

The Blower

*By
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The Blower

OR A COMPANY THEATER

To Georges Lambrichs.

PROLOGUE

Suddenly the light went out, the whispers were silent in the room, the curtain rose on the small stage.

There was a room with quite sordid green papers; In the corner, a sink, near which a gas-burning stove, on which was smoking a bowl, apparently filled with water.

On the other side, towards the wings, there was an iron bed: there was an elongated body. There were two very young men, almost children, who stopped in front of the basin. One of them lifted the lid, glanced at it, sowed a product, covered it, looked at his comrade, and both laughed. They were very pretty teenagers, and they laughed very gracefully, hand on mouth. The second consulted his wrist-watch, nudged the first who approached the bed.

— Teacher, said he, Master, it's time, get up.

He said that with his hands in his pockets, leaning over the sleeping mass.

The bald head, then the thick eyebrows, and then the flashing eyes of the awakened man, emerged, and which, still half-elongated, leaned on his elbows. The young boy remained with his mouth open on the skull of the man who was obviously an old man.

Then the features of the latter clenched and, in a voice hoarse but

thundering:

— Do not smear on my baldness! He said to the young man.

The two boys, laughing loudly, ran out.

The audience remained silent. For me it was He. But for the others? A vague, hesitant hilarity had taken shape at the first exchange of words between the children and the old man. But I—an irresistible thrill won me—to recognize him, unquestionably, as I had last seen him, shortly before his death...

At my side, Lucien did not defile a word, my young confidant. Who had not been able to meet him during his lifetime. Demobilized recently, he sought in various manifestations of Paris the early post-war years to orient his generous sensibility, eager to spend himself, and that day he had me. Trained in this disused music hall serving the patronage meetings of a mixed parish, where this afternoon was given an anonymous performance: *Le Purgatoire*.

But around us, how many people could understand what was happening here?

Was I sad? Embarrassed for the Old? The sight seemed horribly indiscreet to me—as if it had only concerned me with a friendship, an irrecoverable chance, disappeared—but in the shadow of a betrayal—and I, the traitor, were present at the irreparable.

He had left his bed. Then, having made a few passes in his hand on his forehead, he seemed to take his swing, but began to skip and, with a rhythmic gesture of his arms, raised first, then lowered, and again raised, like flashes of lightning from a rope with which he held both ends and jumped from the floor with feet together. He stopped at the tenth leap, and taking out a note-book from his coat, inscribed something in it, saying in a sonorous voice, which was prolonged in groans:

— Three thousand six hundred and fiftieth day of indulgence...

A silence succeeded, heavy, when the two young men reappeared on the stage. They wore one of the fresh cloths, the other a pair of rubber gloves, which he presented to the Master. The latter examined them,

pouting:

— Percés! He said, throwing them into a corner.

But he took a dishcloth, which he delicately unfolded, and recovering his good humor, looked at the children amusedly. Both watched him do so with tenderness. The youngest, however, went to lift the lid of the basin.

Then the Old Man, having approached, plunged his bare hand into the hot water, and drew out of it a large oval dish in the form, and took a brush with which he scraped a few reliefs.

— Still the same duck sauce, he muttered, grumbling; plunged the dish back into the water, and then, instead of wiping it off, handed it to him, a young boy who had opened the faucet all over the sink.

— Do not splash me! said the old man, as the child rinsed the dish on which the water spurted from all sides. At last the child passed the dish back to the old man, who, very slowly, began to wipe it.

— Obviously, the electric washer is not for tomorrow! he added.

— Master, it's far too long, said the two children at the same time, who, with folded hands, were begging:

— Let us do it!

But the old man threw the dish towards the invisible ceiling.

— If it falls, it breaks, said the children.

But the dish did not fall.

Then the old man, advancing towards the railing,

— If it gets broken, it falls, it's all there! It is not, however, for the demonstration of such a law to which I am now subject, to expiate, to the satisfaction of many, a pretended misappropriation of consciences, that we have given you the spectacle of dishes, and I apologize to Of you, you have been disturbed for very little. If it is true that I have left this world, from which you contemplate me at leisure, let it at least be known that it was another who once returned from Russia, another who, Everything, and all that he could do, did it under my name and lived until the triumphant hours of the French Theater and the parade of the inconsol-

able crowd before my false corpse. So a usurper whom you have buried, honored, and disdained—but I have allowed to do for the sake of truth, renouncing the very truth that belongs to all unless it belongs to no one.

At the same moment, a rain of debris fell on his skull. The children had fled, the room had entered the darkness. But he stood still, facing the room. On the spectators' side, the light had returned, but what was not my astonishment, mingled with grief, to see the rows almost empty, if not, at the back of the room, the silhouette of a woman, her face buried in her hands.

Lucien had left me. Who, then, had been able to understand this dismal sketch, who had heard, without acknowledging it, this declaration made in his own voice, with the familiar tone of which I remained penetrated to the very marrow?

The curtain had lowered. There was a very old poster depicting a man with a greenish body, who, with a dancing step, applying a thermogenic cushion to his chest, spat a fire.

Then I heard the sound of a hollow box filled with chips, which was shaking. I turned round. The woman, perceived a moment ago, was standing beside me. She was young, handsome, and wore the uniform of the army of salvation. Beneath her black straw hat with a red ribbon, the regularity of her features, her blue eyes beneath the drooping eyebrows, struck me. A very pleasant brunette, the slender, slender waist, and so she waved before me her tin-lined altarpiece where the pennies were jumping, and while I admired her hand and her fingers holding the handle:

— For hidden miseries, please! She said.

— How? Because of him? I could not refrain from answering.

And while a play of organ was heard behind the curtain and put the height to my trouble:

— Where are we?

Doubtless I spoke too loudly, and as I pronounced the name of the Master:

— Hush! She said, bringing her beautiful fingers to my mouth, which

also amazed me. He was my godfather! She added in a low voice.

She drew back a little and, as if we had said nothing, again waved her chaplain and repeated with some solemnity:

— For hidden miseries!—And she closed her eyes.—Give what you want!

— What matters it, if He *is* where He is, I replied. What does it matter to Him?

— Be simple! Give it!

— To see him! Talk to him right away, right there! I said, knowing full well that this was absolutely insane.

— Give it first!

Then I introduced a few coins. Had I done so that the young “salutist” took my hand:

— Come.

If I had given it with the intention of seeing the Guide which I had lost beyond death, I may at the same time have excluded myself from the certainty of the past.

If I say now that I have seen the Old Man himself, they will tell me that I was the voluntary victim of the imposture I sought; That in this case it was a sad and sufficient individual, paid by someone else, in order to pass for what it was — an equivocal statement, exactly what the Old say those who denigrate it before As after his disappearance.

No one will take away from me the feeling of his authentic presence or that of his greatness—even if it was a too Parisian version of his “purgatory c”—when I saw him from behind, wrapped in his pilgrim, sitting at the table Commanding the switching station, maneuvering with a perfect consciousness of his humble task, being able at any moment, if he had only wished, if he had only yielded to a thousandth of his slightest whims, provoking horrible catastrophes , Especially at rush hour, when the cars were crowded with wage-earners, without adding anything to the motives of his improbable damnation, or even reversing the date of

his equally unlikely redemption-while he was content to fulfill a duty Absolutely anonymous, to whom nothing further obliged him to believe, when he had spent his long terrestrial life in doubt at his home and in his disciples—picking, I say, on the table of orders and all the same Giving me then that part of his immortality for the sole purpose of safeguarding negligible existences no less justified in his eyes than his own, though not worth it, but notwithstanding such simplicity, such sobriety in humility itself, Still succeeding in extracting from these cold mechanicals which furnish a cab of a switchman, by virtue of some subtlety, I know not what a concession of his own fatality to the divine will, those ineffable sounds which, Behind the lowered curtain, had made me believe in an organ game.

Under the vault of the yard, to see his silhouette which he offered from his back, enclosed in the glass partitions of the cabin, in front of the tunnel from which debouched and where rumbling convoys entering and leaving, The roofs of the carriages slipping beneath us—I admired his abnegation of all lyricism, above the crowd on the platforms of the station, nor amazed that such a place would have been assigned to him by way of a A semblance of expiation so conformable to his views—when the unheard-of choso took place: he did not turn round, I saw only a slight quiver in the outline of his temple, his cheek and his strong jaw, but his left hand had left The orders, to me tense. And I squeezed her, I kissed her effusively.

— I am touched by your affection for me, he said. What have you done in recent years?

At this moment one of the windows of the cabin opened, and a blow of hot air penetrated. I saw him start and I closed the vitro without daring to look at him. Then the reflection of his face appeared faintly on the glass.

Whenever I had gone to find him in his house when he asked me where I was, I had difficulty in explaining myself with enough conciseness so as not to overdo him wasting time, and I was always returning

with the feeling of uneasiness which is left to us by an effort of confidences lost in the vague words.

At this very spot he guessed my thoughts, and then, as if he had approached in turn his forehead of the window, very clearly I perceived this whisper in my ear:

— *Alas! Even of theology!...*

And again, with an insinuating reproach:

— Why do you still wear this Roman cloak?

At these words his hands showed themselves as they had been in existence, holding a thick volume of black leather, with his gnarled peasant fingers leafing through the pages of Bible paper: a kind of manual for engineers of the metro—but the whisper continued:

— You are not bound to the breviary anyway?... Do you want us to translate some passages, the hours of the trains are the same, but the hymns are in medieval Latin, the homilies? We could skip them, the Nocturnes are not necessary to me, I know them by heart since sleep has left me, but Matins! When the trains are tripled especially towards Pré-Saint-Gervais and Ménilmontant... If they strike tonight...

Again, as he used to be, he was the one who spoke and, as in the distant years, I even attributed a decisive meaning to everything he said about anything. It was still a question of detecting this meaning. No doubt I sometimes told him adventures often adulterated that he liked to hear, even to have fun of my failures that betrayed such mythomania. But since I had decided to silence my monastic experiences before him ... Again, warning me of my reservations, his voice resumed in a tone of pedagogue teasing:

— So, why do not you marry?

Long before his death, he had asked me this question, and now he was asking me again, as if it were only for that, only that I had wanted, beyond his disappearance, to a word which would have once more decided upon my avowal.

The play of the organ, however, resumed.

— Do you know that fugue?

The powerful chords covered the rumbling of the oars which succeeded each other. A train stopped, threw the passengers back, without again leaving. Now the crowds were on the quays. Few people walked or gained the exit, one would have said with nonchalance. A great calm reigned among this crowd, without any jostling. Peaceful groups were forming, couples of young men and girls venturing on the way, obviously the current of the rail was cut off. The faces turned to the vault, to the switchboard, at first a few, then thousands - as at the spectacle, the spectacle that seemed to resume. The organ played some chaconne, or some rondo, the lightness of which filled me with ease. And suddenly, while thousands of voices were united in a thunderous ovation, the cabin rose slowly, in an elevator, but slowly as I passed the vault, the time for me to see on the quay the Salvationist who, with his hand, directed a choir of children among this enthusiastic crowd.

To recall the presence of the Old Man, after seeing him in this late afternoon in this room at the bottom of a dead-end—how does this differ from the arbitrary description of a dream?

But I did not dream. Lucien is there to prove it, who had accompanied me that day and he can tell the first moments of the curtain raising, the scenery, as I did. But he pretends that, for the rest, I play on the word *Purgatory*, as this sad music-hall was called, and that he left me almost depressed by the insipidity of the spectacle. Other people, not more than thirty, also attended, who had to leave before the end. All of us had been summoned. Now there is a witness, the salvationist, the young brunette who today is my wife.

Are Roberte and Lucien agreeing now to ensure that everything happened differently, and that I only saw Roberte at the exit, making the quest? No, it was before the curtain that she waved before me her chaplain, with these words: "For the hidden miseries!"

Lucien remarked to me that I repeated these words to him afterwards, when I confided to him my first impression of Roberte, of Roberte, sur-

rounded by persons who, as he left the room, looked at her with astonishment—and added that it was from that moment—that the importance of the glances cast on Roberte and of Roberte, thus regarded by others, must begin with me.

And notwithstanding the apparent truth of what Lucien explains to me—I persist in believing, such is the strength of memory, that it was in the room where the light had returned that, still penetrated by the image of Old on the stage, I was approached by the Salvator, facing the curtain lowered, and that the one who was going to become the present Roberte, in this uncertain light, slipping a note in her chaplain, the young woman had said to me: “He was my godfather!”—and not: “He is my godfather”—just as I remember, as I said earlier, that having pronounced the name of the Old man before, I felt on my lips the tip from the fingers of the Salvationist, saying to me: “Hush!” This is all the more striking because a detail struck me: it bore an alliance with the ring finger, a detail which only later became important when I began to search for it not because I had learned that she was a widow already, but because she had belonged to another.

But as it was more than a decade ago, I can not say with certainty that she immediately made it: “Hush!” Before I slip a note into the slot of the chaplain, or after the Salvator had said to me, “Give first!” as a condition that she should make me see, and that I should revisit the one I had just recognized, my illustrious old friend, my Guide, who died six months ago.

While I evoke the reappearance of the Old, it is from Roberte that I have come to speak; in fact, it was the first time I saw her: a salvationist doing the quest; but as she had addressed herself to me, and remained alone with her in the room where the Old Man had just reappeared, this emotion in the very doubt of having seen her again, I can not separate her from the furtive sensation of pleasure, had procured the lively presence of the Salvator, especially since that flattering face was unknown to me, and yet reminded me of something very distant.

She said, "Be simple, give!" Long before I found her, I meditated this injunction of the young woman.

I "gave" to see him, Him. And it was He, the Old One, who showed it to me so that I never saw Roberte without the desire to give it always.

Indeed, for a long time I lived in the strange joy of being alone to know how to lead a posthumous existence in Paris. He gave me brief appointments, but reiterated all the same, in various parts of the capital, but not at all in those I had recently chosen, rather in the most ungrateful quarters, and never in those he had frequented in his lifetime—in the most sordid streets, speaking little, sometimes asking me to follow him at a distance. But when I told him that he was engaged to his goddaughter, whom he had ceased to see, "I observed chastity with her until our marriage, he began to sniff, cough, throat—raised his hand as if wondering about the plausible reasons for this course of action, and continued in silence to walk beside me, while I kept my eyes fixed on the ground. At the end of a I noticed that he had left me or that I had lost sight of him.

Often I really *dream* of him. The absolute difference of our relations in these dreams (which merely reproduce very distant situations) from the exceptional relations I have had with him in his *posthumous life* gives me the certainty of these strange encounters. But as to reminding me of my marriage with Roberte, it belongs to the very peculiarity of the old man's reappearance that I now do not know if he disapproved of this marriage—had welcomed my first confidences with a broad smile of assent. I have put on the account of his doctrine that he suggested to me a pure and simple liaison with his goddaughter, and that I made her my mistress. Could it be that he wanted to warn me, knowing what is going on with Roberte? What strange discretion on his part that he did not warn me otherwise than by disappearing in my eyes?

I

After having missed the portrait of a woman because she is close to me, but her soul escapes me in many ways, so that all I could say was only suspicious and that all that I have applied myself to say of her only concerned the trap of her body and her face, both for herself and for others—I shall try to evoke now how, from the same woman who lives with her of me, I wanted to capture the physiognomy emanating from her and that her own life, yet so simple, disputed me and robbed me—and it is all the same the life that we lead together. And the effort I have tried for years has been to pass behind our lives, to look at it. So I wanted to grasp life by keeping myself out of life, from which it has a completely different aspect. If one fixes from there, one touches an unbearable felicity..

Then I exchanged time to live against the time already experienced by another. Does this mean that I have exchanged my own gaze for that of a man on the decline? Have not my eyes been able to sustain what once and for all would present itself as our own life? Did I have the confused feeling that Roberte's face would collapse in a mutual folding as soon as it ceased to offer itself to the lusts that form the fabric of the world? Rather than quietly grow old with her, I evoked an old age which did not belong to me, and a senile figure unrolled her past perversity, in the shadow of which I could read in the soul of the young widow whom I had married.

— Do not linger too often under the arcades of the Palais Royal, do not stop on the Pont des Arts, especially do not stroll around the Tuileries—that is his domain! But if you absolutely hold it, I'll let you go!

These strange warnings of the Old Man explain to me that he no longer manifested himself in the course of my comings and goings in these quarters.

Scarcely had I perceived these words at the whim of the breeze, than I seized only the reflection of a gesture: he took off his face.

— I have none, and it was only at that moment that the shadow of his long mustaches made him fall long before you saw the light of the day when he was “throwing” me again, I who gave him the example of the worst ... who all my life prayed for him! He pretended to coincide with me, he never contradicted me, he gave his assent to all the demonstrations I gave him on the function I was faithfully fulfilling from his own eyes, on the preference we must give to contemplate, to be suspected of absolute wickedness, by not acting, rather than acting believing that everything is allowed! For it is better to look at all that is forbidden than to look at nothing, thinking that it is indifferent to see or not to see. And, at the moment of his death, he left me, for all reward of my efforts, his final impenitence, and that he died as he lived, even if he consoled me with this mask as a memory of his long treason. “Everything I've always trampled on, which I've abominated, is you who will embody it again!” He told me before expiring, to form myself by forming thyself of all that I concealed from my sight, for it was necessary that the filthiness should take shape, even in the thin ray of a glance such as yourself! and so that I may cross the threshold of the prison and cross the darkness without seeing them, receive this obolus: I leave you my face hollow so that you can fill it as you please in the direction of a compensation that I deny I am free to make you *diro* under this face what you think in repelling for those who will not sleep peacefully until they know how to punish me.” From then on you are built on my account, K., you who have remained attached to him, insensibly! I am only a glance of him—look that can not

throw someone with a civil status. This look has started from his guilty eye that he should have snapped, but we do not tear his eye for it today, we snatch at someone—the look he takes threw on the young boys and girls, it was I whom he allowed to wander here and there, thinking I was losing myself, hoping that I would dissipate myself. But no! I cultivated myself! I have traveled, as he had traveled, and I have been so shrewd that no spectacle, however disgusting, atrocious, unbearable, could distract me. If your eye scandalizes you... Where I look, there one suffers, but one suffers to the enjoyment... K., if you loved him, you, you only loved him for that! for this evil look, as an approbation of what you dare admit. Since he has denied this look that I am, posed here and there, he has also denied you and with all the more resolution as you betrayed it—giving me the preference. Did not you go among the priests? Now this look which he had taken a long time to identify, he thought he recognized in our holy priests! and whenever he saw a man in a cassock, he thought he was crossing the look he had denied, the look he had since decried, vilified, ridiculed, because he could no longer do otherwise than discern him in the priests!—he who, at all costs, wished to remake the gaze of a child! Then, having detached me from his eye as a branch is broken, the broken one breaks. He went off with an indifferent gaze, which he believed to be serene, which he believed to be a human being, whom he believed to be a Christian...

On a beautiful day in April, when the sun shone with a precocious warmth, about an hour after noon, I had seen the elegant mummy sitting in her wheelchair, clad in pearl gray, meditating in front of the basin Palais Royal. At his feet lay an edition of *Aspects de la France*. I hesitated for a moment before asking him to take a look at this far-right newspaper, in which, it was said, the first article appeared on my book, and spoke of the cunning and superficial lesson. He consented with much grace, and handed it to me with his gloved hand. As I read, I went up and down,

when I had a glare. I fell to the newspaper and put my hands on my eyes: I stopped seeing. Did I then make the gestures of a man who drowning? Almost immediately hurried steps approached, and then I felt myself supported.

— So it does not work? Come, come, do not beat yourself, my friend, said he, in a sweet voice, come, I will take you! I know that, in an instant everything will be over.

He made me sit in his own invalid armchair, I who was ingambe a few minutes before, and his skeletal fingers made me passes on the temples. An unspeakable relief was gaining me, while the chair was slipping now, pushing that I was by him 'as at the heart of his own thought.

Where the pool now stands, a crowded group of enormous cedars rose above a thick thicket of ferns and lianas. In the greenish darkness, a young woman wearing a flat straw hat, her face covered with a white veil, dressed in a turquoise suit, leaned against one of the trunks, peering into the depths of the thicket.

She slowly disengaged herself, took off her jacket, and suddenly, naked, lay down full length among the creepers, her arms folded under her veiled head, revealing her armpits, and then, with a finger lifting her veil from her lips, began to kiss a curve of his shoulders. Then, holding one arm under her head, she brings the other back to her throat, slips her fingers around her breasts and flows the palm of her open hand on the roundness of her stomach, the long fingers insinuated in the fleece, she lifted one of her superb thighs, her head scrolled back into her ivy. It lasted a few seconds when the silence was pierced by the distant sigh of a siren which was prolonged in the vibrant immobility of such satisfaction. A gust of wind seemed to shake the plants and bend them to cover her whole body—she had straightened her head and unfolded. Dazzling as ever, Roberte smiled, confused at the pleasure she had given herself. But as her face grew closer, her smile became stupefied, her lips parted, her gray eyes staring with horror at the one behind me, while she raised her hands and applied them to her face.

— Will I never be alone? she said in a panting voice, and she began to scream.

The fingers of death had ripped from my face the soft palms of shame. The two of them seemed to struggle together, with their strident footsteps near me, perceiving themselves as the dry rumble of a tear of cloth, and again these words: “Not here, let me go, we are seen...” A frightful race resounded beneath the arcades, the sound of which suddenly ceased.

But a sneer, interspersed with coughing, whispered in my ears, which resumed the words: “We are seen.” Of course, we are seen, everyone sees us, yes! everyone understood, this duck...

Around me everything was found in the previous state. He was still seated in his wheelchair, but he waved the pages of the newspaper, crumpled it, threw it away from him, speaking to himself since I had given him this morning edition when the article in question appeared to me may be more laudatory than I had been told, not without some indiscreet allusions.

— Everyone sees us, he repeated, we are seen! Ha! the bitch!

I let him speak and walked away insensibly, bypassing the basin at first, pretending not to hear his words. Doubtless not knowing whom he was dealing with—at least I thought so—but hoping to make conversation with him, he shouted louder, “Ha! the bitch!”—and the arcades of the garden echoed this insult. I was at the same time dismayed and filled inwardly, looking for eyes on the basin as a reflection of the ephemeral grove where this revelation had been offered to me. And as I bounced back on the water, I reached out once more: “Ha! the bitch! “Was this really an insult? When I left the Palais-Royal, I wondered if he had really shouted that. Perhaps he shouted, “Hold!” As a good old conservative he was...

I seek in vain facts in this last period of my life, I find only reflections, resonances and I can not go back to their source. The facts bring others

into being, and the latter are kept to the last, and they are arranged with them to live with the least trouble. But the reflections blind me, but the resonances deafen me and I try to look and hear again. The faces and the gestures, the light, the half-light and an incessant rumor carry my thought, and I am astonished that these perpetual undulations may be reflected sufficiently in the uncertainty of having lived them.

I had married not to think of the past; and when we have built our days; when I tried to conquer a daily space—marital life, under the face of Roberte, far from preserving a measure conducive to our tasks, to our children, to a semblance of home, to our futures, has become the bait forces and powers which, if I may say so, have a long hand: they throw themselves into such moments that you ought to forget, if only out of respect for your children, they are their place of duration and foundation; erect them in immense monuments, which obstruct the horizon, they make such moments the horizon themselves, they suspend them like cupolas and arches over the course of days and years, and these cupolas and arches are made of days and of years, they exhibit them to you as the summits of happiness which it is a question of climbing; and so I have been the plaything of their cunning, and I am satisfied in the shadow projected by our life, and I have grown old within their walls.

I attribute to these forces, to these powers, *trompe-l'oeil*, the sonic repercussion, which capture my visual and auditory attention and even disturb the slightest contact with others: the expression of the face of the interlocutors never coincides with the remarks which they hold to me, I am sufficiently impressionable to make myself perplexed as soon as the words spoken to me return, detached from the physiognomy of who spoke to me, now disappeared; I attribute to these powers my relegation in the remote homes of a memory that fascinates an illusory past, the lure of curiosity to discover the motives, in Roberte, of another existence. Finally, I attribute to these powers slowly but surely substituted in me the suspicion to the thought before the facts that they simulate so well that the perpetual apprehension of their presence in all things oblig-

es me to occupy myself with a the time it takes to not see things soothing, because they are irrefutable. These forces and powers frustrated me to the benefit of vision, since vision was for me the last chance of salvation, once they had reduced me to the inconsistency of thought itself, and the only certainty of my existence was the fact of seeing what happens when you think I am not there! Would I dare to speak of perfidious maneuvers when I was imputed to myself, when these forces compelled me to explain myself in books which, in advance, would have no other effect than to blister the plate indifference into pure malignity, when these forces compelled me to make the portrait of my enemies when they compelled me to describe by secret the secret charms of my wife? The silence which some have placed upon these works, as if I had voluntarily surrendered to such an exhibition, a silence mixed with blame, but blaming my only attempt to exonerate me, when I was provoked to prove a kind of courage that I did not ambitiate, a comminatory silence calculated to intimidate anyone who had actually taken up my defense, for fear of the ridicule that there seemed to want to defend the charms of Roberte, the false comments to which they compelled others who as I have depicted him in spite of a feigned reconciliation, have kept me a grudge against having shown an affinity which, although exceptional, but exceptionally unfortunate, with the eccentricity of his own inclinations.

II

Letter to Dr. Yggdrasil

You have asked me to make an effort on myself, and try to tell you, by you alone, the real motives which led me to write *Roberte*, and therefore to give you, for once, the undertones of this history. I know very well that you hope to cure me of my illness by this twofold means: to speak only for you alone and without counting on any public; and, turning away from the products of the imagination, go back to the humble facts, to the naked data of my existence.

But first of all, it is something you have not thought of. The fact of your discretion must encourage me to speak to you of certain things, troublesome if they were said publicly; Now, as soon as I am ready to say them, I should forget that it is to you alone that I speak and beyond your own person I insensibly address myself to a greater number. This is fatal, for what I might say will always seem too debatable not to fear your disapproval and not to appeal to other judgments. Besides, in speaking of embarrassing things, I need hardly be encouraged: my book is full of it, though it is under the pretext of giving them for imagination.

And here I touch on the second point of your speech: to speak of the undertones from which you think to share my affabulation and reality lived. If legitimate, however banal this curiosity may be, I see that it is here

that you are the seat of the evil you wish to cure me. But when I have told you things with simplicity, are you sure that you will tell me what I really experienced and what I could imagine?

To compose a book with my materials, I had to sacrifice details that would have broken the balance. But you tell me that in so doing I thought only of my own equilibrium, and that, by subtracting perhaps from these details, which you still do not know, I did a work unintelligible to the greatest number. In this you will never convince me. If there are things that we can not say, and which we must renounce to make comprehensible to others, it is not that they are less important to us. But as soon as we want to talk about them to make them hear others, they are elusive. And it is not because they would suddenly be “without a bearing” that they would lose anything of the consistency they give to our life. Indeed, it is a strange thing that the simpler the life becomes, the less it suffers our need to relate it. We believe then that our life is poor even though its greatest wealth escapes us. Neither does the camel pass through the hole of a needle, but riches pass into what we say of life when, in a book, we want to display it in the eyes of others.

You wish to submit to a severe ordeal: to speak only to yourself of those things which in the open day evaporate, but which, at the same time, make it possible to establish your diagnosis precisely. For I see you coming: the famous argument of the compensatory imagination is still here yours: my mythomania would have added here, my censure there, my pen aggravating or attenuating according to the needs of the cause, fading, putting relief to obtain the more effect on my painting.

But what about the imagination of others when we talk to them about the seemingly the simplest things in our lives? We make it work and it is not in vain that the first question of your letter was to know: *who is Roberte?* To you, you alone, at least, I could finally say, assured me, as taking me by the hand. And, of course, you thought that by this you might have opened the way to the illiterate: in a word, you thought of yourself: “The poor man, who will relieve him.”

If it is an efficacious process to start by making one lose one's self-control from the one from whom one wants to draw confessions, you could not have succeeded better. But I will not do you the pleasure of making me angry as you please. I will not enter the clinical picture to animate it according to your predictions. In asking such an incongruous question, you were probably persuaded that you had little pretension, and that your lack of tact was proof of your good faith: it was therefore a want of tact with regard to your servant who has lost all notion of decency. Certainly you attributed to such a loss the reason for my malady, but in order to disguise this imputation, you flattered the sick man. Here again your semblance of solidarity did not avoid a lack of real tact. The question you ask me is locked in a vicious circle. In fact, you wish to make me confess that my life, appearing to me too simple, I was obliged to describe it as I did in my book. And in order that I may not escape such an imputation, you choose the very question to which, as you are sure in advance, I can not escape. If I reply, I shall at the same time have recognized that I have given myself too much importance, and too much importance to the incident. But will I then avoid seeing what I perceive at the same moment? And what do I see? the face of a rascal! But who, if not you? The face of the rascal is yours. Insult for insult, you will tell yourself, "you see that you will not escape the law of talion, which advocates the nobleness of the heart, the greatest generosity, which asserts the integral practice of the laws of hospitality!" Let me say that I avoid even telling what I think, that I avoid thinking what you have to think of yourself to ask me such a question: who is Roberte, when knowing too well you will have always before you the image of the rascal that you are. For you insinuate that if I have exaggerated something in my life too simple, it is the personality of my wife, far too much, you estimate, so that you can make the rapprochement that, you would have been able to do, if necessary, pretending besides the delicacy not to do it! Unfortunately for you, delicacy does not pass, but your coarseness is matched only by your insolent amnesia.

