

**THE FALL**

---

---

**&**

---

---

**THE  
OUTSIDER**

---

**ALBERT  
CAMUS**

## THE FALL

The hero of *The Fall*, once a successful Parisian lawyer noted for his modesty and kindly thoughtfulness for the poor and the defeated, at heart despises all but himself. After two insignificant experiences he sets about to reveal his true self to all which soon brings about his calamitous descent to disgrace.

## THE OUTSIDER

*The Outsider* is the story of a young man who, apparently lacking in fundamental emotions, is not only outside the ordinary human framework but is living on the outside instead of the inside of experience. Like a summer insect he skims on the surface of life, until tragedy befalls him.



The Fall  
and  
The Outsider

ALBERT CAMUS

Translated from the French by  
STUART GILBERT

**Lp**

LYTHWAY PRESS  
BATH

*The Outsider* first published in Great Britain  
1946

*The Fall* first published in 1957

by

Hamish Hamilton Ltd

This Large Print edition published by

Lythway Press Ltd

Combe Park, Bath

by arrangement with the copyright holder

1977

ISBN 0 85046 744 6

Photoset and printed in Great Britain by  
Redwood Burn Ltd, Trowbridge & Esher  
Bound by Cedric Chivers Ltd, Bath

THE FALL and  
THE OUTSIDER



# THE FALL





## CHAPTER ONE

MAY I, Monsieur, offer my services without running the risk of intruding? I fear you may not be able to make yourself understood by the worthy gorilla who presides over the fate of this establishment. In fact, he speaks nothing but Dutch. Unless you authorize me to plead your case, he will not guess that you want gin. There, I dare hope he understood me; that nod must mean that he yields to my arguments. He's on the move; indeed, he is making haste with a sort of careful deliberateness. You are lucky; he didn't grunt. When he refuses to serve someone, he merely grunts. No one insists. Being master of one's moods is the privilege of the larger animals. Now I shall withdraw, Monsieur, happy to have been of help to you. Thank you; I'd accept if I were sure of not being a nuisance. You are too kind. Then I shall bring my glass over beside yours.

You are right. His dumbness is deafening. It's the silence of the primeval forest, heavy with menaces. At times I am amazed by his obstinacy in snubbing civilized languages. His business consists in entertaining sailors of

all nationalities in this Amsterdam bar, which he happens to have named—no one knows why—*Mexico City*. With such duties wouldn't you think there might be some fear that his ignorance would be uncomfortable? Fancy the Cro-Magnon man lodged in the Tower of Babel! He would certainly feel out of his element. Yet this one is not aware of his exile; he goes his own sweet way and nothing touches him. One of the rare sentences I have ever heard from his mouth proclaimed that you could take it or leave it. What did one have to take or leave? Doubtless our friend himself. I confess I am drawn by such creatures who are all of a piece. Anyone who has meditated a good deal on man, by profession or vocation, is led to feel nostalgia for the primates. They at least don't have any ulterior motives.

Our host, to tell the truth, has some, although he harbours them deep within him. As a result of not understanding what is said in his presence, he has taken on a distrustful character. Hence that look of touchy dignity as if he suspected, at least, that all is not perfect among men. That disposition makes it less easy to discuss anything with him which doesn't concern his business. Notice, for instance, on the back wall above his head that

empty rectangle marking the place where a picture has been taken down. Indeed, there *was* a picture there, a particularly interesting one, a real masterpiece. Well, I was present when the master of the house received it and when he parted with it. In both cases he did so after weeks of rumination, with the same distrust. In that respect society has somewhat spoiled, you must admit, the frank simplicity of his nature.

Mind you, I'm not judging him. I consider his distrust justified and should be inclined to share it if, as you see, my communicative nature were not opposed to this. I am talkative, alas, and make friends easily. Although I know how to keep my distance, I seize any and every opportunity. When I used to live in France, were I to meet an intelligent man I immediately sought his company. If that be foolish . . . Ah, I see you smile at that use of the subjunctive. I confess my weakness for that mood and for fine speech in general. A weakness that I criticize in myself, believe me. I am well aware that an addiction to silk underwear does not necessarily imply that one's feet are dirty. Nonetheless, style, like sheer silk, too often hides eczema. My consolation is to tell myself that, after all, those who murder the language are not pure either.

Why yes, let's have another gin.

Are you staying long in Amsterdam? A beautiful city, isn't it? Fascinating? There's an adjective I haven't heard for some time. Not since leaving Paris in fact, years ago. But the heart has its own memory and I have forgotten nothing of our beautiful capital, nor of its quays. Paris is a real *trompe-l'œil*, a magnificent dummy setting inhabited by four million silhouettes. Nearly five million at the last census? Why, they must have multiplied. And that wouldn't surprise me. It always seemed to me that our fellow-citizens had two passions: ideas and fornication. Without rhyme or reason, so to speak. Still, let us take care not to condemn them; they are not the only ones, for all Europe is in the same boat. I sometimes think of what future historians will say of us. A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers. After that vigorous definition, the subject will be, if I may say so, exhausted.

Oh, not the Dutch; they are much less modern! They have time—just look at them. What do they do? Well, these gentlemen over here live off the labours of those ladies over there. All of them, moreover, both male and female, are very middle-class creatures who have come here, as usual, out of mythomania

or stupidity. Through too much or too little imagination, in other words. From time to time, these gentlemen indulge in a little knife-or-revolver-play, but don't get the idea that they're keen on it. Their role calls for it, that's all, and they are dying of fright as they shoot it out. Nevertheless, I find them more moral than the others, those who kill in the bosom of the family by a process of attrition. Haven't you noticed that our society is organized for this kind of liquidation? You have heard, of course, of those tiny fish in the rivers of Brazil that attack the unwary swimmer by thousands and with swift little nibbles clean him up in a few minutes, leaving only an immaculate skeleton? Well, that's what their organization is. 'Do you want a good clean life? Like everybody else?' You say yes, of course. How can one say no? 'O.K. You'll be cleaned up. Here's a job, a family, and organized leisure.' And the little teeth attack the flesh, right down to the bone. But I am unjust. I shouldn't say *their* organization. It is *ours*, after all: it's a question of which will clean up the other.

Here is our gin at last. To your prosperity. Yes, the gorilla opened his mouth to call me doctor. In these countries everyone is a doctor, or a professor. They like showing respect, partly out of kindness, partly out of

modesty. With these people, at least, spitefulness is not a national institution. Besides, I am not a doctor. If you want to know, I was a lawyer before coming here. Now, I am a judge-penitent.

But allow me to introduce myself: Jean-Baptiste Clamence, at your service. Pleased to know you. You are in business, no doubt? In a way? Excellent reply! Judicious too: in all things we are merely 'in a way'. Now, allow me to play the detective. You are my age in a way, with the sophisticated eye of the man in his forties who has seen everything, in a way; you are well dressed in a way, that is as people are in our country; and your hands are smooth. Hence a bourgeois, in a way! But a cultured bourgeois! Smiling at the use of the subjunctive, in fact, proves your culture twice over because you recognize it to begin with and then because you feel superior to it. Lastly, I amuse you. And be it said without vanity, this implies in you a certain open-mindedness. Consequently you are in a way . . . But no matter. Professions interest me less than sects. Allow me to ask you two questions and don't answer if you consider them indiscreet. Do you have any possessions? Some? Good. Have you shared them with the poor? No? Then you are what I call a

Sadducee. If you are not familiar with the Scriptures, I admit that this won't help you. But it does help you? So you know the Scriptures? Decidedly, you interest me.

As for me . . . Well, judge for yourself. By my stature, my shoulders, and this face that I have often been told was shy, I look rather like a football player, don't I? But if I am judged by my conversation it must be allowed I have a little subtlety. The camel that provided the hair for my overcoat may have been mangy; instead, my nails are manicured. I, too, am sophisticated, and yet I confide in you without caution on the sole basis of your looks. Finally, despite my good manners and my fine speech, I frequent sailors' bars on the Zeedijk. Come on, give up. My profession is double, that's all, like the human being. I have already told you, I am a judge-penitent. Only one thing is simple in my case: I possess nothing. Yes, I was rich. No, I shared nothing with the poor. What does that prove? That I, too, was a Sadducee . . . Oh, do you hear the fog-horns in the harbour? There'll be fog tonight on the Zuyderzee.

You're leaving already? Forgive me for having perhaps detained you. No, I beg you; I won't let you pay. I am at home at *Mexico*



*City* and have been particularly pleased to receive you here. I shall certainly be here tomorrow, as I am every evening, and I shall be glad to accept your invitation. Your way back? . . . Well . . . But if you don't have any objection, the easiest thing would be for me to accompany you as far as the harbour. Thence, by going around the Jewish quarter you'll come to those handsome avenues with the trams loaded with flowers and noisy as thunder trooping down them. Your hotel is on one of them, the *Damrak*. You first, please. I live in the Jewish quarter or what was called so until our Hitlerian brethren spaced it out a bit. What a clean-up! Seventy-five thousand Jews deported or assassinated; that's real vacuum-cleaning. I admire that diligence, that methodical patience! When one has no character one *has* to apply a method. Here it did wonders, no one can deny it, and I am living on the site of one of the greatest crimes in history. Perhaps that's what helps me to understand the gorilla and his mistrustfulness. Thus I can struggle against my natural inclination carrying me toward what I like. When I see a new face, something inside me sounds the alarm. 'Slow! Danger!' Even when the attraction is strongest, I am on my guard.

Do you know that in my little village,

during a reprisal operation, a German officer courteously asked an old woman to please choose which of her two sons would be shot as a hostage? Choose!—can you imagine that? That one? No, this one. And see him go. Let's not dwell on it, but believe me, Monsieur, any sort of surprise is possible. I knew one pure heart who rejected distrust. He was a pacifist and a libertarian and loved all humanity and the animals with an equal love. An exceptional soul, that's certain. Well, during the last wars of religion in Europe he had retired to the country. He had written on his threshold: 'Wherever you come from, come in and be welcome.' Who do you think answered that noble invitation? The militia, who entered and made themselves at home, and disembowelled him.

Oh, pardon, Madame! But she didn't understand a word of it anyway. All these people, eh? out so late despite the rain which hasn't let up for days. Fortunately there is gin, the sole glimmer in this darkness. Do you feel the golden, copper-coloured light it kindles in you? I like walking through the city of an evening in the warmth of gin. I walk for nights on end, I dream or talk to myself interminably. Yes, like this evening—and I fear making your head swim somewhat. Thank

you, you are most courteous. But it's my overflow; as soon as I open my mouth, sentences pour out. Besides, this country inspires me. I like this crowd of people swarming on the pavements, wedged into a little space of houses and canals, hemmed in by fogs, cold lands, and the sea steaming like wet washing. I like it, for it is double. It is here and elsewhere.

Yes, indeed! From hearing their heavy tread on the damp pavement, from seeing them move ponderously in and out of their shops full of gilded herrings and jewels the colour of dead leaves, you probably think they are here this evening? You are like everybody else; you take these good people for a tribe of syndics and merchants counting up their gold crowns together with their chances of eternal life, whose only lyricism consists in occasionally, with doffing their broad-brimmed hats, taking anatomy lessons? You are wrong. They walk along with us, to be sure, and yet see where their heads are: in that fog compounded of neon, gin, and peppermint emanating from the red and green shop-signs above them. Holland is a dream, Monsieur, a dream of gold and smoke—smokier by day, more gilded by night. And night and day that dream is peopled with Lohengrins like these,

dreamily riding their black bicycles with high handle-bars, funereal swans constantly drifting throughout the whole country, around the seas, along the canals. Their heads in their copper-coloured clouds, they dream; they ride in circles; they pray, sleep-walking in the fog's gilded incense; they have ceased to be here. They have gone thousands of miles away, towards Java, the distant isle. They pray to those grimacing gods of Indonesia with which they have decorated all their shop-windows and which at this moment are floating aimlessly above us before alighting, like gorgeous monkeys, on the signs and stepped roofs, to remind these homesick colonials that Holland is not only the Europe of merchants but also the sea, the sea that leads to Cipango and to those islands where men die mad and happy.

But I am letting myself go! I am pleading a case! Forgive me. Habit, Monsieur, vocation, also the desire to make you fully understand this city, and the heart of things! For we are at the heart of things here. Have you noticed that Amsterdam's concentric canals resemble the circles of hell? The middle-class hell, of course, peopled with bad dreams. When one comes from the outside, as one gradually goes through those circles, life—and hence its crimes—becomes denser, darker. Here, we

are in the last circle. The circle of the . . . Ah, you know that? By heaven, you become harder to classify. But you understand then why I can say that the centre of things is here although we stand at the tip of the continent. A sensitive man grasps such oddities. In any case the newspaper-readers and the fornicators can go no further. They come from the four corners of Europe and stop facing the inland sea, on the drab strand. They listen to the fog-horns, vainly try to make out the silhouettes of boats in the fog, then turn back over the canals and go home through the rain. Chilled to the bone, they come and ask in all languages for gin at *Mexico City*. That's where I wait for them.

Till tomorrow, then, Monsieur *et cher compatriote*. No, you will easily find your way now; I'll leave you near this bridge. I never cross a bridge at night. It's because of a vow. Suppose, after all, that someone should jump in the water. One of two things—either you follow suit to fish him out and, in cold weather, that's taking a great risk! Or you forsake him there and to suppress a dive sometimes leaves one strangely aching. Good night. What? Those ladies behind those windows? Dream, Monsieur, cheap dream, a trip to the Indies!

Those persons perfume themselves with spices. You go in, they draw the curtains and the navigation begins. The gods come down onto the naked bodies and the islands are set adrift, lost souls crowned with the tousled hair of palm trees in the wind. Try it.

## CHAPTER TWO

WHAT is a judge-penitent? Ah, I intrigued you with that little matter. I meant no harm by it, believe me, and I can explain myself more clearly. In a manner of speaking, it's really one of my official duties. But first I must set forth a certain number of facts that will help you to understand my story.

A few years ago I was a lawyer in Paris and, indeed, a rather well-known lawyer. Of course, I didn't tell you my real name. I used to specialize in noble cases. The widow and orphan, as the saying goes—I don't know why, because there are widows who cheat and orphans who are quite savage. Yet it was enough for me to sniff the slightest scent of victim on a defendant for me to swing into action. And what action! A real tempest! My heart was on my sleeve. You really might have thought that justice slept with me every night. I am sure you would have admired the accuracy of my tone, the appropriateness of my emotion, the persuasion and warmth, the restrained indignation of my speeches before the court. Nature has favoured me as to my physique, and the noble attitude comes

effortlessly. Furthermore, I was buoyed up by two sincere feelings: the satisfaction of being on the right side of the bar and an instinctive scorn for judges in general. That scorn, after all, wasn't perhaps so instinctive. I know now that it had its reasons. But, seen from the outside, it appeared to be more like a passion. It can't be denied that, for the moment at least, we have to have judges, don't we? I could not understand, however, how a man could set himself up to perform such a surprising function. I accepted the fact because I saw it, but rather as I accepted locusts. With this difference that the invasions of those orthoptera never brought me a sou whereas I earned my living by carrying on dialogues with people I scorned.

But after all, I was on the right side; that was enough to assure my peace of conscience. The feeling of the law, the satisfaction of being right, the joy of self-esteem, *cher Monsieur*, are powerful incentives to keep us upright or make us move forward. On the other hand, if you deprive men of them, you transform them into dogs frothing with rage. How many crimes committed merely because their authors could not endure being wrong! I once knew a businessman who had a perfect wife, admired by all, and yet he deceived her. That



man was literally enraged to be in the wrong, to be cut off from receiving, or granting himself, a certificate of virtue. The more virtues his wife displayed, the more vexed he became. Eventually, living in the wrong became unbearable to him. What do you think he did then? He gave up deceiving her? Not at all. He killed her. That is how I came to have dealings with him.

My situation was more enviable. Not only did I run no risk of joining the criminal camp (in particular I had no chance of killing my wife, being a bachelor), but I even took up their defence, on the sole condition that they should be noble murderers, just as others are noble savages. The very manner in which I conducted that defence gave me great satisfactions. I was truly above reproach in my professional life. I never accepted a bribe, it goes without saying, nor again did I ever stoop to any shady proceedings. And—this is even rarer—I never deigned to flatter any journalist to get him on my side nor any civil servant whose friendship might be useful to me. I even had the luck to see the Legion of Honour offered to me two or three times and be able to refuse it with a descreet dignity, in which I found my true reward. Finally, I never charged the poor and never boasted of

it. Don't think for a moment, *cher* Monsieur, that I am bragging. I take no credit for this. The avidity which in our society is a substitute for ambition has always made me laugh. I was aiming higher; you will see that the expression is exact in my case.

But you can already imagine my satisfaction. I enjoyed my own nature to the fullest and we all know that therein lies happiness, although, to soothe one another mutually, we occasionally pretend to condemn such joys as selfishness. At least I enjoyed that part of my nature which reacted so appropriately to the widow and the orphan that eventually, through exercise, it came to dominate my whole life. For instance, I loved to help blind people cross streets. From as far away as I could see a cane hesitating on the edge of a pavement, I would rush forward, sometimes only a second ahead of another charitable hand already outstretched, snatch the blind person from any solicitude but mine, and lead him gently but firmly over the pedestrian crossing amidst the hazards of the traffic towards the quiet haven of the other pavement, where we would separate with a mutual emotion. In the same way, I always enjoyed telling people the way in the street, giving a light, lending a hand with heavy barrows,

pushing a stranded car, buying a paper from the Salvation Army girl or flowers from the old-woman pedlar though I knew she stole them from the Montparnasse cemetery. I also liked—and this is harder to say—I liked to give alms. A very Christian friend of mine admitted that one's initial feeling on seeing a beggar approach one's house is unpleasant. Well, with me it was worse: I used to exult. But let's say no more about it.

Let us speak rather of my courtesy. It was famous and yet beyond question. Indeed, good manners provided me with great delights. If I had the luck, on certain mornings, to give up my seat in the bus or the underground to someone who obviously deserved it, to pick up some object an old lady had dropped and return it to her with a smile I knew well, or merely to forfeit my taxi to someone in a greater hurry than I, it was a red letter day. I even rejoiced, I must admit, on those days when, because the public transport was on strike, I had a chance to load into my car at the bus-stops some of my unfortunate fellow-citizens unable to get home. Giving up my seat in the theatre to allow a couple to sit together, lifting a girl's suitcases onto the rack in a train—these were all deeds I performed more often than others because I paid

more attention to the opportunities and was better able to relish the pleasure they gave.

Consequently I was considered generous, and so I was. I gave a great deal in public and in private. But far from suffering when I had to part with an object or a sum of money, I derived constant pleasures from this—among them a sort of melancholy which occasionally rose within me at the thought of the sterility of these gifts and the probable ingratitude that would follow. I even took such pleasure in giving that I hated to be obliged to do so. Exactitude in money matters bored me to death and I conformed ungraciously. I had to be the master of my liberalities.

These are just little touches but they will help you to grasp the constant delights I experienced in my life, and especially in my profession. Being stopped in the corridor of the law-courts by the wife of a defendant you represented for the sake of justice or pity alone—I mean without charging a fee—hearing that woman whisper that nothing, no nothing could ever repay what you had done for them, replying that it was quite natural, that anyone would have done as much, even offering some financial help to tide over the bad days ahead, then—in order to cut the effusions short and preserve their proper

resonance—kissing the hand of a poor woman and breaking away—believe me, *cher Monsieur*, this is achieving more than the vulgar ambitious man and rising to that supreme summit where virtue is its own reward.

Let's pause on these heights. Now you understand what I meant when I spoke of aiming higher. I was talking, it so happens, of those supreme summits, the only places I can really live. Yes, I have never felt comfortable except in lofty surroundings. Even in the details of daily life, I needed to feel *above*. I preferred the bus to the underground, open carriages to taxis, terraces to being indoors. I was an amateur pilot in planes in which one's head is in the open. While on boats I was the eternal pacer of the top deck. In the mountains I used to flee the deep valleys for the passes and plateaux; at the very least, I was a man of the uplands. If fate had forced me to choose between manual labour at a lathe or as a roofer, don't worry, I'd have chosen the roofs and become acquainted with dizziness. Coal-bunkers, ship-holds, subways, grottoes, pits were repulsive to me. I had even developed a special loathing for speleologists, who had the nerve to fill the front page of our newspapers, and whose activities nauseated me. Striving to descend two thousand feet at

the risk of getting one's head caught in a rocky funnel (a siphon as those fools say!) seemed to me the exploit of perverted or traumatized characters. There was something criminal underlying it.

A natural balcony fifteen hundred feet above a sea still visible bathed in sunlight was, on the other hand, the place where I could breathe most freely, especially if I were alone, well above the human ants. I could readily understand why sermons, decisive preachings, and fire-miracles took place on accessible heights. In my opinion no one meditated in cellars or prison cells (unless they were situated in a tower with a broad view); one just became mouldy. And I could understand that man who, having entered holy orders, gave up the frock because his cell, instead of overlooking a vast landscape as he expected, looked out on a wall. Rest assured that as far as I was concerned I did not grow mouldy. At every hour of the day, within myself and among others, I would scale the heights and light conspicuous fires, and a joyful greeting would rise towards me. Thus at least I took pleasure in life and in my own excellence.

My profession satisfied most happily that vocation for summits. It cleansed me of all bitterness towards my neighbour, whom I

always obliged without ever owing him anything. It set me above the judge whom I judged in turn, above the defendant whom I forced to gratitude. Just consider this, *cher Monsieur*, I lived with impunity. I was concerned in no judgment; I was not on the floor of the courtroom but somewhere in the flies like those gods that are brought down by machinery from time to time to transfigure the action and give it its meaning. After all, living aloft is still the only way of being seen and hailed by the largest number.

Some of my good criminals, besides, had killed in obedience to the same feeling. Reading the newspapers afterwards in the sorry condition in which they then were, doubtless brought them a sort of unhappy compensation. Like many men, they had no longer been able to endure anonymity, and that impatience had contributed to leading them to unfortunate extremes. To achieve notoriety it is enough, after all, to kill one's concierge. Unhappily, this is usually an ephemeral reputation, so many concierges are there who deserve and receive the knife. Crime constantly monopolizes the headlines but the criminal appears there only fugitively, to be replaced at once. In short, such brief triumphs cost too dear. Defending our

unfortunate aspirants after a reputation amounted, on the other hand, to becoming really well known, at the same time and in the same places, but by more economical means. Consequently this encouraged me to making more meritorious efforts so that they should pay as little as possible. They were paying their due to some extent in my place. The indignation, talent, and emotion I expended on them washed away, in return, any debt I might feel towards them. The judges punished and the defendants expiated, while I, free of any duty, shielded equally from judgment as from penalty, I freely held sway bathed in a light as of Eden.

Indeed, wasn't that Eden, *cher Monsieur*—no intermediary between life and me? Such was my life. I never had to learn how to live. In that respect, I already knew everything at birth. Some people's problem is to protect themselves from men or at least to come to terms with them. In my case, the understanding was already established. Familiar when it was appropriate, silent when necessary, capable of a free and easy manner as readily as of dignity, I was always in harmony. Hence my popularity was great and my successes in society innumerable. I was acceptable in appearance; I revealed myself to



be both a tireless dancer and an unobtrusively learned man; I managed to love simultaneously—and this is not easy—women and justice; I indulged in sports and the fine arts—but enough, I'll not go on for fear you might suspect me of self-flattery. But just imagine, I beg you, a man at the height of his powers, in perfect health, generously gifted, skilled in bodily exercises as in those of the mind, neither rich nor poor, sleeping well and fundamentally pleased with himself without showing this otherwise than by a happy sociability. You will readily see how I can speak, without immodesty, of a successful life.

Yes, few creatures were more natural than I. I was altogether in harmony with life, fitting into it from top to bottom without rejecting any of its ironies, its grandeur or its servitude. In particular the flesh, matter, the physical in short, which disconcerts or discourages so many men in love or in solitude, without enslaving me, brought me steady joys. I was made to have a body. Whence that harmony in me, that relaxed mastery that people felt, even to telling me sometimes that it helped them in life. Thereby my company was in demand. Often, for instance, people thought they had met me before. Life, its creatures and its gifts, offered themselves to

me and I accepted such marks of homage with a kindly pride. To tell the truth, just from being so fully and simply a man, I looked upon myself as something of a superman.

I was of respectable but humble birth (my father was an officer), and yet, on certain mornings, let me confess it humbly, I felt like a king's son, or a burning bush. It was not a matter, mind you, of the certainty I had of being more intelligent than everyone else. Besides, such certainty is of no consequence because so many imbeciles share it. No, as a result of being showered with blessings, I felt, I hesitate to admit, marked out. Personally marked out, among all, for that long and uninterrupted success. This, after all, was a result of my modesty. I refused to attribute that success to my own merits and could not believe that the conjunction in a single person of such different and such extreme virtues was the result of chance alone. This is why in my happy life I felt somehow that that happiness was authorized by some higher decree. When I add that I had no religion you can see even better how extraordinary that conviction was. Whether ordinary or not, it served for some time to raise me above the daily routine and I literally soared for a period of years, for which, to tell the truth, I still long in my

heart of hearts. I soared until the evening when . . . But no, that's another matter and it must be forgotten. Anyway, I am perhaps exaggerating. I was at ease in everything, to be sure, but at the same time satisfied with nothing. Each joy made me desire another. I went from festivity to festivity. On occasion I danced for nights on end, ever madder about people and life. At times, late on those nights when the dancing, the slight intoxication, my wild enthusiasm, everyone's violent unrestraint would fill me with a tired and overwhelmed rapture, it would seem to me—at the breaking-point of fatigue and for a second's flash—that at last I understood the secret of creatures and of the world. But my fatigue would disappear the next day, and with it the secret; I would rush forth anew. I ran on like that, always heaped with favours, never satiated, without knowing where to stop, until the day—until the evening rather when the music stopped and the lights went out. The gay party at which I had been so happy . . . But allow me to call on our friend the primate. Nod your head to thank him and, above all, drink up with me, I need your understanding.

I see that this declaration amazes you.

Have you never suddenly needed understanding, help, friendship? Yes, of course. I have learned to be satisfied with understanding. It is found more readily and, besides, it's not binding. 'I beg you to believe in my sympathetic understanding' in the inner discourse always precedes immediately 'and now, let's turn to other matters'. It's a board-chairman's emotion; it comes cheap, after catastrophes. Friendship is less simple. It is long and hard to obtain but when one has it there's no getting rid of it; one simply has to cope with it. Don't think for a minute that your friends will telephone you every evening, as they ought to, in order to find out if this doesn't happen to be the evening when you are deciding to commit suicide, or simply whether you don't need company, whether you are not in the mood to go out. No, don't worry, they'll ring up the evening you are not alone, when life is beautiful. As for suicide, they would be more likely to push you to it, by virtue of what you owe to yourself, according to them. May heaven protect us, *cher Monsieur*, from being set on a pedestal by our friends! Those whose duty is to love us—I mean relatives and connections (what an expression!)—are another matter. They find the right word, of course, and it hits the bull's

eye; they ring up as if shooting a rifle. And they know how to aim. Oh, the Bazaines!

What? What evening? I'll get to it, be patient with me. In a certain way I *am* sticking to my subject with all that about friends and connections. You see, I've heard of a man whose friend had been imprisoned and who slept on the floor of his room every night in order not to enjoy a comfort of which his friend had been deprived. Who, *cher* Monsieur, will sleep on the floor for us? Am I capable of it myself? Look, I'd like to be and I shall be. Yes, we shall all be capable of it one day, and that will be salvation. But it's not easy, for friendship is absent-minded or at least unavailing. It is incapable of achieving what it wants. Maybe, after all, it doesn't want it enough? Maybe we don't love life enough? Have you noticed that death alone awakens our feelings? How we love the friends who have just left us? How we admire those of our teachers who have ceased to speak, their mouths filled with earth? Then the expression of admiration springs forth naturally, that admiration they were perhaps expecting from us all life long. But do you know why we are always more just and more generous towards the dead? The reason is simple. With them there is no obligation.

They leave us free and we can take our time, fit the testimonial in between a cocktail-party and a nice little mistress, in our spare time, in short. If they forced us to anything, it would be to remembering, and we have a short memory. No, it is the recently dead we love among our friends, the painful dead, our emotion, ourselves after all!

For instance, I had a friend I generally avoided. He rather bored me, and, besides, he was something of a moralist. But when he was on his death-bed, I was there—don't worry. I never missed a day. He died satisfied with me, holding both my hands. A woman who used to chase after me, and in vain, had the good sense to die young. What room in my heart at once! And when, in addition, it's a suicide! Lord, what a delightful commotion! One's telephone rings, one's heart overflows, and the sentences intentionally short yet heavy with implications, one's restrained suffering and even, yes, a bit of self-accusation!

That's the way man is, *cher Monsieur*. He has two faces: he can't love without self-love. Notice your neighbours if perchance a death takes place in the building. They were asleep in their little routine and suddenly, for example, the concierge dies. At once they awake, bestir themselves, get the details,

commiserate. A newly dead man and the show begins at last. They need tragedy, don't you know; it's their little transcendence, their *apéritif*. Actually, is it mere chance that I should speak of a concierge? I had one, really ill-favoured, malice incarnate, a monster of insignificance and rancour, who would have discouraged a Franciscan. I had even given up speaking to him, but by his mere existence he compromised my customary contentedness. He died and I went to his funeral. Can you tell me why?

Anyway, the two days preceding the ceremony were full of interest. The concierge's wife was ill, lying in the single room, and near her the coffin had been set on trestles. Everyone had to collect his own letters. You opened the door, said '*Bonjour, Madame*', listened to her praise of the dear departed as she pointed to him, and took your letters. Nothing very amusing about that. And yet the whole building passed through her room which stank of carbolic. And the tenants didn't send their servants either; they came themselves to take advantage of the unexpected attraction. The servants too, of course, but on the sly. The day of the funeral, the coffin was too big for the door. 'O my dearie,' the wife said from her bed with a surprise at once delighted and

grieved, 'how big he was!' 'Don't worry, Madame,' replied the undertaker, 'we'll get him through edgewise, and upright.' He was got through upright and then laid down again, and I was the only one (with a former cabaret doorman who, I gathered, used to drink his Pernod every evening with the departed) to go as far as the cemetery and strew flowers on a coffin which astounded me with its sumptuousness. Then I paid a visit to the concierge's wife to receive her thanks which she expressed like a great tragedienne. Tell me, what was the reason for all that? None, except the *apéritif*.

I likewise buried an old fellow-member of the Bar Association. A clerk to whom no one paid any attention, though I always shook his hand. Where I worked I used to shake everyone's hand, anyway, most of them twice over. It didn't cost me anything, and that sort of cordial simplicity won me the popularity so necessary to my contentment. The President of the Bar had not put himself out over the funeral of our clerk. But I did so, and on the eve of a journey, at that, as was amply pointed out. It so happened that I knew my presence would be noticed and favourably commented on. Hence, you see, not even the snow that was falling that day made me withdraw.



What? I'm getting to it, never fear; besides, I have never left it. But let me first point out that my concierge's wife, who had gone to such expense for the crucifix, and the heavy oak and silver handles for the coffin in order to get the most out of her emotion, took up a month later with an overdressed dandy who had a fine voice. He used to beat her; frightful screams could be heard and immediately afterward he would open the window and give cry with his favourite song: 'Women, how pretty you are!' 'All the *same!*' the neighbours would say. All the same what? I ask you. All right, appearances were against the baritone, and against the concierge's wife too. But nothing proves that they were not in love. And nothing proves either that she did not love her husband. Moreover, when the dandy took flight, exhausted in voice and arm, she—that faithful wife—resumed her praises of the departed! After all, I know of others who have appearances on their side and are no more faithful or sincere. I knew a man who gave twenty years of his life to a scatter-brained woman, sacrificing everything to her, his friendships, his work, the very respectability of his life, and who one evening realized that he had never loved her. He had been bored, that's all, bored like most people. Hence he

had made himself out of whole cloth a life full of complications and drama. Something must happen—and that explains most human commitments. Something must happen, even loveless slavery, even war or death. Hurrah then for funerals!

But I at least didn't have that excuse. I was not bored because I was riding on the crest of the wave. On the evening I am speaking about I can say that I was even less bored than ever. And yet . . . You see, *cher Monsieur*, it was a fine autumn evening, still warm in town and already damp over the Seine. Night was falling; the sky, still bright in the west, was darkening; the street-lamps were glowing dimly. I was walking up the quays of the Left Bank towards the Pont des Arts. The river was gleaming between the stalls of the second-hand booksellers. There were but few people on the quays; Paris was already at dinner. I was trampling the dusty yellow leaves that still recalled summer. Gradually the sky was filling with stars that could be seen for a moment after leaving one street-lamp and moving on towards another. I enjoyed the return of silence, the evening's mildness, the emptiness of Paris. I was happy. The day had been good: a blind man, the reduced sentence I had hoped for, a cordial handclasp from my

client, a few generous actions and, in the afternoon, a brilliant improvisation in the company of several friends on the hard-heartedness of our governing class and the hypocrisy of our leaders.

I had gone up onto the Pont des Arts, deserted at that hour, to look at the river that could hardly be made out now night had come. Facing the statue of the Vert-Galant, I dominated the island. I felt rising within me a vast feeling of power and—I don't know how to express it—of completion, which cheered my heart. I straightened up and was about to light a cigarette, the cigarette of satisfaction, when, at that very moment, a laugh burst out behind me. Taken by surprise, I suddenly wheeled round; there was no one there. I stepped to the railing; no barge or boat. I turned back towards the island and, again, heard the laughter behind me, a little farther off as if it were going downstream. I stood there motionless. The sound of the laughter was decreasing, but I could still hear it distinctly behind me, coming from nowhere unless from the water. At the same time I was aware of the rapid beating of my heart. Please don't misunderstand me; there was nothing mysterious about that laugh; it was a good, hearty, almost friendly laugh, which put

everything properly in its place. Soon I could hear nothing more, anyway. I returned to the quays, went up the Rue Dauphine, bought some cigarettes which I didn't need. I was dazed and was breathing fast. That evening I rang up a friend who wasn't at home. I was hesitating about going out when, suddenly, I heard laughter under my windows. I opened them. On the pavement, in fact, some youths were noisily saying good night. I shrugged my shoulders as I closed the windows; after all, I had a brief to study. I went into the bathroom to drink a glass of water. My reflection was smiling in the mirror, but it seemed to me that my smile was double . . .

