



**Portrait
of a
Man
Unknown**

by Nathalie Sarraute

PREFACE BY JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

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a novel by
NATHALIE SARRAUTE

preface by Jean-Paul Sartre
translated by Maria Jolas

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every side, a solid, hard block, without a single fissure, a smooth sphere that offers nothing the hand can grasp. Their actions, which maintain them in a state of perpetual motion, shape, isolate and protect them, hold them in a standing position, that is, erect and impregnable, the way a waterspout is formed, sucked up and erected so solidly by the violent force of the wind outside the ocean, that even a cannon ball is unable to destroy it.

How I should like to see all the misshapen tatters, the trembling shadows, the ghosts, the ghouls and the larvae that flout me and which I nevertheless pursue—take on those same smooth, well-rounded forms, present those same pure, firm outlines.

How delightful and peaceful it would be to see them become part of the cheerful circle of familiar faces.

But for this to happen, I realize perfectly, I should have to bring myself to accept certain risks, to launch out a bit, to begin with, if only on a single point, no matter which one, it's of no importance. As, for instance, to give them at least a name to identify them with. That would already be a first step towards isolating them, towards rounding them off a little and giving them a certain consistency. That would serve to establish them somewhat. But I just can't do it. There's no use pretending. I know it would be just so much pain for nothing. . . . It wouldn't take people long to find out what kind of merchandise I was transporting under this flag. My own. The only kind I have to offer.

Rich ornaments, warm colors, soothing certainties, the fresh sweetness of "life," are not for me. When, occasionally, these "live" persons, or these characters, condescend to come near me too, all I am able to do is to hover about

them and try with fanatical eagerness to find the crack, the tiny crevice, the weak point, as delicate as a baby's fontanelle, at which I seem to see something that resembles a barely perceptible pulsation suddenly swell and begin to throb gently. I cling to it and press upon it. And then I feel a strange substance trickling from them in an endless stream, a substance as anonymous as lymph, or blood, an insipid liquid that flows through my hands and spills. . . . And all that remains of the firm, rosy, velvety flesh of these "live" persons is a shapeless gray covering, from which all blood has been drained away.

readjusted, scoured clean, afraid of nothing. With the result that when I started towards it, I felt no haste and, it seemed to me, had no motive other than the simple curiosity of the disinterested picture lover who wants to compare his impression with that carried away from earlier visits of some years back. There it was, still in the same place, in the most dimly lighted corner of the passage. I had no need to go up to it in order to decipher on the little gold plate, gleaming in the half-light, the familiar title: *Portrait of a Man Unknown*. I recalled that the picture was not signed: the painter, too, was unknown.

This time it seemed to me, if anything, even more curious than it had before. The lines of the face, the lace jabot and waistcoat, as also the hands, seemed to present the kind of fragmentary, uncertain outlines that the hesitant fingers of a blind man might come upon haltingly, feeling his way. It was as though all effort, all doubt, all anxiety had been overtaken by a sudden catastrophe, and had remained congealed in action, like corpses that have petrified in the position they were in when death overtook them. The eyes alone seemed to have escaped the catastrophe and achieved fulfillment. It was as though they had attracted and concentrated in themselves all the intensity, all the life that was lacking in the still formless, dislocated features. In fact they seemed not quite to belong to this face; they made one think of the eyes of those enchanted beings in fairy tales in whose bodies princes and princesses are held captive by a charm. Their distressing, insistent entreaty made one strangely aware of his silence and the tragedy of it.

As before, but with even greater force, the man's expression gripped me by its determination and authoritative-ness. There was no doubt about it, his entreaty was

addressed to me, and to me alone; in vain, in order to keep from slipping all the way down the slope I felt I was now on, I told myself that this was a reappearance of introversion, that I had come there like a criminal drawn back by a morbid impulse to the scene of his crime, that I had been led on by an inner need to play a dangerous, unhealthy game with myself; in vain, I tried with all my might, as I always do, to restrain myself, so as to remain on solid ground, on the safe side; out of the blackness of his struggle I felt him making a painful effort to communicate to me his impassioned, stubborn entreaty.

And little by little, I became aware that a timid note, an almost forgotten strain from long ago, had sounded within me, at first, hesitantly. And it seemed to me, as I stood there before him, lost, dissolved in him, that this faltering note, this timid response he had awakened in me, penetrated him and reverberated inside him, that he seized it and gave it back to me increased and magnified as though by an amplifier; it began to rise from him and from me, louder and louder, a song filled with hope that lifted me up and bore me along. . . . As I ran like someone being carried, pushed, even, out of the museum, I saw the attendants lounging on their benches in the corners sit up and look at me sleepily, and outside, on the square, I saw white birds rise on joyous wing at my approach.

Suddenly I felt free. Liberated. The Unknown Man—I said to myself as I dashed up the hotel stairs—"The Man with the Waistcoat," as I called him, had liberated me. Like a blowtorch, the flame that burned inside him had melted the chain by which they had held me in leash. I was free. The cables were cut. I was sailing along, headed for the open sea.

*T*he world stretched out before me like the fields in fairy tales on which, as a result of a few magic words, the traveler sees fine linen covered with delicious viands spread out before him on glistening grass, beside a spring, or along the banks of a stream.

No longer would I have to stretch out a docile hand to be fed by them, to receive from them the little mouthfuls of premasticated foods and ready-to-serve pleasures that they used to give me.

I had retrieved my own foods, my own pleasures, prepared for me alone, and known to me alone. I recognized their former savor. They enveloped me with their mild fragrance, similar to that given forth by wet young leaves in the spring air.

My fetishes. My little gods. The altars on which I had

badly, he had been too close to the abyss . . . he had slipped . . . the old woman had pushed him into it . . . he hated her now—what business was it of hers? The smelly train upset him; it seemed to him that the grubby houses, the dusty box plants, the entire shabby suburb, had left a sediment on him that irritated him the way stickiness on the hands and face does. He was in a hurry to get away from it all, to get back home.

Once they've reached the Denfert Station, he will have pulled himself together a bit, he'll shake her hand in his rough-diamond manner: "Well, I'll see you soon, eh? See you soon. Thanks. Thanks." in a voice that has recovered its tone. And she will say shyly, to console him (it's so sad, that lonely life of his): "And don't you worry, you hear me." He will shrug his shoulders with that occasional smile of his, that slightly childish smile, uncomfortable and abashed, which his friends like about him, which sometimes makes him irresistible, and which she will be touched by. I myself am touched by it.

This will be the picture she will retain of him: this face seen in half profile—a vague sketch with barely indicated lines, from which stand out more clearly the contours of the cheek that, seen from this angle, has something naïve about it, something that has remained intact as in the case of a very young man—and the abashed, touching smile, like a child's.

And he, while he shakes her hand, will feel that, in spite of himself, he is getting like this picture, that he is a faithful reflection of it: it is this extreme awareness of the impression others have of him, this capacity to reproduce like a mirror the picture of himself that people give back to

him, that always gives him the painful, slightly disturbing sensation of play-acting with everybody, of never being "himself:" "a frequent trait," my specialist would say, "of nervous persons."