You who still bear the scars of deep scratches on the cheek, do you still

attribute to them, as you did at the time, to let nothing sweat your impatience? The signature drawn by the nails of those too handsome hands that you could not remember at the right moment?

Must I remind you again of this morning when you appeared at the window overlooking the garden, and the strange signals you made for H.'s intention? It is not an era that is so distant, and when you now go to Madame de B.'s house, the shortest way leads you past the house which has been uninhabited since then. Can you better remember the circumstances of the past. Behind the pavilion where, for a week or so on the eve of the great holidays, you were wandering about meditating on your thesis, now famous, on depressive mania—the garden extends its long sloping lawn to the bottom fence, shaded by bushes and fig-trees, which separates it but scarcely distinguish it from a cemetery lying in the fields. In the distance the massifs of the great state forests close towards Meaux, the horizon. On the sides, along the low walls, wild rose bushes. At random on the lawn, forming like pens, here and there shrubs, such as the seringa, the tamarisk and the hawthorn, then made like rounds around some large fruit trees. A narrow alley of boxwood ran through the middle.

That morning—you had not yet come down, and for good reason—we were under the great cherry tree, breathing the air of a limpid morning, Guy, H, and I, when, shrubs, my wife, in an ample dressing-gown, her long hair floating freely, advanced, carrying a breakfast tray, and approached the table where we, Guy, H, and I spoke of the religious instruction of our children. I no longer know what Roberte, serving coffee, head bent, hair strewn down his cheeks, frowning, insinuated about it—but the little slap of lips that Guy usually does in certain disputes, but also the sneer of H. I remember, make me think that she then expressed the doubt that in the greatest number of children faith survives beyond the fourteenth year if they were not withdrawn at that age from the institutions religious to which they had been entrusted since childhood. This was the case children of H. as well as those of our close entourage. Guy had not had any, but he overwhelmed with his criticisms and remonstrances the friends

he saw struggling with their intractable boys and girls. At that moment, lying in a deckchair, he exposed his bare chest to the sun. As for Roberte, she made a peremptory gesture of her long hands, brought back and tied her hair. And as she raised her elbows, her dressing-gown opened and her slender body was modeled beneath the silky fabric of her nightgown. She tilted her regular face towards Guy and, wrinkling her lips, her finger brushed against his shoulder. Then, with a pair of scissors, she slid slowly towards the bottom of the garden to cut some shrubs. Guy, after kissing her hand in passing, followed her with his eyes, murmuring: "Evidently, obviously, the eternal feminine"—which responded to the perplexity in which he was with regard to his own home, as every year in this season, he had escaped for three weeks. But H. stared at me and, drawing a puff out of his pipe, said in a disillusioned tone: "Roberte could easily be made a hostess at Longchamp."

It was strange enough to me that Guy and H., married long before me, witnesses of my defrock, and since then insinuating in our long intimacies both solicitude and gestures of protectors at the time of my own marriage, had, in his own way, allowed me to take stock. They, too, had believed that they could easily make their wives like kinds of caryatids of the facade of their life as they had conceived it one day. They had changed, they had become hardened, and they judged them then, without pity.

"It would be easy to make Roberte..." words irremediably complicit in what H. apprehended in me with nostalgia, he who for years had been in the habit of watching my approaches to many precipices whose dizziness he loved... And, in addition, H. had brought you to our house! Thus, I said to myself, so even he, even the others can not help seeing what every day more I guess, I desire. Already what a few futile remarks scarcely permitted to efface, is but the announcement and the promise of so many charms... And what the day before I had sketched in a pusillanimous way, the reconstitution of probable gestures of his life before our marriage, I recovered it with ardor, with resolution, shaking all embarrassment, all shame to do it, with a childish enthusiasm as if I were going to re-enu-

merate the nature of my wife: nothing that to describe it unconsciously would provoke a Roberte unsuspected of herself, which in her would awaken, and would restore to me what she still seemed to want to withdraw from me.

Now, while H. was uttering these inexpiable words, I stood by the side of the pavilion, and what did I see? At the open window of your room, you had just watched the insignificant scene in itself, but H. was still talking, that you were making signs that could only be for him, an injunction to silence, and finally a last one of vexation, since he was probably too late. Indeed, you were occupied with H. assiduously, with the intermittent uneasiness which frequently disorganized his conjugal life; you wanted to find a temporary compromise to his irreducible tastes, you had noticed his exceptional sympathy for Roberte. Had he counted on you to overcome the scruples he had of betraying a friend, in spite of the tacit conventions of our house which ought to have been wiped out beforehand—such a reserve-I doubt it a little. But what is nevertheless extravagant is that you yourself have tried to try the remedy you were going to propose to him, and that, having tried it at will, you have no longer thought of anything else [to continue your own experience. The phrase of H. who spoke louder than of reason, you had immediately grasped it. I should not in any way draw conclusions from it on the subject of H. and you, as to the impression which Roberte had been able to make to you both in this respect.

You remained at the window while I reflected on H. But it was not a reflection, to tell the truth.

Grasped by Roberte's finger, Guy still lying in the deck, followed her with his eyes, when he sat up, muttering for himself, and finally stood up.

At the bottom of the garden, a shrub stirred under the hands of Roberte. From her could be seen only the fingers on the thick fire-wood, which she pruned.

Guy la rejoignit et s'arrêta derrière l'arbuste. Les mains de Roberte continued their work. Suddenly they let the scissors escape. The foliage

froze.

Perhaps it was only at that moment that H. expressed his thoughts. Yet he had his back turned to the garden, facing the pavilion. From the top of your window you heard the words exchanged at the bottom of the steps on the lawn, echoing from this corner, but you were looking away from the wall of the cemetery, which between the shrub and the stones covered with moss, occurred. Guy, in his own way, laughed at you, simply verifying “the eternal feminine,” but during the ecstasy Roberte gave him or her, since she let the scissors slide into the branches—all this was in your field of vision, Guy remarked, raising his eyes, that at the window someone made telegraphic gestures as they were going towards the cemetery, and having observed that it was at the middle window on the second floor, yourselves bent over it, that you seem at the same time, by this glance, to take I know not what tardy revenge against him—the revenge of a bloody discussion that you had, it is said, before the war, about Yoga, and where he had left you confused, annihilated, on the brink of suicide—Guy, even though he occupied the place you secretly thought of reserving for H., your patient, doubt between the pleasure of thwarting your therapeutic projects and the only to see his own effrontery in the garden noticed immediately and precisely by you, knowing that it would place me in an untenable situation.

Was H.’s sentence a warning to me? Did he pronounce it at the wrong time? Did he violate a command? I know it so easily! And the indecision into which he had fallen at that moment was bound to make him malleable at will, into your hands.

I also admit that Guy is very bad language. As soon as he saw you land with H., he made a grimace. He did not leave his scowl during the week of your visit. It remains to be seen how he interpreted the appreciation that H. donna de Roberte, if he interpreted it as a prelude to your own aims, and then got up because there was not a moment to lose... But as soon as you had gone away with H., he did not dry up in allusions as detestable to Roberte as to you, even to such an extent that we almost threw him

out. But I did not see how he could have avoided unmasking himself in a second attempt, constantly advocating the devotion of his own wife and his wife. resignation, coveting in a whisper what it would have been so easy for him to obtain, but disapproving him aloud as soon as he risked sharing the same favors with you—he was reduced to gnawing his brake and ruminating on what had revealed to him his indomitable indiscretion. Notwithstanding his conduct, I will not detain him as a prosecution witness against you. But your question...

I had begun to write to you, promising to remain within the limits of a disinterested search. But if I am misled, the proof is made that I can not answer you, nor that you can cure me. You could not tempt him without asking me the question: who is Roberte? But in advance you have destroyed the terms of the answer.

III

For years Guy de Savigny had become as indispensable to me as the negative proposition is to syntax. I'm a maniac. And I could not have dreamed of a more lucid or safer accomplice. But before admitting himself this very rare sense of all that can obsess a soul, before showing solidarity as he was capable when he saw his fellow-man at the last extremity—he delighted in deferring his understanding, and one aspect of his own mania was to overwhelm the other with arguments to which he was the last to believe. On the contrary, he was skeptical to the very depths of his soul, living, thanks to his resources, in total disuse that his poor health did not justify in his eyes, pampered by his family, enjoying the devotion of a passionately docile wife to his slightest whims, but at last capable of great emotional richness, which, however, he could not translate into an expression that might have satisfied him, he lost himself in his unlimited erudition. Saturated with readings, familiar with all the systems, all the exegeses, he breathed only by references. And he could not account for the least moment lived without scaffolding a block of arguments to make himself heard and legitimate. He was anxious to find in others what he considered to belong only to himself, especially when the other seemed to have overcome scruples which aborted his own experience—then he trampled on the accomplished one of others as if she had operated to her

own detriment—and it was for him a way of recovering what he thought had been stolen from him. Although this was my own way of reacting, and perhaps because of that, between us two such comedy had unfolded more than once. There is nothing more disastrous than the encounter of two idiosyncrasies, mutually attracted by the incommunicable which they assert, and which thus sympathize with the exterior by virtue of a semblance of affinity, but which must to hate one another for the same reason as soon as one succeeds in imposing oneself on the outside by means borrowed from a set of conventional signs—hence by true or false adaptation to common sense—the reason for the other to cry out treason, since it was as if understood between the two natures that nothing would be divulged of what they alone could say to each other. In this way, Guy de Savigny flattered in secret what he was allowed to glimpse, but then he appropriated it and authorized himself a right of scrutiny—quite rightly, moreover, in so far as it was considered that the matter acquired only consistency in that exclusive declaration—authorized only for the sole purpose of keeping you level of perplexity... And that was exactly where I had been with him since Roberte, this evening had been born. He had never believed it to be publishable. But when it was done, it was fatal that he should take his revenge. It was necessary that I should find a diversion to his diffuse grudge, it was all the more necessary that I had concealed from him something else that I could have told him, after all the rest, that he was going to learn, doubt already learned by H. and we will see—but who would see? I write for myself, Théodore Lacase, and Guy still assimilates me to a certain K. who writes for everyone—and so I was going to see how he would insinuate himself... As for the diversion that I imagined, as if to consult him on the subject, was to speak to him of the tax declaration established by Roberte. I doubt whether I was grateful to the tax authorities for taxing our wives' spouses according to differently established categories, and this all the more strongly since, with more appositives, they would have had fewer children. I have said, and not only declared, since no fraud was possible since the strict control exercised

beforehand. Roberte had been placed in the first category. To obtain a satisfactory relief, it would have been necessary for her to pass into the last, and so far from it, that she could return to the second. If we had had three children of our marriage it would have been easy, without the threat of a call to the Hotel de Longchamp was definitely rejected. But as a widow at the moment of remarrying, she had only had a child for ten years. The incentive to have natural children at the Hotel de Longchamp was strong, for even adulterine children had to allow the taxed woman to be gradually degenerated. How could I ever have foreseen that the State in the person of M. would thus discover my secret and that while favoring a fiscal exhibitionism, he would divulge mine own and at the same time would collide, at the same time as myself, to the intractable character of my wife? But that was, of course, two different ways of coming up against her. How can we dare to demand such a deduction without falling aside, without exposing ourselves to the vilest situations? We were suspected of debauchery and Ioberte had just been taxed at the highest rate. The tax authorities thus obtained that Roberte "declared" his apasties. She confessed them. For the fisc, this intruder look anonymous thrown into our privacy, the matter was settled. Roberte accepted that his flesh should become a lucrative source of the public treasury. The Revenue, substituting myself for Roberte's intention, allowed Roberte to carry out this confession in the most inoffensive and costly manner for me, since I kept a secret of the sort adulterated by the expression of a and there was no doubt that M. would not have acted at the last extremity: to send Roberte to the Hotel de Longchamp, under the pretext of giving my aporias the most banal of solutions: Roberte would be a paid trainee and the anonymous children she would bring into the world would assure us the reimbursement of all the fines previously incurred... But what benefit for myself? What did they imagine around me under the influence of Doctor Ygdrasil? destroy in me the laws of hospitality and cure me...

Guy de Savigny had landed the day before in Paris, where he never stopped more than three weeks. A few months before, he had come with-

out a sign, which was quite exceptional. This time, he told me he would arrive at the same time that he was meeting me at the Terminus cafe at the Gare Saint-Lazare. It was a renewal of a predilection we had formerly for this district. But today I can ask myself whether from that moment no no took place according to the timed plan of the revenge he had sworn to take over me, and until the choice of the cafe Terminus where we we rejoined at the end of the afternoon of May. He claimed to come from the Bibliothèque Nationale and also from Boulevard Haussmann. Had he phoned Dr. Ygdrasil, did he go out of his house? I was far from asking him the question, and nothing yet brought me to it at that moment. He had just arrived, and since yesterday he had scarcely had time to turn round and plan appointments—unless his stay in Paris had been prepared from the previous one, in concert with Ygdrasil, and even then with K., but this is another matter. Obviously, as Theodore Lacase, I do. I felt safe from a relapse into the past, and Guy de Savigny was watching for this terrible eventuality. In order to save Lacase, I had to leave Guy with the feeling of his superiority, and, as Theodore, I had no will. In this way, he renounced assimilating himself to K. He was duped by his pride and rejoiced with K. and his wife, the so-called wife of K., as with people with whom neither I nor Roberte had anything of common. He completely satisfied his need to eat some in company with others.

After the first embraces, and they were perfectly sincere in the dull joy that we had, each by ourselves, to tear ourselves apart—it had been almost half a year since we had deprived ourselves of it, and I had I was going to submit to Guy and unfold a form of tax identical to that which Roberte had filled, when, letting his eyes glance over the loggia of the Cafe de la Passerelle, he began to the type:

— The first thing I absolutely want to ask you, Theodore, is that, as a witness of your marriage, you swore to me that in no case would you ever let Roberte go to the Hotel de Longchamp!

Had he guessed my intentions and wanted to take the initiative immediately by cutting short everything that would have allowed me to

distract him from the bottom of the question?

— Why should I want to tear out this promise from me? I just wanted to show you...

— Theodore, he said, turning away his head, but laying his hand on mine, you know the weaknesses of your servant! Know that yesterday evening after dinner I was dragged there... Oh! I stayed there for only half an hour in the gaming room, where one only makes anchovy, the time to take a wolf in the polling booth and take a look at the round... one can not recognize anybody or be recognized, this is the rule, when one of the masked hostesses (it is de rigueur) stopped in front of me and, probably taking advantage of a momentary absence of the supervisor, disguised (which is forbidden), caresses my chin and whispers: "See you soon, I hope!" And when I found my filth, the supervisor had resumed her place, and the hostess had avoided... The voice, the hand, the whole silhouette at last... Roberte! Theodore, tell me quickly that it's impossible, is not it?

— Quite excluded, dear! Calm down! And that will reassure you...

And I unfolded before his eyes the tax form.

— But this form does not tell me anything, it is empty! he said as he went through the questionnaire.

— In your opinion, this is not serious, it is not enough, perhaps? The highest tax?

— But why did you make that statement?

— Roberte always wants to put himself in order ...

— Will you show it to me?

— Oh, Roberte has already dispatched it... that in any case eliminates the danger...

— Removes the danger !? But nothing but to have subscribed this declaration destined it to Longchamp in good and due form, unhappy! You have not clearly explained to her what she would expose herself to...

— Guy, I had to pay a formidable fine for omitting the statement of the previous fiscal year...

— That's not an excuse! Whoever declares his wife makes her im-

mediately justiciable by the competent body and finds herself guilty of having ignored the law which sanctions the proceedings! Have you not understood that these measures were based on nothing but outright intimidation and odious emulation among taxpayers of a new kind... that under the pretext of dispensing a benefit Theodore, if men like you spontaneously offer their wives to the Moloch, M. will see his unspeakable institution accredited by so many votes! It is, then, only a shameful laboratory, and it is only out of pure snobbery that you have yielded to blackmail, too! That's one more reason why Lise and I never came to Paris! Hou! What a frightful world! What a decline !...

While Guy thus warned me against M.'s intentions, I was suddenly distracted by what I saw on the steps of the staircase leading to the Pas-Perdus of the Saint-Lazare station: the "salvationist" there was the quest. At the moment when she was to be with Gilberte at Chanel's, I did not understand that Roberte could be here to resume this habit, which, since our marriage, she had entirely abandoned. Interrupting Guy, I pointed to the young woman on the steps:

— What do you say about it?

— Well! We should go see. Size well taken...

— But you do not understand?

— Now, are you interested in the Salvationists because of Roberte?

— Then you do not recognize her?

Guy frowned, stared at the young woman as much as he could, and looked at me with a pout:

— Indeed, there is some vague resemblance in the pace, all the same.

— That's her, I said.

Guy looked anxious:

— Are you crazy, dear? But if it pleases you, I will pay him my money, and tell you my impression.

He got up, climbed the stairs, stood aloof for a moment, searching his pockets, no doubt found no change, and while among the crowd of trav-

elers few tourists threw a few pieces into the chaplain's chapel. the salvator, Guy looked at her from the corner of her eye and remained frozen, then rubbed her chin. But then the young woman having perceived it, it was she whom I saw approaching him, laughing. Guy was embarrassed, but nothing could tell my own amazement. They had recognized, and coming down the steps, Guy brought him to our table.

Without dwelling on the details—she had donned a dark casaquo and wore a Scottish beret that suited her perfectly—I asked Roberte if she had forgotten or set aside another date for her rendezvous with Gilberte.

Now, three days had elapsed since Gilberte had dined with us and Roberte and she, at the moment of separating, deliberated in the antechamber, a quarter of an hour, of the opportunities that were offered, of the balances and their before fixing their outing together to the day we were. I still wanted to remind him of this detail.

Roberte, who was already astonished at Guy, the kind of “work” for which she had just sought, replied in an aggressive tone:

— But at last, my poor friend, you are still at this nonsense! And first, I have not seen Gilberte for an eternity.

— How! did we not dine together at the beginning of the week?

Roberte merely threw a pitiful smile at Guy. But he turned his head away, staring wide open. Then, without further explanation, she inquired about the condition of his wife, which gave her the opportunity to reply with great detail and comments that I did not even listen to. Overwhelmed, I had cold sweats. Roberte, in her austere demeanor, seemed even more desirable to me, as though I had never possessed her, hostile and distant, notwithstanding what I thought was only a bad farce she played me there, to the point of disowning before Guy the reports we had once again with Gilberte and her husband. After ten minutes, she stood up, pretending that she had to hand over the funds collected to the pastor who managed the work, not far from here, in the Rue d'Amsterdam. And as I asked her if she would have it for a long time, and if she had to wait

for him or accompany her, she would not have either of them, and added that she would have returned long before me, it was necessary to prepare the suitcase of Jerome and the early bed, which was to leave the next day for his aerial in Savoy.

— And tonight's dinner, I said once again. Raphael and Merlin come to dinner tonight for the rehearsal.

— Ah! these rehearsals, poor Roberte! she said, turning to Guy, who, this time visibly dismayed, was looking down on the floor, swinging a chair at his side. Do not worry, all will be ready about eight-thirty, she continued; you know they are always late. Stay quiet with Guy. Besides, why should he not come too? Are you free tonight? I would like you to hear my two partners, Merlin and Raphael, you know, Raphael...

Guy literally jumped at the name. Again I was taken aback. In no case did I want Guy to attend these "rehearsals," certain that he would rush into them and then denigrate them at pleasure. Fortunately, the idea of meeting Raphael there, which he was far from expecting to find so near Roberte, but whose work he hated, caused a torrent of insurmountable jealousy. He would doubtless recuse himself. The day before, foreseeing his arrival from one day to the next in Paris, Roberte had resolved to keep him from the meeting scheduled for the next day, if he should ever land the same day. That she now desired her presence seemed to me entirely in the order of the inexplicable circumstances in which I had surprised her here on the Court of Rome, at the Gare Saint-Lazare.

She walked away, and while Guy was questioning me, I saw her go towards the courtyard of Le Havre, when a scooter mounted by two young men surpassed it in a whirlwind and, turning, stopped before her. The young men dismounted as she nodded, looking at her watch bracelet. No doubt two boys of the Federation who must have missed her while she was seeking at the entrance of the Pas-Perdus. One of them, almost a child, was wearing a pick-up and hurried to exhibit it on the spot—a necessary accessory, apparently, for some patronage meeting. She made gestures of approval and finally clapped her hands to press them. The

oldest of the boys, sturdy and stocky, who held the handlebars, invited Roberte to take their places between them. She settled on the second saddle, the youngest, squeezing the pick-up in his arms, sat down on the luggage rack, and the scooter started, then slowed down by a flood of pedestrians at the gates on Amsterdam Street. The young men howled and laughed at her; much better, she grasped the chin of one of her fingers, and it was not the youngest, and, finally, she stuffed him with small blows to the shoulders so that he would move faster, the fire being orange.

— Since when does she do the quest again? Guy asked, totally forgotten.

And without waiting for my reply, he began to disbelieve at the “work” of which Roberte had just spoken to him, and he referred to the person of Pastor L., whom he called a shameful Marxist, and finally lamented that Roberte would allow himself by activities of this kind. And he immediately drew conclusions for me overwhelming.

— This proves—and it was carried away by being exhausted—it proves that she defends body and soul against all... lupanar that you organize around her ... also, what an absurd idea to make her play the role of Roberte, and that to exhilarate the whole band of those viscous individuals whom you have the misfortune to frequent at this moment. I admire this girl, it is a certain instinct that drives her, but before such an enormity as the publication of your *Roberte*, she runs to the opposite extreme, and you mislead her again...

— You are utterly mistaken, I say, feeling defeated in advance.

He continued:

— It is already a lot that it has been able to adapt to an environment such as yours. She has given you a charming son, you can not demand more from her, there is a limit to adaptation.

— You do not believe what you are saying, my old Guy, I never waited for her to adapt. She has no need of it, and it would be a pity.

— It is infinitely serious, he replied.

— So... it was “she”, you are sure? I ventured.

— What to say?

But I did not want to pronounce what for half an hour I had been dreading.

— Well, I'll dine all the same at home, he hastily slipped in a more honeyed tone.

And then I could not help thinking of the way he had four years ago whispered to V. in our garden his word about the "eternal feminine." How, moreover, his present reaction was in accord with his furtive initiatives of the time, I did not seek to understand it, but something which, precisely, was composed with terrible doubts in the course of being born, seemed obscurely to coincide with its emphatic indignation, if not to justify it.

We had walked down the avenue de l'Opera, to the quays, and went up to Saint-Germain-des-Pres, when he stopped.

— She had an expression that I did not know yet, he said. After all, it may be better for me to come only after dinner, about ten o'clock.

And he went to rest in his hotel room.

IV

On my return home, passing by the dining-room, I found Roberte occupied in marking the linen of Jerome, shirts and socks spread on the table. It promised to last another half an hour. Impatient, I entered the room of our son. He was already in bed, and a little girl from our neighbors on the landing kept him company, while he was taking his dinner on a tray. When I returned to the dining-room, Roberte had disappeared. But the table was set with four covers. I entered the drawing-room, and in the anguish that Roberte's inconsistent words and words, all blaming, of Guy, had given rise to this late afternoon, I was rejected in the past.

That evening I would go into a news hostile to my life, and knowing my inability to escape from it, I would bypass many obscure circumstances which, at that moment, stand as tight walls in our own home.

Sometimes Roberte seems imprisoned in it, sometimes I am relegated to it myself, deafened by a rumor of indistinct voices saying and re-naming a Roberte that I do not know, sometimes I see open long corridors at the turn of which Roberte disappears.

So that evening, waiting for the unlikely return of my wife and for fear of having in vain called our friends, I recalled the origin of these meetings.

Merlin, a disillusioned actor, become almost a hermit jealous of his free meditation, a clear-sighted witness of our affairs, solidarity with all

the nuances of our evil—and Raphael, on the threshold of middle age, notwithstanding his casual movements, to its elders by a new and disconcerting form of expression, each with a kind of expectation in which both were in their own careers, had both, for more than a year, been less devoted to my unavowed obsession. Either life goes on in a definite direction and it ceases to look at itself as it acquires meaning and obeys it—or else it moves on itself to recover itself without ever having to do it: to reproduce a at the moment when it would have been total, an illusory search, but its mobile secret, such was then the deaf motive of our encounters. Merlin, making my own statement about *Roberte, ce soir's* staging tonight, was experimenting with this: to give Roberte's room, where Roberte's life looks, the silence that succeeds the three blows. The Prince of Denmark inaugurated this kind of experiment before Claudius, watching him gaze under a thousand glances.

For months, our two friends had met in our house, improvising in all the tones the unspeakable dialogues of my book—Merlin in the role of Professor Octave, insinuating—Raphael in that of the young nephew, a soul timid with curiosity, which his troubling physiognomy of adolescence proved. Then, when Roberte appeared under Roberte's face, there was an uneasiness...

And it was the same discomfort as finding her now, sometimes occupied very near me—as just now marking Jerome's linen—as far away from me as at the end of the afternoon when she was making the quest for unknown to me, when she was supposed to spend the day with Gilberte, on the side of Chanel or Dior—as if life, our too immediate, separated by my spirit, had risen against this separation of our life from our life that carried our “repetitions”, by shreds ...

Outings in the fortuitous Merlin country residence were meant to give more fulfillment to these rehearsals, to flourish them—but timidity, decency, discretion, respect for each other kept them at the same level of discontinuous reticence, opposed Roberte to our own home. The rehearsals that followed until the summer of the previous year finally de-

graded and, while Roberte and Merlin gained mutual spontaneity on the musical field, Raphael listened to them with all the more attention as he began to distance himself from his own role, that of the nephew. That a rebound was still possible the following year, towards the time of the holidays, that everything seemed to recover during a party at Lucien's, as if the pleasure of his new house could not have done otherwise than the I am still surprised. But already this repetition, outside our home, retained from the ancients only the outline slightly accused here, diverted there, and laughter betrayed in both the feeling that they caricatured their gestures. Since then, as on the other side of the fabric of the untouchable *Roberte*, each one having gradually regained its place in existence, neither Roberte nor our friends had yet been able to part with their mask, which they had not known before...

The bells of St. Sulpice had already sounded for a retreat, and it was nearly nine o'clock, when I heard the door squeak and the antechamber filled with voices. I recognized the rapacious laughter of Raphael, mingled with the words of Merlin and my wife. I did not go to meet them, she had assured me that she would have come back before me. Now, I did not dare to recognize her. The door of the drawing-room opened, and Roberte came forward, radiant, with a silent and ostentatious smile. Indeed, she wore a turquoise suit, gloves and shoes of the same shade. And still wearing a little straw hat pulled over her forehead, her eyes shone under the white veil through which the carmine of her cheeks shone. Something was here at its peak: pleasure or imposture, or both at once. And I let her speak:

— This is what we finally found, Gilberte and me — exorbitant prices at Chanel, but in a store background in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré...

— At what time, before or after Saint-Lazare? I interrupted him foolishly immediately.

— Saint Lazare?... we did not go there at any time of the day..

And she remained, holding the hat she had just taken off, between the

fingers, the palm prominently.

—The quest! let's see, about six o'clock, for the work of L., you told Guy... how was it possible, finally...

She was silent, my questions scattered, as her smile faded away, while Raphael and Merlin laughed each in his own way, Merlin hiding his face with small shakes as every time he attended one of our disputes. Nor did she seem serious to him. However, Roberte, with a hand on her hip, her head slightly bent, and glancing at Raphael, repeated with an almost thoughtful air: "Quest, of course, the quest!" And, turning on her heels: "My God, how should one think of everything!" And, passing to the dining-room, she returned almost immediately with glasses and port, then, raising her own glass high: "For the hidden miseries," she said in a falsely cynical tone, when she pushed a shout. Behind the window of one of the impostes of the cupboards overlooking the drawing-room was the wide face of U. who, from above, watched us without our knowledge. We opened the door and found him perched on a stool. In fact, eight days before, he had been invited to our rehearsal, where he was to take the role of the "colossus." His Neronian face, his blossoming eyes, his blasé look, his size, finally indicated him for this role, which we doubted very much that he would improvise with a spirit of continuity, so much was he in a changing mood, engaged in a thousand projects which his depressions caused to fail.

