

**HENRI
BARBUSSE**

THE INFERNO

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The Inferno:

Содержание

INTRODUCTION	4
CHAPTER I	9
CHAPTER II	17
CHAPTER III	28
CHAPTER IV	32
CHAPTER V	43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	48

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INTRODUCTION

In introducing M. Barbusse's most important book to a public already familiar with "Under Fire," it seems well to point out the relation of the author's philosophy to his own time, and the kinship of his art to that of certain other contemporary French and English novelists.

"L'Enfer" has been more widely read and discussed in France than any other realistic study since the days of Zola. The French sales of the volume, in 1917 alone, exceeded a hundred thousand copies, a popularity all the more remarkable from the fact that its appeal is based as much on its philosophical substance as on the story which it tells.

Although M. Barbusse is one of the most distinguished contemporary French writers of short stories, he has found in the novel form the most fitting literary medium for the expression of his philosophy, and it is to realism rather than romanticism that he turns for the exposition of his special imaginative point of view. And yet this statement seems to need some qualification. In his introduction to "Pointed Roofs," by Dorothy Richardson, Mr. J.D. Beresford points out that a

new objective literary method is becoming general in which the writer's strict detachment from his objective subject matter is united to a tendency, impersonal, to be sure, to immerse himself in the life surrounding his characters. Miss May Sinclair points out that writers are beginning to take the complete plunge for the first time, and instances as examples, not only the novels of Dorothy Richardson, but those of James Joyce.

Now it is perfectly true that Miss Richardson and Mr. Joyce have introduced this method into English fiction, and that Mr. Frank Swinnerton has carried the method a step further in another direction, but before these writers there was a precedent in France for this method, of which perhaps the two chief exemplars were Jules Romains and Henri Barbusse. Although the two writers have little else in common, both are intensely conscious of the tremendous, if imponderable, impact of elemental and universal forces upon personality, of the profound modifications which natural and social environment unconsciously impress upon the individual life, and of the continual interaction of forces by which the course of life is changed more fundamentally than by less imperceptible influences. Both M. Romains and M. Barbusse perceive, as the fundamental factor influencing human life, the contraction and expansion of physical and spiritual relationship, the inevitable ebb and flow perceived by the poet who pointed out that we cannot touch a flower without troubling of a star.

M. Romains has found his literary medium in what he calls

unanimism. While M. Barbusse would not claim to belong to the same school, and in fact would appear on the surface to be at the opposite pole of life in his philosophy, we shall find that his detachment, founded, though it is, upon solitude, takes essentially the same account of outside forces as the philosophy of M. Romain.

He perceives that each man is an island of illimitable forces apart from his fellows, passionately eager to live his own life to the last degree of self-fulfilment, but continually thwarted by nature and by other men and women, until death interposes and sets the seal of oblivion upon all that he has dreamed and sought.

And he has set himself the task of disengaging, as far as possible, the purpose and hope of human life, of endeavouring to discover what promise exists for the future and how this promise can be related to the present, of marking the relationship between eternity and time, and discovering, through the tragedies of birth, love, marriage, illness and death, the ultimate possibility of human development and fulfilment.

"The Inferno" is therefore a tragic book. But I think that the attentive reader will find that the destructive criticism of M. Barbusse, in so far as it is possible for him to agree with it, only clears away the dead undergrowth which obscures the author's passionate hope and belief in the future.

Although the action of this story is spiritual as well as physical, and occupies less than a month of time, it is focussed intensely upon reality. Everything that the author permits us to see and

understand is seen through a single point of life—a hole pierced in the wall between two rooms of a grey Paris boarding house. The time is most often twilight, with its romantic penumbra, darkening into the obscurity of night by imperceptible degrees.

M. Barbusse has conceived the idea of making a man perceive the whole spiritual tragedy of life through a cranny in the wall, and there is a fine symbolism in this, as if he were vouchsafing us the opportunity to perceive eternal things through the tiny crack which is all that is revealed to us of infinity, so that the gates of Horn, darkened by our human blindness, scarcely swing open before they close again.

The hero of this story has been dazzled by the flaming ramparts of the world, so that eternity is only revealed to him in fiery glimpses that shrivel him, and he is left in the dark void of time, clinging to a dream which already begins to fail him.

And the significant thing about this book is that the final revelation comes to him through the human voices of those who have suffered much, because they have loved much, after his own daring intellectual flights have failed him.

So this man who has confronted the greatest realities of life, enabled to view them with the same objective detachment with which God sees them, though without the divine knowledge which transmutes their darkness, comes to learn that we carry all heaven and hell within ourselves, and with a relentless insight, almost Lucretian in its desperate intensity, he cries: "We are divinely alone, the heavens have fallen on our heads." And he

adds: "Here they will pass again, day after day, year after year, all the prisoners of rooms will pass in their kind of eternity. In the twilight when everything fades, they will sit down near the light, in the room full of haloes; they will drag themselves to the window's void. Their mouths will join and they will grow tender. They will exchange a first or a last useless glance. They will open their arms, they will caress each other. They will love life and be afraid to disappear...."

"I have heard the annunciation of whatever finer things are to come. Through me has passed, without staying me in my course, the Word which does not lie, and which said over again, will satisfy."

Truly a great and pitiless book, but there is a cleansing wind running through it, which sweeps away life's illusions, and leaves a new hope for the future in our hearts.

EDWARD J. O'BRIEN.

BASS RIVER, MASS.,

July, 10, 1918.