The picture that he was reproducing just now, that of the "childlike, naïve philosopher who is defenseless before life," restored his self-assurance. He felt all right again. Indeed he had the faculty of straightening up like that quickly. But if I were to stand directly in front of him, right in the middle of the street, and shout in his face: "So it turned out badly, did it, that expedition of yours . . . to go and get a whiff of sordidness . . . ? The old woman spoiled everything . . . you remember . . . there on the bench . . . when you were waiting for the train?" I believe that he would be sincere if he replied that he understood nothing, absolutely nothing of such mad talk: they never do understand when you bowl them over with truths of this sort, he no more than the rest of them, as for that, he's like them, or else he forces himself to be like them, I don't know, one never knows with him he's so sly, always double-faced, always play-acting, with himself as well. But I do know, in any case, that I'd come back empty-handed if I ever dared to try anything like that with him.

It's their way of defending themselves, with all of them, as I said before, this sort of unawareness, whether sincere or pretended. They curl up like hedgehogs when danger becomes too great, close all exits and allow these "truths" of mine, which I hatch so lovingly, to bounce against them without penetrating the surface.

Standing before his door, on the landing, he would shake his head with the indulgent, amused air that an adult

world is his—there, neatly arranged so as to entice and hold him, contained in those little books scattered about on his desk, those little salmon-colored books that are so convenient, just look, you can put them in your pocket if you want to take them with you when you go for a walk; there they are, within reach—he has only to stretch out his hand—the most recent researches and discoveries, the most scholarly, the most daring theories and systems: great fellows they are, he takes pleasure in recognizing this fact, very brilliant fellows too, he likes to repeat it, as he purses his lips and nods with the air of one who is able to judge. It's often amusing to observe their zealotry, their foregone conclusions, their blind tenaciousness, the blinkers they wear, even the best of them. But he doesn't blame them. He understands. He knows that these limitations and foregone conclusions, this blindness, are all necessary in order for them to create for his use products of the best quality. For him, as he sits there, these little books scattered about on his desk are nothing more than selected instruments with which he works, lenses, or different colored spectacles, through which he obtains each time a different view.

According to his whim, or his humor, according to whether his preference of the moment leans towards one or the other of them, the picture varies. Everything changes. According to his whim. The world, always amenable, grows infinitely vast or, on the contrary, shrinks to nothing: becomes narrow and dark, or immense and transparent. According to his whim, colors change. Nothing is set. Nothing impresses him. Under his impetus, like the frail web in which the spider swings, the world sways and trembles.

which macabre memories prowl among livid tree trunks and under scrubby brushwood. . . . No, this time it was a slightly sulphurous odor, the dingy grayness of the railroad station and its platform, the harrowing blowing of the train's whistle, foretelling tragic separations, wrenchings; the old woman was sitting there beside him on the bench, with her bulging stomach and her toothless mouth . . . she was looking at him out of the corner of her eye and smiling her disturbing, falsely tender smile . . . that was it, he could feel it: something which had ripened in that setting, which had burgeoned in that odor, to the sound of those whistle blasts, something solid, hard; he would have to seize it and extract it in order to soothe the swelling, the suffering . . . there it was, now he had got hold of it, it had entered into him so insidiously that at the time he had only noticed a momentary smarting, as when a thorn pierces the flesh, but now he felt it, it was the sore spot in which the twinges originated, from which the pain spread: "They aren't kind to you." Here was the judgment, the infallible verdict: "They aren't kind to you. . . ." The game was up, as well as all the flirting and teasing, evasions and shilly-shallying. There it was, ineluctable, relentless, Reality itself; he felt its sharp point buried in him like a dagger: "They aren't kind to you," and he pressed and dug and probed all around it, in the pitiless way in which one probes into swollen flesh: he knew it well, he had never had any doubt on the subject, he could die all alone like a dog, they would let him die all alone, when they no longer needed him, she especially, for she was growing more avid, more insatiable every day, she clung to him like a leech, draining off all his strength, emptying him of all substance . . . as he lay there, motion-

less, it seemed to him that little by little his blood was flowing from him, sucked off by her . . . he continued to press and probe, he felt something heavy, a burning lump in his chest, at the pit of his stomach, then suddenly a sharper twinge: "The fruit of forty years' hard work"—the words lacerated him like iron prongs: "Forty years of hard work," the fruit of forty years of deprivation and struggle, that was what they were devouring, that was what they were picking off bit by bit, a lot of bloodsuckers. He continued to press and to prod, there it was now, something harder, more definite still, and his distress thickened and swelled around it like foul black blood: four thousand francs, those last four thousand francs, which he had just handed out through stupidity, through sheer weariness and weakness. . . . And yet he knew them well, all those charlatans that were only after his money, the "doctor" as she called him, but she was so gullible, such a credulous, backward fool; he had even shouted "Fool!" in her face . . . with everybody else, that is; it was only with him that she was so stubborn and suspicious, other people could do what they wanted with her. With them she was as meek as a lamb, with them she was defenseless, at the mercy of the first person who came along. . . . *Massage*, so she needed that . . . the charlatan had probably persuaded her in no time. He could see her sticking out her neck, wagging her head: "Oh, *ee-yeess*. . . . Really, doctor? Do you think so? Do you think that would be good for me? Oh, *ee-yeess*. . . ." It was only against him that she advanced in that aggressive manner—a snake that rears its head and strikes: "Absolutely, everybody's surprised that I should have waited so long; I can hardly walk. . . ." Long walks, sports, the open

too late, perhaps after all these were only what are called night fears . . . their game of cat-and-mouse, their eternal shilly-shallying, were perhaps still permissible, just a little while longer. . . . He began to hurry, quick, no time to look for his slippers, and barefooted and in his nightshirt he raced through the hall to the kitchen and climbed on a chair to look: there it was, on the shelf above the sink—the bar of soap was there, the edge fresh cut, the very edge, sharp and well defined, of reality itself. Neither doubt nor hope was possible now; a large piece of the bar had been cut off. He looked: almost a good third. She had cut off a large piece, almost a good third. So that was why she had jumped like that, that was the meaning of her startled manner; “Oh! how you frightened me . . .” as he entered the room.

By now he had reached the very limit. He had plumbed the very depths. There was no need to look any further. After this paroxysm he felt a sort of relief. The clutched hand about his throat and chest had relaxed, he was breathing more freely as he returned to bed, carrying it with him—this concrete, hard fact—like a bone to be gnawed upon, undisturbed, in his kennel.

Back in his bed, his thought traveled about over the hard, distinct outlines, examining and feeling them, a landowner inspecting his estate: the bar of soap had been cut. She had stolen a piece of the bar of soap. He had known it all along. She had been fleecing him, sponging on him. However careful he was to leave nothing lying around, after all he couldn't lock up everything. . . . He had been right in his impression that the soap had been vanishing pretty fast lately, it was certainly not the first time. . . . Like the

I f it had involved her alone, I shouldn't have given it a thought. I know that she needs so little, the merest nothing makes her tremble; this Hypersensitive lined with quivering little silken tentacles that sway at the slightest breath, so that she is constantly brushed by fleeting shadows like those the gentlest of breezes can set in motion on a prairie or a wheat field.

Like dogs sniffing along a wall at suspicious odors they alone recognize, with her nose to the ground, she picks up the scent of the things people are ashamed of; she sniffs at implied meanings, follows through the traces of hidden humiliations, unable to break away from them.

