

HENRI BARBUSSE

LIGHT

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Henri Barbusse

Light

CHAPTER I

MYSELF

All the days of the week are alike, from their beginning to their end.

At seven in the evening one hears the clock strike gently, and then the instant tumult of the bell. I close the desk, wipe my pen, and put it down. I take my hat and muffler, after a glance at the mirror—a glance which shows me the regular oval of my face, my glossy hair and fine mustache. (It is obvious that I am rather more than a workman.) I put out the light and descend from my little glass-partitioned office. I cross the boiler-house, myself in the grip of the thronging, echoing peal which has set it free. From among the dark and hurrying crowd, which increases in the corridors and rolls down the stairways like a cloud, some passing voices cry to me, "Good-night, Monsieur Simon," or, with less familiarity, "Good-night, Monsieur Paulin." I answer here and there, and allow myself to be borne away by everybody else.

Outside, on the threshold of the porch which opens on the naked plain and its pallid horizons, one sees the squares and triangles of the factory, like a huge black background of the stage, and the tall extinguished chimney, whose only crown now is the cloud of falling night. Confusedly, the dark flood carries me away. Along the wall which faces the porch, women are waiting, like a curtain of shadow, which yields glimpses of their pale and expressionless faces. With nod or word we recognize each other from the mass. Couples are formed by the quick hooking of arms. All along the ghostly avenue one's eyes follow the toilers' scrambling flight.

The avenue is a wan track cut across the open fields. Its course is marked afar by lines of puny trees, sooty as snuffed candles; by telegraph posts and their long spider-webs; by bushes or by fences, which are like the skeletons of bushes. There are a few houses. Up yonder a strip of sky still shows palely yellow above the meager suburb where creeps the muddy crowd detached from the factory. The west wind sets quivering their overalls, blue or black or khaki, excites the woolly tails that flutter from muffled necks, scatters some evil odors, attacks the sightless faces so deep-drowned beneath the sky.

There are taverns anon which catch the eye. Their doors are closed, but their windows and fanlights shine like gold. Between the taverns rise the fronts of some old houses, tenantless and hollow; others, in ruins, cut into this gloomy valley of the homes of men with notches of sky. The iron-shod feet all around me on the hard road sound like the heavy rolling of drums, and then on the paved footpath like dragged chains. It is in vain that I walk with head bent—my own footsteps are lost in the rest, and I cannot hear them.

We hurry, as we do every evening. At that spot in the inky landscape where a tall and twisted tree seems to writhe as if it had a soul, we begin suddenly to descend, our feet plunging forward. Down below we see the lights of Viviers sparkle. These men, whose day is worn out, stride towards those earthly stars. One hope is like another in the evening, as one weariness is like another; we are all alike. I, also. I go towards my light, like all the others, as on every evening.

* * * * *

When we have descended for a long time the gradient ends, the avenue flattens out like a river, and widens as it pierces the town. Through the latticed boughs of the old plane trees—still naked on this last day of March—one glimpses the workmen's houses, upright in space, hazy and fantastic

chessboards, with squares of light dabbed on in places, or like vertical cliffs in which our swarming is absorbed. Scattering among the twilight colonnade of the trees, these people engulf themselves in the heaped-up lodgings and rooms; they flow together in the cavity of doors; they plunge into the houses; and there they are vaguely turned into lights.

I continue to walk, surrounded by several companions who are foremen and clerks, for I do not associate with the workmen. Then there are handshakes, and I go on alone.

Some dimly seen wayfarers disappear; the sounds of sliding locks and closing shutters are heard here and there; the houses have shut themselves up, the night-bound town becomes a desert profound. I can hear nothing now but my own footfall.

Viviers is divided into two parts—like many towns, no doubt. First, the rich town, composed of the main street, where you find the Grand Café, the elegant hotels, the sculptured houses, the church and the castle on the hill-top. The other is the lower town, which I am now entering. It is a system of streets reached by an extension of that avenue which is flanked by the workmen's barracks and climbs to the level of the factory. Such is the way which it has been my custom to climb in the morning and to descend when the light is done, during the six years of my clerkship with Messrs. Gozlan & Co. In this quarter I am still rooted. Some day I should like to live yonder; but between the two halves of the town there is a division—a sort of frontier, which has always been and will always be.

In the Rue Verte I meet only a street lamp, and then a mouse-like little girl who emerges from the shadows and enters them again without seeing me, so intent is she on pressing to her heart, like a doll, the big loaf they have sent her to buy. Here is the Rue de l'Etape, my street. Through the semi-darkness, a luminous movement peoples the hairdresser's shop, and takes shape on the dull screen of his window. His transparent door, with its arched inscription, opens just as I pass, and under the soap-dish¹, whose jingle summons customers, Monsieur Justin Pocard himself appears, along with a rich gust of scented light. He is seeing a customer out, and improving the occasion by the utterance of certain sentiments; and I had time to see that the customer, convinced, nodded assent, and that Monsieur Pocard, the oracle, was caressing his white and ever-new beard with his luminous hand.

I turn round the cracked walls of the former tinplate works, now bowed and crumbling, whose windows are felted with grime or broken into black stars. A few steps farther I think I saw the childish shadow of little Antoinette, whose bad eyes they don't seem to be curing; but not being certain enough to go and find her I turn into my court, as I do every evening.

Every evening I find Monsieur Crillon at the door of his shop at the end of the court, where all day long he is fiercely bent upon trivial jobs, and he rises before me like a post. At sight of me the kindly giant nods his big, shaven face, and the square cap on top, his huge nose and vast ears. He taps the leather apron that is hard as a plank. He sweeps me along to the side of the street, sets my back against the porch and says to me, in a low voice, but with heated conviction, "That Pétrarque chap, he's really a bad lot."

He takes off his cap, and while the crescendo nodding of his bristly head seems to brush the night, he adds: "I've mended him his purse. It had become percolated. I've put him a patch on that cost me thirty centimes, and I've re sewn the edge with braid, and all the lot. They're expensive, them jobs. Well, when I open my mouth to talk about that matter of his sewing-machine that I'm interested in and that he can't use himself, he becomes congealed."

He recounts to me the mad claims of Trompson in the matter of his new soles, and the conduct of Monsieur Becret, who, though old enough to know better, had taken advantage of his good faith by paying for the repair of his spout with a knife "that would cut anything it sees." He goes on to detail for my benefit all the important matters in his life. Then he says, "I'm not rich, I'm not, but I'm consentious. If I'm a botcher, it's 'cos my father and my grandfather were botchers before me."

¹ The hanging sign of a French barber.—Tr.

There's some that's for making a big stir in the world, there are. I don't hold with that idea. What I does, I does."

Suddenly a sonorous tramp persists and repeats itself in the roadway, and a shape of uncertain equilibrium emerges and advances towards us by fits and starts; a shape that clings to itself and is impelled by a force stronger than itself. It is Brisbille, the blacksmith, drunk, as usual.

Espying us, Brisbille utters exclamations. When he has reached us he hesitates, and then, smitten by a sudden idea, he comes to a standstill, his boots clanking on the stones, as if he were a cart. He measures the height of the curb with his eye, but clenches his fists, swallows what he wanted to say, and goes off reeling, with an odor of hatred and wine, and his face slashed with red patches.

"That anarchist!" said Crillon, in disgust; "loathsome notions, now, aren't they? Ah! who'll rid us of him and his alcoholytes?" he adds, as he offers me his hand. "Good-night. I'm always saying to the Town Council, 'You must give 'em clink,' I says, 'that gang of Bolsheviks, for the slightest infractionment of the laws against drunkenness.' Yes, indeed! There's that Jean Latrouille in the Town Council, eh? They talk about keeping order, but as soon as it's a question of a-doing of it, they seem like a cold draught."

The good fellow is angry. He raises his great fist and shakes it in space like a medieval mace. Pointing where Brisbille has just plunged floundering into the night, he says, "That's what Socialists are,—the conquering people what can't stand up on their legs! I may be a botcher in life, but I'm for peace and order. Good-night, good-night. Is she well, Aunt Josephine? I'm for tranquillity and liberty and order. That's why I've always kept clear of their crowd. A bit since, I saw her trotting past, as vivacious as a young girl,—but there, I talk and I talk!"

He enters his shop, but turns on his heel and calls me back, with a mysterious sign. "You know they've all arrived up yonder at the castle?" Respect has subdued his voice; a vision is absorbing him of the lords and ladies of the manor, and as he leaves me he bows, instinctively.

His shop is a narrow glass cage, which is added to our house, like a family relation. Within I can just make out the strong, plebeian framework of Crillon himself, upright beside a serrated heap of ruins, over which a candle is enthroned. The light which falls on his accumulated tools and on those hanging from the wall makes a decoration obscurely golden around the picture of this wise man; this soul all innocent of envious demands, turning again to his botching, as his father and grandfather botched.

I have mounted the steps and pushed our door; the gray door, whose only relief is the key. The door goes in grumblingly, and makes way for me into the dark passage, which was formerly paved, though now the traffic of soles has kneaded it with earth, and changed it into a footpath. My forehead strikes the lamp, which is hooked on the wall; it is out, oozing oil, and it stinks. One never sees that lamp, and always bangs it.

And though I had hurried so—I don't know why—to get home, at this moment of arrival I slow down. Every evening I have the same small and dull disillusion.

I go into the room which serves us as kitchen and dining-room, where my aunt is lying. This room is buried in almost complete darkness.

"Good evening, Mame."

A sigh, and then a sob arise from the bed crammed against the pale celestial squares of the window.

Then I remember that there was a scene between my old aunt and me after our early morning coffee. Thus it is two or three times a week. This time it was about a dirty window-pane, and on this particular morning, exasperated by the continuous gush of her reproaches, I flung an offensive word, and banged the door as I went off to work. So Mame has had to weep all the day. She has fostered and ruminated her spleen, and sniffed up her tears, even while busy with household duties. Then, as the day declined, she put out the lamp and went to bed, with the object of sustaining and displaying her chagrin.

When I came in she was in the act of peeling invisible potatoes; there are potatoes scattered over the floor, everywhere. My feet kick them and send them rolling heavily among odds and ends of utensils and a soft deposit of garments that are lying about. As soon as I am there my aunt overflows with noisy tears.

Not daring to speak again, I sit down in my usual corner.

Over the bed I can make out a pointed shape, like a mounted picture, silhouetted against the curtains, which slightly blacken the window. It is as though the quilt were lifted from underneath by a stick, for my Aunt Josephine is leanness itself.

Gradually she raises her voice and begins to lament. "You've no feelings, no—you're heartless,—that dreadful word you said to me,—you said, 'You and your jawing!' Ah! people don't know what I have to put up with—ill-natured—cart-horse!"

In silence I hear the tear-streaming words that fall and founder in the dark room from that obscure blot on the pillow which is her face.

I stand up. I sit down again. I risk saying, "Come now, come; that's all done with."

She cries: "Done with? Ah! it will never be done with!"

With the sheet that night is begriming she muzzles herself, and hides her face. She shakes her head to left and to right, violently, so as to wipe her eyes and signify dissent at the same time.

"Never! A word like that you said to me breaks the heart forever. But I must get up and get you something to eat. You must eat. I brought you up when you were a little one,"—her voice capsizes—"I've given up all for you, and you treat me as if I were an adventuress."

I hear the sound of her skinny feet as she plants them successively on the floor, like two boxes. She is seeking her things, scattered over the bed or slipped to the floor; she is swallowing sobs. Now she is upright, shapeless in the shadow, but from time to time I see her remarkable leanness outlined. She slips on a camisole and a jacket,—a spectral vision of garments which unfold themselves about her handle-like arms, and above the hollow framework of her shoulders.

She talks to herself while she dresses, and gradually all my life-history, all my past comes forth from what the poor woman says,—my only near relative on earth; as it were my mother and my servant.

She strikes a match. The lamp emerges from the dark and zigzags about the room like a portable fairy. My aunt is enclosed in a strong light. Her eyes are level with her face; she has heavy and spongy eyelids and a big mouth which stirs with ruminated sorrow. Fresh tears increase the dimensions of her eyes, make them sparkle and varnish the points of her cheeks. She comes and goes with undiminished spleen. Her wrinkles form heavy moldings on her face, and the skin of chin and neck is so folded that it looks intestinal, while the crude light tinges it all with something like blood.

Now that the lamp is alight some items become visible of the dismal super-chaos in which we are walled up,—the piece of bed-ticking fastened with two nails across the bottom of the window, because of draughts; the marble-topped chest of drawers, with its woolen cover; and the door-lock, stopped with a protruding plug of paper.

The lamp is flaring, and as Mame does not know where to stand it among the litter, she puts it on the floor and crouches to regulate the wick. There rises from the medley of the old lady, vividly variegated with vermilion and night, a jet of black smoke, which returns in parachute form. Mame sighs, but she cannot check her continual talk.