CHAPTER I

The landlady, Madame Lemercier, left me alone in my room, after a short speech impressing upon me all the material and moral advantages of the Lemercier boarding-house.

I stopped in front of the glass, in the middle of the room in which I was going to live for a while. I looked round the room and then at myself.

The room was grey and had a dusty smell. I saw two chairs, one of which held my valise, two narrow-backed armchairs with smeary upholstery, a table with a piece of green felt set into the top, and an oriental carpet with an arabesque pattern that fairly leaped to the eye.

This particular room I had never seen before, but, oh, how familiar it all was—that bed of imitation mahogany, that frigid toilet table, that inevitable arrangement of the furniture, that emptiness within those four walls.

The room was worn with use, as if an infinite number of people had occupied it. The carpet was frayed from the door to the window—a path trodden by a host of feet from day to day. The moulding, which I could reach with my hands, was out of line and cracked, and the marble mantelpiece had lost its sharp edges. Human contact wears things out with disheartening slowness.

Things tarnish, too. Little by little, the ceiling had darkened like a stormy sky. The places on the whitish woodwork and

the pink wallpaper that had been touched oftenest had become smudgy—the edge of the door, the paint around the lock of the closet and the wall alongside the window where one pulls the curtain cords. A whole world of human beings had passed here like smoke, leaving nothing white but the window.

And I? I am a man like every other man, just as that evening was like every other evening.

• • • •

I had been travelling since morning. Hurry, formalities, baggage, the train, the whiff of different towns.

I fell into one of the armchairs. Everything became quieter and more peaceful.

My coming from the country to stay in Paris for good marked an epoch in my life. I had found a situation here in a bank. My days were to change. It was because of this change that I got away from my usual thoughts and turned to thoughts of myself.

I was thirty years old. I had lost my father and mother eighteen or twenty years before, so long ago that the event was now insignificant. I was unmarried. I had no children and shall have none. There are moments when this troubles me, when I reflect that with me a line will end which has lasted since the beginning of humanity.

Was I happy? Yes, I had nothing to mourn or regret, I had no complicated desires. Therefore, I was happy. I remembered that

since my childhood I had had spiritual illuminations, mystical emotions, a morbid fondness for shutting myself up face to face with my past. I had attributed exceptional importance to myself and had come to think that I was more than other people. But this had gradually become submerged in the positive nothingness of every day.

• • • •

There I was now in that room.

I leaned forward in my armchair to be nearer the glass, and I examined myself carefully.

Rather short, with an air of reserve (although there are times when I let myself go); quite correctly dressed; nothing to criticise and nothing striking about my appearance.

I looked close at my eyes. They are green, though, oddly enough, people usually take them for black.

I believed in many things in a confused sort of way, above all, in the existence of God, if not in the dogmas of religion. However, I thought, these last had advantages for poor people and for women, who have less intellect than men.

As for philosophical discussions, I thought they are absolutely useless. You cannot demonstrate or verify anything. What was truth, anyway?

I had a sense of good and evil. I would not have committed an indelicacy, even if certain of impunity. I would not have

permitted myself the slightest overstatement.

If everyone were like me, all would be well.

• • • •

It was already late. I was not going to do anything. I remained seated there, at the end of the day, opposite the looking-glass. In the setting of the room that the twilight began to invade, I saw the outline of my forehead, the oval of my face, and, under my blinking eyelids, the gaze by which I enter into myself as into a tomb.

My tiredness, the gloominess (I heard rain outside), the darkness that intensified my solitude and made me look larger, and then something else, I knew not what, made me sad. It bored me to be sad. I shook myself. What was the matter? Nothing. Only myself.

I have not always been alone in life as I was that evening. Love for me had taken on the form and the being of my little Josette. We had met long before, in the rear of the millinery shop in which she worked at Tours. She had smiled at me with singular persistence, and I caught her head in my hands, kissed her on the lips—and found out suddenly that I loved her.

I no longer recall the strange bliss we felt when, we first embraced. It is true, there are moments when I still desire her as madly as the first time. This is so especially when she is away. When she is with me, there are moments when she repels me.

We discovered each other in the holidays. The days when we shall see each other again before we die—we could count them—if we dared.

To die! The idea of death is decidedly the most important of all ideas. I should die some day. Had I ever thought of it? I reflected. No, I had never thought of it. I could not. You can no more look destiny in the face than you can look at the sun, and yet destiny is grey.

And night came, as every night will come, until the last one, which will be too vast.

But all at once I jumped up and stood on my feet, reeling, my heart throbbing like the fluttering of wings.

What was it? In the street a horn resounded, playing a hunting song. Apparently some groom of a rich family, standing near the bar of a tavern, with cheeks puffed out, mouth squeezed tight, and an air of ferocity, astonishing and silencing his audience.

But the thing that so stirred me was not the mere blowing of a horn in the city streets. I had been brought up in the country, and as a child I used to hear that blast far in the distance, along the road to the woods and the castle. The same air, the same thing exactly. How could the two be so precisely alike?

And involuntarily my hand wavered to my heart.

Formerly—to-day—my life—my heart—myself! I thought of all this suddenly, for no reason, as if I had gone mad.

• • • •

My past—what had I ever made of myself? Nothing, and I was already on the decline. Ah, because the refrain recalled the past, it seemed to me as if it were all over with me, and I had not lived. And I had a longing for a sort of lost paradise.