What? Forgive me, I was thinking of something else. I'll see you again tomorrow, probably. Tomorrow, yes, that's right. No, no, I can't stay. Besides, I'm being called for a consultation by the brown bear you see over there. A decent fellow, to be sure, whom the police are meanly persecuting out of sheer perversity. You think he looks like a killer? Rest assured that his actions conform to his looks. He burgles likewise, and you will be surprised to learn that that cave-man specializes in the art-trade. In Holland everyone is a specialist in paintings and in tulips. This one, with his modest look, is the author of the most

famous theft of a painting. Which one? I may tell you one day. Don't be surprised at my knowledge. Although I am a judge-penitent, I have my sideline here: I am the legal counselor of these good people. I studied the laws of the country and built up a clientele in this quarter where diplomas are not required. It wasn't easy, but I inspire confidence, don't I? I have a good, hearty laugh and an energetic handshake, and those are trump-cards. Besides, I settled a few difficult cases, out of self-interest to begin with and later out of conviction. If pimps and thieves were invariably sentenced, all decent people would get to thinking they themselves were constantly innocent, *cher Monsieur*. And in my opinion—all right, all right, I'm coming!—that's what must be avoided at all costs. Otherwise, everything would be just a joke.

## CHAPTER THREE

I AM indeed grateful to you, *mon cher compatriote*, for your curiosity. However, there is nothing extraordinary about my story. Since you are interested, I'll tell you that I thought a little about that laugh, for a few days, then forgot about it. Once in a great while, I seemed to hear it within me. But most of the time, without making any effort, I thought of other things.

Yet I must admit that I ceased to walk along the Paris quays. Whenever I travelled along them in a car or bus, a sort of silence would descend on me. I was waiting, I believe. But I would cross the Seine, nothing would happen, and I would breathe again. I also had some trouble with my health at that time. Nothing definite, a dejection perhaps, a sort of difficulty in recovering my good spirits. I saw doctors, who gave me stimulants. I was alternately stimulated and depressed. Life became less easy for me: when the body is sad the heart languishes. It seemed to me that I was half unlearning what I had never learned and yet knew so well—how to live. Yet, I think it was probably then that everything began.

But this evening I don't feel quite up to the mark either. I even find trouble expressing myself. I'm not talking so well, it seems to me, and my words are less assured. Probably the weather. It's hard to breathe; the air is so heavy it weighs on one's chest. Would you object, *mon cher compatriote*, to going out and walking in the town a little? Thank you.

How beautiful the canals are this evening! I like the breath of stagnant waters, the smell of dead leaves soaking in the canal and the funereal scent rising from the barges loaded with flowers. No, no, there's nothing morbid about such a taste, I assure you. On the contrary, it's a deliberate act on my part. The truth is that I force myself to admire these canals. What I like most in the world is Sicily, you see, and especially from the top of Etna, in the sunlight, provided I dominate the island and the sea. Java too, but at the time of the trade-winds. Yes, I went there in my youth. In a general way, I like all islands. It is easier to dominate them.

Charming house, isn't it? The two heads you see up there are heads of negro slaves. A shop-sign. The house belonged to a slave-dealer. Oh, they weren't squeamish in those days! They were self-assured; they an-

nounced: 'You see, I'm a man of substance; I'm in the slave-trade; I deal in black flesh.' Can you imagine anyone today making it known publicly that such is his business? What a scandal! I can hear my Parisian colleagues right now. They are adamant on the subject; they wouldn't hesitate to launch two or three manifestoes, maybe even more! And on reflection, I'd add my signature to theirs. Slavery?—certainly not, we are against it! That we should be forced to have it in our homes or in our factories—well, that's natural; but boasting about it, that's the limit!

I am well aware that one can't get along without dominating or being served. Every man needs slaves as he needs fresh air. Commanding is breathing—you agree with me? And even the most destitute manage to breathe. The lowest man in the social scale still has his wife or his child. If he's unmarried, a dog. The essential thing, after all, is being able to get angry with someone who has no right to answer back. 'One doesn't answer back to one's father'—you know the expression? In one way it is very odd. To whom should one answer back in this world if not to what one loves? In another way, it is convincing. Somebody has to have the last word.



Otherwise, every reason can be met with another one and there would never be an end to it. Power, on the other hand, settles everything. It took time, but we finally realized that. For instance, you must have noticed that our old Europe at last philosophizes in the right way. We no longer say as in simple times: 'This is my opinion. What are your objections?' We have become lucid. For the dialogue we have substituted the communiqué. 'This is the truth,' we say. 'You can discuss it as much as you want; we aren't interested. But in a few years there'll be the police to show you I'm right.'

Ah, this dear old planet! All is clear now. We know ourselves; we now know of what we are capable. Just take me, to change examples if not subjects. I have always wanted to be served with a smile. If the maid looked sad, she poisoned my days. She had a right not to be cheerful, to be sure. But I told myself that it was better for her to perform her service with a laugh than with tears. In fact, it was better for me. Yet, without boasting, my reasoning was not altogether idiotic. Likewise, I always refused to eat in Chinese restaurants. Why? Because when they are silent and in the presence of whites, Orientals often look scornful. Naturally they keep that

look when serving. How then can you enjoy the lacquered chicken? And, above all, how can you look at them and think you are right?

Just between ourselves, slavery, preferably smiling, is therefore inevitable. But we must not admit it. Isn't it better that whoever cannot do without having slaves should call them free men? As a matter of principle to begin with, and, secondly, not to drive them to despair. We owe them that compensation, don't we? In that way, they will continue to smile and we shall maintain our good conscience. Otherwise, we'd be obliged to reconsider our opinion of ourselves; we'd go mad with suffering, or even become modest—for anything might happen. Consequently no shop-signs, and this one is shocking. Besides, if everyone told all, displayed his true profession and identity, we shouldn't know which way to turn! Just fancy visiting cards: Dupont, jittery philosopher, or Christian landowner, or adulterous humanist—indeed, there's a wide choice. But it would be hell! Yes, hell must be like that: streets filled with shop-signs and no way of explaining oneself. One is classified once and for all.

You, for instance, *mon cher compatriote*, stop and think of what your sign would be. You are silent? Well, you'll tell me later on. I

know mine in any case: a double face, a charming Janus, and above it the motto of the house: 'Don't rely on it.' On my cards: 'Jean-Baptiste Clamence, play-actor.' Why, shortly after the evening I told you about, I discovered something. Whenever I left a blind man on the pavement to which I had conveyed him, I used to touch my hat to him. Obviously the hat-touching wasn't intended for him since he couldn't see it. To whom was it addressed? To the public. After playing my part, I would take my bow. Not bad, eh? Another day during the same period, when a motorist thanked me for helping him, I replied that no one would have done as much. I meant, of course, anyone. But that unfortunate slip weighed heavy on me. At modesty I really was a champion.

I have to admit it humbly, *mon cher compatriote*, I was always bursting with vanity. I, I, I is the refrain of my whole life and it could be heard in everything I said. I could never speak without boasting, especially if I did so with that shattering discretion of which I was a master. It is quite true that I always lived free and powerful. I simply felt released in my relations with everyone else for the excellent reason that I recognized no equals. I always considered myself more intelligent than

anyone else, as I've told you, but also more sensitive and more skilful, a crack shot, an incomparable driver, a better lover. Even in the fields in which it was easy for me to verify my inferiority—like tennis for instance in which I was but a passable partner—it was hard for me not to think that, with a little time for practice, I would surpass the best players. I found nothing but superiorities in myself and this explained my good-will and serenity. When I was concerned with others, it was out of pure condescension, in utter freedom, and all the credit went to me: my self-esteem would go up a degree.

Along with a few other truths, I discovered these facts little by little in the period following that evening I told you about. Not all at once nor very clearly. First I had to recover my memory. By gradual degrees I saw more clearly, I learned a little of what I knew. Until then I had always been aided by an extraordinary ability to forget. I used to forget everything, beginning with my resolutions. Fundamentally, nothing mattered. War, suicide, love, poverty got my attention, of course, when circumstances forced me, but a courteous, superficial attention. At times, I would pretend to get excited about some cause foreign to my daily life. But basically I didn't

really take part in it except, of course, when my freedom was thwarted. How can I express it? Everything slid off—yes, just rolled off me.

Let's be fair to myself: sometimes my forgetfulness was praiseworthy. You have noticed that there are people whose religion consists in forgiving all offences, and who do in fact forgive them but never forget them? I wasn't good enough to forgive offences, but eventually I always forgot them. And the man who thought I hated him couldn't get over seeing me touch my hat to him with a smile. According to his nature, he would then admire my nobility of character or scorn my ill-breeding without realizing that my reason was simpler: I had forgotten his very name. The same infirmity that often made me indifferent or ungrateful made me magnanimous in such cases.

I lived consequently without any other continuity than that, from day to day, of I, I, I. Without thought for the morrow with women, without thought for the morrow in virtue or vice, each day for itself, just like dogs—but every day myself secure at my post. Thus I progressed on the surface of life, in the realm of words as it were, never in reality. All those books barely read, those

friends barely loved, those cities barely visited, those women barely possessed! I went through the gestures out of boredom or absent-mindedness. Then came human beings; they wanted to cling but there was nothing to cling to, and that was unfortunate. For them. As for me, I forgot. I never remembered anything but myself.

Gradually, however, my memory returned. Or rather, I returned to it, and in it I found the recollection that was awaiting me. But before telling you of it, allow me, *mon cher compatriote*, to give you a few examples (they will be useful to you, I am sure) of what I discovered in the course of my exploration.

One day in my car when I was slow in making a get-away at the green light while our patient fellow-citizens immediately began honking furiously behind me, I suddenly remembered another occasion set in similar circumstances. A motor-cycle ridden by a spare little man wearing spectacles and plus-fours had gone around me and planted itself in front of me at the red light. As he came to a stop the little man had stalled his motor and was vainly striving to revive it. When the light changed, I asked him with my usual courtesy to take his motor-cycle out of the way so that I might pass. The little man

was getting irritable over his wheezy motor. Hence he replied, according to the rules of Parisian courtesy, that I could go and climb a tree. I insisted, still polite but with a slight shade of impatience in my voice. I was immediately told in no uncertain terms that I could go to hell. Meanwhile several horns began noisily behind me. With greater firmness I begged my interlocutor to be polite and to realize that he was blocking the traffic. The irascible character, probably exasperated by the now evident ill-temper of his motor, informed me that if I wanted what he called a thorough dusting off he would gladly give it to me. Such cynicism filled me with a healthy rage and I got out of my car with the intention of thrashing this foul-mouthed individual. I don't think I am cowardly (but what doesn't one think!); I was a head taller than my adversary and my muscles have always been sound. I still believe the dusting off would have been received rather than given. But I had hardly set foot on the pavement when from the gathering crowd a man stepped forth, rushed at me, informed me that I was the scum of the earth and that he would not allow me to strike a man who had a motorcycle between his legs and hence was at a disadvantage. I turned towards this musketeer

and, in truth, didn't even see him. Indeed, hardly had I turned my head when, almost simultaneously, I heard the motor-cycle begin popping again and received a violent blow on the ear. Before I had time to register what had happened, the motor-cycle drove away. Dazed, I mechanically walked towards D'Artagnan when, at the same moment, an exasperated concert of horns rose from the now considerable line of vehicles. The light was changing to green. Then, still somewhat bewildered, instead of giving a drubbing to the idiot who had addressed me, I docilely returned to my car and started up, while as I passed the idiot greeted me with a 'Silly ass!' that I still recall.

A totally insignificant story, in your opinion? Probably. Still it took me some time to forget it, and that's the point. Yet I had excuses. I had let myself be beaten without replying, but I could not be accused of cowardice. Taken by surprise, addressed from both sides, I had mixed everything up and the motor horns had put the finishing touch to my embarrassment. Yet I was unhappy about this as if I had violated the code of honour. I could see myself getting back into my car without any reaction, under the ironic gaze of a crowd especially delighted because, as I



recall, I was wearing a very elegant blue suit. I could hear the 'Silly ass!' which, in spite of everything, struck me as justified. In short, I had collapsed in public. As a result of a series of circumstances, to be sure, but there are always circumstances. As an afterthought I clearly saw what I should have done. I saw myself felling D'Artagnan with a good hook to the jaw, getting back into my car, pursuing the monkey who had struck me, overtaking him, jamming his machine against the kerb, taking him aside and giving him the licking he had fully deserved. With a few variants, I ran off this little film a hundred times in my imagination. But it was too late, and for several days I gnawed on a feeling of bitter resentment.

Why, it's raining again. Let's stop, shall we, under this portico? Good. Where was I? Oh yes, honour! Well, when I recovered the recollection of that episode, I realized what it meant. After all, my dream had not stood up to facts. I had dreamed—this was now clear—of being a complete man who managed to make himself respected in his person as well as in his profession. Half Cerdan, half de Gaulle, if you will. In short, I wanted to dominate in all things. This is why I put on airs, made a particular point of displaying my

physical skill rather than my intellectual gifts. But after having been struck in public without reacting, it was no longer possible for me to cherish that fine picture of myself. If I had been the friend of truth and intelligence I claimed to be, what would that episode have mattered to me? It was already forgotten by those who had witnessed it. I'd have barely accused myself of having got angry over nothing and also, having got angry, of not having managed to face up to the consequences of my anger, for want of presence of mind. Instead of that, I was eager to get my revenge, to strike and conquer. As if my true desire were not to be the most intelligent or most generous creature on earth, but only to beat anyone I wanted, to be the stronger, in fact, and in the most elementary way. The truth is that every intelligent man, as you know, dreams of being a gangster and of ruling over society by force alone. As it is not so easy as the detective novels might lead one to believe, one generally relies on politics and rushes to join the cruellest party. What does it matter, after all, if by humiliating one's mind one succeeds in dominating everyone? I discovered in myself sweet dreams of oppression.

I learned at least that I was on the side of the guilty, the accused, only exactly in so far

as their crime caused me no harm. Their guilt made me eloquent because I was not its victim. When I was threatened, I became not only a judge in turn but even more: an irascible master who wanted, regardless of all laws, to strike down the offender and get him on his knees. After that, *mon cher compatriote*, it is very hard to continue seriously believing one has a vocation for justice and is the predestined defender of the widow and orphan.

Since the rain is coming down harder and we have the time, may I share with you another discovery I made, soon after, in my memory? Let's sit down on this bench out of the rain. For centuries pipe-smokers have been watching the same rain falling on the same canal. What I have to tell you is a bit more difficult. This time it concerns a woman. To begin with, you must know that I always succeeded with women—and without much effort. I don't say succeed in making them happy or even in making myself happy through them. No, simply succeed. I used to achieve my ends just about whenever I wanted. I was considered to have charm. Fancy that! You know what charm is: a way of getting the answer yes without having asked any clear question. And that was true of me at the time. Does that surprise you? Come

now, don't deny it. With the face I now have, that's quite natural. Alas, after a certain age every man is responsible for his face. Mine . . . But what matter? It's a fact—I was considered to have charm and I took advantage of it.

Without calculation, however; I acted in good faith, or almost. My relationship with women was natural, free, easy as the saying goes. No guile in it except that obvious guile which they look upon as a homage. I loved them, according to the hallowed expression, which amounts to saying that I never loved any of them. I always considered misogyny vulgar and stupid, and almost all the women I have known seemed to me better than I. Nevertheless, setting them so high, I made use of them more often than I served them. How can one make it out?

Of course, true love is exceptional, two or three times a century, more or less. The rest of the time there is vanity or boredom. As for me, in any case I was no Portuguese Nun. I am not hard-hearted; far from it—full of pity, on the contrary, and with a ready tear to boot. Only, my emotional impulses always turn towards me, my feelings of pity concern me. It is not true, after all, that I never loved. I conceived at least one great love in my life,

of which I was always the object. From that point of view, after the inevitable hardships of youth, I had settled down early on: sensuality alone dominated my love-life. I looked merely for objects of pleasure and conquest. Moreover, I was aided in this by my looks: nature had been generous with me. I was considerably proud of this and derived many satisfactions therefrom—without my knowing now whether they were due to physical pleasure or to prestige. Of course you will say that I am boasting again. I shan't deny it and I am hardly proud of doing so, for here I am boasting of what is true.

In any case, my sensuality (to limit myself to it) was so real that even for a ten-minute adventure I'd have disowned father and mother, even were I to regret it bitterly. Nay—*especially* for a ten-minute adventure and even more so if I were sure it was to have no sequel. I had principles, to be sure, such as that the wife of a friend is sacred. But I simply ceased quite sincerely, a few days before, to feel any friendship for the husband. Maybe I ought not to call this sensuality? Sensuality is not repulsive. Let's be indulgent and use the word infirmity, a sort of congenital inability to see in love anything but the physical. That infirmity, after all,

was convenient. Combined with my faculty for forgetting, it favoured my freedom. At the same time, through a certain appearance of inaccessibility and unshakable independence it gave me, it provided the opportunity for new successes. As a result of not being romantic, I gave romance something to work on. Our feminine friends have this in common with Bonaparte, that they always think they can succeed where everyone else has failed.

In this exchange, moreover, I satisfied something in addition to my sensuality: my passion for gambling. Amongst women I loved those who would be my partners in a sort of game, which has at least the taste of innocence. You see, I can't endure being bored and appreciate only the diversions of life. Any society, however brilliant, soon crushes me, whereas I have never been bored with the women I liked. It hurts me to confess it, but I'd have given ten conversations with Einstein for a first meeting with a pretty chorus-girl. It's true that at the tenth meeting I was longing for Einstein or a serious book. In short, I was never concerned with the major problems except in the intervals between my little excesses. And how often, standing on the pavement involved in a passionate discussion with friends, I lost the

thread of the argument being developed because a devastating woman was crossing the street at that very moment.

Hence I played the game. I knew they didn't like one to reveal one's purpose too quickly. First, there had to be conversation, fond attentions as they say. I wasn't worried about speeches, being a lawyer, nor about glances, having been an amateur-actor during my military service. I often changed parts, but it was always the same play. For instance, the little act of incomprehensible attraction, of the 'mysterious something', of the 'it's unreasonable, I certainly didn't want to be attracted, I was even tired of love, etc. . . .' always worked, though it is one of the oldest in the repertory. There was also the one of the mysterious happiness no other woman has ever given you; it may be a blind alley perhaps—indeed, it surely is (for one cannot cover oneself too much)—but it just happens to be unique. Above all, I had perfected a little speech which was always well received and which, I am sure, you will applaud. The essential part of that act lay in the assertion, painful and resigned, that I was nothing, that it was not worth getting involved with me, that my life was elsewhere and not related to everyday happiness—a happiness that maybe

I should have preferred to anything, but there you were, it was too late. As to the reasons behind this decisive lateness, I maintained secrecy, knowing that it is always better to go to bed with a mystery. In a way, moreover, I believed what I said; I was living my part. It is not surprising that my partners likewise began to tread the boards enthusiastically. The most sensitive among them tried to understand me, and that effort led them to a sort of abandoned melancholy. The others, satisfied to note that I was respecting the rules of the game and had the tactfulness to talk before acting, progressed without delay to the realities. This meant I had won—and twice over, since, besides the desire I felt for them, I was satisfying the love I bore myself by proving my special powers on each occasion.

This was so much so that even if some among them provided but slight pleasure, I nevertheless tried to resume relations with them, at long intervals, helped doubtless by that strange desire which absence fosters, when it is followed by the sudden rediscovery of an involvement, but also to verify the fact that our ties still held and that it was my privilege alone to tighten them. Sometimes I went so far as to make them swear not to give themselves to any other man, in order to quiet my



worries once and for all on that score. My heart, however, played no part in that worry, nor even my imagination. A certain type of pretension was in fact so personified in me that it was hard for me to imagine, despite the facts, that a woman who had once been mine could ever belong to another. But the oath they swore to me liberated me while it bound them. As soon as I knew they would never belong to anyone else, I could make up my mind to break off—which otherwise was almost always impossible for me. As far as they were concerned, I had proved my point once and for all and assured my power for a long time. Strange, isn't it? But that's the way it was, *mon cher compatriote*. Some cry: 'Love me!' Others: 'Don't love me!' But a certain genus, the worst and most unhappy, cries: 'Don't love me and be faithful to me!'

Except that the proof is never definitive, after all; one has to begin again with each new person. As a result of beginning over and over again, one gets in the habit. Soon the speech comes without thinking and the reflex follows; and one day you find yourself taking without really desiring. Believe me, for certain men at least, not taking what one doesn't desire is the hardest thing in the world.

This is what happened eventually and

there's no point in telling you who she was except that, without really stirring me, she had attracted me by her passive, avid manner. Frankly, it was a shabby experience, as I should have expected. But I never had any complexes and soon forgot a person whom I didn't see again. I thought she hadn't noticed anything and didn't even imagine she could have an opinion. Besides, her passive manner cut her off from the world in my eyes. A few weeks later, however, I learned that she had related my deficiencies to a third person. At once I felt as if I had been somewhat deceived; she wasn't so passive as I had thought and she didn't lack judgment. Then I shrugged my shoulders and pretended to laugh. I even laughed outright; clearly the incident was unimportant. If there is any realm in which modesty ought to be the rule, isn't it sex with all the unforeseeable there is in it? But no, each of us tries to show up to advantage, even in solitude. Despite having shrugged my shoulders, what was my behaviour in fact? I saw that woman again a little later and did everything necessary to charm her and really take her back. It was not very difficult, for *they* don't like, either, to end on a failure. From that moment onwards, without really intending it, I began, in fact, to mortify her in

every way. I would give her up and take her back, force her to give herself at inappropriate times and in inappropriate places, treat her so brutally, in every respect, that eventually I attached myself to her as I imagine the gaoler is bound to his prisoner. And this kept up till the day when, in the violent disorder of painful and constrained pleasure, she paid a tribute aloud to what was enslaving her. That very day I began to move away from her. I have forgotten her since.

I'll agree with you, though you politely haven't said a word, that that adventure is not a very pretty one. But just think of your life, *mon cher compatriote!* Search your memory and perhaps you will find some similar story that you'll tell me later on. As for me, when that little matter came to mind, I again began to laugh. But it was another kind of laugh, rather like the one I had heard on the Pont des Arts. I was laughing at my speeches and my pleadings in court. Even more at my pleading in court than at my speeches to women. To them, at least, I did not lie much. Instinct spoke clearly, without subterfuges, in my attitude. The act of love, for instance, is a confession. Selfishness screams aloud, vanity shows off, or else true generosity reveals itself. Ultimately in that regrettable story, even

more than in my other affairs, I had been more outspoken than I thought; I had declared who I was and how I could live. Despite appearances, I was therefore more worthy in my private life—even and especially when I behaved as I have told you—than in my great professional flights about innocence and justice. At least, seeing myself act with others, I couldn't deceive myself as to the truth of my nature. No man is a hypocrite in his pleasures—I read that or did I think it myself, *mon cher compatriote*?

When I examined thus the trouble I had in separating once and for all from a woman—a trouble which involved me in so many simultaneous liaisons—I didn't blame my soft-heartedness. That was not what impelled me when one of my mistresses tired of waiting for the Austerlitz of our passion and spoke of leaving me. At once I was the one who made a step forward, who yielded, who became eloquent. As for the affection and soft-heartedness, I aroused these in her, experiencing merely the appearance of them myself—simply a little excited by this refusal, alarmed also by the possible loss of an affection. At times I truly thought I was suffering, to be sure. But the rebellious one had merely to leave in fact for me to forget her without

effort, just as I forgot her at my side when, on the contrary, she had decided to return. No, it was not love or generosity that aroused me when I was in danger of being forsaken, but merely the desire to be loved and to receive what, in my opinion, was my due. The moment I was loved and my partner again forgotten, I shone, I was at the top of my form, I became likable.

Be it said, moreover, that as soon as I had won that affection I became aware of its weight. In my moments of irritation I told myself that the ideal solution would have been the death of the person I was interested in. Her death would, on the one hand, have fixed our relationship once and for all and, on the other, removed its constraint. But one cannot long for the death of everyone or, to go to extremes, depopulate the planet in order to enjoy a freedom that is unthinkable otherwise. My sensibility was opposed to this, and my love of mankind.

The only deep emotion I occasionally felt in these affairs was gratitude, when all was going well and I was left, not only peace, but freedom to come and go—never kinder and gayer with one than when I had just left another's bed, as if I extended to all other women the debt I had just contracted towards

one of them. In any case, however apparently confused my feelings were, the result I achieved was clear: I kept all my affections within reach to make use of them when I wanted. On my own admission, I could live happily only on condition that all the individuals on earth, or the greatest possible number, were turned towards me, eternally unattached, deprived of any separate existence and ready to answer my call at any moment, doomed in short to sterility until the day I should deign to favour them. In short, for me to live happily it was essential for the individuals I chose not to live at all. They must receive their life, sporadically, only at my bidding.

Oh, I don't feel any self-satisfaction, believe me, in telling you this. Upon thinking of that time when I used to ask for everything without paying anything myself, when I used to mobilize so many people in my service, when I used to put them in the refrigerator, so to speak, in order to have them at hand some day when it would suit me, I don't know how to name the odd feeling that comes over me. Isn't it shame, perhaps? Tell me, *mon cher compatriote*, doesn't shame sting a little? It does? Well, it's probably shame, then, or one of those silly emotions to do with honour. It

seems to me in any case that that emotion has never left me since the adventure I found at the heart of my memory, which I cannot any longer put off relating, despite my digressions and the inventive efforts for which, I hope, you give me credit.

Look, the rain has stopped! Be kind enough to walk home with me. I am strangely tired, not from having talked so much but at the mere thought of what I still have to say. Oh well, a few words will suffice to relate my essential discovery. What's the use of saying more, anyway? For the statue to stand bare the fine speeches must take flight. So here goes. That particular night in November, two or three years before the evening when I thought I heard laughter behind me, I was returning to the Left Bank and to my home by way of the Pont Royal. It was an hour past midnight, a fine rain was falling, a drizzle rather, that scattered the few people on the streets. I had just left a mistress, who was surely already asleep. I was enjoying that walk, a little numbed, my body calmed and irrigated by a flow of blood rather like the falling rain. On the bridge I passed behind a figure leaning over the railing and seeming to stare at the river. On closer view, I made out a slim young woman dressed in black. Between

her dark hair and coat collar could be seen the back of her neck, cool and damp, which stirred me. But I went on, after a moment's hesitation. At the end of the bridge I followed the quay towards Saint-Michel, where I lived. I had already gone some fifty yards when I heard the sound—which, despite the distance, seemed dreadfully loud in the midnight silence—of a body striking the water. I stopped short but without turning round. Almost at once I heard a cry, repeated several times, which was going downstream; then it abruptly ceased. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable. I wanted to run and yet didn't move an inch. I was trembling, I believe from cold and shock. I told myself that I had to be quick and I felt an irresistible weakness steal over me. I have forgotten what I thought then. 'Too late, too far . . .' or something of the sort. I was still listening as I stood motionless. Then, slowly, in the rain, I went away. I told no one.

But here we are; here's my house, my refuge! Tomorrow? Yes, if you wish. I'd like to take you to the island of Marken so that you can see the Zuyderzee. Let's meet at eleven at *Mexico City*. What? That woman? Oh, I don't know. Really I don't know. The



next day and the days following, I didn't read the papers.

## CHAPTER FOUR

A DOLLS' village, isn't it? No shortage of quaintness here! But I didn't bring you to this island for quaintness, *cher ami*. Anyone can show you peasant head-dresses, wooden shoes and ornamented houses with fishermen smoking choice tobacco surrounded by the smell of furniture-polish. I am one of the few people, on the other hand, who can show you what really matters here.

We are reaching the dyke. We'll have to follow it to get as far as possible from these too charming houses. Please, let's sit down. Well, what do you think of it? Isn't it the most beautiful negative landscape? Just see on the left that pile of ashes they call a dune here, the grey dyke on the left, the livid beach at our feet and, in front of us, the sea looking like a weak lye-solution with the vast sky reflecting the colourless waters. A flabby hell, indeed! Everything horizontal, no relief; space is colourless and life dead. Is it not universal obliteration, everlasting nothingness made visible? No human beings, above all, no human beings! You and I alone facing the planet at last deserted! The sky is alive? You are right,

*cher ami*. It thickens, becomes concave, opens up air shafts and closes cloudy doors. Those are the doves. Haven't you noticed that the sky of Holland is filled with millions of doves, invisible because of their altitude, which flap their wings, rise or fall in unison, filling the heavenly space with dense multitudes of greyish feathers carried hither and thither by the wind. The doves wait up there all year round. They wheel above the earth, look down, and would like to come down. But there is nothing but the sea and the canals, roofs covered with shop-signs, and never a head on which to alight.

You don't understand what I mean? I'll grant you I'm tired. I lose the thread of what I am saying; I've lost that lucidity to which my friends used to enjoy paying respects. I say 'my friends', moreover, as a matter of principle. I have no more friends; I have nothing but accomplices. To make up for this, their number has increased; they are the whole human race. And within the human race, you first of all. Whoever is at hand is always the first. How do I know I have no friends? It's very easy: I discovered it the day I thought of killing myself to play a trick on them, to punish them, in a way. But punish whom? Some would be surprised; no one

would feel punished. I realized I had no friends. Besides, even if I had I shouldn't be any better off. If I'd been able to commit suicide and then see their reaction, why, then the game would have been worth the candle. But the earth is dark, *cher ami*, the coffin thick, and the shroud opaque. The eyes of the soul—to be sure—if there is a soul and it has eyes! But you see, we're not sure, we can't be sure. Otherwise, there would be a solution; at least one could get oneself taken seriously. Men are never convinced of your reasons, of your sincerity, of the seriousness of your sufferings, except by your death. So long as you are alive, your case is doubtful; you have a right only to their scepticism. So if there were the least certainty that one could enjoy the show, it would be worth proving to them what they are unwilling to believe and thus amazing them. But you kill yourself and what does it matter whether or not they believe you? You are not there to see their amazement and their contrition (fleeting at best), to witness—such is every man's dream—your own funeral. In order to cease being a doubtful case, one has to cease being, that's all.

Besides, isn't it better thus? We'd suffer too much from their indifference. 'You'll pay for this!' a daughter said to her father who had

prevented her from marrying too smart a suitor. And she killed herself. But the father paid for nothing. He loved fly-fishing. Three Sundays later he went back to the river—to forget, as he said. He was right; he forgot. To tell the truth, the contrary would have been surprising. You think you are dying to punish your wife and actually you are freeing her. It's better not to see that. Apart from the fact that you might hear the reasons they give for your action. As far as I'm concerned, I can hear them now: 'He killed himself because he couldn't bear . . .' Ah, *cher ami*, how poor in invention men are! They always think one commits suicide for a reason. But it's quite possible to commit suicide for two reasons. No, that never occurs to them. So what's the good of dying intentionally, of sacrificing yourself to the idea you want people to have of you? Once you are dead, they will take advantage of it to attribute idiotic or vulgar motives to your action. Martyrs, *cher ami*, must choose between being forgotten, mocked, or made use of. As for being understood—never!

Besides, let's not beat about the bush; I love life—that's my real weakness. I love it so much that I am incapable of imagining what is not life. Such avidity has something

plebeian about it, don't you think? Aristocracy cannot imagine itself without a little distance surrounding itself and its own life. One dies if necessary, one breaks rather than bending. But I bend, because I continue to love myself. For example, after all I have told you, what do you think I developed? An aversion for myself? Come, come, it was mostly with others that I was fed up. To be sure, I knew my failings and regretted them. Yet I continued to forget them with a rather meritorious obstinacy. The prosecution of others, on the contrary, went on constantly in my heart. Of course—does that shock you? Maybe you think it's not logical? But the question is not how to remain logical. The question is how to slip through and, above all—yes, above all, the question is how to elude judgment. I'm not saying to avoid punishment, for punishment with judgment is bearable. It has a name, besides, that guarantees our innocence: it is called misfortune. No, on the contrary, it's a matter of dodging judgment, of avoiding being for ever judged without ever having a sentence pronounced.

But one can't dodge it so easily. Today we are always as ready to judge as we are to fornicate. With this difference that there are no inadequacies to fear. If you doubt this, just

listen to the table-conversation during August in those summer hotels where our charitable fellow-citizens take their cure for boredom. If you still hesitate to come to a conclusion, read the writings of our great men of the moment. Or else observe your own family; you will learn a thing or two. *Mon cher ami*, let's not give them any pretext, no matter how small, for judging us! Otherwise, we'll be left in shreds. We are forced to take the same precautions as the lion-tamer. If, before going into the cage, he has the misfortune to cut himself while shaving, what a feast for the animals! I realized this all of a sudden the day I began to suspect that maybe I wasn't so admirable. From then on, I became mistrustful. Since I was bleeding slightly, there was no escape for me; they would devour me.

My relations with my contemporaries were apparently the same and yet subtly out of tune. My friends hadn't changed. On occasion, they still extolled the harmony and security they found in my company. But I was aware only of the dissonances and disorder that filled me; I felt vulnerable and as if I were handed over to public accusation. In my eyes my fellows ceased to be the respectful public to which I was accustomed. The circle of which I was the centre broke and they lined

up in a row as on the judges' bench. The moment I grasped that there was something to judge in me, I realized that, in fact, they had an irresistible vocation for judgment. Yes, they were there as before, but they were laughing. Or rather it seemed to me that every one of them that I met was looking at me with a hidden smile. I even had the impression, at that time, that people were tripping me up. Two or three times, in fact, I stumbled as I entered public places. Once even, I went sprawling on the floor. The Cartesian Frenchman in me didn't take long to catch hold of himself and attribute those accidents to the only reasonable divinity—that is, chance. None the less, my distrust remained.

Once my attention was aroused, it was not hard for me to discover that I had enemies. In my profession, to begin with, and also in my social life. Some among them I had obliged. Others I should have obliged. All that, after all, was natural, and I discovered it without too much grief. It was harder and more painful, on the other hand, to admit that I had enemies among people I hardly knew or didn't know at all. I had always thought, with the ingenuousness I have already illustrated to you, that those who didn't know me couldn't resist liking me if they came to know me. Not



at all! I encountered hostility especially among those who knew me only at a distance without my knowing them myself. Doubtless they suspected me of living fully and being given up completely to happiness; and that cannot be forgiven. The look of success, when it is worn in a certain way, would infuriate a jackass. Then again, my life was full to bursting and, for lack of time, I used to refuse many advances. Then I would forget my refusals, for the same reason. But those advances had been made me by people whose life was not full and who, for that very reason, would remember my refusals.

Thus it is that, to take but one example, women, in the end, cost me dear. The time I used to devote to them I couldn't give to men, who didn't always forgive me this. Is there any way out? Your successes and happiness are forgiven you only if you generously consent to share them. But to be happy it is essential not to be too concerned with others. Consequently, there is no escape. Happy and judged or absolved and wretched. As for me, the injustice was even greater: I was condemned for past successes. For a long time I had lived in the illusion of a general agreement, whereas, from all sides, judgments, arrows, mockeries rained upon

me, inattentive and smiling. The day I was alerted I became lucid; I received all the wounds at the same time and lost my strength all at once. The whole universe then began to laugh at me.

That is what no man (except those who are not really alive—in other words, wise men) can endure. Spitefulness is the only possible ostentation. People hasten to judge in order not to be judged themselves. What do you expect? The idea that comes most naturally to man, as if from his very nature, is the idea of his innocence. From this point of view, we are all like that little Frenchman at Buchenwald who insisted on registering a complaint with the clerk, himself a prisoner, who was recording his arrival. A complaint? The clerk and his comrades laughed: 'Useless, old man. You don't lodge complaints here.' 'But you see, sir,' said the little Frenchman, 'my case is exceptional. I am innocent!'