*P*rudence. They are very prudent. Indeed they never take any very great risks. One has to spy on them for a long time before one is aware of their slight quivering, their treadmill motions, like the ebb and flow of a tideless sea that hardly comes in or goes out at all, with little lapping waves.

Nor do they ever put themselves forward very much. You have to lie in wait a long time, and keep hidden watch, before you see them move. Many people in my place, I realize, would get exasperated at this game, and become discouraged. But not me, I'm going to be patient. I'm going to resist the temptation that seizes me frequently, when I see them so inert, to hit them, to give them just one

handedness, diverges from the norm, transgresses the relentless, subtle, sure rules, the secret of which they possess.

Conventional, worn-out old metaphors come to mind, despite oneself, "the pact with the devil," or the famous broomstick of the "sorcerer's apprentice," when we see them, snugly enclosed in their quilted caskets, paying each day a heavier tribute for their eternally threatened security.

Their fanatical eye never abandons its uneasy, ferret's vigil in order to discover in the smooth, impervious protecting wall, some defect, the tiniest of cracks. . . .

Like ants working tirelessly in an effort to rebuild an ant-hill that is crumbling on every side, like women who are continually refreshing their delicate make-up, they scurry about, filling in holes, adding new plaster . . . like varnish the construction that surrounds them is constantly cracking and peeling . . . and through the tiny fissure, an undefinable threat, something relentless and intolerable that exists on the other side, always ready to worm its way in, keeps seeping through, stealthily. . . . Under its pressure the peeling and abrasion grow inordinately; it advances upon them, filling their entire field of vision the way close-ups cover the whole screen in a film. And all their contained anguish, suddenly liberated, aroused as by a draught of air, swells and tautens towards this abyss. . . .

Lonely men, women whom "life," as they say, has already treated rather badly, widows, their children dead, one of scarlet fever—"You should have seen what a darling he was . . . Why? he used to ask—he could say extraordinary

. . . he wouldn't be able to see the crack anymore, the crack through which something relentless and intolerable had seized hold of him by main force and was dragging him along, through which his very life, it seemed to him, was ebbing away. . . .

Once more, everything was going to turn out all right.

Relieved and soothed he was now able to trot somewhat embarrassed, back to his study, resume his seat in the middle of the universe he had woven for himself, start it swinging, according to his mood, with renewed satisfaction and vigor, watch it come to life under his gaze and assume color again, fresh and iridescent as a sparkling spider web on which, after the rain, little rain-bow-hued drops, clinging to the silken threads, tremble and gleam in the sun.

And yet it would be the natural thing, it would be the normal thing." She felt like writhing and stamping with rage and impatience: everybody understood that, everybody said it to her. Even the doctor, the last time she had gone to consult him, had been surprised: "And yet it would be the natural thing"—he had said that to her—"and yet it would be the normal thing. Strange, that your father shouldn't understand. . . . Somebody absolutely must speak to him." With an energetic gesture he had passed the blotter over the prescription he had just written out. "It's really one of the rare cases for which medicine can perform wonders. It would be a pity not to take advantage

of that fact." He had had the self-assured, indifferent tone, that they always have when they make their oracular statements that give such an irrefutable, impressive air to what they say.

She felt like stamping her feet like a spoiled child who has been refused the toy he wants somebody to buy for him, which he considers his right. It was her right. Everybody told her so. Even the doctor had been surprised. Everybody understood that: he was her father. There was no use trying to wriggle out of it: she was his daughter. However often he refused, however much he fumed, nothing would change that: he was her papa. That was the norm, the law with which she would force him to comply. It wouldn't help for him to turn away sullenly, with an air of being fed up, she would find a way to force him. . . .

It was this certainty, this conviction she had of enforcing the rules, of carrying out the orders of an infallible power, to which both of them must submit, that gave her, when she appeared tight-lipped in the doorway, that inexorable, obstinate, opinionated look, as though she were ready to brave anything, all sorts of whims and scenes, the look that trained nurses have when they arrive at the appointed hour in the room of a "difficult" patient, a poultice or a syringe in their hands. . . .

And yet I know well, it must never be forgotten—nothing is ever quite simple with them, I know exactly what they're like, always double-faced, not to say triple- or many-faced, evasive and full of all kinds of little secret recesses. . . . There was something else, too, that impelled her to rise suddenly with the air of a clairvoyant guided by

strange voices, and go to him, sweeping aside all obstacles. A call that came from him. An obscure, strange attraction. Something that she feels moving inside her, when she sits there curled up on the foot of her bed, in the calm and the propitious torpor of the summer afternoons, a coiled snake that starts gently to uncoil and lifts its head. It's for that reason, I have always suspected, always known, too, it's for that reason, because she feels, coiled up inside her, this strange need, this attraction, that she goes around asking everybody, she needs to be advised, to be reassured, she doesn't know, is it natural, normal at her age, ah! *ee-ee-yes?* Really? for her to need him as she does, because it's hard, isn't it, it's hard for a woman alone, and he's all she has left in the world, now that her poor mother is dead. . . . That's why she stands there in that imploring way of hers, hands crossed on her stomach, masquerading, all in mourning, her lisle-thread gloves and her black cotton stockings. . . . The placid-faced old women—the same ones with whom I, too, in my moments of dejection, had tried to curry favor, but in vain, they're suspicious of me, I don't inspire confidence in them—these old women, at sight of her, felt sorry for her, shook their heads. . . . "Certainly, poor soul. And when you think that she's all he's got in the world. Really, some people don't deserve to have children. There's one good thing, however, he can't take it with him. . . . She's quite right. She'd be wrong to feel uncomfortable. She's his daughter, isn't she? And no matter what he does, he can't get away from that. . . ." They give a careful coating, a wrapping to what she has so cleverly furnished them, the strange need, the obscure, dubious attraction (but of course they don't see it that way, these are things

that, in their simplicity, in their great purity, they never see, and they act without realizing what they're doing, impelled by an unconscious instinct); they place it in a strong container—such as they always keep on hand—all prepared, all addressed and packed with every precaution, well protected—in which, like an explosive enclosed in its thick, powerful armature, she can convey it in all security to him as he sits back there, waiting—a motionless target, to be aimed at.

As for him, he knew when she arrived that she was not alone. They were always there, right behind her, he knew it, that army of female dispensers, her protectresses, whom she had sought out and who never refuse her their support. Their silent, drab multitude was there backing her, urging her on. When she appeared in the doorway, with her stiff expression, her bulging eyes staring straight before her, their inexpressive faces pressed forward behind her, like the smooth, waxlike features of the saints who surround the set figures of the Virgin in primitive paintings.

He had known them for a long time. Already, years ago, it was they he had felt watching him, the first time, as he had leaned over the cradle, somewhat moved, uneasy, adjusting his glasses on his nose in order to see more clearly, when he had heard her aggressive, stubborn cry (the sensation was still fresh, unexpected)—they were all there then, around the cradle, wagging their heads with a serious satisfied air, like the wicked godmothers in fairy tales.