"You, my lad, you who are so genteel when you like, and earn a hundred and eighty francs a month,—you're genteel, but you're short of good manners, it's that chiefly I find fault with you about. So you spat on the window-pane; I'm certain of it. May I drop dead if you didn't. And you're nearly twenty-four! And to revenge yourself because I'd found out that you'd spat on the window, you told me to stop my jawing, for that's what you said to me, after all. Ah, vulgar fellow that you are! The factory gentlemen are too kind to you. Your poor father was their best workman. You are more genteel than your poor father, more English; and you preferred to go into business rather than

go on learning Latin, and everybody thought you quite right; but for hard work you're not much good —ah, la, la! Confess that you spat on the window.

"For your poor mother," the ghost of Mame goes on, as she crosses the room with a wooden spoon in her hand, "one must say that she had good taste in dress. That's no harm, no; but certainly they must have the wherewithal. She was always a child. I remember she was twenty-six when they carried her away. Ah, how she loved hats! But she had handsome ways, for all that, when she said, 'Come along with us, Josephine!' So I brought you up, I did, and sacrificed everything...."

Overcome by the mention of the past, Mame's speech and action both cease. She chokes and wags her head and wipes her face with her sleeve.

I risk saying, gently, "Yes, I know it well."

A sigh is my answer. She lights the fire. The coal sends out a cushion of smoke, which expands and rolls up the stove, falls back, and piles its muslin on the floor. Mame manipulates the stove with her feet in the cloudy deposit; and the hazy white hair which escapes from her black cap is also like smoke.

Then she seeks her handkerchief and pats her pockets to get the velvet coal-dust off her fingers. Now, with her back turned, she is moving casseroles about. "Monsieur Crillon's father," she says, "old Dominic, had come from County Cher to settle down here in '66 or '67. He's a sensible man, seeing he's a town councilor. (We must tell him nicely to take his buckets away from our door.) Monsieur Bonéas is very rich, and he speaks so well, in spite of his bad neck. You must show yourself off to all these gentlemen. You're genteel, and you're already getting a hundred and eighty francs a month, and it's vexing that you haven't got some sign to show that you're on the commercial side, and not a workman, when you're going in and out of the factory."

"That can be seen easily enough."

"I'd rather you had a badge."

Breathing damply and forcefully, she sniffs harder and quicker, and looks here and there for her handkerchief; she prowls with the lamp. As my eyes follow her, the room awakens more and more. My groping gaze discovers the tiled floor, the conference of chairs backed side by side against the wall, the motionless pallor of the window in the background above the low and swollen bed, which is like a heap of earth and plaster, the clothes lying on the floor like mole-hills, the protruding edges of tables and shelves, pots, bottles, kettles and hanging clouts, and that lock with the cotton-wool in its ear.

"I like orderliness so much," says Mame as she tacks and worms her way through this accumulation of things, all covered with a downy layer of dust like the corners of pastel pictures.

According to habit, I stretch out my legs and put my feet on the stool, which long use has polished and glorified till it looks new. My face turns this way and that towards the lean phantom of my aunt, and I lull myself with the sounds of her stirring and her endless murmur.

And now, suddenly, she has come near to me. She is wearing her jacket of gray and white stripes which hangs from her acute shoulders, she puts her arm around my neck, and trembles as she says, "You can mount high, you can, with the gifts that you have. Some day, perhaps, you will go and tell men everywhere the truth of things. That *has* happened. There have been men who were in the right, above everybody. Why shouldn't you be one of them, my lad, *you* one of these great apostles!"

And with her head gently nodding, and her face still tear-stained, she looks afar, and sees the streets attentive to my eloquence!

* * * * *

Hardly has this strange imagining in the bosom of our kitchen passed away when Mame adds, with her eyes on mine, "My lad, mind you, never look higher than yourself. You are already something of a home-bird; you have already serious and elderly habits. That's good. Never try to be different from others."

"No danger of that, Mame."

No, there is no danger of that. I should like to remain as I am. Something holds me to the surroundings of my infancy and childhood, and I should like them to be eternal. No doubt I hope for much from life. I hope, I have hopes, as every one has. I do not even know all that I hope for, but I should not like too great changes. In my heart I should not like anything which changed the position of the stove, of the tap, of the chestnut wardrobe, nor the form of my evening rest, which faithfully returns.

* * * * *

The fire alight, my aunt warms up the stew, stirring it with the wooden spoon. Sometimes there spurts from the stove a mournful flame, which seems to illumine her with tatters of light.

I get up to look at the stew. The thick brown gravy is purring. I can see pale bits of potato, and it is uncertainly spotted with the mucosity of onions. Mame pours it into a big white plate. "That's for you," she says; "now, what shall I have?"

We settle ourselves each side of the little swarthy table. Mame is fumbling in her pocket. Now her lean hand, lumpy and dark, unroots itself. She produces a bit of cheese, scrapes it with a knife which she holds by the blade, and swallows it slowly. By the rays of the lamp, which stands beside us, I see that her face is not dry. A drop of water has lingered on the cheek that each mouthful protrudes, and glitters there. Her great mouth works in all directions, and sometimes swallows the remains of tears.

So there we are, in front of our plates, of the salt which is placed on a bit of paper, of my share of jam, which is put into a mustard-pot. There we are, narrowly close, our foreheads and hands brought together by the light, and for the rest but poorly clothed by the huge gloom. Sitting in this jaded armchair, my hands on this ill-balanced table,—which, if you lean on one side of it, begins at once to limp,—I feel that I am deeply rooted where I am, in this old room, disordered as an abandoned garden, this worn-out room, where the dust touches you softly.

After we have eaten, our remarks grow rarer. Then Mame begins again to mumble; once again she yields to emotion under the harsh flame of the lamp, and once again her eyes grow dim in her complicated Japanese mask that is crowned with cotton-wool, and something dimly shining flows from them.

The tears of the sensitive old soul splash on that lip so voluminous that it seems a sort of heart. She leans towards me, she comes so near, so near, that I feel sure she is touching me.

I have only her in the world to love me really. In spite of her humors and her lamentations I know well that she is always in the right.

I yawn, while she takes away the dirty plates and proceeds to hide them in a dark corner. She fills the big bowl from the pitcher and then carries it along to the stove for the crockery.

Antonia has given me an appointment for eight o'clock, near the Kiosk. It is ten past eight. I go out. The passage, the court,—by night all these familiar things surround me even while they hide themselves. A vague light still hovers in the sky. Crillon's prismatic shop gleams like a garnet in the bosom of the night, behind the riotous disorder of his buckets. There I can see Crillon,—he never seems to stop,—filing something, examining his work close to a candle which flutters like a butterfly ensnared, and then, reaching for the glue-pot which steams on a little stove. One can just see his face, the engrossed and heedless face of the artificer of the good old days; the black plates of his ill-shaven cheeks; and, protruding from his cap, a vizor of stiff hair. He coughs, and the window-panes vibrate.

In the street, shadow and silence. In the distance are venturing shapes, people emerging or entering, and some light echoing sounds. Almost at once, on the corner, I see Monsieur Joseph Bonéas vanishing, stiff as a ramrod. I recognized the thick white kerchief, which consolidates the boils on his neck. As I pass the hairdresser's door it opens, just as it did a little while ago, and his agreeable voice

says, "That's all there is to it, in business." "Absolutely," replies a man who is leaving. In the oven of the street one can see only his littleness—he must be a considerable personage, all the same. Monsieur Pocard is always applying himself to business and thinking of great schemes. A little farther, in the depths of a cavity, stoppered by an iron-grilled window, I divine the presence of old Eudo, the bird of ill omen, the strange old man who coughs, and has a bad eye, and whines continually. Even indoors he must wear his mournful cloak and the lamp-shade of his hood. People call him a spy, and not without reason.

Here is the Kiosk. It is waiting quite alone, with its point in the darkness. Antonia has not come, for she would have waited for me. I am impatient first, and then relieved. A good riddance.

No doubt Antonia is still tempting when she is present. There is a reddish fever in her eyes, and her slenderness sets you on fire. But I am hardly in harmony with the Italian. She is particularly engrossed in her private affairs, with which I am not concerned. Big Victorine, always ready, is worth a hundred of her; or Madame Lacaille, the pensively vicious; though I am equally satiated of her, too. Truth to tell, I plunge unreflectingly into a heap of amorous adventures which I shortly find vulgar. But I can never resist the magic of a first temptation.

I shall not wait. I go away. I skirt the forge of the ignoble Brisbille. It is the last house in that chain of low hills which is the street. Out of the deep dark the smithy window flames with vivid orange behind its black tracery. In the middle of that square-ruled page of light I see transparently outlined the smith's eccentric silhouette, now black and sharp, now softly huge. Spectrally through the glare, and in blundering frenzy, he strives and struggles and fumbles horribly on the anvil. Swaying, he seems to rush to right and to left, like a passenger on a hell-bound ferry. The more drunk he is, the more furiously he falls upon his iron and his fire.

I return home. Just as I am about to enter a timid voice calls me—"Simon!"

It is Antonia. So much the worse for her. I hurry in, followed by the weak appeal.

I go up to my room. It is bare and always cold; always I must shiver some minutes before I shake it back to life. As I close the shutters I see the street again; the massive, slanting blackness of the roofs and their population of chimneys clear-cut against the minor blackness of space; some still waking, milk-white windows; and, at the end of a jagged and gloomy background, the blood-red stumbling apparition of the mad blacksmith. Farther still I can make out in the cavity the cross on the steeple; and again, very high and blazing with light on the hill-top, the castle, a rich crown of masonry. In all directions the eye loses itself among the black ruins which conceal their hosts of men and of women—all so unknown and so like myself.

CHAPTER II

OURSELVES

It is Sunday. Through my open window a living ray of April has made its way into my room. It has transformed the faded flowers of the wallpaper and restored to newness the Turkey-red stuff which covers my dressing-table.

I dress carefully, dallying to look at myself in the glass, closely and farther away, in the fresh scent of soap. I try to make out whether my eyes are little or big. They are the average, no doubt, but it really seems to me that they have a tender brightness.

Then I look outside. It would seem that the town, under its misty blankets in the hollow of the valley, is awaking later than its inhabitants.

These I can see from up here, spreading abroad in the streets, since it is Sunday. One does not recognize them all at once, so changed are they by their unusual clothes;—women, ornate with color, and more monumental than on week days; some old men, slightly straightened for the occasion; and some very lowly people, whom only their cleanness vaguely disguises.

The weak sunshine is dressing the red roofs and the blue roofs and the sidewalks, and the tiny little stone setts all pressed together like pebbles, where polished shoes are shining and squeaking. In that old house at the corner, a house like a round lantern of shadow, gloomy old Eudo is encrusted. It forms a comical blot, as though traced on an old etching. A little further, Madame Piot's house bulges forth, glazed like pottery. By the side of these uncommon dwellings one takes no notice of the others, with their gray walls and shining curtains, although it is of these that the town is made.

Halfway up the hill, which rises from the river bank, and opposite the factory's plateau, appears the white geometry of the castle, and around its pallors a tapestry of reddish foliage, and parks. Farther away, pastures and growing crops which are part of the demesne; farther still, among the stripes and squares of brown earth or verdant, the cemetery, where every year so many stones spring up.

* * * * *

We have to call at Brisbille's, my aunt and I, before Church. We are forced to tolerate him thus, so as to get our twisted key put right. I wait for Mame in the court, sitting on a tub by the shop, which is lifeless to-day, and full of the scattered leavings of toil. Mame is never ready in time. She has twice appeared on the threshold in her fine black dress and velvet cape; then, having forgotten something, she has gone back very quickly, like a mole. Finally, she must needs go up to my room, to cast a last glance over it.

At last we are off, side by side. She takes my arm proudly. From time to time she looks at me, and I at her, and her smile is an affectionate grimace amid the sunshine.

When we have gone a little way, my aunt stops, "You go on," she says; "I'll catch you up."

She has gone up to Apolline, the street-sweeper. The good woman, as broad as she is long, was gaping on the edge of the causeway, her two parallel arms feebly rowing in the air, an exile in the Sabbath idleness, and awkwardly conscious of her absent broom.

Mame brings her along, and looking back as I walk, I hear her talking of me, hastily, as one who confides a choking secret, while Apolline follows, with her arms swinging far from her body, limping and outspread like a crab.

Says Mame, "That boy's bedroom is untidy. And then, too, he uses too many shirt-collars, and he doesn't know how to blow his nose. He stuffs handkerchiefs into his pockets, and you find them again like stones."

"All the same, he's a good young man," stammers the waddling street cleanser, brandishing her broom-bereaved hands at random, and shaking over her swollen and many-storied boots a skirt weighted round the hem by a coat-of-mail of dry mud.

These confidences with which Mame is in the habit of breaking forth before no matter whom get on my nerves. I call her with some impatience. She starts at the command, comes up, and throws me a martyr's glance.