But of what avail to pray or rebel? I felt I had nothing more to expect from life. Thenceforth, I should be neither happy nor unhappy. I could not rise from the dead. I would grow old quietly, as quiet as I was that day in the room where so many people had left their traces, and yet no one had left his own traces.

This room—anywhere you turn, you find this room. It is the universal room. You think it is closed. No, it is open to the four winds of heaven. It is lost amid a host of similar rooms, like the light in the sky, like one day amid the host of all other days, like my "I" amid a host of other I's.

I, I! I saw nothing more now than the pallor of my face, with deep orbits, buried in the twilight, and my mouth filled with a silence which gently but surely stifles and destroys.

I raised myself on my elbow as on a clipped wing. I wished that something partaking of the infinite would happen to me.

I had no genius, no mission to fulfil, no great heart to bestow. I had nothing and I deserved nothing. But all the same I desired some sort of reward.

Love. I dreamed of a unique, an unheard-of idyll with a

woman far from the one with whom I had hitherto lost all my time, a woman whose features I did not see, but whose shadow I imagined beside my own as we walked along the road together.

Something infinite, something new! A journey, an extraordinary journey into which to throw myself headlong and bring variety into my life. Luxurious, bustling departures surrounded by solicitous inferiors, a lazy leaning back in railway trains that thunder along through wild landscapes and past cities rising up and growing as if blown by the wind.

Steamers, masts, orders given in barbarous tongues, landings on golden quays, then strange, exotic faces in the sunlight, puzzlingly alike, and monuments, familiar from pictures, which, in my tourist's pride, seem to have come close to me.

My brain was empty, my heart arid. I had never found anything, not even a friend. I was a poor man stranded for a day in a boarding-house room where everybody comes and everybody goes. And yet I longed for glory! For glory bound to me like a miraculous wound that I should feel and everybody would talk about. I longed for a following of which I should be the leader, my name acclaimed under the heavens like a new clarion call.

But I felt my grandeur slip away. My childish imagination played in vain with those boundless fancies. There was nothing more for me to expect from life. There was only I, who, stripped by the night, rose upward like a cry.

I could hardly see any more in the dark. I guessed at, rather than saw, myself in the mirror. I had a realising sense of my

weakness and captivity. I held my hands out toward the window, my outstretched fingers making them look like something torn. I lifted my face up to the sky. I sank back and leaned on the bed, a huge object with a vague human shape, like a corpse. God, I was lost! I prayed to Him to have pity on me. I thought that I was wise and content with my lot. I had said to myself that I was free from the instinct of theft. Alas, alas, it was not true, since I longed to take everything that was not mine.

CHAPTER II

The sound of the horn had ceased for some time. The street and the houses had quieted down. Silence. I passed my hand over my forehead. My fit of emotion was over. So much the better. I recovered my balance by an effort of will-power.

I sat down at the table and took some papers out of my bag that I had to look over and arrange.

Something spurred me on. I wanted to earn a little money. I could then send some to my old aunt who had brought me up. She always waited for me in the low-ceilinged room, where her sewing-machine, afternoons, whirred, monotonous and tiresome as a clock, and where, evenings, there was a lamp beside her which somehow seemed to look like herself.

Notes—the notes from which I was to draw up the report that would show my ability and definitely decide whether I would get a position in Monsieur Berton's bank—Monsieur Berton, who could do everything for me, who had but to say a word, the god of my material life.

I started to light the lamp. I scratched a match. It did not catch fire, the phosphorous end breaking off. I threw it away and waited a moment, feeling a little tired.

Then I heard a song hummed quite close to my ear.

• • • •

Some one seemed to be leaning on my shoulder, singing for me, only for me, in confidence.

Ah, an hallucination! Surely my brain was sick—my punishment for having thought too hard.

I stood up, and my hand clutched the edge of the table. I was oppressed by a feeling of the supernatural. I sniffed the air, my eyelids blinking, alert and suspicious.

The singing kept on. I could not get rid of it. My head was beginning to go round. The singing came from the room next to mine. Why was it so pure, so strangely near? Why did it touch me so? I looked at the wall between the two rooms, and stifled a cry of surprise.

High up, near the ceiling, above the door, always kept locked, there was a light. The song fell from that star.

There was a crack in the partition at that spot, through which the light of the next room entered the night of mine.

I climbed up on the bed, and my face was on a level with the crack. Rotten woodwork, two loose bricks. The plaster gave way and an opening appeared as large as my hand, but invisible from below, because of the moulding.

I looked. I beheld. The next room presented itself to my sight freely.

It spread out before me, this room which was not mine. The

voice that had been singing had gone, and in going had left the door open, and it almost seemed as though the door were still swinging on its hinges. There was nothing in the room but a lighted candle, which trembled on the mantelpiece.

At that distance the table looked like an island, the bluish and reddish pieces of furniture, in their vague outline, like the organs of a body almost alive.

I looked at the wardrobe. Bright, confused lines going straight up, its feet in darkness. The ceiling, the reflection of the ceiling in the glass, and the pale window like a human face against the sky.

I returned to my room—as if I had really left it—stunned at first, my thoughts in a whirl, almost forgetting who I was.

I sat down on my bed, thinking things over quickly and trembling a little, oppressed by what was to come.

I dominated, I possessed that room. My eyes entered it. I was in it. All who would be there would be there with me without knowing it. I should see them, I should hear them, I should be as much in their company as though the door were open.

••••

A moment later I raised my face to the hole and looked again. The candle was out, but some one was there. It was the maid. No doubt she had come in to put the room in order. Then she paused.