— I just witnessed an incredible show, he said. Theodore here turned like a lion in his cage.

— Naturally, as soon as I have the least delay, it is panic, said Roberte, I can not take a step without Monsieur losing the north!

— Admit it all the same, I said, this day was weird...

— But she must be trained, Theodore, you do not leave her any margin! what do you, the author of *Roberte, ce soir*, say when Madame is to make her period in the field?

— Have you read the *Match* this week, indeed? asked Raphael.

— Not the slightest desire, really!

We sat at the table.

— There's an article from K., says U. Very bad! But the photographs show the installation of the house and a lovely person, the hostess recreation, welcoming an old visitor, it's pretty nice. And he showed me the periodical on which, among other things, a well-made masked woman, falling back on a sofa, stretched out her arm towards a niche where a night-light was burning, while the visitor, also masked, conversed with her. Absolutely conventional scene. On another page, in close-up, one saw the same lady lightly raising her wolf.

— It's K's wife, "said Raphael.

— Do I read? asked U. Only some useful information.

And he began:

THE HÔTEL DE LONGCHAMP

In this house there are three kinds of encounters: first, those that are suitable for the outdoors between people who prefer this "skillful" place to any hotel or to their own home.

The Director—this is a condition of the statute—only accepts them after having ascertained that the potential partners, at least four—or more—agree to respond to his own summons (he needs to increase his "staff"), in return for which they will have the free enjoyment of the amenities and amenities of his house for their own arrangements.

However, the Director organizes every three months in the afternoons and evenings of persons who, according to their fiscal situation, have signed a semi-annual contract and have previously agreed to appear on the lists drawn up for that purpose. At the beginning, the Director was required, in accordance with the statute, to have absolute discretion as to name, age, occupation, etc. It seems, however, that the interested parties themselves have not observed this discretion, which is now purely formal. And at the same time, the candidate has all the

time to know the list of his possible partners. The Director communicated to him, with the tacit agreement of the parties concerned, the names of the prospective persons who had accepted his "invitation"—and indeed anyone who had first thought of being invited to attend, realized that the tax authorities docility for the following cases. Thus, on such a date, X. knows that among fifty persons gathered, he will have the chance of falling on Mrs. Z. or Miss Y. But on the day, men and women are not only masked, but gloved. Indeed, the trivial expedient of the mask proved insufficient immediately, the amateurs of feminine hands having proved more expert than one thought.

There are parts perfectly anonymous, nobody having been able or willing. to ask who will meet with him: if the Director were to confine himself to the same milieu, to a certain elite, it would be totally the spirit of the institution.

On the other hand, the "pseudonymous" parties in which one "finds oneself" are the most costly for the "elected", and generally are for the benefit of different categories of victims or victims of war, etc., at the expense of the State.

Their rate dispenses "taxpayers"—and here we touch the core of the false problem—exempts them, I say, from the act of generation, if they have more than three children to raise. Less costly, the anonymous parties become free from the fourth convocation of their interested parties, for the third time the act of generation has been consummated. Under the guise of demographic interest, we take pride in bringing the population to double in five years, and here all the consequences arising from labor, social security, reconversion, conscription, etc. Now, for eighteen months, Longchamp has opened its doors, we are in a position to say that this stud has brought back in all but one hundred and fifty births! And besides, what need to falsify figures which no one dreams of reporting?

Finally, the Director is empowered, by means of taxation, and on notice given by the collectors of the respective districts, to summon tax-

able women who have had only one child from their recent marriage for up to ten years after their (last) marriage, even if they were mothers of two or three children of a previous marriage.

The duties of the Director are voluntary, legally. How would the State reward such a pastime? On the other hand, it is an inconsistency, since he is responsible for collecting sums comparable to the public purse. It is a juridically insoluble situation which is tolerated all the more in the close circle of M. that it lends itself to many misfortunes. His choice was, at the very least, the most laborious. A crowd of people, soldiers, industrialists, doctors, men of letters especially, those who complain of being constantly or exploited, or frustrated, or shorn, or groaning on their starvation wages, suddenly each and every one of us these people had nothing more in a hurry than to waste their time gracefully. Once the designation had been made, a campaign of calumny was unleashed against the man who had the misfortune to accept - to such an extent that, without ever exercising such a function, the philanthropist in question was forced to disappear himself, his person an attempt imputable to the mere lightness of the most capricious of our princes. And yet, he sacrificed the honor of his name behind which henceforth hides the actual director, who then? The same person who is not satisfied with his pulpit at the University, nor with his vast audience, but who is still of all the cocktails, all the vernissages, all the manifestos. Now it is well known that M. was his pupil. The disciple in power remains so attached to his master that, in spite of their difference in taste in matters of sex, and perhaps because of this, M. considers that it is at last the best solution.

If ever this administration moves, will the next one ever dare to repeal these statutes? Did not he pretend that the school quarrel would be palpable before that which he had aroused in the future legislation, and that the clerics exclusively directed at the monster of Longchamp...

Roberte, going up and down, the book open by hand, but no longer

looking at the text, knowing it by heart, had just pronounced the first words of the third act to the address of old Octave: "You could have at least ask my opinion before committing your Victor as tutor of Antoine" and again "what bad faith!" And that with so much timeliness and purpose. was surprised, thinking that she spontaneously spoke, and realizing that she already lived rather than played her part when the doors of the drawing-room were opened:

— You could at least have asked me for my opinion, repeated the "Salvator" on entering.

Here she is face to face with Roberte; I leave, with my hands raised. The Salvator raises hers, and clinging to each other, palms to palms, their fingers intertwine.

Merlin, who played the part of the old Octavian, re-read the passage of his own reply; Raphael was preparing to intervene as a young Antoine. But Guy, after following the Salvationist, remained on the threshold and examined me. U., on the couch, with his eyes on the ceiling, said nothing but shook his head or shrugged his shoulders. Roberte's tone now displeased him.

The Salvationist tightly clasps Roberte's fingers, folds them slowly but surely, while Roberte swallows with pain and shame without succeeding in surmounting the strength of her opponent or in disengaging his fingers. The Salvator twists her wrists, Roberte sinks on her knees. Then the Salvationist throws herself on her character and both roll on the floor. And as the Salvator presses his face against Roberte's, sticks his lips to hers, stifles her words, Roberte clears her hands and slaps her.

Guy had retired to a corner and was waiting. U. defiled me: "It is impossible. Separate her." He does not say to me, "Separate them!" But "Separate her!"

Facing us, seated on a sofa with Raphael, the Salvator, in accordance with the argument of the scene in which Roberte lectured his nephew, raised his index finger, with his other arm surrounded Raphael.

—It's very bad, says U.

The Salvationist lowered his hand, and on the other, in a distraction, pinched Raphael's cheek.

My ears were still tingling with the furious pounding of Roberte's heels, which, having rushed out of the living room, shut herself up in the bathroom.

Raphael and Merlin questioned each other. U. rose from the divan and declared that this passage of Roberte's part was too long for her, who could not bear the diction, having no "trade" for it, and that it must occur more by his gestures: it was only to highlight his "brushing" character, to what was the appearance of my wife. And he began, very heavily, to "detail" her, to make up for his disobliging words.

Merlin visibly disapproved of his remarks. Raphael, who was left alone on the couch, abounded in the sense of U., saying that one or two replicas of Roberte should suffice here, and that it was for me to simplify the terms of his role so that avoiding incidents, he said, as painful as the duplication to which they had just been present.

That, since Guy's arrival, I had referred to as the "salvator", had returned to the drawing-room, arranging his hair, having left the coat of the turquoise tailor whom Roberte wore before dinner, indifferent to our remarks, almost with modesty U.'s criticisms, but the latter, taking her by the wrist, said: "There are enough charms to affirm oneself with fewer words!"

Then Guy, until then aloof, rushed upon them:

— Splitting?—he deliberately took the word of Raphael.—There is no duplication! You know that! If you are true friends of Theodore and Roberte, you should immediately take them out of this game of dupes, transvestites, and duplicates: for there are two women here, and not one, as you pretend to admit with this sinister dialectic of which you are all marked since your incurable puberty...

He seemed to be talking in a vacuum. As long as the others did not hear his words, I would remain reassured, despite what I had to see and know that I had seen.

Merlin, blinking his eyelids, drew puffs from his pipe; Raphael looked sternly at Guy, as much as his velvety eyes, slightly brighter than usual, did not seem overwhelmed by Guy's insulting reproaches, while, with an air of slyness, to the latter with an irritating courtesy: "You too, of course, you will play in this room?" And taking a glass of whiskey from the Salvationist's hand: "Thank you, Roberte!" Said U, insisting on the name, and as she crossed her arms, one knee on the other, her lips curling, the way he continued to look at her seemed to undress her completely: she felt a slight shudder, passed the palm on her calves, and began to blush, lowering her eyes. In fact, standing beside her, Guy, his hands in his pockets, stared at her with a sort of fury. Then, turning to me, he hissed rather than pronounced:

— Thus, Theodore, you allow your wife to suffer for this one?

At these words, our three friends had risen, not because they had any brilliancy, but because, suddenly rising from the top of his tall Guy, Roberto was passing around his neck with his bare arms, whispering in his ear, rather distinctly:

— This one, admit all the same that you know her well! He snatched himself from the embrace, but turning round, in the aspect of Roberte, naked under a sheath with sparkling spangles which, covering her breasts and her sides, scarcely covered her pubis, as if dizzy with the effusions emanating from her body, he remained frozen in the gesture of slapping her. Outside of him, having been thus played in the presence of our friends, and confronted with the very fact that, by his tone of blame at their address, he denied, for his part, ever having appreciated:

— You want to be treated like a whore, well, come on!

And, carrying his hand under Roberte's armpit, he pulled on the zipper of the sheath: the breasts gushed out, then the belly and finally, in the hollow of the thighs, the fleece on the curiously tattooed pubic of the image d'a bee.

— Here we are in a different climate, said Merlin, it is not ours!

But Raphael had applauded like a kid. Indeed, Guy, curled up, with

his head thrust into his shoulders, his mouth open, contemplated, quite sheepishly, the bodice by which he was hurt by the Salvationist. She laughed, she hid her breasts gushing in the eyes of all. With her fingers, she disguised the nipples, each surrounded by the same stigma, the bee.

— What have I done, he stammered, what have I done! Can you ever forgive your old unbalance..

And, whining, he kissed her hands. But she was paying more attention to what Merlin was saying: “That’s not what we want, it’s not what you wanted.”

At this moment, in the high mirror of the drawing-room, which reflected in the escape, the apartment, with all the doors open, to the end of the antechamber, the mirror of which repeated the salon, I saw U, leaning over the sparkling sheath, which displayed a cape of black silk on a glimmer of epidermis. The Salvator, leaning on the mantelpiece, talking with Merlin, observed in the mirror U in the antechamber where Roberte’s face was visible in the distant gloom. Raphael had joined him and soon Guy, who was watching an opportunity to apologize to them for his incongruous remarks. But he scarcely succeeded, walking up and down in the dining-room between the drawing-room and the antechamber, where U. and Raphael were discussing, and always among them, the person with the beautiful hands, wrapped in her cloak, slipping her fingers on her lustrous hair.

In the drawing-room, Merlin and the Salvator were leafing through scores on the piano, and soon, both sitting on the keyboard, the accents of four hands, which they made to sound, brought Raphael back to the drawing-room. And Guy, having avoided Raphael, whom he saw occupied with Merlin and the Salvator in turning the pages of the score, finally approached me on tiptoe and whispered to me:

— U. took your Roberte away.

V

Haydn's chords had dissipated my disappointments, their echoes revived with all the more force the last images.

Suddenly, at the piano, my wife interrupted herself; and there was no doubt that it was she who, with solicitude, turning to me, begged me to go and see if the gates were closed on the side of Jerome's room. The perpetual *molto* of the final threatened to awaken him.

The doors were well closed, but I crossed all the same the room that preceded that of Jerome and, eager to assure myself of his sleep, I opened. By the light of a night-light, seated in her bed, Jerome read. Far from being afraid of my appearance:

— Impossible to leave tomorrow without knowing the end of the story of the mummy! I can not fall asleep, you know, and here, I turned on when I saw through the window...

— You have just seven hours of sleep and your train leaves before nine o'clock! Give this book, or I call your mother...

But, laughing, he stood on his bed:

— Mama has just come out, you will not tell her anything, put this book in my suitcase. She does not want me to prevail!

— I'll call her right away! and, lifting him up, I took him under his sheets.

Thus Jerome had seen her come out. I took the nightlight and went back to the drawing-room.

There Merlin and Raphael bent over Guy lying on the couch, his head resting on Roberte's knees, which passed his long hands on his temples. His fall had interrupted the piano, they were at last occupied with him; Roberte's palms did the rest. He opened his eyes, murmuring his eternal: "Evidently, the eternal feminine." I shrugged, without the slightest anxiety. Roberte begged us to go and get caffeine from a pharmacy at night. Merlin and Raphael accompanied me.

As we were going up the Rue Bonaparte, they questioned me about Guy, his old relations with Breton, his Calvinist origins, and little by little I let my doubts appear. The attitude he had taken during the evening ended in one of the jokes he was accustomed to. Merlin was protesting, describing his discomfort and how he had slumped, almost discreetly, so as not to interrupt his four hands. I had only one thought: to find Roberte as quickly as possible. Guy's true or false malaise was only an immediate allusion to the circumstances in which we had both intercepted the salvationist at the entrance to the Gare Saint-Lazare, as at the silent interlude which, was held in the salon during the rehearsal.

We walked to the still open pharmacy near the church square. It was Merlin who, seeing me haggard, had the pharmaceuticals delivered to him, while Raphael took leave of us. I was somewhat annoyed, for he did so with a certain coldness, and abruptly, and I concluded that the atmosphere of the evening had once disgusted him with our rehearsals. For a long time he had lain in ambiguity, in inconsistency, Roberte no doubt had disappointed him, he would not return soon, his curiosity exhausted.

And we were passing by a cafe terrace - facing the church on the other side of the boulevard, at an angle to the statue of Diderot—when lightning fell on me: in the first row of tables where the public tonight Roberte was seated, dazzling—flanked by two young men, the same as I thought I had seen with her in the afternoon at the court of Le Havre.

Merlin, too, had stopped.

— You see it? I said. Proof that all this was rhyme for nothing! U. and Guy will have dragged her here... Roberte is there, at the first tables... Jerome must not leave tomorrow... there was never any question that he leaves... How Roberte would come here, in the middle of the night, if she was worried about Guy... if she were to get Jerome to leave tomorrow morning... She's beckoning, I told you so!

— There is no convincing evidence, said Merlin (or something similar, for from that moment I could no longer distinguish what was said to me, and I interpreted at random the sounds uttered, with an effort of syntax, eliminating the most words that had no sense, but which were the most numerous). - There is no convincing proof - there are only new obstacles, one falls, and one arrives on a new landing, one goes up and one creates a ceiling.

Already I approached the terrace. But Merlin, ready to descend by the Rue des Ciseaux towards Saint-Sulpice, did not follow me. He brandished pharmaceuticals that the Salvationist had urgently demanded for Guy.

The young woman who had been seated had one of the two young men come up and stood up to us. Merlin greeted him: it was Dulaure, a young reporter photographer.

— You are asked, he said to Merlin; what do you become?

— You have a job tonight, I think? My old man, we're in a hurry ... Maybe just now ...

— Come a minute, I'll leave for the Elysee. We are there with Roberte, who saw you go by with Monsieur.

He naturally did not know who I was. But it seemed at best with my wife. And she had sent him to run after Merlin because Dulaure had recognized him. However, Roberte made great signs which, perhaps, did not concern me.

Preceding Dulaure and Merlin slowly, but without understanding the latter's hesitation, I stayed a few seconds without further progress, at twenty paces from Roberte.

— That's it! Are you blind? and so we arrived at the table, where Roberte, singularly wearing a corset of mats, surrounding her head, as she had worn them shortly before our marriage, but sheerly painted, had not been at the beginning of the evening - clasped in a sleeveless bodice, her arms bare under a silk cape, had at that moment her hand passed around the neck of her other rider, a teenager, whom later she presented Felix, one of her nephews.

— What is going on? Where did you go? she asked, I have been waiting for an hour! U. finally left. It was fatal with that unbearable Savigny! You always do the opposite of what we decide together! she continued, leaning towards me—but, saying, she looked over my shoulder, someone I did not suspect of being part of her company.—Why did you tell him to come? Theodore Lacase is inconceivable! He must now have Savigny's presence to make me ridiculous forever! And to say that Merlin and I could not even finish our Schubert!...

— Was not it Haydn you were playing just now?... I ventured without raising the bad faith of his purpose, the quartet in...

— Look! What are you wearing there, Merlin? said Roberte, taking the pack of pharmaceuticals.

— Have you slept Savigny at home? replied Merlin.

Felix, a rather handsome fellow, looking rather blase, in spite of his fifteen or sixteen years, with one hand in his pocket, and with the other holding his dirty fingers sparkling with his pretended aunt, rubbing his thumbnail sometimes with his heavy eyes, as if he were drinking his words, watched her gesticulate, sometimes looked at me with disgust, or pouted me, even tongue-tongued, slumped in her chair, knees apart, not being able to make up for the idea that I was his uncle. Dulaure questioned me with a look and seemed to wonder why I, the husband, did not make myself heard of her. And indeed, stupid and reassured, I did not say anything anymore, thinking to be out of the nightmare. Sometimes I turned to see better behind me the character to whom Roberte, speaking to me, had cast an eye as if to attract his attention—a rather small man

with a Slavic face, angular features, which no longer defiled a word. Merlin introduced us and I did not remember his name. All the same, every time Roberte spoke, I noticed that she was still waiting for him as tacit approval. Sometimes he would get up, take a look round the crowd and reassemble. From time to time he seemed to be making signs of intelligence to someone sitting at the end of the terrace.

— Of course, I continued, of course, Guy's syncope was nothing but shame.

— Syncope? said Roberte, and when? Immediately I saw her enter here next door, at the Madison Hotel, she just passed in front of us staring at me with one of those contempt...

— So we'll see right now, Merlin and me. We were disturbed for him, because you were alarmed, only!...

— Me? Alarmed? What is this story again? cried Roberte, snatching his hand so brutally from that of his nephew's muzzle that he lost his balance and tilted back. Felix! A little dress in front of your uncle!

And she knocked the table with her hand. And as she emptied a glass, lit a cigarette, threw it, sickly, and opened her compact:

— You yourself should come back now, I said, seeing her get excited. Jerome was not sleeping just now, he was reading, and if he really has to leave tomorrow morning for his aerial...

— Did not Jerome sleep? And he's leaving tomorrow! Guy, a syncope?

And, saying this, she dropped her head on Merlin's shoulder, repeating: "Ah! Poor Roberte!" As appealing to his only understanding.

She was still talking when the two men's bikers arrived in full dress, attracting all eyes. One remained in the saddle, the other dismounted and walked straight on us. Dulaure walked away, the silent person motioned to his anonymous interlocutor on the other side of the terrace.

Huge, shining, boots and straps polished, head with a medal profile under his leather helmet, square shoulders, a real wardrobe, but the belt tightening his wasp waist, the Adonis of the marechaussee, almost a step

aerial, came forward and his gauntlet touched Roberte's shoulder:

— Madame, he whispered, Madame.

— Leon! You finally! she said, turning round. How beautiful you are this evening, my Leon!—and I saw her clench her fists, and stamp her.

— That's the guy I need, gentlemen, the Intellectuals!

And she threw herself against him who was dominating her, and with her long fingers she caressed her white shoulder-straps.

Leon remained frozen, but at the same time he presented her with a cushion stuffed with tiny medals.

— That's it? she asked in surprise.

— That's it! said Leon, turned hilarious.

And, bowing to her, he turned back, straddled his horse, and the two motorcyclists set out again towards the right bank.

All this had hardly lasted five minutes. Dulaure on the sidewalk had just set up his apparatus.

Leon had pleased me. His pace would have been perfectly agreeable to one of the personages of our "rehearsals," and I regretted to know it in the marechaussee, although the uniform enhanced precisely that pace proper to the part I had intended for him.

— This is the "colossus" we need! I said unwisely to Merlin.

But, no longer thinking of our "rehearsals," and doubtless surprised that this was my only reaction to Roberte's reception of Leon, he did not reply, while Dulaure, not grasping my remark at all, considered as a phenomenon. Meanwhile, Felix had taken possession of the cushion—and besides his curiosity, we shared it, too—Roberte, with the back of her hand, slapped him in front of us, and immediately concealed it from him.

— Come on, go to bed! I've seen you enough tonight! she said harshly.

Why was she so severe with the boy to whom she had abandoned her beautiful fingers a quarter of an hour before? And Merlin, visibly embarrassed, already standing, beckoned to me, when suddenly Roberte showed a metallic altar and, as it stood there, under her cloak, stretching

out her bare arms, clenching the handle of her hand with her sparkling fingers the chaplain began to circulate among the crowd of consumers, repeating the ritual words: "For hidden miseries!"

Deceiving the vigilance of the boss and the boys, a single man and a woman as beautiful as filthy had insinuated themselves among the tables to beg. Immediately after Leon's impromptu, the boys chased them, but not quickly enough for the one-eyed man and his companion to clash with the elegant young woman who, she raised her altarpiece, articulating distinctly: "For hidden miseries!"

Pushed back on the sidewalk, the one-eyed one and the filthy dirty girl persisted in parking in front of the terrace, and the man, with his eye full of harshness, followed the evolutions of the questor. It is not impossible that they should be despatched there to hinder it. The boss asked us to stop the quest. We had to wait until the tramps wanted to leave. But they were there to shoot us with their looks, it was their right. And so they watched Roberte.

At the third table from ours were three parachutists of the foreign legion. Immediately behind us was a fat American officer—a glabrous face and a pastor, wearing gold-rimmed glasses, a serene smile on his lips—conversing in a low voice with a tall, red-haired young man in his shirt. They were suspicious of the quest.

— For hidden miseries! continued Roberte, waving her chaplain.

— And we! What are you waiting for? suddenly said the one-eyed man, threateningly.

Behind us the Americans murmured.

Legionaries played dice, exclamations with different accents, Gothic, Slavic and Latin, punctuated their blows. When Roberte passed by their table, one of the three paid her his money. And I saw her pin one of the little medals struck by some emblem. They examined her and they began to throw the dice with fury.

— The Bee to the winner! exclaimed the man with a Romanian accent, with a smile to the pursuer.

At this moment, the one-eyed man, whom his companion wanted to drag, sent to Roberte:

— Come here! What a fuck I do!

— Will you? said Roberte, raising the chaplain, and slipping between the table of the Americans and ours, she was about to rejoin the one-eyed man on the pavement.

— A good spanking in front of everyone? Oh! I like this! The young woman, filthy, stupefied, looked at her with her black eyes.

— Come on! For the hidden miseries, a good spanking! said Roberte again, when, with a bound, the great redhead assailed her on the back.

With one hand grasping her wrist, passing the other under the naked armpit, and to the bosom as she turned, he brushed his lips to her cheek and glued his lips to Roberte's; made capsize. With his hand grasped at the wrist, her head flips under the lips of the young man, the breast grabbed, she let go of the chaplain who bounced on the ground with a crash and opened.

From that moment on, my impressions became blurred. I see Felix picking up the widespread contents of the gaping chaplain, the legionaries rushing on the Americans, Dulaure firing a flash, Merlin standing, perplexed, squeezing drugs, myself brandishing a chair without believing it, a legionnaire shouting: "Down with the good offices!" To the impassive face of the American captain, while Roberte remained singularly in the position in which she had been constrained.

In this din, Merlin and I found ourselves together, but a compact crowd had dragged Roberte inside the establishment. She climbed onto a table and harangued people. At that moment, Dulaure was able to disengage himself and pick up the debris from his overturned apparatus near us. His film was intact. According to him, the legionaries explained to the police inspector that the winner of their game of dice had to take the woman. The latter showed a medal she had pinned to his comrade, the loser—but no one understood the meaning of the bee depicted on the medal. Many of the people who responded to the quest raised this

bee, but the permission-holders claimed the privilege of which they were the emblem. They threatened to kidnap Roberte forcibly or forcibly, for the bee was the stake of their bet.

Dulaure was still speaking, when the character who, in our group, remained mute until the scandal had taken place, had disappeared in the scuffle, appeared at the end of the terrace near an old gentleman quietly away who seemed to follow all this heckling with amusement. On a word from the still unknown character of the man, the gentleman slowly rises and waves his cane to the inspector to whom he reveals his mysterious authority.

I wanted to rush to them. Merlin held me by the sleeve.

— You are mad, Theodore! Leave K. to disentangle this affair, and let us go in at last! Roberte is still waiting for us!

But these words he repeated to me afterwards, I did not understand them, I hardly heard them. Roberte was there to parley with the old gentleman, and I did not at all understand why the dumb man had intervened and thus brought her to her. To top it off, one of the parachutists already lifted it, and then, in a stir, he let it fall. Then a hedge opened in the crowd—preceded by the mute, Slavic physiognomy, and gesticulating in an obsequious manner—the old gentleman, holding Roberte under his arm, led her to a large Rolls, along the land of the statue of Diderot. The mute individual has disappeared. Roberte did not even look at us.

— Where are you going? cried I, in consternation.

— But what does your husband do? said the old gentleman at once, looking for his eyes.

— “He” spoke to you instantly!

— What do you say? I asked in my turn.

Merlin pulled me back through the sleeve.

— I prefer not to come! He has seen this too often! continued Roberte, settling into the carriage and putting on her gloves.

— But where are you going? I insisted once more.

— I’m going to be spanked in the red room, Monsieur Théodore Lac-

ase, to serve you!

There was no longer any way of obtaining an intelligible answer from her. Yet I could not help but say:

— And Jerome?

Then, leaning at the door, she whispered to me with a strange smile:

— Your Salvator is watching!

And the car started.

— Well! said Merlin, you must be satisfied tonight!

Later he absolutely denied anything like it. My daze was such that, seeing Merlin running before me through the Rue des Ciseaux, and thus reaching the Rue des Canettes, I asked him where he went with so much eagerness. He did not even bother to answer me, and even showed some ill-humor when we finally debouched on the Place Saint-Sulpice.

Who had we left an hour before to go to his request to absurdly seek these pharmaceuticals? Who had been separated from me in the midst of the fight? Which of the two was Jerome's mother? So what, under our windows, where we could always see the lights burning since the day before, I began to tell the menu in Merlin of the singular incidents which had occurred since the afternoon at the Gare Saint-Lazare until the beginning of our evening. At least I think I spoke to Merlin for a good quarter of an hour and I do not know what he could answer. He did not have to understand right away why I did not want to go home, but, worried about my kind of talk, he did not want to leave me alone. Finally, he preceded me on the stairs and it was he who first entered the antechamber.

In the dining-room everything had remained in the same state, the reliefs of the meal, the bottles, the glasses, the towels dragging here and there.

Merlin opened the door of the drawing-room and looked, and even at some length. Then he withdrew at a wolf's pace.

On the couch, I saw the sleeping "salvationist." The keyboard of the piano remained open, the score of Haydn still on the desk. Only the lamp of the piano diffused a light of nightlight in the vast room.

I approached her who did not want to be Roberte. I contemplated that noble face, so resigned in its almost painful expression, was the arched line of the lips, the wings of the nose, the dimples in which everything breathed a pure pleasure. She was sleeping deeply. And I once more endeavored to lend to this mouth the shouts and insolent remarks mingled with those cunning complaints I had heard just now.

VI

What happened next day—if tomorrow there was—how to describe it now? The day that followed, how did I live it? Everyone else will see a tissue of anachronisms. I can not rethink it in a relative order and retouch its incoherence. But whoever remembers the most banal day endures chance without explanation. Place the facts, the people—nothing more arbitrary, a pure matter of mood! Familiarity, the bizarre—a way to interpret! Optics from a specific platform! But habit settles everything! A flick of the maniac is enough for life to lose its seriousness—one jumps onto another platform... It is not the people who import, it is the places: the people change places, but the places do not change! In such places “she was with him without my knowledge”! It can not be changed anymore, but it “changes”! Here is a fact! How do we go back there as in a place? But it does not change face for all that! But what does it mean that she has the same face? Habit that, what a bore! But to return to the places where she changed without changing face! Go back tens, hundreds of times! Thought is capable of it! The fact is nothing! It does not matter what happened next, since previously is still there! Go for it!

It may be that this day has unfolded without any need. I’m the one who chained up the incidents from end to end. Unless necessity is called my fear... My fear that abruptly ceased the incoherence, and that to see

clearly one did not take away the thought.

When I open my eyes, the sun already filters through the inner shutters of the living room.

