nausea jean-paul sartre

CTIONS PAPERBOOK

Jean-Paul Sartre

NAUSEA

Translated from the French by

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A New Directions Paperbook

moment I stopped, dropped the stone and left. Probably I looked somewhat foolish or absent-minded, because the children laughed behind my back.

So much for external things. What has happened inside of me has not left any clear traces. I saw something which disgusted me, but I no longer know whether it was the sea or the stone. The stone was flat and dry, especially on one side, damp and muddy on the other. I held it by the edges with my fingers wide apart so as not to get them dirty.

Day before yesterday was much more complicated. And there was also this series of coincidences, of *quid-pro-quos* that I can't explain to myself. But I'm not going to spend my time putting all that down on paper. Anyhow, it was certain that I was afraid or had some other feeling of that sort. If I had only known what I was afraid of, I would have made a great step forward.

The strangest thing is that I am not at all inclined to call myself insane, I clearly see that I am not: all these changes concern objects. At least, that is what I'd like to be sure of.

10.30[1]

Perhaps it was a passing moment of madness after all. There is no trace of it any more. My odd feelings of the other week seem to me quite ridiculous today: I can no longer enter into them. I am quite at ease this evening, quite solidly *terre-à-terre* in the world. Here is my room facing north-east. Below the Rue des Mutilés and the construction-yard of the new station. From my window I see the red and white flame of the *Rendezvous des Cheminots* at the corner of the Boulevard Victor-

[1] Evidently in the evening. The following paragraph is much later than the preceding ones. We are inclined to believe it was written the following day at the earliest.

DIARY

Monday, 29 January, 1932:

Something has happened to me, I can't doubt it any more. It came as an illness does, not like an ordinary certainty, not like anything evident. It came cunningly, little by little; I felt a little strange, a little put out, that's all. Once established it never moved, it stayed quiet, and I was able to persuade myself that nothing was the matter with me, that it was a false alarm. And now, it's blossoming.

I don't think the historian's trade is much given to psychological analysis. In our work we have to do only with sentiments in the whole to which we give generic titles such as Ambition and Interest. And yet if I had even a shadow of self-knowledge, I could put it to good use now.

For instance, there is something new about my hands, a certain way of picking up my pipe or fork. Or else it's the fork which now has a certain way of having itself picked up, I don't know. A little while ago, just as I was coming into my room, I stopped short because I felt in my hand a cold object which held my attention through a sort of personality. I opened my hand, looked: I was simply holding the door-knob. This morning in the library, when the Self-Taught Man[1] came to say good morning to me, it took me ten seconds to recognize him. I saw an unknown face, barely a face. Then there was his hand like a fat white worm in my own hand. I dropped it almost immediately and the arm fell back flabbily.

There are a great number of suspicious noises in the streets, too.

[1] Ogier P . . . , who will be often mentioned in this journal. He was a bailiff's clerk. Roquentin met him in 1930 in the Bouville library.

So a change *has* taken place during these last few weeks. But where? It is an abstract change without object. Am I the one who has changed? If not, then it is this room, this city and this nature; I must choose.

* * * * *

I think I'm the one who has changed: that's the simplest solution. Also the most unpleasant. But I must finally realize that I am subject to these sudden transformations. The thing is that I rarely think; a crowd of small metamorphoses accumulate in me without my noticing it, and then, one fine day, a veritable revolution takes place. This is what has given my life such a jerky, incoherent aspect. For instance, when I left France, there were a lot of people who said I left for a whim. And when I suddenly came back after six years of travelling, they still could call it a whim. I see myself with Mercier again in the office of that French functionary who resigned after the Petrou business last year. Mercier was going to Bengal on an archeological mission. I always wanted to go to Bengal and he pressed me to go with him. Now I wonder why. I don't think he was too sure of Portal and was counting on me to keep an eye on him. I saw no reason to refuse. And even if I had suspected that little deal with Portal, it would have been one more reason to accept with enthusiasm. Well, I was paralysed, I couldn't say a word. I was staring at a little Khmer statuette on a green carpet, next to a telephone. I seemed to be full of lymph or warm milk. With angelic patience veiling a slight irritation, Mercier told me:

"Now look, I have to be officially fixed up. I know you'll end up by saying yes, so you might as well accept right away."