She was alone. She was quite near me. But I did not very

well see the living being who was moving about, perhaps because I was dazzled by seeing it so truly—a dark blue apron, falling down from her waist like rays of evening, white wrists, hands darker than her wrists from toil, a face undecided yet striking, eyes hidden yet shining, cheeks prominent and clear, a knot on top of her head gleaming like a crown.

A short time before I had seen the girl on the staircase bending over cleaning the banisters, her reddened face close to her large hands. I had found her repulsive because of those blackened hands of hers and the dusty chores that she stooped over. I had also seen her in a hallway walking ahead of me heavily, her hair hanging loose and her body giving out an unpleasant odour, so that you felt it was obnoxious and wrapped in dirty underwear.

••••

And now I looked at her again. The evening gently dispelled the ugliness, wiped out the misery and the horror, changed the dust into shadow, like a curse turned into a blessing. All that remained of her was colour, a mist, an outline; not even that; a thrill and the beating of her heart. Every trace of her had disappeared save her true self.

That was because she was alone. An extraordinary thing, a dash of the divine in it, to be actually alone. She was in that perfect innocence, that purity which is solitude.

I desecrated her solitude with my eyes, but she did not know

it, and so /she/ was not desecrated.

She went over to the window with brightening eyes and swinging hands in her apron of the colour of the nocturnal sky. Her face and the upper part of her body were illuminated. She seemed to be in heaven.

She sat down on the sofa, a great low red shadow in the depths of the room near the window. She leaned her broom beside her. Her dust cloth fell to the floor and was lost from sight.

She took a letter from her pocket and read it. In the twilight the letter was the whitest thing in the world. The double sheet trembled between her fingers, which held it carefully, like a dove in the air. She put the trembling letter to her lips, and kissed it. From whom was the letter? Not from her family. A servant girl is not likely to have so much filial devotion as to kiss a letter from her parents. A lover, her betrothed, yes. Many, perhaps, knew her lover's name. I did not, but I witnessed her love as no other person had. And that simple gesture of kissing the paper, that gesture buried in a room, stripped bare by the dark, had something sublime and awesome in it.

She rose and went closer to the window, the white letter folded in her grey hand.

The night thickened—and it seemed to me as if I no longer knew her age, nor her name, nor the work she happened to be doing down here, nor anything about her—nothing at all. She gazed at the pale immensity, which touched her. Her eyes gleamed. You would say she was crying, but no, her eyes only

shed light. She would be an angel if reality flourished upon the earth.

She sighed and walked to the door slowly. The door closed behind her like something falling.

She had gone without doing anything but reading her letter and kissing it.

• • • •

I returned to my corner lonely, more terribly alone than before. The simplicity of this meeting stirred me profoundly. Yet there had been no one there but a human being, a human being like myself. Then there is nothing sweeter and stronger than to approach a human being, whoever that human being may be.

This woman entered into my intimate life and took a place in my heart. How? Why? I did not know. But what importance she assumed! Not of herself. I did not know her, and I did not care to know her. She assumed importance by the sole value of the momentary revelation of her existence, by the example she gave, by the wake of her actual presence, by the true sound of her steps.

It seemed to me as if the supernatural dream I had had a short while before had been granted, and that what I called the infinite had come. What that woman, without knowing it, had given me by showing me her naked kiss—was it not the crowning beauty the reflection of which covers you with glory?

• • • •

The dinner bell rang.

This summons to everyday reality and one's usual occupations changed the course of my thoughts for the moment. I got ready to go down to dinner. I put on a gay waistcoat and a dark coat, and I stuck a pearl in my cravat. Then I stood still and listened, hoping to hear a footstep or a voice.

While doing these conventional things, I continued to be obsessed by the great event that had happened—this apparition.

I went downstairs and joined the rest of my fellow-boarders in the brown and gold dining-room. There was a general stir and bustle and the usual empty interest before a meal. A number of people seated themselves with the good manners of polite society. Smiles, the sound of chairs being drawn up to the table, words thrown out, conversations started. Then the concert of plates and dishes began and grew steadily louder.

My neighbours talked to those beside them. I heard their murmur, which accentuated my aloneness. I lifted my eyes. In front of me a shining row of foreheads, eyes, collars, shirtfronts, waists, and busy hands above a table of glistening whiteness. All these things attracted my attention and distracted it at the same time.

I did not know what these people were thinking about. I did not know who they were. They hid themselves from one another.

Their shining fronts made a wall against which I dashed in vain.

Bracelets, necklaces, rings. The sparkling of the jewels made me feel far away from them as do the stars. A young girl looked at me with vague blue eyes. What could I do against that kind of sapphire?

They talked, but the noise left each one to himself, and deafened me, as the light blinded me.

Nevertheless, at certain moments these people, because in the course of conversation they thought of things they had at heart, revealed themselves as if they were alone. I recognized the revelation of this truth, and felt myself turning pale on remembering that other revelation.

Some one spoke of money, and the subject became general. The assembly was stirred by an ideal. A dream of grasping and touching shone through their eyes, just as a little adoration had come into the eyes of the servant when she found herself alone.

They recalled military heroes triumphantly, and some men thought, "Me, too!" and worked themselves up into a fever, showing what they were thinking of, in spite of their ridiculously low station and the slavery of their social position. One young girl seemed dazzled, looked overwhelmed. She could not restrain a sigh of ecstasy. She blushed under the effect of an inscrutable thought. I saw the surge of blood mount to her face. I saw her heart beaming.