It was they, the first day, who had brought her to him—a bundle swathed in covers—and had laid her in his arms

with a triumphant, slightly mocking air. They had tickled the bundle, making their thick, flabby fingers run up and down it, water-soaked fingers, with broad, spatulate nails, nurses' and midwives' fingers, with clever, prehensile movements, and they had simpered, sticking out their lips in a gluttonous gesture: "Just look at that now, isn't it cute; now, isn't it sweet, look how proud it is already to be held in its papa's arms. . . . Yes ma'am, that's my papa, that's my papa, all right. . . ." They hugged the bundle to them, they swung it towards him to tease him, their lips puckered in a voluptuous, gluttonous pout: "That's my papa, all right. . . . How proud and happy my papa is to have such a fine little girl, such a fine little girl"—they stuck out their lips with a relish,—"yes, ma'am. . . ." Already, even then, as he had held out his arm awkwardly to take her—"No, no, not that way, oh! what an awkward thing a papa is, that hurts, doesn't it, my lambkin, my precious, its papa doesn't know how to hold it right. . . ." As he had put out his arm obediently, his elbow bent, he had felt his face grow inert and heavy, set, in spite of himself; it had seemed to him that invisible threads, glued to him, were drawing him along, or that a sticky coating spread all over him was hardening and adhering to him like a mask.

He must have felt already, while they were chattering and simpering and swinging the bundle smilingly in his direction, that this bundle in their hands was an instrument, like a sounding tube with which they were trying gently to probe him, which they were inserting into him delicately, with the help of their vaselined voices, a drain through which a part of himself, his very substance, would trickle away.

Or perhaps it seemed to him rather, as he felt her close to him, warm and spineless and already avid—an insatiable, obstinate little animal—that she was like a leech applied to him in order to bleed and weaken him.

Nor had she ever consented to abandon the position in which her fairy godmothers had laid her, huddled up against him, battenning on his substance, drinking his blood.

On the contrary, little by little she had perfected her knowledge of his soft spots, his sensitive points. And it was in these spots, at these points, that she preferred to curl up, that she caused to gather and ooze forth something that, without her, he knew, would have remained diffused and diluted within him; but she clung to him like a damp, hot compress that draws pus up to the skin and causes an abscess to ripen.

When she was still just a child, on Sunday afternoons, at the silent but inexorable injunction of the "fairies," he would "take her walking." The entire neighborhood, in fact, seemed to exert upon him the same heavy, mute compulsion that forced him to stroll slowly along, holding her by the hand, amidst the crowds in their Sunday best, on the dreary avenue, bordered by blighted houses, at the end of which stretched a park with lawns that were too vivid in color, like glowing red nailpolish at the end of soiled, dingy fingers.

They made slow progress, as though impeded in their movements by the warm, slightly moist air, and neither spoke. At the entrance of the park, there was a woman selling toys: little celluloid windmills, balls, dolls. He knew, without even having to look at her, that the child's eyes, inexpressive, already rather bulging eyes, like those

He was not alone, either, like her he had his protective cohort, his old guard, that he trotted out when things got too complicated, his old friends, who were always ready to stand by him . . . this time, as he fought, step by step, he felt them behind him—a firm rampart. . . . On Saturdays, when he went to meet good old Jerome at the restaurant—a first-class restaurant, because he too, the old codger, had come quite a way since those rides on top of the bus, he'd become "somebody," as they say—when he went to lunch with Jerome and a few old cronies of the old days, right away, just as soon as he passed through the revolving door into the inviting warmth and saw him, in his usual seat, waving his folded newspaper in greeting, the metamorphosis took place, relieving and slightly painful, just as shedding must be for insects. It was as though a vacuum cleaner had passed through him, picking up everything that was either floating about inside him, or palpitating at the slightest breath, all the diffused feelings of anguish, all the dubious strange impulses. Under their placid gaze, a manner they have that is so self-assured and always slightly indifferent, he felt that he filled up with a consistent substance that gave him density and weight, steadiness, he too became "somebody," protected and respectable, deeply rooted, stuck like a wedge in the well-constructed universe they lived in. Like everything else that surrounded them, the dining room with its broad comfortable seats and discreet lighting, as also the bill of fare and the well-trained waiters with their skillful, deferential manner, he assumed under their gaze simple, precise outlines, a reliable, familiar look (for those lunching at the nearby tables, one glance was enough to be able to catalogue him, he was

. . . He kept his word. I don't have to help them any more now . . . oh, a few treats from time to time. . . . But you, for instance, you're too good, too indulgent, too weak, that's the word. They never show any gratitude, believe me. If you want a little appreciation for what you give them, keep them on short rations. As for me, I can tell you, when I was fourteen years old, my father said to me: 'Now, my boy, that's enough. You've played long enough. Your school days are over. Life is about to start.' It started all right, and it hasn't always been easy, but when all's said and done, we got along, didn't we, old chap, we got along somehow, just the same . . . oh, I can tell you, it has meant hard work, since the old days on the top deck of the bus, on the Montparnasse-Gare de l'Est line. . . . But still and all, we didn't get along too badly, did we?"

"No, sir! we weren't like you, we didn't count on our parents to shoulder all our burdens . . . Papa, I need this, or I need that. . . . When we were your age, and even well before then, it was our parents who leaned on us, that's absolutely true. . . ." But he was too generous, too weak. . . . One thing, however, he wouldn't let anybody come and remonstrate with him, that would be a little too much, or tell him what he should do. . . . No, not him. Well planted on his widespread feet, his hands thrust into his pockets, he grew stiff and heavy, opaque: the fellow with the clean-cut outlines that his friends had unfalteringly cut out of the solid substance that surrounded them. A man like themselves, circumspect, settled. There was of course that mask he felt against his face, and that funny voice, slightly foggy, which he always has when he speaks to her, but that was nothing, he was holding his own: "What are you complain-

ing about, after all? What's this all about? You should have enough left over from what you get already. How many people are there, in our day, whose parents give them an income comparable to what I give you? How many, at your age? Do you know many?"

But they're in a militant mood, too, she and the fairies; they won't give in either, that's not the way they see it, "Well, really, what does he imagine . . . where does he think he is, anyway, that father of yours, in the moon?" She shook her head, overcome—"Isn't that a downright shame"—she too is strong, with clear-cut outlines: a poor, unfortunate woman struggling with hard necessity. . . . "How can you say that? You don't seem to realize how much more expensive everything has become. . . . Everybody knows that, for goodness sake, everybody is complaining about it, prices are absolutely exorbitant . . . the slightest thing. . . ."

Tstt—tstt—he was shaking his head with impatience, his hands, thrust deep in his pockets, were clinking his keys together . . . *tstt . . . tstt . . .* he knew all about that. . . . "No use coming with all kinds of excuses, I don't know who 'everybody' is, who has told you all that nonsense, but I do know something about prices. All that is just so much bunk. And even so, has my income increased? When the cost of living rises, I deny myself a few more things, that's all, the way I've always done . . . I don't count on the help of anybody; in fact, I never had anybody I could count on. . . ."

They were standing firmly, brow to brow, heavy and awkward, in their rigid carapaces, their heavy armor—two giant insects, two enormous dung beetles. . . . "I ask as little as possible from you, and you know it, it's no pleasure

thousand francs. . . . He told me it would cost around six thousand francs." He stuck his head forward a bit, half-closing his eyes, he was articulating emphatically, as though dumbfounded, stressing each syllable: "Six thousand francs? Six thousand francs. . . ?" They were slipping, attached to each other, they were falling. . . . She heard him laugh: "Six thousand francs! For massage! That's all!"