I'm alone on the couch. I was buried under blankets.

On a small bedside table I noticed a large sheet of paper where Roberte's writing said to me:

"Rest, it's eight o'clock. Jerome and I leave for the station. After Saint-Gervais I stopped at the deaconesses' house in Lyon. I'll be back at the end of the week. See if Guy is better. He is now housed in the red room that I had requisitioned at Hotel B. for the two of us. You wanted to spend that night with me. But you did not return yesterday at the appointed time, no doubt Merlin had things to tell you that he does not want me to hear. Have I been detestable enough yesterday? Do not come to pick me up at the station on Saturday, I'll be back for dinner. R."

I rushed into the dining-room, knocking on the table, shoving piles of plates and glasses, which the cleaning lady had not yet put away. I went through the apartment to the rooms Roberte and Jerome, where she had just remodeled the beds. In vain I question him about the details of the departure. Roberte had left him the key.

What to do? It was ten o'clock. So I think of all the phone calls that we have to give. I would call Saint-Gervais' aerial about five o'clock in the afternoon, I would have a chance to hear the voices of Roberte and Jerome, but it was long until five o'clock. I foresaw that I would not touch on my work. And first of all I would call Versailles to alert Merlin. But it is still too early, he was only joined at one hour to his usual bistro. No, the first thing to do is run to the Madison Hotel, see if Guy had really been away at night. But then; the red room! Indeed, the red room, exquisite in its installation and proportions Directoire, at the Hotel du Beaujolais! I had totally forgotten her. That was why Roberte had waited for me!... Which? The one who, towards midnight, was seated with Dulaure at Saint-Germain-des-Pres, or the one who, even to the dawn, was watching for my re-

turn home? And then it was out of spite, it was her practical sense—for she had used a singular title of requisition for this luxurious room—she had led this infatuated and sickly Savigny, what an idea! for the requisition to serve at least something—it was there in his character of “salvationist”.

As I walk along the rue des Ciseaux, towards the Boulevard, where the Hotel Madison is situated, behind the statue of Diderot, the whole scene of Roberte, with Leon, with the redhead and the paratroopers, had retreated out at night, is going on again with such intensity that I forgot the departure of Jerome—the absence of Roberte, his maternal solicitude, pure derision; I entered the hall of the Madison, holding in her hand the word she had left me, ready to show it to Guy. But he did not come home from the night!—assures the manager. Mail had been waiting for him since morning.

Then I went down to the quays. As I crossed the Seine, crossed the Louvre bridge, the sight of the City to my right, the escape to my left towards the Tuileries teared me. the crossing of the courtyard of the Louvre, the perspective of the gardens, the irruption on the Place du Français, the engagement in the Palais-Royal exasperated me and filled me with bitterness: here I knew plenitude in the past, this was snatched away from me, I do not know when, everything recognizes me, all mocks me... the gates and galleries of the Palais Royal whisper to me once more and finally I pass under the peristyle of Véfour, and here I am the Hotel du Beaujolais.

Here the porter does not know the name of Savigny. I betrayed myself to ask if a lady did not come late at night to occupy a “requisitioned” room.

— Requisitioned?

The doorman stared at me, mockingly.

— Let’s see! You would not know Madame Lacase?

— Indeed, this lady has come, much more, she is still there ...

I do not want to know more, she’s there, I’ve had to read badly, give in to a thoughtless movement, just evaporate - but a groom who seems to

have recognized me, with a zeal unqualified establishes communication with the room, picks up the phone, hands it to me, which I seize, more clearly the voice tone of Roberte: "Hello? we go down at once." Without replying, I return the apparatus to the groom, and I run away.

Why did not I wait for her? Seeing whether the "Salvator" appeared or not, had made me flee. Hardly in the street, I explained my gesture by this false reasoning: For me, she travels at the time that he is with his son. His word this morning stems from all his conduct before and after dinner yesterday. I had recognized the voice of Roberte, but after her writing this morning, to speak to her here, in spite of this message, as if nothing but a mere joke had been granted, was to do the game of Guy. And henceforth he would have made me admit that I was accepting what had happened the night before with us during the "rehearsal".

I reread the word of Roberte. His presence at the Beaujolais confirmed only the purpose of the "red room". For the rest, she was laughing at me. Suddenly I was struck by the discordance of these lines. Two different intentions, emanating from two different temperaments, were combined, borrowing the writing of Roberte to simulate the same person. With whom did Savigny occupy the red room?

"It can not be the same woman!" I said, "and yet I could not even use his doodle to prove the contrary. I just heard the voice of this woman and it's that of Roberte. I reread his word and this writing convinces me of his absence. Why is she trying to make me believe now that she had lied to me? Was it not the process of the day before that was continuing?" But what if it was not one?... Perhaps I had long since already given signs of imbalance, and Roberte was anxious to keep our son away, moreover, from putting herself in safety... We tried to convince her to my progressive deficiency, and then it acted under the influence of some of my enemies.

On the part of Guy this was only a morose delight, but others, who did not owe me the same care, more determined in their antipathy, not merely enveloping me with a thick silence, in the eyes of whom I counted for nothing if not simply because I had a wife who had slept on occasion,

were thinking of delivering her from me at the instigation of my mother-in-law...

All these infantile and stupid conjectures tired my reason, and I still had enough time to shake them and take my hand again, but the scenario of the incidents of the day before and the beginning of that day passed before my eyes and I could object to them by passively recapitulating them. How had she emerged that Savigny called the “lining?” What premeditation should this not have supposed in one and the other, and then what plan did they pursue that, in all probability, they could have concerted only inspired by a third party? To what end did they arrive in so few hours to divide the parts to the point of misleading my mind, in such a way as to render the wife, whom I thought my wife, more and more contradictory? Was there anything more free?

I was still amazed at the attitude of Raphael, Merlin, and U, not surprising, when Roberte found himself face to face with the “Salvationist.” At that moment I had still overcome my own emotion, because my friends were reacting only to the same woman, the only one who was bodily in our midst. But the arrival of Guy, his way of behaving towards Roberte, meant that all recourse to fiction was over. His lack of tact towards my friends was worth a lesson to my address. In his eyes I had simply pleased to supplant my wife with another and thus to do wrong to one with the concurrence of the other. But what the night had revealed to me was worse: without my knowledge there was a complicity if not between the two women, at least between each of them and someone who directed their reciprocal play. This one wanted to deride my “laws of hospitality” after having abused it. Such a farce was provocative, for it would have been very difficult for me to delimit this abuse.

On my way through the Rue des Petits-Champs, by dint of going back in all directions to such an absurd situation, without realizing where I was going, I had come to the Rue de la Paix, and remembering a to settle at the Book Club with E., to try to think of something else, I entered. E. intercepted me in the corridors.

— Here! your friend of Savigny goes out of here at once, and your wife is with him.

— Error, I say—and my blood was frozen—she has just left Paris. But Guy's gone?

E. looked at me, then spoke of the exorbitant demands of Savigny. I shrugged instead of supporting his conditions as I should have. I was distraught again.

— All the same, replied E., I have only seen your wife once or twice, a tall brunette, slender, is not she, but really I was convinced that it was her.

He handed me a draft contract, which I pocketed without further attention.

E. added:

— Finally, let Savigny know that I reject his conditions.

— I too, I said, but I did not know what I was saying.

While strolling under the foliage of the Tuileries, I returned about twelve and a half on the left bank. From Versailles, the patron of the bistrot had answered me on the telephone that Merlin was in Paris for the day. Then, having some reluctance to look for U. and Raphael, who were to meet at Lipp at the same hour about some desperate Democratic vigilance committee, I went home. The concierge handed me a note from Merlin, who had come in the morning, who said she would wait for me at the cafe de la Mairie.

Retracing the Place Saint-Sulpice a few moments later, I met someone I had stopped attending since the year already far from my defrock. For a long time this character had elaborated, in the silence of meditation to the most subtle introspection, his contortions of the old maid and introduced into the metaphysical reflection the hysteria of a vexed governess, faced with the unassimilable character, for he, of the post-war generation, whom he imputed in a general way to the influence of the illustrious godfather of Roberte, and especially to the more methodical dissolution, taught by the Phalanstere who nested in Saint-Germain-des-Pres. One day we had almost been intimate, but, caught up in the mirage of the

aurora borealis, whose flying saucer irradiated a sky full of perplexities, since I had the weakness to open myself with too much frankness without taking care of the gases escapes which permitted him to glide with imperturbable coquetry between ecumenical movements, humanitarian meetings, family councils, theaters, learned and pedagogical societies, the fierce commiseration which he distilled during his flight with regard to of the disciples of his rivals, had informed me of the nature of these gases, made of harshness and vanity, the inevitable residues of the interior life, the price of those aurora borealis which had once misled me. At the height of the fountain of the sacred orators, the saucer lowered to the ground, scaring the doves, while, pressing the pace, I had saluted it with deference. But then she deigned to address me such signals:

— In the past I have made a false step for you, today you are trying to try some kind of detestable thing, and not content to make yourself talk about what can only be said to a confessor, now that you are married, that you are a father, you wish, in spite of your simple family obligations, that you also speak of your wife—and under what bias!... You made a false journey in the past, you have undoubtedly carried the cassock, it was human, you have reported it by flouting those who had wanted to save you, it was not elegant, but it was still comprehensible, it concerns you; Now, married, you are mocking the sacrament of marriage—which compelled you to marry? Here again one has the impression that you never touch the holy realities except to defile them, for lack of vocation... I had a certain friendship for you, formerly; your difficulties had moved me. Since then, only what the uncontrollable rumor of a mixed medium brings me comes from you. We do not know from one medium to another what happens in each only by a shimmering of which we remain ultimately responsible. For you calumny itself is void of meaning. But since yesterday I knew by X. who had it from Y. that you had come to live with another woman, a dissolute woman, because she resembled yours, in order better to be able to attribute to her the disorders of that one!

As I was naive enough to shake my head, he went on:

— I do not want to know at all whether such puerility—and it is none the less perverse—before even being a fault characterized, responds to the reality of facts. But now the result of an unhealthy book, which, because you wrote it, imposes itself on your life as an imperative, you are about to fall into bigamy... I do not scandalize at all. I have only pity on you! But these are misfortunes for which the respect which you owe to yourself no longer exists in your mind. You have lost it to the notion... In any case, whether this is true, or false as I hope, do not count on me to the Jury of the Critics' Prize. I will pray for you, be sure of it!... The splendid weather it does! And all the horrors brought to us by the morning news! One does not even have the leisure to contemplate these doves!... I had to go to Venice for the Biennale... But Algiers !... and these sadists of the *Modern Times!*... God is hiding!

I bowed without taking the hand that he held out to me, looking away, for how to shake hands with a flying saucer? I was quite ignorant that I had been nominated among the candidates for the Critics' Prize. But that the flying saucer, from which I avoided the approaches, had insinuated this detail according to my conjugal life; that this formidable apparatus, with which I no longer had the shadow of a report, might have had echoes of what was still only an absurd apprehension in me—that fell upon me like a warning from heaven: precisely the sky had been able to choose better than the flying saucer whose condescension towards me would make me positively deaf and blind. And seeing Merlin by the side of the Cafe de la Mairie from afar, I hastened to inform him of this extraordinary incident. From whom had the vexed governess known anything of this kind, which could have sweated to her? Merlin explained it to me at once. The Jury of the Critics' Prize had met for the first time this morning, and among the members present was N. Or N. had seen U. the day before, perhaps with Roberte, added Merlin. And of course in the air, it had resulted in the matter of what I had just heard. Merlin did not insist otherwise on the merits.

—It's a tall story from U., he said. I also regretted that you called him

to play the role of the colossus, whereas the role of Roberte is not at the point.

And he inquired of her, and asked me what had happened to Jerome. He learned without surprise that Roberte had accompanied him to Savoy. Telephoning to the aerial seemed superfluous.

To see him also take the unfolding of the adventures, I quietened for a few moments. He wanted to talk about something else, and I was afraid I would bother him if I went back to the details of the night; I was somewhat ashamed to tell him of my exploration at the Hotel du Beaujolais, obviously he avoided talking about Guy, so I renounced mentioning the red room—this labyrinth cut me the stain, and I could find words to express more and more inconsistent assumptions—so much so that I wondered why I had been so anxious to see him again, since I had nothing more to say to him. In spite of my embarrassment, I was afraid that he would leave me, but he had a long habit of following the thought of the other even in silence.

He then proposed to accompany me to friends who, on the other side of the boulevard, lived at the Court of Rohan.

— Besides, you saw them for a moment yesterday evening.

And as I assured him not to remember him, except from a silent personage whose presence I did not explain amongst us, he said to me:

— But precisely, it is he that I must go to see. He has a comedy to propose to me.

We entered the passage du Commerce in the direction of Saint-André-des-Arts, but towards the middle of the passage, leaving to the left the hotel where Sainte-Beuve lived, we discovered, on the right, a small silent court, tiles of old and high crosses, and, by a vault, debouched on two other more extensive courts adjoining the gardens of Lycee Fenelon. Here we climbed a portico on the right, the gates of which were surmounted by an old lantern—an enchanting place, entirely made up of the high facades of old private mansions of the eighteenth century. We climbed the stairs to the second floor. To the left, the door was ajar, a door

concealed the entrance to the apartment. Merlin stopped on this landing. I leaned out of the window of the staircase, and beneath the vine hanging down the walls, through the opening of an open window on the side, I saw Guy's profile. He spoke sometimes low, sometimes strong enough. I backed away.

Merlin was about to strike, and I detained him.

— Wait, I whispered, Guy is there. How boring! You see that he is doing very well. Listen, then!

Merlin stood there.

“...And suddenly...” — Guy's voice was shrill — “...she's in her corset!...”

The rest was covered by shouts of a nasal male voice and another, feminine, whose stamp passed me literally.

The nasal voice: “If you thus begin your stay in Paris...” And the feminine voice finished: “...you will be completely slammed before three days!”

Merlin however had struck. The door was lifted; the angular-looking Slavic-looking man appeared, and with excessively ceremonious gestures, almost shouted at us, then fixed me, stiffened a little, and held out my hand. Merlin introduced us. It was K., the author of the article on the Hotel de Longchamp, of which U. had read to us some fragments the evening before dinner. I was embarrassed, for in spite of the entreaties of Merlin I had not been able to decide to read his work on the present chances of practicing Fourier's ideas concerning the polyandry of women.

Guy, seeing us in, did not give me time to inquire about his condition, and, turning over the roles, said to me:

— Old man, how pale you are this morning! Why did not you wait for us at Beaujolais just now?

And almost immediately he turned his back, his hands in his pockets, and began to pace the vast room on the beamed ceiling.

I remained nailed to the spot.

Merlin had gone to a door at the back apparently giving onto a sec-

ond room. He was probably talking with K's wife. The latter put away large-format photographs. There was one, fixed to the wall, which should have served to illustrate his article, and as I approached to examine it:

— We are very close, do you know? he began, but what I am trying to render, you have expressed it with so much more means, how shall I say ...anagogical...

Guy, turned towards the window, stammered by himself: "...anagogical, anagogical..."

I had remained in suspense, turning away my eyes from the photograph which had already amazed me, but before looking at it more closely, I considered K. to finish his sentence on our supposed affinities when at the bottom of the room I saw passing through the door, resting on Merlin's shoulders with her hands, two long hands pushing her into the large room, and suddenly Merlin called me. K. had approached.

— Valentine, my wife, he said.

I could hardly overcome a violent vertigo.

She did not lose countenance. Seemingly, while leaning slightly to the side, looking at me from the corner of my eye:

— It's really you! she says. It was impossible to get along last night! I hate coffee terraces right now. All the night they thought they saw paratroopers coming down from the roofs!

Merlin and K. spoke of the chances of a general strike. Guy was indignant at their words; the man of the 18th of June was going to put an end to the verbiage, to put reason to the French of Algeria, to impose on the Fellaghas... But I could not hear any longer.

— Explain yourself! I shouted, fixing the so-called Valentine K. Explain yourself now!

She raised her hand to her neck, began to blush and, in a slightly trembling voice:

— I've seen too many! she continued, "I have seen too much!"... I believe it more to nothing!

— And I do not believe in anything, I said, either to the aerial or to

Jerome, or to your paper this morning.

She looked in turn at K., Merlin, then Guy, who remained at the window and gazed at the courtyard.

K. took a step towards me, saying:

— My wife is absolutely at a distance from any conspiracy for or against.

He also thought that we were talking about agitation and that Jerome was the name of some sort of liaison agent. As for the morning paper, he supposed it to be some newsletter, and that the evolution of the crisis had put me in the state of exasperation into which he saw me. He should have put me at the door, but taking me for a nut, he waited politely in silence for my rage to fall. I was far from being angry with him. On the contrary, I would have even embraced him to know how to live with her. But this was not the time to demonstrate that.

— Well, put the red room at your disposal, I said suddenly, with more calm.

The alleged Mme. K. lowered her eyes, but K., either anxiety for his wife, or curiosity, inquired:

— A room... for meetings?

I made a frantic gesture with both arms, my mouth open, the gesture of both greeting and wanting to appease, like an idiot trying to signify something without words, and I slipped behind while Mme. K. was laughing in the same cascaded laugh that I had perceived yesterday at the terrace of the cafe, as Roberte had the secret of it. Standing at the ramp I went down the stairs, rage in my heart. Guy had rushed after me.

— What took you? He asked.

— I do not want to see you any more, I said. You came to Paris to destroy me.

— What are you saying? he said, staying on the landing. Me, you destroy! I who always called you daredevil!

Merlin shook K.'s wife's hand, while Guy went home, shrugging.

Descended in haste to follow me, Merlin stopped me on the steps of

the steps:

— But, finally, Theodore, why this attitude? K. wondered if he had vexed you.

— Vexed, I said, vexed! but you do not understand what is going on! And photography?... What an idea to have made me go up to... them! Since when do you see Roberte living with K.? Let her do what she pleases, but at least have the probity of warning me! She knows all too well that I grant her complete freedom! But to ridicule myself in this way!...

Merlin grabbed me under the arm and raised his head. From the window, Valentine K. was still throwing her: “To-night! “

She looked towards the Rue du Jardinets, where a young boy entered the courtyard.

— Come on, hurry! she cried.

The child ran to meet Merlin.

— Jerome! You too! But what are you doing here? I shouted as much as I could. And even today I would not swear it was him. But when it was only an idea, I felt none the less of the satisfaction of howling like this, as well as of the surprising idea of finding here Jerome, which would make the situation perfect.

Merlin had kissed the child.

— That’s K.’s son, he said, trying to cover my vociferations. Jerome escaped and went up the stairs. I wanted to go after him. Mrs. K. withdrew from the window.

Then Guy, crossing the child and the adjitter to climb, tumbled literally. Furious, he rushed at me.

— Old man, you’re absolutely crazy, my word! That was not enough last night!

— Where were you this morning? said I, in the red room, at Beaujoulais! With Mrs. K. on the market! And you do not shrink from taking my son away!

I shouted loudly, the concierges were coming out of their little house, windows were opening everywhere.

— I'm running to the police station! I said to the window of the K. At the police station!

— At the asylum I fear! replied Guy. And he was left with his hands in his pockets, on the steps of the steps.

Merlin dragged me in silence.

— Theodore, go and have lunch.

— Not the slightest desire, I said, to the police station at first.

And by the crossroads of Buci I reached the Rue de l'Abbaye, Merlin, at my heels, seeing me making disturbing zigzags as if I had wanted to sow it, ran behind me and repeated: "Theodore, you do not be ashamed!" And, at the sight of the police station, he succeeded in overtaking me, ready to repress me soon enough if I pretended to enter. But I no longer thought of the ridiculous remedy of which Merlin wished to avoid ridicule. On the other hand, something attracted me to the front of the bookshop of the Divan. There, indeed, were three copies of *Roberte* exhibited this evening beside those of K. on Fourier's work. This alignment, imputable to the bookseller, disguised me in myself, when suddenly I had the clear impression of having been suffering from existence as a modest candle. The title of my book seemed to me unusual, as soon as the common reflex of seizing my name remained unsuccessful. In vain did I try to decipher "Theodore Lacase," according to the characters composed on the title: inexorably, the name of K. , with the Slavonic consonances, was reconstituted and succeeded with infallible malice both on the copies of *Roberte* and on that of his work devoted to Fourier. It would take a cataclysm to engrave its meaning in my memory. There would then disappear the reasons for strolling in the district of the Palais Royal, for not having foreseen what these evil consonances were, as the name of Theodore Lacase had just disappeared.

— See! said I to Merlin, see if this does not explain this! Is it, or is it not, the name of K. that appears on these copies in place of mine?

Merlin took fright at that moment. And seeking a diversion, he suddenly remembered the intention I had had of calling Saint-Gervais in

the afternoon to make sure that Roberte had landed there with Jerome without a hitch. There was no reason to do so. But after my behavior at the K.'s, which he had no reason to foresee, no longer knowing whether I was consciously obstinately disowning, or whether I was wandering for good, he took me once more under his arm.

— Come on, he said, I'm starving, accompany me to the Lipp, we shall be at peace before the arrival of the others. We will talk with a rested head and call Saint-Gervais.

We seated ourselves in the hall at the back of the brewery, from which we could observe the persons who entered.

— It never happened! I said. Admit it's her!

— And if I told you that it was she, indeed, retorted Merlin, it would stop at once to interest you!

— There was also a piano among the K's, I remarked. It was I believe the same score of Haydn, that Guy's supposed fainting prevented you from finishing...

— Error, with Valentine K. I play the Schubert.

— A strange sensation that to see suddenly accomplish the gesture worrying and desired however, on the part of the person least able to decide it under pain of disavowing at the same time...

— So you are perfectly reassured, Theodore!

And Merlin leafed through the manuscript that K. had entrusted to him. He whispered in a low voice:

— Art leaves me indifferent, unsatisfied. My corruption is too far advanced for the word to heal the evil. I do not know where, with the soul, has been able to pass the spiritual health proper to sustain itself with such kind of nourishment there... the eyes of the soul are insatiable as long as they have not found their object. insatiable in the absence of the vision that the ubiquity of the body of Violette must constitute somewhere...

Merlin broke off.

— How can she maintain her identity if she remains an unknown for who owns it for the first time? Does not she forget what she is under her

own eyes...

I murmured in this way, mingling my words with the text that Merlin had just read and which I had only followed with one ear.

Merlin pushed the manuscript back and lit a pipe. He had just finished his meal.

— It's interesting? I asked.

And, seeing the pendulum hanging from the vault, I jumped. It was sixteen o'clock. The panorama of Saint-Gervais spread before my eyes.

— It's unplayable, Merlin said.

— Violette... she's called Violette, K's wife?

— Valentine...

— Do you see them often?

— Yesterday evening you were not so upset while you were talking with her, I did not think then that it was for the first time!

— How?

— I would not have taken you home this morning.

— Obviously it was not for the first time!

— Yesterday evening, you were talking about Guy with Valentine K. normally...

— With Valentine K.? She complained that she had been interrupted in four-hands with you by the intrusion of Guy, which had just happened to us...

— No report! At home, Roberte was frightened of Guy's fainting while we were executing the Haydn...

— On the terrace of the cafe, Roberte spoke louder than everyone else until...

— Valentine, I tell you, Valentine! When we left the pharmacy at night with the medicines claimed by Roberte for Guy, seeing us in front of the coffee-tobacco terrace, there, near Madison, Valentine called us by Dulaure...

— And then the quest that your alleged Valentine K. has improvised?

— Valentine is part of a committee of democratic vigilance ...

— What? “For hidden miseries!” she repeated, as my Salvator of *Roberte* does when she seeks the work of Pastor L.—Is this the formula of a committee of vigilance?...

— Perhaps it’s because of the situation...

— And the incident with the redhead and parachutists? What about the police?

But I did not mention Leon.

— ...We had to smell some clandestine activity, K. had advised against Valentine. On this side she has more guts than him, he’s a funky, but he’s right besides...

— I understand! He does not want to compromise himself on the political plane, even if he is to maroon in the shadows...

— Theodore, shut up!

— Well what? You say he’s a coward? He does not shrink from assuming the title of my books...

— *Violette* or an evening in Harmony, is the subject of his play, here, quite unplayable.

Should I or should I not burst? It was the moment or never! But if I discovered myself too early, I risk losing *Roberte* altogether. Merlin was absolutely in good faith. He did not suspect anything, at least not of the mistake *Roberte* made him commit. It was not evidently on the copies of *Roberte* that I had seen the name of K. My protest would have been ridiculous and vain. K., or any publisher other than mine, would have risked such a gross falsification. Thus Merlin attributed to a movement of humor rather than delirium my indignant words at the front of the “Divan”. But *Violette* was precisely a work of my own, still in draft form... It was a copy of my notes more or less elaborate, more or less retouched by K. that the latter had handed over to Merlin: the novel he had derived from it was unknown to me, had just appeared; the dramatic version was merely a recast, dialogue, of my drafts... It was an earlier draft to *Roberte* tonight, dating three to four years. And while Merlin, frankly and honestly, was defending K. and his pretended woman, he did not realize that he

had the document under his hand that alone sustained the most horrible suspicion.

— It's a shy K, you should have talked to him more.

— A shy one! His article on the Hotel de Longchamp? A shy shy! You invent, Merlin, you cover your friends, it is to your honor! A moment ago I saw, as I see you now, my own book under his name, just as I saw Jerome climbing into their apartment... joining his mother who is waiting for you tonight to resume the four- hands... on the piano of K.!

— Still, you have noticed this piano where we play the Schubert... but to confuse their son with yours is still violent! Leave the children out of play! Remove yours! When they have so much trouble with theirs!

— But it is entirely in the “harmonious” manners! With Jerome and more, and all the possible children of Violette, Valentine, or Roberte, all the less taxes... and say that Guy became their accomplice!

— Guy probably wanted to avoid the worst...

Then, unable to contain myself more, I explained the word of Roberte left in the morning at my bedside.

— Well, said Merlin, calmly, after having studied it by munching the end of his pipe, have you gone to see the red room? Were you sure she was there with Guy? You recognized his voice! How, you did not expect them? But what are you doing?

— This word is not unusual for you?

— No, Roberte thinks of everything! Lately she had a piano placed there for me.

— You too were in the red room?

— I played there for an hour yesterday before coming to you for the rehearsal.

— She did not tell me!

— Do not you like it?

— No, it's the opposite.

— She really thinks about everything!

— That's why she says nothing to me! You remember, I think, you had

taken a look at the living room, before I entered it, you had to see her on the couch, where she had fallen asleep, waiting for us...

Merlin just smiled.

— And then, I added, you have retired on tiptoe for fear of waking her. If you had stayed a moment longer to see this face that expressed I know not what disappointment...

— I saw nothing, he said suddenly, there was no one in the drawing-room.

— You're lying, Merlin! I said—and it seemed to me that everything was still flickering around me—impossible that you did not see Roberte sleeping on the couch.

He denied again.

At this point, Lipp's manager informed me that I would have communication with Saint-Gervais within ten minutes.

But I wanted to change places, for while we spoke in this way, I saw K. and U. enter, who, seeing Merlin alone at the table I had just left, approached.

K. seemed unable to keep up with agitation. I took the opportunity to go down to the basement and locked myself in the intercity cabin.

At the end of the line, the director of the aerial told me that Jerome had arrived with his group.

— With his mother? I asked anxiously.

But the headmistress had not seen her. She inquired and, a few seconds later, told me that a lady had indeed accompanied Jerome. However, she had not appeared, perhaps she had returned to her hotel. At that very hour the child was in the refectory. I was told to call in the evening. This lady was to return at about eight o'clock.

Going up from the basement, I stopped short of the level of the room and made a sign to Merlin. He leaned over the railing to tell me that K was looking for Valentine. He had just had a frightful scene with her shortly after our departure. She would have suddenly saved herself from home, he would have spun her off, and if she believed she would have gone to

their common friend, Dr. Ygdrasil. Now K. wanted to talk to me. Merlin had barely finished whispering to me that K. was approaching the staircase leading to the basement. But at once I went down the steps to hide myself in a cabin. Merlin did not reveal my presence. I heard them exchange a few words, then K. rushed into a telephone booth, next to mine.

— Is the doctor there? I heard him cry out so much that I could follow the conversation almost.

No doubt he spoke to Ygdrasil.

— Hold it! Lock her up if necessary, until I come!

Then he went back in haste. At first I dared not move; cautiously, I climbed a few steps. Merlin, again alone at our table, was reading. Then, from the upper floor of the brewery, slowly descending the staircase, the slender waist, molded in a Scottish dress, the Valentine K. appeared, face with a peremptory regularity, casting furtive glances in the room of the ground floor. Then, spotting Merlin, she slipped, like a rattlesnake, and, leaning toward him, made her jump literally.