They discussed the phenomena of occultism and the Beyond. "Who knows?" some one said. Then they discussed death. Two

diners, at opposite ends of the table, a man and a woman who had not spoken to each other and seemed not to be acquainted, exchanged a glance that I caught. And seeing that glance leap from their eyes at the same time, under the shock of the idea of death, I understood that these two loved each other.

• • • •

The meal was over. The young people went into the parlour. A lawyer was telling some people around him about a murder case that had been decided that day. The nature of the subject was such that he expressed himself very cautiously, as though confiding a secret. A man had injured and then murdered a little girl and had kept singing at the top of his voice to prevent the cries of his little victim from being heard. One by one the people stopped talking and listened with the air of really not listening, while those not so close to the speaker felt like drawing up right next to him. About this image risen in their midst, this paroxysm so frightful to our timid instincts, the silence spread in a circle in their souls like a terrific noise.

Then I heard the laugh of a woman, of an honest woman, a dry crackling laugh, which she thought innocent perhaps, but which caressed her whole being, a burst of laughter, which, made up of formless instinctive cries, was almost fleshy. She stopped and turned, silent again. And the speaker, sure of his effect, continued in a calm voice to hurl upon these people the story of

the monster's confession.

A young mother, whose daughter was sitting beside her, half got up, but could not leave. She sat down again and bent forward to conceal her daughter. She was eager and yet ashamed to listen.

Another woman was sitting motionless, with her head leaning forward, but her mouth compressed as if she were defending herself tragically. And beneath the worldly mask of her face, I saw a fanatical martyr's smile impress itself like handwriting.

And the men! I distinctly heard one man, the man who was so calm and simple, catch his breath. Another man, with a characterless business man's face, was making a great effort to talk of this and that to a young girl sitting next to him, while he watched her with a look of which he was ashamed and which made him blink. And everybody condemned the satyr in terms of the greatest abuse.

And so, for a moment, they had not lied. They had almost confessed, perhaps unconsciously, and even without knowing what they had confessed. They had almost been their real selves. Desire had leaped into their eyes, and the reflection passed—and I had seen what happened in the silence, sealed by their lips.

It is this, it is this thought, this kind of living spectre, that I wished to study. I rose, shrugging my shoulders, and hurried out, impelled by eagerness to see the sincerity of men and women unveiled before my eyes, beautiful as a masterpiece in spite of its ugliness. So, back in my room again, I placed myself against the wall as if to embrace it and look down into the Room.

There it was at my feet. Even when empty, it was more alive than the people one meets and associates with, the people who have the vastness of numbers to lose themselves in and be forgotten in, who have voices for lying and faces to hide themselves behind.

CHAPTER III

Night, absolute night. Shadows thick as velvet hung all around.

Everything sank into darkness. I sat down and leaned my elbow on the round table, lighted by the lamp. I meant to work, but as a matter of fact I only listened.

I had looked into the Room a short time before. No one had been there, but no doubt some one was going to come.

Some one was going to come, that evening perhaps, or the next day, or the day after. Some one was bound to come. Then other human beings would follow in succession. I waited, and it seemed to me as if that was all I was made for.

I waited a long time, not daring to go to sleep. Then, very late, when silence had been reigning so long that it paralysed me, I made an effort. I leaned up against the wall once more and looked prayerfully. The Room was black, all things blending into one, full of the night, full of the unknown, of every possible thing. I dropped back into my own room.

••••

The next day I saw the Room in the simplicity of daylight. I saw the dawn spread over it. Little by little, it began to come out of its ruins and to rise.

It was arranged and furnished on the same plan as my own room. Opposite me was the mantelpiece with the looking-glass above. On the right was the bed, and on the left, on the same side as the window, a sofa, chairs, armchairs, table, wardrobe. The rooms were identical, but the history of mine was finished while the history of the other one had not yet begun.

After an insipid breakfast, I returned to the spot that attracted me, the hole in the partition. Nothing. I climbed down again.

It was close. A faint smell from the kitchen lingered even here. I paused in the infinite vastness of my empty room.

I opened my door a little bit, then all the way. In the hall the door of each room was painted brown, with numbers carved on brass plates. All were closed. I took a few steps, which I alone heard—heard echoing too loudly in that house, huge and immobile.

The passage was very long and narrow. The wall was hung with imitation tapestry of dark green foliage, against which shone the copper of a gas fixture. I leaned over the banister. A servant (the one who waited at the table and was wearing a blue apron now, hardly recognisable with her hair in disorder) came skipping down from the floor above with newspapers under her arm. Madame Lemercier's little girl, with a careful hand on the banister, was coming upstairs, her neck thrust forward like a bird, and I compared her little footsteps to fragments of passing seconds. A lady and a gentleman passed in front of me, breaking off their conversation to keep me from catching what they were

saying, as if they refused me the alms of their thoughts.

These trifling events disappeared like scenes of a comedy on which the curtain falls.

I passed the whole afternoon disheartened. I felt as if I were alone against them all, while roaming about inside this house and yet outside of it.

As I passed through the hallway, a door went shut hastily, cutting off the laugh of a woman taken by surprise. A senseless noise oozed from the walls, worse than silence. From under each door a broken ray of light crept out, worse than darkness.

I went downstairs to the parlour, attracted by the sound of conversation.

A group of men were talking, I no longer remember about what. They went out, and I was alone. I heard them talking in the hall. Then their voices died away.