She proceeds with her nose lowered under her black hat with green foliage, hurt that I should thus have summoned her before everybody, and profoundly irritated. So a persevering malice awakens again in the depths of her, and she mutters, very low, "You spat on the window the other day!"

But she cannot resist hooking herself again on to another interlocutor, whose Sunday trousers are planted on the causeway, like two posts, and his blouse as stiff as a lump of iron ore. I leave them, and go alone into Brisbille's.

The smithy hearth befires a workshop which bristles with black objects. In the middle of the dark bodies of implements hanging from walls and ceiling is the metallic Brisbille, with leaden hands, his dark apron rainbowed with file-dust,—dirty on principle, because of his ideas, this being Sunday. He is sober, and his face still unkindled, but he is waiting impatiently for the church-going bell to begin, so that he may go and drink, in complete solitude.

Through an open square, in the ponderous and dirt-shaggy glazing of the smithy, one can see a portion of the street, and a sketch, in bright and airy tones, of scattered people. It is like the sharply cut field of vision in an opera-glass, in which figures are drawn and shaded, and cross each other; where one makes out, at times, a hat bound and befeathered, swaying as it goes; a little boy with sky-blue tie and buttoned boots, and tubular knickers hanging round his thin, bare calves; a couple of gossiping dames in swollen and somber petticoats, who tack hither and thither, meet, are mutually attracted and dissolve in conversation, like rolling drops of ink. In the foreground of this colored cinema which goes by and passes again, Brisbille, the sinister, is ranting away, as always. He is red and lurid, spotted with freckles, his hair greasy, his voice husky. For a moment, while he paces to and fro in his cage, dragging shapeless and gaping shoes behind him, he speaks to me in a low voice, and close to my face, in gusts. Brisbille can shout, but not talk; there must be a definite pressure of anger before his resounding huskiness issues from his throat.

Mame comes in. She sits on a stool to get her breath again, all the while brandishing the twisted key which she clasps to the prayer-book in her hand. Then she unburdens herself and begins to speak in fits and starts of this key, of the mishap which twisted it, and of all the multiple details which overlap each other in her head. But the slipshod, gloomy smith's attention is suddenly attracted by the hole which shows the street.

"The lubber!" he roars.

It is Monsieur Fontan who is passing, the wine-merchant and café-proprietor. He is an expansive and imposing man, fat-covered, and white as a house. He never says anything and is always alone. A great personage he is; he makes money; he has amassed hundreds of thousands of francs. At noon and in the evening he is not to be seen, having dived into the room behind the shop, where he takes his meals in solitude. The rest of the time he just sits at the receipt of custom and says nothing. There is a hole in his counter where he slides the money in. His house is filling with money from morning till night.

"He's a money-trap," says Mame.

"He's rich," I say.

"And when you've said that," jeers Brisbille, "you've said all there is to say. Why, you damned snob, you're only a poor drudge, like all us chaps, but haven't you just got the snob's ideas?"

I make a sign of impatience. It is not true, and Brisbille annoys me with the hatred which he hurls at random, hit or miss; and all the more because he is himself visibly impressed by the approach

of this man who is richer than the rest. The rebel opens his steely eye and relapses into silence, like the rest of us, as the big person grows bigger.

"The Bonéas are even richer," my aunt murmurs.

Monsieur Fontan passes the open door, and we can hear the breathing of the corpulent recluse. As soon as he has carried away the enormous overcoat that sheathes him, like the hide of a pachyderm, and is disappearing, Brisbille begins to roar, "What a snout! Did you see it, eh? Did you see the jaws he swings from his ears, eh? The exact likeness of a hog!"

Then he adds, in a burst of vulgar delight, "Luckily, we can expect it'll all burst before long!"

He laughs alone. Mame goes and sits apart. She detests Brisbille, who is the personification of envy, malice and coarseness. And everybody hates this marionette, too, for his drunkenness and his forward notions. All the same, when there is something you want him to do, you choose Sunday morning to call, and you linger there, knowing that you will meet others. This has become a tradition.

"They're going to cure little Antoinette," says Benoît, as he frames himself in the doorway.

Benoît is like a newspaper. He to whom nothing ever happens only lives to announce what is happening to others.

"I know," cries Mame, "they told me so this morning. Several people already knew it this morning at seven. A big, famous doctor's coming to the castle itself, for the hunting, and he only treats just the eyes."

"Poor little angel!" sighs a woman, who has just come in.

Brisbille intervenes, rancorous and quarrelsome, "Yes, they're always going to cure the child, so they say. Bad luck to them! Who cares about her?"

"Everybody does!" reply two incensed women, in the same breath.

"And meanwhile," said Brisbille, viciously, "she's snuffing it." And he chews, once more, his customary saying—pompous and foolish as the catchword of a public meeting—"She's a victim of society!"

Monsieur Joseph Bonéas has come into Brisbille's, and he does it complacently, for he is not above mixing with the people of the neighborhood. Here, too, are Monsieur Pocard, and Crillon, new shaved, his polished skin taut and shiny, and several other people. Prominent among them one marks the wavering head of Monsieur Mielvaque, who, in his timidity and careful respect for custom, took his hat off as he crossed the threshold. He is only a copying-clerk at the factory; he wears much-used and dubious linen, and a frail and orphaned jacket which he dons for all occasions.

Monsieur Joseph Bonéas overawes me. My eyes are attracted by his delicate profile, the dull gloom of his morning attire, and the luster of his black gloves, which are holding a little black rectangle, gilt-edged.

He, too, has removed his hat. So I, in my corner discreetly remove mine, too.

He is a young man, refined and distinguished, who impresses by his innate elegance. Yet he is an invalid, tormented by abscesses. One never sees him but his neck is swollen, or his wrists enlarged by a ghastly outcrop. But the sickly body encloses bright and sane intelligence. I admire him because he is thoughtful and full of ideas, and can express himself faultlessly. Recently he gave me a lesson in sociology, touching the links between the France of to-day and the France of tradition, a lesson on our origins whose plain perspicuity was a revelation to me. I seek his company; I strive to imitate him, and certainly he is not aware how much influence he has over me.

All are attentive while he says that he is thinking of organizing a young people's association in Viviers. Then he speaks to me, "The farther I go the more I perceive that all men are afflicted with short sight. They do not see, nor can they see, beyond the end of their noses."

"Yes," say I.

My reply seems rather scanty, and the silence which follows repeats it mercilessly. It seems so to him, too, no doubt, for he engages other interlocutors, and I feel myself redden in the darkness of Brisbille's cavern.

Crillon is arguing with Brisbille on the matter of the recent renovation of an old hat, which they keep handing to each other and examine ardently. Crillon is sitting, but he keeps his eyes on it. Heart and soul he applies himself to the debate. His humble trade as a botcher does not allow a fixed tariff, and he is all alone as he vindicates the value of his work. With his fists he hammers the gray-striped mealy cloth on his knees, and the hair, which grows thickly round his big neck, gives him the nape of a wild boar.

"That felt," he complains, "I'll tell you what was the matter with it. It was rain, heavy rain, that had drowned it. That felt, I tells you, was only like a dirty handkerchief. What does *that* represent—in ebullition of steam, in gumming, and the passage of time?"

Monsieur Justin Pocard is talking to three companions, who, hat in hand, are listening with all their ears. He is entertaining them in his sonorous language about the great financial and industrial combination which he has planned. A speculative thrill electrifies the company.

"That'll brush business up!" says Crillon, in wonder, torn for a moment from contemplation of the hat, but promptly relapsing on it.

Joseph Bonéas says to me, in an undertone,—and I am flattered,—"That Pocard is a man of no education, but he has practical sense. That's a big idea he's got,—at least if he sees things as I see them."

And I, I am thinking that if I were older or more influential in the district, perhaps I should be in the Pocard scheme, which is taking shape, and will be huge.

Meanwhile, Brisbille is scowling. An unconfessable disquiet is accumulating in his bosom. All this gathering is detaining him at home, and he is tormented by the desire for drink. He cannot conceal his vinous longing, and squints darkly at the assembly. On a week day at this hour he would already have begun to slake his thirst. He is parched, he burns, he drags himself from group to group. The wait is longer than he can stand.

Suddenly every one looks out to the street through the still open door.

A carriage is making its way towards the church; it has a green body and silver lamps. The old coachman, whose great glove sways the slender scepter of a whip, is so adorned with overlapping capes that he suggests several men on the top of each other. The black horse is prancing.

"He shines like a piano," says Benoît.

The Baroness is in the carriage. The blinds are drawn, so she cannot be seen, but every one salutes the carriage.

"All slaves!" mumbles Brisbille. "Look at yourselves now, just look! All the lot of you, as soon as a rich old woman goes by, there you are, poking your noses into the ground, showing your bald heads, and growing humpbacked."

"She does good," protests one of the gathering.

"Good? Ah, yes, indeed!" gurgles the evil man, writhing as though in the grip of some one; "I call it ostentation—that's what *I* call it."

Shoulders are shrugged, and Monsieur Joseph Bonéas, always self-controlled, smiles.

Encouraged by that smile, I say, "There have always been rich people, and there must be."

"Of course," trumpets Crillon, "that's one of the established thoughts that you find in your head when you fish for 'em. But mark what I says,—there's some that dies of envy. I'm *not* one of them that dies of envy."

Monsieur Mielvaque has put his hat back on his petrified head and gone to the door. Monsieur Joseph Bonéas, also, turns his back and goes away.

All at once Crillon cries, "There's Pétrarque!" and darts outside on the track of a big body, which, having seen him, opens its long pair of compasses and escapes obliquely.

"And to think," says Brisbille, with a horrible grimace, when Crillon has disappeared, "that the scamp is a town councilor! Ah, by God!"

He foams, as a wave of anger runs through him, swaying on his feet, and gaping at the ground. Between his fingers there is a shapeless cigarette, damp and shaggy, which he rolls in all directions, patching up and resticking it unceasingly.

Charged with snarls and bristling with shoulder-shrugs, the smith rushes at his fire and pulls the bellows-chain, his yawning shoes making him limp like Vulcan. At each pull the bellows send spouting from the dust-filled throat of the furnace a cutting blue comet, lined with crackling and dazzling white, and therein the man forges.

Purpling as his agitation rises, nailed to his imprisoning corner, alone of his kind, a rebel against all the immensity of things, the man forges.

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The church bell rang, and we left him there. When I was leaving I heard Brisbille growl. No doubt I got my quietus as well. But what can he have imagined against *me*?

We meet again, all mixed together in the Place de l'Eglise. In our part of the town, except for a clan of workers whom one keeps one's eye on, every one goes to church, men as well as women, as a matter of propriety, out of gratitude to employers or lords of the manor, or by religious conviction. Two streets open into the Place and two roads, bordered with apple-trees, as well, so that these four ways lead town and country to the Place.

It has the shape of a heart, and is delightful. It is shaded by a very old tree, under which justice was formerly administered. That is why they call it the Great Tree, although there are greater ones. In winter it is dark, like a perforated umbrella. In summer it gives the bright green shadow of a parasol. Beside the tree a tall crucifix dwells in the Place forever.

The Place is swarming and undulating. Peasants from the surrounding country, in their plain cotton caps, are waiting in the old corner of the Rue Neuve, heaped together like eggs. These people are loaded with provisions. At the farther end, square-paved, one picks out swarthy outlines of the Epinal type, and faces as brightly colored as apples. Groups of children flutter and chirrup; little girls with their dolls play at being mothers, and little boys play at brigands. Respectable people take their stand more ceremoniously than the common crowd, and talk business piously.

Farther away is the road, which April's illumination adorns all along the lines of trees with embroidery of shadow and of gold, where bicycles tinkle and carriages rumble echoingly; and the shining river,—those long-drawn sheets of water, whereon the sun spreads sheets of light and scatters blinding points. Looking along the road, on either side of its stone-hard surface, one sees the pleasant, cultivated earth, the bits of land sewn to each other, and many-hued, brown or green as the billiard cloth, then paling in the distance. Here and there, on this map in colors, copses bulge forth. The by-roads are pricked out with trees, which follow each other artlessly and divide the infantile littleness of orchards.

This landscape holds us by the soul. It is a watercolor now (for it rained a little last night), with its washed stones, its tiles varnished anew, its roofs that are half slate and half light, its shining pavements, water-jeweled in places, its delicately blue sky, with clouds like silky paper; and between two house-fronts of yellow ocher and tan, against the purple velvet of distant forests, there is the neighboring steeple, which is like ours and yet different. Roundly one's gaze embraces all the panorama, which is delightful as the rainbow.

From the Place, then, where one feels himself so abundantly at home, we enter the church. From the depths of this thicket of lights, the good priest murmurs the great infinite speech to us, blesses us, embraces us severally and altogether, like father and mother both. In the manorial pew, the foremost of all, one glimpses the Marquis of Monthyon, who has the air of an officer, and his mother-in-law, Baroness Grille, who is dressed like an ordinary lady.

Emerging from church, the men go away; the women swarm out more grudgingly and come to a standstill together; then all the buzzing groups scatter.