I knew very well that if I stayed there, if she saw me in her turn, something was going to happen, not in common with what the others were feverishly commenting then. I could only see her from behind. She straightened up, and as she spoke to Merlin, who had got up and saw me watching her, she moved closer to the basement ramp. But courage abandoned me. I had the idea of going into the cabin and pretending a conversation on the phone, keeping the door ajar. I said as she walked down the stairs. Has the hut returned to the air? The Valentine K. locked up in a toilet, came out after a few seconds, and lingered in front of the sink. But almost immediately the telephone set, which had until then been powerless, sounded furiously. From above, the manager shouted: "Monsieur Lacase, you are asked for Saint-Gervais!" And I shook my head. "Hello! Hello!" And it was the same timbre of voice which, in the morning at Beaujolais, had whispered in my ear, and later at the Court of Rohan: "Hello, hello... is it you, Theodore?—Yes, I said, is it really you, Roberte?—All is well here, said the voice; What has been new since

this morning?...—We'll talk about it when you get back... come back soon!—See you Saturday!—Is Jerome happy?... But already the voice had resumed: "Hello, hello!... is it you, Theodore?" And as I repeated: "Yes, Roberte, you can not hear me?" The voice went on without interrupting: "All is well here; What has been new since this morning?" I did not want to hang up at once, but I still listened: "See you Saturday!" I was silent, and the same voice resumed: "Hello, hello! is it you, Theodore? Everything's fine here, what's new ... "

Behind me, however, I could hear the sound of the heels of Valentine K., advancing, retreating in front of the mirror. And, opening the door wide open, I saw her, her abundant brown hair falling to the waist, her long fingers lacing braids, a hairpin between her lips. And as I passed her, she turned her head to my side, and with her blue eye beneath her lowered eyebrow, gave me a simple smile. Then, looking at herself again in the mirror, she crowned herself with her braids.

VII

When I awoke, I seemed to recognize Guy, sitting on the edge of the divan. At first I thought my dreams were prolonged; sometimes I saw only the back of his head, sometimes his eye spied over my shoulder. And as I met his gaze, all my incomprehensible situation occurred to my mind. Then, turning to me completely, looking anxiously, "Theodore, I must speak to you," he said very softly.

And suddenly I felt relieved. No, it was not Merlin who could get me out of my perplexities, Merlin was too much of my unavowable improvisations. Guy, at the origin of this nightmare, would doubtless dispel it. I put my hand on his to make him understand that, reconciled, I listened.

— Theodore, we spent the whole of yesterday preventing Ygdrasil from getting you interned.

— Ygdrasil? And why had he prevented it? Besides, where would this praiseworthy intention come from?

— ...You have already forgotten the scandal you made yesterday morning at the K. What misfortune for you that your friend Merlin brought you there!

— And yourself, what were you doing there?

— I was trying to prevent the worst companies against you! I have known the K. for years, more than once I have received them at home

in the Dordogne. An insignificant couple, if they were not evil and perverse. For Heaven's sake, Theodore, listen to me well: do not joke with this woman!

— To joke?!...

Again he resumed his nagging method of yesterday. I wanted to drive him away. But I had the strength to reply almost in a low voice:

— What other woman than Roberte?

— It is a terrible instrument in the guise of candor. They have abused you shamefully for years! K., who is only a creature of Ygdrasil, is jealous of you, your book, your own wife; he only thinks of showing off his own, and he has succeeded in imposing it on you.

— What? But how, how?

— How? With the consent of yours, of course, of the “salvist”, who, for the sake of sacrifice, disappears... at the right moment.

— With the consent of Roberte?

— But it is not Roberte, the one you persist in naming Roberte! It is indeed K.'s wife who, under this name, spends her afternoons with her friend Gilberte on dog shows, horticultural exhibitions, dressmakers' presentations, manicures, beauty institutes—with what money rest?—and which not only lends itself to the rehearsals of your unplayable play, but still surrenders itself to all who come ... not at all in your order of ideas, poor Theodore, but otherwise constrained—the wretch!...

— So Roberte knew your friend K. for a long time?

— ...no, not him at first, but the woman he married... he who, unfortunately, has the same tastes as you.

— The same tastes!?

— Oh yes! your “laws of hospitality”... formula that he stole from you in his book.

— What? In his book? It does not exist! Nor a second woman in all resembling Roberte to substitute for her on occasion!

— You do not want to believe the only friend you have, Theodore!

— ...The only friend!... the friend of the “eternal feminine,” I said, and I

am amused for a moment.

— Yes, I am not a saint, Theodore, I have allowed myself to be caught up to your play, to your laws, like yourself, who have been lamentably victimized to-day.

— What proof, said I, in a last burst of common sense, what proof will you give me to sustain such an unthinkable adventure?

— To advocate the laws of hospitality as you do is one thing; engendering a son is another; but to exercise paternal rights in the atmosphere of such laws is an unthinkable thing.

— Which report?

— However, your son, this last reality that remains to you, Theodore, your son knows which is his mother, he alone will tell you.

— Nothing would be less certain, I say, if what you say there is true...

— Alas, Theodore, it is so true that your son has been removed from you solely for this purpose.

— Distant? Roberte would have put Jerome in an aerial position to lend himself to such a maneuver? Guy, are not you ashamed to talk with such nonsense in the state I am in?

Suddenly, the strange encounter with the child whom Merlin had embraced and told me to be the son of the K., all came back to me, as well as my phone call to Saint-Gervais, arrival of Jerome in Savoy.

— See where you came from, Theodore, said Guy sadly, you have lost even the instinctive certainty of recognizing your son.

— So, why did you stop me yesterday morning from taking him back?...

— You did not think about it seriously, Theodore, you were simply annoyed to find him at the K.

For a second we looked at each other's eyes.

— The laws of hospitality, you deny them, Theodore?...

— She claims to have had it from another, perhaps?...

— Finally, Theodore, you surprise me! When one has the nerve to flout the family institutions, one also bears the consequences, sacrebleu!

Do not slander Roberte now!

— And why would she return to K.?

— She hides better so... now that she is being prosecuted...

— From... prosecutions?...

— ...for having made her first husband pass for death!

— How? What? Roberte would not have been a widow, as many clues proved?

— Again, Theodore, I'm talking about K's wife!

— But then, it does not stick at all, what you say! When I became acquainted with Roberte, I knew she was a war widow, and she still bore the alliance of her first marriage with Commandant D. when I saw her for the first time in her quest for a Salvationist, remember that sometimes we talked about these details... And because the alleged wife of K. would also have been so, you will not insinuate...

— It is not at all a coincidence, Theodore, but of pure illusion on your part, cleverly maintained! The day after your marriage, when you thought you were living with your wife, it was not with the little Salvationist, the goddaughter of the illustrious old man, as we all also believed then, but with this adventuress, the pernicious widow of Dr. Rodin...

— The day after my marriage? When? What year?

And the first days of our conjugal life were slowly passing through my mind. The apartment left Roberte, our various residences, travel, return to my apartment in Saint-Sulpice...

— The second time you came to us in the Dordogne, with Roberte. Remember the singular turn of my wife towards him that I myself did not explain. But when you were settled, and I made a second stay with you, I had already understood.

This was the occasion of the fortnight of June, when, four years before, he had passed with Ygdrasil and H. And as he saw me pensive, he launched a retrospective survey:

— K., the perverted child, who had just been released by Ygdrasil, who had subjected him to the most fantastic treatment at the end of the

seminary, K. fell on the doctor's secretary, the beautiful Mrs. Rodin, and, unaware of herself, he was initiated into the secrets of her widowhood. And nothing more was needed for this incurable morbid defrocked man to propose to marry her, already informed about the fraud committed with the charitable complicity of your "salvationist"...

— And when did this complicity come about?

— Ever since they had frequented their network of resistance.

Resistance networks! That was Guy's *tote*. But he spoke here not without experience. His apparent inactivity during the "dark years", which he had lived in his property in the Dordogne, covered a privileged position as an observer. Thanks to family ramifications in the magistracy, the army and the teaching, he had secure antennae. But since then he has been abusing such references to want to elucidate the actions of various persons in obscure circumstances.

— No one will ever write or dare to write the complete history of networks! And it is not finished, you see, these are now spare individuals, women as well as men, for all the possible blows, as all this is agitated again about Algiers, for or against, we no longer recognize each other! Victims of the Gestapo yesterday, executioners of the Democrats today! And the masochistic reflexes of the latter, orchestrated by the school of Chartres!

I shut up. During the first years of our common life, I had endeavored as much as possible to deafen Roberte, gradually, the last resonances of the world of horrors in which his generous heart had beaten in unison with sufferings and desperate undertakings, but the ordeal had none the less inflected his temperament to the point of stiffening his young nature somewhat. And all the same the blossoming of the woman in her had triumphed. Guy's general considerations, justified as they might be, would be a pleasure to apply them to certain folds of Roberte's earlier life that I had deliberately left behind in the shadows. And only my state of depression could make me want the most frightening deductions.

— But of whom do you hold all this? Of K.? Does he think you are

your friend, of you who tell me it is worse than hanging? If he has your confidence, is he himself worthy of faith? Or would you have assisted the companies in a third party?

— Far from it, neither have I seen anything before, nor has it ever told me anything. In front of him, I always pretend to believe that Valentine, the ex-Rodin, is normally his wife.

— ...normally his wife, what do you mean?

— ...when it does not replace yours, parbleu! in your “rehearsals”!

— And how could you not have let me hear, V, what you say you understood at that moment?

— A V? But you do not think of it! You had invited Ygdrasil with whom I was almost blurred then. Ygdrasil had thrown K. into Madame Rodin’s arms. This one was in your house under the name of your wife, who must have retired, and for good reason! I thought you all agreed together!

— But who told you that this supposed usurper was the widow of Doctor Rodin?

— Ygdrasil told him to H. And H., before their departure, made me understand. What then happened? Did Mrs. Rodin leave with them to give way, again, to Roberte? Anyway, when, a few days later, your wife, at your request, read us your manuscript of *Roberte* tonight, I did not know what to do.

Indeed, I remembered this evening, in the green room of our pavilion, V. Guy was basking in a chair, observing Roberte’s features as she read in a collegial tone, which she had believed to adopt for this reading. Guy had a good memory. Even the signals that the window of Ygdrasil had made to H., sitting in the garden with me on that distant morning in June, he mentioned them very imprudently. But were not these signals simply meant for him?

— But neither Y. nor H. could have known then that she was only a false widow?

— K. alone knew Rodin alive, whom he knew at the end of ‘44 during

his seminary period, either at Lyons or at Grenoble, more exactly at La Tronche, where Doctor Rodin had come to make a retreat. It was on the eve of the terrible affair of the Vercors.

— But let's not go back so far, please. K. never told you about it, you said. How is all this bursting to-day, so that you may report it yourself with so much assurance, in the grave perplexity in which you see me?

— Theodore, a little more than two months ago, I had come to Paris with a gust of wind, with the intention of staying there for only two or three days, a fifteenth, I did not come to see you. You who are the first among them; I usually land! It was the first time I ever had, and Roberte and you were quite annoyed.

— Upset? No, we only learned later your stay and as you had not announced...

— In any case, Lise has strongly reproached me, when she did not know why. As for you writing it, it could not be either, you would have thought that I invented...

— And now you do not invent...

— Alas! Theodore, the extraordinary discovery that I have then, is it my fault if it concerns you! Otherwise, I would have gone there right away...

— Over there?

— Do you think I would have advanced anything that JC said just now if... Lise...

— Lise? Is Lise aware?...

— I tell her everything. And then she made me swear that this time I would talk to you...

— From this discovery? But you just have to read...

VIII

— ...You know that I regularly go to one of my booksellers at the Choiseul passage to exchange rare editions. During this previous stay in Paris, one afternoon, I came to bring him a princeps of the Baron de Feneneste to swap that d'Aubigne for an almost unreachable Aretino. My second-hand bookkeeper took the dates back, compared, evaluated. Very embarrassed, he hesitated to satisfy me, having promised an old customer who was waiting there, seated in a corner, to resell very dearly his Aretino for which he had already received a deposit. Without much hope I had to attempt a transaction. I went to the old bibliophile, whom the book-seller introduced to me under the name of Doctor Laurence. He examined the copies, both courteous and distant, when the bookseller, looking out, said to him, "I believe, doctor, that here is much better!" K's wife had stopped in the storefront and was looking inside. Truly, the last person I expected to meet there, and, besides, annoyed, for I had an appointment in the evening at their house, and I did not want them to know that I had been at my bookseller's. I owed money to K. who knew that I was ruining myself there rather than getting a profit from it, and I was planning on tapping them again that evening to prolong my stay. So, as soon as I recognized him, I hid behind the back shelves. What was not my surprise to hear the V. K. enter and the two men salute her by giving

her: "Well, beauty! Well, my little one!" After which it seemed to me that we were going to a neighboring room, the door of which was open. The bookseller had returned to his office, but for a moment I had been following the conversation between my old client and the V. K. Apparently she was complaining that she had been summoned by him to this place. All I could hear was an extinguished or broken voice. K. lowered the tone a little, then there was a burst of laughter, and finally a few short moans. "Stop him, but not in my name!" I realized that here again, there was talk of money. She was silent, it was he who was talking, with some coughing. Then she asked humorously: "Less than sixteen?" All the same, and after a last sigh: "You exaggerate, but since it is necessary, let us go and speak no more of it."

"On a little staircase in a snail, she passed on to the upper floor: an oval piece, which my bookseller had shown me one day, panels and mirrors of Venice, Directoire furniture, a bed carved with draperies, in an alcove, lamps with globes in opaline, all to delight. I heard a door slamming.

"Thinking she had had the curiosity to see this installation, I did not try to understand more and asked the book-keeper where his old customer had gone. He shrugged and told me I had fallen bad that day, as Dr. Laurence was not in the mood to cede his Aretino for half the price envisaged and not wanting to compensate for the rest by acquiring my Agrippa d'Aubigné. He proposed to give him an option on this copy: as soon as he had an amateur for the latter, he would pay Dr. Laurence two-thirds of it, and in the meantime he would keep the Arétin for sale. I saw that the operation was lost and begged him to confide to me, at least for a few days, this precious volume. He consented to it only on condition that I signed an acknowledgment of debt which he would hand over to Dr. Laurence. Then he asked me if, to change, I did not want to attend a "stereoscope" session. He opened under the staircase a tiny cabinet, and placed it in front of an apparatus, which, thanks to an arrangement of mirrors...

—Guy, let's get to the point! I said, impatient to see him dwelling on

so many preliminary details.

— ...which, thanks to an arrangement of mirrors, reflected everything that was happening above, in the small living room... I was far from thinking that it would show me anything other than old daguerreotypes. Well, not only was it not, but I saw K's wife in all her magnificent effrontery. Naked, wearing an otter or beaver cap, like Davy Crockett, whose tail caressed her shoulders and her breasts, she had her hunting-gun snatched by three boys disguised as Redskins; one of them held her in the face, while she gave herself at the earliest. Still, she merited, copiously the sum that had just been advanced. She did not leave it. Undoubtedly she received on that day something extravagant, a costly dress, or enough to allow K. to daydream for six months, to live beyond their means.

— But I still do not see where you find the trace of old Rodin?...

— The same evening I went to dine with the K's. There were at least ten people arriving one after the other—enough to put me in a ball! Can not place a word. The K. of an imperturbable insurance. Himself taciturn until the moment when they all begged him to read to them his new piece: *Violette or an evening in Harmony*. I retire to a corner, determined to spin at the first opportunity, in spite of my need for money, but scarcely have I listened absent-mindedly to the first passages, that something forces me to listen: what it begins to read, seems to me, word for word, I tell you, the decal of your *Roberte ce soir*, and thus, for a follower of Fourier such as K. who advocates the pooling of women, a paradoxical creation. The scene takes place at the time of Louis Philippe, and your professor Octave appears there in the guise of a certain Gerfaut, a sort of charlatan, a secret agent of the government of the day, and charged with spying on a pretended phalanstery where reigns the free exchange of men and women, divided by classes of temperaments. So, in order to dissolve this community—as if it had ever existed! Gerfaut introduced an adventurer to his orders, and managed to disrupt the rules of the strange house by the following procedure: Gerfaut creates a new “class”, that of the “contemplatives”, by organizing sessions where Violette, the adventurer,

engages his own body in “magic operations.” Such a spectacle, which unfolds with all the preparations of a mysterious cult, throws the men of the phalanstery into such ecstasy that, finally, the class of “contemplatives” prevails in number over the other “classes,” so much so that, taken at his own game, Gerfaut will inaugurate a phalanstery where reigns as a perverse chastity based on this visual attraction, when it is denounced to the police by Violette, and arrested as a conspirator, & c.

In recounting the argument of K.’s play, Guy had only recounted my own work left in the draft state, and the manuscript, which had fallen into the hands of K., had enabled him to make know what wandering monstrosity. But this was not the time to interrupt Guy, to point out to him.

IX

— So, he went on, something smoky—if not this idea of vision and that he had to steal from somebody—a flabby text, frankly bad, but which, as for situations, I guessed at once, is a clever transposition of incidents borrowed from the previous life of K's wife. While the others chuckle while listening to K. thundering, his wife comes into the darkness to slip an envelope sealed, bearing: "To Guy, to open, at his house." Returning to the hotel, I remove a check from the envelope to the order of... you guess?...

— I expect everything.

— ...to the order of Mme Theodore Lacase!

— Well, I said, trembling slightly, if we must believe you, if we must admit a friendship between the two women, they had some debt to settle between them. bring, at least notify Roberte... K's wife was counting on you to give it to him?... if this check existed, so worded...

— My poor Theodore! Your servant has for too long the reputation of an indelicate in your eyes! Do you think that I would have dared to make such a false step than to give this check to Roberte!—

— But how did you want to touch the sum ... she alone could endorse it beforehand...

— But it was done!

— It was done?! Who had signed for Roberte?...

— K.'s wife! She's not on her first move!

— Come on! You cut yourself, Guy! Again you make me find Roberte with K.! You're wasting your time trying to persuade me otherwise...

— Ha! perhaps, he said with an embarrassed air. Maybe... Well, I did not see either of you during this previous stay. I neglected you. A fortiori this check bearing the signature of Roberte forbade me to go see you, you understand? A funny pretext to suddenly show me at home with this document! at the moment when I was about to leave! I was stuck and thanks to K.'s wife who was still making money...

— On a false signature of Roberte!

— It was Roberte's writing. You will tell me that the K. might well have signed it in the meantime by Roberte, since it was Madame Lacase nominally the beneficiary... anyway, I could not ask your wife for proof...

— It was not acting as a friend...

— On the contrary, Theodore, you would have liked me...

— But what makes you assert that K.'s wife had falsified the signature?

— The very motive that prevented me from bringing the check to Roberte! K.'s wife had to hide the name of the shooter under pain of discovering his intention...

— Why should I point out this detail of the check, if not to insinuate that Roberte was at Choiseul's passage? You wanted to show me first that K.'s wife is Rodin's false widow—and if it was Roberte that you surprised with Dr. Laurence, I do not see any more relationship...

— You confuse everything, Theodore, you follow your idea, to you, who is: Roberte = wife of K., instead of listening, point by point, what I tell you; you would like it to be Roberte that I have contemplated by the stereoscope, of course! Alas! I liked K.'s wife that day, as for Roberte, I only saw the signature on this check that evening K.'s wife. Is that clear?

— No, I said in a low voice. Doctor Laurence...

— But there! This brazen woman—I speak of K.—and I still hear it today, had said to Laurence: “Barre it, but not in my name!...” And it must

be believed that at that moment she was actually thinking of establishing some link between the name of Roberte and that of Dr. Laurence by making the beneficiary of this sum of five hundred thousand francs...

— Five hundred thousand francs? I said, and you went touch it?

X

— The next day I went to the bank, a counter on the Boulevard Haussmann, which she had indicated to me, where I was to pay two-thirds of it, and keep the rest after the operation. The annoying thing is that I still had to wait so long. But scarcely was I going to approach the wicket that I saw there, guess who? Dr. Ygdrasil. That was his bank. Everything was explained, he had opened a county to him, in which, under the name of Madame Rodin, she was his secretary.

— So it was not the bank where Dr. Laurence's check was payable? Where was he?

— You ask me too much, I forgot...

— You had a way to go back to the source...

— I did not care much about where the old bibliophile had his bank. But there was Ygdrasil there, we had been on bad terms for a long time, as you know, and, besides, I was embarrassed to see him there, holding my check to your wife's order questions, checks...

— You had only to fold it... You were burning with desire to show it to him...

— ...No, but the temptation was strong, because we might talk about you...

— ...and you could not be silent...

— Thinking of delaying the operation for a quarter of an hour, I turned around, but when I came back he was going out and we found ourselves face to face. “Hello, Savigny!” cried he, in a most affable tone. Believing that too many years have passed since our old disputes, I let myself shake hands. He wants to make me understand that, strengthened by his position in the psychiatric world, he is now too comfortable not to smile with serenity of the contempt I showed him in the past. Nevertheless, this position has limits, and it can not neglect me altogether. So, when I speak, I go to the wicket, he tells me that he will wait for me and sit on a bench. Then comes the catastrophe. The employee turns and returns the check, goes to a department head, submits the check and returns, while the chief shouts: “Mrs Rodin must reopen a new account...” Then he leaves “You understand, for such a sum... Madame... how... Lacase..., etc., etc.” Impossible that Ygdrasil did not hear. Now, Ygdrasil comes before me and we are out, and after asking myself how long I stay in Paris, he invites me to take a stroke at the Cafe de la Paix, and as we go along he speaks about the events who threatened, and, once seated at the terrace of the cafe, inquired whether I was still in contact with my cousin Savigny, the Procureur de la Republique, and this question was only to be explained towards the end of the “So, you saw the K., of course, and also the Lacase?” Was it or not an allusion to the of the check, I was not sure. I answered a little abruptly that I did not see you, that I would probably not have time to see you. “Blurred? - No why? When did you see the K’s?” And “It’s okay. You do not think?” And little by little he leaves his concern about her, he remains attached to her, declares himself responsible for the fate of this girl, goes so far as to express regrets for having once tolerated his union with K. And to mention the visit we had made to you at V.—I had not seen him since then—and to entrust to me the strange question that K. would have asked him a little before, even pushing him to go to see in your house what it was like about the bewildering resemblance between his own wife and yours, which K. had never met, not even knowing who you were yourself. And he dares to confess that when he had come to

V., there was no doubt: your wife was indeed her former secretary, and therefore the widow of Rodin. He thought then that you were in the act, that K. had made fun of him, or that, following an arrangement between you, Theodore, the wife of K. and Roberte, the latter was replaced by it to satisfy your fantasies. He could not explain otherwise the presence of K.'s wife in your house, since the one you presented to her as Roberte had himself been recognized by Ygdrasil in secret. So, no more than you, he knew nothing yet about the collusion between the two women...

— You told me earlier ...

— I told you I asked myself the same question!

— You have this done by Ygdrasil.

— Go and ask him, Theodore!

— He wrote me in time, in fact, after Roberte's appearance this evening, to know from whom she was the portrait.

— And then, what did you say?

— Nothing...

— It was a mistake, Theodore, you would not be here today!

— Something told me that it was you who had pushed him to ask me the question... But we were scrambled!

— Oh, you could already be reconciled, as now! You've never quarreled with anyone for a long time, Guy! You frequent, you continue to patronize K...

— My God, Theodore, there are some chances in life that are for something in our relations with people, antipathy or sympathy can be born of less than nothing...

— In short, Ygdrasil told you about K. and his wife...

— In your context, obviously, Theodore...

— My background! It is still you who supplied it!

— Finally, he told me that K. liked to make his wife live in an atmosphere of appalling ambiguity... at first it would have been only a kind of threat... by allusions...

— But forgive me, Guy! You had to meet Ygdrasil to find out? Did

you feel anything of that atmosphere on that night when she gave you the check? Or the other morning? You were so titillated!...

— If I felt it ?! The threat was already fulfilled... everything was clear now...

— But what then? What had been accomplished?... What would he have threatened?...

— To “resuscitate” Dr. Rodin, to prove to him that his first husband was not dead, a seemingly absurd idea, that was what had been accomplished.

— And after living here with me, until then, she would have gone back to K.'s house to escape prosecution, you say? How would she escape it?

— Because until then she did not know that K. knew too, long ago, that Rodin is still alive! She thought she was alone! She was cheating on K.! She deceived Ygdrasil! And this is the confession she came to him three months ago. And she does not dare leave K. as long as she suspects him ready to denounce it...

This seemed to me to give credit to the alleged complicity between the two women. K.'s wife could no longer replace Roberte with me at the pleasure of the latter. And to give the appearance of a gap in their game, they would have imagined the departure of Jerome, and the prosecution against K.'s wife.

— Why would he denounce it? I asked, what interest?

— Of course he will not denounce it! A pure need to terrorize it! When she went to find Ygdrasil, he thought she had gone mad. And indeed, here is what she told him... Under the pretext of a crisis of osteoarthritis which she suffers since her activity in the maquis...

— You talk about Roberte! You borrow this detail from Roberte, once again!

— I simply repeat what K.'s wife went to say to Ygdrasil! Under this pretext, K. would have taken her to the office of a specialist and there they would have entrusted the V. K. to an old chiropractor. And now, under the eyes of K., who knew what he was returning, the old chiropractor

massaging the K., who had not yet suspected anything, would have begun to feel it with irrationality, without any protest from K. Moreover, K. would have eclipsed herself, and then, alone with her, while he was massaging the appauses of the K., the chiropractor would have exclaimed: “How well I know all this! How well I know all this! Who was mine! And finally: “Ah! she thought to escape the bitch...”

— What next?...

— She almost fainted...

— You do not miss an opportunity...

— Ygdrasil had the impression that K’s wife was simulating a delirious state by telling him such details. For if she said it true, the situation became alarming for her. The old chiropractor would then have promised him not to upset his existence, provided that she would undertake to join him at the places he would tell her. But he also warned her that in case the events in Algiers changed the conditions of the regime, he would have enough friends in the new government team to venture to appear in the open. To subtract the K. from the old chiropractor’s enterprises, Ygdrasil even envisioned that he would take over his former office as secretary, or even as a secretary, since he feared complications for her, and on the other hand he hesitated to have her checked by his colleagues, the identity of this old specialist, who obviously practiced under a borrowed name in the office of another. It was at this moment that Ygdrasil made me understand why he had approached me. My cousin prosecutor might not be absolutely insensitive... he must have been in possession of the file Rodin...

— The file Rodin !? What is it?

XI

— Well, there it is! Dr Rodin, a former merchant marine doctor, who was already in his sixties at the time of the war, a rich owner in the Dordogne, a rabid Murrassian, was appointed by the Vichy government to medical supervision of the young people who were leaving for the Compulsory Service Job. This old fool was then at best with the administration of Sauckel. He did not know that Roberte his young wife...

— How Roberte ??...

— Yes, know, Theodore, Roberte it was not your wife's first name... at least it's the name that's in the file..

— But my wife always called herself in her family!

— So let me continue, please! You will see at once what happened between the two women. So, Rodin, I said, did not know anything about the activities of his wife who had affiliated with a network of resistance fighters, the very one where she became friends with yours... What a frightful thing, learned and concluded the next market with her. He would declare "unfit" those whom she would recommend to him, provided that she would then indulge in each one of them in his house. It was a way of leaving her the option of choosing the boys with whom she would have the least dislike to unite, and thus to prepare them in advance if necessary. How did this happen? I knew something about it recently by

one of our farmers at B. without suspecting that one day I would know this lady in your own circle, much more like your own but false wife. Rodin, thus holding Roberte at his mercy, could then denounce the young men as she pleased, and hurried to hide them in the maquis. Exhausted, Roberte finally induced three young men to defeat him as an indicator, when the maquis began his first operations. They had to do it badly, seriously wounded him, thinking he was dead and set fire to his house. A brief but atrocious return of the Nazis allowed him to have them shot. He himself disappeared, and passed himself off as a victim of summary execution. His wife seemed no less compromised. But then your future wife, the real, the goddaughter of your illustrious master—the one we call the “salvationist”—resolved to dissipate the suspicion that spread in the network about his unhappy friend, taking advantage of his extraordinary resemblance to she devoted herself to saving Roberte’s reputation. She adopted her name, while Roberte took her own: Valentine, replaced her in the most dangerous missions, was deported on the eve of the Liberation, and returned, still under the name of Roberte, having washed it of all suspicion... That the Salvationist has passed himself out as a widow, in order to maintain the confusion of identity between the two women, would prove that she continued this strange sacrifice until the day when you met her. But no doubt, when you pretended to kill the laws of hospitality with you, that she did not decide to avoid such an innovation, by asking in her turn the help which the false widow of Rodin could not refuse him. And now that the false death has become threatening for K.’s wife, it is yours that, once again, bears all the consequences...