A fashionable lady came in, with a rustle of silk and the smell of flowers and perfume. She took up a lot of room because of her fragrance and elegance. She carried her head held slightly forward and had a beautiful long face set off by an expression of great sweetness. But I could not see her well, because she did not look at me. She seated herself, picked up a book, and turned the pages, and the leaves cast upon her face a reflection of whiteness and thoughtfulness.

I watched her bosom rising and falling, and her motionless face, and the living book that was merged with her. Her complexion was so brilliant that her mouth seemed almost dark.

Her beauty saddened me. I looked at this unknown woman with sublime regret. She caressed me by her presence. A woman always caresses a man when she comes near him and they are alone. In spite of all sorts of separation, there is always an awful beginning of happiness between them.

But she went out. That was the end of her. Nothing had happened, and now it was over. All this was too simple, too hard, too true.

A gentle despair that I had never experienced before troubled me. Since the previous day I had changed. Human life, its living truth, I knew it as we all know it. I had been familiar with it all my life. I believed in it with a kind of fear now that it had appeared to me in a divine form.

CHAPTER IV

I went for several days without seeing anything. Those days were frightfully warm. At first the sky was grey and rainy. Now September was flaming to a close. Friday! Why, I had been in that house a week already.

One sultry morning I sat in my room and sank into dreamy musings and thought of a fairy tale.

The edge of a forest. In the undergrowth on the dark emerald carpet, circles of sunlight. Below, a hill rising from the plain, and above the thick yellow and dark-green foliage, a bit of wall and a turret as in a tapestry. A page advanced dressed like a bird. A buzzing. It was the sound of the royal chase in the distance. Unusually pleasant things were going to happen.

••••

The next afternoon was also hot and sunny. I remembered similar afternoons, years before and the present seemed to be that past, as if the glowing heat had effaced time and had stifled all other days beneath its brooding wings.

The room next to mine was almost dark. They had closed the shutters. Through the double curtains made out of some thin material I saw the window streaked with shining bars, like the

grating in front of a fire.

In the torrid silence of the house, in the large slumber it enclosed, bursts of laughter mounted and broke, voices died away, as they had the day before and as they always would.

From out of these remoter sounds emerged the distinct sound of footsteps, coming nearer and nearer. I propped myself up against the wall and looked. The door of the Room opened, as if pushed in by the flood of light that streamed through it, and two tiny shadows appeared, engulfed in the brightness.

They acted as though they were being pursued. They hesitated on the threshold, the doorway making a frame around those little creatures. And then they entered.

The door closed. The Room was now alive. I scrutinised the newcomers. I saw them indistinctly through the dark red and green spots dancing in front of my eyes, which had been dazzled by the flood of light. A little boy and a little girl, twelve or thirteen years old.

They sat down on the sofa, and looked at each other in silence. Their faces were almost alike.

• • • •

The boy murmured:

"You see, *Hélène*, there is no one here."

And a hand pointed to the uncovered bed, and to the empty table and empty clothes-racks—the careful denudation of

unoccupied rooms.

Then the same hand began to tremble like a leaf. I heard the beating of my heart. The voices whispered:

"We are alone. They did not see us."

"This is about the first time we've ever been alone together."

"Yet we have always known each other."

A little laugh.

They seemed to need solitude, the first step to a mystery toward which they were travelling together. They had fled from the others. They had created for themselves the forbidden solitude. But you could clearly tell that now that they had found solitude, they did not know what else to look for.

• • • •

Then I heard one of them stammer and say sadly, with almost a sob:

"We love each other dearly."

Then a tender phrase rose breathlessly, groping for words, timidly, like a bird just learning to fly:

"I'd like to love you more."

To see them thus bent toward each other, in the warm shadow, which bathed them and veiled the childishness of their features, you would have thought them two lovers meeting.

Two lovers! That was their dream, though they did not yet know what love meant.

One of them had said "the first time." It was the time that they felt they were alone, although these two cousins had been living close together.

No doubt it was the first time that the two had sought to leave friendship and childhood behind them. It was the first time that desire had come to surprise and trouble two hearts, which until now had slept.

• • • •

Suddenly they stood up, and the slender ray of sunlight, which passed over them and fell at their feet, revealed their figures, lighted up their faces and hair, so that their presence brightened the room.

Were they going away? No, they sat down again. Everything fell back into shadow, into mystery, into truth.

In beholding them, I felt a confused mingling of my past and the past of the world. Where were they? Everywhere, since they existed. They were on the banks of the Nile, the Ganges, or the Cydnus, on the banks of the eternal river of the ages. They were Daphnis and Chloë, under a myrtle bush, in the Greek sunshine, the shimmer of leaves on their faces, and their faces mirroring each other. Their vague little conversation hummed like the wings of a bee, near the freshness of fountains and the heat that consumed the meadows, while in the distance a chariot went by, laden with sheaves.

The new world opened. The panting truth was there. It confused them. They feared the brusque intrusion of some divinity. They were happy and unhappy. They nestled as close together as they could. They brought to each other as much as they could. But they did not suspect what it was that they were bringing. They were too small, too young. They had not lived long enough. Each was to self a stifling secret.

Like all human beings, like me, like us, they wished for what they did not have. They were beggars. But they asked / themselves/ for charity. They asked for help from their /own/ persons.

The boy, a man already, impoverished already by his feminine companion, turned, drawn towards her, and held out his awkward arms, without daring to look at her.