At noon the shops close. The fine ones do it unassisted; the others close by the antics of some good man who exerts himself to carry and fit the shutters. Then there is a great void.

After lunch I wander in the streets. In the house I am bored, and yet outside I do not know what to do. I have no friend and no calls to pay. I am already too big to mingle with some, and too little yet to associate with others. The cafés and licensed shops hum, jingle and smoke already. I do not go to cafés, on principle, and because of that fondness for spending nothing, which my aunt has impressed on me. So, aimless, I walk through the deserted streets, which at every corner yawn before my feet. The hours strike and I have the impression that they are useless, that one will do nothing with them.

I steer in the direction of the fine gardens which slope towards the river. A little enviously I look over the walls at the tops of these opulent enclosures, at the tips of those great branches where still clings the soiled, out-of-fashion finery of last summer.

Far from there, and a good while after, I encounter Tudor, the clerk at the Modern Pharmacy. He hesitates and doubts, and does not know where to go. Every Sunday he wears the same collar, with turned down corners, and it is becoming gloomy. Arrived where I am, he stops, as though it occurred to him that nothing was pushing him forward. A half-extinguished cigarette vegetates in his mouth.

He comes with me, and I take his silence in tow as far as the avenue of plane trees. There are several figures outspaced in its level peace. Some young girls attract my attention; they appear against the dullness of house-fronts and against shop fronts in mourning. Some of the charming ones are accompanied by their mothers, who look like caricatures of them.

Tudor has left me without my noticing it.

Already, and slowly everywhere, the taverns begin to shine and cry out. In the grayness of twilight one discerns a dark and mighty crowd, gliding therein. In them gathers a sort of darkling storm, and flashes emerge from them.

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And lo! Now the night approaches to soften the stony streets.

Along the riverside, to which I have gone down alone, listless idylls dimly appear,—shapes sketched in crayon, which seek and join each other. There are couples that appear and vanish, strictly avoiding the little light that is left. Night is wiping out colors and features and names from both sorts of strollers.

I notice a woman who waits, standing on the river bank. Her silhouette has pearly-gray sky behind it, so that she seems to support the darkness. I wonder what her name may be, but only discover the beauty of her feminine stillness. Not far from that consummate caryatid, among the black columns of the tall trees laid against the lave of the blue, and beneath their cloudy branches, there are mystic enlacements which move to and fro; and hardly can one distinguish the two halves of which they are made, for the temple of night is enclosing them.

The ancient hut of a fisherman is outlined on the grassy slope. Below it, crowding reeds rustle in the current; and where they are more sparse they fashion concentric orbs upon the gleaming, fleeing water. The landscape has something exotic or antique about it. You are no matter where in the world or among the centuries. You are on some corner of the eternal earth, where men and women are drawing near to each other, and cling together while they wrap themselves in mystery.

* * * * *

Dreamily I ascend again towards the sounds and the swarming of the town. There, the Sunday evening rendezvous,—the prime concern of the men,—is less discreet. Desire displays itself more

crudely on the pavements. Voices chatter and laughter dissolves, even through closed doors; there are shouts and songs.

Up there one sees clearly. Faces are discovered by the harsh light of the gas jets and its reflection from plate-glass shop windows. Antonia goes by, surrounded by men, who bend forward and look at her with desire amid their clamor of conversation. She saw me, and a little sound of appeal comes from her across the escort that presses upon her. But I turn aside and let her go by.

When she and her harness of men have disappeared, I smell in their wake the odor of Pétrolus. He is lamp-man at the factory. Yellow, dirty, cadaverous, red-eyed, he smells rancid, and was, perhaps, nurtured on paraffin. He is some one washed away. You do not see him, so much as smell him.

Other women are there. Many a Sunday have I, too, joined in all that love-making.

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Among these beings who chat and take hold of each other, an isolated woman stands like a post, and makes an empty space around her.

It is Louise Verte. She is fearfully ugly, and she was too virtuous formerly, at a time when, so they say, she need not have been. She regrets this, and relates it without shame, in order to be revenged on virtue. She would like to have a lover, but no one wants her, because of her bony face and her scraped appearance; from a sort of eczema. Children make sport of her, knowing her needs; for the disclosures of their elders have left a stain on them. A five-year-old girl points her tiny finger at Louise and twitters, "She wants a man."

In the Place is Véron, going about aimlessly, like a dead leaf—Véron, who revolves, when he may, round Antonia. An ungainly man, whose tiny head leans to the right and wears a colorless smile. He lives on a few rents and does not work. He is good and affectionate, and sometimes he is overcome by attacks of compassion.

Véron and Louise Verte see one another,—and each makes a détour of avoidance. They are afraid of each other.

Here, also, on the margin of passion, is Monsieur Joseph Bonéas, very compassionate, in spite of his intellectual superiority. Between the turned-down brim of his hat and his swollen white kerchief,—thick as a towel,—a mournful yellow face is stuck.

I pity these questing solitaries who are looking for themselves! I feel compassion to see those fruitless shadows hovering there, wavering like ghosts, these poor wayfarers, divided and incomplete.

Where am I? Facing the workmen's flats, whose countless windows stand sharply out in their huge flat background. It is there that Marie Tusson lives, whose father, a clerk at Messrs. Gozlan's, like myself, is manager of the property. I steered to this place instinctively, without confessing it to myself, brushing people and things without mingling with them.

Marie is my cousin, and yet I hardly ever see her. We just say good-day when we meet, and she smiles at me.

I lean against a plane tree and think of Marie. She is tall, fair, strong and amiable, and she goes modestly clad, like a wide-hipped Venus; her beautiful lips shine like her eyes.

To know her so near agitates me among the shadows. If she appeared before me as she did the last time I met her; if, in the middle of the dark, I saw the shining radiance of her face, the swaying of her figure, traced in silken lines, and her little sister's hand in hers,—I should tremble.

But that does not happen. The bluish, cold background only shows me the two second-floor windows pleasantly warmed by lights, of which one is, perhaps, she herself. But they take no sort of shape, and remain in another world.

At last my eyes leave that constellation of windows among the trees, that vertical and silent firmament. Then I make for my home, in this evening which comes at the end of all the days I have lived.

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Little Antoinette,—how comes it that they leave her all alone like this?—is standing in my path and holding a hand out towards me. It is her way that she is begging for. I guide her, ask questions and listen, leaning over her and making little steps. But she is too little, and too lispy, and cannot explain. Carefully I lead the child,—who sees so feebly that already she is blind in the evening, as far as the low door of the dilapidated dwelling where she nests.

In my street, in front of his lantern-shaped house, with its iron-grilled dormer, old Eudo is standing, darkly hooded, and pointed, like the house.

I am a little afraid of him. Assuredly, he has not got a clean conscience. But, however guilty, he is compassionate. I stop and speak to him. He lifts to me out of the night of his hood a face pallid and ruined. I speak about the weather, of approaching spring. Heedless he hears, shapes "yes" with the tip of his lips, and says, "It's twelve years now since my wife died; twelve years that I've been utterly alone; twelve years that I've heard the last words she said to me."

And the poor maniac glides farther away, hooded in his unintelligible mourning; and certainly he does not hear me wish him good-night.

At the back of the cold downstairs room a fire has been lighted. Mame is sitting on the stool beside it, in the glow of the flaming coal, outstretching her hands, clinging to the warmth.

Entering, I see the bowl of her back. Her lean neck has a cracked look and is white as a bone. Musingly, my aunt takes and holds a pair of idle tongs. I take my seat. Mame does not like the silence in which I wrap myself. She lets the tongs fall with a jangling shock, and then begins vivaciously to talk to me about the people of the neighborhood. "There's everything here. No need to go to Paris, nor even so much as abroad. This part; it's a little world cut out on the pattern of the others," she adds, proudly, wagging her worn-out head. "There aren't many of them who've got the wherewithal and they're not of much account. Puppets, if you like, yes. That's according to how one sees it, because at bottom there's no puppets,—there's people that look after themselves, because each of us always deserves to be happy, my lad. And here, the same as everywhere, the two kinds of people that there are—the discontented and the respectable; because, my lad, what's always been always will be."

CHAPTER III

EVENING AND DAWN

Just at the moment when I was settling down to audit the Sesmaisons' account—I remember that detail—there came an unusual sound of steps and voices, and before I could even turn round I heard a voice through the glass door say, "Monsieur Paulin's aunt is very ill."

The sentence stuns me. I am standing, and some one is standing opposite me. A draught shuts the door with a bang.

Both of us set off. It is Benoît who has come to fetch me. We hurry. I breathe heavily. Crossing the busy factory, we meet acquaintances who smile at me, not knowing the turn of affairs.

The night is cold and nasty, with a keen wind. The sky drips with rain. We jump over puddles as we walk. I stare fixedly at Benoît's square shoulders in front of me, and the dancing tails of his coat as the wind hustles them along the nocturnal way.

Passing through the suburban quarter, the wind comes so hard between the infrequent houses that the bushes on either side shiver and press towards us, and seem to unfurl. Ah, we are not made for the greater happenings!

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I meet first in the room the resounding glare of a wood fire and an almost repelling heat. The odors of camphor and ether catch my throat. People that I know are standing round the bed. They turn to me and speak all together.

I bend down to look at Mame. She is inlaid upon the whiteness of the bed, which is motionless as marble. Her face is sunk in the cavity of the pillow. Her eyes are half closed and do not move; her skin has darkened. Each breath hums in her throat, and beyond that slight stirring of larynx and lips her little frail body moves no more than a doll's. She has not got her cap on and her gray hair is unraveled on her head like flocks of dust.

Several voices at once explain to me that it is "double congestion, and her heart as well." She was attacked by a dizziness, by prolonged and terrible shivering. She wandered, mentioned me, then suddenly collapsed. The doctor has no hope but is coming back. The Reverend Father Piot was here at five.

Silence hovers. A woman puts a log in the fire, in the center of the dazzling cluster of snarling flames, whose light throws the room into total agitation.

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For a long time I look upon that face, where ugliness and goodness are mingled in such a heartrending way. My eyes seek those already almost shut, whose light is hardening. Something of darkness, an internal shadow which is of herself, overspreads and disfigures her. One may see now how outworn she was, how miraculously she still held on.

This tortured and condemned woman is all that has looked after me for twenty years. For twenty years she took my hand before she took my arm. She always prevented me from understanding that I was an orphan. Delicate and small as I was for so long, she was taller and stronger and better than I! And at this moment, which shows me the past again in one glance, I remember that she beautified the affairs of my childhood like an old magician; and my head goes lower as I think of her untiring admiration for me. How she did love me! And she must love me still, confusedly, if some glimmering light yet lasts in the depths of her. What will become of me—all alone?

She was so sensitive, and so restless! A hundred details of her vivacity come to life again in my eyes. Stupidly, I contemplate the poker, the tongs, the big spoon—all the things she used to flourish as she chattered. There they are—fallen, paralyzed, mute!

As in a dream I go back to the times when she talked and shouted, to days of youth, to days of spring and of springtime dresses; and all the while my gaze, piercing that gay and airy vision, settles on the dark stain of the hand that lies there like the shadow of a hand, on the sheet.

My eyes are jumbling things together. I see our garden in the first fine days of the year; our garden—it is behind that wall—so narrow is it that the reflected sunshine from our two windows dapples the whole of it; so small that it only holds some pot-encaged plants, except for the three currant bushes which have always been there. In the scarves of the sun rays a bird—a robin—is hopping on the twigs like a rag jewel. All dusty in the sunshine our red hound, Mirliton, is warming himself. So gaunt is he you feel sure he must be a fast runner. Certainly he runs after glimpsed rabbits on Sundays in the country, but he never caught any. He never caught anything but fleas. When I lag behind because of my littleness my aunt turns round, on the edge of the footpath, and holds out her arms, and I run to her, and she stoops as I come and calls me by my name.

* * * * *

"Simon! Simon!"

A woman is here. I wrench myself from the dream which had come into the room and taken solidity before me. I stand up; it is my cousin Marie.

She offers me her hands among the candles which flutter by the bed. In their poor starlight her face appears haggard and wet. My aunt loved her. Her lips are trembling on her rows of sparkling teeth; the whole breadth of her bosom heaves quickly.

I have sunk again into the armchair. Memories flow again, while the sick woman's breathing is longer drawn, and her stillness becomes more and more inexorable. Things she used to say return to my lips. Then my eyes are raised, and look for Marie, and turn upon her.

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She has leaned against the wall, and remains so—overcome. She invests the corner where she stands with something like profane and sumptuous beauty. Her changeful chestnut hair, like bronze and gold, forms moist and disordered scrolls on her forehead and her innocent cheeks. Her neck, especially, her white neck, appears to me. The atmosphere is so choking, so visibly heavy, that it enshrouds us as if the room were on fire, and she has loosened the neck of her dress, and her throat is lighted up by the flaming logs. I smile weakly at her. My eyes wander over the fullness of her hips and her outspread shoulders, and fasten, in that downfallen room, on her throat, white as dawn.