— But K.’s wife, knowing that Rodin was alive long before the chiropractor’s incident, had she not already met him elsewhere?...

— That, we will never know so long as the file Rodin slumber and it is to the great disappointment of my cousin the Prosecutor that Mr. wanted to classify this case. On the other hand, the K. had to sign a contract which obliges him to go to the Hotel de Longchamp every fortnight. M., he thinks he knows your wife. He is also deceived by the Roberte,

whose name covers two interchangeable women, it is quite possible. But according to the Prosecutor, who does not know that the Salvationist has become your wife, it is only the widow of Rodin, the wife of K., that M. knows. And besides, according to my cousin, M. would have instituted Longchamp only to better permit a crowd of suspected persons to silence those who would recognize them in this house. The Prosecutor, if he wants to take any initiative, is immediately blocked by the veto of M. who formally promised K.'s wife to avoid the slightest trouble. Now, in a recent investigation—you know that an investigation is never closed, materially!—my cousin the Prosecutor gathered the gossip of a former postal worker, according to which Rodin would have first delivered his wife to a certain Laurence, a colleague, who lived in his house. The young maquisards took this Laurence for Rodin, and killed him. It may therefore be that if someone was actually the victim of this summary execution ordered by Roberte, Rodin would have seized the identity papers of his companion of debauchery and impersonated the witness of his own torture.

— And you talked about it at Ygdrasil?

— If I talked to Ygdrasil about it?... Guy looked puzzled.

— What have you, Guy? You're no longer there ??

— I dare not tell you what he thinks about it...

— Do not you dare?

— Well, after all, I do not have to spare this woman...

— What to say?

— Under the seal of secrecy...

— You've already told me too much, Guy, anyway I can not avoid seeing Ygdrasil now!

— Free to you! What make the situation inextricable...

— Good! let's stay there!

— I wanted to warn you against this woman!

— That's done! You certainly did not spare it...

— It seems all the more harmful because it is led by an irresistible

curiosity to relive certain sensations!

— You've experienced it, Guy!

— No, it is Ygdrasil who said this when speaking of the organization of this girl. An irresistible curiosity to revive certain sensations...

— Ygdrasil told you about his... organization !?

— He said this because he had any doubt about the visit to the chiropractor.

— How? Is not it because of this incident that he wanted to see the Prosecutor?

Of course! But the need to revive certain sensations for the K. could corroborate the gossip of the second inquiry... If this Laurence was really a companion of debauchery to which Rodin would have delivered his wife first, it could be, according to Ygdrasil, that she has vaguely sought out this man to renew such a humiliation... What is the responsibility of K's wife? Did she only believe in the summary execution of her first frightful husband? Does not she know that someone else would have been killed in her place? And what other? Doctor Laurence? That is the perplexity of the Prosecutor. There is another factor. Your book appears. Attracted by the title, by a name that appears in his file, my cousin throws himself on it. Who is this Professor Octave with his laws of hospitality? How is it that his wife, as desired, is called Roberte? At this moment, the false death is revealed. Apprehension of my cousin: will false death make a complaint? Has not this book been dictated by the false widow to the author? And here is the upheaval of the regime will make resume to the false death of the hair of the beast. For my cousin, it would be a question of punishing the terrible couple who have played with a few young patriots, as a result of tragic circumstances - but also punishing the attempted summary execution which made an apparently innocent victim, widow is responsible. From the legal point of view, this seems paradoxical and is a matter that deserves all the more thorough consideration. Rodin, on the train where things are going, sees his risks diminishing day by day, his crime, with desperate ramifications, fades away. But the false widow, the instigator of her

failed execution, knowing him to be alive, has fallen silent: far worse, she finds herself under her thumb! So, to mislead my cousin, K. and Ygdrasil are consulting, who is being called? to your wife! to the Salvationist! my dear Theodore, she is named for K's wife, and it was she who was arrested yesterday evening.

— She was arrested... Where? When? and the scene on the terrace revived in my mind.

— You did not want to listen to me the day before yesterday, Theodore, when I warned you about your “rehearsals,” for since you had this crazy idea of staging your book, you were forcing the Salvationist who likes to appeal to this terrible girl who does not care about you ...

Here I wanted to show him the note that Roberte had written to me before his departure. However, I thought it better to remind him of his own conduct during the evening:

— Is it then with the alleged wife of K. or, according to you, with my wife, that you entered the drawing-room while we were rehearsing?

— I came in alone! he said with a startled air. K.'s wife was there, in her role as Roberte, she fled as soon as she saw me...

— On the contrary, she passed her arms around your neck, seeing you angry...

— You see, Theodore, that you could have watched this woman, playing the Roberte, but still suffer her to slap your wife.

— But at what point? I said, frightened.—At last he alluded to the horrible scene.—At what moment?

— Let's see! It was the very situation of the whole evening! It was obvious! Everyone agreed with that, except me!

— Our friends... okay?

— But of course! To finish with your “rehearsals” and finally end up with K.'s wife... which decently was impossible with yours!

— Decently! That's why you came to tell me that U. was taking “my Roberte”?

— Indeed, U. took away the wife of K...

— But then, Guy, since U had retired with this undesirable, instead of being relieved, you had then this uneasiness...

— In fact, I was sickened...

— ...to the point of having to lie down on the couch, his head resting on Roberte's knees redoubling solicitude?

— A soul so generous, mistreated in this way by this intruder, that was what upset me...

— But then, my dear Guy, what haste you had to find yourself the next morning at this intrusive woman of K.?

— A doubt had come to me in the night, he said, frowning, as if he agreed that he too could be mistaken in his calculated elucubrations, that K.'s wife's wheel might well have exchanged her role once more and persuaded Roberte to replace her with K. And I wanted to have a clear heart.

— Net or not, I said, pointing to Hoberte's note, can not have been written by one of the two women, borrowing his manner from the other?

— Theodore, said he, handing it over to me, the confession I am about to make to you will confirm, I think, all that I have just related. I know that for years you have been angry with me for my attitude towards your Roberte. Do not you see that you put an old friend such as me to torture by making him adopt the ways of living in your house? Even if I had acted only to sanction your strange conceptions? Yes, Theodore, I possessed the woman you thought was your wife, knowing at the time that she was not! Letting you believe that I was betraying you, since it was in your eyes the only way to pay homage to him as if to flatter your tastes! But these are so repugnant to me that I should never have made up my mind, had I known beforehand that your own wife had given me such largesse!

XII

That Dr. Ygdrasil might have thus contravened the professional secrecy to speak of K.'s wife in such terms, and that to Guy de Savigny, with whom he was scarcely reconciled, was, at the very least, lame.

As soon as Guy had left me, I went to phone Ygdrasil to receive me before nightfall. He told me to come in spite of the late hour of the day, but warned me that he would make me wait.

The lady who had opened and introduced me to the drawing-room had then laid down on a sofa. On the opposite side of the obscured room, a young boy was watching a television show. From time to time he squatted beside the young lady, and they both whispered and laughed in the darkness in a very annoying manner. When, impatient, I looked at them, he buried his face in a cushion or ran to the screen, while the girl remained to scrutinize me, a finger in the mouth.

We rang the bell. She went out, then came back, stopped the projection, gave light by pulling down the shutters of the balcony and offered to hear some discs. She was very well dressed, dressed in sombre, with a lace collar and cuffs, tall, with brown hair, blue eyes, supple hands, in other circumstances I should have found her ravishing. The boy, about fourteen years of age at most, also seemed singularly graceful and attractive, and no doubt I must have fallen very low to observe that many women had

envied the curve of his legs. Such impressions exceeded me, and pretending to listen to some jazz, I went to the balcony which, overlooking the Boulevard Haussmann, made it possible to embrace the whole neighborhood between the Madeleine and the Opéra, the angles of which crepuscular background of a pure sky. This aspect of the city was as unusual to me that night as my presence at Ygdrasil that I had not seen in years.

What was it that had not been necessary to determine me at this rendezvous which was likely to turn into the most embarrassing consultation? Nothing but this fatal need to have the most intimate of myself checked by the most foreign and distant minds, the antipodes of my soul, this tragic weakness in soliciting the arbitration of others, in turn, on arbitrariness, in order to obtain, as the ratification of all that ought to have remained for ever the unspeakable part of my life. And so, listening to Guy's words without believing it, I had failed at Dr. Ygdrasil's.

Rightly or wrongly, I was persuaded, then, that he kept the word of the enigma. But how would I approach it? What to start with? His stay with us at V, and the fact that he had read my book, would disturb this interview and disfigure me. What attitude would I take, I, the victim of an illusion that he would judge, according to his views, to maintain, perhaps, when I wait for him to leave me, who, at the same time, would guess the suspicions which I had formerly fostered towards him, to believe him capable of helping me now?

I made an effort to assemble the scattered elements of the interview I was going to have with him. According to his method—in the state in which I was, wanting to escape would make it even more effective—he would let the conversation disperse in a multitude of details, then pick up the pieces, in his most symptomatic eyes, and stick them together in his own way, to impose his way of judging me. From then on, he would dictate to me a course of action to follow me on a false trail. Certainly, I would only have to refuse, but he would arrange to compel me. It was therefore necessary to limit myself cautiously and not to say everything about what Guy had pretended to teach me, nor to give one by one the

incidents that had disturbed me. And already I prepared to give him a succinct account, while foreseeing the questions which I should arouse from him. To each one had to respond in a dry, categorical, if not absolutely silent manner, and not let me be diverted from the true goal: that is, to establish to what extent Guy had not invented everything by relating me word for word their maintenance. So I would know whether or not K's wife had come to tell her that her first husband was alive. The need to be certain on this point covered others who alternately obsessed me with no less urgency: the Choiseul passage, the stereoscope, the delivery of the check. But at first glance it was much too anecdotal and less good pretext to go to the attack. Everything was thus summed up in this first circumstance: Jerome's presence in the K. could not be achieved without the intrusion of K's wife. In this way, unexpected for Ygdrasil, I would touch the bottom of the question. Besides, how else would I explain to Ygdrasil the sudden step I was making towards him? I had not seen him since his stay at V. I had not sent him my letter. But I wanted him to confess his own conduct, which Guy seemed to have confirmed. Was it not, in short, the real object which I proposed? The best way of not discovering myself would be to speak to him immediately of Jerome's remoteness, and I would present it as a kidnapped by the K. In this way I could see how he, their friend, advocate or argue in their favor. And then, after I had described to Ygdrasil the scene at the Court of Rohan, including the moment when Guy had prevented me from dragging with me the child whom Merlin had designated me as the son of K. and which the so-called Valentine had called out of the window, I would say to Ygdrasil: "You are aware of this scene! And not only of this incident, but of all that has preceded it, you, the friend of K. and his wife! So two things one: either Roberte is..."

I still had to sketch the difficulty of the dilemma when a slight touch made me return. Nice fingers scarcely resting on my shoulder had immediately withdrawn and I saw behind me the tall girl, her hand now lifted, pointing to the half-open door of the consulting room. As a result, the pa-

tiently united terms of my reasoning fell on the roofs of the Haussmann quarter.

— Will you give yourself the trouble to enter, she said, and this form of politeness comminatory, she pronounced it in a tone all the more acrimonious, it seemed to me, that I had considered a little too long his hand, instead of directing me immediately to the doctor's closet.

Standing behind a gigantic horseshoe desk, Ygdrasil, with his hair crippled, his head slightly leaning to the side, with a tender look of his black and damp eyes, held out my hand. I sank into a leather armchair while he was cleaning his glasses, elbows between a telephone device and a small ovoid sculpture of Brancusi that served as a paperweight. Against the walls, high windows alternated with Chinese hangings.

— I look forward to the release of your next book, he said. Content of the reception reserved for the previous one? Not happy?

And, as the Brancusi was not enough, he went to take on the chimney-piece the cast-iron replica of a sculpture by Klinger, which depicted a gorilla taking away a naked woman, and carried it to the desk.

— Happy? Not happy? he repeated with a smile.

— It's going very badly, I told him without further preliminaries. Roberte is both with me and with your friend K. I leave a long conversation with Guy de Savigny and I learn that of two things one: either Roberte is also the wife of this K. and therefore the widow of a certain Doctor Rodin, or she is not K's wife, but the widow of Commandant D. and in that case I would have lived... sometimes with one, other...

— You do not make that choice, Ygdrasil interrupted, shaking his head—and he began to slap his ass on his seat as he used to when he entered the room.—Too many things experienced to say at the same time hinder your speech, do not you? You should come and rest at my place at L. for some time, hm? you have a mine I will not say scary, but is it not? Let's go back: you have a charming woman named Roberte and you wrote a book called *Roberte, ce soir*. Hm... when I wrote to ask you quite as a friend who was Roberte, is not it, quite a friend, for any answer you

told me about my stay with you at V.

— No, I did not answer you, because to speak quite as a friend as you say, I would not have avoided writing insults to you.

— I did not take it into account.

— Perhaps you would not have considered it. But I never sent this letter.

— Yet I received it.

— Amazing! Who could have passed it on to you?...

— Whatever, it was better that way. Never anything to ruminate, especially not the things we want unpleasant for others. Notice that I am far too accustomed to what you call insulting to make any difference between what would be supposedly amiable and what would not be so. Simple manifestations of a seemingly indissoluble totality: the person or what from the need to agree one names so. Where does our own person stop, where does that of others begin? We are much too mixed up before we can utter a single personal word. If we were educated from this knowledge, there would never be any injuries. In the present state of things it is better to hurt and bear the consequences. Stage inevitable, but let's get to the point. You said that if ... if K's wife is indeed the widow of Rodin...

— ...she is not then my wife, who is the widow of Commandant D.

— But who then pretends that K's wife would be yours at the same time?

— This is not what I say, but... everything is concurred...

— ...yes, all concur?...

— ...to make me admit now that K's wife would have substituted for mine.

— That's an idea! But since when do you admit it?

— The day before yesterday, I think.

— But it came to you all of a sudden?

— I do not know exactly. I feel that it has been going on for a week now... But this has become more and more clear for three days.

— So what happened?

— Here. Guy ensures that...

— Guy of Savigny? Beware! Have you seen him again? Is he back in Paris?

— Yes. I told you just now that I was coming out of a conversation with him.

— Excuse me, I did not understand, said Ygdrasil, and he was busy, pen in hand, looking for a sheet of paper, moving Brancusi's ovoid, shaking his files, replacing the cast iron Klinger's "gorilla", then spreading his hand on the blotter and nodding his head:

— So you've seen Guy again! So what...

— It ensures that...

— Sorry! Guy saw your wife again?

— Of course.

— ...Hm...; so what?

— ...it would appear that the wife of K. and Roberte would have an arrangement between them which would go back to the period of clandestine resistance under occupation.

— What arrangement?

— A sort of convention... that of replacing, thanks to an exceptional resemblance...

— An exceptional resemblance, Theodore?

— Yes, that would allow them to pass for each other as circumstances dictate.

— For that reason resemblance would not be indispensable, Theodore!

— What if! since thanks to this K. would have incited his wife Valentine to take the place of mine, Roberte.

— It was you who said it!

— Guy claims it!

— But you have just said so eagerly!

— That would be grotesque!

— Do you think! But under what circumstances? Did not you notice

anything before Guy came in?

— For example, for some time now, we have been contemplating a comedy inspired by my book in the “theater of society,” with the help of two other friends; and K.’s wife, unbeknownst to me, would come to play the part of Roberte in the absence of the latter.

— Is it a private representation?

— Exclusively. We are only amateurs.

— And your wife took the lead role? Roberta?

— Yes, I want my wife to appear in that role. She has a hard time studying it, getting used to it...

— The contrary would astonish me, Theodore. And that is why she would arrange to be always absent at the right time?

— Otherwise, always more and more often, since we “repeat”.

— And you never thought of calling another interpreter? Never?

— That would not interest me at all! It is Roberte herself whom I wish to see in the role of Roberte.

— This is likely to be very troublesome for your audience.

— Oh, a guest audience...

— Hm! guest! You mean the initiates, Theodore! This questioning took an unpleasant turn.

— That would be of no interest to me, I replied. But maybe K...

— In itself a fact so banal! interrupted Ygdrasil, who was following his idea. Valentine double Roberte. Good! And you say it would happen without your knowledge! Pardon me, here you lay a trap for me. You, the author of the play, collect your interpreters, and you pretend not to notice that K.’s wife is at home, in a rather superficial circumstance, even if you denounce a premeditated act...

— ...Maybe K...

— For what purpose would K. have induced his wife to replace yours? You have never asked yourself the question, too absurd!

— It is to realize with you that I have come! You limit yourself to objecting to an inadmissibility! Of course, with a different temperament, a

mentality better suited to the mores that have run, I could have agreed with K. so that things could be done simply as you say. But this is the antipodes of my mind! And first of all I do not know who your friend K is. Notwithstanding the fact that we are strangers to one another, Guy asserts that K. would be jealous of me, of my wife, and that through of his own he would have sought to spy on me... this stratagem would have lasted for several years now... And you yourself would have witnessed it...

— Me?

— Five years ago, K. would have informed you, I do not know what noises, but probably because his wife must have spoken to him about his intimacy with mine—an intimacy of which I—in a word, he would have asked you to go and see us if it were true that between the two women there was an astonishing resemblance.

— Theodore, one can make everything tell a sick person and, unfortunately, K. had the imprudence to say, in time, to Guy, that he had been my patient.

— Guy adds that you came to V. only to assure you of the identity of my wife and that you were immediately convinced to see with me Valentine K.

Ygdrasil was silent, perhaps he judged it useless to contradict him, and no doubt refused to explain why he had accepted my invitation.

— For that reason, I continued, about six months after this stay, my book having appeared, you wrote me to know who was Roberte.

— But absolutely not for that reason!

— You would not have told V. and H. to Guy that K.'s wife was the place of Roberte, my wife? And this by indirect means?

— ...

— You did not make signals at the window, on the garden side!

— But, Theodore, you begin again to recite your letter to me! Signals!

And while he was turning over the order of his files on his desk, he murmured: "Nothing to do! It starts again!"

— Forgive me, I have not sent you this letter! This is the first time I've

been talking about this detail!

— I have already told you that I received this letter! Unfortunately I destroyed it! Never would I have thought of you that you would come out this circumstance five years later! No, definitely, Theodore, I thought I had a right to imagine that you had passed this stage, since Roberte, to-night. You see, I speak to you not as a doctor, but as a friend. If I can help you, I will try to do it as a friend, not as a doctor, do you? I do not want to doubt that you are in your right mind. Therefore, let me for a moment completely out of the question. If you were sick, I would accept your personal attacks. You're not sick, you're terribly cunning, are you not? so much so that out of a taste for cunning you become a dupe of stories you like to hear...

— These are not stories! Roberte's behavior has been very strange for some time. She does not go where she wants to go! Still going, but there are situations where she seems to be in both places at the same time. Such ubiquity is virtually impossible.

— And you conclude?

— It must be admitted that the two women agree.

Ygdrasil looked at me for a few moments, then

— So you now know K's wife?

— Either I have known her for a long time, or she does not exist independently of mine.

— But have you ever seen him outside of you, except at K, at least with him?

— Indeed, I was for the first time with K. the day before yesterday morning when a friend had taken me, who was not aware of anything, before making me go up to their home. This friend, who seemed to know Valentine K as much as my wife, never made the slightest comparison, nor had I thought it necessary to warn me.

— That friend, who is it?

— A certain Merlin who once made theater but that the fashionable innovations have disgusted the stage. Yet he is interested in the idea of a

theater of society...

— And you trust him?

— Absolutely. It is infinitely delicate and in no case...

— Your friend is a joker. If he never made a rapprochement, then he tacitly did it...

— And why, then, tacitly?

— But see, Theodore, he was the witness of your first meeting with K's wife!

— First meeting? Therefore, to say! since I thought then that Roberte lived with K. without having confessed to him...

— And that seems to exclude you, Theodore, that Roberte has a secret liaison with K.? Quite excluded? You who have described...

— Nothing is excluded, no doubt, but it can not be his way of acting! She would have taken it otherwise.

— But how did she react... I mean K.'s wife, how did she behave when she saw you coming there, at home?

— Oh, most naturally in the world, as not knowing me... at least in the presence of K... and absolutely like his own wife.

— And K himself? you saw him then for the first time?

— Never seen before! He was of an excessive politeness... so he would not have had the bad taste to introduce my wife under the name of his...

— From yours or from hers! hm! At the point where you are, it comes back to the same thing, Theodore!

— The same?... to the point where I am...

— In reality you do not care! You are above these daily distinctions...

— ...Yes, but at that time I could not care less... perhaps because this morning I was not above the daily, on the contrary the daily became aggressive... it was necessary to resort to daily distinctions!

— At the point where you are, you should be prepared for situations like this... Yes, they do not happen every day! And yet, if they burst, it can hardly be perceived that thanks to the habit we have taken to distinguish.

— But you do not live like one lives every day, Theodore! and if ev-

eryday life cheats because it no longer resembles you, you should rejoice!

— But I do not cheat, on the contrary I do not lose sight of the rule of the game that is banality...

— You say you've never seen K. before!

— He was totally alien to me and remains so.

— This name K. does not tell you anything?

— Nothing!

— You are obstinate!

— What a strange reproach!

— You speak of distinction to be made, and make no apparent distinction for yourself. You answer in the name of Lacase. That of K. no longer tells you anything. And you claim not to cheat!

— I do not understand what you are suggesting!

— I speak to you as a friend, not as a doctor.

— I hope so.

— ...And among the K. since we are still with the K., there was no other explanation?

— There was no explanation to give! I took advantage of a moment in the conversation to make K's wife understandably say that she could have warned me of her reversal.

— And K did not notice anything?

— He thought we were talking about the political crisis. He did not understand...

— Are you sure?

From here I was distraught. The opportunity to attack K. had vanished by this sort of process of tendency which he seemed to want me to have ignored the personality of K. I had insisted too much on Roberte. All I had to do was to cut myself off behind Guy's false warnings.

— But, said I, we ought to have told you this meeting.

— I was not told anything at all.

— You would have arranged for me...

— About you? said Ygdrasil, when the phone rang on his desk. He

unhooked and while he listened in silence, consternation, at least it was my impression, stupefaction came on his face. He hung up and looked at his watch:

— I have not been informed of anything, Theodore.

But whilst he had learned some serious news on the telephone, all that Guy had told me of his conversation with Ygdrasil again came to my mind. Since Roberte remained silent on Roberte's account and kept stealing away from the slightest allusion to his stay at V., perhaps he would speak of his relationship with K's wife. on his own ground. I would try, in desperation.

— However, I ventured, K's wife would have given you uneasiness...

— Not that I know! he said.

But then the phone rang for the second time. Ygdrasil stood up, carrying the camera, and sat down on a couch to listen. At the end of a minute he said to the transmitter: "Drive them to the back room." Then he resumed his place in front of me, and I had got up and seemed distracted.

— What are you doing? he said, stay! stay!

— Have you known her for a long time?

— Who?

— K's wife? She would have been your secretary?

— Indeed, she was my secretary, ten years ago.

— Is that true?

— This is perfectly true.

— So if Roberte is also K's wife she would have hidden this important detail.

— Ygdrasil remained for a moment forbidden, clearly embarrassed.

— You see that I am not yet delirious, I said.

— You seem to me in full possession of your means!

— But that's enough to make me lose them. Roberte has killed me this episode of his past! This gives Guy a point.

— I am simply saying that K's wife was my secretary before their marriage. It is you who impute to your own wife silence on a fact which does

not even concern her!

— If Guy said the truth on this point, the rest seems equally plausible. Is it really Dr. Rodin that K's wife would be the widow?

— No doubt.

— Guy just told me that you met recently?

— Recently? no, two months ago, but very briefly, I believe at the end of an exhibition.

— On leaving an exhibition? He claims it was in a bank on Boulevard Haussmann.

— No, no, I see now, it was on leaving a vernissage... a gallery of the Faubourg Saint-Honore... we spent half an hour together, in fact, I was quite surprised that it addressed me again. Moreover, it has hardly changed.

— No, it has not changed. So he says it was in a bank... well, it does not matter—(actually it mattered a lot), but I went on.—At that moment you would have told him about a strange behavior of K. towards his wife, for example, he would threaten her to “resuscitate” Rodin.

— Never, never, have I spoken to him of such things! said Ygdrasil. Never, do you? and, literally suffocated, he kept shaking his head.

— K would have put his threat to execution, I continued. And while I was giving him all the so-called details of the meeting with the old chiropractor, whom Guy said was holding Ygdrasil, the latter—was it to make me forget the solemn tone of his denial, was it to dissipate a real agitation which gained him—began to make the circle of his cabinet, passing sometimes before me, now behind me, the bulging torso, the protruding rump, elbows raised, hands clasped behind the head or spread apart, raised on tiptoe, spinning on itself, with two or three entrechats.

— ...K's wife would finally come herself to make you the confession that Rodin is alive...

Scarcely had I pronounced these last three words, which I perceived as redoubled blows against the door at the bottom, with tremors, followed by groans.

Ygdrasil had stopped short, his feet clasped, frozen in the position of the jump, his gaze in the distance, towards the window. Then, without troubling himself about the noise, he slowly resumed his march, and when calm had returned, after a second's silence,

— Come, Theodore, when you have gone out of the house of the K.—you have seen Roberte again... at your house, at any moment, I suppose?—you insisted so much on his ubiquity! and then what did you tell him of this extraordinary coincidence?

This question, posed in a casual tone, a turning back, a volte-face that was nothing but a refusal to explain what I had just told him, all this contradicted me.

— In the first place, I would not have said anything to him at first. I had just seen her, I thought I had seen her at K.'s, under conditions you know, without Merlin having made the slightest remark. But I had wished that I could not have materially...

— ...Materially?...

— ...Since since that morning she is absent, at least absent in principle...

— Absent? You mean what you have just told me: it is in K. in fact, but absent in principle?

— In principle she must have left for Savoy and still be there ...

— She was gone when you went up to the K.?

— This was only a pretext, that of driving our son into an aerial. She wanted to keep him away from the house for a while ...

— Did he see anything?

— ...Here he is in this aerial for three months...

— For three months! Why not six? The child will not remain without feeling all that is going on in you, is not it? The air will not change anything..

— Now you think there's something going on...

— I am speaking of your theater of society!

— Roberte wanted to follow the advice of a pediatrician at all costs...

— You had any quarrels about that with Roberte?

— I would have preferred to keep it... until the denouement...

— Until the denouement!... It could be long !... There, your wife took the initiative against you...

— Again it was only a pretext! When I went down with Merlin, we met a child of about ten, who was coming back from school and coming back into the yard. Merlin pointed it out to me as K's son. Through the window K's wife called him. So I was not sure she was really gone...

— ...Because she called the child?

— They have a son, the K.?

— And not only a son of K., but his wife had others who are not of him. Why would not she call him?

— What do you say, I... recognized Jérôme right away... I wanted to drag him along with me...

— You wanted to hold him back? That's why she called him?

— I thought she wanted to prevent me from recognizing it. It was obvious! So she was not gone and...

— Yes or no, was it Jerome?

— It was him... but while I recognized him, Merlin told me that it was their son. I no longer knew who I was, nor how I should understand this attribution.

— And you immediately ceased to believe that it was him?

— She called him! As a woman of K. it was quite natural! But no less natural as she wanted to convince me of her departure with Jerome, as Roberte...

— There is a double inconvenience in doubting the wife of K. and the departure of Roberte...

— How?

— For if she is there, all of a sudden, in the meantime you will not have resolved anything about K's wife.

— I can not solve anything in the meantime.

— And if it's not gone, there's no gap at all!

— What do you mean? I said, annoyed at the fact that he put the alternate in a bad joke. Perhaps he would start his dance steps again.

— Did she really come to tell you that her first husband is alive?

— Be careful, Theodore, there may not be an interval on this side!

— Again, did she come?...

— You live, and life only leaves you conjectures!

— Will you answer me at last!

— That is exactly your state, is not it?

— Good!... Doctor, I just have to go...

— Try it, Theodore! The facts make you inactive, conjectures alone make you act. Why would I give you more? Guy is better informed than I am.

— So you confirm?

— Come, Theodore, you were overwhelmed by this representation?

— Upset! It would be less.

— And you believed it? You had a compelling reason to believe that?

— A reason to fear him, yes!

— No, Theodore, you would have liked it to be so!

— You are laughing at me?

— You would have liked it had happened to K's wife...

— But, you do not see?... if the widow of Rodin had replaced Roberte with me.

— Well, when she had told me that her husband was alive, what had changed in your relationship with Roberte?

— With Roberte... no...

— But?...

— ...If under the cover of being the wife of K., Roberte was the widow of Rodin?...

— Good! Here we are again at the starting point!

— ...Rodin would oppress my existence...