We are all exceptional cases. We all want to appeal against something! Each of us insists on being innocent at all costs, even if he has to accuse the whole human race and heaven itself. You won't delight a man by complimenting him on the efforts by which he has become intelligent or generous. On the other hand, he will beam if you admire his natural

generosity. Inversely, if you tell a criminal that his crime is not due to his nature or his character but to unfortunate circumstances, he will be extravagantly grateful to you. During the counsel's speech, this is the moment he will choose to weep. Yet there is no credit in being honest or intelligent by birth. Just as one is surely no more responsible for being a criminal by nature than for being a criminal by force of circumstance. But those rascals want grace, that is irresponsibility, and they shamelessly allege the justifications of nature or the excuses of circumstances, even if they are contradictory. The essential thing is that they should be innocent, that their virtues, by grace of birth, should not be in question and that their misdeeds, born of a momentary misfortune, should never be more than temporary. As I told you, it's a matter of dodging judgment. Since it is hard to dodge it, tricky to get one's nature simultaneously admired and excused, they all strive to be rich. Why? Did you ever ask yourself? For power, of course. But especially because wealth shields from immediate judgment, takes you out of the subway crowd to enclose you in a chromium-plated automobile, isolates you in huge protected lawns, Pullman cars, first-class cabins.

Wealth, *cher ami*, is not quite acquittal but reprieve, and that's always worth taking.

Above all, don't believe your friends when they ask you to be sincere with them. They merely hope you will encourage them in the good opinion they have of themselves by providing them with the additional assurance they find in your promise of sincerity. How could sincerity be a condition of friendship? A liking for truth at any cost is a passion that spares nothing and that nothing resists. It's a vice, at times a comfort, or a selfishness. Therefore, if you are in that situation, don't hesitate: promise to tell the truth and lie as best you can. You will satisfy their hidden desire and doubly prove your affection.

This is so true that we rarely confide in those who are better than ourselves. Rather, we are more inclined to flee their society. Most often, on the other hand, we confess to those who are like us and who share our weaknesses. Hence we don't want to improve ourselves or be bettered, for we should first be bound to be judged in default. We merely wish to be pitied and encouraged in the course we have chosen. In short, we should like, at the same time, to cease being guilty and yet not to make the effort of cleansing ourselves. Not enough cynicism and not enough virtue.

We lack the energy required for evil as well as that required for good. Do you know Dante? Really? Well, I'll be damned! Then you know that Dante accepts the idea of neutral angels in the quarrel between God and Satan. And he puts them in Limbo, a sort of vestibule of his Hell. We are in the vestibule, *cher ami*.

Patience? You are probably right. It would take patience to wait for the Last Judgment. But there you are, we're in a hurry. So much in a hurry, indeed, that I was obliged to make myself a judge-penitent. First, however, I had to make shift with my discoveries and put myself right with my contemporaries' laughter. From the evening when I was called—for I was really called—I had to answer or at least seek an answer. It wasn't easy; for some time I floundered. To begin with, that perpetual laugh and the laughs had to teach me to see clearly within me and to discover at last that I was not simple. Don't smile; that truth is not so fundamental as it seems. What we call fundamental truths are simply the ones we discover after all the others.

However that may be, after prolonged research on myself, I brought out the basic duplicity of the human being. Then I realized, as a result of delving in my memory, that modesty helped me to shine, humility to

conquer, and virtue to oppress. I used to wage war by peaceful means and eventually used to achieve, through disinterested means, everything I desired. For instance, I never complained that my birthday was overlooked; people were even surprised, with a touch of admiration, by my discretion on this subject. But the reason for my disinterestedness was even more discreet: I longed to be forgotten in order to be able to complain to myself. Several days before the famous date (which I knew very well) I was on the alert, eager to let nothing slip that might arouse the attention and memory of those on whose lapse I was counting (didn't I once go so far as to consider falsifying a friend's calendar?) Once my solitude was thoroughly proved, I could surrender to the charms of a virile self-pity.

Thus the surface of all my virtues had a less imposing reverse side. It is true that, in another sense, my shortcomings turned to my advantage. The obligation I felt to hide the vicious part of my life gave me, for example, a cold look that was confused with the look of virtue; my indifference made me loved; my selfishness culminated in my generousities. I stop there, for too great a symmetry would upset my argument. But after all, I presented a harsh exterior and yet could never resist the

offer of a glass or of a woman! I was considered active, energetic, and my kingdom was the bed. I used to advertise my loyalty and I don't believe there is a single person I loved that I didn't eventually betray. Of course, my betrayals didn't stand in the way of my fidelity; I used to knock off a considerable pile of work through successive periods of idleness; and I had never ceased aiding my neighbour, thanks to my enjoyment in so doing. But however much I repeated such facts to myself, they gave me but superficial consolations. On certain mornings, I would get up the case against myself most thoroughly, coming to the conclusion that I excelled above all in scorn. The very people I helped most often were the most scorned. Courteously, with a solidarity charged with emotion, I used to spit daily in the face of all the blind.

Tell me frankly, is there any excuse for that? There is one, but so wretched that I cannot dream of advancing it. In any case, here it is: I have never been really able to believe that human affairs were serious matters. I had no idea where the serious might lie, except that it was not in all this I saw around me—which seemed to me merely an amusing game, or tiresome. There are really efforts

and convictions I have never been able to understand. I always looked with amazement, and a certain suspicion, on those strange creatures who died for money, fell into despair over the loss of a 'position', or sacrificed themselves with a high-and-mighty manner for the prosperity of their family. I could better understand that friend who had made up his mind to stop smoking and through sheer will-power had succeeded. One morning he opened the paper, read that the first H-bomb had been exploded, learned about its wonderful effects, and hastened to a tobacco-shop.

To be sure, I occasionally pretended to take life seriously. But very soon the frivolity of seriousness struck me and I merely went on playing my role as well as I could. I played at being efficient, intelligent, virtuous, a good citizen, shocked, indulgent, responsible, high-minded . . . In short, there's no need to go on, you have already grasped that I was like my Dutchmen who are here without being here: I was absent at the moment when I took up the most space. I have never been really sincere and enthusiastic except when I used to indulge in sports and, in the army, when I used to act in plays we put on for our own amusement. In both cases there was a rule of



the game which was not serious but which we enjoyed taking as if it were. Even now, the Sunday games in an overflowing stadium and the theatre, which I loved with an unparalleled devotion, are the only places in the world where I feel innocent.

But who would consider such an attitude legitimate in the face of love, death, and the wages of the poor? Yet what can be done about it? I could imagine the love of Isolde only in novels or on the stage. At times people on their deathbeds seemed to me convinced of their roles. The lines spoken by my poor clients always struck me as fitting the same pattern. Hence, living among men without sharing their interests, I could not manage to believe in the commitments I made. I was courteous and indolent enough to live up to what was expected of me in my profession, my family, or my life as a citizen, but each time with a sort of indifference that spoiled everything. I lived my whole life under a double code, and my most serious acts were often the ones in which I was the least involved. Wasn't it this, after all, for which, on top of my blunders, I could not forgive myself, which made me revolt most violently against the judgment I felt forming, in me and around me, and that forced me to seek an escape?

For some time, in appearances my life continued as if nothing had changed. I was on rails and speeding ahead. As if purposely, people's praises increased. And that's just where the trouble came from. You remember the remark: 'Woe to you when all men speak well of you!' Ah, the one who said that spoke words of wisdom! Woe to me! Consequently, the engine began to have whims, inexplicable breakdowns.

Then it was that the thought of death burst into my daily life. I would measure the years separating me from my end. I would look for examples of men of my age who were already dead. And I was tormented by the thought that I might not have time to accomplish my task. What task? I had no idea. Frankly, was what I was doing worth continuing? But that was not quite it. A ridiculous fear pursued me, in fact: one could not die without having confessed all one's lies. Not to God or to one of his representatives; I was above that, as you well imagine. No, it was a matter of confessing to men, to a friend, to a beloved woman, for example. Otherwise, even if there were only one lie hidden in a life, death made it definitive. No one, ever again, would know the truth on this point since the only one to know it was precisely the dead man sleeping on his

secret. That absolute murder of a truth used to make me dizzy. Today, by the way, it would cause me, instead, subtle joys. The idea, for instance, that I am the only one to know what everyone is looking for and that I have at home an object which has kept the police of three countries on the run to no avail is a sheer delight. But let's not go into that. At the time, I had not yet found the recipe and I was fretting.

I pulled myself together, of course. What did one man's lie matter in the history of generations? And what presumption to want to drag out into the full light of truth a paltry fraud, lost in the sea of ages like a grain of sand in the ocean! I also told myself that the body's death, to judge from those I had seen, was in itself sufficient punishment and that it absolved all. Salvation was won (that is, the right to disappear for good) in the sweat of the death-agony. None the less the discomfort grew; death was faithful at my bedside; I used to get up with it every morning, and compliments became more and more unbearable to me. It seemed to me that the falsehood increased with them so inordinately that never again could I put myself right.

A day came when I could bear it no longer. My first reaction was excessive. Since I was a

liar, I would reveal this and hurl my duplicity in the face of all those imbeciles, even before they discovered it. Provoked to truth, I would accept the challenge. In order to forestall the laughter, I dreamed of hurling myself into the general derision. In fact, it was still a question of dodging judgment. I wanted to put the laughers on my side, or at least to put myself on their side. I contemplated, for instance, jostling the blind on the street; and from the secret, unexpected joy this gave me I recognized how much a part of my soul loathed them; I planned to puncture the tyres of wheelchairs, to go and shout 'lousy proletarian' under the scaffoldings on which labourers were working, to smack infants in the subway. I dreamed of all that and did none of it, or if I did something of the sort, I have forgotten it. In any case, the very word 'justice' gave me strange fits of rage. I continued, of necessity, to use it in my speeches to the court. But I took my revenge by publicly inveighing against the humanitarian spirit; I announced the publication of a manifesto exposing the oppression that the oppressed inflict on decent people. One day while I was eating lobster at a terrace restaurant and a beggar bothered me, I called the proprietor to drive him away and loudly approved the

words of that administrator of justice: 'You are embarrassing people,' he said. 'Just put yourself in the place of these ladies and gents, after all!' Finally, I used to express, to whoever would listen, my regret that it was no longer possible to act like a certain Russian land-owner whose character I admired. He would have a beating administered both to his peasants who bowed to him and to those who didn't bow to him in order to punish a boldness he considered equally impudent in both cases.

However, I recall more serious excesses. I began to write an *Ode to the Police* and an *Apotheosis of the Guillotine*. Above all, I used to force myself to visit regularly the special cafés where our professional humanitarian free-thinkers gathered. My good past record assured me of a welcome. There, without seeming to, I would let fly a forbidden expression: 'Thank God . . .' I would say, or more simply: 'My God . . .' You know what shy little children our café atheists are. A moment of amazement would follow that outrageous expression, they would look at one another dumbfounded, then the tumult would burst forth. Some would flee the café, others would gabble indignantly without listening to anything, and all would writhe in

convulsions like the devil in holy water.

You must find all that childish. Yet maybe there was a more serious reason for those little jokes. I wanted to upset the game and above all to destroy that flattering reputation, the thought of which threw me into a rage. 'A man like you . . .' people would say sweetly, and I would blanch. I didn't want their esteem because it wasn't general, and how could it be general when I couldn't share in it? Hence it was better to cover everything, judgment and esteem, with a cloak of ridicule. I had to liberate at all costs the feeling that was stifling me. In order to reveal to all eyes what he was made of, I wanted to break open the handsome wax-figure I presented everywhere. For instance, I recall an informal lecture I had to give to a group of young fledgling lawyers. Irritated by the fantastic praises of the President of the Bar who had introduced me, I couldn't resist long. I had begun with the enthusiasm and emotion expected of me, which I had no trouble in summoning up to order. But I suddenly began to advise alliance as a system of defence. Not, I said, the alliance perfected by modern inquiries which judge simultaneously a thief and an honest man in order to crush the second under the crimes of the first. On the

contrary, I meant to defend the thief by exposing the crimes of the honest man, the lawyer in this instance. I explained myself very clearly on this point:

‘Let us suppose that I have accepted the defence of some pitiable citizen, a murderer through jealousy. Gentlemen of the Jury, consider (I should say) how venial it is to get angry when one sees one’s natural goodness put to the test by the malignity of the fair sex. Is it not more serious, on the contrary, to be on this side of the bar, on my own bench, without ever having been good or suffered from being duped? I am free, shielded from your severities, yet who am I? A Louis XIV in pride, a billy goat for lust, a Pharaoh for wrath, a king of laziness. I haven’t killed anyone? Not yet, to be sure! But have I not let deserving creatures die? Maybe. And maybe I am ready to do so again. Whereas this man—just look at him—will not do so again. He is still quite amazed to have accomplished what he has.’ This speech rather upset my young colleagues. After a moment, they made up their minds to laugh at it. They became completely reassured when I got to my conclusion, in which I invoked the human individual and his supposed rights. That day, habit won in the end.

By repeating these pleasant indiscretions, I merely succeeded in disconcerting opinion somewhat. Not in disarming it, least of all in disarming myself. The amazement I generally encountered in my listeners, their rather reticent embarrassment, somewhat like what you are showing—no, don't protest—did not calm me at all. You see, it is not enough to accuse yourself in order to clear yourself; otherwise, I'd be as innocent as a lamb. One must accuse oneself in a certain way, which it took me considerable time to perfect. I did not discover it until I fell into the most utterly forlorn state. Until then, the laughter continued to drift my way, without my random efforts succeeding in divesting it of its benevolent, almost tender quality that hurt me.

But the sea is rising, it seems to me. It won't be long before our boat leaves; the day is ending. Look, the doves are gathering up there. They are crowding against one another, hardly stirring, and the light is waning. Don't you think we should keep silent to enjoy this rather sinister moment? No, I interest you? You are very polite. Moreover, I now run the risk of really interesting you. Before explaining myself on the subject of judges-penitent, I must talk to you of debauchery and of the little-ease.



## CHAPTER FIVE

You are wrong, *cher*, the boat is going at full speed. But the Zuyderzee is a dead sea, or almost. With its flat shores, lost in the fog, there's no knowing where it begins or ends. So we are steaming along without any landmark; we can't gauge our speed. We are making progress and yet nothing is changing. It's not navigation but dreaming.

In the Greek archipelago I had the contrary feeling. Constantly new islands would appear on the horizon. Their treeless backbone marked the limit of the sky and their rocky shore contrasted sharply with the sea. No confusion possible; in the sharp light everything was a landmark. And from one island to another, ceaselessly on our little boat, which was nevertheless dawdling, I felt as if we were scudding along, night and day, on the crest of the short, cool waves in a race full of spray and laughter. Since then, Greece itself drifts somewhere within me, on the edge of my memory, tirelessly . . . Hold on, I too am drifting; I am becoming lyrical! Stop me, *cher*, I beg you.

By the way, do you know Greece? No? So

much the better. What should we do there, I ask you? There it required pure hearts. Do you know that there friends walk along the street in pairs holding hands? Yes, the women stay at home and you often see a middle-aged, respectable man, sporting moustaches, gravely striding along the pavements, his fingers locked in those of his friend. In the Orient likewise, at times? I don't say no. But tell me, would you take my hand in the streets of Paris? Oh, I'm joking. *We* have a sense of decorum; scum gives us a stilted manner. Before appearing in the Greek islands, we should have to wash at length. There the air is chaste, the sea and sensual enjoyment transparent. And we . . .

Let's sit down on these deck-chairs. What a fog! I interrupted myself, I believe, on the way to the little-ease. Yes, I'll tell you what I mean. After having struggled, after having exhausted all my insolent airs, discouraged by the uselessness of my efforts, I made up my mind to leave the society of men. No, no, I didn't look for a desert island; there are none left. I simply took refuge among women. As you know, they don't really condemn any weakness; they are more inclined to try to humiliate or disarm our strength. This is why woman is the reward, not of the warrior, but

of the criminal. She is his harbour, his haven; it is in a woman's bed that he is generally arrested. Is she not all that remains to us of earthly paradise? In distress, I hastened to my natural harbour. But I no longer indulged in pretty speeches. I still gambled a little, out of habit; but invention was lacking. I hesitate to admit it for fear of using a few more forbidden expressions: it seems to me that at that time I felt the need of love. Obscene, isn't it? In any case, I experienced a secret suffering, a sort of privation that made me emptier and allowed me, partly forced to it, and partly just out of curiosity, to make a few commitments. Inasmuch as I needed to love and be loved, I thought I was in love. In other words, I acted the fool.

I often caught myself asking a question which, as a man of experience, I had always previously avoided. I would hear myself asking: 'Do you love me?' You know that it is customary to answer in such cases: 'And you?' If I answered yes, I found myself committed beyond my real feelings. If I dared to say no, I ran the risk of ceasing to be loved, and I would suffer as a result. The greater the threat to the emotion in which I had hoped to find calm, the more I demanded it of my partner. Hence I was led to ever more explicit promises and

came to exact an ever vaster emotion from my heart. Thus I developed a deceptive passion for a charming fool who had so thoroughly read the sentimental press that she spoke of love with the assurance and conviction of an intellectual announcing the classless society. Such conviction, as you must know, is contagious. I tried myself out at talking likewise of love and eventually convinced myself. At least until she became my mistress and I realized that the sentimental press, though it taught how to talk of love, did not teach how to make love. After having loved a parrot, I had to go to bed with a serpent. So I looked elsewhere for the love promised by books which I had never encountered in life.

But I lacked practice. For more than thirty years I had been in love with myself exclusively. What hope was there of losing such a habit? I didn't lose it and remained a trifler in passion. I multiplied the promises. I contracted simultaneous loves as, at an earlier period, I had multiple liaisons. In this way I accumulated more misfortunes, for others, than at the time of my fine indifference. Have I told you that my parrot, in despair, wanted to let herself die of hunger? Fortunately I arrived in time and submitted to holding her hand until she met, on his return from a journey to Bali,

the engineer with greying temples who had already been described to her by her favourite weekly. In any case, far from finding myself transported and absolved in the eternity, as the saying goes, of passion, I added even more to the weight of my crimes and to my deviation from virtue. As a result, I conceived such a loathing for love that for years I could not hear *La Vie en rose* or the *Liebestod* without gnashing my teeth. I tried accordingly to give up women, in a certain way, and to live in a state of chastity. After all, their friendship ought to satisfy me. But this was tantamount to giving up gambling. Without desire, women bored me beyond all expectation, and obviously I bored them too. No more gambling and no more theatre—I was probably in the realm of truth. But truth, *cher ami*, is a colossal bore.

Despairing of love and of chastity, I at last told myself that there was nothing left but debauchery, a substitute for love, which quiets the laughter, restores silence and, above all, confers immortality. At a certain degree of lucid intoxication, lying late at night between two prostitutes and drained of all desire, hope ceases to be a torture, you see, the mind dominates the whole past, and the pain of living is for ever over. In a sense, I had always

lived in debauchery, never having ceased wanting to be immortal. Wasn't this the key to my nature and also a result of the great self-love I have told you about? Yes, I was bursting with a longing to be immortal. I was too much in love with myself not to want the precious object of my love never to disappear. Since, in the waking state and with a little self-knowledge, one can see no reason why immortality should be conferred on a salacious monkey, one has to obtain substitutes for that immortality. Because I longed for eternal life, I went to bed with harlots and drank for nights on end. In the morning, to be sure, my mouth was filled with the bitter taste of the mortal state. But, for hours on end, I had soared in bliss. Dare I admit it to you? I still remember with affection certain nights when I used to go to a sordid night-club to meet a quick-change dancer who honoured me with her favours and for whose reputation I even fought one evening with a bearded braggart. Every night I would strut at the bar, in the red light and dust of that earthly paradise, lying fantastically and drinking at length. I would wait for dawn and at last end up in the always unmade bed of my princess, who would indulge mechanically in sex and then sleep without transition. Day would come softly to

throw light on this disaster and I would get up and stand motionless in a dawn of glory.

Alcohol and women provided me, I admit, with the only solace of which I was worthy. I'll reveal this secret to you, *cher ami*, don't be afraid to make use of it. Then you'll see that true debauchery is liberating because it creates no obligations. In it you possess only yourself; hence it remains the favourite pastime of the great lovers of their own person. It is a jungle without past or future, without any promise above all, or any immediate penalty. The places where it is practised are separated from the world. On entering, one leaves behind fear and hope. Conversation is not obligatory there; what one comes for can be had without words, and often indeed without money. Ah, I beg you, let me pay honour to the unknown and forgotten women who helped me then! Even today, my recollection of them contains something resembling respect.

In any case, I freely took advantage of that liberation. I was even seen in a hotel dedicated to what is called sin living at the same time with a mature prostitute and an unmarried girl of the best society. I played the gallant with the first and gave the second an opportunity to learn a few facts of life.

Unfortunately the prostitute had a most middle-class nature; she has since consented to write her memoirs for a confessional paper quite open to modern ideas. The girl, for her part, got married to satisfy her unbridled instincts and make use of her remarkable gifts. I am not a little proud likewise to have been admitted as an equal, at that time, by a masculine guild too often reviled. But I'll not insist on that: you know that even very intelligent people glory in being able to empty one bottle more than the next man. I might ultimately have found peace and release in that happy dissipation. But, there too, I encountered an obstacle in myself. This time it was my liver, and a fatigue so dreadful that it hasn't yet left me. One plays at being immortal and after a few weeks one doesn't even know whether or not one can hang on till the next day.

The sole benefit of that experience, when I had given up my nocturnal exploits, was that life became less painful for me. The fatigue that was gnawing at my body had simultaneously eroded many raw points in me. Each excess decreases vitality, hence suffering. There is nothing frenzied about debauchery, contrary to what is thought. It is but a long sleep. You must have noticed that men



who really suffer from jealousy have no more urgent desire than to go to bed with the woman they nevertheless think has betrayed them. Of course they want to assure themselves once more that their dear treasure still belongs to them. They want to possess it, as the saying goes. But there is also the fact that immediately afterwards they are less jealous. Physical jealousy is a result of the imagination at the same time as being a self-judgment. One attributes to the rival the nasty thoughts one had oneself in the same circumstances. Fortunately excess of sensual satisfaction weakens both imagination and judgment. The suffering then lies dormant as long as virility does. For the same reasons adolescents lose their metaphysical unrest with their first mistress; and certain marriages, which are merely formalized debauches, become the monotonous hearses of daring and invention. Yes, *cher ami*, bourgeois marriage has put our country into slippers and will soon lead it to the gates of death.

I am exaggerating? No, but I am straying from the subject. I merely wanted to tell you the advantage I derived from those months of orgy. I lived in a sort of fog in which the laughter became so muffled that eventually I ceased to notice it. The indifference that

already filled so much of me now encountered no resistance and extended its sclerosis. No more emotions! An even temper, or rather no temper at all. Tubercular lungs are cured by drying up and gradually asphyxiate their happy owner. So it was with me as I peacefully died of my cure. I was still living on my work although my reputation was seriously damaged by my flights of language, and the regular exercise of my profession compromised by the disorder of my life. It is noteworthy, however, that I aroused less resentment by my nocturnal excesses than by my verbal provocations. The references, purely verbal, that I often made to God in my speeches before the court awakened distrust in my clients. They probably feared that heaven could not represent their interests as well as a lawyer invincible in the code of law. Whence it was but a step to conclude that I invoked the divinity in proportion to my ignorance. My clients took that step and became scarce. Now and then I still argued a case. At times even, forgetting that I no longer believed in what I was saying, I was a good advocate. My own voice would lead me on and I would follow it; without really soaring, as I used to do, I at least got off the ground and did a little hedge-hopping. Outside my

profession, I saw but few people and painfully kept alive one or two exhausted liaisons. It even happened that I would spend purely friendly evenings, without any element of desire, yet with this difference that, resigned to boredom, I scarcely listened to what was being said. I became a little fatter and at last was able to believe that the crisis was over. Nothing remained but to grow older.

One day, however, during a trip to which I was treating a friend without telling her I was doing so to celebrate my cure, I was aboard an ocean liner—on the upper deck, of course. Suddenly, far off at sea, I perceived a black speck on the steel-grey ocean. I turned away at once and my heart began to beat wildly. When I forced myself to look, the black speck had disappeared. I was on the point of shouting, of stupidly calling for help when I saw it again. It was one of those bits of débris that ships leave behind them. Yet I had not been able to endure watching it; for I had thought at once of a drowning person. Then I realized, calmly; just as you resign yourself to an idea the truth of which you have long known, that that cry which had sounded over the Seine behind me years before had never ceased, carried by the river to the waters of the Channel, to travel throughout the world, across the

limitless expanse of the ocean, and that it had waited for me there until the day I encountered it. I realized likewise that it would continue to await me on seas and rivers, everywhere in short where lies the bitter water of my baptism. Here too, by the way, aren't we on the water? On this flat, monotonous, interminable water whose limits are indistinguishable from those of the land? Is it credible that we shall ever reach Amsterdam? We shall never get out of this immense stoup of holy-water. Listen. Don't you hear the cries of invisible gulls? If they are crying in our direction, to what are they calling us?

But they are the same gulls that were crying, that were already calling over the Atlantic the day I realized once and for all that I was not cured, that I was still cornered and that I had to make do with it as best I could. Ended the glorious life, but ended also the frenzy and the convulsions. I had to submit and admit my guilt. I had to live in the little-ease. To be sure, you are not familiar with that dungeon cell that was called the little-ease in the Middle Ages. More often than not, one was forgotten there for life. That cell was distinguished from others by ingenious dimensions. It was not high enough to stand up in nor yet wide enough to lie down

in. One had to take on an awkward manner and live on the diagonal; sleep was a collapse, and waking a squatting. *Mon cher*, there was genius—and I am weighing my words—in that so simple invention. Every day through the unchanging constraint that stiffened his body, the condemned man learned that he was guilty and that innocence consists in stretching joyously. Can you imagine a frequenter of summits and upper decks in that cell? What? One could live in those cells and still be innocent? Improbable. Highly improbable! Or else my reasoning would collapse. That innocence should be reduced to living hunch-backed—not for one second would I entertain such an hypothesis. Moreover, we cannot assert the innocence of anyone, whereas we can state with certainty the guilt of all. Every man testifies to the crime of all the others—that is my faith and my hope.

Believe me, religions are on the wrong track the moment they start to moralize and fulminate commandments. God is not needed to create guilt or to punish. Our fellow-men suffice, aided by ourselves. You were speaking of the Last Judgment. Allow me to laugh respectfully. I shall wait for it resolutely, for I have known what is worse,

the judgment of men. For them, no extenuating circumstances; even the good intention is accounted a crime. Have you at least heard of the spitting cell, which a race of people recently thought up to prove itself the greatest on earth? A walled-up box in which the prisoner can stand without moving. The solid door that locks him in this cement shell stops at chin-level. Hence only his face is visible, and every passing gaoler spits copiously on it. The prisoner, wedged into his cell, cannot wipe his face, though he is allowed, it is true, to close his eyes. Well, that, *mon cher*, is a human invention. They didn't need God for that little masterpiece.

So what? Well, God's sole usefulness would be to guarantee innocence, and I am inclined to see religion rather as a huge laundering venture—as it was once but briefly, for exactly three years, and it wasn't called religion. Since then, soap has been lacking, our faces are dirty, and we wipe one another's nose. All dunces, all punished, let's all spit on one another and—hurry! to the little-ease! Each tries to spit first, that's all. I'll tell you a big secret *mon cher*. Don't wait for the Last Judgment. It takes place every day.

No, it's nothing; I'm merely shivering a little in this damned humidity. We're landing

anyway. Here we are. After you. But stay a little, I beg you, and walk home with me. I haven't finished; I must go on. Continuing is what is hard. Say, do you know why he was crucified—the one you are perhaps thinking of at this moment? Well, there were heaps of reasons for that. There are always reasons for murdering a man. On the contrary, it is impossible to justify his living. That's why crime always finds lawyers, and innocence only rarely. But, besides the reasons that have been very well explained to us for the past two thousand years, there was a major one for that terrible agony, and I don't know why it has been so carefully hidden. The real reason is that *he* knew he was not altogether innocent. If he did not bear the weight of the crime he was accused of, he had committed others—even though he didn't know which ones. Did he really not know them? He was at the source, after all; he must have heard of a certain slaughter of the innocents. The children of Judea massacred while his parents were taking him to a safe place—why did they die if not because of him? Those blood-spattered soldiers, those infants cut in two filled him with horror. But given the man he was, I am sure he could not forget them. And as for that sadness that can be felt in his every act,

wasn't it the incurable melancholy of a man who heard night after night the voice of Rachel weeping for her children and refusing all comfort? The lamentation would rend the night, Rachel would call her children who had been killed for him, and he was still alive!

Knowing what he knew, familiar with everything about man—ah, who would have believed that crime consists less in making others die than in not dying oneself!—brought face to face day and night with his innocent crime, he found it too hard for him to hold on and continue. It was better to have done with it, not to defend himself, to die, in order not to be the only one to live, and to go elsewhere where perhaps he would be upheld. He was not upheld, he complained and, as a last straw, he was censured. Yes, it was the third evangelist, I believe, who first suppressed his complaint. 'Why hast thou forsaken me?'—it was a seditious cry, wasn't it? Well then, the scissors! Mind you, if Luke had suppressed nothing, the matter would hardly have been noticed; in any case, it would not have assumed such importance. Thus the censor shouts aloud what he proscribes. The world's order likewise is ambiguous.

None the less, the censured one was unable



to carry on. And I know, *cher*, what I am talking about. There was a time when I didn't have the slightest idea, at any single moment, how I could reach the next one. Yes, one can wage war in this world, ape love, torture one's fellow-man, or merely say evil of one's neighbour while knitting. But, in certain cases, carrying on, merely continuing, is superhuman. And he was not superhuman, you can take my word for it. He cried aloud his agony and that's why I love him, my friend who died without knowing.

The unfortunate thing is that he left us alone, to carry on, whatever happens, even when we are lodged in the little-ease, knowing in turn what he knew but incapable of doing what he did and of dying like him. People naturally tried to get some help from his death. After all, it was a stroke of genius to tell us: 'You're not a very pretty sight, that's certain! Well, we won't go into the details. We'll just liquidate it all at once, on the cross!' But too many people now climb on to the cross merely to be seen from a greater distance, even if they have to trample somewhat on the one who has been there so long. Too many people have decided to do without generosity in order to practise charity. Oh, the injustice, the rank injustice that has been

done him! It wrings my heart!

Heavens, how easily one slips into a habit; I'm on the point of making a speech to the court. Forgive me and realize that I have my reasons. Why, a few streets from here there is a museum called 'Our Lord in the attic'. At the time, they had the catacombs in the attic. After all, the cellars are flooded here. But today—set your mind at rest—their Lord is neither in the attic nor in the cellar. They have hoisted him onto a judge's bench, in the secret of their hearts, and they smite, above all they judge, they judge in his name. He spoke softly to the adulteress: 'Neither do I condemn thee!' but that doesn't matter; they condemn without absolving anyone. In the name of the Lord, here is what you deserve. Lord? He, my friend, didn't expect so much. He simply wanted to be loved, nothing more. Of course, there are those who love him, even among Christians. But they are not numerous. He had foreseen that too; he had a sense of humour. Peter, you know, the funk, Peter denied him: 'I know not the man . . . I know not what thou sayest . . . etc.' Really, he went too far! And my friend makes a play on words: 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.' Irony could go no further, don't you think? But no, they still triumph!

‘You see, he had said it!’ He had said it indeed; he knew the question thoroughly. And then he left for ever, leaving them to judge and condemn, with pardon on their lips and the sentence in their hearts.

For it cannot be said there is no more pity; no, by heaven, we never stop talking of it. It’s just that no one is ever acquitted any more. Over the dead body of innocence the judges swarm, the judges of all species, those of Christ and those of the Anti-Christ, who are the same anyway, reconciled in the little-ease. For one mustn’t blame everything exclusively on the Christians. The others are involved too. Do you know what has become of one of the houses in this city that lodged Descartes? A lunatic asylum. Yes, it’s general delirium, and persecution. We too, naturally, are obliged to come to it. You have had a chance to observe that I spare nothing and, as for you, I know that you think as I do. Wherefore, since we are all judges, we are all guilty before one another, all Christs in our cheap way, one by one crucified, always without knowing. We should be at least, if I, Clamence, had not found a way out, the only solution, truth at last . . .

No, I am stopping, *cher ami*, fear nothing! Besides I’m going to leave you, for we are at

my door. In solitude and when fatigued, one is inclined, after all, to take oneself for a prophet. When all is said and done, that's really what I am, having taken refuge in a desert of stones, fogs, and stagnant waters—an empty prophet for shabby times, Elijah without a messiah, stuffed with fever and alcohol, my back up against this mouldy door, my finger raised towards a threatening sky, showering imprecations on lawless men who cannot endure any judgment. For they can't endure it, *très cher*, and that's the whole question. He who clings to a law does not fear the judgment that puts him in his place within an order he believes in. But the keenest of human torments is to be judged without law. Yet we are in that torment. Deprived of their natural curb, the judges, loosed at random, are racing through their job. Hence we have to try to go faster than they, don't we? And it's a real madhouse. Prophets and quacks multiply; they hasten to get there with a good law or a flawless organization before the world is deserted. Fortunately, *I* arrived! I am the end and the beginning; I announce the law. In short, I am a judge-penitent.

Yes, yes, I'll tell you tomorrow what this noble profession consists of. You are leaving the day after tomorrow, so we are in a hurry.

Come to my place, will you? Ring three times. You are going back to Paris? Paris is a long way off; Paris is beautiful; I haven't forgotten it. I remember its twilights at this same season, more or less. Evening falls, dry and rasping, over the roofs blue with smoke, the city rumbles, the river seems to flow backward. Then I used to wander in the streets. They wander likewise now, I know! They wander, pretending to hasten towards the tired wife, the strict home . . . Ah, *mon ami*, do you know what the solitary creature is like as he wanders in big cities? . . .

## CHAPTER SIX

I'M embarrassed to be in bed when you come. It's nothing, just a little fever that I'm treating with gin. I'm accustomed to these attacks. Malaria, I think, that I caught at the time I was Pope. No, I'm only half joking. I know what you're thinking: it's very hard to disentangle the true from the false in what I'm saying. I admit you are right. I myself . . . You see, a person I knew used to divide human beings into three categories: those who prefer having nothing to hide rather than being obliged to lie, those who prefer lying to having nothing to hide, and finally those who like both lying and the hidden. I'll let you choose which case suits me best.

But what do I care? Don't lies eventually lead to the truth? And don't all my stories, true or false, tend towards the same conclusion? Don't they all have the same meaning? So what does it matter whether they are true or false if, in both cases, they are significant of what I have been and of what I am? Sometimes it is easier to see clearly into the liar than into the man who tells the truth. Truth, like light, blinds. Falsehood, on the

contrary, is a beautiful twilight that enhances every object. Well, take it how you like, I was named Pope in a prison-camp.