He had a reddish-black beard, heavily scented. I got a waft of perfume at each movement of his head. And then, suddenly, I woke from a six-year slumber.

The statue seemed to me unpleasant and stupid and I felt terribly, deeply bored. I couldn't understand why I was in Indo-China. What was I doing there? Why was I talking to these people? Why was I dressed so oddly? My passion was dead. For years it had rolled over and submerged me; now I felt empty. But that wasn't the worst: before me, posed with a sort of indolence, was a voluminous, insipid idea. I did not see clearly what it was, but it sickened me so much I couldn't look at it. All that was confused with the perfume of Mercier's beard.

I pulled myself together, convulsed with anger, and answered dryly:

"Thank you, but I believe I've travelled enough, I must go back to France now." Two days later I took the boat for Marseilles.

If I am not mistaken, if all the signs which have been amassed are precursors of a new overthrow in my life, well then I am terrified. It isn't that my life is rich, or weighty or precious. But I'm afraid of what will be born and take possession of me—and drag me—where? Shall I have to go off again, leaving my research, my book and everything else unfinished? Shall I awake in a few months, in a few years, broken, deceived, in the midst of new ruins? I would like to see the truth clearly before it is too late.

Tuesday, 30 *January:*

Nothing new.

I worked from nine till one in the library. I got Chapter XII started and all that concerns Rollebon's stay in Russia up to the death of Paul I. This work is finished: nothing more to do with it until the final revision.

It is one-thirty. I am eating a sandwich in the Café Mably, everything is more or less normal. Anyway, everything is

always normal in cafés and especially the Café Mably, because of the manager, M. Fasquelle, who has a raffish look which is positively reassuring. It will soon be time for his nap and his eyes are pink already, but he stays quick and decisive. He strolls among the tables and speaks confidently to the customers.

"Is everything all right, Monsieur?"

I smile at seeing him thus; when his place empties his head empties too. From two to four the café is deserted, then M. Fasquelle takes a few dazed steps, the waiters turn out the lights and he slips into unconsciousness: when this man is lonely he sleeps.

There are still about twenty customers left, bachelors, small-time engineers, office employees. They eat hurriedly in boarding-houses which they call their "*popotes*" and, since they need a little luxury, they come here after their meals. They drink a cup of coffee and play poker dice; they make a little noise, an inconsistent noise which doesn't bother me. In order to exist, they also must consort with others.

I live alone, entirely alone. I never speak to anyone, never; I receive nothing, I give nothing. The Self-Taught Man doesn't count. There is Françoise, the woman who runs the *Rendezvous des Cheminots*. But do I speak to her? Sometimes after dinner, when she brings my beer, I ask her:

"Have you time this evening?"

She never says no and I follow her into one of the big rooms on the second floor she rents by the hour or by the day. I do not pay her: our need is mutual. She takes pleasure in it (she has to have a man a day and she has many more besides me) and thus I purge myself of a certain nostalgia the cause of which I know too well. But we hardly speak. What good is it? Every man for himself: besides, as far as she's concerned, I am pre-eminently a customer in her café. Taking off her dress, she tells me:

"Say, have you ever heard of that aperitif, *Bricot*? Because there are two customers who asked for some this week. The girl didn't know and she came to ask me. They were commercial travellers, they must have drunk that in Paris. But I don't like to buy without knowing. I'll keep my stockings on if you don't mind."