— Oppressed, Theodore? This is not quite the term, it seems to me... What would you do in that case? If Roberte had never told you about

it? Would you imagine K. in his way of acting towards his wife, as Guy claimed he was acting?...

— I would leave Roberte free to shut up or speak. I do not think I would question him. I would always wait for her to tell me about it...

— But, Theodore, would you then stand back? And if the supposed dead husband would come then find yourself? both?

— I would avoid that... I would arrange to go find it myself... I would get along with him...

— You say that seriously, Theodore?

— ...It can not be that there is here the same death for two widows...

— It could be as well as two men living for the same woman! Thus, Theodore, you would let your wife struggle with the undead! It's up to you to hear him! But this is perhaps what you are already doing by not wanting to solve anything! This is perhaps what the undead wants!

— But what could he want...

— ...Well, that you get along with him to solve nothing!

— ...I said in such a case... if this happened...

— But there! You think it only happened to K's wife!

— Guy wants me to believe it and you do not refute it!

— Refute? What's the point? You are so interested in this representation of the chiropractor... of K.'s wife under the hands of the old doctor supposedly dead, that you need a rebuttal!

— You do not deny that she has come to tell you this circumstance!

— Your insistence is suspect to me! I speak to you as a friend, do not you, as a friend!

— ...This Rodin of which one no longer knows which of the two women is the widow...

— There is no doubt that K's wife is his widow, if not you, Theodore!

— ...If he is really alive and hides under the name of Dr. Laurence, and yet Roberte is the fake widow...

— But then, think! K. would be innocent of all that you accuse him of!

— ...This substitution of his wife to Roberte, it is difficult for me not only to admit it but to admit it...

— And of course you maintain this accusation so as not to incriminate your own wife...

— Roberte... Rodin's widow!... I dismiss this hypothesis, it is only apprehension...

— You do not dismiss it at all, Theodore, you experience it with the K.!

— I'm experiencing it?

— Oh yes! That is very convenient for you! Since it's K's wife! Was it not she who interpreted the role of Roberte in your "rehearsals"?

— ...At the instigation of K.!

— And this accusation against K. now allows you to experience the "false widow", is not it? Only the undead is missing in your theater of society! He is waiting for a sign of you to make his entry...

— He did not wait, I said, thinking that here I would resume my revenge against this offensive of fallacious lucidity.

— He did not wait?

— ...This chiropractor delivers checks to the wife of K., whom she endorses under the name of Roberte...

— This doctor Laurence?

— Apparently. According to Guy it would be the same individual as his bibliophile of passage Choiseul...

— In the passage Choiseul?

— There is a bookseller who makes exchanges of rare editions. In this way Guy came into contact with an old bibliophile who would have been presented to him as Doctor Laurence. He surprised the K. in this shop in conversation with this amateur.

— You are not wary of this homonymy?

— Of course. I think Guy imagined that name after the fact...

— Afterwards?

— Yes, as soon as he knew the visit of K.'s wife to the chiropractor...

— And how did he know that this so-called doctor Laurence was giving checks to K's wife. Is this the chiropractor or the bibliophile?

— Guy seems to have had that check in his hands. A few hours after seeing her in this bookstore with this old man, Guy received from K's wife, who lent him money, a check drawn by Laurence, which Guy was supposed to endorse in his turn. It was then that he recognized Roberte's signature.

— He showed it to you?

— Alas, no, it goes back two or three months, when he saw you again...

— Theodore, it is only pure nonsense that this story! A child would not accept it! Laurence here, Laurence there!

— No doubt, but Guy may have misunderstood this name...

— Do you really want to?

— There is a certain Florence among my mother-in-law's friends.

— Well, is that also an acquaintance of you?

— No, during my engagement with Roberte, he was in the crowd of my mother-in-law's guests. A great old man. He was called Uncle Florence. I did not talk to him or see him again.

— Is Guy aware?

— No. He might have understood Laurence for Florence.

— Impossible! There is a clear difference between the first syllable. Is this the first time you think of this confusion?

— Yes, let's say that Guy simply imagined this name after that of the chiropractor...

— Theodore, we're wasting our time! The chiropractor is also of his invention, unless K. himself has informed him... As for the check...

— It is at the moment to give it to the bank of the boulevard Haussmann that it says to have found you to the window, then you stayed together...

— I repeat that it was after a vernissage...

— From this interview with you, Guy established a relationship between the old bibliophile, the chiropractor, and Rodin.

— And now yourself with... how do you say? Uncle Florence... it's all the same curious...

— Guy maybe wanted to scramble us...

— I am speaking of you, of this rapprochement which you suddenly made with that quidam who was present at your betrothal... a great old man, you said?

— A great old man...

— And you have remembered his physiognomy?...

— Very vaguely, a pretty good head all the same...

— And now, here, you lend his face to that old bibliophile whom Guy saw in a consultation with K.?

— No, I see the moment when he was seated at a distance from my mother-in-law's house...

— You should know your mother-in-law...

— Oh! No way! If she knows anything, she knows everything else for a long time.

— But you remembered this old man... at least something tangible...

— From tangible? a vague impression...

— But who cares about you ...

— And the signature at the bottom of the check?...

— Why Guy says he met me at that time, because...

— You would have asked him to intercede with his cousin the Prosecutor Savigny...

— To intercede! What a wink! His cousin! He rests with me at L. I see him every fortnight!

— You see him every fortnight!

— ...Since I did not tell her anything about K.'s wife or this supposed Laurence, it's weird!

— Who did not you say? to the Prosecutor?

— To Guy! This is probably to corroborate his history of the chiropractor. It does not hold on that side...

— But the Prosecutor Savigny...

— As for this bibliophile, whatever his name, let us say that it is true, it would be up to you to go see...

At this new evasion, I was on the point of reporting to Ygdrasil the description which Guy had made of me of all that he had seen by the stereoscope. But it would have been totally discrediting his testimony, which was already so doubtful in the eyes of my interlocutor. Already I felt that he was listening to me no more than to sketch some clinical picture.

— You let me down, I said, seeing him distracted.

— But by no means, Theodore, by no means!

— This false signature at the bottom of the check, from the hand of K's wife?...

— You should advise Roberte. If both women are aware, yours must agree with this procedure. She can not ignore that K.'s wife receives these checks from Mrs. Theodore Lacase.

— Guy believes that it is to bring back the consequences of his adventure...

— What? What an adventure?

And then, seeing him revive, I told him, despite my reticence, but snatches in bits, what the stereoscope had revealed to Guy. I expected laughter, new mockery. But Ygdrasil listened to me, perfectly impassive.

— Is that adventure? he said. Too bad it stops at the passage Choiseul! However, if Rodin existed as a bibliophile and a lover of stereoscopes, there is no evidence that he is not also a chiropractor!

— So even if you did not tell Guy, do you think that last thing?

— I do not believe it, I just say that we do not have proof either!

— What makes you say that, Ygdrasil? You said at the time that it did not hold up this visit to the chiropractor in which the wife of K. would have recognized his first husband supposed dead...

— The homonymy of the names cited by Guy, that was suspicious! But not at all the stereoscope of the passage Choiseul!...

— I was so convinced that it was pure Savigny that I hesitated to tell you...

— You are mistaken, Theodore! You are absolutely wrong! That's still tangible! The stereoscope! Hm! It does not only explain the check, but perhaps also... the chiropractor!

He had risen, and once more he paced up and down his closet, taking off his glasses, looking at me with gravity, and repeating once more:

— That completely changes the question! You have underestimated this detail... The stereoscope!

— It's so old...

— You watched my television?

— No.

— ...The stereoscope! It is admirable!

— What do you mean?

— This is a way of checking whether there is a resemblance between the two women, provided that they are two... or if on the other hand it is the same...

— What do you mean?

— Roberte should go find Dr. Laurence at the Choiseul Pass where this old amateur might fall into the trap. If she gets caught for K., we would know then that it is Rodin...

— Roberte... at the Choiseul passage?...

— Is that repugnant to you?

— But who tells us that she was not already there when Guy thought she saw K.'s wife? It's a vicious circle!

— No doubt, Theodore, but you will never get out of it until you've seen it! We must provoke this encounter instead of supposing it! Take the example of the alleged conduct of K.

— Do you propose that to me, to take K.'s example?

— Did not you bring it back to me? And why? Because you found his way of acting perfectly logical! Is it not much easier to give Roberte an appointment in a bookshop than to lead her insidiously to a chiropractor as K. would have done?

— And then after?

You have had the bibliophile warned by the second-hand bookstore, under the pretext of a rare occasion. It is true in a double sense, is it not? Here, you could take this fine copy of Martial, he said—and he went to take in a window a beautiful folio of the Renaissance, which he leafed before my eyes, while I could not believe my ears.—I lend it to you for the occasion... And you ask to come to terms with the bibliophile Savigny has appointed you. Either Roberte has accompanied you, or else she takes charge of this commission.

— She will not accept... she can not ignore that he is in touch with K's wife...

— But that's what it's important to know! If she smells the slightest trap, she will manage well, but then you watch her...

— Would not it be easier to get this check...

— But how awkward, Theodore! You would give the alert and everything would be hijacked by the main responsible! The bookseller of the passage Choiseul offers a way of rest... Roberte will unmask this doctor Laurence...

— She will arrange to inform her friend...

— At the same time I will come to my side at Choiseul Passage...

— Would you do that, Ygdrasil?

— I would have given an appointment to K's wife.

— You? I said, thinking that he was falling from the clouds to see him suddenly deploy such a detective zeal. You will have given an appointment to K's wife?

— We must confront the two women, Theodore!

— But why in this place precisely?

— It will serve as a touchstone, Theodore! Either they will have similar reflexes, we would then know that they are in connivance, or whether it is the same woman...

— Terrible alternative...

— So you back off again?...

— This confrontation will be foiled! You will have given an appoint-

ment to K's wife, and you will see, it will be my wife, Roberte, who will answer, or will not answer...

— You are entering the vicious circle, Theodore!

— But this confrontation is impracticable!

— Why do you say so insistently?

— That would be too painful!

— But this is not a sufficient reason, your condition is infinitely more...

— This kind of show has already been offered to me recently, no, no...

— What? What are you saying? First news!—And he had jumped back.—They were both in front of you? How? And when?

— It's hard to describe... the other night we were doing a rehearsal... Roberte debits her role, suddenly the doors open and here is... Roberte jumps on her... The others have not seen anything... If Guy had not been there, I'd say it was a waking dream. Hallucinosi. That had never happened to me... But at last Guy made some bizarre remarks right after this scene, and he roughly apostrophized Roberte and our friends...

— Who had entered, who threw himself on Roberte?

— But... precisely Roberte!

— Theodore, no literature! said Ygdrasil, and settled back into his chair with a sort of triumphal serenity. Or you tell me stories—do not you, I still speak to you as a friend, but you do not simulate! The simulation would compel me to listen to you as a patient, you are not, no need to start on this ground... Or I lend myself to an investigation and then no detours, no metaphors, no pun! Did another woman come in, yes or no?

— ...As in a dream... yes... another...

— K's wife?

— ...Since I told you it was Roberte!

— No, it was K's wife!

— But that evening I knew nothing either of K. or of his wife!

— And what happened? This woman threw herself on Roberte and then? They fought, were they invectives?

— They fought together... they slapped each other...

— And then they stayed there the rest of the evening?

— No, one or the other has escaped...

— Who? Which of the two?

— Roberte... Roberte who was there before...

Ygdrasil looked at me for a moment.

— It is a curious expression: Roberte-who-was-there-before was it not... K's wife? now that you've been to the K's., will you say it was Roberte who came in or Roberte who was there before?

— I tell you it's Roberte who came in!

— That other woman was Roberte, you keep saying! But then: it was not Roberte who was there before—was K's wife? K's wife was there before! Is that your feeling now?

— If you want...

— It's up to you to want!

— You put logic where there is none. You seek to enclose me in a reasoning!

— Sorry, I'm just repeating what you're telling me! Listen to me, Theodore: you admit the existence of K's wife without admitting it to you?

— It is inconceivable, quite inconceivable. You know all the same my wife, you were at home at V.!

Ygdrasil made great gestures to prevent such evocation.

— Let's not go back to the contents of your letter, please!

— Do not deny that you know her!

Ygdrasil shook his head again, wiping his forehead.

— It does not change anything that I know, he said, taking off his glasses. What is now essential, essential to your balance, is that you see them once again facing each other.

— Are you serious, Doctor? you want to provoke a new hallucinosis in me? No, as long as they act in concert!

— The concert?... They would have slapped themselves, in concert!

— But I'm just repeating what you told me! That was your first conclusion...

— So what? I do not see how this would be irresistible to my balance! I will go mad at the idea of having lived sometimes with one, sometimes with the other, believing to live with one.

— Theodore, it is before that you risk becoming so. What have you to fear?

— If it were two women, I would be unable to choose.

— This is indeed what it would take! that one prevails over the other.

— You banalize...

— For all this has happened to you only by your obsessive Roberte. You shrink from the approach of the woman whose book is only a quest...

— You banalize to pleasure! I do not think of the wife of K. for me always non-existent!

— But Roberte does not exist any more for you if not according to the wife of K.!

— Neither do I dream of separating myself from Roberte for...

— For a Roberte who would betray you with K.? asked Ygdrasil. Not even for a Roberte who would betray you with K.?

— Again, she will betray me only from your point of view, not in my eyes, even though she would break our conventions.

— Your conventions! Are they only applicable to your “laws of hospitality”? Theodore, the practice of these laws will never be for you but an obsession that will always remove you from a real accomplishment. You absolutely want to give without return and never receive! You can not live without subjecting yourself to the universal law of exchange!

— I do not want it.

— But you expect others to please him, since they must, according to you, accept your wife. And you refuse the wife of the other. Pure protectionism than that!

— I do not intend in any way to share wives or plead in favor of a universal prostitution to which you would like to bring me. It is not a gratuitous mistress that I pass to friends against theirs, I lend them my wife.

— In other words, you practice neither more nor less than the usury

in the field of the emotions.

— But these emotions are theirs, you confuse the earth and its fruits ...

— You bind the body of your wife, if I understand correctly... this is only a sham of the gift...

— And what is your idea of exchange if not a sham! One never gives what is unchangeable, but always one lends to better possess what one has.

— Theodore, it is nothing but a dream of an aristocrat eager to dominate.

— Perhaps, but what can I do? I do not feel otherwise...

— An atavism of proprietor, without any moral reference to the present situation of mankind. This is the root of the evil: you insist that Roberte betray you, in the little week, and you are incapable of betraying it yourself... a lamentable voyeur comedy...

— You are only degrading a much more profound truth... the other, the stranger, the unknown are indispensable to an ever-renewed knowledge of Roberte, so desperate that it seems to you...

— All this you said with much subtlety, a lot of obscurities also in your book. But you will always remain on the side of the singular husband whom you have wanted to describe. Again I speak to you not as a doctor but as a friend. Adultery of the wife by the husband, one can not live with such an idea. The practice of hospitality, as you conceive it, can not be unilateral. Like any hospitality, this too, and especially that one, demands absolute reciprocity to be viable, and this is the step you do not want to cross: the pooling of women by men and men by women. This is the corollary of your laws of hospitality, the only universal legitimation of the marriage's adulteration by the husband, without which all this remains only a phantasm in which the monogamic morality transgresses madly to return on it even where the sacrament of marriage is only verified by sacrilege, the vestige of a theology whose miasmas poison you...

— You make all sorts of arguments to me, Ygdrasil, not only a psychiatrist, but what is worse, a sociologist and an economist. I am only a

primitive mentality...

— Primitive? Theodore, there you definitely go there...

— ...So primitive that the transgression of marriage is still for me a religious act as much as marriage itself. I challenge you to find in no theology...

— Of course, but you are none the less its degenerate product in this respect...

— Degenerate! One always cries out to degeneration when the living forces work reason!

— If they destroy it they are dark forces, but that's what you like...

— And if reason destroys them, is it less obscure?...

— Again, Theodore, you cheat! Transgression, a religious act, what does that mean?... Knowingly you return to the magic stage...

— And what do you do, Ygdrasil, what else can we do? We do not escape our fund, it is he who leads us, who is playing your utopias: the pooling of women. I say to you that universal prostitution can not even be practiced if it does not presuppose the attraction of the transgression of marriage: the wife, prostituted by the husband, nevertheless remains the wife, the unchangeable good of the spouse, the overpriced property that gives its price to the consent of the wife when she yields to a lover chosen by her master...

— Here! "Universal prostitution": it is up to the terms that fascinate you that we want to extirpate! The pooling of women and men prepares the way for innocence, genders the feeling of fault and misfortune, which engender each other...

— Innocence, misfortune, fault, what kind of insipid happiness do you want to regulate this? According to the economist notions of the production of goods, supply and demand? The formation of prices? I ask you whether women may or may not be regarded as goods, as I say, as consumer goods!... It would seem that something of this kind was emerging in the mentality of the new leaders, a strong antique expedient, it is true, that they are considering taxing our wives according to the degree

of their appas, the signs of wealth.

Ygdrasil seemed to want to take notes without my knowledge. For, taking up his pen again, as I had interrupted him, he shook his head, and, looking at me without being able to conceal his alarm:

— ...Yes, yes, continue, I hear you... clues of wealth?

— ...Finally! I mention this in passing, because last year the tax authorities literally ruined me by recovering sums that I had to pay for Roberte, and that this kind of taxation has quite the character of a fine...

— A fine? But for what offense?

— Because I was opposed to what Roberte was doing at the Hotel de Longchamp...

— How, Theodore, have you opposed this? he exclaimed. But it was the way of salvation! When the state conforms more and more to your dreams, to the point of discrediting itself and to courageously renounce the prejudice of its traditional dignity, you spit on the magnanimity of the magistrates? Do you not see that our dreamed minister is working, but with how much subtlety, the very disappearance of the notion of a state, that he is hastening the confusion of the State and of civil society, the very liquidation of society for the benefit of groups of affinities, that it favors the extraordinary elasticity of which these groups already give proof, until they become organs of the collective imagination, that the lyricism triumphs in the erasure of the boundaries between women and men, between animality and the intellect—and that, at great expense, he erects a sanctuary for general felicity, as a melting pot for a new race, free from all the chicanery of avarice and greed, the sordid family instinct, the sad necessity of reproducing itself? And you, Theodore, you the utopist of the Laws of Hospitality, the theoretician of the adulteration of the wife by the husband, you are still to apologize for all these miseries by an inconceivable blindness to support desperately those narrow institutions which are only waiting to fall into dust, to make you the defender of the conjugal home on the pretext of sustaining your absurd ideal of a voyeur's father! And you are arguing with the state the contribution of your wife.

And you refuse him the look on his appeasers! And you complain that he wishes to keep you out of a grave embezzlement by a purely symbolic compensation, what, a drop of water in the sea, you who... are nothing in this universal, irresistible gestation...

Ygdrasil, carried away by his enthusiasm, walked up and down, his eyes ecstatic behind his glasses.

— In vain do you condemn the sordid family instinct, I repeat, under the guise of advocating the Hotel de Longchamp as an unprecedented social innovation. It is ultimately for the demographic preoccupations of M. that you plead: the sad necessity of to reproduce yourself, but with the greatest profit for this usurper, that hypostatized monster that is the State, that plagiarist of the plagiarists of all our most intimate intentions! Let me prefer the setting of the family, the personal form to reproduce, and if I appear to you degenerate or vicious, for that, too bad or so much better! Defeat marriage, notions of conjugal fidelity, order, decency, chastity in their representative aspects, which direct our will and stimulate our desires—and the prohibition is never more than a dyke, a reservoir of energies—then everything is dispersed, degraded, annihilated in total amorphousness. Such an enterprise, beneath the exterior of a bold innovation which thinks of making a clean sweep of everything, aims only at chaos, at the general deliquescence proper to satisfy weak natures like your friend K...

Ygdrasil, who had listened to me calmly, took off his glasses again and said to me:

— Theodore, you are a masterpiece of inconsistency! By dint of wanting to maintain the pros and cons, your reason is exhausting. Unfortunately, I do not have much time left to give you, but I would not mind letting you go out of my house in this state of distress. However, the critical phase you are going through—forgive the friend now to talk to you as a doctor, is it not?—well, this phase makes it possible to predict that you are at a turning point, certainly anxious, but that was the evolution inscribed in your book ... We must go now to the end, consent to the exchange, to exchange Roberte for other women, to accept to be unfaithful

to Roberte as you persist in wanting it to be to you...

— That's when I really own it, you can not understand...

— But it is absolutely sterile! as is also the fixed idea that your wife would have a likeness to mistake with K's wife!

— It was never my idea! It is that of K. and if it is a fact, this resemblance, he has shamefully exploited it! Judge it yourself!

— Leave K. finally out of the question! he said abruptly. All you have done for nearly an hour is to lend your own intentions to K. You do not see that it could get you into trouble?

— I get into trouble, when I seek to know...

— It is not K., but you who threaten your wife to resurrect the dead...

— Roberte is not the widow of Rodin...

— If K. has substituted his wife for yours, I will eventually believe that Rodin was the model of the old "Professor Octave," the character of your book...

— It is a creation of my mind.

— You say so! But if it was with K's wife that you lived, no doubt it was she who inspired you.

— At last you admit! I lived with K's wife!

— I admit nothing at all! I try to show you where this leads you to argue that K. has shamefully exploited the resemblance of his wife with yours! Soon he will declare himself the author of *Roberte*, and you will figure as a plagiarist...

— How?

— You will realize it yourself right away.

— What do you mean?

— She's there. She had to go in, or she was not at all. She asks to see me.

— Who then asks to see you?

— Your wife, I suppose.

— You exaggerate, Doctor! Naturally, Roberte had left with Jerome. It is impossible for her to be back already.

— You are sure of it all at once!

— Would not it be K.'s wife who asks you under the name of mine according to her usual procedure?

— I stick to your first version. I think you were right to doubt his departure. She had moved to K.

— And his own wife during that time, what has become of her?

— You are very much anxious about the fate of K.'s wife, Theodore!

— Let's see! it can only be it! What would Roberte do here?

— So you change your mind again? Come, Theodore, we must finish!

He rang.

I slumped into the leather armchair, my hands on my eyes.

We knocked. Through my fingers I saw the young girl in dark clothes, leaning toward the doctor.

— Who just missed out? asked Ygdrasil.

— I told you Mrs. L. and her son.

— Do you hear, Theodore? With his son! Make her come in.

The girl went to the door at the back, opened and disappeared into the next room. She did not come back. The door remained open. Ygdrasil had risen and was waiting on the threshold.

A lady entered the closet, preceded by a young boy who came to me with a smile.

— And here we are, daddy! It did not take long.

He had, if not age, nothing to make me confound for a moment with Jerome, as had happened to me at the Court of Rohan. I pulled back and pulled myself behind the chair. He stopped, intimidated.

As for the woman, still young, but very pale, she stared at my lips with coldness and disdain.

— Must I look for you everywhere on my return? she said in a dull voice. This is a journey for nothing, because of your indecision the place retained there was given to another child.

Tiredness surrounded her gray eyes. Doubtless a fair face, slightly wilted, defeated. However a graceful, elegant size. But an unknown. I did not

stumble and was silent.

You see, doctor, she said, it has been going on for months! How do you expect the child to progress under such conditions? Every time I propose to put him in a boarding-school, Monsieur makes a scene, judges that his son does not need any change of air but must be done to the spirit that reigns at home. And I have less and less time to take care of it, absent all day. You are fixed on the attitude of Theodore, you will give me an attestation. Come, there's no point in insisting.

She held out her hand to the child and sent him back to the other room. That was all. The door closed on the unknown.

— Do you understand, Theodore? said Ygdrasil to me with a look of agony.

— Of course, it is a person who acts on your orders.

— Seriously, Theodore, you say you did not recognize her or the child?

— I replied, that person!

Suddenly the door opened—this time from the side of the drawing-room—and the girl with brown hair and blue eyes sprang almost naked in the room, waving her naked arms and her beautiful hands, straps on her wrists, and while I was astonished to find her bigger, much more woman, more mature, she rushed at Ygdrasil shouting:

— It was well worth calling me at home to make me fidget by this brute!

And at my sight:

— How! K.? You here? she said, putting her hand on her mouth.

And, as a madwoman of terror, she ran violently through the door at the back, and found herself face to face with the stranger of a moment ago.

— Look at that dazed look, see this impudent woman! said the latter, pushing her back into the room, and pointing to me and the young lady. Why did he come here? To witness the shivers of Madame! Fraudster! Look!...

And, before Ygdrasil had only time to stop, twice she slapped the bewildered young creature. This one had received the pair of slaps not without brushing me with all the suppleness of her body.

— Enough, Doctor, I shouted as I rose, and I trembled with rage and amazement.

— We were overwhelmed by the events, he said—and he turned on himself.

— Say rather by, your procedures! I was warned!

But the voice suddenly missed me. The others were suddenly motionless. In an overwhelming silence, I walked towards the threshold of the drawing-room. A phrase obsessed me, which seemed superfluous to me, and then I no longer saw how to tear myself away from these places:

— Guy was right, I said. You are only a fakir! Surrounded by her figures who still did not move, Ygdrasil, again behind his desk, cleaned his glasses and punctuated each of my words a little bow.

— A vulgar fakir!

He had bowed very low.

XIII

Shortly before my return home, our new maid had brought my mother-in-law into the drawing-room.

She could no longer fall ill. But as I pretended to dodge, the maid warned me that she was accompanied by an elderly gentleman, and that both asked to see Roberte—the maid did not know her departure as much as my mother-in-law—and I told myself that if I went out I might find her an hour later, because my mother-in-law had a great deal of patience, especially when it was her daughter. So I went to the show.

A tall old man, leaning on crutches with arm-rests, examined the old paneling of the room while nodding his head. I begged him to sit in an armchair.

This handsome head with a broad forehead, deep eyes beneath thick eyebrows, their blue eyes lost in the distance, I already seemed to have seen it somewhere. But under long mustaches a convulsive trembling occasionally raised one of the corners of the lips. Calm, they expressed a superb contempt.

— Finally, I bring you Uncle Florence, said my mother-in-law. He wanted to know you! We have talked a lot and often about you. But if you're in the middle of it, just pretend we're not there. Roberte told us to come up, we'll wait for him.

— Oh! I do not work, mother. Roberte told you to go up? She is...

— This is a possible exchange of your apartment against another that Uncle Florence can not occupy. I told Roberte about it. I also wanted Uncle Florence to see how happy Roberte is with you here. Thanks to you, he hoped to reintegrate this apartment that was his long ago.

The old man, who had not addressed me a word, listened, his eyes closed, and smiled. Elbowed, he gathered his raised hands, with the tips of his fingers, which he struck in proportion as my mother-in-law spoke.

— To exchange this apartment! You formerly occupied it, monsieur? I'm not aware of anything! Never Roberte intended...

— She's going to come right away...

— But, my dear mother, Roberte is now at St. Gervais with Jerome, she will not be home till to-morrow!

My mother-in-law immediately became angry:

— She comes, I tell you!

— Incoming? I asked again. The poor fool confounds everything, I said. Let her talk.

— Roberte went to look for pastries for tea...

— Pastries for tea? It is half past seven. I go out to dinner with friends. Roberte is not in Paris. She drove Jérôme to his aerial. But I'll give you some port or fruit juice ...

— Yes, it's a great idea to put it on air! a child so nervous, is killing for Roberte. He did not stop throughout the film to explain this silly story to me. But as he speaks at his age, Theodore! And how he laughs! It is abnormal; and this insolence! Formerly, parents did not see their children all the time...

Well, well, I was going to say, you were in the cinema with little Charles or with little Madeleine—but I held back and repeated again, desperately:

— Jerome is tonight in his aerial at Saint-Gervais. Did M. Florence accompany you to the show?

But the old man, his eyes still closed, kept smiling, shaking his head,

imperturbably dumb.

— Oh no! resumed my mother-in-law, Uncle Florence hated the cinema, he could not bear the children, but he wished to see you both for this apartment; he admires your Roberte... tonight...

— Well, said I, emboldened, addressing myself to the old man, have you had the patience to read?

— Patience to read? said my mother-in-law, while Uncle Florence shrugged his shoulders. Read? He admires, he loves Roberte, he knows her since the end of the war, almost longer than you, he knew her when we were together in Cannes in 46. Ah! it spoils it! You know, the pretty sequined sheath is a memory of Uncle Florence...

— This spangled sheath? I know nothing! For what occasion?

— Oh, for an attraction during a charity sale we had organized at my home in Nice with the American consul. Ah! Roberte had a success with men! They banged the number furiously. She had to show herself nearly ten times...

— Truly, I regret, I have not had this pleasure; she certainly must not have kept it, that sheath. But was not she then part of the Salvation Army?