Sit down, please. You are examining this room. Bare, to be sure, but clean. A Vermeer, without furniture or copper pots. Without books either, for I gave up reading some time ago. At one time, my house was full of half-read books. It's just as disgusting as those people who cut a piece off a foie gras and have the rest thrown away. At any rate, I have ceased to like anything but confessions, and authors of confessions write especially to avoid confessing, to tell nothing of what they know. When they claim to get to the painful admissions, you have to watch out, for they are about to dress the corpse. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. So I put a stop to it. No more books, no more useless objects either; the bare necessities, clean and polished like a coffin. Besides, these Dutch beds, so hard and with their immaculate sheets—one dies in them as if already wrapped in a shroud, embalmed in purity.

You are curious to know my pontifical adventures? Nothing out of the ordinary, you know. Shall I have the strength to tell you of them? Yes, the fever is going down. It was all so long ago. It was in Africa where, thanks to

a certain Mr. Rommel, war was raging. I wasn't involved in it—no, don't worry. I had already dodged the one in Europe. Mobilized of course, but I never saw action. In a way, I regret it. Maybe that would have changed a great many things? The French army didn't need me on the front; it merely asked me to take part in the retreat. A little later I got back to Paris, and the Germans. I was tempted by the Resistance, about which people were beginning to talk just around the time I discovered that I was patriotic. You are smiling? You are wrong. I made my discovery in the Métro passages, at the Châtelet station. A dog had strayed into the labyrinth. Big, wire-haired, one ear cocked, eyes laughing, he was cavorting and sniffing at the legs of passers-by. I have a very old and very faithful fondness for dogs. I like them because they always forgive. I called this one, who hesitated, obviously won over, wagging his tail enthusiastically a few yards ahead of me. Just then, a young German soldier who was walking briskly along, passed me. Having reached the dog, he caressed the shaggy head. Without hesitating, the animal fell in step with the same enthusiasm and disappeared with him. From the resentment and the sort of rage I felt against the German soldier, it was clear to me



that my reaction was patriotic. If the dog had followed a French civilian, I'd not even have thought of it. But, on the contrary, I imagined that friendly dog as the mascot of a German regiment and it made me fly into a rage. Hence the test was convincing.

I reached the Southern Zone with the intention of finding out about the Resistance. But once there and having found out, I hesitated. The undertaking struck me as a little mad and, in a word, romantic. I think especially that underground action suited neither my temperament nor my preference for exposed heights. It seemed to me that I was being asked to do some weaving in a cellar, for days and nights on end, until some brutes should come to haul me from hiding, undo my weaving and then drag me to another cellar to beat me to death. I admired those who indulged in such heroism of the depths but couldn't imitate them.

So I crossed over to North Africa with the vague intention of getting to London. But in Africa the situation was not clear; the opposing parties seemed to be equally right and I stood aloof. I can see from your manner that I am skipping rather fast, in your opinion, over these details which have a certain significance. Well, let's say that, having judged you

at your true value, I am skipping over them so that you will notice them the better. In any case, I eventually reached Tunisia where a fond friend gave me work. That friend was a very intelligent woman who was involved in the film-business. I followed her to Tunis and didn't discover her real employment until the days following the Allied landing in Algeria. She was arrested that day by the Germans and I too, but without having intended it. I don't know what became of her. As for me, no harm was done me and I realized, after considerable anguish, that it was chiefly just a security-measure. I was interned near Tripoli in a camp where we suffered from thirst and destitution more than from brutality. I'll not describe it to you. We children of this half-century don't need a diagram to imagine such places. A hundred and fifty years ago, people became sentimental about lakes and forests. Today we have the lyricism of the prison-cell. Hence, I'll leave it to you. You need only add a few details: the heat, the vertical sun, the flies, the sand, the lack of water.

There was a young Frenchman with me who had faith. Yes, it's decidedly a fairy-tale! The Duguesclin type, if you will. He had crossed over from France into Spain to go and fight. The Catholic general had interned him

and, having seen that in the Franco camps the chick-peas were, if I may say so, blessed by Rome, he had developed a profound melancholy. Neither the sky of Africa, where he had next landed, nor the leisures of the camp had distracted him from that melancholy. But his reflections, and the sun too, had somewhat unhinged him. One day when, under a tent dripping with molten lead, the ten or so of us were panting among the flies, he repeated his diatribes against the Roman, as he called him. He looked at us with a wild stare above his week-old beard. Bare to the waist and covered with sweat, he drummed with his hands on the visible keyboard of his ribs. He declared to us the need for a new Pope who should live among the wretched instead of praying on a throne, and the sooner the better. He stared with wild eyes as he shook his head. 'Yes,' he repeated, 'as soon as possible!' Then he calmed down suddenly and in a dull voice said that we must choose him amongst ourselves, pick a complete man with his vices and virtues and swear allegiance to him, on the sole condition that he should agree to keep alive, in himself and in others, the community of our sufferings. 'Who among us,' he asked, 'has the most failings?' As a joke, I raised my hand and was the only one to do so. 'O.K. Jean-

Baptiste will do.' No, he didn't say precisely that because I had another name in those days. He declared at least that nominating oneself as I had done presupposed also the greatest virtue and proposed electing me. The others agreed, in fun, but with a trace of seriousness all the same. The truth is that Dugesclin had impressed us. It seems to me that even I was not altogether laughing. To begin with, I considered that my little prophet was right; and then with the sun, the exhausting labour, the struggle for water, we were not at our best. In any case, I exercised my pontificate for several weeks, with increasing seriousness.

Of what did it consist? Well, I was something like a group-leader or the secretary of a cell. The others, in any case, and even those who lacked faith, got into the habit of obeying me. Dugesclin was suffering; I administered his suffering. I discovered then that it was not so easy as I thought to be a Pope, and I remembered this just yesterday after having given you such a scornful speech about judges, our brothers. The big problem in the camp was the water allotment. Other groups, political or sectarian, had formed and each favoured his comrades. I was consequently led to favour mine, and this

was a little concession to begin with. Even among us, I could not maintain complete equality. According to my comrades' condition, or the work they had to do, I gave an advantage to this one or to that. Such distinctions are far-reaching, you can take my word for it. But decidedly I am tired and no longer want to think of that period. Let's just say that I closed the circle the day I drank the water of a dying comrade. No, no, it wasn't Duguesclin; he was already dead, I believe, for he stinted himself too much. Besides, had he been there, out of love for him I'd have resisted longer, for I loved him—yes, I loved him, or so it seems to me. But I drank the water, that's certain, while convincing myself that the others needed me more than this fellow who was going to die anyway and that I had a duty to keep myself alive for them. Thus, *cher*, empires and churches are born under the sun of death. And in order to correct somewhat what I said yesterday, I am going to tell you the great idea that has come to me while telling all this, which—I'm not sure now—I may have lived or only dreamed. My great idea is that one must forgive the Pope. To begin with, he needs it more than anyone else. Secondly, that's the only way to set oneself above him . . .

Did you close the door thoroughly? Yes? Make sure, please. Forgive me, I have the bolt-complex. On the point of going to sleep, I can never remember whether or not I shot the bolt. And every night I must get up to make sure. One can be certain of nothing, as I've told you. Don't think that this worry about the bolt is the reaction of a frightened householder. In the old days I didn't lock my apartment or my car. I didn't lock up my money; I didn't cling to what I owned. To tell the truth, I was a little ashamed to own anything. Didn't I occasionally, in my general conversations, exclaim with earnestness: 'Property, gentlemen, is murder!' Not being sufficiently big-hearted to share my wealth with a deserving poor man, I left it at the disposal of eventual thieves, hoping thus to correct injustice by chance. Today, moreover, I possess nothing. Hence I am not worried about my safety, but about myself and my presence of mind. I am equally eager to block the door of the closed little universe of which I am the king, the Pope, and the judge.

By the way, will you please open that cupboard? Yes, look at that painting. Don't you recognize it? It is *The Just Judges*. That doesn't make you jump? Can it be that your culture has gaps? Yet if you read the papers,

you would recall the theft in 1934 from the Saint-Bavon Cathedral at Ghent, of one of the panels of the famous Van Eyck altarpiece, *The Adoration of the Lamb*. That panel was called *The Just Judges*. It represented judges on horseback coming to adore the sacred animal. It was replaced by an excellent copy, for the original was never found. Well, here it is. No, I had nothing to do with it. A frequenter of *Mexico City*—you had a glimpse of him the other evening—sold it to the gorilla for a bottle, one drunken evening. I first advised our friend to hang it in a place of honour, and for a long time, while they were being looked for throughout the world, our devout judges sat enthroned at *Mexico City* above the drunkards and the pimps. Then the gorilla, at my request, put it in custody here. He balked a little at doing so, but he got a fright when I explained the matter to him. Since then, these worthy magistrates form my sole company. At *Mexico City*, above the bar, you saw what a void they left.

Why did I not return the panel? Ah! Ah! You have a policeman's reflex, you do! Well, I'll answer you as I would the state's attorney, if it could ever occur to anyone that this painting had come to rest in my room. First, because it belongs not to me but to the

proprietor of *Mexico City*, who deserves it as much as the Archbishop of Ghent. Secondly, because among all those who file past *The Adoration of the Lamb* no one could distinguish the copy from the original and hence no one is wronged by my misconduct. Thirdly, because in this way I dominate. False judges are held up to the world's admiration and I alone know the true ones. Fourth, because I thus have a chance of being sent to prison—an attractive idea in a way. Fifth, because those judges are on their way to meet the Lamb, because there is no lamb or innocence any longer, and because the clever rascal who stole the panel was an instrument of the unknown justice that one ought not to thwart. Finally, because this way everything is in harmony. Justice being separated once and for all from innocence—the latter on the cross and the former in the cupboard—I have the way clear to work according to my convictions. With a clear conscience I can practise the difficult profession of judge-penitent, in which I have set myself up after so many blighted hopes and contradictions; and now it is time, since you are leaving, for me to tell you what it is.

Allow me first to sit up so that I can breathe more easily. Oh, how weak I am! Lock up my



judges, please. As for the profession of judge-penitent, I am practising it at present. Ordinarily, my offices are at *Mexico City*. But real vocations are carried beyond the place of work. Even in bed, even with a fever, I am functioning. Besides, one doesn't practise this profession, one breathes it constantly. Don't get the idea that I have talked to you at such length for five days just for the fun of it. No, I used to talk through my hat quite enough in the past. Now my words have a purpose. They have the purpose, obviously, of silencing the laughter, of avoiding judgment personally, though there is apparently no escape. Is not the great thing that stands in the way of our escaping it the fact that we are the first to condemn ourselves? Therefore it is essential to begin by extending the condemnation to all, without distinction, in order to thin it out at the start.

No excuses ever, for anyone; that's my principle at the outset. I deny the good intention, the respectable mistake, the indiscretion, the extenuating circumstance. With me there is no giving of absolution or blessing. Everything is simply totted up, and then: 'It comes to so much. You are an evil-doer, a satyr, a congenital liar, a homosexual, an artist, etc.' Just like that. Just as flatly. In

philosophy as in politics, I am for any theory that refuses to grant man innocence and for any practice that treats him as guilty. You see in me, *très cher*, an enlightened advocate of slavery.

Without slavery, to tell the truth, there is no definitive solution. I very soon realized that. Once upon a time, I was always talking of freedom. At breakfast I used to spread it on my toast, I used to chew it all day long, and in company my breath was delightfully redolent of freedom. With that keyword I would bludgeon whoever contradicted me; I made it serve my desires and my power. I used to whisper it in bed in the ear of my sleeping partners and it helped me to drop them. I would slip it . . . But steady, I am getting excited and losing all sense of proportion. After all, I did on occasion make a more disinterested use of freedom and even—just imagine my naïveté—defended it two or three times without of course going so far as to die for it, but nevertheless taking a few risks. I must be forgiven such rash acts; I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know that freedom is not a reward or a decoration that is celebrated with champagne. Nor yet a gift, a box of dainties designed to make you lick your chops. Oh, no! It's a chore, on the contrary,

and a long-distance race, quite solitary and very exhausting. No champagne, no friends raising their glasses as they look at you affectionately. Alone in a forbidding room, alone in the prisoner's box before the judges, and alone to decide in face of oneself or in the face of others' judgment. At the end of all freedom is a court-sentence; that's why freedom is too heavy to bear, especially when you're down with a fever, or are distressed, or love nobody.

Ah, *mon cher*, for anyone who is alone, without God and without a master, the weight of days is dreadful. Hence one must choose a master, God being out of fashion. Besides, that word has lost its meaning; it's not worth the risk of shocking anyone. Take our moral philosophers, for instance, so serious, loving their neighbour and all the rest—nothing distinguishes them from Christians, except that they don't preach in churches. What, in your opinion, keeps them from becoming converted? Respect perhaps, respect for men; yes, self-respect. They don't want to start a scandal so they keep their feelings to themselves. I knew, for example, an atheistic novelist who used to pray every night. That didn't stop anything: how he gave it to God in his books! What a dusting off, as someone or other would say. A militant free-

thinker to whom I spoke of this raised his hands—with no evil intention, I assure you—to heaven: ‘You’re telling me nothing new,’ that apostle sighed, ‘they are all like that.’ According to him, eighty per cent of our writers, if only they could avoid putting their names to it, would write and hail the name of God. But they do sign their names, according to him, because they love themselves and they hail nothing at all because they loathe themselves. Since, nevertheless, they cannot keep themselves from judging, they make up for it by moralizing. In short, their satanism is virtuous. An odd epoch indeed! It’s not at all surprising that minds are confused and that one of my friends, an atheist when he was a model husband, was converted when he became an adulterer!

Ah, the little sneaks, play-actors, hypocrites—and yet so touching! Believe me, they all are, even when they set fire to heaven. Whether they are atheists or church-goers, Muscovites or Bostonians, all Christians from father to son. But actually there is no father left, no rule left! They are free and hence have to shift for themselves; and since they don’t want freedom or its judgments, they ask to be rapped on the knuckles, they invent dreadful rules, they rush out to build piles of faggots to

replace churches. Savonarolas, I tell you. But they believe solely in sin, never in grace. They think of it, to be sure. Grace is what they want—acceptance, surrender, happiness, and maybe, for they are sentimental too, betrothal, the virginal bride, the upright man, the organ music. Take me, for example, and I am not sentimental—do you know what I used to dream of? A total love of the whole heart and body, day and night, in an uninterrupted embrace, sensual enjoyment and mental excitement—all lasting five years and ending in death. Alas!

So, after all, for want of betrothal or uninterrupted love, it will be marriage, brutal marriage, with power and the whip. The essential is that everything should become simple, as for the child, that every act should be ordered, that good and evil should be arbitrarily, hence obviously, pointed out. And I'm all in favour, however Sicilian and Javanese I may be and not at all Christian, though I feel friendship for the first Christian of all. But on the bridges of Paris I too learned that I was afraid of freedom. So hurrah for the master, whoever he may be, to take the place of heaven's law. 'Our Father who art provisionally here . . . Our guides, our delightfully severe masters, O cruel and beloved

leaders . . .’ In short, you see, the essential is to cease being free and to obey, in repentance, a greater rogue than oneself. When we are all guilty, that will be democracy. Not to mention the fact, *cher ami*, that we must take revenge for having to die alone. Death is solitary, whereas slavery is collective. The others get theirs too, and at the same time as we—that’s what counts. All together at last, but on our knees and heads bowed.

Isn’t it a good thing too to live like the rest of the world, and for that doesn’t the rest of the world have to be like me? Threat, dishonour, police are the sacraments of that resemblance. Scorned, hunted down, compelled, I can then show what I am worth, enjoy what I am, be natural at last. This is why, *très cher*, after having solemnly paid my respects to freedom, I decided privately that it had to be handed over without delay to anyone who comes along. And every time I can, I preach in my church of *Mexico City*, I invite the good people to submit to authority and humbly to solicit the comforts of slavery, even if I have to present it as true freedom.

But I’m not being crazy; I’m well aware that slavery is not immediately realizable. It will be one of the blessings of the future, that’s all. In the meantime, I must get along

with the present and seek at least a provisional solution. Hence I had to find another means of extending judgment to everybody in order to make it weigh less heavily on my own shoulders. I found the means. Open the window a little, please; it's frightfully hot. Not too much, I'm cold as well. My idea is both simple and fertile. How to get everyone involved in order to have the right to sit calmly on the outside myself? Should I climb up to the pulpit, like many of my illustrious contemporaries, and curse humanity? Very dangerous, that is! One day, or one night, laughter bursts out without a warning. The judgment you are passing on others eventually snaps back in your face, causing some damage. And so what? you ask. Well, here's the stroke of genius. I discovered that while waiting for the masters with their rods, we should, like Copernicus, reverse the reasoning in order to win the day. Inasmuch as one couldn't condemn others without immediately judging oneself, one had to overwhelm oneself to have the right to judge others. Inasmuch as every judge some day ends up as a penitent, one had to travel the road in the opposite direction and practise the profession of penitent to be able to end up as a judge. You follow me? Good. But to make myself

even clearer, I'll tell you how I operate.

First I closed my law-office, left Paris, traveled. I aimed to set up under another name in some place where I shouldn't lack for a practice. There are many in the world, but chance, convenience, irony, and also the necessity for a certain mortification made me choose a capital city of waters and fogs, corseted by canals, particularly crowded, and visited by men from all the corners of the earth. I set up my office in a bar in the sailors' quarter. The clientele of a port is varied. The poor don't go into the luxury districts, whereas eventually the gentlefolk always wind up at least once, as you have seen, in the disreputable places. I lie in wait particularly for the bourgeois, and the straying bourgeois at that; it's with him that I get my best results. Like a virtuoso with a rare violin, I draw my subtlest sounds from him.

So I have been practising my useful profession at *Mexico City* for some time. It consists to begin with, as you know from experience, in indulging in public confession as often as possible. I accuse myself up hill and down dale. It's not hard, for I have now acquired a memory. But let me point out that I don't accuse myself crudely, beating my breast. No, I navigate skilfully, multiplying distinctions and digressions too—in short I



adapt my words to my listener and lead him to go me one better. I mingle what concerns me and what concerns others. I choose the features we have in common, the experiences we have endured together, the failings we share—good form, the man of the moment, in fact, such as reigns in me and in others. With all that I construct a portrait which is the image of all and of no one. A mask, in short, rather like those carnival masks which are both lifelike and stylized so that they make people say: 'Why, surely I've met him!' When the portrait is finished, as it is this evening, I show it with great sorrow: 'This, alas, is what I am!' The prosecutor's charge is finished. But at the same time the portrait I hold out to my contemporaries becomes a mirror.

Covered with ashes, tearing my hair, my face scored by clawing, but with piercing eyes, I stand before all humanity recapitulating my shames without losing sight of the effect I am producing and saying: 'I was the lowest of the low.' Then imperceptibly I pass from the 'I' to the 'we'. When I get to 'This is what we are', the game is over and I can tell them off. I am like them, to be sure; we are in the soup together. However, I have a superiority in that I know it and this gives me the right to speak. You see the advantage, I am sure. The more I

accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you. Even better, I provoke you into judging yourself, and this relieves me of that much of the burden. Ah, *mon cher*, we are odd, wretched creatures and, if we merely look back over our lives, there's no lack of occasions to amaze and scandalize ourselves. Just try. I shall listen, you may be sure, to your own confession with a great feeling of fraternity.

Don't laugh! Yes, you are a difficult client; I saw that at once. But you'll come to it inevitably. Most of the others are more sentimental than intelligent; they are disconcerted at once. With the intelligent ones it takes time. It is enough to explain the method fully to them. They don't forget it; they reflect. Sooner or later, half as a game and half out of emotional upset, they give up and tell all. *You* are not only intelligent, you look polished by use. Admit, however, that today you feel less pleased with yourself than you felt five days ago? Now I shall wait for you to write to me or to come back. For you will come back, I am sure! You'll find me unchanged. And why should I change, since I have found the happiness that suits me? I have accepted duplicity instead of being upset about it. On the contrary, I have settled into it and found there

the comfort I was looking for throughout life. I was wrong, after all, to tell you that the essential thing was to avoid judgment. The essential thing is to be able to permit oneself everything, even if, from time to time, one has to profess vociferously one's own infamy. I permit myself everything all over again, and without the laughter this time. I haven't changed my way of life; I continue to love myself and to make use of others. Only, the confession of my crimes allows me to begin again lighter in heart and to taste a double enjoyment, first of my nature and secondly of a charming repentance.

Since finding my solution, I yield to everything, to women, to pride, to boredom, to resentment, and even to the fever that I feel delightfully rising at this moment. I dominate at last, but for ever. Once more I have found a height to which I am the only one to climb and from which I can judge everybody. At long intervals, on a really beautiful night I occasionally hear a distant laugh and again I doubt. But quickly I crush everything, people and things, under the weight of my own infirmity and at once I perk up.

So I shall await your respects at *Mexico City* as long as necessary. But take off this blanket; I want to breathe. You will come,

won't you? I'll show you the details of my technique, for I feel a sort of affection for you. You will see me teaching them night after night that they are vile. This very evening, moreover, I shall resume. I can't do without it or deny myself those moments when one of them collapses, with the help of alcohol, and beats his breast. Then I grow taller, *très cher*, I grow taller, I breathe freely, I am on the mountain, the plain stretches before my eyes. How intoxicating to feel like God the Father and to hand out definitive testimonials of bad character and habits. I sit enthroned among my bad angels at the summit of the Dutch heaven and I watch ascending towards me, as they issue from the fogs and the water, the multitude of the Last Judgment. They rise slowly; I already see the first of them arriving. On his bewildered face, half hidden by a hand, I read the melancholy of the common condition and the despair of not being able to escape it. And as for me, I pity without absolving, I understand without forgiving and, above all, I feel at last that I am being adored!

Yes, I am moving about. How could I remain in bed like a good patient? I must be higher than you, and my thoughts lift me up. Such nights, or such mornings rather (for the fall occurs at dawn), I go out and walk briskly

along the canals. In the livid sky the layers of feathers become thinner, the doves move a little higher, and above the roofs a rosy light announces a new day of my creation. On the Damrak the first tram sounds its bell in the damp air and marks the awakening of life at the extremity of this Europe where, at the same moment, hundreds of millions of men, my subjects, painfully slip out of bed, a bitter taste in their mouths, to go to their joyless work. Then, soaring over this whole continent which is under my sway without knowing it, drinking in the absinthe-coloured light of breaking day, intoxicated with bad words, I am happy—I am happy, I tell you, I won't let you think I'm not happy, I am happy unto death! Oh, sun, beaches, and the islands in the path of the trade-winds, youth whose memory drives one to despair!

I'm going back to bed; forgive me. I fear I got worked up; yet I'm not weeping. At times one wanders, doubting the facts, even when one has discovered the secrets of the good life. To be sure, my solution is not the ideal. But when you don't like your own life, when you know that you must change lives, you don't have any choice, do you? What can one do to become another? Impossible. One would have to cease being anyone, forget oneself for

someone else, at least once. But how? Don't be too hard on me. I'm like that old beggar who wouldn't let go of my hand one day on a café terrace: 'Oh sir,' he said, 'it's not just that I'm no good, but you lose track of the light.' Yes, we have lost track of the light, the mornings, the holy innocence of those who forgive themselves.

Look, it's snowing! Oh, I must go out! Amsterdam asleep in the white night, the dark jade canals under the little snow-covered bridges, the empty streets, my muffled steps—it will be purity, even if fleeting, before tomorrow's mud. See the huge flakes drifting against the window-panes. It must be the doves, surely. They finally make up their minds to come down, the little dears; they are covering the waters and the roofs with a thick layer of feathers; they are fluttering at every window. What an invasion! Let's hope they are bringing good news. Everyone will be saved, eh?—and not only the elect. Possessions and hardships will be shared and you, for example, from today on you will sleep every night on the ground for me. The whole shooting-match, eh! Come now, admit that you would be flabbergasted if a chariot came down from heaven to carry me off, or if the snow suddenly caught fire. You don't believe

it? No more do I. But still I must go out.

All right, all right, I'll be quiet; don't get upset! Don't take too seriously my emotional outbursts or my ravings. They are controlled. Why, now that you are going to talk to me about yourself, I shall find out whether or not one of the objectives of my absorbing confession is achieved. I always hope, in fact, that my interlocutor will be a policeman and that he will arrest me for the theft of *The Just Judges*. For the rest—am I right?—no one can arrest me. But as for that theft, it falls within the provisions of the law and I have arranged everything so as to make myself an accomplice: I am harbouring that painting and showing it to whoever wants to see it. You would arrest me then; that would be a good beginning. Perhaps the rest would be taken care of subsequently; I would be decapitated, for instance, and I'd have no more fear of death; I'd be saved. Above the gathered crowd, you would hold up my still warm head, so that they could recognize themselves in it and I could again dominate—an exemplar. All would be consummated; I should have brought to a close, unseen and unknown, my career as a false prophet crying in the wilderness and refusing to come forth.

But of course you are not a policeman; that

would be too easy. What? Ah, I suspected as much, you see. So that strange affection I felt for you had sense to it. You practise in Paris the noble profession of lawyer! I sensed that we were of the same species. Are we not all alike, constantly talking and to no one, for ever up against the same questions although we know the answers in advance? Then tell me, please, what happened to you one night on the quays of the Seine and how you managed never to risk your life. You yourself utter the words that for years have never ceased echoing through my nights and that I shall at last say through your mouth: 'O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us!' A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion! Just suppose, *cher maître*, that we should be taken literally? We'd have to go through with it. Brr. . . ! The water's so cold! But let's not worry! It's too late now. It'll always be too late. Fortunately!





# THE OUTSIDER



# PART ONE



## CHAPTER ONE

MOTHER died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: *Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy.* Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday.

The Home for Aged Persons is at Marengo, some fifty miles from Algiers. With the two-o'clock bus I should get there well before nightfall. Then I can spend the night there, keeping the usual vigil beside the body, and be back here by tomorrow evening. I have fixed up with my employer for two days' leave; obviously, under the circumstances, he couldn't refuse. Still, I had an idea he looked annoyed, and I said, without thinking: 'Sorry, sir, but it's not my fault, you know.'

Afterwards it struck me I needn't have said that. I had no reason to excuse myself; it was up to him to express his sympathy and so forth. Probably he will do so the day after tomorrow, when he sees me in black. For the present, it's almost as if Mother weren't really dead. The funeral will bring it home to one, put an official seal on it, so to speak. . . .

I took the two-o'clock bus. It was a blazing hot afternoon. I'd lunched, as usual, at Céleste's restaurant. Everyone was most kind, and Céleste said to me, 'There's no one like a mother'. When I left they came with me to the door. It was something of a rush, getting away, as at the last moment I had to call in at Emmanuel's place to borrow his black tie and mourning-band. He lost his uncle a few months ago.

I had to run to catch the bus. I suppose it was my hurrying like that, what with the glare of the road and from the sky, the reek of petrol and the jolts, that made me feel so drowsy. Anyhow, I slept most of the way. When I woke I was leaning up against a soldier; he grinned, and asked me if I'd come from a long way off, and I just nodded, to cut things short. I wasn't in a mood for talking.

The Home is a little over a mile from the village. I went there on foot. I asked to be allowed to see Mother at once, but the doorporter told me I must see the Warden first. He wasn't free, and I had to wait a bit. The porter chatted with me while I waited; then he led me to the office. The Warden was a very small man, with grey hair and a Legion of Honour rosette in his buttonhole. He gave me a long look with his watery blue eyes. Then we shook

hands, and he held mine so long that I began to feel embarrassed. After that he consulted a register on his table, and said:

‘Madame Meursault entered the Home three years ago. She had no private means and depended entirely on you.’

I had a feeling he was blaming me for something, and started to explain. But he cut me short.

‘There’s no need to excuse yourself, my boy. I’ve looked up the record and obviously you weren’t in a position to see that she was properly cared for. She needed someone to be with her all the time, and young men in jobs like yours don’t get too much pay. In any case she was much happier in the Home.’

I said: ‘Yes, sir; I’m sure of that.’

Then he added: ‘She had good friends here, you know, old folks like herself, and one gets on better with people of one’s own generation. You’re much too young, you couldn’t have been much of a companion to her.’

That was so. When we lived together, Mother was always watching me, but we hardly ever talked. During her first few weeks at the Home she used to cry a good deal. But that was only because she hadn’t settled down. After a month or two she’d have cried if she’d been told to leave the Home. Because



this, too, would have been a wrench. That was why, during the last year, I seldom went to see her. Also, it would have meant losing my Sunday—not to mention the fag of going to the bus, getting my ticket, and spending two hours on the journey, each way.

The Warden went on talking, but I didn't pay much attention. Finally he said:

'Now, I suppose you'd like to see your mother?'

I rose without replying and he led the way to the door. As we were going down the stairs he explained:

'I've had the body moved to our little mortuary—so as not to upset the other old people, you understand. Every time there's a death here, they're in a nervous state for two or three days. Which means, of course, extra work and worry for our staff.'

We crossed a courtyard where there were a number of old men, talking amongst themselves in little groups. They fell silent as we came up with them. Then, behind our backs, the chattering began again. Their voices reminded me of parakeets in a cage, only the sound wasn't quite so shrill. The Warden stopped outside the entrance of a small, low building.

'So here I leave you, Monsieur Meursault.

If you want me for anything, you'll find me in my office. We propose to have the funeral to-morrow morning. That will enable you to spend the night beside your mother's coffin, as no doubt you would wish to do. Just one more thing; I gathered from your mother's friends that she wished to be buried with the rites of the Church. I've made arrangements for this; but I thought I should let you know.'

I thanked him. So far as I knew, my mother, though not a professed atheist, had never given a thought to religion in her life.

I entered the mortuary. It was a bright, spotlessly clean room, with whitewashed walls and a big skylight. The furniture consisted of some chairs and trestles. Two of the latter stood open in the centre of the room and the coffin rested on them. The lid was in place, but the screws had been given only a few turns and their nickelled heads stuck out above the wood, which was stained dark walnut. An Arab woman, a nurse I supposed, was sitting beside the bier; she was wearing a blue smock and had a rather gaudy scarf wound round her hair.

Just then the porter came up behind me. He'd evidently been running, as he was a little out of breath.

'We put the lid on, but I was told to

unscrew it when you came, so that you could see her.'

While he was going up to the coffin I told him not to trouble.

'Eh? What's that?' he exclaimed. 'You don't want me to. . . ?'

'No,' I said.

He put back the screwdriver in his pocket and stared at me. I realized then that I shouldn't have said 'No', and it made me rather embarrassed. After eyeing me for some moments he asked:

'Why not?' But he didn't sound reproachful; he simply wanted to know.

'Well, really I couldn't say,' I answered.

He began twiddling his white moustache; then, without looking at me, said gently:

'I understand.'

He was a pleasant-looking man, with blue eyes and ruddy cheeks. He drew up a chair for me near the coffin, and seated himself just behind. The nurse got up and moved towards the door. As she was going by the porter whispered in my ear:

'It's a tumour she has, poor thing.'

I looked at her more carefully and I noticed that she had a bandage round her head, just below her eyes. It lay quite flat across the bridge of her nose, and one saw

hardly anything of her face except that strip of whiteness.

As soon as she had gone, the porter rose.

‘Now I’ll leave you to yourself.’

I don’t know whether I made some gesture, but instead of going he halted behind my chair. The sensation of someone posted at my back made me uncomfortable. The sun was getting low and the whole room was flooded with a pleasant, mellow light. Two hornets were buzzing overhead, against the skylight. I was so sleepy I could hardly keep my eyes open. Without looking round I asked the porter how long he’d been at the Home. ‘Five years.’ The answer came so pat that one could have thought he’d been expecting my question.

That started him off, and he became quite chatty. If anyone had told him ten years ago that he’d end his days as door-porter at a Home at Marengo, he’d never have believed it. He was sixty-four, he said, and hailed from Paris.

When he said that, I broke in without thinking, ‘Ah, you don’t come from here?’

I remembered then that, before taking me to the Warden, he’d told me something about Mother. He said she’d have to be buried mighty quickly because of the heat in these

parts, especially down in the plain. 'At Paris they keep the body for three days, sometimes four.' After that he mentioned that he'd spent the best part of his life in Paris, and could never manage to forget it. 'Here,' he said, 'things have to go with a rush, like. You've hardly time to get used to the idea that somebody's dead, before you're hauled off to the funeral.' 'That's enough,' his wife put in. 'You didn't ought to say such things to the poor young gentleman.' The old fellow blushed and began to apologize. I told him it was quite all right. As a matter of fact I found it rather interesting, what he'd been telling me; I hadn't thought of that before.

Now he went on to say that he'd entered the Home as an ordinary inmate. But he was still quite hale and hearty, so when the porter's job fell vacant, he offered to take it on.

I pointed out that, even so, he was really an inmate like the others, but he wouldn't hear of it. He was 'an official, like'. I'd been struck before that by his habit of saying 'they' or, less often, 'them old folks', when referring to inmates no older than himself. Still, I could see his point of view. As door-porter he had a certain standing, and some authority over the rest of them.

Just then the nurse returned. Night had

fallen very quickly; all of a sudden, it seemed, the sky went black above the skylight. The porter switched on the lamps, and I was almost blinded by the blaze of light.

He suggested I should go to the refectory for dinner, but I wasn't hungry. Then he proposed bringing me a mug of *café au lait*. As I am very fond of *café au lait* I said 'Thanks', and a few minutes later he came back with a tray. I drank the coffee, and then I wanted a cigarette. But I wasn't sure if I should smoke, under the circumstances—in Mother's presence. I thought it over; really it didn't seem to matter, so I offered the porter a cigarette and we both smoked.

After a while he started talking again.

'You know, your mother's friends will be coming soon, to keep vigil with you beside the body. We always have a "vigil" here, when anyone dies. I'd better go and get some chairs and a pot of black coffee.'

The glare from the white walls was making my eyes smart, and I asked him if he couldn't turn off one of the lamps. 'Nothing doing,' he said. They'd arranged the lights like that; either one had them all on or none at all. After that I didn't pay much more attention to him. He went away, brought some chairs and set them out round the coffin. On one he placed a

coffee-pot and ten or a dozen cups. Then he sat down facing me, on the far side of Mother. The nurse was at the other end of the room, with her back to me. I couldn't see what she was doing, but by the way her arms moved I guessed that she was knitting. I was feeling very comfortable; the coffee had warmed me up, and through the open door came scents of flowers, and breaths of cool night air. I think I dozed off for a while.

I was awakened by an odd rustling in my ears. After having had my eyes closed, I had a feeling that the light had grown even stronger than before. There wasn't a trace of shadow anywhere, and every object, each curve or angle, scored its outline on one's eyes. The old people, Mother's friends, were coming in. I counted ten in all, gliding almost soundlessly through the bleak white glare. None of the chairs creaked when they sat down. Never in my life had I seen anyone so clearly as I saw these people; not a detail of their clothes or features escaped me. And yet I couldn't hear them, and it was hard to believe they really existed.