Just as Alice in Wonderland, after she had drunk the contents of the magic vial, felt that she was changing form, shrinking, then growing taller, it seemed to them that their outlines were breaking up, stretching in every direction, their carapaces and armors seemed to be cracking on every side, they were naked, without protection, they were slipping, clasped to each other, they were going down as into the bottom of a well . . . the fairies, the old cronies, already far behind, had remained up there, on the surface, in the daylight . . . down where they were going now, things seemed to wobble and sway as in an undersea landscape, at once distinct and unreal, like objects in a nightmare, or else they became swollen, took on strange proportions . . . six thousand francs . . . a great flabby mass was weighing on her, crushing her . . . she tried clumsily to disengage herself a bit, she heard her own voice, a funny, too neutral-sounding voice. . . . "I believe it's an inclusive price. The gymnastic lessons, the ultraviolet rays, all that is included. In fact, it's a special price for me. Last year, after her ski accident in Mégève, Renée . . ." at this point these words sounded very funny indeed, words from out yonder, used by people who live somewhere very far away, as though on another planet, in a universe with other dimensions, the words of people who walk in the sunlight, loiter in front of shopwindows, buy a newspaper, absent-

mindedly throw a coin on the pile of newspapers and pass on, whistling. . . . She didn't understand through what stupid oversight, through what aberration she could have for one moment allowed herself to believe that she was like them, one of them. . . . If they had come near her now, the fairies or Renée, she would have turned her head, abashed. . . . And he, if they had decided his old cronies— but they were far away—if they could have come to pull him by the tail of his jacket to try and bring him back to them: "Why it's nothing serious, come on, there's really no reason why you should get into such a state, it's nothing really, it's not worth-while mentioning, it's nothing serious, old boy . . ." he would have pushed them aside impatiently, they should let him alone, he had no use in this instance for their ponderous common sense, he would have rejected with rage, trampled underfoot the cardboard armor with its commonplace outlines with which they tried to disguise him; this was not the time, he needed all his liberty of movement, this time the cup was full, her audacity had gone too far, he could hardly believe it . . . six thousand francs . . . for massage . . . was that all? Indeed? . . . he began to laugh . . . it would be a crime, if he didn't straighten out matters right away, a crime was about to be committed, the most serious of all, the only unpardonable crime here in this world, in the world into which they had both descended, this world of theirs in which both of them were now imprisoned. . . .

It had been in order for her to learn to avoid all temptation ever to commit that crime that he had accustomed her, at a very tender age, to advance only by short, regular steps,

this name in thought. . . . If a cynically bold, or simply unaware person had ever taken the liberty of mentioning it before them, they would have lowered their eyes, frightened, ashamed, they would have stopped up their ears. I myself, down here where I am with them now, hardly dare pronounce it under my breath. . . . Offhandedness . . . I think that's how it is called . . . offhandedness . . . the crime they never have dared call by name. . . . It cast its immense shadow over the world in which they lived; it covered their world entirely like a giant netting with invisible, finely woven meshes—as soon as she tried timidly to make the slightest movement, as soon as she began to quiver a little, or to try to disengage herself, she felt its tightened meshes covering her on all sides—or rather, it would be more exact to compare the crime that he was constantly dangling before her to the black liquid that an octopus sprays about itself to blind its prey. . . . “Corsica? Indeed? Italy? And why not China? Why not a trip around the world, eh? Why not? Ah! mountain climbing? The latest fad? The Meije, Mount Blanc? And your outfit? That can come later, eh? We'll think about that afterwards, we'll speak of that later, you can't be bothered with such trifles, isn't it so? But I happen to know what such an outfit costs, with the hotel and all the rest. . . . But you, of course, you hadn't thought about that, it doesn't bother you. . . . The goose that laid the golden egg, that's what I am for you, it just falls from heaven like manna, you can afford anything. . . . Six thousand francs . . . that's all . . . for beauty treatments. . . . Hal anybody can see that you have never done anything with your two hands. . . . Six thousand francs. . . .” He was shouting. “. . . do you know how hard you would have to work to

earn that amount? That's the salary of a civil servant, or a judge; as for myself, I remember how I had to slave, how I had to economize; but little you care, do you? You would bring me to a pauper's grave, if you had your way, absolutely destitute, a pauper's grave. . . .”

“A pauper's grave, indeed. . . !” She laughed with his same laughter, an icy, false laughter. “. . . So I'll bring you to a pauper's grave! You say that to me. . . . When I myself have just about one foot in the grave. Seriously. No, I'm not just talking, the doctor was anxious . . . I've already waited too long . . . I'm sure he suspected bone tuberculosis, and I look so badly that people are afraid of me, everybody has noticed it, I'm growing thinner every day. . . . But little you care, and no mistake, after all, I can go to a public hospital, can't I, I can be treated at a free clinic, that's plenty good enough for me . . . that's where I'll end . . . I knew all along that that was where I would end one day, if I should ever fall ill, people like me go to a public hospital, people who have nothing that belongs to them, nobody they can count on. To a public hospital, that's where I'll go, that's where I can go and die like a dog. . . .”

His own ludicrous image. A caricature of himself—that flat, protruding face, those already red eyes, about to water, that mouth twisted into an expression of bitter hatred and shame, his expression—his own image ridiculously overdone, and distended, as in a deforming mirror. . . . No, there was no danger. Not with her. Never. What had he been thinking about? And I myself, what flights of the imagination had I indulged in? What had I been talking

always brought out in him all the things that he would have liked to hold back, his fear, that shameful fear that he would have liked to hide, but she had felt it pulsing faintly within him and had made it spurt forth—an acrid, thick blood that she had fed upon.

Now she was right up against him, soaked heavy with fear. His own foul droppings. Loathsome. . . . He clenched his fists and began to shout, but the words that came bursting up seemed to have as little connection with the confused feelings that were boiling deep down inside him, as the will-o'-the-wisps that dance on the opaque surface of stagnant water have with the invisible, complicated process of decomposition of the plants that lie underneath the ooze on the bottom of a pond: "No, none of that. . . . Nobody is to make a fool of me, do you hear me, I don't like to be taken for any stupider than I am. . . . Go tell that to your girl friends. . . . Don't try to tell that to me, I know you too well. . . . There's one thing I know that they certainly don't know, those girl friends of yours, you didn't tell them everything. . . . There's one thing they don't know, but that I do know, I know you. . . . You don't need that money. No, it's not true, you have no need at all for it. . . . By dragging it out of me, one sou at a time, you have got together quite a little pile, haven't you? Did you tell them that? Only your pile means more to you than your own hide. For nothing on earth would you touch that. With my money you can afford such things as massage and beauty treatments—exactly, I know what I'm talking about—but your own savings, eh, well that's something sacred, that can't be touched. . . ." She drew herself up, her rigid face thrust forward, she was speaking in that choked voice

of hers, at once caustic and affected, slightly rolling her r's: "Please excuse me if I laugh. . . . So it's you . . . now, it's you, is it, who are reproaching me with having saved a little money. . . . It would have been better for me if I had . . . I wouldn't be so hard up now, just when I find myself in an emergency. . . . But you may rest assured, I have nothing. Not a sou. I'd like to know how I could have done it, when I can never make out till the end of each month. I deny myself everything. I had to cancel my coal order this winter, when I saw the price. I have nothing to wear, I never go out. I barely have enough to eat. . . ."