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The doctor has been again. He stood some time in silence by the bed; and as he looked our hearts froze. He said it would be over to-night, and put the phial in his hand back in his pocket. Then, regretting that he could not stay, he disappeared.

And we stayed on beside the dying woman—so fragile that we dare not touch her, nor even try to speak to her.

Madame Piot settles down in a chair; she crosses her arms, lowers her head, and the time goes by.

At long intervals people take shape in the darkness by the door; people who come in on tiptoe whisper to us and go away.

The moribund moves her hands and feet and contorts her face. A gurgling comes from her throat, which we can hardly see in the cavity that is like a nest of shadow under her chin. She has blenched, and the skin that is drawn over the bones of her face like a shroud grows whiter every moment.

Intent upon her breathing, we throng about her. We offer her our hands—so near and so far—and do not know what to do.

I am watching Marie. She has sunk onto the little stool, and her young, full-blooming body overflows it. Holding her handkerchief in her teeth, she has come to arrange the pillow, and leaning over the bed, she puts one knee on a chair. The movement reveals her leg for a moment, curved like a beautiful Greek vase, while the skin seems to shine through the black transparency of the stocking, like clouded gold. Ah! I lean forward towards her with a stifled, incipient appeal above this bed, which is changing into a tomb. The border of the tragic dress has fallen again, but I cannot remove my eyes from that profound obscurity. I look at Marie, and look at her again; and though I knew her, it seems to me that I wholly discover her.

"I can't hear anything now," says a woman.

"Yes I can—"

"No, no!" the other repeats.

Then I see Crillon's huge back bending over. My aunt's mouth opens gently and remains open. The eyelids fall back almost completely upon the stiffened gleam of the eyes, which squint in the gray and bony mask. I see Crillon's big hand hover over the little mummified face, lowering the eyelids and keeping them closed.

Marie utters a cry when this movement tells her that our aunt has just died.

She sways. My hand goes out to her. I take her, support, and enfold her. Fainting, she clings to me, and for one moment I carry—gently, heavily—all the young woman's weight. The neck of her dress is undone, and falls like foliage from her throat, and I just saw the real curve of her bosom, nakedly and distractedly throbbing.

Her body is agitated. She hides her face in her hands and then turns it to mine. It chanced that our faces met, and my lips gathered the wonderful savor of her tears!

* * * * *

The room fills with lamentation; there is a continuous sound of deep sighing. It is overrun by neighbors become friends, to whom no one pays attention.

And now, in this sacred homelet, where death still bleeds, I cannot prevent a heavy heart-beat in me towards the girl who is prostrated like the rest, but who reigns there, in spite of me—of herself—of everything. I feel myself agitated by an obscure and huge rapture—the birth of my flesh and my vitals among these shadows. Beside this poor creature who was so blended with me, and who is falling, falling, through a hell of eternity, I am uplifted by a sort of hope.

I want to fix my attention on the fixity of the bed. I put my hand over my eyes to shut out all thought save of the dead woman, defenseless already, reclining on that earth into which she will sink. But my looks, impelled by superhuman curiosity, escape between my fingers to this other woman, half revealed to me in the tumult of sorrow, and my eyes cannot come out of her.

Madame Piot has changed the candles and attached a band to support the dead woman's chin. Framed in this napkin, which is knotted over the skull in her woolly gray hair, the face looks like a hook-nosed mask of green bronze, with a vitrified line of eyes; the knees make two sharp summits under the sheet; one's eyes run along the thin rods of the shins and the feet lift the linen like two in-driven nails.

Slowly Marie prepares to go. She has closed the neck of her dress and hidden herself in her cloak. She comes up to me, sore-hearted, and with her tears for a moment quenched she smiles at me without speaking. I half rise, my hands tremble towards her smile as if to touch it, above the past and the dust of my second mother.

Towards the end of the night, when the dead fire is scattering chilliness, the women go away one by one. One hour, two hours, I remain alone. I pace the room in one direction and another, then I look, and shiver. My aunt is no more. There is only left of her something indistinct, struck down, of subterranean color, and her place is desolate. Now, close to her, I am alone! Alone—magnified by my affliction, master of my future, disturbed and numbed by the newness of the things now beginning. At last the window grows pale, the ceiling turns gray, and the candle-flames wink in the first traces of light.

I shiver without end. In the depth of my dawn, in the heart of this room where I have always been, I recall the image of a woman who filled it—a woman standing at the chimney-corner, where a gladsome fire flames, and she is garbed in reflected purple, her corsage scarlet, her face golden, as she holds to the glow those hands transparent and beautiful as flames. In the darkness, from my vigil, I look at her.

* * * * *

The two nights which followed were spent in mournful motionlessness at the back of that room where the trembling host of lights seemed to give animation to dead things. During the two days various activities brought me distraction, at first distressing, then depressing.

The last night I opened my aunt's jewel box. It was called "the little box." It was on the dressing table, at the bottom of piled-up litter. I found some topaz ear-rings of a bygone period, a gold cross, equally outdistanced, small and slender—a little girl's, or a young girl's; and then, wrapped in tissue paper, like a relic, a portrait of myself when a child. Last, a written page, torn from one of my old school copy-books, which she had not been able to throw wholly away. Transparent at the folds, the worn sheet was fragile as lace, and gave the illusion of being equally precious. That was all the treasure my aunt had collected. That jewel box held the poverty of her life and the wealth of her heart.

* * * * *

It poured with rain on the day of the funeral. All the morning groups of people succeeded each other in the big cavern of our room, a going and coming of sighs. My aunt was laid in her coffin towards two o'clock, and it was carried then into the passage, where visitors' feet had brought dirt and puddles. A belated wreath was awaited, and then the umbrellas opened, and under their black undulation the procession moved off.

When we came out of the church it was not far off four o'clock. The rain had not stopped and little rivers dashed down from either side of the procession's sluggish flow along the street. There were many flowers, so that the hearse made a blot of relief, beautiful enough. There were many people, too, and I turned round several times. Always I saw old Eudo, in his black cowl, hopping along in the mud, hunchbacked as a crow. Marie was walking among some women in the second half of the file, whose frail and streaming roof the hearse drew along irregularly with jerks and halts. Her gait was jaded; she was thinking only of our sorrow! All things darkened again to my eyes in the ugliness of the evening.

The cemetery is full of mud under the muslin of fallen rain, and the footfalls make a sticky sound in it. There are a few trees, naked and paralyzed. The sky is marshy and sprinkled with crows.

The coffin, with its shapeless human form, is lowered from the hearse and disappears in the fresh earth.

They march past. Marie and her father take their places beside me. I say thanks to every one in the same tone; they are all like each other, with their gestures of impotence, their dejected faces, the words they get ready and pour out as they pass before me, and their dark costume. No one has come from the castle, but in spite of that there are many people and they all converge upon me. I pluck up courage.

Monsieur Lucien Gozlan comes forward, calls me "my dear sir," and brings me the condolences of his uncles, while the rest watch us.

Joseph Bonéas says "my dear friend" to me, and that affects me deeply. Monsieur Pocard says, "If I had been advised in time I would have said a few words. It is regrettable—"

Others follow; then nothing more is to be seen in the rain, the wind and the gloom but backs.

"It's finished. Let's go."

Marie lifts to me her sorrow-laved face. She is sweet; she is affectionate; she is unhappy; but she does not love me.

We go away in disorder, along by the trees whose skeletons the winter has blackened.

When we arrive in our quarter, twilight has invaded the streets. We hear gusts of talk about the Pocard scheme. Ah, how fiercely people live and seek success!

Little Antoinette, cautiously feeling her way by a big wall, hears us pass. She stops and would look if she could. We espy her figure in that twilight of which she is beginning to make a part, though fine and faint as a pistil.

"Poor little angel!" says a woman, as she goes by.

Marie and her father are the only ones left near me when we pass Rampaille's tavern. Some men who were at the funeral are sitting at tables there, black-clad.

We reach my home; Marie offers me her hand, and we hesitate. "Come in."

She enters. We look at the dead room; the floor is wet, and the wind blows through as if we were out of doors. Both of us are crying, and she says, "I will come to-morrow and tidy up. Till then—"

We take each other's hand in confused hesitation.

* * * * *

A little later there is a scraping at the door, then a timid knock, and a long figure appears.

It is Véron who presents himself with an awkward air. His tall and badly jointed body swings like a hanging signboard. He is an original and sentimental soul, but no one has ever troubled to find out what he is. He begins, "My young friend—hum, hum—" (he repeats this formless sound every two or three words, like a sort of clock with a sonorous tick)—"One may be wanting money, you know, for something—hum, hum; you need money, perhaps—hum, hum; all this expense—and I'd said to myself 'I'll take him some—'"

He scrutinizes me as he repeats, "Hum, hum." I shake his hand with tears in my eyes. I do not need money, but I know I shall never forget that action; so good, so supernatural.

And when he has swung himself out, abashed by my refusal, embarrassed by the unusual size of his legs and his heart, I sit down in a corner, seized with shivering. Then I obliterate myself in another corner, equally forlorn. It seems as if Marie has gone away with all I have. I am in mourning and I am all alone, because of her.

CHAPTER IV

MARIE

The seat leans against the gray wall, at the spot where a rose tree hangs over it, and the lane begins to slope to the river. I asked Marie to come, and I am waiting for her in the evening.

When I asked her—in sudden decision after so many days of hesitation—to meet me here this evening, she was silent, astonished. But she did not refuse; she did not answer. Some people came and she went away. I am waiting for her, after that prayer.

Slowly I stroll to the river bank. When I return some one is on the seat, enthroned in the shadow. The face is indistinct, but in the apparel of mourning I can see the neck-opening, like a faint pale heart, and the misty expansion of the skirt. Stooping, I hear her low voice, "I've come, you see." And, "Marie!" I say.

I sit down beside her, and we remain silent. She is there—wholly. Through her black veils I can make out the whiteness of her face and neck and hands—all her beauty, like light enclosed.

For me she had only been a charming picture, a passer-by, one apart, living her own life. Now she has listened to me; she has come at my call; she has brought herself here.

* * * * *

The day has been scorching. Towards the end of the afternoon storm-rain burst over the world and then ceased. One can still hear belated drops falling from the branches which overhang the wall. The air is charged with odors of earth and leaves and flowers, and wreaths of wind go heavily by.

She is the first to speak; she speaks of one thing and another.

I do not know what she is saying; I draw nearer to see her lips; I answer her, "I am always thinking of you."

Hearing these words, she is silent. Her silence grows greater and greater in the shadows. I have drawn still nearer; so near that I feel on my cheek the wing-beat of her breath; so near that her silence caresses me.

Then, to keep myself in countenance, or to smoke, I have struck a match, but I make no use of the gleam at my finger-tips. It shows me Marie, quivering a little; it gilds her pale face. A smile arises on her face; I have seen her full of that smile.

My eyes grow dim and my hands tremble. I wish she would speak.

"Tell me—" Her down-bent neck unfolds, and she lifts her head to speak. At that moment, by the light of the flame that I hold, whose great revealing kindness I am guarding, our eyes fall on an inscription scratched in the wall—a heart—and inside it two initials, H-S. Ah, that design was made by me one evening. Little Helen was lolling there then, and I thought I adored her. For a moment I am overpowered by this apparition of a mistake, bygone and forgotten. Marie does not know; but seeing those initials, and divining a presence between us, she dare not speak.

As the match is on the point of going out I throw it down. The little flame's last flicker has lighted up for me the edge of the poor black serge skirt, so worn that it shines a little, even in the evening, and has shown me the girl's shoe. There is a hole in the heel of the stocking, and we have both seen it. In quick shame, Marie draws her foot under her skirt; and I—I tremble still more that my eyes have touched a little of her maiden flesh, a fragment of her real innocence.

Gently she stands up in the grayness, and puts an end to this first fate-changing meeting.

We return. The obscurity is outstretched all around and against us. Together and alone we go into the following chambers of the night. My eyes follow the sway of her body in her dress against

the vaguely luminous background of the wall. Amid the night her dress is night also; she is there—wholly! There is a singing in my ears; an anthem fills the world.

In the street, where there are no more wayfarers, she walks on the edge of the causeway. So that my face may be on a level with hers, I walk beside her in the gutter, and the cold water enters my boots.

And that evening, inflated by mad longing, I am so triumphantly confident that I do not even remember to shake her hand. By her door I said to her, "To-morrow," and she answered, "Yes."

On one of the days which followed, finding myself free in the afternoon, I made my way to the great populous building of flats where she lives. I ascended two dark flights of steps, closely encaged, and followed a long elbowed corridor. Here it is. I knock and enter. Complete silence greets me. There is no one, and acute disappointment runs through me.

