to them, evoked some period of their finished past, revived in their memory the stagnant recollections of their love. Each was a secret question, each was a mysterious reply, sad questions and sad replies, those “do you remembers?” of a bygone love.

Their minds, in this agonizing meeting, which might be the last, traveled back through the years, through the whole history of their passion; and nothing was audible in the room save the crackling of the fire.

Suddenly, as if awakening from a dream, he said, with a start of terror:

“Your letters!”

“What? My letters?” she queried.

“I might have died without destroying them!”

“Oh, what does that matter to me? That is of no consequence now. Let them find them and read them—I don't care!”

“I will not have that,” he said. “Get up, Any; open the lowest drawer of my desk, the large one; they are all there, all. You must take them and throw them into the fire.”

She did not move at all, but remained crouching, as if he had counseled her to do something cowardly.

“Any, I entreat you!” he continued; “if you do not do this, you will torture me, unnerve me, drive me mad. Think—they may fall into anyone's hands, a notary, a servant, or even your husband. . . . I do not wish. . . .”

She rose, still hesitating, and repeating:

“No, that is too hard, too cruel! I feel as if you were compelling me to burn both our hearts!”

He supplicated her, his face drawn with pain.

Seeing him suffer thus, she resigned herself and walked toward the desk. On opening the drawer, she found it filled to the edge with a thick packet of letters, piled one on top of another, and she recognized on all the envelopes the two lines of the address she had written so often. She knew them—those two lines—a man's name, the name of a street—as well as she knew her own name, as well as one can know the few words that have represented to us in life all hope and all happiness. She looked at them, those little square things that contained all she had known how to express of her love, all that she could take of herself to give to him, with a little ink on a bit of white paper.

He had tried to turn his head on the pillow that he might watch her, and again he said: “Burn them, quick!”

Then she took two handfuls, holding them a few seconds in her grasp. They seemed heavy to her, painful, living, at the same time dead, so many different things were in them, so many things that were now over—so sweet to feel, to dream! It was the soul of her soul, the heart of her heart, the essence of her loving self that she was holding there; and she remembered with what delirium she had scribbled some of them, with what exaltation, what intoxication of living and of adoring some one, and of expressing it.

“Burn them! Burn them, Any!” Olivier repeated.

With the same movement of both hands, she cast into the fireplace the two packets of papers, which became scattered as they fell upon the wood. Then she seized those that remained in the desk and threw them on top of the others, then another handful, with swift movements, stooping and rising again quickly, to finish as soon as might be this terrible task.

When the fireplace was full and the drawer empty, she remained standing, waiting, watching the almost smothered flames as they crept up from all sides on that

mountain of envelopes. They attacked them first at the edges, gnawed at the corners, ran along the edge of the paper, went out, sprang up again, and went creeping on and on. Soon, all around that white pyramid glowed a vivid girdle of clear fire which filled the room with light; and this light, illuminating the woman standing and the man dying, was their burning love, their love turned to ashes.

The Countess turned, and in the dazzling light of that fire she beheld her friend leaning with a haggard face on the edge of the bed.

“Are they all there?” he demanded.

“Yes, all.”

But before returning to him she cast a last look upon that destruction, and on that mass of papers, already half consumed, twisting and turning black, and she saw something red flowing. It looked like drops of blood, and seemed to come out of the very heart of the letters, as from a wound; it ran slowly toward the flames, leaving a purple train.

The Countess received in her soul the shock of supernatural terror, and recoiled as if she had seen the assassination of a human being; then she suddenly understood that she had seen simply the melting of the wax seals.

She returned to the wounded man, and lifting his head tenderly laid it back in the center of the pillow. But he had moved, and his pain increased. He was panting now, his face drawn by fearful suffering, and he no longer seemed to know that she was there.

She waited for him to become a little calmer, to open his eyes, which remained closed, to be able to say one word more to her.

Presently she asked: “Do you suffer much?”

He did not reply.

She bent over him and laid a finger on his forehead to make him look at her. He

opened his eyes then, but they were wild and dazed.

Terrified, she repeated: “Do you suffer? Olivier! Answer me! Shall I call? Make an effort! Say something to me!”

She thought she heard him murmur: “Bring her . . . you swore to me.”

Then he writhed under the bedclothes, his body grew rigid, his face convulsed with awful grimaces.

“Olivier! My God! Olivier!” she cried. “What is the matter? Shall I call?”

This time he heard her, for he replied, “No . . . it is nothing.”

He appeared to grow easier, in fact, to suffer less, to fall suddenly into a sort of drowsy stupor. Hoping that he would sleep, she sat down again beside the bed, took his hand, and waited. He moved no more, his chin had dropped to his breast, his mouth was half opened by his short breath, which seemed to rasp his throat in passing. Only his fingers moved involuntarily now and then, with slight tremors which the Countess felt to the roots of her hair, making her long to cry out. They were no more the tender little meaning pressures which, in place of the weary lips, told of all the sadness of their hearts; they were spasms of pain which spoke only of the torture of the body.

Now she was frightened, terribly frightened, and had a wild desire to run away, to ring, to call, but she dared not move, lest she might disturb his repose.

The far-off sound of vehicles in the streets penetrated the walls; and she listened to hear whether that rolling of wheels did not stop before the door, whether her husband were not coming to deliver her, to tear her away at last from this sad tete-a-tete.

As she tried to draw her hand from Olivier's, he pressed it, uttering a deep sigh! Then she resigned herself to wait, so that she should not trouble him.

The fire was dying out on the hearth, under the black ashes of the letters; two

candles went out; some pieces of furniture cracked.

All was silent in the house; everything seemed dead except a tall Flemish clock on the stairs, which regularly chimed the hour, the half hour, and the quarter, singing the march of time in the night, modulating it in divers tones.

The Countess, motionless, felt an intolerable terror rising in her soul. Nightmare assailed her; fearful thoughts filled her mind; and she thought she could feel that Olivier's fingers were growing cold within her own. Was that true? No, certainly not. But whence had come that sensation of inexpressible, frozen contact? She roused herself, wild with terror, to look at his face. It was relaxed, impassive, inanimate, indifferent to all misery, suddenly soothed by the Eternal Oblivion.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK STRONG AS DEATH ***

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