Nearly all the women wore aprons, and the strings drawn tight round their waists made their big stomachs bulge still more. I'd never yet noticed what big paunches old women

usually have. Most of the men, however, were thin as rakes, and they all carried sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that one couldn't see their eyes, only a dull glow in a sort of nest of wrinkles.

On sitting down, they looked at me, and wagged their heads awkwardly, sucking their lips in between their toothless gums. I couldn't decide if they were greeting me and trying to say something, or if it was due to some infirmity of age. I inclined to think that they were greeting me, after their fashion, but it had a queer effect, seeing all those old fellows grouped round the porter, solemnly eyeing me and dandling their heads from side to side. For a moment I had an absurd impression that they had come to sit in judgment on me.

A few minutes later one of the women started weeping. She was in the second row and I couldn't see her face because of another woman in front. At regular intervals she emitted a little choking sob; one had a feeling she would never stop. The others didn't seem to notice. They sat in silence, slumped in their chairs, staring at the coffin or at their walking-sticks or any other object just in front of them, and never took their eyes off it. And still the woman sobbed. I was



rather surprised, as I didn't know who she was. I wanted her to stop crying, but dared not speak to her. After a while the porter bent towards her and whispered in her ear; but she merely shook her head, mumbled something I couldn't catch, and went on sobbing as steadily as before.

The porter got up and moved his chair beside mine. At first he kept silent; then, without looking at me, he explained.

'She was devoted to your mother. She says your mother was her only friend in the world, and now she's all alone.'

I had nothing to say, and the silence lasted quite a while. Presently the woman's sighs and sobs became less frequent, and, after blowing her nose and snuffling for some minutes, she, too, fell silent.

I'd ceased feeling sleepy, but I was very tired and my legs were aching badly. And now I realized that the silence of these people was telling on my nerves. The only sound was a rather queer one; it came at longish intervals, and at first I was puzzled by it. However, after listening attentively, I guessed what it was; the old men were sucking at the insides of their cheeks, and this caused the odd, wheezing noises that had mystified me. They were so much absorbed in their thoughts that

they didn't know what they were up to. I even had an impression that the dead body in their midst meant nothing at all to them. But now I suspect that I was mistaken about this.

We all drank the coffee, which the porter handed round. After that, I can't remember much; somehow the night went by. I can recall only one moment; I had opened my eyes and I saw the old men sleeping hunched up on their chairs, with one exception. Resting his chin on his hands clasped round his stick, he was staring hard at me, as if he had been waiting for me to wake. Then I fell asleep again. I woke up after a bit, because the ache in my legs had developed into a sort of cramp.

There was a glimmer of dawn above the skylight. A minute or two later one of the old men woke up and coughed repeatedly. He spat into a big check handkerchief, and each time he spat it sounded as if he was retching. This woke the others, and the porter told them it was time to make a move. They all got up at once. Their faces were ashen-grey after the long, uneasy vigil. To my surprise each of them shook hands with me, as though this night together, in which we hadn't exchanged a word, had created a kind of intimacy between us.

I was quite done in. The porter took me to

his room and I tidied myself up a bit. He gave me some more white coffee, and it seemed to do me good. When I went out the sun was up and the sky mottled red above the hills between Marengo and the sea. A morning breeze was blowing and it had a pleasant salty tang. There was the promise of a very fine day. I hadn't been in the country for ages, and I caught myself thinking what an agreeable walk I might have had, if it hadn't been for Mother.

As it was, I waited in the courtyard under a plane-tree. I sniffed the smells of the cool earth and found I wasn't sleepy any more. Then I thought of the other fellows in the office. At this hour they'd be getting up, preparing to go to work; for me this was always the worst hour of the day. I went on thinking, like this, for ten minutes or so; then the sound of a bell inside the building attracted my attention. I could see movements behind the windows; then all was calm again. The sun had risen a little higher and was beginning to warm my feet. The Porter came across the yard and said the Warden wished to see me. I went to his office and he got me to sign some document. I noticed that he was in black, with pin-stripe trousers. He picked up the telephone-receiver and looked at me.

'The undertaker's men arrived some moments ago, and they will be going to the mortuary to screw down the coffin. Shall I tell them to wait, for you to have a last glimpse of your mother?'

'No,' I said.

He spoke into the receiver, lowering his voice.

'That's all right, Figeac. Tell the men to go there now.'

He then informed me that he was going to attend the funeral, and I thanked him. Sitting down behind his desk, he crossed his short legs and leant back. Besides the nurse on duty, he told me, he and I would be the only mourners at the funeral. It was a rule of the Home that inmates shouldn't attend funerals, though there was no objection to letting some of them sit up beside the coffin, the night before.

'It's for their own sakes,' he explained, 'to spare their feelings. But in this particular instance I've given permission for an old friend of your mother to come with us. His name is Thomas Pérez.' The Warden smiled. 'It's a rather touching little story in its way. He and your mother had become almost inseparable. The other old people used to tease Pérez about having a "fiancée"'. "When are

you going to marry her?" they'd ask. He'd turn it with a laugh. It was a standing joke, in fact. So, you can guess, he feels very badly about your mother's death. I thought I couldn't decently refuse him permission to attend the funeral. But, on our medical officer's advice, I forbade him to sit up beside the body last night.'

For some time we stayed without speaking. Then the Warden got up and went to the window. Presently he said:

'Ah, there's the padre from Marengo. He's a bit ahead of time.'

He warned me that it would take us a good three-quarters of an hour, walking to the church, which was in the village. Then we went downstairs.

The priest was waiting just outside the mortuary door. With him were two acolytes, one of whom had a censer. The priest was stooping over him, adjusting the length of the silver chain on which it hung. When he saw us he straightened up and said a few words to me, addressing me as 'My son'. Then he led the way into the mortuary.

I noticed at once that four men in black were standing behind the coffin and the screws in the lid had now been driven home. At the same moment I heard the Warden

remark that the hearse had arrived, and the priest started his prayers. Then everybody made a move. Holding a strip of black cloth, the four men approached the coffin, while the priest, the boys and myself filed out. A lady I hadn't seen before was standing by the door. 'This is Monsieur Meursault,' the Warden said to her. I didn't catch her name, but I gathered she was a nursing sister attached to the Home. When I was introduced, she bowed, without the trace of a smile on her long, gaunt face. We stood aside from the doorway to let the coffin by; then, following the bearers down a corridor, we came to the front entrance, where a hearse was waiting. Oblong, glossy, varnished black all over, it vaguely reminded me of the pen-trays in the office.

Beside the hearse stood a quaintly dressed little man, whose duty it was, I understood, to supervise the funeral, as a sort of master of ceremonies. Near him, looking constrained, almost bashful, was old M. Pérez, my mother's special friend. He wore a soft felt hat with a pudding-basin crown and a very wide brim—he whisked it off the moment the coffin emerged from the doorway—trousers that concertina'd on his shoes, a black tie much too small for his high white double-

collar. Under a bulbous, pimply nose, his lips were trembling. But what caught my attention most was his ears; pendulous, scarlet ears that showed up like blobs of sealing-wax on the pallor of his cheeks and were framed in wisps of silky white hair.

The undertaker's factotum shepherded us to our places, with the priest in front of the hearse, and the four men in black on each side of it. The Warden and myself came next, and, bringing up the rear, old Pérez and the nurse.

The sky was already a blaze of light, and the air stoking up rapidly. I felt the first waves of heat lapping my back, and my dark suit made things worse. I couldn't imagine why we waited so long for getting under way. Old Pérez, who had put on his hat, took it off again. I had turned slightly in his direction and was looking at him when the Warden started telling me more about him. I remember his saying that old Pérez and my mother used often to have a longish stroll together in the cool of the evening; sometimes they went as far as the village, accompanied by a nurse, of course.

I looked at the countryside, at the long lines of cypresses sloping up towards the skyline and the hills, the hot red soil dappled with vivid green, and here and there a lonely house

sharply outlined against the light—and I could understand Mother's feelings. Evenings in these parts must be a sort of mournful solace. Now, in the full glare of the morning sun, with everything shimmering in the heat-haze, there was something inhuman, discouraging, about this landscape.

At last we made a move. Only then I noticed that Pérez had a slight limp. The old chap steadily lost ground as the hearse gained speed. One of the men beside it, too, fell back and drew level with me. I was surprised to see how quickly the sun was climbing up the sky, and just then it struck me that for quite a while the air had been throbbing with the hum of insects and the rustle of grass warming up. Sweat was trickling down my face. As I had no hat I tried to fan myself with my handkerchief.

The undertaker's man turned to me and said something that I didn't catch. At the same time he wiped the crown of his head with a handkerchief that he held in his left hand, while with his right he tilted up his hat, I asked him what he'd said. He pointed upwards.

'Sun's pretty bad today, ain't it?'

'Yes,' I said.

After a while he asked: 'Is it your mother



we're burying?'

'Yes,' I said again.

'What was her age?'

'Well, she was getting on.' As a matter of fact I didn't know exactly how old she was.

After that he kept silent. Looking back, I saw Pérez limping along some fifty yards behind. He was swinging his big felt hat at arm's length, trying to make the pace. I also had a look at the Warden. He was walking with carefully measured steps, economizing every gesture. Beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead, but he didn't wipe them off.

I had an impression that our little procession was moving slightly faster. Wherever I looked I saw the same sun-drenched countryside, and the sky was so dazzling that I dared not raise my eyes. Presently we struck a patch of freshly tarred road. A shimmer of heat played over it and one's feet squelched at each step, leaving bright black gashes. In front, the coachman's glossy black hat looked like a lump of the same sticky substance, poised above the hearse. It gave one a queer, dream-like impression, that bluey-white glare overhead and all this blackness round one: the sleek black of the hearse, the dull black of the men's clothes and the silvery black gashes in the road. And then there were the smells,

smells of hot leather and horse-dung from the hearse, veined with whiffs of incense-smoke. What with these and the hangover from a poor night's sleep, I found my eyes and thoughts growing blurred.

I looked back again. Pérez seemed very far away now, almost hidden by the heat-haze; then, abruptly, he disappeared altogether. After puzzling over it for a bit, I guessed that he had turned off the road into the fields. Then I noticed that there was a bend of the road a little way ahead. Obviously Pérez, who knew the district well, had taken a short cut, so as to catch us up. He rejoined us soon after we were round the bend; then began to lose ground again. He took another short cut and met us again farther on; in fact this happened several times during the next half-hour. But soon I lost interest in his movements; my temples were throbbing and I could hardly drag myself along.

After that everything went with a rush; and also with such precision and matter-of-factness that I remember hardly any details. Except that when we were on the outskirts of the village the nurse said something to me. Her voice took me by surprise, it didn't match her face at all; it was musical and slightly tremulous. What she said was: 'If one goes too

slowly there's the risk of a heat-stroke. But, if one goes too fast, one perspires, and the cold air in the church gives one a chill.' I saw her point; either way one was for it.

Some other memories of the funeral have stuck in my mind. The old boy's face, for instance, when he caught us up for the last time, just outside the village. His eyes were streaming with tears, of exhaustion or distress, or both together. But because of the wrinkles they couldn't flow down. They spread out, criss-crossed, and formed a sort of glaze over the old, worn face.

And I can remember the look of the church, the villagers in the street, the red geraniums on the graves, Pérez's fainting-fit—he crumpled up like a rag doll—the tawny red earth pattering on Mother's coffin, the bits of white roots mixed up with it; then more people, voices, the wait outside a café for the bus, the rumble of the engine, and my little thrill of pleasure when we entered the first brightly lit streets of Algiers, and I pictured myself going straight to bed and sleeping twelve hours at a stretch.

## CHAPTER TWO

ON waking I understood why my employer had looked rather glum when I asked for my two days off; it was a Saturday today. I hadn't thought of this at the time; it only struck me when I was getting out of bed. Obviously he had seen that it would mean my getting four days' holiday straight off, and one couldn't expect him to like that. Still, for one thing, it wasn't my fault if Mother was buried yesterday and not today; and then, again, I'd have had my Saturday and Sunday off in any case. But naturally this didn't prevent me from seeing my employer's point.

Getting up was an effort, as I'd been really exhausted by the previous day's experiences. While shaving, I wondered how to spend the morning, and decided that a swim would do me good. So I caught the tram that goes down to the harbour.

It was quite like old times; a lot of young people were in the swimming-pool, amongst them Marie Cardona who used to be a typist at the office. I was rather keen on her in those days, and I fancy she liked me too. But she was with us so short a time that nothing came

of it.

While I was helping her to climb on to a raft, I let my hand stray over her breasts. Then she lay flat on the raft, while I trod water. After a moment she turned and looked at me. Her hair was over her eyes and she was laughing. I clambered up on to the raft, beside her. The air was pleasantly warm and, half jokingly, I let my head sink back upon her lap. She didn't seem to mind, so I let it stay there. I had the sky full in my eyes, all blue and gold, and I could feel Marie's stomach rising and falling gently under my head. We must have stayed a good half-hour on the raft, both of us half asleep. When the sun got too hot she dived off and I followed. I caught her up, put my arm round her waist and we swam side by side. She was still laughing.

While we were drying ourselves on the edge of the swimming-pool she said: 'I'm browner than you.' I asked her if she'd come to the cinema with me that evening. She laughed again and said 'Yes', if I'd take her to the comic everybody was talking about, the one with Fernandel in it.

When we had dressed, she stared at my black tie and asked if I was in mourning. I explained that my mother had died. 'When?' she asked, and I said, 'Yesterday'. She made no

remark, though I thought she shrank away a little. I was just going to explain to her that it wasn't my fault, but I checked myself, as I remembered having said the same thing to my employer, and realizing then it sounded rather foolish. Still, foolish or not—somehow one can't help feeling a bit guilty, I suppose, about things like that.

Anyhow, by the evening Marie had forgotten all about it. The film was funny in parts, but much of it downright stupid. She pressed her leg against mine while we were in the picture-house, and I was fondling her breast. Towards the end of the show I kissed her, but rather clumsily. Afterwards she came back with me to my place.

When I woke up Marie had gone. She'd told me her aunt expected her first thing in the morning. I remembered it was a Sunday, and that put me off; I've never cared for Sundays. So I turned my head and lazily sniffed the smell of brine that Marie's head had left on the pillow. I slept until ten. After that I stayed in bed until noon, smoking cigarettes. I decided not to lunch at Céleste's restaurant as I usually did; they'd be sure to pester me with questions, and I dislike being questioned. So I fried some eggs, and ate them off the pan. I did without bread as there wasn't any left,

and I couldn't be bothered going down to buy it.

After lunch I felt at a loose end and roamed about the little flat. It suited us well enough when Mother was with me, but now I was by myself it was too large and I'd moved the dining-table into my bedroom. That was now the only room I used; it had all the furniture I needed; a brass bedstead, a dressing-table, some cane chairs whose seats had more or less caved in, a wardrobe with a tarnished mirror. The rest of the flat was never used, so I didn't trouble to look after it.

A bit later, for want of anything to do, I picked up an old newspaper that was lying on the floor and read it. There was an advertisement of Kruschen Salts and I cut it out and pasted it into an album where I keep things that amuse me in the papers. Then I washed my hands and, as a last resource, went out on to the balcony.

My bedroom overlooks the main street of our district. Though it was a fine afternoon the paving-blocks were black and glistening. What few people were about seemed in an absurd hurry. First of all there came a family going for their Sunday afternoon walk; two small boys in sailor suits, with short trousers hardly down to their knees, and looking

rather uneasy in their Sunday best; then a little girl with a big pink bow and black patent-leather shoes. Behind them was their mother, an enormously fat woman in a brown silk dress, and their father, a dapper little man, whom I knew by sight. He had a straw hat, a walking-stick, and a butterfly tie. Seeing him beside his wife, I understood why people said he came of a good family and had married beneath him.

Next came a group of young fellows, the local 'bloods', with sleek oiled hair, red ties, coats cut very tight at the waist, braided pockets, and square-toed shoes. I guessed they were going to one of the big cinemas in the centre of the town. That was why they had started out so early and were hurrying to the tram-stop, laughing and talking at the top of their voices.

After they had passed the street gradually emptied. By this time all the matinées must have begun. Only a few shopkeepers and cats remained about. Above the sycamores bordering the road the sky was cloudless, but the light was soft. The tobacconist on the other side of the street brought a chair out on to the pavement in front of his door and sat astride it, resting his arms on the back. The trams which a few minutes before had been crowded



were now almost empty. In the little café, *Chez Pierrot*, beside the tobacconist's, the waiter was sweeping up the sawdust in the empty restaurant. A typical Sunday afternoon. . . .

I turned my chair round and seated myself like the tobacconist, as it was more comfortable that way. After smoking a couple of cigarettes I went back to the room, got a tablet of chocolate and returned to the window to eat it. Soon after, the sky clouded over and I thought a summer storm was coming. However, the clouds gradually lifted. All the same they had left in the street a sort of threat of rain, which made it darker. I stayed watching the sky for quite a while.

At five there was a loud clanging of trams. They were coming from the stadium in our suburb where there had been a football match. Even the back platforms were crowded and people were standing on the steps. Then another tram brought back the teams. I knew they were the players by the little suitcase each man carried. They were bawling out their team-song, 'Keep the ball rolling, boys'. One of them looked up at me and shouted, 'We licked them!' I waved my hand and called back, 'Good work!' From now on there was a steady stream of private

cars.

The sky had changed again; a reddish glow was spreading up beyond the housetops. As dusk set in the street grew more crowded. People were returning from their walks, and I noticed the dapper little man with the fat wife amongst the passers-by. Children were whimpering and trailing wearily after their parents. After some minutes the local cinemas disgorged their audiences. I noticed that the young fellows coming from them were taking longer strides and gesturing more vigorously than at ordinary times; doubtless the picture they'd been seeing was of the Wild West variety. Those who had been to the picture-houses in the middle of the town came a little later, and looked more sedate, though a few were still laughing. On the whole, however, they seemed languid and exhausted. Some of them remained loitering in the street under my window. A group of girls came by, walking arm in arm. The young men under my window swerved so as to brush against them, and shouted humorous remarks, which made the girls turn their heads and giggle. I recognized them as girls from my part of the town, and two or three of them, whom I knew, looked up and waved to me.

Just then the street-lamps came on, all together, and they made the stars that were beginning to glimmer in the night sky paler still. I felt my eyes getting tired, what with the lights and all the movement I'd been watching in the street. There were little pools of brightness under the lamps, and now and then a tramcar passed, lighting up a girl's hair, or a smile, or a silver bangle.

Soon after this, as the trams became fewer and the sky showed velvety black above the trees and lamps, the street grew emptier, almost imperceptibly, until a time came when there was nobody to be seen and a cat, the first of the evening, crossed unhurrying the deserted street.

It struck me that I'd better see about some dinner. I had been leaning so long on the back of my chair, looking down, that my neck hurt when I straightened myself up. I went down, bought some bread and spaghetti, did my cooking and ate my meal standing. I'd intended to smoke another cigarette at my window, but the night had turned rather chilly and I decided against it. As I was coming back, after shutting the window, I glanced at the mirror and saw reflected in it a corner of my table with my spirit-lamp and some bits of bread beside it. It occurred to me

that somehow I'd got through another Sunday, that Mother now was buried, and tomorrow I'd be going back to work as usual. Really, nothing in my life had changed.

## CHAPTER THREE

I HAD a busy morning in the office. My employer was in a good humour. He even inquired if I wasn't too tired, and followed it up by asking what Mother's age was. I thought a bit, then answered, 'Round about sixty', as I didn't want to make a blunder. At which he looked relieved—why, I can't imagine—and seemed to think that closed the matter.

There was a pile of bills of lading waiting on my desk and I had to go through them all. Before leaving for lunch I washed my hands. I always enjoyed doing this at midday. In the evening it was less pleasant, as the roller-towel after being used by so many people was sopping wet. I once brought this to my employer's notice. It was regrettable, he agreed—but, to his mind, a mere detail. I left the office building a little later than usual, at half-past twelve, with Emmanuel, who works in the Forwarding Department. Our building overlooks the sea, and we paused for a moment on the steps to look at the shipping in the harbour. The sun was scorching hot. Just then a big truck came up, with a din of chains

and backfires from the engine, and Emmanuel suggested we should try to jump it. I started to run. The truck was well away, and we had to chase it for quite a distance. What with the heat and the noise from the engine, I felt half dazed. All I was conscious of was our mad rush along the water-front, amongst cranes and winches, with dark hulls of ships alongside and masts swaying in the offing. I was the first to catch up with the truck. I took a flying jump, landed safely, and helped Emmanuel to scramble in beside me. We were both of us out of breath and the bumps of the truck on the roughly laid cobbles made things worse. Emmanuel chuckled, and panted in my ear, 'We've made it!'

By the time we reached Céleste's restaurant we were dripping with sweat. Céleste was at his usual place beside the entrance, with his apron bulging on his paunch, his white moustache well to the fore. When he saw me he was sympathetic and 'hoped I wasn't feeling too badly'. I said 'No', but I was extremely hungry. I ate very quickly and had some coffee, to finish up. Then I went to my place and took a short nap, as I'd drunk a glass of wine too many. When I woke I smoked a cigarette before getting off my bed. I was a bit late and had to run for the tram.

The office was stifling, and I was kept hard at it all the afternoon. So it came as a relief when we closed down and I was strolling slowly along the wharves in the coolness. The sky was green, and it was pleasant to be out of doors after the stuffy office. However, I went straight home as I had to put some potatoes on to boil.

The hall was dark and, when I was starting up the stairs, I almost bumped into old Salamano, who lived on the same floor as I. As usual, he had his dog with him. For eight years the two had been inseparable. Salamano's spaniel is an ugly brute, afflicted with some skin disease—mange, I expect; anyhow it has lost all its hair and its body is covered with brown scabs. Perhaps through living in one small room, cooped up with his dog, Salamano has come to resemble it. His towy hair has gone very thin, and he has reddish blotches on his face. And the dog has developed something of its master's queer hunched-up gait; it always has its muzzle stretched far forward and its nose to the ground. But, oddly enough, though so much alike, they detest each other.

Twice a day at eleven and six, the old fellow takes his dog for a walk, and for eight years that walk has never varied. You can see them

in the Rue de Lyon, the dog pulling his master along as hard as he can, till finally the old chap misses a step and nearly falls. Then he beats his dog and calls it names. The dog cowers and lags behind, and it's his master's turn to drag him along. Presently the dog forgets, starts tugging at the leash again, gets another hiding and more abuse. Then they halt on the pavement, the pair of them, and glare at each other; the dog with terror and the man with hatred in his eyes. Every time they're out this happens. When the dog wants to stop at a lamp-post, the old boy won't let him, and drags him on, and the wretched spaniel leaves behind him a trail of little drops. But, if he does it in the room, it means another hiding.

It's been going on like this for eight years, and Céleste always says it's a 'crying shame', and something should be done about it; but really one can't be sure. When I met him in the hall, Salamano was bawling at his dog, calling him a bastard, a lousy mongrel, and so forth, and the dog was whining. I said, 'Good evening', but the old fellow took no notice and went on cursing. So I thought I'd ask him what the dog had done. Again, he didn't answer, but went on shouting, 'You bloody cur!' and the rest of it. I couldn't see very clearly,



but he seemed to be fixing something on the dog's collar. I raised my voice a little. Without looking round, he mumbled in a sort of suppressed fury: 'He's always in the way, blast him!' Then he started up the stairs, but the dog tried to resist and flattened itself out on the floor, so he had to haul it up on the leash, step by step.

Just then the man who lives on my floor came in from the street. The general idea hereabouts is that he's a pimp. But if one asks him what his job is, he says he's a warehouseman. One thing's sure: he isn't popular in our street. Still, he often has a word for me, and drops in sometimes for a short talk in my room, because I listen to him. As a matter of fact, I find what he says quite interesting. So, really, I've no reason for freezing him off. His name is Sintès: Raymond Sintès. He's short and thick-set, has a nose like a boxer's, and always dresses very sprucely. He, too, once said to me, referring to Salamano, that it was 'a bloody shame', and asked me if I wasn't disgusted by the way the old man served his dog. I answered: 'No.'

We went up the stairs together, Sintès and I, and when I was turning in at my door, he said:

'Look here! How about having some grub

with me? I've a black-pudding and some wine.'

It struck me that this would save my having to cook my dinner, so I said, 'Thanks very much'.

He, too, has only one room, and a little kitchen without a window. I saw a pink-and-white plaster angel above his bed, and some photos of sporting champions and naked girls pinned to the opposite wall. The bed hadn't been made and the room was dirty. He began by lighting a paraffin lamp; then fumbled in his pocket and produced a rather grimy bandage which he wrapped round his right hand. I asked him what the trouble was. He told me he'd been having a rough house with a fellow who'd annoyed him.

'I'm not one who looks for trouble,' he explained, 'only I'm a bit short-tempered. That fellow said to me, challenging, like, "Come down off that tram, if you're a man". I says, "You keep quiet, I ain't done nothing to you". Then he said I hadn't any guts. Well, that settled it. I got down off the tram and I said to him, "You better keep your mouth shut, or I'll shut it for you"—"I'd like to see you try!" says he. Then I gave him one across the face and laid him out good and proper. After a bit I started to help him to get up, but all he did

was to kick at me from where he lay. So I gave him one with my knee and a couple more swipes. He was bleeding like a pig when I'd done with him. I asked him if he'd had enough, and he said, "Yes".'

Sintès was busy fixing his bandage while he talked, and I was sitting on the bed.

'So you see,' he said, 'it wasn't my fault; he was asking for it, wasn't he?'

I nodded, and he added:

'As a matter of fact, I rather want to ask your advice about something; it's connected with this business. You've knocked about the world a bit, and I dare say you can help me. And then I'll be your pal for life; I never forget anyone who does me a good turn.'

When I made no comment, he asked me if I'd like us to be pals. I replied that I had no objection, and that appeared to satisfy him. He got out the black-pudding, cooked it in a frying-pan, then laid the table, putting out two bottles of wine. While he was doing this he didn't speak.

We started dinner, and then he began telling me the whole story, hesitating a bit at first.

'There's a girl behind it—as usual. We slept together pretty regular. I was keeping her, as a matter of fact, and she cost me a tidy

sum. That fellow I knocked down is her brother.'

Noticing that I said nothing, he added that he knew what the neighbours said about him, but it was a filthy lie. He had his principles like everybody else, and a job in a warehouse.

'Well,' he said, 'to go on with my story. . . . I found out one day that she was letting me down.' He gave her enough money to keep her going, without extravagance, though; he paid the rent of her room and twenty francs a day for food. 'Three hundred francs for rent, and six hundred for her grub, with a little present thrown in now and then, a pair of stockings or what not. Say, a thousand francs a month. But that wasn't enough for my fine lady; she was always grumbling that she couldn't make both ends meet with what I gave. So one day I says to her, "Look here, why not get a job for a few hours a day? That'd make things easier for me, too. I bought you a new frock this month, I pay your rent and give you twenty francs a day. But you go and waste your money at the café with a pack of girls. You give them coffee and sugar. And of course the money comes out of my pocket. I treat you on the square, and that's how you pay me back." But she wouldn't hear of working, though she kept on saying she couldn't make do with

what I gave her. And then one day I found out she was doing the dirty on me.'

He went on to explain that he'd discovered a lottery ticket in her bag, and, when he asked where the money'd come from to buy it, she wouldn't tell him. Then, another time he'd found a pawn-ticket for two bracelets which he'd never set eyes on before.

'So I knew there was dirty work going on, and I told her I'd have nothing more to do with her. But, first, I gave her a good hiding, and I told her some home-truths. I said that there was only one thing interested her and that was getting into bed with men whenever she'd the chance. And I warned her straight, "You'll be sorry one day, my girl, and wish you'd got me back. All the girls in the street, they're jealous of your luck in having me to keep you."'

He'd beaten her till the blood came. Before that he'd never beaten her. 'Well, not hard, anyhow; only affectionately, like. She'd howl a bit, and I had to shut the window. Then, of course, it ended as per usual. But this time I'm done with her. Only, to my mind, I ain't punished her enough. See what I mean?'

He explained that it was about this he wanted my advice. The lamp was smoking, and he stopped pacing up and down the room,

to lower the wick. I just listened, without speaking. I'd had a whole bottle of wine to myself and my head was buzzing. As I'd used up my cigarettes I was smoking Raymond's. Some late trams passed, and the last noises of the street died off with them. Raymond went on talking. What bored him was that he had 'a sort of lech on her' as he called it. But he was quite determined to teach her a lesson.

His first idea, he said, had been to take her to an hotel, and then call in the special police. He'd persuade them to put her on the register as a 'common prostitute' and that would make her wild. Then he'd looked up some friends of his in the underworld, fellows who kept tarts for what they could make out of them, but they had practically nothing to suggest. Still, as he pointed out, that sort of thing should have been right up their street; what's the good of being in that line if you don't know how to treat a girl who's let you down? When he told them that, they suggested he should 'brand' her. But that wasn't what he wanted either. It would need a lot of thinking out. . . . But, first, he'd like to ask me something. Before he asked it, though, he'd like to have my opinion of the story he'd been telling, in a general way.

I said I hadn't any, but I'd found it interesting.

Did I think she really had done the dirty on him?

I had to admit it looked like that. Then he asked me if I didn't think she should be punished, and what I'd do if I were in his shoes. I told him one could never be quite sure how to act in such cases, but I quite understood his wanting her to suffer for it.

I drank some more wine, while Raymond lit another cigarette and began explaining what he proposed to do. He wanted to write her a letter, 'a real stinker, that'll get her on the raw', and at the same time make her repent of what she'd done. Then, when she came back, he'd go to bed with her and, just when she was 'properly primed up', he'd spit in her face and throw her out of the room. I agreed it wasn't a bad plan; it would punish her all right.

But, Raymond told me, he didn't feel up to writing the kind of letter that was needed, and that was where I could help. When I didn't say anything, he asked me if I'd mind doing it right away, and I said, 'No', I'd have a shot at it.

He drank off a glass of wine and stood up. Then he pushed aside the plates and the bit of

cold pudding that was left, to make room on the table. After carefully wiping the oilcloth, he got a sheet of squared paper from the drawer of his bedside table; after that, an envelope, a small red wooden penholder and a square inkpot with purple ink in it. The moment he mentioned the girl's name I knew she was a Moor.

I wrote the letter. I didn't take much trouble over it, but I wanted to satisfy Raymond, as I'd no reason not to satisfy him. Then I read out what I'd written. Puffing at his cigarette, he listened, nodding now and then. 'Read it again, please,' he said. He seemed delighted. 'That's the stuff,' he chuckled. 'I could tell you was a brainy sort, old boy, and you know what's what.'

At first I hardly noticed that 'old boy'. It came back to me when he slapped me on the shoulder and said, 'So now we're pals, ain't we?' I kept silence and he said it again. I didn't care one way or the other, but as he seemed so set on it, I nodded and said, 'Yes'.

He put the letter in the envelope and we finished off the wine. Then both of us smoked for some minutes, without speaking. The street was quite quiet, except when now and again a car passed. Finally I remarked that it was getting late, and Raymond agreed.



‘Time’s gone mighty fast this evening,’ he added, and in a way that was true. I wanted to be in bed, only it was such an effort making a move. I must have looked tired, for Raymond told me ‘one mustn’t let things get one down’. At first I didn’t catch his meaning. Then he explained that he had heard of my mother’s death; anyhow, he said, that was something bound to happen one day or another. I appreciated that, and told him so.

When I rose Raymond shook hands very warmly, remarking that men always understood each other. After closing the door behind me I lingered for some moments on the landing. The whole building was quiet as the grave, a dank, dark smell rising from the well-hole of the stairs. I could hear nothing but the blood throbbing in my ears, and for a while I stood listening to it. Then the dog began to moan in old Salamano’s room, and through the sleep-bound house the little plaintive sound rose slowly, like a flower growing out of the silence and the darkness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I HAD a busy time in the office throughout the week. Raymond dropped in once to tell me he'd sent off the letter. I went to the pictures twice with Emmanuel, who doesn't always understand what's happening on the screen and asks one to explain it. Yesterday was Saturday, and Marie came as we'd arranged. She had a very pretty dress, with red and white stripes, and leather sandals, and I couldn't take my eyes off her. One could see the outline of her firm little breasts, and her sun-tanned face was like a velvety brown flower. We took the bus and went to a beach I know, some miles out of Algiers. It's just a strip of sand between two rocky spurs, with a line of rushes at the back, along the tide-line. At four o'clock the sun wasn't too hot, but the water was pleasantly tepid, and small, languid ripples were creeping up the sand.

Marie taught me a new game. The idea was, while one swam, to suck in the spray off the waves and, when one's mouth was full of foam, to lie on one's back and spout it out against the sky. It made a sort of frothy haze that melted into the air or fell back in a warm

shower on one's cheeks. But very soon my mouth was smarting with all the salt I'd drawn in; then Marie came up and hugged me in the water, and pressed her mouth to mine. Her tongue cooled my lips, and we let the waves roll us about for a minute or two before swimming back to the beach.

When we had finished dressing, Marie looked hard at me. Her eyes were sparkling. I kissed her; after that neither of us spoke for quite a while. I pressed her to my side as we scrambled up the foreshore. Both of us were in a hurry to catch the bus, get back to my place and tumble on to the bed. I'd left my window open and it was pleasant to feel the cool night air flowing over our sunburnt bodies.

Marie said she was free next morning so I proposed she should have luncheon with me. She agreed, and I went down to buy some meat. On my way back I heard a woman's voice in Raymond's room. A little later old Salamano started grumbling at his dog and presently there was a sound of boots and paws on the wooden stairs; then, 'Filthy brute! Get on, you cur!' and the two of them went out into the street. I told Marie about the old chap's habits, and it made her laugh. She was wearing one of my pyjama suits, and had the

sleeves rolled up. When she laughed I wanted her again. A moment later she asked me if I loved her. I said that sort of question had no meaning, really; but I supposed I didn't. She looked sad for a bit, but when we were getting our lunch ready she brightened up and started laughing, and when she laughs I always want to kiss her. It was just then that the row started in Raymond's room.

First we heard a woman saying something in a high-pitched voice; then Raymond bawling at her, 'You let me down, you bitch! I'll learn you to let me down!' There came some thuds, then a piercing scream—it made one's blood run cold—and in a moment there was a crowd of people on the landing. Marie and I went out to see. The woman was still screaming and Raymond still knocking her about. Marie said, wasn't it horrible! I didn't answer anything. Then she asked me to go and fetch a policeman, but I told her I didn't like policemen. However, one turned up presently; the lodger on the second floor, a plumber, came up with him. When he banged on the door the noise stopped inside the room. He knocked again and, after a moment, the woman started crying, and Raymond opened the door. He had a cigarette dangling from his underlip and a rather sickly smile. 'Your

name?’ Raymond gave his name. ‘Take that cigarette out of your mouth when you’re talking to me,’ the policeman said gruffly. Raymond hesitated, glanced at me, and kept the cigarette in his mouth. The policeman promptly swung his arm and gave him a good hard smack on the left cheek. The cigarette shot from his lips and dropped a yard away. Raymond made a wry face, but said nothing for a moment. Then, in a humble tone he asked if he mightn’t pick up his fag.