Of course, there was no need to tell that to him, he knew her, always depriving herself, cutting down on everything, continually snooping and poking about, nosing around everywhere, looking for ways to save a few sous. . . . Never a moment of entertainment, she wouldn't indulge herself. . . . Never a gesture of loathing, nothing discouraged her, embarrassment was something she had forgotten, she was ready to face anything. . . . He had sometimes been ashamed of her before other people, even when she was still young; the looks the people around them gave one another, the looks of the servants in hotels, when he had had the misfortune to ask her to do the tipping, their meager, protracted smile, the way he had felt them staring after him; but she was so thick-skinned, she didn't care a rap, nothing mattered to her, as soon as it was a question of saving a few sous. . . . And this sort of promiscuity, this sort of loathsome complicity that she caused to exist between them, that she forced upon him—it was on purpose, he knew, in order to debase him slyly, to lower him—as when she would hand him a bill, commenting on it scathingly

in her slangy, derisive way: "This guy makes no bones about it. If you want what he's got, you've gotta pay for it. And the workmen's time . . . that alone. . . ." What loathing she had aroused in him when he had watched her—that was long ago, she was still a child at the time—go and hide the bag of candy she had received for Christmas, before her little friends arrived. . . . It was doubtless this, the fact of seeing her like that all the time, her nose to the ground, cringing and trembling, that awakened and made rise up in protest within him something that had been lying dormant, a drowsy animal, a wild, cruel animal, ready to leap at her and bite. . . . If she had ever raised her head in disdain and cast an absent-minded gaze elsewhere, perhaps the beast in him—like a dog that stops barking and retires, calmed down, when the passer-by he was attacking goes on his way, unperturbed—perhaps the beast in him would have fallen asleep again; but he saw her there at his feet, cringing, crawling in the mud and the mire; there she was before him, flaccid, acquiescent, always within reach; the temptation was too great, an irresistible desire was growing in him to seize hold of her, to bend her double, to batter her down, further still, harder. . . . "But my poor girl, I know you, a gold mine, El Dorado itself, do you hear me, all the gold of Croesus, nothing would change you, I could give you anything on earth, you would still deprive yourself of everything, you would let yourself die of hunger, just to be able to put more and more money aside . . . you like to do it, I know you, you're like that, you can't do without it. . . ."

"Well, I must say, that's going too far . . . !" All at once her eyes filled with tears. ". . . that's really too hard. . . ."

She was on the verge of a scene, she had that air of helpless anger of a child who is about to "go into a tantrum"—"You dare say that to me, it's you who say that to me! That's going too far! You know perfectly well"—all at once she had softened, her eyes were streaming—"you know perfectly well I wouldn't be like that if I had been brought up differently, you are the one who gave me the habit. . . ." Her flat face and dejected air gave her the look of a weeping widow. . . . She did it on purpose, it was to make him feel ashamed, he knew that, in order to humiliate him, to make people feel sorry for her at his expense, that she got herself up the way she did, with her black lisle-thread stockings and her darned gloves, so that she could throw that into his face: you made me what I am, you wanted it, I am your product, your handiwork. . . .

He could have taken her in his two hands and crushed her. . . . "Ah! so it's me now, so I'm the cause of all your woes, I'm your scapegoat. . . . I can tell you I'm beginning to have about enough, I've shouldered the blame for too long, I've had enough. . . ." He was hesitating, he was looking around him for something to crush her with, but there was nothing within reach, he found nothing at hand, except such coarse, heavy-to-handle contrivances as are used by the people up there—he sensed confusedly that this was not what was needed here, between them, they didn't need crude instruments borrowed from those other people out there, but it couldn't be helped, he saw nothing else, he had no choice. . . . "You ought to look around a bit, catch yourself another victim. . . . Find yourself a husband, what the hell. . . . A husband. . . . It's high time. . . ." He felt that he was crushing a flabby substance that was yielding

and into which he was sinking. . . . "When you need that badly to be carried along on somebody's outstretched arms, or live like a parasite, always clinging to somebody else, you look for a husband. A husband. . . . Then it would be his turn. . . . Only . . ." he was sinking further and further down, he was being dragged down, meeting with no resistance . . . "only, there's nobody around, eh? nobody wants the job, I take it! Ah, ha! there haven't been any bidders yet . . ." he was experiencing the painful, sickening voluptuousness of a maniac, the kind that takes one's breath away, that one feels when one presses one's own abscess between two fingers to make the pus spurt out, or when one tears off bit by bit the scab of a wound . . . "they don't want the job, they're no fools . . ." he was choking, his words came with difficulty . . . "for them there's nothing doing . . ." he was going down, he was sinking as though from dizziness, drawn further and further down, to the depths of a strange voluptuousness, a funny sort of voluptuousness that resembled suffering: "Ah! it's because she's too homely, if you must know . . . she's too homely . . . and it's probably I too, I who forced you . . . I who am responsible for your looks. . . ."

She struggled feebly, gave a few kicks without really trying to disengage herself, hitting out the while in a mild way that increased his excitement; she started talking in her weepy, slightly childish, exasperating voice. . . . "Yes, it's you, of course it's you, you did everything you could to keep me by myself, so that I should see nobody, you always kept me from seeing people, or going out . . . what scenes you used to make if I ever made so bold as to invite anyone for dinner . . . I looked like a servant girl, I was dressed

like a servant girl, I didn't dare let anybody see me. . . ." He took a little time off to tighten his hold, get a more convenient grip on her, he had all the time he needed, there she was in his hands, inert, one might have said that she was waiting. . . . He sneered . . . "Naturally . . . I was sure of it . . . that's nothing new . . . I'm the unfeeling brute . . . I'm the ogre who kept the suitors from crowding around to sue for happiness. . . ." One moment more . . . before letting himself fall further down, to the bottom this time, to the very bottom. . . . "No, my poor girl, just between ourselves, eh? No, but can't you see for yourself, tell me, have you ever looked at yourself . . ." the abscess had burst, the scab was entirely off, the wound was bleeding, suffering and voluptuousness had attained their peak, he was at the end of his tether, at the very end, they had reached bottom, alone together, they were by themselves, now they were quite by themselves, naked, stripped, far from outside eyes . . . he felt steeped in the atmosphere of mellowness, the relaxed tepidity produced by intimacy—alone in their nice, big hide-out, where you can do anything you want, where there is no longer any need to conceal anything—he was holding her by the lapel of her coat, talking right close up to her face. . . . "Well, if you want to know, I never did speak to you about it, but since you force me to do so now, well, I'm going to tell you . . . if you want to know the truth, I did everything, I tell you, everything and more still. . . . You remember that Adonis, that young fellow . . . you know perfectly well who I'm talking about . . . well, I all but crawled to get him to marry you, I made up to him, I even went so far as to sink money in that little business of his . . . but as for him, there was nothing doing . . .

he left, you remember. . . ." He looked at her a bit from one side, his voice was slightly hoarse. . . . "He left, he cut and ran . . . in other words, nothing came of it. . . ."