I take some hesitant steps in the tiny vestibule, which is lighted by the glass door to the kitchen, wherein I hear the drip of water. I see a room whose curtains invest it with brodered light. There is a bed in it, with a cover of sky-blue satinette shining like the blue of a chromo. It is Marie's room! Her gray silk hat, rose-trimmed, hangs from a nail on the flowery paper. She has not worn it since my aunt's death; and alongside hang black dresses. I enter this bright blue sanctuary, inhabited only by a cold and snow-like light, and orderly and chaste as a picture.

My hand goes out like a thief's. I touch, I stroke these dresses, which are wont to touch Marie. I turn again to the blue-veiled bed. On a whatnot there are books, and their titles invite me; for where her thoughts dwell, the things which occupy her mind—but I leave them. I would rather go near her bed. With a movement at once mad, frightened and trembling, I lift the quilts that clothe it and my gaze enters it, and my knees lean trembling on the edge of this great lifeless thing, which, alone among dead things, is one of soft and supple flesh.

* * * * *

My customary life continues and my work is always the same. I make notes, by the way, of Crillon's honest trivialities; of Brisville's untimely outbursts; of the rumors anent the Pocard scheme, and the progress of the Association of Avengers, a society to promote national awakening, founded by Monsieur Joseph Bonéas. The same complex and monotonous existence bears me along as it does everybody. But since that tragic night when my sorrow was transformed into joy at the lyke-wake in the old room, in truth the world is no longer what it was. People and things appear to me shadowy and distant when I go out into the current of the crowds; when I am dressing in my room and decide that I look well in black; when I sit up late at my table in the sunshine of hope. Now and again the memory of my aunt comes bodily back to me. Sometimes I hear people pronounce the name of Marie. My body starts when it hears them say "Marie," who know not what they say. And there are moments when our separation throbs so warmly that I do not know whether she is here or absent.

* * * * *

During this walk that we have just had together the summer and the sweetness of living have weighed more than ever on my shoulders. Her huge home, which is such a swarming hive at certain times, is now immensely empty in the labyrinth of its dark stairs and the landings, whence issue the narrow closed streets of its corridors, and where in the corners taps drip upon drain-stones. Our immense—our naked solitude pervades us. An exquisite emotion takes hold of me while we are slowly climbing the steep and methodical way. There is something human in the stairway; in the inevitable shapes of its spiral and its steps cut out of the quick, in the rhythmic repetition of its steps. A round skylight pierces the sloping roof up there, and it is the only light for this part of the people's house, this poor internal city. The darkness which runs down the walls of the well, whence we are striving to

emerge step by step, conceals our laborious climb towards that gap of daylight. Shadowed and secret as we are, it seems to me that we are mounting to heaven.

Oppressed by a common languor, we at last sat down side by side on a step. There is no sound in the building under the one round window bending over us. We lean on each other because of the stair's narrowness. Her warmth enters into me; I feel myself agitated by that obscure light which radiates from her. I share with her the heat of her body and her thought itself. The darkness deepens round us. Hardly can I see the crouching girl there, warm and hollowed like a nest.

I call her by her name, very quietly, and it is as though I made a loud avowal! She turns, and it seems that this is the first time I have seen her naked face. "Kiss me," she says; and without speaking we stammer, and murmur, and laugh.

* * * * *

Together we are looking at a little square piece of paper. I found it on the seat which the rose-tree overhangs on the edge of the downward lane. Carefully folded, it had a forgotten look, and it was waiting there, detained for a moment by its timorous weight. A few lines of careful writing cover it. We read it:

"I do not know how speaks the pious heart; nothing I know; th' enraptured martyr I. Only I know the tears that brimming start, your beauty blended with your smile to espy."

Then, having read it, we read it again, moved by a mysterious influence. And we finger the chance-captured paper, without knowing what it is, without understanding very well what it says.

* * * * *

When I asked her to go with me to the cemetery that Sunday, she agreed, as she does to all I ask her. I watched her arms brush the roses as she came in through the gardens. We walked in silence; more and more we are losing the habit of talking to each other. We looked at the latticed and flower-decked square where our aunt sleeps—the garden which is only as big as a woman. Returning from the cemetery by way of the fields, the sun already low, we join hands, seized with triumphant delight.

She is wearing a dress of black delaine, and the skirt, the sleeves and the collar wave in the breeze. Sometimes she turns her radiant face to me and it seems to grow still brighter when she looks at me. Slightly stooping, she walks, though among the grass and flowers whose tints and grace shine in reflection on her forehead and cheeks, she is a giantess. A butterfly precedes us on our path and alights under our eyes, but when we come up it takes wing again, and comes down a little farther and begins all over again; and we smile at the butterfly that thinks of us.

Inlaid with gold by the slanting sun we lead each other, hand in hand, as far as the statue of Flora, which once upon a time a lord of the manor raised on the fringe of the wood. Against the abiding background of distant heights the goddess stands, half-naked, in the beautiful ripe light. Her fair hips are draped with a veil of still whiter stone, like a linen garment. Before the old moss-mellowed pedestal I pressed Marie desperately to my heart. Then, in the sacred solitude of the wood, I put my hands upon her, and so that she might be like the goddess I unfastened her black bodice, lowered the ribbon shoulder-straps of her chemise, and laid bare her wide and rounded bosom.

She yielded to the adoration with lowered head, and her eyes magnificently troubled, red-flushing with blood and sunshine.

I put my lips on hers. Until that day, whenever I kissed her, her lips submitted. This time she gave me back my long caress, and even her eyes closed upon it. Then she stands there with her hands crossed on her glorious throat, her red, wet lips ajar. She stands there, apart, yet united to me, and her heart on her lips.

She has covered her bosom again. The breeze is suddenly gusty. The apple trees in the orchards are shaken and scatter bird-like jetsam in space; and in that bright green paddock yonder the rows of out-hung linen dance in the sunshine. The sky darkens; the wind rises and prevails. It was that very day of the gale. It assaults our two bodies on the flank of the hill; it comes out of infinity and sets roaring the tawny forest foliage. We can see its agitation behind the black grille of the trunks. It makes us dizzy to watch the swift displacement of the gray-veiled sky, and from cloud to cloud a bird seems hurled, like a stone. We go down towards the bottom of the valley, clinging to the slope, an offering to the deepest breath of heaven, driven forward yet holding each other back.

So, gorged with the gale and deafened by the universal concert of space that goes through our ears, we find sanctuary on the river bank. The water flows between trees whose highest foliage is intermingled. By a dark footpath, soft and damp, under the ogive of the branches, we follow this crystal-paved cloister of green shadow. We come on a flat-bottomed boat, used by the anglers. I make Marie enter it, and it yields and groans under her weight. By the strokes of two old oars we descend the current.

It seems to our hearts and our inventing eyes that the banks take flight on either side—it is the scenery of bushes and trees which retreats. *We*—we abide! But the boat grounds among tall reeds. Marie is half reclining and does not speak. I draw myself towards her on my knees, and the boat quivers as I do. Her face in silence calls me; she calls me wholly. With her prostrate body, surrendered and disordered, she calls me.

I possess her—she is mine! In sublime docility she yields to my violent caress. Now she is mine—mine forever! Henceforth let what may befall; let the years go by and the winters follow the summers, she is mine, and my life is granted me! Proudly I think of the great and famous lovers whom we resemble. I perceive that there is no recognized law which can stand against the might of love. And under the transient wing of the foliage, amid the continuous recession of heaven and earth, we repeat "never"; we repeat "always"; and we proclaim it to eternity.

* * * * *

The leaves are falling; the year draws near to its end; the wedding is arranged to take place about Christmas.

That decision was mine; Marie said "yes," as usual, and her father, absorbed all the day in figures, would emerge from them at night, like a shipwrecked man, seeing darkly, passive, except on rare occasions when he had fits of mad obstinacy, and no one knew why.

In the early morning sometimes, when I was climbing Chestnut Hill on my way to work, Marie would appear before me at a corner, in the pale and blushing dawn. We would walk on together, bathed in those fresh fires, and would watch the town at our feet rising again from its ashes. Or, on my way back, she would suddenly be there, and we would walk side by side towards her home. We loved each other too much to be able to talk. A very few words we exchanged just to entwine our voices, and in speaking of other people we smiled at each other.

One day, about that time, Monsieur the Marquis of Monthyon had the kindly thought of asking us both to an evening party at the castle, with several leading people of our quarter. When all the guests were gathered in a huge gallery, adorned with busts which sat in state between high curtains of red damask, the Marquis took it into his head to cut off the electricity. In a lordly way he liked heavy practical jokes—I was just smiling at Marie, who was standing near me in the middle of the crowded gallery, when suddenly it was dark. I put out my arms and drew her to me. She responded with a spirit she had not shown before, our lips met more passionately than ever, and our single body swayed among the invisible, ejaculating throng that elbowed and jostled us. The light flashed again. We had loosed our hold. Ah, it was not Marie whom I had clasped! The woman fled with a stifled exclamation of shame and indignation towards him who she believed had embraced her, and who

had seen nothing. Confused, and as though still blind, I rejoined Marie, but I was myself again with difficulty. In spite of all, that kiss which had suddenly brought me in naked contact with a complete stranger remained to me an extraordinary and infernal delight. Afterwards, I thought I recognized the woman by her blue dress, half seen at the same time as the gleam of her neck after that brief and dazzling incident. But there were three of them somewhat alike. I never knew which of those unknown women concealed within her flesh the half of the thrill that I could not shake off all the evening.

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There was a large gathering at the wedding. The Marquis and Marchioness of Monthyon appeared at the sacristy. Brisbille, by good luck, stayed away. Good sectarian that he was, he only acknowledged civil marriages. I was a little shamefaced to see march past, taking their share of the fine and tranquil smile distributed by Marie, some women who had formerly been my mistresses—Madame Lacaille, nervous, subtle, mystical; big Victorine and her good-natured rotundity, who had welcomed me any time and anywhere; and Madeleine Chaine; and slender Antonia above all, with the Italian woman's ardent and theatrical face, ebony-framed, and wearing a hat of Parisian splendor. For Antonia is very elegant since she married Véron. I could not help wincing when I saw that lanky woman, who had clung to me in venturesome rooms, now assiduous around us in her ceremonious attire. But how far off and obliterated all that was!

CHAPTER V

DAY BY DAY

We rearranged the house. We did not alter the general arrangement, nor the places of the heavy furniture—that would have been too great a change. But we cast out all the dusty old stuff, the fossilized and worthless knick-knacks that Mame had accumulated. The photographs on the walls, which were dying of jaundice and debility, and which no longer stood for anybody, because of the greatness of time, we cleared out of their imitation tortoiseshell and buried in the depths of drawers.

I bought some furniture, and as we sniffed the odor of varnish which hung about for a long time in the lower room, we said, "This is the real thing." And, indeed, our home was pretty much like the middle-class establishments of our quarter and everywhere. Is it not the only really proud moment here on earth, when we can say, "I, too!"

Years went by. There was nothing remarkable in our life. When I came home in the evening, Marie, who often had not been out and had kept on her dressing-gown and plaits, used to say, "There's been nothing to speak of to-day."

The aeroplanes were appearing at that time. We talked about them, and saw photographs of them in the papers. One Sunday we saw one from our window. We had heard the chopped-up noise of its engine expanding over the sky; and down below, the townsfolk on their doorsteps, raised their heads towards the ceiling of their streets. Rattling space was marked with a dot. We kept our eyes on it and saw the great flat and noisy insect grow bigger and bigger, silhouetting the black of its angles and partitioned lines against the airy wadding of the clouds. When its headlong flight had passed, when it had dwindled in our eyes and ears amid the new world of sounds, which it drew in its train, Marie sighed dreamily.

"I would like," she said, "to go up in an aeroplane, into the wind—into the sky!"

One spring we talked a lot about a trip we would take some day. Some railway posters had been stuck on the walls of the old tin works, that the Pocard scheme was going to transfigure. We looked at them the day they were freshly brilliant in their wet varnish and their smell of paste. We preferred the bill about Corsica, which showed seaside landscapes, harbors with picturesque people in the foreground and a purple mountain behind, all among garlands. And later, even when stiffened and torn and cracking in the wind, that poster attracted us.

One evening, in the kitchen, when we had just come in—there are memories which mysteriously outlive the rest—and Marie was lighting the fire, with her hat on and her hands wiped out in the twilight by the grime of the coal, she said, "We'll make that trip later!"

Sometimes it happened that we went out, she and I, during the week. I looked about me and shared my thoughts with her. Never very talkative, she would listen to me. Coming out of the Place de l'Eglise, which used to affect us so much not long ago, we often used to meet Jean and Genevieve Trompson, near the sunken post where an old jam pot lies on the ground. Everybody used to say of these two, "They'll separate, you'll see; that's what comes of loving each other too much; it was madness, I always said so." And hearing these things, unfortunately true, Marie would murmur, with a sort of obstinate gentleness, "Love is sacred."