The officer said ‘Yes’, and added: ‘But don’t you forget next time that we don’t stand for any nonsense, not from blokes like you.’

Meanwhile the girl went on sobbing and repeating: ‘He hit me, the coward. He’s a pimp.’

‘Excuse me, officer,’ Raymond put in, ‘but is that in order, calling a man a pimp in the presence of witnesses?’

The policeman told him to ‘shut his trap’.

Raymond then turned to the girl. ‘Don’t you worry, my pet. We’ll meet again.’

‘That’s enough,’ the policeman said, and told the girl to go away. Raymond was to stay in his room till summoned to the police-station. ‘You ought to be ashamed of yourself,’ the policeman added, ‘getting so tight you can’t stand steady. Why, you’re shaking all over!’

‘I’m not tight,’ Raymond explained. ‘Only when I see you standing there and looking at me, I can’t help trembling. That’s only natural.’

Then he closed his door, and we all went away. Marie and I finished getting our lunch ready. But she hadn’t any appetite, and I ate nearly all. She left at one, and then I had a nap.

Towards three there was a knock at my door and Raymond came in. He sat down on the edge of my bed and for a minute or two said nothing. I asked him how it had gone off. He said it had all gone quite smoothly at first, as per programme; only then she’d slapped his face and he’d seen red, and started thrashing her. As for what happened after that, he needn’t tell me, as I was there.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘you taught her a lesson all right, and that’s what you wanted, isn’t it?’

He agreed, and pointed out that whatever the police did, that wouldn’t change the fact she’d had her punishment. As for the police, he knew exactly how to handle them. But he’d like to know if I’d expected him to return the blow when the policeman hit him.

I told him I hadn’t expected anything whatsoever and, anyhow, I had no use for the police. Raymond seemed pleased and asked if

I'd like to come out for a stroll with him. I got up from the bed and started brushing my hair. Then Raymond said that what he really wanted was for me to act as his witness. I told him I had no objection; only I didn't know what he expected me to say.

'It's quite simple,' he replied. 'You've only got to tell them that the girl had let me down.'

So I agreed to be his witness.

We went out together and Raymond stood me a brandy in a café. Then we had a game of billiards; it was a close game and I lost by only a few points. After that he proposed going to a brothel, but I refused; I didn't feel like it. As we were walking slowly back he told me how pleased he was at having paid out his mistress so satisfactorily. He made himself extremely amiable to me and I quite enjoyed our walk.

When we were nearly home I saw old Salamaño on the doorstep; he seemed very excited. I noticed that his dog wasn't with him. He was turning like a teetotum, looking in all directions, and sometimes peering into the darkness of the hall with his little bloodshot eyes. Then he'd mutter something to himself and start gazing up and down the street again.

Raymond asked him what was wrong, but he didn't answer at once. Then I heard him

grunt, 'The bastard! The filthy cur!' When I asked him where his dog was, he scowled at me and snapped out, 'Gone!' A moment later, all of a sudden, he launched out into it.

'I'd taken him to the Parade Ground as usual. There was a fair on, and one could hardly move for the crowd. I stopped at one of the booths to look at the Handcuff King. When I turned to go, the dog was gone. I'd been meaning to get a smaller collar, but I never thought the brute could slip it and get away like that.'

Raymond assured him the dog would find its way home, and told him stories of dogs that had travelled miles and miles to get back to their masters. But this seemed to make the old fellow even more worried than before.

'Don't you understand, they'll do away with him; the police, I mean. It's not likely anyone will take him in and look after him; with all those scabs he puts everybody off.'

I told him that there was a pound at the police station, where stray dogs are taken. His dog was certain to be there, and he could get it back on payment of a small charge. He asked me how much the charge was, but there I couldn't help him. Then he flew into a rage again.

'Is it likely I'd give money for a tyke like



that? No bloody fear! They can kill him for all I care.' And he went on calling his dog the usual names.

Raymond gave a laugh and turned into the hall. I followed him upstairs, and we parted on the landing. A minute or two later I heard Salamano's footsteps and a knock on my door.

When I opened it, he halted for a moment in the doorway.

'Excuse me . . . I hope I'm not disturbing you.'

I asked him in, but he shook his head. He was staring at his toe-caps, and the gnarled old hands were trembling. Without meeting my eyes, he started talking.

'They won't really take him from me, will they, Monsieur Meursault? Surely they wouldn't do a thing like that. If they do—I don't know what will become of me.'

I told him that, so far as I knew, they kept stray dogs in the pound for three days, waiting for their owners to call for them. After that they disposed of the dogs as they thought fit.

He stared at me in silence for a moment, then said, 'Good evening'. After that I heard him pacing up and down his room for quite a while. Then his bed creaked. Through the

wall there came to me a little wheezing sound, and I guessed that he was weeping. For some reason, I don't know what, I began thinking of Mother. But I had to get up early next day; so, as I wasn't feeling hungry, I did without supper, and went straight to bed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

RAYMOND rang me up at the office. He said that a friend of his—to whom he'd spoken about me—invited me to spend next Sunday at his little seaside bungalow just outside Algiers. I told him I'd have been delighted; only I had promised to spend Sunday with a girl. Raymond promptly replied that she could come, too. In fact, his friend's wife would be very pleased not to be the only woman in a party of men.

I'd have liked to hang up at once, as my employer doesn't approve of one's using the office phone for private calls. But Raymond asked me to hold on; he had something else to tell me, and that was why he'd rung me up, though he could have waited till the evening to pass on the invitation.

'It's like this,' he said. 'I've been shadowed all the morning by some Arabs. One of them's the brother of that girl I had the row with. If you see him hanging round the house when you come back, pass me the word.'

I promised to do so.

Just then, my employer sent for me. For a moment I felt uneasy as I expected he was

going to tell me to stick to my work and not waste time chattering with friends over the phone. However, it was nothing of the kind. He wanted to discuss a project he had in view, though so far he'd come to no decision. It was to open a branch at Paris, so as to be able to deal with the big companies on the spot, without postal delays, and he wanted to know if I'd like a post there.

'You're a young man,' he said, 'and I'm pretty sure you'd enjoy living in Paris. And, of course, you could travel about France for some months in the year.'

I told him I was quite prepared to go; but really I didn't care much one way or the other.

He then asked if a 'change of life', as he called it, didn't appeal to me, and I answered that one never changed one's real life; anyhow, one life was as good as another and my present one suited me quite well.

At this he looked rather hurt, and told me that I always shilly-shallied, and that I lacked ambition—a grave defect, to his mind, when one was in business.

I returned to my work. I'd have preferred not to vex him, but I saw no reason for 'changing my life'. By and large it wasn't an unpleasant one. As a student I'd had plenty of

ambition of the kind he meant. But, when I had to drop my studies, I very soon realized all that was pretty futile.

Marie came that evening and asked me if I'd marry her. I said I didn't mind; if she was keen on it, we'd get married.

Then she asked me again if I loved her. I replied, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing—but I supposed I didn't.

'If that's how you feel,' she said, 'why marry me?'

I explained that it had no importance really but, if it would give her pleasure, we could get married right away. I pointed out that anyhow the suggestion came from her; as for me, I'd merely said 'Yes'.

Then she remarked that marriage was a serious matter.

To which I answered: 'No.'

She kept silent after that, staring at me in a curious way. Then she asked:

'Suppose another girl had asked you to marry her—I mean, a girl you liked in the same way as you like me—would you have said "Yes" to her, too?'

'Naturally.'

Then she said she wondered if she really loved me or not. I, of course, couldn't en-

lighten her as to that. And, after another silence, she murmured something about my being 'a queer fellow'. 'And I dare say that's why I love you,' she added. 'But maybe that's why one day I'll come to hate you.'

To which I had nothing to say, so I said nothing.

She thought for a bit, then started smiling, and, taking my arm, repeated that she was in earnest; she really wanted to marry me.

'All right,' I answered. 'We'll get married whenever you like.' I then mentioned the proposal made by my employer and Marie said she'd love to go to Paris.

When I told her I'd lived in Paris for a while, she asked me what it was like.

'A dingy sort of town, to my mind. Masses of pigeons and dark courtyards. And the people have washed-out, white faces.'

Then we went for a walk all the way across the town by the main streets. The women were good-lookers, and I asked Marie if she, too, noticed this. She said 'Yes' and that she saw what I meant. After that we said nothing for some minutes. However, as I didn't want her to leave me, I suggested we should dine together at Céleste's. She'd have loved to dine with me, she said, only she was booked up for the evening. We were near my place, and I

said, '*Au revoir*, then'.

She looked me in the eyes.

'Don't you want to know what I'm doing this evening?'

I did want to know, but I hadn't thought of asking her, and I guessed she was making a grievance of it. I must have looked embarrassed, for suddenly she started laughing and bent towards me, pouting her lips for a kiss.

I went by myself to Céleste's. When I had just started my dinner an odd-looking little woman came in and asked if she might sit at my table. Of course she might. She had a chubby face like a ripe apple, bright eyes, and moved in a curiously jerky way as if she were on wires. After taking off her close-fitting jacket she sat down and started studying the bill of fare with a sort of rapt attention. Then she called Céleste and gave her order, very fast but quite distinctly; one didn't lose a word. While waiting for the *hors d'œuvre* she opened her bag, took out a slip of paper and a pencil, and added up the bill in advance. Diving into her bag again, she produced a purse and took from it the exact sum, plus a small tip, and placed it on the cloth in front of her.

Just then the waiter brought the *hors*

*d'œuvre*, which she proceeded to wolf down voraciously. While waiting for the next course, she produced another pencil, this time a blue one, from her bag, and the radio magazine for the coming week, and started making ticks against almost all the items of the daily programmes. There were a dozen pages in the magazine and she continued studying them closely throughout the meal. When I'd finished mine she was still ticking off items with the same meticulous attention. Then she rose, put on her jacket again with the same abrupt, robot-like gestures, and walked briskly out of the restaurant.

Having nothing better to do, I followed her for a short distance. Keeping on the kerb of the pavement, she walked straight ahead, never swerving or looking back, and it was extraordinary how fast she covered the ground, considering her smallness. In fact, the pace was too much for me, and I soon lost sight of her and turned back homewards. For a moment the 'little robot' (as I thought of her) had much impressed me, but I soon forgot about her.

As I was turning in at my door I ran into old Salamano. I asked him into my room, and he informed me that his dog was definitely lost. He'd been to the pound to inquire, but it



wasn't there, and the staff told him it had probably been run over. When he asked them whether it was any use inquiring about it at the police station, they said the police had more important things to attend to than keeping records of stray dogs run over in the streets. I suggested he should get another dog, but, reasonably enough, he pointed out that he'd become used to this one, and it wouldn't be the same thing.

I was seated on my bed, with my legs up, and Salamano on a chair beside the table, facing me, his hands spread on his knees. He had kept on his battered felt hat and was mumbling away behind his draggled yellowish moustache. I found him rather boring, but I had nothing to do and didn't feel sleepy. So, to keep the conversation going, I asked some questions about his dog—how long he had had it and so forth. He told me he had got it soon after his wife's death. He'd married rather late in life. When a young man, he'd wanted to go on the stage; during his military service he'd often played in the regimental theatricals and acted rather well, so everybody said. However, finally, he had taken a job in the railway, and he didn't regret it, as now he had a small pension. He and his wife had never hit it off very well, but they'd got

used to each other, and when she died he felt lonely. One of his mates on the railway whose bitch had just had pups, had offered him one, and he had taken it, as a companion. He'd had to feed it from the bottle at first. But, as a dog's life is shorter than a man's, they'd so to speak grown old together.

'He was a cantankerous brute,' Salamano said. 'Now and then we had some proper set-tos, he and I. But he was a good tyke all the same.'

I said he looked well bred, and that evidently pleased the old man.

'Ah, but you should have seen him before his illness!' he said. 'He had a wonderful coat; in fact, that was his best point really. I tried hard to cure him; every mortal night after he got that skin disease I rubbed an ointment in. But his real trouble was old age, and there's no curing that.'

Just then I yawned, and the old chap said he'd better make a move. I told him he could stay, and that I was sorry about what had happened to his dog. He thanked me, and mentioned that my mother had been fond of his dog. He referred to her as 'your poor mother', and was afraid I must be feeling her death terribly. When I said nothing he added hastily and with a rather embarrassed air that

some of the people in the street said nasty things about me because I'd sent my mother to the Home. But he, of course, knew better; he knew how devoted to my mother I had always been.

I answered—why, I still don't know—that it surprised me to learn I'd produced such a bad impression. As I couldn't afford to keep her here, it seemed the obvious thing to do, to send her to a Home. 'In any case,' I added, 'for years she'd never had a word to say to me, and I could see she was moping, with no one to talk to.'

'Yes,' he said, 'and at a Home one makes friends, anyhow.'

He got up, saying it was high time for him to be in bed, and added that life was going to be a bit of a problem for him, under the new conditions. For the first time since I'd known him he held out his hand to me—rather shyly, I thought—and I could feel the scales on his skin. Just as he was going out of the door, he turned and, smiling a little, said:

'Let's hope the dogs won't bark again to-night. I always think it's mine I hear. . . .'

## CHAPTER SIX

IT was an effort waking up that Sunday morning; Marie had to jog my shoulders and shout my name. As we wanted to get into the water early, we didn't trouble about breakfast. My head was aching slightly and my first cigarette had a bitter taste. Marie told me I looked like a mourner at a funeral, and I certainly did feel very limp. She was wearing a white dress and had her hair loose. I told her she looked quite ravishing like that, and she laughed happily.

On our way out we banged on Raymond's door, and he shouted that he'd be with us in a jiffy. We went down to the street and, because of my being rather under the weather and our having kept the blind down in my room, the glare of the morning sun hit me in the eyes like a clenched fist.

Marie, however, was almost dancing with delight, and kept repeating, 'What a heavenly day!' After a few minutes I was feeling better, and noticed that I was hungry. I mentioned this to Marie but she paid no attention. She was carrying an oilcloth bag in which she had stowed our bathing kit and a towel. Presently

we heard Raymond shutting his door. He was wearing blue trousers, a short-sleeved white shirt, and a straw hat. I noticed that his forearms were rather hairy, but the skin was very white beneath. The straw hat made Marie giggle. Personally, I was rather put off by his get-up. He seemed in high spirits and was whistling as he came down the stairs. He greeted me with, 'Hullo, old boy!' and addressed Marie as 'Mademoiselle'.

On the previous evening we had visited the police station, where I gave evidence for Raymond—about the girl's having been false to him. So they let him off with a warning. They didn't check my statement.

After some talk on the doorstep we decided to take the bus. The beach was within easy walking distance, but the sooner we got there the better. Just as we were starting for the bus stop, Raymond plucked my sleeve and told me to look across the street. I saw some Arabs lounging against the tobacconist's window. They were staring at us silently, in the special way these people have—as if we were blocks of stone or dead trees. Raymond whispered that the second Arab from the left was 'his man', and I thought he looked rather worried. However, he assured me that all that was ancient history. Marie, who hadn't followed

his remarks, asked, 'What is it?'

I explained that those Arabs across the way had a grudge against Raymond. She insisted on our going at once. Then Raymond laughed, and squared his shoulders. The young lady was quite right, he said. There was no point in hanging about here. Half-way to the bus stop he glanced back over his shoulder and said the Arabs weren't following. I, too, looked back. They were exactly as before, gazing in the same vague way at the spot where we had been.

When we were in the bus, Raymond, who now seemed quite at ease, kept making jokes to amuse Marie. I could see he was attracted by her, but she had hardly a word for him. Now and again she would catch my eye and smile.

We alighted just outside Algiers. The beach is not far from the bus stop; one has only to cross a patch of high land, a sort of plateau, which overlooks the sea and shelves down steeply to the sands. The ground here was covered with yellowish pebbles and wild lilies that showed snow-white against the blue of the sky, which had already the hard metallic glint it gets on very hot days. Marie amused herself swishing her bag against the flowers and sending the petals showering in

all directions. Then we walked between two rows of little houses with wooden balconies and green or white palings. Some of them were half-hidden in clumps of tamarisks; others rose naked from the stony plateau. Before we came to the end of it, the sea was in full view; it lay smooth as a mirror, and in the distance a big headland jutted out over its black reflection. Through the still air came the faint buzz of a motor-engine and we saw a fishing-boat very far out, gliding almost imperceptibly across the dazzling smoothness.

Marie picked some rock-irises. Going down the steep path leading to the sea, we saw some bathers already on the sands.

Raymond's friend owned a small wooden bungalow at the near end of the beach. Its back rested against the cliff-side, while the front stood on piles, which the water was already lapping. Raymond introduced us to his friend, whose name was Masson. He was tall, broad-shouldered and thick-set; his wife was a plump, cheerful little woman, who spoke with a Paris accent.

Masson promptly told us to make ourselves at home. He had gone out fishing, he said, first thing in the morning, and there would be fried fish for lunch. I congratulated him on his little bungalow, and he said he always

spent his week-ends and holidays here. 'With the missus, needless to say,' he added. I glanced at her, and noticed that she and Marie seemed to be getting on well together; laughing and chattering away. For the first time, perhaps, I seriously considered the possibility of my marrying her.

Masson wanted to have a swim at once, but his wife and Raymond were disinclined to move. So only the three of us, Marie, Masson and myself, went down to the beach. Marie promptly plunged in, but Masson and I waited for a bit. He was rather slow of speech and had, I noticed, a habit of saying 'and what's more' between his phrases—even when the second added nothing really to the first. Talking of Marie, he said: 'She's an awfully pretty girl, and what's more, charming.'

But I soon ceased paying attention to this trick of his; I was basking in the sunlight which, I noticed, was making me feel much better. The sand was beginning to stoke up under-foot and, though I was eager for a dip, I postponed it for a minute or two more. At last I said to Masson: 'Shall we go in now?' and plunged. Masson walked in gingerly and only began to swim when he was out of his depth. He swam hand over hand and made slow



headway, so I left him behind and caught up Marie. The water was cold and I felt all the better for it. We swam a long way out, Marie and I side by side, and it was pleasant feeling how our movements matched, hers and mine, and how we were both in the same mood, enjoying every moment.

Once we were out in the open, we lay on our backs and, as I gazed up at the sky, I could feel the sun drawing up the film of salt water on my lips and cheeks. We saw Masson swim back to the beach and slump down on the sand under the sun. In the distance he looked enormous, like a stranded whale. Then Marie proposed that we should swim tandem. She went ahead and I put my arms round her waist, from behind, and while she drew me forward with her arm-strokes, I kicked out behind to help us on.

That sound of little splashes had been in my ears for so long that I began to feel I'd had enough of it. So I let go of Marie and swam back at an easy pace, taking long, deep breaths. When I made the beach I stretched myself belly-downwards beside Masson, resting my face on the sand. I told him 'it was fine' here and he agreed. Presently Marie came back. I raised my head to watch her approach. She was glistening with brine and

holding her hair back. Then she lay down beside me and what with the combined warmth of our bodies and the sun, I felt myself dropping off to sleep.

After a while Marie tugged my arm and said Masson had gone to his place; it must be nearly lunch-time. I rose at once, as I was feeling hungry, but Marie told me I hadn't kissed her once since the early morning. That was so—though I'd wanted to, several times. 'Let's go into the water again,' she said, and we ran into the sea and lay flat amongst the ripples for a moment. Then we swam a few strokes and when we were almost out of our depth she flung her arms round me and hugged me. I felt her legs twining round mine, and my senses tingled.

When we got back, Masson was on the steps of his bungalow, shouting to us to come. I told him I was ravenously hungry, and he promptly turned to his wife and said he'd taken quite a fancy to me. The bread was excellent, and I had my full share of the fish. Then came some steak and chips. None of us spoke while eating. Masson drank a lot of wine and kept refilling my glass the moment it was empty. By the time coffee was handed round I was feeling slightly muzzy, and I started smoking one cigarette after another.

Masson, Raymond and I discussed a plan of spending the whole of August on the beach together, sharing expenses.

Suddenly Marie exclaimed: 'I say! Do you know the time? It's only half-past eleven!'

We were all surprised at that, and Masson remarked that we'd had a very early lunch, but really lunch was a movable feast, one had it when one felt like it.

This set Marie laughing, I don't know why. I suspect she'd drunk a bit too much.

Then Masson asked if I'd like to come with him for a stroll on the beach.

'My wife always has a nap after lunch,' he said. 'Personally I find it doesn't agree with me; what I need is a short walk. I'm always telling her it's much better for the health. But of course she's entitled to her own opinion.'

Marie proposed to stay and help with the washing-up. Mme Masson smiled and said that, in that case, the first thing was to get the men out of the way. So we went out together, the three of us.

The light was almost vertical and the glare from the water seared one's eyes. The beach was quite deserted now. One could hear a faint tinkle of knives and forks and crockery in the shacks and bungalows lining the fore-shore. Heat was welling up from the rocks

and one could hardly breathe.

At first Raymond and Masson talked of things and people I didn't know. I gathered that they'd been acquainted for some time and had even lived together for a while. We went down to the water's edge and walked along it; now and then a longer wave wetted our canvas shoes. I wasn't thinking of anything, as all that sunlight beating down on my bare head made me feel half asleep.

Just then Raymond said something to Masson that I didn't quite catch. But at the same moment I noticed two Arabs in blue dungarees a long way down the beach, coming in our direction. I gave Raymond a look and he nodded, saying, 'That's him'. We walked steadily on. Masson wondered how they'd managed to track us here. My impression was that they had seen us taking the bus and noticed Marie's oilcloth bathing-bag; but I didn't say anything.

Though the Arabs walked quite slowly they were much nearer already. We didn't change our pace, but Raymond said:

'Listen! If there's a rough house, you, Masson, take on the second one. I'll tackle the fellow who's after me. And you, Meursault, stand by to help if another one comes up, and lay him out.'

I said, 'Right', and Masson put his hands in his pockets.

The sand was hot as fire and I could have sworn it was glowing red. The distance between us and the Arabs was steadily decreasing. When we were only a few steps away the Arabs halted. Masson and I slowed down, while Raymond went straight up to his man. I couldn't hear what he said, but I saw the native lowering his head, as if to butt him in the chest. Raymond lashed out promptly and shouted to Masson to come. Masson went up to the man he had been marking and struck him twice with all his might. The fellow fell flat into the water and stayed there some seconds with bubbles coming up to the surface round his head. Meanwhile Raymond had been slogging the other man, whose face was streaming with blood. He glanced at me over his shoulder and shouted:

'Just you watch! I ain't finished with him yet!'

'Look out!' I cried. 'He's got a knife.'

I spoke too late. The man had gashed Raymond's arm and his mouth as well.

Masson sprang forward. The other Arab got up from the water and placed himself behind the fellow with the knife. We didn't dare to move. The two natives backed away slowly,

keeping us at bay with the knife and never taking their eyes off us. When they were at a safe distance they swung round and took to their heels. We stood stock still, with the sunlight beating down on us. Blood was dripping from Raymond's wounded arm, which he was squeezing hard above the elbow.

Masson remarked that there was a doctor who always spent his Sundays here, and Raymond said: 'Good. Let's go to him at once.' He could hardly get the words out as the blood from his other wound made bubbles in his mouth.

We each gave him an arm and helped him back to the bungalow. Once we were there he told us the wounds weren't so very deep and he could walk to where the doctor was. Marie had gone quite pale, and Mme Masson was in tears.

Masson and Raymond went off to the doctor's while I was left behind at the bungalow to explain matters to the women. I didn't much relish the task and soon dried up and started smoking, staring at the sea.

Raymond came back at about half-past one, accompanied by Masson. He had his arm bandaged and a strip of sticking-plaster on the corner of his mouth. The doctor assured him it was nothing serious, but he was looking

very glum. Masson tried to make him laugh, but without success.

Presently Raymond said he was going for a stroll on the beach. I asked him where he proposed to go and he mumbled something about 'wanting to take the air'. We—Masson and I—then said we'd go with him, but he flew into a rage and told us to mind our own business. Masson said we mustn't insist, seeing the state he was in. However, when he went out, I followed him.

It was like a furnace outside, with the sunlight splintering into flakes of fire on the sand and sea. We walked for quite a while, and I had an idea that Raymond had a definite idea where he was going; but probably I was mistaken about this.

At the end of the beach we came to a small stream that had cut a channel in the sand, after coming out from behind a biggish rock. There we found our two Arabs again, lying on the sand in their blue dungarees. They looked harmless enough, as if they didn't bear any malice, and neither made any move when we approached. The man who had slashed Raymond stared at him without speaking. The other man was blowing down a little reed and extracting from it three notes of the scale, which he played over and over again, while he

watched us from the corner of an eye.

For a while nobody moved; it was all sunlight and silence except for the tinkle of the stream and those three little lonely sounds. Then Raymond put his hand to his revolver-pocket, but the Arabs still didn't move. I noticed that the man playing on the reed had his big toes splayed out almost at right angles to his feet.

Still keeping his eyes on his man, Raymond said to me: 'Shall I plug him one?'

I thought quickly. If I told him not to, considering the mood he was in, he might very well fly into a temper and use his gun. So I said the first thing that came into my head.

'He hasn't spoken to you yet. It would be a low-down trick to shoot him like that, in cold blood.'

Again, for some moments one heard nothing but the tinkle of the stream and the flute-notes weaving through the hot, still air.

'Well,' Raymond said at last, 'if that's how you feel, I'd better say something insulting, and if he answers back I'll loose off.'

'Right,' I said. 'Only, if he doesn't get out his knife you've no business to fire.'

Raymond was beginning to fidget. The Arab with the reed went on playing, and both of them watched all our movements.



‘Listen,’ I said to Raymond. ‘You take on the fellow on the right, and give me your revolver. If the other one starts making trouble or gets out his knife, I’ll shoot.’

The sun glinted on Raymond’s revolver as he handed it to me. But nobody made a move yet; it was just as if everything had closed in on us so that we couldn’t stir. We could only watch each other, never lowering our eyes; the whole world seemed to have come to a standstill on this little strip of sand between the sunlight and the sea, the twofold silence of the reed and stream. And just then it crossed my mind that one might fire, or not fire—and it would come to absolutely the same thing.

Then, all of a sudden, the Arabs vanished; they’d slipped like lizards under cover of the rock. So Raymond and I turned and walked back. He seemed happier, and began talking about the bus to catch for our return.

When we reached the bungalow Raymond promptly went up the wooden steps, but I halted on the bottom one. The light seemed thudding in my head and I couldn’t face the effort needed to go up the steps and make myself amiable to the women. But the heat was so great that it was just as bad staying where I was, under that flood of blinding light falling from the sky. To stay, or to make a

move—it came to much the same. After a moment I returned to the beach, and started walking.

There was the same red glare as far as the eye could reach, and small waves were lapping the hot sand in little, flurried gasps. As I slowly walked towards the boulders at the end of the beach I could feel my temples swelling under the impact of the light. It pressed itself upon me, trying to check my progress. And each time I felt a hot blast strike my forehead, I gritted my teeth, I clenched my fists in my trouser-pockets and keyed up every nerve to fend off the sun and the dark befuddlement it was pouring into me. Whenever a blade of vivid light shot upwards from a bit of shell or broken glass lying on the sand, my jaws set hard. I wasn't going to be beaten, and I walked steadily on.

The small black hump of rock came into view far down the beach. It was rimmed by a dazzling sheen of light and feathery spray, but I was thinking of the cold, clear stream behind it, and longing to hear again the tinkle of running water. Anything to be rid of the glare, the sight of women in tears, the strain and effort—and to retrieve the pool of shadow by the rock and its cool silence!

But when I came nearer I saw that

Raymond's Arab had returned. He was by himself this time, lying on his back, his hands behind his head, his face shaded by the rock while the sun beat on the rest of his body. One could see his dungarees steaming in the heat. I was rather taken aback; my impression had been that the incident was closed, and I hadn't given a thought to it on my way here.

On seeing me the Arab raised himself a little, and his hand went to his pocket. Naturally, I gripped Raymond's revolver in the pocket of my coat. Then the Arab let himself sink back again, but without taking his hand from his pocket. I was some distance off, at least ten yards, and most of the time I saw him as a blurred dark form wobbling in the heat-haze. Sometimes, however I had glimpses of his eyes glowing between the half-closed lids. The sound of the waves was even lazier, feebler, than at noon. But the light hadn't changed; it was pounding fiercely as ever on the long stretch of sand that ended at the rock. For two hours the sun seemed to have made no progress; becalmed in a sea of molten steel. Far out on the horizon a steamer was passing; I could just make out from the corner of an eye the small black moving patch, while I kept my gaze fixed on the Arab.

It struck me that all I had to do was to turn,

walk away, and think no more about it. But the whole beach, pulsing with heat, was pressing on my back. I took some steps towards the stream. The Arab didn't move. After all, there was still some distance between us. Perhaps because of the shadow on his face, he seemed to be grinning at me.

I waited. The heat was beginning to scorch my cheeks, beads of sweat were gathering in my eyebrows. It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother's funeral, and I had the same disagreeable sensations—especially in my forehead, where all the veins seemed to be bursting through the skin. I couldn't stand it any longer, and took another step forward. I knew it was a fool thing to do; I shouldn't get out of the sun by moving on a yard or so. But I took that step, just one step, forward. And then the Arab drew his knife and held it up towards me, athwart the sunlight.

A shaft of light shot upwards from the steel, and I felt as if a long, thin blade transfixed my forehead. At the same moment all the sweat that had accumulated in my eyebrows splashed down on my eyelids, covering them with a warm film of moisture. Beneath a veil of brine and tears my eyes were blinded: I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and, less distinctly, of

the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs.

Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. And so, with that crisp, whip-crack sound, it all began. I shook off my sweat and the clinging veil of light. I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this beach on which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more into the inert body, on which they left no visible trace. And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing.

## PART TWO



## CHAPTER ONE

I WAS questioned several times immediately after my arrest. But they were all formal examinations, as to my identity and so forth. At the first of these, which took place at the police station, nobody seemed to take much interest in the case. However, when I was brought before the examining magistrate a week later, I noticed that he eyed me with distinct curiosity. Like the others, he began by asking my name, address and occupation, the date and place of my birth. Then he inquired if I had chosen a lawyer to defend me. I answered 'No', I hadn't thought about it, and asked him if it was really necessary for me to have one. 'Why do you ask that?' he replied. I replied that I regarded my case as very simple. He smiled. 'Well, it may seem so to you. But we've got to abide by the law, and, if you don't engage a lawyer, the Court will have to appoint one for you.'

It struck me as an excellent arrangement that the authorities should see to details of this kind, and I told him so. He nodded, and agreed that the Code was all that could be desired.



At first I didn't take him quite seriously. The room in which he interviewed me was much like an ordinary sitting-room, with curtained windows and a single lamp standing on the desk. Its light fell on the armchair in which he'd had me sit, while his own face stayed in shadow.

I had read descriptions of such scenes in books, and at first it all seemed like a game. After our conversation, however, I had a good look at him. He was a tall man with clean-cut features, deep-set blue eyes, a big grey moustache and abundant, almost snow-white hair, and he gave me the impression of being highly intelligent and, on the whole, likeable enough. There was only one thing that put one off: his mouth had now and then a rather ugly twist; but it seemed to be only a sort of nervous *tic*. When leaving, I very nearly held out my hand and said 'Good-bye'; just in time I remembered that I'd killed a man.

Next day a lawyer came to my cell; a small, plump, youngish man with sleek black hair. In spite of the heat—I was in my shirt-sleeves—he was wearing a dark suit, stiff collar, and a rather showy tie, with broad black and white stripes. After depositing his brief-case on my bed, he introduced himself, and added that he'd perused the record of my

case with the utmost care. His opinion was that it would need cautious handling, but there was every prospect of my getting off, provided I followed his advice. I thanked him, and he said: 'Good. Now let's get down to it.'

Sitting on the bed, he said that they'd been making investigations into my private life. They had learnt that my mother died recently in a Home. Inquiries had been conducted at Marengo and the police informed that I'd shown 'great callousness' at my mother's funeral.

'You must understand,' the lawyer said, 'that I don't relish having to question you about such a matter. But it has much importance and, unless I find some way of answering the charge of "callousness", I shall be handicapped in conducting your defence. And that is where you, and only you, can help me.'

He went on to ask me if I had felt grief on that 'sad occasion'. The question struck me as an odd one; personally I'd have been much embarrassed by having to ask anyone a thing like that.

I answered that in recent years I'd rather lost the habit of noting my feelings, and hardly knew what to answer. I could truthfully say I'd been quite fond of Mother—but really that didn't mean much. All normal

people, I added, as an afterthought, had more or less desired the death of those they loved, at some time or another.

Here the lawyer interrupted me, looking greatly perturbed.

‘You must promise me not to say anything of that sort at the trial, or to the examining magistrate.’

I promised, to satisfy him; but I explained that my physical condition at any given moment often influenced my feelings. For instance, on the day I attended Mother’s funeral, I was fagged out and only half awake. So really I hardly took stock of what was happening. Anyhow I could assure him of one thing: that I’d rather Mother hadn’t died.

The lawyer, however, looked displeased. ‘That’s not enough,’ he said curtly.

After considering for a bit he asked me if he could say that on that day I had kept my feelings under control.

‘No,’ I said. ‘That wouldn’t be true.’

He gave me a queer look, as if I slightly revolted him; then informed me, in an almost hostile tone, that in any case the Head of the Home and some of the staff would be cited as witnesses.

‘And that might do you a very nasty turn,’ he concluded.

When I suggested that Mother's death had no connection with the charge against me he merely replied that this remark showed I'd never had any dealings with the Law.

Soon after this he left, looking quite vexed. I wished he had stayed longer and I could have explained that I desired his sympathy, not for him to make a better job of my defence but, if I might put it so, spontaneously. I could see that I got on his nerves; he couldn't make me out and, naturally enough, this irritated him. Once or twice I had a mind to assure him that I was just like everybody else; quite an ordinary person. But really that would have served no great purpose, and I let it go—out of laziness as much as anything else.

Later in the day I was taken again to the examining magistrate's office. It was two in the afternoon and, this time, the room was flooded with light—there was only a thin curtain on the window—and extremely hot.

After inviting me to sit down, the magistrate informed me in a very polite tone that, 'owing to unforeseen circumstances', my lawyer was unable to be present. I should be quite entitled, he added, to reserve my answers to his questions until my lawyer could attend.

To this I replied that I could answer for

myself. He pressed a bell-push on his desk and a young clerk came in and seated himself just behind me. Then we—I and the magistrate—settled back in our chairs and the examination began. He led off by remarking that I had the reputation of being a taciturn, rather self-centred person, and he'd like to know what I had to say to that. I answered:

‘Well, I rarely have anything much to say. So naturally I keep my mouth shut.’

He smiled as on the previous occasion, and agreed that that was the best of reasons. ‘In any case,’ he added, ‘it has little or no importance.’