Our Hypersensitive. . . . Who would have recognized her now? She who trembled at the slightest breath, who quivered and withdrew into herself at the slightest contact, took these blows without batting an eyelash. A barely visible something about her that resembled quaking, a slight unsteadiness—almost nothing. . . . She blushed a little, just as a matter of form, she too was speaking right up close to him, her voice too was low, hoarse: "Well, believe it or not, I've got something to tell you, too. . . . I've been hesitating thus far, but now my mind is made up. . . . You won't have much longer to carry me on your outstretched arms, as you say . . . you'll soon be rid of me. . . . There's no accounting for tastes. . . . Imagine, if you can, that there's a nice man who would like to make his life with me. We've waited a long while, but our minds are about made up . . . I can speak to you about it now . . . we are going to become engaged. . . ." En-gaged. . . . She pronounced the word awkwardly, with a childish, silly air about her. . . . Always the same words from up there, the same contrivances, heavy and hard to handle, intended for the use of the people up there, the only ones they have at hand. Now I saw it. I knew it. I saw it all at once clearly, the secret of her attitude—so surprising at first glance to anyone who knew her—underneath his telling blows, the secret of her insensibility to suffering that reminded one of the almost miraculous impassibility of the early Christian martyrs—Saint Blandina submitting to torture with complete serenity: all of their gestures, all of their movements, those she was

trying to make at that moment, and which were copies of the ones people make up there, on the surface, in daylight, seemed now—in that dark, entirely closed world in which they were both confined, in that world of their own in which they went eternally round and round, lighter in weight, childish and harmless, as different from those made by the people on the outside, as are the leaps and bounds, the flights and pursuits of a ballet from those of everyday life.

The games they played . . . their gnawings and nibblings . . . the sweet taste of nourishing milk. The soft warmth of the breast. The familiar, bland and slightly sugary odor of their intimacy. . . . She smelled it, I am sure, she inhaled it voluptuously, shut up snugly in there with him, when he held her so tight, and whispered so close to her things that only they knew, when he bowled her over, far from the sight of others, with what he called his "truths." It had been that same taste, that same secret odor that she had relished already, and had delighted in, in the past—I had sensed it confusedly—when they used to walk (here I am back again, each one of their gestures, each word they speak is like a knot in which a thousand tangled threads are inextricably mingled together), when they used to pass on, without turning their heads to look at cabs and windmills, timidly close together, huddled up to each other under the curious, insolent gaze of strangers, her damp, little hand curled tightly in his big hot hand. . . . Their hide-out. Their nice, big hide-out. . . . It was only to get him a little more excited that she struggled like that, that she tried to answer back, that she pretended she wanted to break away from him. It was just to tease him.

live, won't you, and perhaps, even, several of you, he must know that better than I do . . . I don't believe he's going to be satisfied, nor you either, eh? from what I know of you, with love in a cottage. . . . And that's why, in an emergency, you'll come whining . . . you'll come and whine that you're broke at the end of every month . . . this time you'll really find out what privation means, and no joking, for good, the way I did, I know all about it. . . . But he's no fool, that guy, he must know what he's about, he's probably counting on a nice neat little sum that will permit him to leave that skimpy life of his behind, 'begin a new life,' as you say, otherwise, believe me. . . ."

She lifted her head high, in a way that I had never seen her do, and turned aside with a disdainful air: "Well, that's where you are mistaken. Believe it or not, he doesn't want anything. He doesn't want to ask you for anything. . . . He is not counting on anybody but himself. . . ."

I don't know what I could have been thinking when I said that she would only have to raise her head well above the miasmas into which he tried to push her, to impress him and command his respect. . . . But he didn't seem to take her seriously, he was not going to be taken in by her air of detachment, by this unusual display of dignity; it was too late, he knew her, let her put on airs if she wanted to, he would not let himself be deluded. . . .

Or perhaps, on the other hand, he suddenly had the impression that it was true. That she had suddenly taken a leap. A real one—like the ones they take up there, on the surface, in daylight. A leap in order to get out of his reach. . . . Perhaps he had noticed, perhaps he had suddenly seen beside her not the ridiculous puppet that I myself thought

good, I don't want to see you again, get out, get out. . . !” He opened the door with one hand while, with the other, he held her, pushing her. She put up a resistance, set her back against the wall, clutched hold of the door frame with both hands, and all at once shouted, she too, for the first time, in that caustic, mocking, provoking voice of hers: “Ah! so that's it. . . . You've got what you were after . . . I should have guessed it . . . that's what you were after from the very beginning. . . . That's why you kept egging me on. . . . So as not to have to part with it. . . .” She shouted in a high, shrill voice: “This way, you can keep your money. . . .” He gave her a blow in the chest that made her let go of the door frame. . . . “You bitch. . . ! You dirty bitch. . . !” He pushed her so hard that she bumped against the front door just opposite the door of the study.

The concierge who was listening, while pretending to polish the doorbell, or wipe the stair rail, must have been startled, must have drawn back. The study door was heard to slam, then there was the sound of the key in the lock. He had locked the door.

An immense silence fell over the vestibule. An immense silence and an immense chill. The only sound to be heard was the furtive rubbing of the dustcloth which the concierge, in order to keep herself in countenance, was passing over the wall, while she prudently stepped down one or two steps. And, from the kitchen, the shrill, arrogant little noise of plates being slipped one on top of the other by the maid, her head bent slightly forward towards the half-open door. Noises, in this silence, as alarming and threatening as the distant sound of a tam-tam.

But she had already pulled herself together; with a

bound, she seized the knob of the study door and turned it softly. Leaning against the keyhole, she whispered: "Let me in, papa, look, that's not reasonable . . . open the door. . . . What's the matter with you, anyway? Go ahead, open the door, I can't leave like this. . . . Hurry and open the door, this is ridiculous, people are listening. . . ." She turned the knob. . . . Her voice assumed a more and more childish, cry-baby tone. . . . "Let me in, listen. . . . It's embarrassing . . . people are listening. . . . You can't let me go like this . . . I'm ill. . . ." She was crying. . . . "It's serious. . . . More serious than you think. . . . Everybody knows that . . . I have already promised the doctor . . . papa . . . papa, listen to me. . . . Let me in . . . I'll explain it to you. I've had to take a loan . . . I've already paid a deposit. . . ." She rattled the knob. . . . "I absolutely must have it . . . I'll stay here as long as I have to . . . I can't leave like this. . . ."

Will he. . . . Won't he. . . . Will he. . . ? The key turned in the lock and the door opened, just wide enough for an arm to appear. A sort of choked shout was heard. . . . "What the hell. . . !" or "Go to hell. . . !" it was hard to distinguish exactly. . . . He stuck his arm through the crack in the door—he must have been holding the door to with the other hand—and threw a small wad of crumpled bank notes onto the carpet. . . . She gave a jump. Picked them up. Her face, as she straightened up, holding the bills, expressed satisfaction and relief. She unfolded them, started counting. There were four of them. . . . Four thousand-franc notes. . . . She nodded, smiling with a funny, knowing smile, half touched, half disdainful. She stuck the money into her bag, opened the front door gently. . . . The con-

cierge, her back turned, busily cleaning the bars of the staircase, stepped a bit to one side, to let her pass.