The girl, a woman already, leaned her face on the back of the sofa, her eyes shining. Her cheeks were plump and rosy, tinted and warmed by her heart. The skin of her neck, taut and satiny, quivered. Half-blown and waiting, a little voluptuous because voluptuousness already emanated from her, she was like a rose inhaling sunlight.

And I—I could not tear my eyes from them.

• • • •

After a long silence, he murmured:

"Shall we stop calling each other by our first names?"

"Why?"

He seemed absorbed in thought.

"So as to begin over again," he said at last.

"Shall we, Miss Janvier?" he asked again.

She gave a visible start at the touch of this new manner of address, at the word "Miss," as if it were a kind of embrace.

"Why, Mr. Lecoq," she ventured hesitatingly, "it is as though something had covered us, and we were removing—"

Now, he became bolder.

"Shall we kiss each other on our mouths?"

She was oppressed, and could not quite smile.

"Yes," she said.

They caught hold of each other's arms and shoulders and held out their lips, as if their mouths were birds.

"Jean!" "Hélène!" came softly.

It was the first thing they had found out. To embrace the embracer, is it not the tiniest caress and the least sort of a bond? And yet it is so sternly prohibited.

Again they seemed to me to be without age.

They were like all lovers, while they held hands, their faces joined, trembling and blind, in the shadow of a kiss.

••••

They broke off, and disengaged themselves from their embrace, whose meaning they had not yet learned.

They talked with their innocent lips. About what? About the past, which was so near and so short.

They were leaving their paradise of childhood and ignorance. They spoke of a house and a garden where they had both lived.

The house absorbed them. It was surrounded by a garden wall, so that from the road all you could see was the tip of the eaves, and you couldn't tell what was going on inside of it.

They prattled:

"The rooms, when we were little and they were so big—"

"It was easier to walk there than anywhere else."

To hear the children talk, you would have thought there was something benevolent and invisible, something like the good God of the past, behind those walls. She hummed an air she had heard there, and said that music was easier to remember than people. They dropped back into the past easily and naturally. They wrapped themselves up in their memories as though they were cold.

"The other day, just before we left, I took a candle and walked alone through the rooms, which scarcely woke up to watch me pass."

In the garden, so prim and well kept, they thought only of the flowers, and little else. They saw the pool, the shady walk, and the cherry tree, which, in winter when the lawn was white, they made believe had too many blossoms—snow blossoms.

The day before they had still been in the garden, like brother and sister. Now life seemed to have grown serious all at once,

and they no longer knew how to play. I saw that they wanted to kill the past. When we are old, we let it die; when we are young and strong, we kill it.

She sat up straight.

"I don't want to remember any more," she said.

And he:

"I don't want us to be like each other any more. I don't want us to be brother and sister any more."

Gradually their eyes opened.

"To touch nothing but each other's hands," he muttered, trembling.

"Brother—sister—that's nothing."

It had come—the hour of beautiful, troubled decisions, of forbidden fruits. They had not belonged to each other before. The hour had come when they sought to be all in all to each other.

They were a little self-conscious, a little ashamed of themselves already. A few days before, in the evening, it had given them profound pleasure to disobey their parents and go out of the garden although they had been forbidden to leave it.

"Grandmother came to the top of the steps and called to us to come in."

"But we were gone. We had slipped through the hole in the hedge where a bird always sang. There was no wind, and scarcely any light. Even the trees didn't stir. The dust on the ground was dead. The shadows stole round us so softly that we almost spoke to them. We were frightened to see night coming on. Everything

had lost its colour. But the night was clear, and the flowers, the road, even the wheat were silver. And it was then that my mouth came closest to your mouth."

"The night," she said, her soul carried aloft on a wave of beauty, "the night caresses the caresses."

"I took your hand, and I knew that you would live life whole. When I used to say 'Hélène,' I did not know what I was saying. Now, when I shall say 'she,' it will be everything."

Once more their lips joined. Their mouths and their eyes were those of Adam and Eve. I recalled the ancestral lesson from which sacred history and human history flow as from a fountain. They wandered in the penetrating light of paradise without knowledge. They were as if they did not exist. When—through triumphant curiosity, though forbidden by God himself—they learned the secret, the sky was darkened. The certainty of a future of sorrow had fallen upon them. Angels pursued them like vultures. They grovelled on the ground from day to day, but they had created love, they had replaced divine riches by the poverty of belonging to each other.

The two little children had taken their parts in the eternal drama. By talking to each other as they did they had restored to their first names their full significance.

"I should like to love you more. I should like to love you harder. How could I?"

• • • •

They said no more, as though there were no more words for them. They were completely absorbed in themselves, and their hands trembled.

Then they rose, and as they did so, the door opened. There stood the old stooping grandmother. She came out of the grey, out of the realm of phantoms, out of the past. She was looking for them as if they had gone astray. She called them in a low voice. She put into her tone a great gentleness, almost sadness, strangely harmonising with the children's presence.

"You are here, children?" she said, with a kind little laugh. "What are you doing here? Come, they are looking for you."

She was old and faded, but she was angelic, with her gown fastened up to her neck. Beside these two, who were preparing for the large life, she was, thenceforth, like a child, inactive, useless.

They rushed into her arms, and pressed their foreheads against her saintly mouth. They seemed to be saying good-by to her forever.

• • • •

She went out. And a moment afterwards they followed her,

hastily, as they had come, united now by an invisible and sublime bond. On the threshold, they looked at each other once more.