After a short silence he suddenly leant forward, looked me in the eyes and said, raising his voice a little:

‘What really interests me is—you!’

I wasn't quite clear what he meant, so I made no comment.

‘There are several things,’ he continued, ‘that puzzle me, about your crime. I feel sure that you will help me to understand them.’

When I replied that really it was quite simple, he asked me to give him an account of what I'd done that day. As a matter of fact I had already told him at our first interview—in a summary sort of way, of course—about Raymond, the beach, our swim, the fight,

then the beach again, and the five shots I'd fired. But I went over it all again, and after each phrase he nodded. 'Quite so, quite so.' When I described the body lying on the sand, he nodded more emphatically, and said 'Good!' Personally I was tired of repeating the same story; I felt as if I'd never talked so much in all my life before.

After another silence he stood up and said he'd like to help me; I interested him and, with God's help, he would do something for me in my trouble. But, first, he must put a few more questions.

He began by asking bluntly if I'd loved my mother.

'Yes,' I replied, 'like everybody else.' The clerk behind me, who had been typing away at a steady pace, must just then have hit the wrong keys, as I heard him pushing the carrier back and crossing something out.

Next, without any apparent logical connection, the magistrate sprang another question.

'Why did you fire five consecutive shots?'

I thought for a bit; then explained that they weren't quite consecutive. I fired one at first, and the other four after a short interval.

'Why did you pause between the first and second shot?'

I seemed to see it hovering again before my

eyes, the red glow of the beach, and to feel that fiery breath on my cheeks—and, this time, I made no answer.

During the silence which followed, the magistrate kept fidgeting, running his fingers through his hair, half rising, then sitting down again. Finally, planting his elbows on the desk, he bent towards me with a queer expression.

‘But why, *why* did you go on firing at a prostrate man?’

Again I found nothing to reply.

The magistrate drew his hand across his forehead and repeated in a slightly different tone:

‘I ask you “*Why?*” I insist on your telling me.’

I still kept silent.

Suddenly he rose, walked to a file cabinet standing against the opposite wall, pulled a drawer open, and took from it a silver crucifix, which he was waving as he came back to the desk.

‘Do you know who this is?’ His voice had changed completely; it was vibrant with emotion.

‘Of course I do,’ I answered.

That seemed to start him off; he began speaking at a great pace. He told me he

believed in God, and that even the worst of sinners could obtain forgiveness of Him. But first he must repent, and become like a little child, with a simple, trustful heart, open to conviction. He was leaning right across the table brandishing his crucifix before my eyes.

As a matter of fact I had great difficulty in following his remarks as, for one thing, the office was so stiflingly hot and big flies were buzzing round and settling on my cheeks; also because he rather alarmed me. Of course I realized it was absurd to feel like this, considering that, after all, it was I who was the criminal. However, as he continued talking, I did my best to understand, and I gathered that there was only one point in my confession that badly needed clearing up—the fact that I'd waited before firing a second time. All the rest was, so to speak, quite in order; but this completely baffled him.

I started to tell him that he was wrong in insisting on this; the point was of quite minor importance. But, before I could get the words out, he had drawn himself up to his full height, and was asking me very earnestly if I believed in God. When I said 'No', he plumped down into his chair indignantly.

That was unthinkable, he said; all men believe in God, even those who reject Him. Of



this he was absolutely sure; if ever he came to doubt it, his life would lose all meaning. 'Do you wish,' he asked indignantly, 'my life to have no meaning?' Really I couldn't see how my wishes came into it, and I told him as much.

While I was talking, he thrust the crucifix again just under my nose and shouted: 'I, anyhow, am a Christian. And I pray Him to forgive you for your sins. My poor young man, how can you not believe that He suffered for your sake?'

I noticed that his manner seemed genuinely solicitous when he said, 'My poor young man'—but I was beginning to have enough of it. The room was growing steadily hotter.

As I usually do when I want to get rid of someone whose conversation bores me, I pretended to agree. At which, rather to my surprise, his face lit up.

'You see! You see! Now won't you own that you believe and put your trust in Him?'

I must have shaken my head again, for he sank back in his chair looking limp and dejected.

For some moments there was a silence during which the typewriter, which had been clicking away all the time we talked, caught up with the last remark. Then he gazed at me

intently and rather sadly.

‘Never in all my experience have I known a soul so case-hardened as yours,’ he said in a low tone. ‘All the criminals who have come before me until now wept when they saw this symbol of our Lord’s sufferings.’

I was on the point of replying that was precisely because they *were* criminals. But then I realized that I, too, came under that description. Somehow it was an idea to which I never could get reconciled.

To indicate, presumably, that the interview was over, the magistrate stood up. In the same weary tone he asked me a last question: Did I regret what I had done?

After thinking a bit, I said that what I felt was less regret than a kind of vexation—I couldn’t find a better word for it. But he didn’t seem to understand. This was as far as things went at that day’s interview.

I came before the magistrate many times more, but on these occasions my lawyer always accompanied me. The examinations were confined to asking me to amplify my previous statements. Or else the magistrate and my lawyer discussed technicalities. At such times they took very little notice of me and, in any case, the tone of the examinations changed as time went on. The magistrate

seemed to have lost interest in me, and to have come to some sort of decision about my case. He never mentioned God again or displayed any of the religious fervour I had found so embarrassing at our first interview. The result was that our relations became more cordial. After a few questions, followed by an exchange of remarks with my lawyer, the magistrate closed the interview. My case was 'taking its course', as he put it. Sometimes, too, the conversation was of a general order and the magistrate and lawyer encouraged me to join in it. I began to breathe more freely. Neither of the two men, at these times, showed the least hostility towards me, and everything went so smoothly, so amiably, that I had an absurd impression of being 'one of the family'. I can honestly say that during the eleven months these examinations lasted I got so used to them that I was almost surprised at having ever enjoyed anything better than those rare moments when the magistrate, after escorting me to the door of the office, would pat my shoulder and say in a friendly tone: 'Well, Mr. Antichrist, that's all for the present!' After which I was made over to my warders.

## CHAPTER TWO

THERE are some things of which I've never cared to talk. And, a few days after I'd been sent to prison, I decided that this phase of my life was one of them. However, as time went by, I came to feel that this aversion had no real substance. In point of fact, during those first few days, I was hardly conscious of being in prison; I had always a vague hope that something would turn up, some agreeable surprise.

The change came soon after Marie's first and only visit. From the day when I got her letter telling me they wouldn't let her come to see me any more, because she wasn't my wife—it was from that day I realized that this cell was my last home, a dead end, as one says.

On the day of my arrest they put me in a biggish room with several other prisoners, mostly Arabs. They grinned when they saw me enter, and asked me what I'd done. I told them I'd killed an Arab, and they kept mum for a while. But presently night began to fall, and one of them explained to me how to lay out my sleeping-mat. By rolling up one end one makes a sort of bolster. All night I felt

bugs crawling over my face.

Some days later I was put by myself in a cell, where I slept on a plank bed hinged to the wall. The only other furniture was a latrine bucket and a tin basin. The prison stands on rising ground, and through my little window I had glimpses of the sea. One day when I was hanging on the bars, straining my eyes towards the sunlight playing on the waves, a warder entered and said I had a visitor. I thought it must be Marie, and so it was.

To go to the Visitors' Room, I was taken along a corridor, then up a flight of steps, then along another corridor. It was a very large room, lit by a big bow-window, and divided into three compartments by high iron grilles running transversely. Between the two grilles there was a gap of some thirty feet, a sort of no-man's-land between the prisoners and their friends. I was led to a point exactly opposite Marie, who was wearing her striped dress. On my side of the rails were about a dozen other prisoners, Arabs for the most part. On Marie's side were mostly Moorish women. She was wedged between a small old woman with tight-set lips, and a fat matron, with a hat, who was talking shrilly and gesticulated all the time. Because of the distance between the visitors and prisoners I found I,

too, had to raise my voice.

When I came into the room the babel of voices echoing on the bare walls, and the sunlight streaming in, flooding everything in a harsh white glare, made me feel quite dizzy. After the relative darkness and the silence of my cell it took me some moments to get used to these conditions. After a bit, however, I came to see each face quite clearly, lit up as if a spotlight played on it.

I noticed a prison official seated at each end of the no-man's-land between the grilles. The native prisoners and their relations on the other side were squatting opposite each other. They didn't raise their voices and, in spite of the din, managed to converse almost in whispers. This murmur of voices coming from below made a sort of accompaniment to the conversations going on above their heads. I took stock of all this very quickly, and moved a step forward towards Marie. She was pressing her brown, sun-tanned face to the bars and smiling as hard as she could. I thought she was looking very pretty, but somehow couldn't bring myself to tell her so.

'Well?' she asked, pitching her voice very high. 'What about it? Are you all right, have you everything you want?'

'Oh, yes. I've everything I want.'

We were silent for some moments; Marie went on smiling. The fat woman was bawling at the prisoner beside me, her husband presumably, a tall, fair, pleasant-looking man.

‘Jeanne refused to have him,’ she yelled.—‘That’s just too bad,’ the man replied.—‘Yes, and I told her you’d take him back the moment you get out; but she wouldn’t hear of it.’

Marie shouted across the gap that Raymond sent me his best wishes, and I said, ‘Thanks’. But my voice was drowned by my neighbour’s asking, ‘if he was quite fit’. The fat woman gave a laugh. ‘Fit? I should say he is! The picture of health.’

Meanwhile the prisoner on my left, a youngster with thin, girlish hands, never said a word. His eyes, I noticed, were fixed on the little old woman opposite him, and she returned his gaze with a sort of hungry passion. But I had to stop looking at them as Marie was shouting to me that we mustn’t lose hope.

‘Certainly not,’ I answered. My gaze fell on her shoulders and I had a sudden longing to squeeze them, through the thin dress. Its silky texture fascinated me, and I had a feeling that the hope she spoke of centred on it somehow. I imagine something of the same sort was in

Marie's mind, for she went on smiling, looking straight at me.

'It'll all come right, you'll see, and then we shall get married.'

All I could see of her now was the white flash of her teeth, and the little puckers round her eyes. I answered: 'Do you really think so?' but chiefly because I felt it up to me to answer something.

She started talking very fast in the same high-pitched voice.

'Yes, you'll be acquitted, and we'll go bathing again, Sundays.'

The woman beside Marie was still yelling away, telling her husband that she'd left a basket for him in the prison office. She gave a list of the things she'd brought and told him to mind and check them carefully, as some had cost quite a lot. The youngster on my other side and his mother were still gazing mournfully at each other, and the murmur of the Arabs droned on below us. The light outside seemed to be surging up against the window, seeping through, and smearing the faces of the people facing it with a coat of yellow oil.

I began to feel slightly squeamish, and wished I could leave. The strident voice beside me was jarring on my ears. But, on the other hand, I wanted to have the most I could of



Marie's company. I've no idea how much time passed. I remember Marie's describing to me her work, with that set smile always on her face. There wasn't a moment's let-up in the noise—shouts, conversations, and always that muttering undertone. The only oasis of silence was made by the young fellow and the old dame gazing into each other's eyes.

Then, one by one, the Arabs were led away; almost everyone fell silent when the first one left. The little old woman pressed herself against the bars and at the same moment a warder tapped her son's shoulder. He called '*Au revoir, Mother*', and, slipping her hand between the bars, she gave him a small, slow wave with it.

No sooner was she gone than a man, hat in hand, took her place. A prisoner was led up to the empty place beside me, and the two started a brisk exchange of remarks—not loud, however, as the room had become relatively quiet. Someone came and called away the man on my right and his wife shouted at him—she didn't seem to realize it was no longer necessary to shout—'Now, mind you look after yourself, dear, and don't do anything rash!'

My turn came next. Marie threw me a kiss. I looked back as I walked away. She hadn't

moved; her face was still pressed to the rails, her lips still parted in that tense, twisted smile.

Soon after this I had a letter from her. And it was then that the things I've never liked to talk about began. Not that they were particularly terrible; I've no wish to exaggerate and I suffered less than others. Still, there was one thing in those early days that was really irksome: my habit of thinking like a free man. For instance, I would suddenly be seized with a desire to go down to the beach for a swim. And merely to have imagined the sound of ripples at my feet, and then the smooth feel of the water on my body as I struck out, and the wonderful sensation of relief it gave, brought home still more cruelly the narrowness of my cell.

Still, that phase lasted a few months only. Afterwards, I had prisoner's thoughts. I waited for the daily walk in the courtyard, or a visit from my lawyer. As for the rest of the time, I managed quite well, really. I've often thought that had I been compelled to live in the trunk of a dead tree, with nothing to do but gaze up at the patch of sky just overhead, I'd have got used to it by degrees. I'd have learnt to watch for the passing of birds or drifting clouds, as I had come to watch for my

lawyer's odd neckties, or, in another world, to wait patiently till Sunday for a spell of love-making with Marie. Well, here anyhow, I wasn't penned in a hollow tree-trunk. There were others in the world worse off than I was. I remembered it had been one of Mother's pet ideas—she was always voicing it—that in the long run one gets used to anything.

Usually, however, I didn't think things out so far. Those first months were trying, of course; but the very effort I had to make helped me through them. For instance, I was plagued by the desire for a woman—which was natural enough, considering my age. I never thought of Marie especially. I was obsessed by thoughts of this woman or that, of all the ones I'd had, all the circumstances under which I'd loved them; so much so that the cell grew crowded with their faces, ghosts of my old passions. That unsettled me, no doubt; but, at least, it served to kill time.

I gradually became quite friendly with the chief gaoler, who went the rounds with the kitchen-hands at meal-times. It was he who brought up the subject of women. 'That's what the men here grumble about most,' he told me. I said I felt like that myself. 'There's something unfair about it,' I added, 'like hitting a man when he's down.'—'But that's the

whole point of it,' he said; 'that's why you fellows are kept in prison.'—'I don't follow.'—'Liberty,' he said, 'means that. You're being deprived of your liberty.' It had never before struck me in that light, but I saw his point. 'That's true,' I said. 'Otherwise it wouldn't be a punishment.' The gaoler nodded. 'Yes, you're different, you can use your brains. The others can't. Still, those fellows find a way out; they do it by themselves.' With which remark the gaoler left my cell. Next day I did like the others.

The lack of cigarettes, too, was a trial. When I was brought to the prison, they took away my belt, my shoe-laces, and the contents of my pockets, including my cigarettes. Once I had been given a cell to myself I asked to be given back anyhow the cigarettes. Smoking was forbidden, they informed me. That, perhaps, was what got me down the most; in fact, I suffered really badly during the first few days. I even tore off splinters from my plank bed and sucked them. All day long I felt faint and bilious. It passed my understanding why I shouldn't be allowed even to smoke; it could have done no one any harm. Later on, I understood the idea behind it; this privation, too, was part of my punishment. But, by the time I understood, I'd lost the craving, so it

had ceased to be a punishment.

Except for these privations, I wasn't too unhappy. Yet again, the whole problem was: how to kill time. After a while, however, once I'd learnt the trick of remembering things, I never had a moment's boredom. Sometimes I would exercise my memory on my bedroom, and, starting from a corner, make the round, noting every object I saw on the way. At first it was over in a minute or two. But each time I repeated the experience, it took a little longer. I made a point of visualizing every piece of furniture, and each article upon or in it, and then every detail of each article, and finally the details of the details, so to speak: a tiny dent or incrustation, or a chipped edge, and the exact grain and colour of the woodwork. At the same time I forced myself to keep my inventory in mind from start to finish, in the right order and omitting no item. With the result that, after a few weeks, I could spend hours merely in listing the objects in my bedroom. I found that the more I thought, the more details, half-forgotten or malobserved, floated up from my memory. There seemed no end to them.

So I learned that even after a single day's experience of the outside world a man could easily live a hundred years in prison. He'd

have laid up enough memories never to be bored. Obviously, in one way, this was a compensation.

Then there was sleep. To begin with, I slept badly at night and never in the day. But gradually my nights became better and I managed to doze off in the daytime as well. In fact, during the last months, I must have slept sixteen or eighteen hours out of the twenty-four. So there remained only six hours to fill—with meals, relieving nature, my memories . . . and the story of the Czech.

One day, when inspecting my straw mattress, I found a bit of newspaper stuck to its underside. The paper was yellow with age, almost transparent, but one could still make out the letter-print. It was the story of a crime. The first part was missing, but one gathered that its scene was some village in Czechoslovakia. One of the villagers had left his home to try his luck abroad. After twenty-five years, having made a fortune, he returned to his country with his wife and child. Meanwhile his mother and sister had been running a small hotel in the village where he was born. He decided to give them a surprise and, leaving his wife and child in another inn, he went to stay at his mother's place, booking a room under an assumed

name. His mother and sister completely failed to recognize him. At dinner that evening he showed them a large sum of money he had on him, and in the course of the night they slaughtered him with a hammer. After taking the money they flung the body into the river. Next morning his wife came and, without thinking, betrayed the guest's identity. His mother hanged herself. His sister threw herself into a well. I must have read that story thousands of times. In one way it sounded most unlikely; in another, it was plausible enough. Anyhow, to my mind, the man was asking for trouble; one shouldn't play fool tricks of that sort.

So, what with long bouts of sleep, my memories, readings of that scrap of newspaper, the tides of light and darkness, the days slipped by. I'd read, of course, that in gaol one ends up by losing track of time. But this had never meant anything definite to me. I hadn't grasped how days could be at once long and short. Long, no doubt, as periods to live through, but so distended that they ended up by overlapping on each other. In fact I never thought of days as such; only the words 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow' still kept some meaning.

When, one morning, the warder informed

me I'd now been six months in gaol. I believed him—but the words conveyed nothing to my mind. To me it seemed like one and the same day that had been going on since I'd been in my cell, and that I'd been doing the same thing all the time.

After the gaoler left me I shined up my tin pannikin and studied my face in it. My expression was terribly serious. I thought, even when I tried to smile. I held the pannikin at different angles, but always my face had the same mournful, tense expression.

The sun was setting and it was the hour of which I'd rather not speak—'the nameless hour', I called it—when evening sounds were creeping up from all the floors of the prison in a sort of stealthy procession. I went to the barred window and in the last rays looked once again at my reflected face. It was as serious as before; and that wasn't surprising, as just then I was feeling serious. But, at the same time, I heard something that I hadn't heard for months. It was the sound of a voice; my own voice, there was no mistaking it. And I recognized it as the voice that for many a day of late had been buzzing in my ears. So I knew that all this time I'd been talking to myself.

And something I'd been told came back to



me; a remark made by the nurse at Mother's funeral. No, there was no way out, and no one can imagine what the evenings are like in prison.

## CHAPTER THREE

ON the whole I can't say that those months passed slowly; another summer was on its way almost before I realized the first was over. And I knew that with the first really hot days something new was in store for me. My case was down for the last Sessions of the Assize Court, and that Sessions was due to end some time in June.

The day on which my trial started was one of brilliant sunshine. My lawyer assured me the case would take only two or three days. 'From what I hear,' he added, 'the Court will despatch your case as quickly as possible, as it isn't the most important one on the Cause List. There's a case of parricide immediately after, which will take them some time.'

They came for me at half-past seven in the morning and I was conveyed to the Law Courts in the prison van. The two policemen led me into a small room that smelt of darkness. We sat near a door through which came sounds of voices, shouts, chairs scraping on the floor; a vague hubbub which reminded me of one of those small town 'socials' when, after the concert's over, the hall is cleared for

dancing.

One of my policemen told me the judges hadn't arrived yet, and offered me a cigarette, which I declined. After a bit he asked me if I was feeling nervous. I said 'No', and that the prospect of witnessing a trial rather interested me; I'd never had occasion to attend one before.

'Maybe,' the other policeman said. 'But after an hour or two one's had enough of it.'

After a while a small electric bell purred in the room. They unfastened my handcuffs, opened the door, and led me to the prisoner's dock.

There was a great crowd in the courtroom. Though the venetian blinds were down, light was filtering through the chinks, and the air was stiflingly hot already. The windows had been kept shut. I sat down, and the police officers took their stand on each side of my chair.

It was then that I noticed a row of faces opposite me. These people were staring hard at me, and I guessed they were the jury. But somehow I didn't see them as individuals. I felt as one does just after boarding a tram and one's conscious of all the people on the opposite seat staring at one in the hope of finding something in one's appearance to amuse them. Of course I knew this was an absurd

comparison; what these people were looking for in me wasn't anything to laugh at, but signs of criminality. Still, the difference wasn't so very great, and, anyhow, that's the idea I got.

What with the crowd and the stuffiness of the air I was feeling a bit dizzy. I ran my eyes round the courtroom but couldn't recognize any of the faces. At first I could hardly believe that all these people had come on my account. It was such a new experience, being a focus of interest; in the ordinary way no one ever paid much attention to me. 'What a crush!' I remarked to the policeman on my left, and he explained that the newspapers were responsible for it. He pointed to a group of men at a table just below the jury-box. 'There they are!' 'Who?' I asked, and he replied, 'The Press'. One of them, he added, was an old friend of his.

A moment later the man he'd mentioned looked our way and, coming to the dock, shook hands warmly with the policeman. The journalist was an elderly man with a rather grim expression, but his manner was quite pleasant. Just then, I noticed that almost all the people in the courtroom were greeting each other, exchanging remarks and forming groups—behaving, in fact, as in a club where

the company of others of one's own tastes and standing makes one feel at ease. That, no doubt, explained the odd impression I had of being *de trop* here, a sort of gate-crasher.

However, the journalist addressed me quite amiably, and said he hoped all would go well for me. I thanked him, and he added with a smile:

'You know, we've been featuring you a bit. We're always rather short of copy in the summer, and there's been precious little to write about except your case and the one that's coming on after it. I expect you've heard about it; it's a case of parricide.'

He drew my attention to one of the group at the Press table, a plump, small man with huge black-rimmed glasses, who made one think of an over-fed weasel.

'That chap's the special correspondent of one of the Paris dailies. As a matter of fact he didn't come on your account. He was sent for the parricide case, but they've asked him to cover yours as well.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, 'That was very kind of them', but then I thought it would sound silly. With a friendly wave of his hand he left us, and for some minutes nothing happened.

Then, accompanied by some colleagues,

my lawyer bustled in, in his gown. He went up to the Press table and shook hands with the journalists. They remained laughing and chatting together, all seemingly very much at home here, until a bell rang shrilly and everyone went to his place. My lawyer came up to me, shook hands, and advised me to answer all the questions as briefly as possible, not to volunteer information, and to rely on him to see me through.

I heard a chair scrape on my left, and a tall, thin man wearing pince-nez settled the folds of his red gown as he took his seat. The public prosecutor, I gathered. A clerk of the court announced that Their Honours were entering and at the same moment two big electric fans started buzzing overhead. Three judges, two in black and the third in scarlet, with brief-cases under their arms, entered and walked briskly to the bench, which was several feet above the level of the courtroom floor. The man in scarlet took the central, high-backed chair, placed his cap of office on the table, ran a handkerchief over his small bald crown, and announced that the hearing would now begin.

The journalists had their fountain-pens ready; they all wore the same expression of slightly ironical indifference, with the

exception of one, a much younger man than his colleagues, in grey flannels with a blue tie, who, leaving his pen on the table, was gazing hard at me. He had a plain, rather chunky face; what held my attention was his eyes, very pale, clear eyes, riveted on me, though not betraying any definite emotion. For a moment I had an odd impression, as if I were being scrutinized by myself. That—and the fact that I was unfamiliar with court procedure—may explain why I didn't follow very well the opening phases: the drawing of lots for the jury, the various questions put by the presiding judge to the prosecutor, the foreman of the jury and my counsel (each time he spoke all the jurymen's heads swung round together towards the bench), the hurried reading of the charge-sheet, in the course of which I recognized some familiar names of people and places, then some supplementary questions put to my lawyer.

Next, the judge announced that the court would call over the witness-list. Some of the names read out by the clerk rather surprised me. From amongst the crowd, which until now I had seen as a mere blur of faces, rose, one after the other, Raymond, Masson, Salamano, the door-keeper from the Home, old Pérez, and Marie, who gave me a little

nervous wave of her hand before following the others out by a side door. I was thinking how strange it was I hadn't noticed any of them before when I heard the last name called, that of Céleste. As he rose, I noticed beside him the quaint little woman with a mannish coat and brisk, decided air, who had shared my table at the restaurant. She had her eyes fixed on me, I noticed. But I hadn't time to wonder about her; the judge had started speaking again.

He said that the trial proper was about to begin, and he need hardly say that he expected the public to refrain from any demonstration whatsoever. He explained that he was there to supervise the proceedings, as a sort of umpire, and he would take a scrupulously impartial view of the case. The verdict of the jury would be interpreted by him in a spirit of justice. Finally, at the least sign of a disturbance he would have the court cleared.

The day was stoking up. Some of the public were fanning themselves with newspapers, and there was a constant rustle of crumpled paper. On a sign from the presiding judge the clerk of the court brought three fans of plaited straw, which the three judges promptly put in action.

My examination began at once. The judge



questioned me quite calmly and even, I thought, with a hint of cordiality. For the  $n$ th time I was asked to give particulars of my identity and, though heartily sick of this formality, I realized that it was natural enough; after all, it would be a shocking thing for the court to be trying the wrong man.

The judge then launched into an account of what I'd done, stopping every two or three sentences to ask me, 'Is that correct?' To which I always replied, 'Yes, sir', as my lawyer had advised me. It was a long business, as the judge lingered on each detail. Meanwhile the journalists scribbled busily away. But I was sometimes conscious of the eyes of the youngest fixed on me; also those of the queer little robot woman. The jurymen, however, were all gazing at the red-robed judge, and I was again reminded of the row of passengers on one side of a tram. Presently he gave a slight cough, turned some pages of his file, and, still fanning his face, addressed me gravely.

He now proposed, he said, to touch on certain matters which, on a superficial view, might seem foreign to the case, but actually were highly relevant. I guessed that he was going to talk about Mother, and at the same moment realized how odious I would find this.

His first question was: Why had I sent my mother to an Institution? I replied that the reason was simple; I hadn't enough money to see that she was properly looked after at home. Then he asked if the parting hadn't caused me distress. I explained that neither Mother nor I expected much of one another—or, for that matter, of anybody else; so both of us had got used to the new conditions easily enough. The judge then said that he had no wish to press the point, and asked the Prosecutor if he could think of any more questions that should be put to me at this stage.

The Prosecutor, who had his back half turned to me, said, without looking in my direction, that, subject to His Honour's approval, he would like to know if I'd gone back to the stream with the intention of killing the Arab. I said 'No'. In that case, why had I taken a revolver with me, and why go back precisely to that spot? I said it was a matter of pure chance. The Prosecutor then observed in a nasty tone: 'Very good. That will be all for the present.'

I couldn't quite follow what came next. Anyhow, after some palavering between the Bench, the Prosecutor and my counsel, the presiding judge announced that the court

would now rise; there was an adjournment till the afternoon, when evidence would be taken.

Almost before I knew what was happening, I was rushed out to the prison van, which drove me back, and I was given my midday meal. After a short time, just enough for me to realize how tired I was feeling, they came for me. I was back in the same room, confronting the same faces, and the whole thing started again. But the heat had meanwhile much increased, and by some miracle fans had been procured for everyone; the jury, my lawyer, the prosecutor, and some of the pressmen, too. The young man and the robot woman were still at their places. But they were not fanning themselves and, as before, they never took their eyes off me.

I wiped the sweat from my face, but I was barely conscious of where or who I was until I heard the Warden of the Home called to the witness-box. When asked if my mother had complained about my conduct, he said 'Yes', but that didn't mean much; almost all the inmates of the Home had grievances against their relatives. The judge asked him to be more explicit; did she reproach me with having sent her to the Home, and he said 'Yes', again. But this time he didn't qualify his answer.

To another question he replied that on the day of the funeral he was somewhat surprised by my calmness. Asked to explain what he meant by 'my calmness', the Warden lowered his eyes and stared at his shoes for a moment. Then he explained that I hadn't wanted to see Mother's body, or shed a single tear, and that I'd left immediately the funeral ended, without lingering at her grave. Another thing had surprised him. One of the undertaker's men told him that I didn't know my mother's age. There was a short silence; then the judge asked him if he might take it that he was referring to the prisoner in the dock. The Warden seemed puzzled by this, and the judge explained: 'It's a formal question. I am bound to put it.'

The Prosecutor was then asked if he had any questions to put, and he answered loudly: 'Certainly not! I have all I want.' His tone and the look of triumph on his face, as he glanced at me, were so marked that I felt as I hadn't felt for ages. I had a foolish desire to burst into tears. For the first time I'd realized how all these people loathed me.

After asking the jury and my lawyer if they had any questions, the judge heard the door-keeper's evidence. On stepping into the box the man threw a glance at me, then

looked away. Replying to questions, he said that I'd declined to see Mother's body, I'd smoked cigarettes and slept, and drunk *café au lait*. It was then I felt a sort of wave of indignation spreading through the courtroom, and for the first time I understood that I was guilty. They got the door-keeper to repeat what he had said about the coffee and my smoking. The Prosecutor turned to me again, with a gloating look in his eyes. My counsel asked the door-keeper if he, too, hadn't smoked. But the Prosecutor took strong exception to this. 'I'd like to know,' he cried indignantly, 'who is on trial in this court. Or does my friend think that by aspersing a witness for the prosecution he will shake the evidence, the abundant and cogent evidence, against his client?' None the less, the judge told the door-keeper to answer the question.

The old fellow fidgeted a bit. Then, 'Well, I know I didn't ought to have done it,' he mumbled, 'but I did take a fag from the young gentleman when he offered it—just out of politeness.'

The judge asked me if I had any comment to make. 'None,' I said, 'except that the witness is quite right. It's true I offered him a cigarette.'

The door-keeper looked at me with surprise and a sort of gratitude. Then, after humming and hawing for a bit, he volunteered the statement that it was he who'd suggested I should have some coffee.

My lawyer was exultant. 'The jury will appreciate,' he said, 'the importance of this admission.'

The Prosecutor, however, was promptly on his feet again. 'Quite so,' he boomed above our heads. 'The jury will appreciate it. And they will draw the conclusion that, though a third party might inadvertently offer him a cup of coffee, the prisoner, in common decency, should have refused it, if only out of respect for the dead body of the poor woman who had brought him into the world.'

After which the door-keeper went back to his seat.

When Thomas Pérez was called, a court officer had to help him to the box. Pérez stated that, though he had been a great friend of my mother, he had met me once only, on the day of the funeral. Asked how I had behaved that day, he said:

'Well, I was most upset, you know. Far too much upset to notice things. My grief sort of blinded me, I think. It had been a great shock, my dear friend's death; in fact I fainted

during the funeral. So I didn't hardly notice the young gentleman at all.'

The Prosecutor asked him to tell the court if he'd seen me weep. And when Pérez answered 'No', added emphatically: 'I trust the jury will take note of this reply.'

My lawyer rose at once, and asked Pérez in a tone that seemed to me needlessly aggressive:

'Now think well, my man! Can you swear you saw he didn't shed a tear?'

Pérez answered, 'No'.

At this some people tittered and my lawyer, pushing back one sleeve of his gown, said sternly:

'That is typical of the way this case is being conducted. No attempt is being made to elicit the true facts.'

The Prosecutor ignored this remark; he was making dabs with his pencil on the cover of his brief, seemingly quite indifferent.

There was a break of five minutes, during which my lawyer told me the case was going very well indeed. Then Céleste was called. He was announced as a witness for the defence. The defence meant me.

Now and again Céleste threw me a glance; he kept squeezing his panama hat between his hands as he gave evidence. He was in his best

suit, the one he wore when sometimes of a Sunday he went with me to the races. But evidently he hadn't been able to get his collar on; the top of his shirt, I noticed, was secured only by a brass stud. Asked if I was one of his customers, he said, 'Yes, and a friend as well'. Asked to state his opinion of me, he said that I was 'all right' and, when told to explain what he meant by that, he replied that everyone knew what that meant. 'Was I a secretive sort of man?'—'No,' he answered, 'I shouldn't call him that. But he isn't one to waste his breath, like a lot of folks.'

The Prosecutor asked him if I always settled my monthly bill at his restaurant when he presented it. Céleste laughed. 'Oh, he paid on the nail all right. But the bills were just details, like, between him and me.' Then he was asked to say what he thought about the crime. He placed his hands on the rail of the box and one could see he had a speech all ready.

'To my mind it was just an accident, or a stroke of bad luck, if you prefer. And a thing like that takes you off your guard.'

He wanted to continue, but the judge cut him short. 'Quite so. That's all, thank you.'

For a bit Céleste seemed flabbergasted; then he explained that he hadn't finished



what he wanted to say. They told him to continue, but to make it brief.

He only repeated that it was 'just an accident'.

'That's as it may be,' the judge observed. 'But what we are here for is to try such accidents, according to law. You can stand down.'

Céleste turned and gazed at me. His eyes were moist and his lips trembling. It was exactly as if he'd said: 'Well, I've done my best for you, old chap. I'm afraid it hasn't helped much. I'm sorry.'

I didn't say anything, or make any movement, but for the first time in my life I wanted to kiss a man.

The judge repeated his order to stand down and Céleste returned to his place amongst the crowd. During the rest of the hearing he remained there; leaning forward, elbows on knees and his panama between his hands, not missing a word of the proceedings.

It was Marie's turn next. She had a hat on, and still looked quite pretty, though I much preferred her with her hair free. From where I was I had glimpses of the soft curves of her breasts, and her underlip had the little pout that always fascinated me. She appeared very nervous.

The first question was: How long had she

known me? Since the time when she was in our office, she replied. Then the judge asked her what were the relations between us, and she said she was my girl friend. Answering another question, she admitted promising to marry me. The Prosecutor, who had been studying a document in front of him, asked her rather sharply when our 'liaison' had begun. She gave the date. He then observed with a would-be casual air that apparently she meant the day following my mother's funeral. After letting this sink in he remarked in a slightly ironic tone that obviously this was a 'delicate topic' and he could enter into the young lady's feelings, but—and here his voice grew sterner—his duty obliged him to waive considerations of delicacy.

After making this announcement he asked Marie to give a full account of our doings on the day when I had 'intercourse' with her for the first time. Marie wouldn't answer at first, but the prosecutor insisted, and then she told him that we had met at the baths, gone together to the pictures, and then to my place. He then informed the court that, as a result of certain statements made by Marie at the proceedings before the magistrate, he had studied the cinema programmes of that date, and turning to Marie asked her to name the film

that we had gone to see. In a very low voice she said it was a picture with Fernandel in it. By the time she had finished, the courtroom was so still you could have heard a pin drop.

Looking very grave, the Prosecutor drew himself up to his full height and, pointing at me, said in such a tone that I could have sworn he was genuinely moved:

‘Gentlemen of the jury, I would have you note that on the next day after his mother’s funeral that man was visiting the swimming-pool, starting a liaison with a girl, and going to see a comic film. That is all I wish to say.’