Returning, not far from the anachronistic and clandestine Eudo's lair, we used to hear the coughing parrot. That old bird, worn threadbare, and of a faded green hue, never ceased to imitate the fits of coughing which two years before had torn Adolphe Piot's lungs, who died in the midst of his family under such sad circumstances. Those days we would return with our ears full of the obstinate clamor of that recording bird, which had set itself fiercely to immortalize the noise that passed for a moment through the world, and toss the echoes of an ancient calamity, of which everybody had ceased to think.

Almost the only people about us are Marthe, my little sister-in-law, who is six years old, and resembles her sister like a surprising miniature; my father-in-law, who is gradually annihilating himself; and Crillon. This last lives always contented in the same shop while time goes by, like his father and his grandfather, and the cobbler of the fable, his eternal ancestor. Under his square cap, on the edge of his glazed niche, he soliloquizes, while he smokes the short and juicy pipe which joins him in talking and spitting—indeed, he seems to be answering it. A lonely toiler, his lot is increasingly hard, and almost worthless. He often comes in to us to do little jobs—mend a table leg, re-seat a chair, replace a tile. Then he says, "There's summat I must tell you—"

So he retails the gossip of the district, for it is against his conscience, as he frankly avows, to conceal what he knows. And Heaven knows, there is gossip enough in our quarter!—a complete network, above and below, of quarrels, intrigues and deceptions, woven around man, woman and the public in general. One says, "It *can't* be true!" and then thinks about something else.

And Crillon, in face of all this perversity, all this wrong-doing, smiles! I like to see that happy smile of innocence on the lowly worker's face. He is better than I, and he even understands life better, with his unfailing good sense.

I say to him, "But are there not any bad customs and vices? Alcoholism, for instance?"

"Yes," says Crillon, "as long as you don't exarrergate it. I don't like exarrergations, and I find as much of it among the pestimists as among the opticians. Drink, you say! It's chiefly that folks haven't enough charitableness, mind you. They blame all these poor devils that drink and they think themselves clever! And they're envious, too; if they wasn't that, tell me, would they stand there in stony peterified silence before the underhand goings-on of bigger folks? That's what it is, at bottom of us. Let me tell you now. I'll say nothing against Termite, though he's a poacher, and for the castle folks that's worse than all, but if yon bandit of a Brisville weren't the anarchist he is and frightening everybody, I'd excuse him his dirty nose and even not taking it out of a pint pot all the week through. It isn't a crime, isn't only being a good boozier. We've got to look ahead and have a broad spirit, as Monsieur Joseph says. Tolerantness! We all want it, eh?"

"You're a good sort," I say.

"I'm a man, like everybody," proudly replies Crillon. "It's not that I hold by accustomary ideas; I'm not an antiquitary, but I don't like to single-arise myself. If I'm a botcher in life, it's cos I'm the same as others—no less," he says, straightening up. And standing still more erect, he adds, "*Nor* no more, neither!"

When we are not chatting we read aloud. There is a very fine library at the factory, selected by Madame Valentine Gozlan from works of an educational or moral kind, for the use of the staff. Marie, whose imagination goes further afield than mine, and who has not my anxieties, directs the reading. She opens a book and reads aloud while I take my ease, looking at the pastel portrait which hangs just opposite the window. On the glass which entombs the picture I see the gently moving and puffing reflection of the fidgety window curtains, and the face of that glazed portrait becomes blurred with broken streaks and all kinds of wave marks.

"Ah, these adventures!" Marie sometimes sighs, at the end of a chapter; "these things that never happen!"

"Thank Heaven," I cry.

"Alas," she replies.

Even when people live together they differ more than they think!

At other times Marie reads to herself, quite silently. I surprise her absorbed in this occupation. It even happens that she applies herself thus to poetry. In her set and stooping face her eyes come and go over the abbreviated lines of the verses. From time to time she raises them and looks up at the sky, and—vastly further than the visible sky—at all that escapes from the little cage of words.

And sometimes we are lightly touched with boredom.

* * * * *

One evening Marie informed me that the canary was dead, and she began to cry, as she showed me the open cage and the bird which lay at the bottom, with its feet curled up, as rumped and stark as the little yellow plaything of a doll. I sympathized with her sorrow; but her tears were endless, and I found her emotion disproportionate.

"Come now," I said, "after all, a bird's only a bird, a mere point that moved a little in a corner of the room. What then? What about the thousands of birds that die, and the people that die, and the poor?" But she shook her head, insisted on grieving, tried to prove to me that it was momentous and that she was right.

For a moment I stood bewildered by this want of understanding; this difference between her way of feeling and mine. It was a disagreeable revelation of the unknown. One might often, in regard to small matters, make a multitude of reflections if one wished; but one does not wish.

* * * * *

My position at the factory and in our quarter is becoming gradually stronger. By reason of a regular gratuity which I received, we are at last able to put money aside each month, like everybody.

"I say!" cried Crillon, pulling me outside with him, as I was coming in one evening; "I must let you know that you've been spoken of spontaneously for the Town Council at the next renewal. They're making a big effort, you know. Monsieur the Marquis is going to stand for the legislative elections—but we've walked into the other quarter," said Crillon, stopping dead. "Come back, come back."

We turned right-about-face.

"This patriotic society of Monsieur Joseph," Crillon went on, "has done a lot of harm to the anarchists. We've all got to let 'em feel our elbows, that's necessential. You've got a foot in the factory, eh? You see the workmen; have a crack of talk with 'em. You ingreassiate yourself with 'em, so's some of 'em'll vote for you. For *them's* the danger."

"It's true that I am very sympathetic to them," I murmured, impressed by this prospect.

Crillon came to a stand in front of the Public Baths. "It's the seventeenth to-day," he explained; "the day of the month when I takes a bath. Oh, yes! I know that *you* go every Thursday; but I'm not of that mind. You're young, of course, and p'raps you have good reason! But you take my tip, and hobnob with the working man. We must bestir ourselves and impell ourselves, what the devil! As for me, I've finished my political efforts for peace and order. It's *your* turn!"

He is right. Looking at the ageing man, I note that his framework is slightly bowed; that his ill-shaven cheeks are humpbacked with little ends of hair turning into white crystals. In his lowly sphere he has done his duty. I reflect upon the mite-like efforts of the unimportant people; of the mountains of tasks performed by anonymity. They are necessary, these hosts of people so closely resembling each other; for cities are built upon the poor brotherhood of paving-stones.

He is right, as always. I, who am still young; I, who am on a higher level than his; I must play a part, and subdue the desire one has to let things go on as they may.

A sudden movement of will appears in my life, which otherwise proceeds as usual.

CHAPTER VI

A VOICE IN THE EVENING

I approached the workpeople with all possible sympathy. The toiler's lot, moreover, raises interesting problems, which one should seek to understand. So I inform myself in the matter of those around me.

"You want to see the greasers' work? Here I am," said Marcassin, surnamed Pétrolus. "I'm the lamp-man. Before that I was a greaser. Is that any better? Can't say. It's here that that goes on, look—there. My place you'll find at night by letting your nose guide you."

The truth is that the corner of the factory to which he leads me has an aggressive smell. The shapeless walls of this sort of grotto are adorned with shelves full of leaking lamps—lamps dirty as beasts. In a bucket there are old wicks and other departed things. At the foot of a wooden cupboard which looks like iron are lamp glasses in paper shirts; and farther away, groups of oil-drums. All is dilapidated and ruinous; all is dark in this angle of the great building where light is elaborated. The specter of a huge window stands yonder. The panes only half appear; so encrusted are they they might be covered with yellow paper. The great stones—the rocks—of the walls are upholstered with a dark deposit of grease, like the bottom of a stewpan, and nests of dust hang from them. Black puddles gleam on the floor, with beds of slime from the scraping of the lamps.

There he lives and moves, in his armored tunic encrusted with filth as dark as coffee-grounds. In his poor claw he grips the chief implement of his work—a black rag. His grimy hands shine with paraffin, and the oil, sunk and blackened in his nails, gives them a look of wick ends. All day long he cleans lamps, and repairs, and unscrews, and fills, and wipes them. The dirt and the darkness of this population of appliances he attracts to himself, and he works like a nigger.

"For it's got to be well done," he says, "and even when you're fagged out, you must keep on rubbing hard."

"There's six hundred and sixty-three, monsieur" (he says "monsieur" as soon as he embarks on technical explanations), "counting the smart ones in the fine offices, and the lanterns in the wood-yard, and the night watchmen. You'll say to me, 'Why don't they have electricity that lights itself?' It's 'cos that costs money and they get paraffin for next to nothing, it seems, through a big firm 'at they're in with up yonder. As for me, I'm always on my legs, from the morning when I'm tired through sleeping badly, from after dinner when you feel sick with eating, up to the evening, when you're sick of everything."

The bell has rung, and we go away in company. He has pulled off his blue trousers and tunic and thrown them into a corner—two objects which have grown heavy and rusty, like tools. But the dirty shell of his toil did upholster him a little, and he emerges from it gaunter, and horribly squeezed within the littleness of a torturing jacket. His bony legs, in trousers too wide and too short, break off at the bottom in long and mournful shoes, with hillocks, and resembling crocodiles; and their soles, being soaked in paraffin, leave oily footprints, rainbow-hued, in the plastic mud.

Perhaps it is because of this dismal companion towards whom I turn my head, and whom I see trotting slowly and painfully at my side in the rumbling grayness of the evening exodus, that I have a sudden and tragic vision of the people, as in a flash's passing. (I do sometimes get glimpses of the things of life momentarily.) The dark doorway to my vision seems torn asunder. Between these two phantoms in front the sable swarm outspreads. The multitude encumbers the plain that bristles with dark chimneys and cranes, with ladders of iron planted black and vertical in nakedness—a plain vaguely scribbled with geometrical lines, rails and cinder paths—a plain utilized yet barren. In some places about the approaches to the factory cartloads of clinker and cinders have been dumped, and some of it continues to burn like pyres, throwing off dark flames and darker curtains. Higher, the

hazy clouds vomited by the tall chimneys come together in broad mountains whose foundations brush the ground and cover the land with a stormy sky. In the depths of these clouds humanity is let loose. The immense expanse of men moves and shouts and rolls in the same course all through the suburb. An inexhaustible echo of cries surrounds us; it is like hell in eruption and begirt by bronze horizons.

At that moment I am afraid of the multitude. It brings something limitless into being, something which surpasses and threatens us; and it seems to me that he who is not with it will one day be trodden underfoot.

My head goes down in thought. I walk close to Marcassin, who gives me the impression of an escaping animal, hopping through the darkness—whether because of his name,² or his stench, I do not know. The evening is darkening; the wind is tearing leaves away; it thickens with rain and begins to nip.

My miserable companion's voice comes to me in shreds. He is trying to explain to me the law of unremitting toil. An echo of his murmur reaches my face.

"And that's what one hasn't the least idea of. Because what's nearest to us, often, one doesn't see it."

"Yes, that's true," I say, rather weary of his monotonous complaining.

I try a few words of consolation, knowing that he was recently married. "After all, no one comes bothering you in your own little corner. There's always that. And then, after all, you're going home—your wife is waiting for you. You're lucky—"

"I've no time; or rather, I've no strength. At nights, when I come home I'm too tired—I'm too tired, you understand, to be happy, you see. Every morning I think I shall be, and I'm hoping up till noon; but at night I'm too knocked out, what with walking and rubbing for eleven hours; and on Sundays I'm done in altogether with the week. There's even times that I don't even wash myself when I come in. I just stay with my hands mucky; and on Sundays when I'm cleaned up, it's a nasty one when they say to me, 'You're looking well.'"

And while I am listening to the tragicomical recital which he retails, like a soliloquy, without expecting replies from me—luckily, for I should not know how to answer—I can, in fact, recall those holidays when the face of Pétrolus is embellished by the visible marks of water.

"Apart from that," he goes on, withdrawing his chin into the gray string of his over-large collar; "apart from that, Charlotte, she's very good. She looks after me, and tidies the house, and it's her that lights *our* lamp; and she hides the books carefully away from me so's I can't grease 'em, and my fingers make prints on 'em like criminals. She's good, but it doesn't turn out well, same as I've told you, and when one's unhappy everything's favorable to being unhappy."

He is silent for a while, and then adds by way of conclusion to all he has said, and to all that one can say, "My father, he caved in at fifty. And I shall cave in at fifty, p'raps before."

With his thumb he points through the twilight at that sort of indelible darkness which makes the multitude, "Them others, it's not the same with them. There's those that want to change everything and keep going on that notion. There's those that drink and want to drink, and keep going that way."

I hardly listen to him while he explains to me the grievances of the different groups of workmen, "The molders, monsieur, them, it's a matter of the gangs—"

Just now, while looking at the population of the factory, I was almost afraid; it seemed to me that these toilers were different sorts of beings from the detached and impecunious people who live around me. When I look at this one I say to myself, "They are the same; they are all alike."

In the distance, and together, they strike fear, and their combination is a menace; but near by they are only the same as this one. One must not look at them in the distance.