— Whatever! For a sale of charity, see, Theodore! But, at least, you must have seen her in her new turquoise suit?

— Well?

— Uncle Florence must see her in the new tail he gave her, that is the least thing!

And, leaning towards me who thought she was dreaming, she added in a low voice:

— And you too, Theodore, you would have to tell him your satisfaction, if you do not want to thank him...

— Me, tell him my satisfaction? Thank him? What are you singing there, mother?

— Do not be so proud, Theodore! Uncle Florence had brought us money before I got my money back, he got into that habit...

— Since when has M. Florence taken care to dress my wife?

— He has become accustomed to Roberte, and has continued even after your marriage. She never dared to claim anything, I guessed what she wanted too expensive, he knew by me and did not wait to get him. Everything she carries a little better than proper, it's him. In short, she does not like to receive from any other man for this kind of need. I like a woman to have a group of admirers; each one has his specialty for her: Uncle Florence flattering her exterior, you, Theodore, bring her the spirit; but with a novelist so difficult to understand, a philosopher as obscure as you, she would still be wearing her sad uniform of salvation today! Thanks to Uncle Florence, she is always a chic, when it is necessary! He likes his little Roberte to be presentable. After the Liberation, she immediately found an important situation with a doctor, a chief of a clinic, I believe; I'm sure it was thanks to him. Uncle Florence is so influential. You should also enjoy it; you begin to be known, but not enough, you must have no worries other than your books...

And turning to the cripple,

— Is not that your opinion, Uncle Florence?

Another shrug of the old man's shoulders, his eyes still closed.

— Uncle Florence can tell you a lot about things. He knows everything! He traveled extensively as a naval doctor, he knew ten, twenty languages, he cared for the Maharaja of... The Agha Khan... Ah! Well, my dear, here you are!

The door had just opened and let the pretended woman of K. appear.

— Excuse me, she said, speaking quickly, I am disturbing you, but I have an urgent communication to make you.

— What does it mean! I exclaimed, are you all the same?

The old man opened his eyes wide and ceased smiling. But scarcely had I pronounced these words than I thought I had been mistaken. The same impression felt three days before at the K. or Lipp's was reproduced here, at home. At first glance, it was her ... and yet, besides that she wore that evening a very light and seaming summer dress, clear and sown with drawings of flowers, and that she was capped in an unusual way for

Roberte, she had something dark in her gray eyes, at once aggressive and fierce, a crease more pronounced at the corner of her arched lips, shaded by a slight down, and regularity of his features, the firmness of the chin contributed to give her a hard, even voracious expression, which was strangely varied by the inviting movements of her bare arms, the gestures of her hands, crinkling between her long fingers a pair of white gloves, concealing and exhibiting her nails in turn; hence something impersonal in its lasciviousness, almost vicious, whose still borrowed gait still escaped me. A transformation had taken place so disturbing that I gradually ceased to recognize it, as a curiosity, both anxious and greedy, rose within me.

— Eh. Well, darling, said my mother-in-law, Theodore never wants to believe me. Uncle Florence is waiting for you with impatience. But do not let Jerome enter. Oh, this child is rotten, unbearable. Uncle Florence is very tired. You must show him the tailor you have chosen, dear! And then you'll talk about the apartment...

The pretended Mrs. K. raised her beautiful hands:

— Doubtless there is a mistake, madam, I have not the honor to know you! I come to find Théodore L. for...

— What the heck of a style you take there, Roberte! I said in my turn, your mother has just informed me that she has met you just now, and I swear to her that you have left with Jerome for the air!

The alleged Mrs. K. let pass a few seconds of silence, then gracefully:

— It was indeed from Jerome that I wanted to speak to you. A friend shared with your wife and I drove him with a group of children to his Saint-Gervais aerial. Your wife, hindered herself, had entrusted him to her this morning, and I said, she finally gave him back to me. Jerome is my son.

— What's the use of this tautology, Roberte? I interrupted.

— Tautology? asked my mother-in-law, Uncle Florence, do you know that term?

— It is not your wife's son, continued the so-called Mrs. K.

Uncle Florence gave him a furious glance, and another convulsive trembling agitated his lips.

— It is and it is not of you, it is of me and it is not of me... I insinuated.

— But what a funny way you speak to each other now! exclaimed my mother-in-law. What woman do you mean, darling? My God, by dint of living with you, Theodore, she has become incapable of expressing herself like everybody else...

— Do not be surprised, dear mother, I said, she is playing. We have been repeating a play of mine since the beginning of the year. I thought thus tending the pole to the alleged Mrs. K. But she continued in the same tone:

— The child is in the best conditions there, say the least bad...

— And the mother of Jerome, under what conditions is she? I insisted.

— She has nothing to fear, she can get away with it, for she has the truth for her, if not justice.

The old man had a start, to the point of releasing one of his crutches. Mechanically I stooped to raise it, but he had put a foot on it and probably did not want me to touch it.

— I am determined to help the unhappy woman, said the so-called Mrs. K., provided she resisted the calumnious conduct with which she was overwhelmed.

— All this, you learned by heart, darling? asked my mother-in-law once more, it is much too tiring for Roberte, what you write there, Theodore! Repeat once more, but speak more slowly, Uncle Florence would like to understand.

— ...The only way to defend oneself against calumnies is to submit to them in silence, continued the alleged K.

And she whipped her palm on the pair of light gloves she held in her hand, when the old man, with a sudden movement of his foot, sent his crutch, fallen just now, sliding violently into the legs of the pretended K. She started, backed away and looked at him with more surprise than in-

dignation.

— Infamous creature, said the old man, without moving, fixing her. He broke his silence at last, by an insult which, in proportion to my nervousness, was going to put order in the conversation.

The so-called Mrs. K., with her hand on her hip, at first looked at him with a seemingly casual air, the wings of the nose still palpitating.

— What do you want with me? she said in a white voice, who are you?

— Your first victory, said the old man.

And suddenly, as moved by a spring, he stood and, using himself as a cane of his other crutch, he advanced like a specter on the alleged woman of K.

The latter, trembling like a leaf of all her tall waist, leaned one hand against the woodwork, and on the other nervously scraped the pearls of her necklace.

The old man, on his crutch, began to brush the curve of the beautiful legs of the pretended K., and even to raise her robe above her knees. She herself, dropping her gloves, stretching her fingers to the edge of her dress, receded a step, stealing her calves, while at the end of her crutch, she gave him little taps on her hands.

— I am your master for eternity! he declared in a solemn tone.

And with her back still on the woodwork, she sought with one hand the handle of the door, with a bound it was upon her. The thing, unimaginable the moment before, had taken place. The old man, with an unexpected vigor and vigor, with one arm, had girded it.

In her light dress, stuck against the pearl-gray suit of the old man, for a second she seemed almost to disappear in him. As much as she could, she pushed back, but in doing so just stick her stomach against his. And as she raised her hand, he seized her fingers, and pressing them tightly to crack the knuckles, he brutally snatched his covenant. She cried, but it seemed to me that she was choking her cry in a sort of laugh. The alliance had fallen at the feet of my mother-in-law:

— Uncle Florence, we do not do such a thing on a visit, she said as I raised the ring. But do not let that happen! she said, nudging me.

With a glance inside the ring, I had read the engraved name: K. At the same moment, the so-called Mrs. K., turning her head, blushing, her eyes lowered, pushing back from her hand the old man's chin was whispering, "Not here!" And impatiently, with her fingers, she had grabbed Uncle Florence's nose and mustache, when everything yielded and all the skin of the old man's face remained to him in the hand: "Ah!" She said.

Then something like an entirely unformed flesh appeared: the globes of the eyes were kept in caves without a bottom and by the orifices, formerly nostrils and mouths,

— Recognize your only husband, the first who will also be the last.

My mother-in-law turned away with horror, but her lightness and her good manners, and perhaps also her want of imagination, made her lose her countenance, and, overcoming her brief emotion,

— At least you could have taken the trouble to warn us! she says. In such a case one warns!

And she got up.

The old man, or what remained of Uncle Florence, brushed his hand over the shining hair of the beautiful K., and made her fall over his shoulders. She shook her head, her eyes closed, her lips folded in disgust, stirred in all directions, her breasts bulging under her crumpled dress, and, raising her elbows, the armpits of her bustier, already soaked in sweat, she opposed her palms, removing them at the slightest contact of the shapeless face.

— That face you burned with your little bastards, you'll undergo! He whispered.

And then, grasping her firmly under the shoulders, thumbs stuck on her breasts, he applied the mass of flesh, plowed once by the flames, on the beautiful cheeks of the alleged K.

— She began to scream, while her fingers folded over his palms, her nails glittering on his wrists, she tried, with all the repulsion of having to

touch him, to throw away the cluster of blistered flesh which was the delicate epidermis of her cheeks cutthroat.

— Ah, that's fine! she said, no longer restraining herself from slapping him.

I remained there, fascinated both by the disgusting contact of the inconceivable Uncle Florence and the pretended wife of K., and by the attraction of her handsome face, exasperated with shame, red with confusion, which even the horror seemed to blossom at that impossible moment: her beautiful gray eyes, more angry than shrunken, that she rolled with no scam, her beautiful hands, her fingers clenched and straightened, her long thighs that the knee bone of the frightful uncle forced her to pull away under her light dress—the slightest details of this humiliating position enhanced the prestige of this girl. There was more than a resemblance to the absent “salvationist,” but as a decisive adherence to my performance, a flashy snapshot of Roberte—and that was what, in the morning, at K., had struck me dull: this silent trickery whose intermissions would explain to me the inequalities of our “repetitions”: successful, it was the V. K. who played and deceived me while playing; it was too natural, too modest a Salvationist, who was only sulky, indifferent to the resources of his own body, here manifest.

In a flash I had understood, I thought he understood easily, because inside me something had moved, had slipped and, thanks to this slippage, had made me want it in and so on. It seemed to me then that I touched this shared reality and in this discernment I felt for a moment free. And without thinking of intervening, I left the V. K. struggling in the embrace of the hideous Florence.

— These are things that surpass me, Theodore, suddenly resumed my mother-in-law, trying to get me out of my stupor. My darling, you should not have asked us to go upstairs!

But how could he reply confusedly: “It is not your daughter, it is not Roberte, but the wife of a certain K., I hardly know her, Uncle Florence seems to know her very well, an unfortunate coincidence ...”, I would

have been incapable of forming only these words.

At that moment, holding her back against the woodwork of a panel and pressing her into the vise of his powerful arms, the old man began rolling his skull over the throat of K's so-called wife. She almost suffocated, but overcoming her reluctance, with her supple fingers she had seized by the lobe the ear of the old man and pulled on it to remove it—in vain. At the same time, turning towards me, as much as her posture permitted her, she glared at me as only this sly girl could do, and with a gesture of her thumb turned upside down, as only Roberte knows—and I one could see the nail of this thumb shining with the voluptuous pulp and expert in many larcenies—she pointed out to me the only thing left to do.

Such a sign of intelligence on his part literally echoed me. Almost immediately she threw a foot forward, and from the point of her shoe pointed to one of the crutches which had fallen from the old man on the floor. I stooped, I raised it, I branding it, and with the handle of copper I struck a blow on the skull of the luxurious Florence.

As he crumbled, he turned round, and the globes of his eyes, from the depths of the void where they were floating, fixed me.

My mother-in-law should have fainted. She was only very pale. The man who had frequented her for years under the mask of Uncle Florence no longer existed for her under that unnamable face. But, passing behind the pretended K, she asked me in a quivering voice: "Who is this woman?" And went away without waiting for an answer.

XIV

... What good is it to regret having yielded to the illusion of such expedients, now that the part is lost?... The stroke of the crutch on the skull of the false death, the borrowed face of the alleged Mrs. K., her provocative gestures, even in the most sordid details of a scene that only progressed in time that there appeared in the most arbitrary way a liberation just persuasive so that it was thought necessary to move from one gesture to the other... up to the most trivial of solutions: the trunk! Already open to receive Uncle Florence, in the absence of a trap, in the absence of his volatilisation—but already the crutch had given him too much historical consistency to allow him to remain curled up under the lid for that he could not repel him like a devil, so that his words, which he then uttered, standing, but the feet already in the trunk, could be attributed only to a smoky image of the past (we open the window and we do not talk about it anymore) a second blow would have been impossible if he himself had rendered his *ultima verba* not once again collapsed. Then, then, the haste of the fingers of the so-called Mrs K to padlock the trunk...

A fact, this one indubitable: I was myself at the bottom of the trunk. The suffocation, the choking of Theodore Lacase, was what Roberte wanted. Indeed, the blow by myself on the skull of false death had exhausted my strength, had emptied Theodore Lacase. I sank into total ob-

scurity, and at first there were furtive tactile and auditory sensations, and finally brief flashes.

Sometimes it was re-forming, slipping on my face, the satiny palm of K's wife, and then words whispered in my ear: "Now choose between a criminal companion, ready to do anything, even to betray you if necessary, but for that purpose ready to procure for you all the delights—and another honest, modest until inapparence in its resemblance to me, but inaccessible, but impermeable to your thought, to your practices, that its coldness and indifference to observing them efface in this very similarity..."

Sometimes another voice, rasping and broken, covered them: "Kiss me, Theodore, squeeze yourself against me, we'll blow up the lock! You owe me all that has filled your existence for ten years! Death, my vision nevertheless nourishes you. You were born too late, Theodore, you only look for a vanished world: mine. These crutches are for you that I carry them, it is for you that on them I drag myself, and you strike me! What's the point? You have not the strength to bring down me, or to pretend to possess this woman, mine, and all the more so to give it away! You are too poor to be generous, Theodore, your wealth, you borrow it from me, your emotions, it is I who lived them, your confessions are only the decal of a guilty felicity of which you do not have ability... In vain did you seek in your stagings, in your ridiculous rehearsals, to reproduce a splendor forever absent from your life in cantilever.

"Your laws of hospitality are only a plagiarism, as your marriage with Roberte is one, and you are trying to reconstruct with your Salvator the couple we are both Roberte and I... You were attracted by the widow, but the marriage with a false widow is null, you could not marry the wife of a dead man, even if it means calling the dead man to live with her, for it is only with my posthumous eyes that you can to see what she has in store for others, that she may kill you, and you must be killed by her that I have done to him, you will not dare!"

And suddenly everything started again from the crutch stroke on his

skull. But far from crumbling, he turned towards me, and without letting go of K's wife: "No way!" He said, raising the index finger to draw my attention to the rest, and, taking K.'s wrist from his wrist, kicking her in the back of the kidney, had the breasts already bare, and the buttress, so to speak, tied her feet and her fists, and allowed her to twist so that all the seams of her bodice cracked—though he was sketching a dance of Cossacks around her. At this moment my mother-in-law was deceiving her door, trying to escape, opened the cupboard of the drawing-room, and backed away. Felix, the nephew, was perched on a stool from the top of which, through the window of the impost, he had witnessed the scene. To see him in the state in which the vision of the struggle had plunged him, my mother-in-law finally saved herself. Then Uncle Florence, lifting the pretended Mrs. K., as if he were carrying a plume and knees apart, clung to the chandelier. "Felix, have fun now," said the uncle, and he handed him a crutch so that he could annoy her as he liked. Felix tumbled down the stool, but before he had only raised his nose, K. testified in her own way that Uncle Florence was really alone in making rain and fine weather..

Then, in the darkness that had returned, there was a rumor of words, and I seemed to distinguish—but so far away—in the corner of the drawing-room, Roberte and Merlin on the piano, who were prelude to a four hands. Sometimes they played a piece straight away, sometimes the lid fell back on the keyboard, and Merlin, instead of a score, put a manuscript on the desk. Roberte, indignant, leaped from his seat, turned round in the room, while Merlin uttered more and more vehement accusations against her. Roberte, Roberte alone could have procured for me the *Violette* de Theodore, or the rough draft of this text, and all the most intimate annotations on which I, K., had improvised... I... K!... What was this Theodore Lacase, of whom Merlin defended so passionately? Theodore, who had a wife very similar to mine. "I can not believe that you had recourse to such a process, Roberte!" said Merlin.—He seeks in the depths of me the monster, he pursues him in the expectation of

unbounded wickedness.—He adores you!—No, he loves worse than me.—It's a spoliation!—Hey! Would not the laws of hospitality be one?—But these laws were born from you, too indissolubly linked to the spirit of Theodore, so as not to destroy him by this perfidy!—I will not destroy him, but I will accomplish his dream.—Roberte, you are coming out of a game of which you have been observing the rules.—There are no limits to this game, Merlin! Have I not become the wife of K. for Theodore?..."

...And again, with her long fingers that I knew well, taking me by the chin, she said to me: "Theodore, it's time to go, decide, now that we have crossed this corpse...—What a connection between you and this...—Choose between her and me!—You're the same!—No, I am the one you see thanks to the dead... Come, for the last time!—The last time? You belong to Me!—We do not take back what we gave. As he had given me to those who killed him at my imitation, K. gave me to you, unknown to you, when you thought you would give me to your friends.—You beat me at the game, either! Let's start our life again and do not "repeat" anymore!—Do not we repeat? It's too late. Look at it!" And, tucking her dress, she denuded her pubis tattooed with the image of the bee. "What is that? You obey the lies of Guy to make them plausible?—I am only a hostess at Longchamp!..."

EPILOGUE

I opened my eyes that morning at home. I did not recognize anything, neither the room on the high ceiling, nor the high window, nor the walls of the courtyard, which were not those of the court of Rohan, but the austere one of an old Regence. In front of me, the door of the room was open and a part of the apartment was seen, in escape, to the dining room. Little by little I realized that I had spent the night in Theodore's bedroom. As on the day of their marriage, to which I had not yet attended, the roses, the irises, the lilies flamed, the flowers of the fields enamelled the apartment as far as the eye could see. There was a crowd of people crowding in, the people who had come from near or far in the various vicissitudes of my conflict with Lacase: Merlin, Raphael, Savigny, and Doctor Ygdrasil. But I sought in vain Theodore Lacase. I was on his bed, and, seated beside me, Roberte smiled at me. Behind her stood her mother, and conversing with the old bookseller of the passage Choiseul, Uncle Florence. Only Théodore Lacase could not be found. Then Ygdrasil, leaning towards me, said:

— K. wake up! Fear nothing! It's me, Ygdrasil, who is talking to you.

Roberte passed her hand over my forehead. I should never have dared to believe that she could caress me, K. the mortal enemy of her husband, before their friends.

— K.! said Ygdrasil, finally recognize that you are here at home!

— No, I'm not at home! Why did you bring me here? Where is Theodore? Have they left, he and Valentine, to live with me?... at the Court of Rohan? Has she chased me, moved me? Why are you not with them, why do you all gather together at Theodore's in his absence? Is it unknown to him that you receive me, Roberte?

— With us, my friend, at home, said the wife of Theodore, at my house Roberte, who suffers no interpreter of my own person.

I no doubt had the air of questioning myself, for they were silent and were waiting for what I was about to say.

— Have you abandoned him, my accuser? Or did he calm down... in Mrs. Rodin's arms?

And as silence continued:

— Did he leave you, Roberte, your Theodore? Roberte was staring at me, she had stopped smiling.

Then something impossible happened to my mind and to hold it back I wanted to fix Roberte first to see if she guessed my thought. But after a moment:

— Is he... dead? I said at last.

— Yes, my friend, she said, shaking her head gravely, Theodore is dead, after Rodin, here we are alone, you and I!

— Finally alone! you say, Roberte!—and I took her hands. Are not you horribly afraid of his death?

— K., she said, striking my forehead with her finger, it was here that we buried him here, your Theodore here!

— And you are no more unhappy than that! Roberte!

— Come, she said—and, seizing my head, she looked at me in the eye—think of yourself, K.! and breathe freely!

— ...Breathe freely! That's saying a lot... without Theodore or Rodin, I no longer have the courage to be K., now! Are you still Roberte, without Lacase or Rodin?

— More than ever! she says.

— And you will keep me here?

— Provided you stay!

— Alas, without Theodore, are there still the laws of hospitality?...

— You will always be my host, my dear K.!

I got up. They took me to the drawing-room, among the flowers.

And through the lofty windows I perceived the towers of St. Sulpice, crowned with balusters.

— You never came to our house? asked Roberte. And yet, all this is yours now.

— All this is far, far away, again, I said, and I dropped my head on her shoulder. The others were circling around us.

They whispered and whispered.

— He resigned, shortly after midnight, someone said.

— Who has resigned? I asked.

— M. resigned, the administration of M. is liquidated.

— Here we are again free, a little freer, said Raphael.

— What are you going to do with freedom? asked Savigny.

— Too bad for Longchamp, says U.

— All remains to be done, says Merlin.

— Longchamp dwells, said Roberte, I assure you! Almost at the same instant a troop of children invaded the apartment. Jerome seemed to be leading this young crowd at various ages, among whom were two or three boys from thirteen to fourteen, and two delightful little girls.

— Schools leave for this happy day! said Roberte.

And indeed, all these children carried satchels under their arms, stuffed with books, which they threw with a crash pell-mell on the floor, some deposited instruments of precision, microscopes, others of the aquariums, the a squirrel in his cage, and all this was soon concealed under plants and flowers, in the midst of cries. Jerome asked Roberte:

— Has my wounded pigeon recovered?

— Hush! Calm down, my children, Roberte commanded, clapping her hands.

And she made them line up in a semicircle, facing the adults. A silence reigned, which was overflowing with curiosity. And Roberte began:

— Jerome is...—She looked at me, but pointing to a portrait of a family—from Theodore! See how he resembles him! said she, addressing Uncle Florence, who was contemplating with interest the young assembly. Lucien and Marc are from U! Adrien and Marie-Chantal are from Raphael!—And the latter looked at his progeny, his eyes wide open.—Sylvain is from H!—And they looked for him, who, hidden behind azaleas, watched the scene.—Jacques is from Merlin!—and I heard him say: “Here! When then...” But Roberte continued, imperturbably, the prizes of the winners:—Julie is from... Savigny! and the latter mumbled, “What impudence!” when the doors were opened: M. in person appeared in the midst of us.

— Ah! said the mother of Roberte, “the minister comes to congratulate you, my dear!

— He comes to congratulate himself on his fall, says Roberte.

— Hou! Hou! said one from all sides.

— Galvaudeur!

— Peculator!

M. had seized the hands of Roberte, and kissed them with a suppliant air.

— Can you ever forgive the last of the bastards! I gave you back to Caesar more than he owed, and now he trembles...

— So much the better, said Roberte, pulling out her hands.

— He will chase me if you do not agree to be reimbursed...

— Keep your money and make friends with the riches of iniquities...

— How? She refuses? says U.

— It is in the good tradition of the Desert, remarked Savigny, in whom the Calvinist revived.

To see M. in this humiliating situation, my antipathy for him was going to vanish, and he already seemed simple and humane to me, when he suddenly straightened himself up and thought it his duty to make this

declaration:

— We will come back! We'll start again! The foundations are thrown away!

— The foundations of what then? hazarded Merlin.

— We do not tear the institutions of... desire! pursued desperately M.

And addressing Ygdrasil:

— You, Doctor, explain to them! I'm tired...

But Ygdrasil no longer knew him and turned his back with perfectly equivocal nods.

— Go back to your institutions and leave us the desire, Roberte said. But wait a little! Oh yes! There are still these two!

And, calling the two great boys of thirteen and fourteen:

— Laurent and Pierre are good of you!

— Of me? said M., and, wiping his forehead, he could not conceal his dismay in the midst of general hilarity.

— Come on, do not beat yourself! I keep them! said Roberte to him.

Then, wanting to be casual, M. concluded with a smile of relief rather than conviction:

— At least we will have some people who will take us by example!

— God forbid! said Savigny.

— Our boat is afloat! continued M.

— For a deluge of blood and tears! replied Savigny—and he resumed his tone of prayer.

— Already the wind of forgetfulness is rising, which swells our sails for an unknown land, but the most familiar, the most ancient of the land, for as one goes round the seas, history also returns to its starting point...

And, saying this, M. had fixed me, what Ygdrasil saw me with uneasiness.

— It is you who are responsible, you who have compromised everything! said M., pointing his finger at me.

And everyone looked at me. I was suddenly remembered.

— What did you say? insisted M.

— I said nothing!

— ...But at the very moment: “As one goes around the seas, history also returns to its starting point...”

— You said it, indeed, confirmed Ygdrasil.

— I did not say it, but I think so.

— This is indeed a sentence of Theodore! said Savigny suddenly.

At the same moment Ygdrasil made gestures of his arms, urging him to be silent, as in the past...

— Theodore? Alas! I said with a sigh.

— It is you K. who have compromised everything with your article! began again.

Ygdrasil took this opportunity to remind me of myself:

— What do you think, K.? Are you in for something, K.? Defend yourself, K.!

— But cease to trouble our host with such questions! Roberte said abruptly. Our host is here to rest, he has thought enough, he has nothing to do with your nonsense, and he has better things to do than to defend himself! That is why he is my host!

“My host”! How those words in Roberte’s mouth were soft in my ear!

Then, in silence, Roberte declared:

— With all these children, my friends, each of you gave me a testimony of his own way of feeling, and of understanding me! And now the whole world will grow around me and prolong the memory of the fortuitous hours lived in necessity! Let us remain faithful to the fortuitous one! So banish all care of the burdens usually caused by paternity! But let none of you ever venture to claim its exercise! Who among you would care? The family which we form has no other origin than humor, caprice, chance, gambling! That there reigns only bonds of affinities in caprice, humor, chance, gambling!

The children, however, had gathered around us, observing each other with their mouths open:

— Long live the feast of the Fathers! they cried.

But the fathers answered,

— Live the Laws of Hospitality!

— You are a wonderful woman, dear! said the mother-in-law of Theodore Lacase to Roberte. And again, all of them to resume in chorus: “Long live the laws of hospitality!”

But I was silent, ashamed of all this rejoicing in the absence of Theodore, I, his unworthy guest.

— But how old is she herself? I heard the old bookseller of the passage Choiseul inquiring of Savigny.

— You ask me too much! replied the Gascon. That’s not the question, it does not matter now, my cousin was deaconess at sixteen...

— Which report?

— She has no age at all! said Uncle Florence.

— Poor K., insinuated U.—and I realized then that neither did he take Roberte seriously in the role that Theodore had him repeat once, he gave credit to the words she had just uttered—poor K.! What is he doing there? He woke up too late!

— Happy Theodore! added Savigny, he left before the settlement of the account. Admit that it turns a little to the sale of charity in a patronage! It feels patronage, terribly! Do not forget that she never ceased to be a Salvationist...

These remarks were lost in the hubbub of sudden gaiety that had just broken out, so much so that without being sure of being K., all the same I thought that everything was going to be arranged. Everyone had his share. Everyone would put on his own! From time to time Ygdrasil gave me a look of encouragement, besides superfluous.

They brought drinks. However, the moment was too serious for us to dance. The weather outside looked promising. The children leaned over the windows and commented on the amenities of the enormous bus that awaited them in the street. Uncle Florence was going to pay everything again.

— And now a good surprise! solemnly declared the mother of

Roberte, and raising his stick:

— I bought the Hôtel de Longchamp! To install this little world! I invite you to spend the day there! A lunch awaits us!

The children applauded. But Jerome, who had gone away for a moment, ran back, preceded by a rustle of wings.

All eyes were raised on the ceiling against which a pigeon clashed, searching for a way out, in desperation.

— Here he flies again! He can fly, my Theodore, cried Jerome.

Roberte managed to catch up with him. She lodged him in the hollow of her hand and, with his long fingers, caressed him. Jerome received it.

— We'll let him go, but let's get down! he said. And the troop of children rushing after him. In front of the gate, Jerome tossed his pigeon, which, as it flicked, crossed the open high windows of the drawing-room.

— Adieu, farewell, Theodore! cried the children.

I burst into tears.

— Come, come, K.! said Roberte, taking me in her arms.

— Oh, forgive me, it's nothing, I said confusedly, it is with joy and gratitude that I weep! But I can not forget it so quickly..

— All this is on Theodore's part! He rejoices with us, he is in spirit among us! she said in an almost teasing tone.

They looked at me with compassion, but an amused compassion.

Only Ygdrasil stared at me again, looking anxious.

— Warning! he whispered to his neighbors. If everything starts all over again. Especially no pity!

— Emotion and fatigue, said Roberte, you must not blame him!

And with a pass of her superb hands on my face, I made the past disappear and brought me back to the tangible present: the immediate epidermis of her palm satin on my eyes, on my lips. I had recovered body. I was going to possess Roberte, the wife of the late Theodore Lacase, of whom I was the guest. And then I would go and tell him where I can find him.

— On the way to Longchamp! It was now the unanimous cry. Everyone spoke at once. Roberte was radiant.

Really, this was a day we would remember...

Le Souffleur

By Pierre Klossowski

A Google Translation

Ed. Sean Tatol