And now that the room was empty like a deserted sanctuary, I thought of their glance, their first glance of love, which I had seen.

No one before me had ever seen a first glance of love. I was beside them, but, far away. I understood and read it without being part of the infatuation myself, without being lost in the sensation. That is why I saw that glance. They did not know when it began, they did not know that it was the first. Afterwards they would forget. The urgent flowering of their hearts would destroy those preludes. We can no more know our first glance of love than our last. I shall remember it when they will have forgotten it.

I do not recall my own first glance of love, my own first gift of love. Yet it happened. Those divine simplicities are erased from my heart. Good God, then what do I retain that is of value? The little boy that I was is dead forever, before my eyes. I survived him, but forgetfulness tormented me, then overcame me, the sad process of living ruined me, and I scarcely know what he knew. I remember things at random only, but the most beautiful, the sweetest memories are gone.

Well, this tender canticle that I overheard, full of infinity and overflowing with fresh laughter, this precious song, I take and hold and cherish. It pulses in my heart. I have stolen, but I have preserved truth.

CHAPTER V

For a day, the Room remained vacant. Twice I had high hopes, then disillusionment.

Waiting had become a habit, an occupation. I put off appointments, delayed my walks, gained time at the risk of losing my position. I arranged my life as for a new love. I left my room only to go down to dinner, where nothing interested me any more.

The second day, I noticed that the Room was ready to receive a new occupant. It was waiting. I had a thousand dreams of who the guest would be, while the Room kept its secret, like some one thinking.

Twilight came, then evening, which magnified the room but did not change it. I was already in despair, when the door opened in the darkness, and I saw on the threshold the shadow of a man.

• • • •

He was scarcely to be distinguished in the evening light.

Dark clothing, milky white cuffs from which his grey tapering hands hung down; a collar a little whiter than the rest. In his round greyish face I could see the dusky hollows of his eyes and mouth, under the chin a cavity of shadow. The yellow of his forehead shone unclearly. His cheekbone made an obscure bar in

the dusk. You would have called him a skeleton. What was this being whose physiognomy was so monstrously simple?

He came nearer, and his face kindled, assumed life. I saw that he was handsome.

He had a charming serious face, fringed with a fine black beard, a high forehead and sparkling eyes. A haughty grace guided and refined his movements.

He came forward a step or two, then returned to the door, which was still open. The shadow of the door trembled, a silhouette appeared and took shape. A little black-gloved hand grasped the knob, and a woman stole into the room, with a questioning face.

She must have been a few steps behind him in the street. They had not wished to enter the room together, in which they both sought refuge to escape pursuit.

She closed the door, and leaned her whole weight against it, to close it still tighter. Slowly she turned her head to him, paralysed for a moment, it seemed to me, with fear that it was not he. They stared into each other's faces. A cry burst from them, passionate, restrained, almost mute, echoing from one to the other. It seemed to open up their wound.

"You!"

"You!"

She almost fainted. She dropped on his breast as though swept by a storm. She had just strength enough to fall into his arms. I saw the man's two large pale hands, opened but slightly crooked,

resting on the woman's back. A sort of desperate palpitation seized them, as if an immense angel were in the Room, struggling and making vain efforts to escape. And it seemed to me that the Room was too small for this couple, although it was full of the evening.

"They didn't see us!"

It was the same phrase which had come the other day from the two children.

He said, "Come!" leading her over to the sofa, near the window, and they seated themselves on the red velvet. I saw their arms joined together as though by a cord. They remained there, engrossed, gathering about them all the shadow of the world, reviving, beginning to live again in their element of night and solitude.

What an entry, what an entry! What an irruption of anathema!

I had thought, when this form of sin presented itself before me, when the woman appeared at the door, plainly driven toward him, that I should witness bliss in its plenitude, a savage and animal joy, as momentous as nature. On the contrary, I found that this meeting was like a heart-rending farewell.

"Then we shall always be afraid?"

She seemed just a little more tranquil, and said this with an anxious glance at him, as if really expecting a reply.

She shuddered, huddled in the shadows, feverishly stroking and pressing the man's hand, sitting upright, stiffly. I saw her throat rising and falling like the sea. They stayed there, touching

one another; but a lingering terror mingled with their caresses.

"Always afraid—always afraid, always. Far from the street, far from the sun, far from everything. I who had so much wanted full daylight and sunlight!" she said, looking at the sky.

They were afraid. Fear moulded them, burrowed into their hearts. Their eyes, their hearts were afraid. Above all, their love was afraid.

A mournful smile glided across the man's face. He looked at his friend and murmured:

"You are thinking of /him."/

She was sitting with her cheeks in her hands and her elbows on her knees and her face thrust forward. She did not reply.

She /was/ thinking of him. Doubled up, small as a child, she gazed intently into the distance, at the man who was not there. She bowed to this image like a suppliant, and felt a divine reflection from it falling upon her—from the man who was not there, who was being deceived, from the offended man, the wounded man, from the master, from him who was everywhere except where they were, who occupied the immense outside, and whose name made them bow their heads, the man to whom they were a prey.

Night fell, as if shame and terror were in its shadows, over this man and woman, who had come to hide their embraces in this room, as in a tomb where dwells the Beyond.

• • • •

He said to her:

"I love you!"

I distinctly heard those grand words.

I love you! I shuddered to the depths of my being on hearing the profound words which came from those two human beings. I love you! The words which offer body and soul, the great open cry of the creature and the creation. I love you! I beheld love face to face.

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