Pétrolus gets excited; he makes gestures; he punches in and punches out again with his fist, the hat which is stuck askew on his conical head, over the ears that are pointed like artichoke leaves. He

² *Marcassin*—a young wild boar.—Tr.

is in front of me, and each of his soles is pierced by a valve which draws in water from the saturated ground.

"The unions, monsieur—" he cries to me in the wind, "why, it's dangerous to point at them. You haven't the right to think any more—that's what they call liberty. If you're in *them*, you've got to be agin the parsons—(I'm willing, but what's that got to do with labor?)—and there's something more serious," the lamp-man adds, in a suddenly changed voice, "you've got to be agin the army, —the *army*!"

And now the poor slave of the lamp seems to take a resolution. He stops and devotionally rolling his Don Quixote eyes in his gloomy, emaciated face, he says, "*I'm* always thinking about something. What? you'll say. Well, here it is. I belong to the League of Patriots."

As they brighten still more, his eyes are like two live embers in the darkness, "Déroulède!" he cries; "that's the man—he's *my* God!"

Pétrolus raises his voice and gesticulates; he makes great movements in the night at the vision of his idol, to whom his leanness and his long elastic arms give him some resemblance. "He's for war; he's for Alsace-Lorraine, that's what he's for; and above all, he's for nothing else. Ah, that's all there is to it! The Boches have got to disappear off the earth, else it'll be us. Ah, when they talk politics to *me*, I ask 'em, 'Are you for Déroulède, yes or no?' That's enough! I got my schooling any old how, and I know next to nothing but I reckon it's grand, only to think like that, and in the Reserves I'm adjutant³—almost an officer, monsieur, just a lamp-man as I am!"

He tells me, almost in shouts and signs, because of the wind across the open, that his worship dates from a function at which Paul Déroulède had spoken to him. "He spoke to everybody, an' then he spoke to me, as close to me as you and me; but it was *him*! I wanted an idea, and he gave it to me!"

"Very good," I say to him; "very good. You are a patriot, that's excellent."

I feel that the greatness of this creed surpasses the selfish demands of labor—although I have never had the time to think much about these things—and it strikes me as touching and noble.

A last fiery spasm gets hold of Pétrolus as he espies afar Eudo's pointed house, and he cries that on the great day of revenge there will be some accounts to settle; and then the fervor of this ideal-bearer cools and fades, and is spent along the length of the roads. He is now no more than a poor black bantam which cannot possibly take wing. His face mournfully awakes to the evening. He shuffles along, bows his long and feeble spine, and his spirit and his strength exhausted, he approaches the porch of his house, where Madame Marcassin awaits him.

³ A non-com., approximately equivalent to regimental sergeant-major.—Tr.

CHAPTER VII

A SUMMARY

The workmen manifest mistrust and even dislike towards me. Why? I don't know; but my good intentions have gradually got weary.

One after another, sundry women have occupied my life. Antonia Véron was first. Her marriage and mine, their hindrance and restriction, threw us back upon each other as of yore. We found ourselves alone one day in my house—where nothing ever used to happen, and she offered me her lips, irresistibly. The appeal of her sensuality was answered by mine, then, and often later. But the pleasure constantly restored, which impelled me towards her, always ended in dismal enlightenments. She remained a capricious and baffling egotist, and when I came away from her house across the dark suburb among a host of beings vanishing, like myself, I only brought away the memory of her nervous and irritating laugh, and that new wrinkle which clung to her mouth like an implement.

Then younger desires destroyed the old, and gallant adventures begot one another. It is all over with this one and that one whom I adored. When I see them again, I wonder that I can say, at one and the same time, of a being who has not changed, "How I loved her!" and, "How I have ceased to love her!"

All the while performing as a duty my daily task, all the while taking suitable precautions so that Marie may not know and may not suffer, I am looking for the happiness which lives. And truly, when I have a sense of some new assent wavering and making ready, or when I am on the way to a first rendezvous, I feel myself gloriously uplifted, and equal to everything!

This fills my life. Desire wears the brain as much as thought wears it. All my being is agog for chances to shine and to be shared. When they say in my presence of some young woman that, "she is not happy," a thrill of joy tears through me.

On Sundays, among the crowds, I have often felt my heart tighten with distress as I watch the unknown women. Reverie has often held me all day because of one who has gone by and disappeared, leaving me a clear vision of her curtained room, and of herself, vibrating like a harp. She, perhaps, was the one I should have always loved; she whom I seek gropingly, desperately, from each to the next. Ah, what a delightful thing to see and to think of a distant woman always is, whoever she may be!

There are moments when I suffer, and am to be pitied. Assuredly, if one could read me really, no one would pity me. And yet all men are like me. If they are gifted with acceptable physique they dream of headlong adventures, they attempt them, and our heart never stands still. But no one acknowledges that, no one, ever.

Then, there were the women who turned me a cold shoulder; and among them all Madame Pierron, a beautiful and genteel woman of twenty-five years, with her black fillets and her marble profile, who still retained the obvious awkwardness and vacant eye of young married women. Tranquil, staid and silent, she came and went and lived, totally blind to my looks of admiration.

This perfect unconcern aggravated my passion. I remember my pangs one morning in June, when I saw some feminine linen spread upon the green hedge within her garden. The delicate white things marshaled there were waiting, stirred by the leaves and the breeze; so that Spring lent them frail shape and sweetness—and life. I remember, too, a gaunt house, scorching in the sun, and a window which flashed and then shut! The window stayed shut, like a slab. All the world was silent; and that splendid living being was walled up there. And last, I have recollection of an evening when, in the bluish and dark green and chalky landscape of the town and its rounded gardens, I saw that window lighted up. A narrow glimmer of rose and gold was enframed there, and I could distinguish, leaning on the sill that overhung the town, in the heart of that resplendence, a feminine form which stirred before my eyes in inaccessible forbearance. Long did I watch with shaking knees that window

dawning upon space, as the shepherd watches the rising of Venus. That evening, when I had come in and was alone for a moment—Marie was busy below in the kitchen—alone in our unattractive room, I retired to the starry window, beset by immense thoughts. These spaces, these separations, these incalculable durations—they all reduce us to dust, they all have a sort of fearful splendor from which we seek defense in our hiding.

* * * * *

I have not retained a definite recollection of a period of jealousy from which I suffered for a year. From certain facts, certain profound changes of mood in Marie, it seemed to me that there was some one between her and me. But beyond vague symptoms and these terrible reflections on her, I never knew anything. The truth, everywhere around me, was only a phantom of truth. I experienced acute internal wounds of humiliation and shame, of rebellion! I struggled feebly, as well as I could, against a mystery too great for me, and then my suspicions wore themselves out. I fled from the nightmare, and by a strong effort I forgot it. Perhaps my imputations had no basis; but it is curious how one ends in only believing what one wants to believe.

* * * * *

Something which had been plotting a long while among the Socialist extremists suddenly produced a stoppage of work at the factory, and this was followed by demonstrations which rolled through the terrified town. Everywhere the shutters went up. The business people blotted out their shops, and the town looked like a tragic Sunday.

"It's a revolution!" said Marie to me, turning pale, as Benoît cried to us from the step of our porch the news that the workmen were marching. "How does it come about that you knew nothing at the factory?"

An hour later we learned that a delegation composed of the most dangerous ringleaders was preceding the army of demonstrators, commissioned to extort outrageous advantages, with threats, from Messrs. Gozlan.

Our quarter had a loose and dejected look. People went furtively, seeking news, and doors half opened regretfully. Here and there groups formed and lamented in undertones the public authority's lack of foresight, the insufficient measures for preserving order.

Rumors were peddled about on the progress of the demonstration.

"They're crossing the river."

"They're at the Calvary cross-roads."

"It's a march against the castle!"

I went into Fontan's. He was not there, and some men were talking in the twilight of the closed shutters.

"The Baroness is in a dreadful way. She's seen a dark mass in the distance. Some young men of the aristocracy have armed themselves and are guarding her. She says it's another Jacquerie⁴ rising!"

"Ah, my God! What a mess!" said Crillon.

"It's the beginning of the end!" asserted old Daddy Ponce, shaking his grayish-yellow forehead, all plaited with wrinkles.

Time went by—still no news. What are they doing yonder? What shall we hear next?

At last, towards three o'clock Postaire is framed in the doorway, sweating and exultant. "It's over! It's all right, my lad!" he gasps; "I can vouch for it that they all arrived together at the Gozlan's"

⁴ A terrible insurrection of the French peasantry in 1358.—Tr.

villa. Messrs. Gozlan were there. The delegates, I can vouch for it that they started shouting and threatening, my lad! 'Never mind that!' says one of the Messrs. Gozlan, 'let's have a drink first; I'll vouch for it we'll talk better after!' There was a table and champagne, I'll vouch for it. They gave 'em it to drink, and then some more and then some more. I'll vouch for it they sent themselves something down, my lad, into their waistcoats. I can vouch for it that the bottles of champagne came like magic out of the ground. Fontan kept always bringing them as though he was coining them. Got to admit it was an extra-double-special guaranteed champagne, that you want to go cautious with. So then, after three-quarters of an hour, nearly all the deputation were drunk. They spun round, tongue-tied, and embraced each other,—I can vouch for it. There were some that stuck it, but they didn't count, my lad! The others didn't even know what they'd come for. And the bosses; they'd had a fright, and they didn't half wriggle and roar with laughing—I'll vouch for it, my lad! An' then, to-morrow, if they want to start again, there'll be troops here!"

Joyful astonishment—the strike had been drowned in wine! And we repeated to each other, "To-morrow there'll be the military!"

"Ah!" gaped Crillon, rolling wonder-struck eyes, "That's clever! Good; that's clever, that is! Good, old chap—"

He laughed a heavy, vengeful laugh, and repeated his familiar refrain full-throated: "The sovereign people that can't stand on its own legs!"

By the side of a few faint-hearted citizens who had already, since the morning, modified their political opinions, a great figure rises before my eyes—Fontan. I remember that night, already long ago, when a chance glimpse through the vent-hole of his cellar showed me shiploads of bottles of champagne heaped together, and pointed like shells. For some future day he foresaw to-day's victory. He is really clever, he sees clearly and he sees far. He has rescued law and order by a sort of genius.

The constraint which has weighed all day on our gestures and words explodes in delight. Noisily we cast off that demeanor of conspirators which has bent our shoulders since morning. The windows that were closed during the weighty hours of the insurrection are opened wide; the houses breathe again.

"We're saved from that gang!" people say, when they approach each other.

This feeling of deliverance pervades the most lowly. On the step of the little blood-red restaurant I spy Monsieur Mielvaque, hopping for joy. He is shivering, too, in his thin gray coat, cracked with wrinkles, that looks like wrapping paper; and one would say that his dwindled face had at long last caught the hue of the folios he desperately copies among his long days and his short nights, to pick up some sprigs of extra pay. There he stands, not daring to enter the restaurant (for a reason he knows too well); but how delighted he is with the day's triumph for society! And Mademoiselle Constantine, the dressmaker, incurably poor and worn away by her sewing-machine, is overjoyed. She opens wide the eyes which seem eternally full of tears, and in the grayish abiding half-mourning of imperfect cleanliness, in pallid excitement, she claps her hands.

Marie and I can hear the furious desperate hammering of Brisbille in his forge, and we begin to laugh as we have not laughed for a long time.

At night, before going to sleep, I recall my former democratic fancies. Thank God, I have escaped from a great peril! I can see it clearly by the terror which the workmen's menace spread in decent circles, and by the universal joy which greeted their recoil! My deepest tendencies take hold of me again for good, and everything settles down as before.

* * * * *

Much time has gone by. It is ten years now since I was married, and in that lapse of time there is hardly a happening that I remember, unless it be the disillusion of the death of Marie's rich godmother, who left us nothing. There was the failure of the Pocard scheme, which was only a swindle

and ruined many small people. Politics pervaded the scandal, while certain people hurried with their money to Monsieur Boulaque, whose scheme was much more safe and substantial. There was also my father-in-law's illness and his death, which was a great shock to Marie, and put us into black clothes.

I have not changed. Marie *has* somewhat. She has got stouter; her eyelids look tired and red, and she buries herself in silences. We are no longer quite in accord in details of our life. She who once always said "Yes," is now primarily disposed to say "No." If I insist she defends her opinion, obstinately, sourly; and sometimes dishonestly. For example, in the matter of pulling down the partition downstairs, if people had heard our high voices they would have thought there was a quarrel. Following some of our discussions, she keeps her face contracted and spiteful, or assumes the martyr's air, and sometimes there are moments of hatred between us.

Often she says, while talking of something else, "Ah, if we had had a child, all would have been different!"

I am becoming personally negligent, through a sort of idleness, against which I have not sufficient grounds for reaction. When we are by ourselves, at meal times, my hands are sometimes questionable. From day to day, and from month to month, I defer going to the dentist and postpone the attention required. I am allowing my molars to get jagged.

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