When he sat down there was the same dead silence. Then all of a sudden Marie burst into tears. He’d got it all wrong, she said; it wasn’t a bit like that really, he’d bullied her into saying the opposite of what she meant. She knew me very well, and she was sure I hadn’t done anything really wrong—and so on. At a sign from the presiding judge, one of the court officers led her away, and the hearing continued.

Hardly anyone seemed to listen to Masson, the next witness. He stated that I was a respectable young fellow; ‘and, what’s more, a very decent chap.’ Nor did they pay any more attention to Salamano, when he told them

how kind I'd always been to his dog, or when, in answer to a question about my mother and myself, he said that really Mother and I had very little in common and that explained why I'd fixed up for her to enter the Home. 'You've got to understand,' he added. 'You've got to understand.' But no one seemed to understand. He was told to stand down.

Raymond was the next, and last, witness. He gave me a little wave of his hand and led off by saying I was innocent. The judge rebuked him.

'You are here to give evidence, not your views on the case, and you must confine yourself to answering the questions put you.'

He was then asked to make clear his relations with the deceased, and Raymond took this opportunity of explaining that it was he, not I, against whom the dead man had a grudge, because he, Raymond, had beaten up his sister. The judge asked him if the deceased had no reason to dislike me, too. Raymond told him that my presence on the beach that morning was a pure coincidence.

'How comes it then,' the Prosecutor inquired, 'that the letter which led up to this tragedy was the prisoner's work?'

Raymond replied that this, too, was due to mere chance.

To which the prosecutor retorted that in this case 'chance' or 'mere coincidence' seemed to play a remarkably large part. Was it by chance that I hadn't intervened when Raymond assaulted his mistress? Did this convenient term 'chance' account for my having vouched for Raymond at the police station and having made, on that occasion, statements extravagantly favourable to him? In conclusion, he asked Raymond to state what were his means of livelihood.

On his describing himself as a warehouseman, the Prosecutor informed the jury it was common knowledge that the witness lived on the immoral earnings of women. I, he said, was this man's intimate friend and associate; in fact, the whole background of the crime was of the most squalid description. And what made it even more odious was the personality of the prisoner, an inhuman monster wholly without a moral sense.

Raymond began to expostulate, and my lawyer, too, protested. They were told that the Prosecutor must be allowed to finish his remarks.

'I have nearly done,' he said; then turned to Raymond. 'Was the prisoner your friend?'

'Certainly. We were the best of pals, as they say.'

The Prosecutor then put me the same question. I looked hard at Raymond, and he did not turn away.

Then, 'Yes', I answered.

The Prosecutor turned towards the jury.

'Not only did the man before you in the dock indulge in the most shameful orgies on the day following his mother's funeral. He killed a man cold-bloodedly, in pursuance of some sordid vendetta in the underworld of prostitutes and pimps. That, gentlemen of the jury, is the type of man the prisoner is.'

No sooner had he sat down than my lawyer, out of all patience, raised his arms so high that his sleeves fell back, showing the full length of his starched shirt-cuffs.

'Is my client on trial for having buried his mother, or for killing a man?' he asked.

There were some titters in court. But then the Prosecutor sprang to his feet, and, draping his gown round him, said he was amazed at his friend's ingenuousness in failing to see that between these two elements of the case there was a vital link. They hung together psychologically, if he might put it so. 'In short,' he concluded, speaking with great vehemence, 'I accuse the prisoner of behaving at his mother's funeral in a way that showed he was already a criminal at heart.'

These words seemed to make much effect on the jury and public. My lawyer merely shrugged his shoulders and wiped the sweat from his forehead. But obviously he was rattled, and I had a feeling things weren't going well for me.

Soon after this incident the court rose. As I was being taken from the courthouse to the prison van, I was conscious for a few brief moments of the once familiar feel of a summer evening out of doors. And, sitting in the darkness of my moving cell, I recognized, echoing in my tired brain, all the characteristic sounds of a town I'd loved, and of a certain hour of the day which I had always particularly enjoyed. The shouts of newspaper-boys in the already languid air, the last calls of birds in the public garden, the cries of sandwich-vendors, the screech of trams at the steep corners of the upper town, and that faint rustling overhead as darkness sifted down upon the harbour—all these sounds made my return to prison like a blind man's journey along a route whose every inch he knows by heart.

Yes, this was the evening hour when—how long ago it seemed!—I always felt so well content with life. Then, what awaited me was a night of easy, dreamless sleep. This was the same hour, but with a difference; I was

returning to a cell and what awaited me was a night haunted by forebodings of the coming day. And so I learnt that familiar paths traced in the dusk of summer evenings may lead as well to prison as to innocent, carefree sleep.



## CHAPTER FOUR

It is always interesting, even in the prisoner's dock, to hear oneself being talked about. And certainly in the speeches of my lawyer and the prosecuting counsel a great deal was said about me; more, in fact, about me personally than about my crime.

Really there wasn't any very great difference between the two speeches. Counsel for the defence raised his arms to heaven and pleaded Guilty, but with extenuating circumstances. The Prosecutor made similar gestures; he agreed that I was guilty, but denied extenuating circumstances.

One thing about this phase of the trial was rather irksome. Quite often, interested as I was in what they had to say, I was tempted to put in a word, myself. But my lawyer had advised me not to. 'You won't do your case any good by talking,' he had warned me. In fact there seemed to be a conspiracy to exclude me from the proceedings; I wasn't to have any say and my fate was to be decided out of hand.

It was quite an effort at times for me to refrain from cutting them all short, and

saying: 'But, damn it all, who's on trial in this court, I'd like to know? It's a serious matter for a man, being accused of murder. And I've something really important to tell you.'

However, on second thoughts, I found I had nothing to say. In any case, I must admit that hearing oneself talked about loses its interest very soon. The Prosecutor's speech, especially, began to bore me before he was half-way through it. The only things that really caught my attention were occasional phrases, his gestures, and some elaborate tirades—but these were isolated patches.

What he was aiming at, I gathered, was to show that my crime was premeditated. I remember his saying at one moment, 'I can prove this, gentlemen of the jury, to the hilt. First, you have the facts of the crime, which are as clear as daylight. And then you have what I may call the night side of this case, the dark workings of a criminal mentality.'

He began by summing up the facts, from my mother's death onwards. He stressed my heartlessness, my inability to state Mother's age, my visit to the bathing-pool where I met Marie, our *matinée* at the pictures where a Fernandel film was showing, and finally my return with Marie to my rooms. I didn't quite follow his remarks at first as he kept on

mentioning 'the prisoner's mistress', whereas for me she was just 'Marie'. Then he came to the subject of Raymond. It seemed to me that his way of treating the facts showed a certain shrewdness. All he said sounded quite plausible. I'd written the letter in collusion with Raymond so as to entice his mistress to his room and subject her to ill-treatment by a man 'of more than dubious reputation'. Then, on the beach, I'd provoked a brawl with Raymond's enemies, in the course of which Raymond was wounded. I'd asked him for his revolver and gone back myself with the intention of using it. Then I'd shot the Arab. After the first shot I waited. Then, 'to be certain of making a good job of it', I fired four more shots deliberately, point blank and in cold blood, at my victim.

'That is my case,' he said. 'I have described to you the series of events which led this man to kill the deceased, fully aware of what he was doing. I emphasize this point. We are not concerned with an act of homicide committed on a sudden impulse which might serve as extenuation. I ask you to note, gentlemen of the jury, that the prisoner is an educated man. You will have observed the way in which he answered my questions; he is intelligent and he knows the value of words. And I repeat

that it is quite impossible to assume that, when he committed the crime, he was unaware what he was doing.'

I noticed that he laid stress on my 'intelligence'. It puzzled me rather why what would count as a good point in an ordinary person should be used against an accused man as an overwhelming proof of his guilt. While thinking this over, I missed what he said next, until I heard him exclaim indignantly: 'And has he uttered a word of regret for his most odious crime? Not one word, gentlemen. Not once in the course of these proceedings did this man show the least contrition.'

Turning towards the dock, he pointed a finger at me, and went on in the same strain. I really couldn't understand why he harped on this point so much. Of course I had to own that he was right; I didn't feel much regret for what I'd done. Still, to my mind he overdid it, and I'd have liked to have a chance of explaining to him, in a quite friendly, almost affectionate way, that I have never been able really to regret anything in all my life. I've always been far too much absorbed in the present moment, or the immediate future, to think back. Of course, in the position into which I had been forced, there was no question of my speaking to anyone in that tone. I hadn't the

right to show any friendly feeling or possess good intentions. And I tried to follow what came next, as the Prosecutor was now considering what he called my 'soul'.

He said he'd studied it closely—and had found a blank, 'literally nothing, gentlemen of the jury'. Really, he said, I had no soul, there was nothing human about me, not one of those moral qualities which normal men possess had any place in my mentality. 'No doubt,' he added, 'we should not reproach him with this. We cannot blame a man for lacking what it was never in his power to acquire. But in a criminal court the wholly passive ideal of tolerance must give place to a sterner, loftier ideal, that of Justice. Especially when this lack of every decent instinct is such as that of the man before you, a menace to society.' He proceeded to discuss my conduct towards my mother, repeating what he had said in the course of the hearing. But he spoke at much greater length of my crime; at such length, indeed, that I lost the thread and was conscious only of the steadily increasing heat.

A moment came when the Prosecutor paused and, after a short silence, said in a low, vibrant voice: 'This same court, gentlemen, will be called on to try tomorrow that most

odious of crimes, the murder of a father by his son.' To his mind, such a crime was almost unimaginable. But, he ventured to hope, Justice would be meted out without faltering. And yet, he made bold to say, the horror that even the crime of parricide inspired in him paled beside the loathing inspired by my callousness.

'This man, who is morally guilty of his mother's death, is no less unfit to have a place in the community than that other man who did to death the father who begat him. And, indeed, the one crime led on to the other; the first of these two criminals, the man in the dock, set a precedent, if I may put it so, and authorized the second crime. Yes, gentlemen, I am convinced'—here he raised his voice a tone—'that you will not find I am exaggerating the case against the prisoner when I say that he is also guilty of the murder to be tried tomorrow in this court. And I look to you for a verdict accordingly.'

The Prosecutor paused again, to wipe the sweat off his face. He then explained that his duty was a painful one, but he would do it without flinching. 'This man has, I repeat, no place in a community whose basic principles he flouts without compunction. Nor, heartless as he is, has he any claim to mercy. I ask you

to impose the extreme penalty of the law; and I ask it without a qualm. In the course of a long career, in which it has often been my duty to ask for a capital sentence, never have I felt that painful duty weigh so little on my mind as in the present case. In demanding a verdict of murder without extenuating circumstances, I am following not only the dictates of my conscience and a sacred obligation, but also those of the natural and righteous indignation I feel at the sight of a criminal devoid of the least spark of human feeling.'

When the Prosecutor sat down there was a longish silence. Personally I was quite over-come by the heat and my amazement at what I had been hearing. The presiding judge gave a short cough, and asked me in a very low tone if I had anything to say. I rose, and as I felt in the mood to speak, I said the first thing that crossed my mind: that I'd had no intention of killing the Arab. The judge replied that this statement would be taken into consideration by the court. Meanwhile he would be glad to hear, before my counsel addressed the court, what were the motives of my crime. So far, he must admit, he hadn't fully understood the grounds of my defence.

I tried to explain that it was because of the

sun, but I spoke too quickly and ran my words into each other. I was only too conscious that it sounded nonsensical, and, in fact, I heard people tittering.

My lawyer shrugged his shoulders. Then he was directed to address the court, in his turn. But all he did was to point out the lateness of the hour and to ask for an adjournment till the following afternoon. To this the judge agreed.

When I was brought back next day, the electric fans were still churning up the heavy air and the jurymen playing their gaudy little fans in a sort of steady rhythm. The speech for the defence seemed to me interminable. At one moment, however, I pricked up my ears; it was when I heard him saying: 'It is true I killed a man.' He went on in the same strain, saying 'I' when he referred to me. It seemed so queer that I bent towards the policeman on my right and asked him to explain. He told me to shut up; then, after a moment, whispered: 'They all do that.' It seemed to me that the idea behind it was still further to exclude me from the case, to put me off the map, so to speak, by substituting the lawyer for myself. Anyway, it hardly mattered; I already felt worlds away from this courtroom and its tedious 'proceedings'.



My lawyer, in any case, struck me as feeble to the point of being ridiculous. He hurried through his plea of provocation, and then he, too, started in about my 'soul'. But I had an impression that he had much less talent than the Prosecutor.

'I, too,' he said, 'have closely studied this man's soul; but, unlike my learned friend for the prosecution, I have found something there. Indeed I may say that I have read the prisoner's mind like an open book.' What he had read there was that I was an excellent young fellow, a steady, conscientious worker who did his best by his employer; that I was popular with everyone and sympathetic in others' troubles. According to him I was a dutiful son, who had supported his mother as long as he was able. After anxious consideration I had reached the conclusion that, by entering a Home, the old lady would have comforts that my means didn't permit me to provide for her. 'I am astounded, gentlemen,' he added, 'by the attitude taken up by my learned friend in referring to this Home. Surely if proof be needed of the excellence of such institutions, we need only remember that they are promoted and financed by a Government department.' I noticed that he made no reference to the funeral, and this

seemed to me a serious omission. But, what with his long-windedness, the endless days and hours they had been discussing my 'soul', and the rest of it, I found that my mind had gone blurred; everything was dissolving into a greyish, watery haze.

Only one incident stands out; towards the end, while my counsel rambled on, I heard the tin trumpet of an ice-cream vendor in the street, a small, shrill sound cutting across the flow of words. And then a rush of memories went through my mind—memories of a life which was mine no longer and had once provided me with the surest, humblest pleasures: warm smells of summer, my favourite streets, the sky at evening, Marie's dresses and her laugh. The futility of what was happening here seemed to take me by the throat, I felt like vomiting, and I had only one idea: to get it over, to go back to my cell, and sleep . . . and sleep.

Dimly I heard my counsel making his last appeal.

'Gentlemen of the jury, surely you will not send to his death a decent, hard-working young man, because for one tragic moment he lost his self-control? Is he not sufficiently punished by the lifelong remorse that is to be his lot? I confidently await your verdict, the only

verdict possible—that of homicide with extenuating circumstances.’

The court rose and the lawyer sat down, looking thoroughly exhausted. Some of his colleagues came to him and shook his hand. ‘You put up a magnificent show, old chap,’ I heard one of them say. Another lawyer even called me to witness: ‘Fine, wasn’t it?’ I agreed, but insincerely; I was far too tired to judge if it had been ‘fine’ or otherwise.

Meanwhile the day was ending and the heat becoming less intense. By some vague sounds that reached me from the street I knew that the cool of the evening had set in. We all sat on, waiting. And what we all were waiting for really concerned nobody but me. I looked round the courtroom. It was exactly as it had been on the first day. I met the eyes of the journalist in grey and the robot woman. This reminded me that not once during the whole hearing had I tried to catch Marie’s eye. It wasn’t that I’d forgotten her; only I was too preoccupied. I saw her now, seated between Céleste and Raymond. She gave me a little wave of her hand, as if to say, ‘At last!’ She was smiling, but I could tell that she was rather anxious. But my heart seemed turned to stone, and I couldn’t even return her smile.

The judges came back to their seats. Someone read out to the jury, very rapidly, a string of questions. I caught a word here and there. 'Murder of malice aforethought . . . Provocation . . . Extenuating circumstances.' The jury went out, and I was taken to the little room where I had already waited. My lawyer came to see me; he was very talkative and showed more cordiality and confidence than ever before. He assured me that all would go well and I'd get off with a few years' imprisonment or transportation. I asked him what were the chances of getting the sentence quashed. He said there was no chance of that. He had not raised any point of law, as this was apt to prejudice the jury. And it was difficult to get a judgment quashed except on technical grounds. I saw his point, and agreed. Looking at the matter dispassionately, I shared his view. Otherwise there would be no end to litigation. 'In any case,' the lawyer said, 'you can appeal in the ordinary way. But I'm convinced the verdict will be favourable.'

We waited for quite a while, a good three-quarters of an hour, I should say. Then a bell rang. My lawyer left me, saying:

'The foreman of the jury will read out the answers. You will be called on after that to hear the judgment.'

Some doors banged. I heard people hurrying down flights of steps, but couldn't tell whether they were near by or distant. Then I heard a voice droning away in the courtroom.

When the bell rang again and I stepped back into the dock, the silence of the courtroom closed in round me and, with the silence, came a queer sensation when I noticed that, for the first time, the young journalist kept his eyes averted. I didn't look in Marie's direction. In fact, I had no time to look as the presiding judge had already started pronouncing a rigmarole to the effect that 'in the name of the French People' I was to be decapitated in some public place.

It seemed to me then that I could interpret the look on the faces of those present; it was one of almost respectful sympathy. The policemen, too, handled me very gently. The lawyer placed his hand on my wrist. I had stopped thinking altogether. I heard the judge's voice asking if I had anything more to say. After thinking for a moment, I answered, 'No'. Then the policemen led me out.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I HAVE just refused, for the third time, to see the prison chaplain. I have nothing to say to him, don't feel like talking—and shall be seeing him quite soon enough, anyway. The only thing that interests me now is the problem of circumventing the machine, learning if the inevitable admits a loophole.

They have moved me to another cell. In this one, lying on my back, I can see the sky, and there is nothing else to see. All my time is spent in watching the slowly changing colours of the sky, as day moves on to night. I put my hands behind my head, gaze up, and wait.

This problem of a loophole obsesses me; I am always wondering if there have been cases of condemned prisoners escaping from the implacable machinery of justice at the last moment, breaking through the police cordon, vanishing in the nick of time before the guillotine falls. Often and often I blame myself for not having given more attention to accounts of public executions. One should always take an interest in such matters. There's never any knowing what one may come to. Like every-

one else I'd read descriptions of executions in the papers. But technical books dealing with this subject must certainly exist; only I'd never felt sufficiently interested to look them up. And in these books I might have found escape stories. Surely they'd have told me that in one case anyhow the wheels had stopped; that once, if only once, in that inexorable march of events, chance or luck had played a happy part. Just once! In a way I think that single instance would have satisfied me. My emotion would have done the rest. The papers often talk of 'a debt owed to society'—a debt which, according to them, must be paid by the offender. But talk of that sort doesn't touch the imagination. No, the one thing that counted for me was the possibility of making a dash for it and defeating their bloodthirsty rite; of a mad stampede to freedom that would anyhow give me a moment's hope, the gambler's last throw. Naturally all that 'hope' could come to was to be knocked down at the corner of a street or picked off by a bullet in my back. But, all things considered, even this luxury was forbidden me; I was caught in the rat-trap irrevocably.

Try as I might, I couldn't stomach this brutal certitude. For really, when one came to think of it, there was a disproportion between

the judgment on which it was based and the unalterable sequence of events starting from the moment when that judgment was delivered. The fact that the verdict was read out at 8 p.m. rather than at 5, the fact that it might have been quite different, that it was given by men who change their underclothes, and was credited to so vague an entity as the 'French People'—for that matter, why not to the Chinese or the German People?—all these facts seemed to deprive the court's decision of much of its gravity. Yet I could but recognize that, from the moment the verdict was given, its effects became as cogent, as tangible, as, for example, this wall against which I was lying, pressing my back to it.

When such thoughts crossed my mind, I remembered a story Mother used to tell me about my father. I never set eyes on him. Perhaps the only things I really knew about him were what Mother had told me. One of these was that he'd gone to see a murderer executed. The mere thought of it turned his stomach. But he'd seen it through and, on coming home, was violently sick. At the time I found my father's conduct rather disgusting. But now I understood; it was so natural. How had I failed to recognize that nothing was more important than an execution; that,



viewed from one angle, it's the only thing that can genuinely interest a man? And I decided that, if ever I got out of gaol, I'd attend every execution that took place. I was unwise, no doubt, even to consider this possibility. For, the moment I'd pictured myself in freedom, standing behind a double rank of policemen—on the right side of the line, so to speak—the mere thought of being an onlooker who comes to see the show, and can go home and vomit afterwards, flooded my mind with a wild, absurd exultation. It was a stupid thing to let my imagination run away with me like that; a moment later I had a shivering fit and had to wrap myself closely in my blanket. But my teeth went on chattering; nothing would stop them.

Still, obviously, one can't be sensible all the time. Another equally ridiculous fancy of mine was to frame new laws, altering the penalties. What was wanted, to my mind, was to give the criminal a chance, if only a dog's chance; say, one chance in a thousand. There might be some drug, or combination of drugs, which would kill the patient (I thought of him as 'the patient') nine hundred and ninety times in a thousand. That he should know this was, of course, essential. For after taking much thought,

calmly, I came to the conclusion that what was wrong about the guillotine was that the condemned man had no chance at all, absolutely none. In fact, the patient's death had been ordained irrevocably. It was a foregone conclusion. If by some fluke the knife didn't do its job, they started again. So it came to this, that—against the grain, no doubt—the condemned man had to hope the apparatus was in good working order! This, I thought, was a flaw in the system; and, on the face of it, my view was sound enough. On the other hand, I had to admit it proved the efficiency of the system. It came to this: the man under sentence was obliged to collaborate mentally, it was in his interest that all should go off without a hitch.

Another thing I had to recognize was that, until now, I'd had wrong ideas on the subject. For some reason I'd always supposed that one had to go up steps and climb on to a scaffold to be guillotined. Probably that was because of the 1789 Revolution; I mean, what I'd learnt about it at school, and the pictures I had seen. Then one morning I remembered a photograph the newspapers had featured on the occasion of the execution of a famous criminal. Actually the apparatus stood on the ground; there was nothing very impressive

about it, and it was much narrower than I'd imagined. It struck me as rather odd that picture had escaped my memory until now. What had struck me at the time was the neat appearance of the guillotine; its shining surfaces and finish reminded one of some laboratory instrument. One always has exaggerated ideas about what one doesn't know. Now I had to admit it seemed a very simple process, getting guillotined; the machine is on the same level as the man, and he walks towards it as one steps forward to meet somebody one knows. In a sense, that, too, was disappointing. The business of climbing a scaffold, leaving the world below one, so to speak, gave something for a man's imagination to get hold of. But, as it was, the machine dominated everything; they killed you discreetly, with a hint of shame and much efficiency.

There were two other things about which I was always thinking: the dawn, and my appeal. However, I did my best to keep my mind off these thoughts. I lay down, looked up at the sky, and forced myself to study it. When the light began to turn green I knew that night was coming. Another thing I did to deflect the course of my thoughts was to listen to my heart. I couldn't imagine that this faint

throbbing, which had been with me for so long, would ever cease. Imagination has never been one of my strong points. Still, I tried to picture a moment when the beating of my heart no longer echoed in my head. But in vain. The dawn and my appeal were still there. And I ended by believing it was a silly thing to try to force one's thoughts out of their natural groove.

They always came for one at dawn; that much I knew. So really all my nights were spent in waiting for that dawn. I have never liked being taken by surprise. When something happens to me I want to be ready for it. That's why I got into the habit of sleeping off and on in the daytime and watching through the night for the first hint of daybreak in the dark dome above. The worst period of the night was that vague hour when, I knew, they usually came; once it was after midnight I waited, listening intently. Never before had my ears perceived so many noises, such tiny sounds. Still, I must say I was lucky in one respect; never during any of those periods did I hear footsteps. Mother used to say that however miserable one is, there's always something to be thankful for. And each morning, when the sky brightened and light began to flood my cell, I agreed with her. Because I

might just as well have heard footsteps, and felt my heart shattered into bits. Even though the faintest rustle sent me hurrying to the door and, pressing an ear to the rough, cold wood, I listened so intently that I could hear my breathing, quick and hoarse like a dog's panting—even so there was an end; my heart hadn't split, and I knew I had another twenty-four hours' respite.

Then all day there was my appeal to think about. I made the most of this idea, studying my effects so as to squeeze out the maximum of consolation. Thus I always began by assuming the worst; my appeal was dismissed. That meant, of course, I was to die. Sooner than others, obviously. 'But,' I reminded myself, 'it's common knowledge that life isn't worth living anyhow'. And, on a wide view, I could see that it makes little difference whether one dies at the age of thirty or three-score and ten—since, in either case, other men and women will continue living, the world will go on as before. Also, whether I died now or forty years hence, this business of dying had to be got through, inevitably. Still, somehow this line of thought wasn't as consoling as it should have been; the idea of all those years of life in hand was a galling reminder! However, I could argue myself out

of it, by picturing what would have been my feelings when my term was up, and death had cornered me. Once one's up against it, the precise manner of one's death has obviously small importance. Therefore—but it was hard not to lose the thread of the argument leading up to that 'therefore'—I should be prepared to face the dismissal of my appeal.

At this stage, but only at this stage, I had, so to speak, the *right*, and accordingly I gave myself leave, to consider the other alternative; that my appeal was successful. And then the trouble was to calm down that sudden rush of joy racing through my body and even bringing tears to my eyes. But it was up to me to bring my nerves to heel and steady my mind; for, even in considering this possibility, I had to keep some order in my thoughts, so as to make my consolations, as regards the first alternative, more plausible. When I'd succeeded, I had earned a good hour's peace of mind; and that, anyhow, was something.

It was at one of these moments that I refused once again to see the chaplain. I was lying down and could mark the summer evening coming on by a soft golden glow spreading across the sky. I had just turned down my appeal, and felt my

blood circulating with slow, steady throbs. No, I didn't want to see the chaplain. . . . Then I did something I hadn't done for quite a while; I fell to thinking about Marie. She hadn't written for ages; probably, I surmised, she had grown tired of being the mistress of a man sentenced to death. Or she might be ill, or dead. After all, such things happen. How could I have known about it, since, apart from our two bodies, separated now, there was no link between us, nothing to remind us of each other? Supposing she were dead, her memory would mean nothing; I couldn't feel an interest in a dead girl. This seemed to me quite normal; just as I realized people would soon forget me once I was dead. I couldn't even say that this was hard to stomach; really, there's no idea to which one doesn't get acclimatized in time.

My thoughts had reached this point when the chaplain walked in, unannounced. I couldn't help giving a start on seeing him. He noticed this evidently, as he promptly told me not to be alarmed. I reminded him that usually his visits were at another hour, and for a pretty grim occasion. This, he replied, was just a friendly visit; it had no concern with my appeal, about which he knew nothing. Then he sat down on my bed, asking

me to sit beside him. I refused—not because I had anything against him; he seemed a mild, amiable man.

He remained quite still at first, his arms resting on his knees, his eyes fixed on his hands. They were slender but sinewy hands, which made me think of two nimble little animals. Then he gently rubbed them together. He stayed so long in the same position that for a while I almost forgot he was there.

All of a sudden he jerked his head up and looked me in the eyes.

‘Why,’ he asked, ‘don’t you let me come to see you?’

I explained that I didn’t believe in God.

‘Are you really so sure of that?’

I said I saw no point in troubling my head about the matter; whether I believed or didn’t was, to my mind, a question of so little importance.

He then leant back against the wall, laying his hands flat on his thighs. Almost without seeming to address me, he remarked that he’d often noticed one fancies one is quite sure about something, when in point of fact one isn’t. When I said nothing he looked at me again, and asked:

‘Don’t you agree?’

I said that seemed quite possible. But,



though I mightn't be so sure about what interested me, I was absolutely sure about what didn't interest me. And the question he had raised didn't interest me at all.

He looked away and, without altering his posture, asked if it was because I felt utterly desperate that I spoke like this. I explained that it wasn't despair I felt, but fear—which was natural enough.

'In that case,' he said firmly, 'God can help you. All the men I've seen in your position turned to Him in their time of trouble.'

Obviously, I replied, they were at liberty to do so, if they felt like it. I however, didn't want to be helped, and I hadn't time to work up interest for something that didn't interest me.

He fluttered his hands fretfully; then, sitting up, smoothed out his cassock. When this was done he began talking again, addressing me as 'my friend'. It wasn't because I'd been condemned to death, he said, that he spoke to me in this way. In his opinion every man on the earth was under sentence of death.

There, I interrupted him; that wasn't the same thing, I pointed out, and, what's more, could be no consolation.

He nodded. 'Maybe. Still, if you don't die soon, you'll die one day. And then the same

question will arise. How will you face that terrible, final hour?’

I replied that I’d face it exactly as I was facing it now.

Thereat he stood up, and looked me straight in the eyes. It was a trick I knew well. I used to amuse myself trying it on Emmanuel and Céleste, and nine times out of ten they’d look away uncomfortably. I could see the chaplain was an old hand at it, as his gaze never faltered. And his voice was quite steady when he said: ‘Have you no hope at all? Do you really think that when you die you die outright, and nothing remains?’

I said: ‘Yes.’

He dropped his eyes and sat down again. He was truly sorry for me, he said. It must make life unbearable for a man, to think as I did.

The priest was beginning to bore me, and, resting a shoulder on the wall, just beneath the little skylight, I looked away. Though I didn’t trouble much to follow what he said, I gathered he was questioning me again. Presently his tone became agitated, urgent, and, as I realized that he was genuinely distressed, I began to pay more attention.

He said he felt convinced my appeal would succeed, but I was saddled with a load of guilt,

of which I must get rid. In his view man's justice was a vain thing; only God's justice mattered. I pointed out that the former had condemned me. Yes, he agreed, but it hadn't absolved me from my sin. I told him that I wasn't conscious of any 'sin'; all I knew was that I'd been guilty of a criminal offence. Well, I was paying the penalty of that offence, and no one had the right to expect anything more of me.

Just then he got up again, and it struck me that if he wanted to move in this tiny cell, almost the only choice lay between standing up and sitting down. I was staring at the floor. He took a single step towards me, and halted, as if he didn't dare to come nearer. Then he looked up through the bars at the sky.

'You're mistaken, my son,' he said gravely. 'There's more that might be required of you. And perhaps it *will* be required of you.'

'What do you mean?'

'You might be asked to see . . .'

'To see what?'

Slowly the priest gazed round my cell, and I was struck by the sadness of his voice when he spoke again.

'These stone walls, I know it only too well, are steeped in human suffering. I've never been able to look at them without a shudder.

And yet—believe me, I am speaking from the depths of my heart—I *know* that even the wretchedest among you have sometimes seen, taking form upon that greyness, a divine face. It's that face you are asked to see.'

This roused me a little. I informed him that I'd been staring at those walls for months; there was nobody, nothing in the world, I knew better than I knew them. And once upon a time, perhaps, I used to try to see a face. But it was a sun-gold face, flowing with desire—Marie's face. I had no luck; I'd never seen it, and now I'd given up trying. Indeed I'd never seen anything 'taking form', as he called it, against those grey walls.

The chaplain gazed at me mournfully. I now had my back to the wall and light was flowing over my forehead. He muttered some words I didn't catch; then abruptly asked if he might kiss me. I said, 'No'. Then he turned, came up to the wall, and slowly drew his hand along it.

'Do you really love these earthly things so very much?' he asked in a low voice.

I made no reply.

For quite a while he kept his eyes averted. His presence was getting more and more irksome, and I was on the point of telling him to go, and leave me in peace, when all of a

sudden he swung round on me, and burst out passionately:

‘No! No! I refuse to believe it. I’m sure you’ve often wished there was an after-life.’

Of course I had, I told him. Everybody has that wish at times. But that had no more importance than wishing to be rich, or to swim very fast, or to have a better-shaped mouth. It was in the same order of things. I was going on in the same vein, when he cut in with a question. How did I picture my life after the grave?

I fairly bawled out at him: ‘A life in which I can remember this life on earth. That’s all I want of it.’ And in the same breath I told him I’d had enough of his company.

But, apparently, he had more to say on the subject of God. I went close up to him and made a last attempt to explain that I’d very little time left, and I wasn’t going to waste it on God.

Then he tried to change the subject by asking me why I hadn’t once addressed him as ‘Father’, seeing that he was a priest. That irritated me still more, and I told him he wasn’t my father; quite the contrary, he was on the others’ side.

‘No, no, my son,’ he said, laying his hand on my shoulder. ‘I’m on *your* side, though you

don't realize it—because your heart is hardened. But I shall pray for you.'

Then, I don't know how it was, but something seemed to break inside me, and I started yelling at the top of my voice. I hurled insults at him, I told him not to waste his rotten prayers on me; it was better to burn than to disappear. I'd taken him by the neckband of his cassock, and, in a sort of ecstasy of joy and rage, I poured out on him all the thoughts that had been simmering in my brain. He seemed so cocksure, you see. And yet none of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair. Living as he did, like a corpse, he couldn't even be sure of being alive. It might look as if my hands were empty. Actually, I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he; sure of my present life and of the death that was coming. That, no doubt, was all I had; but at least that certainty was something I could get my teeth into—just as it had got its teeth into me. I'd been right, I was still right, I was always right. I'd passed my life in a certain way, and I might have passed it in a different way, if I'd felt like it. I'd acted thus, and I hadn't acted otherwise; I hadn't done *x*, whereas I had done *y* or *z*. And what did that mean? That, all the time, I'd been waiting for this present

moment, for that dawn, tomorrow's or another day's, which was to justify me. Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why. He, too, knew why. From the dark horizon of my future a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing towards me, all my life long, from the years that were to come. And on its way that breeze had levelled out all the ideas that people tried to foist on me in the equally unreal years I then was living through. What difference could they make to me, the death of others, or a mother's love, or his God; or the way one decides to live, the fate one thinks one chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to 'choose' not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers. Surely, surely he must see that? Every man alive was privileged; there was only one class of men, the privileged class. All alike would be condemned to die one day; his turn, too, would come like the others'. And what difference could it make if, after being charged with murder, he were executed because he didn't weep at his mother's funeral, since it all came to the same thing in the end? The same thing for Salamano's wife and for Salamano's dog. That little robot woman was as 'guilty' as the

girl from Paris who had married Masson, or as Marie, who wanted me to marry her. What did it matter if Raymond was as much my pal as Céleste, who was a far worthier man? What did it matter if at this very moment Marie was kissing a new boy friend? As a condemned man himself, couldn't he grasp what I meant by that dark wind blowing from my future? . . .

I had been shouting so much that I'd lost my breath, and just then the warders rushed in and started trying to release the chaplain from my grip. One of them made as if to strike me. The chaplain quietened them down, and gazed at me for a moment without speaking. I could see tears in his eyes. Then he turned and left the cell.

Once he'd gone, I felt calm again. But all this excitement had exhausted me and I dropped heavily on to my sleeping-plank. I must have had a longish sleep, for, when I woke, the stars were shining down on my face. Sounds of the countryside came faintly in, and the cool night air, veined with smells of earth and salt, fanned my cheeks. The marvellous peace of the sleepbound summer night flooded through me like a tide. Then, just on the edge of daybreak, I heard a steamer's siren. People were starting on a voyage to a



world which had ceased to concern me, for ever. Almost for the first time in many months I thought of my mother. And now, it seemed to me, I understood why at her life's end she had taken on a 'fiancé'; why she'd played at making a fresh start. There, too, in that Home where lives were flickering out, the dusk came as a mournful solace. With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. No one, no one in the world had any right to weep for her. And I, too, felt ready to start life over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, made me realize that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still. For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained was to hope that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.