Not the slightest discomfiture did she show this time, nor did she tremble at all when she saw me appear before her suddenly on the sidewalk, as soon as she set foot out of the house. On the contrary, I was the one who was embarrassed, her cold expression made me lower my eyes and kept me at a distance. I tried timidly to buttonhole her, asked her in which direction she was going: I wanted to follow her, at all costs, wherever she was going. She felt this probably, but it didn't seem to bother her, or hardly, perhaps, just a vague tickle, a fly that lights on an elephant. She looked at her wrist watch: "Oh! my goodness, it's late. I wanted to go to the Manet exhibition. Tomorrow's the last day. But I'm very late."—"The Manet exhibition? It closes tomorrow, already? I should like to see it too. . . . I should hate to miss it. . . ." I was hesitating. Now it was my voice—reduced to a fine thread—that had assumed an affected, childish intonation: "May I go with you? You don't mind?" She turned her eyes in my direction, examining me quietly: "Certainly not. . . . Why should I? Only, we must hurry. It's late."

We walked fast, taking the curbs together with long strides, cutting corners. I trotted along beside her, as before, staring at her profile. Her austere outstretched head seemed to cleave the air like a ship's prow. No, not a prow; something hideous. Her head, thrust forward on the end of her rigid neck, made you think of the head of a gargoyle. No, not that, either. At present these words had an insipid,

attempt to forestall their adversaries and challenge them . . . "or let's say . . . for instance . . ." I looked away . . . "there is a picture . . . you've never seen it, probably, . . . it's not very well known . . . a portrait . . . in a Dutch museum . . . it isn't even signed . . . the portrait of an Unknown Man . . . Man with Doublet is my name for it . . . well, there's something in that portrait . . . a sort of anguish . . . a sort of appeal . . . I . . . I prefer it to anything else . . . there's something uplifting. . . ." I looked at her: it seemed to me that she was watching me with a serious, keen expression that I had never seen her wear before; she looked away, she seemed to be staring at something in the distance, but I felt that she was looking inside herself, and she smiled softly—the sort of embarrassed, amused, touched smile that people have sometimes when you bring up in their presence certain intimate and slightly ridiculous recollections of their early childhood. All at once I felt stirred by an outpouring of gratitude and hope . . . that timid, tender gleam, the affectionate light in her eye, I watched it alight and loiter willingly over a mental picture within herself, the one that I saw inside myself, the same that she had doubtless recognized in me a while back, when she had looked at me so closely; we both looked at it, it was the picture of a narrow vestibule . . . in the threatening silence furtive noises could be heard. . . . They were behind the doors, waiting . . . there was not a moment to lose . . . open the door, open the door quickly, look here papa . . . she had hold of the doorknob and was turning it as gently as possible, she was whispering, leaning against the keyhole . . . for goodness sake, open the door, it's ridiculous, people can hear us. . . . If he didn't open, something was going to

happen, something final, something sure and hard, everything was suddenly going to petrify, take on rigid, heavy outlines, they were going to spring triumphantly forth wagging their heads, relentlessly: "So you see, what did we tell you, he's an egoist and a miser. . . ." But he wouldn't allow that, she knew it well, they both knew it well, he was going to open the door . . . she would see him again, as she knew him, as she had always known him, not the cheaply manufactured puppet, the dime-store trash intended for the common herd, but as he was in reality, indefinable, without outlines, soft and warm, malleable . . . he was going to open the door for her, he was going to let her in, nothing ever happened between them, nothing ever could happen between them "for good," their games would go on, huddled up close to him, she would feel once more their secret pulsation, weak and gentle as the palpitation of still warm viscera.

Yet no . . . in reality I had never believed all that, I had never been wrong about it, way down deep inside, I had been expecting it, I had never stopped watching for it, the hardly perceptible shudder of disgust which she gave now all of a sudden, the slightly shrinking gesture she made. She turned to look at me once more with an inscrutable, hard expression that repulsed me and kept me at a distance. Condescendingly she smiled: "Ah! yes, so that's it . . . that's what I thought. . . . The way you judge painting. . . . You are just as you always were. . . . Incurable. . . . Watch out, that's very unhealthy; nothing good ever comes of it, that . . ." she pronounced her words with a sort of repugnance . . . "that sort of too personal contact . . . the pursuit of emotions of that kind. . . . If I were you, I should

some time, like myself, they had finished their lunch and were drinking their coffee. Nor was it to be wondered at that I had not noticed them, they had changed so much, and through a curious mimetism, had become so indistinguishable, fitted in so exactly with the commonplace, flashy, restaurant dining room, with its mirrors, polished brass, potted plants and bright red velvet seats: flat, highly colored images, similar to those that surrounded them, to all the people eating lunch, seated about them at the other tables.

She particularly was almost unrecognizable. A gray suit. Bright-colored scarf. Hair piled smartly on top of her head in great puffs. Even a bit made-up: her round face—she had put on weight, her face had filled out—had that smooth, flawless look, that sort of set glamor, that make-up gives.

As for the old man, I couldn't see him entirely. I only had a glimpse of his shiny pate and of one of his heavy dewlaps, congested until it was almost purple, protruding over his stiff collar.

The man seated opposite them had pivoted in his chair in order to attract the attention of the waiter. Turned to one side, with his legs crossed and one elbow leaning on the table, I had a three-quarter view of him. A "monsieur" who was neither old nor young, and rather stout. His light brown, somewhat reddish hair, already sparse on the temples, was sleeked straight back with care. The skin of his heavy-featured face was a purplish pink and appeared a bit moist, as though pickled. It seemed to me that everything about him, including the style of his clothes, was vaguely reminiscent of the old man. Same cut. Same sort of Sunday-

asked the local notary." He leaned over towards the old man: "500 grand, at the very lowest. And without counting the land." The old man lifted his head, as though somebody were pulling it, by short jerks, from down to up: "Ah? Ah? are you sure of that? Five hundred thousand francs? As much as that . . . ? In that case, in that case, then, I have nothing more to say. My first impression was that it was a lot to spend on a house that, when all is said and done, will be lived in very little." She assumed the tone of a very good little girl. "Oh! papa, don't say that. We'll be going there often. And during the summer vacation . . . Louis has three weeks' leave . . . next year, when he gets to be assistant director, he will even be able to take a month. . . ." She was a frisky, puffed up ball—like a tamed bird that has just taken a nice dust bath on the edge of its little metal tub, and is shaking its ruffled feathers. . . . Safe at last. Out of harm's way. The old man had gone a bit too far with her and she had been really scared. . . . Now, however. Look. All over. Not a breath. Not a quiver. Nothing had happened. We could skip it. Dumontet and his Medusa look. Everything grew petrified. Dumontet was speaking: "Such is life, eh . . . ? And you know, if you think about it, 150,000 francs, at 3 per cent, makes an annual rent of hardly 4500 francs." He gave a sly little laugh: "That's better, don't you agree, than to squander money in certain business ventures. . . ."

Now it was the old man's turn to wrinkle his lids, he appeared to be counting: "4500 francs rent. . . . You'd have to call that 4500 francs additional rent. That's somewhat different. And it's not a mere trifle, just the same. . . . Anybody can make mistakes, naturally, but don't say that, even

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