In the past—even a long while after she left me—I thought about Anny. Now I think of no one any more. I don't even bother looking for words. It flows in me, more or less quickly. I fix nothing, I let it go. Through the lack of attaching myself to words, my thoughts remain nebulous most of the time. They sketch vague, pleasant shapes and then are swallowed up: I forget them almost immediately.

I marvel at these young people: drinking their coffee, they tell clear, plausible stories. If they are asked what they did yesterday, they aren't embarrassed: they bring you up to date in a few words. If I were in their place, I'd fall over myself. It's true that no one has bothered about how I spend my time for a long while. When you live alone you no longer know what it is to tell something: the plausible disappears at the same time as the friends.

You let events flow past; suddenly you see people pop up who speak and who go away, you plunge into stories without beginning or end: you'd make a terrible witness. But in compensation, one misses nothing, no improbability or story too tall to be believed in cafés. For example, Saturday, about four in the afternoon, on the end of the timbered sidewalk of the new station yard, a little woman in sky blue was running backwards, laughing, waving a handkerchief. At the same time, a negro in a cream-coloured raincoat, yellow shoes and a green hat, turned the corner of the street and whistled. Still going backwards, the woman bumped into him, underneath a lantern which hangs on a paling and which is lit at night. All at once

there was the paling smelling strongly of wet wood, this lantern and this little blonde woman in the negro's arms under a sky the colour of fire. If there had been four or five of us, I suppose we would have noticed the jolt, the soft colours, the beautiful blue coat that looked like an eiderdown quilt, the light raincoat, the red panes of the lantern; we would have laughed at the stupefaction which appeared on those two childish faces.

A man rarely feels like laughing alone: the whole thing was animated enough for me, but it was a strong, even a fierce, yet pure sensation. Then everything came asunder, there was nothing left but the lantern, the palisade and the sky; it was still rather beautiful. An hour later the lantern was lit, the wind blew, the sky was black; nothing at all was left.

All that is nothing new; I have never resisted these harmless emotions; far from it. You must be just a little bit lonely in order to feel them, just lonely enough to get rid of plausibility at the proper time. But I remained close to people, on the surface of solitude, quite resolved to take refuge in their midst in case of emergency. Up to now I was an amateur at heart.

Everywhere, now, there are objects like this glass of beer on the table there. When I see it, I feel like saying: "Enough." I realize quite well that I have gone too far. I don't suppose you can "take sides" with solitude. That doesn't mean that I look under my bed before going to sleep, or think I see the door of my room open suddenly in the middle of the night. Still, somehow I am not at peace: I have been *avoiding* looking at this glass of beer for half an hour. I look above, below, right and left; but I don't want to see *it*. And I know very well that all these bachelors around me can be of no help: it is too late, I can no longer take refuge among them. They could come and tap me on the shoulder and say, "Well, what's the matter

with that glass of beer?" It's just like all the others. It's bevelled on the edges, has a handle, a little coat of arms with a spade on it and on the coat of arms is written "Spatenbrau", I know all that, but I know there is something else. Almost nothing. But I can't explain what I see. To anyone. There: I am quietly slipping into the water's depths, towards fear.

I am alone in the midst of these happy, reasonable voices. All these creatures spend their time explaining, realizing happily that they agree with each other. In Heaven's name, why is it so important to think the same things all together. It's enough to see the face they make when one of these fishy-eyed men with an inward look and with whom no agreement is possible, passes them. When I was eight years old and used to play in the Luxembourg gardens there was a man who came and sat in a sentry-box, against the iron fence which runs along the Rue Auguste-Comte. He did not speak but from time to time stretched out his leg and looked at his foot fearfully. The foot was encased in a boot, but the other one was in a slipper. The guard told my uncle that the man was a former proctor. They retired him because he used to come, dressed up as an academician, to read the school term marks. We had a horrible fear of him because we sensed he was alone. One day he smiled at Robert, holding out his arms to him from a distance: Robert almost fainted. It wasn't this creature's poverty-stricken look which frightened us, nor the tumour he had on his neck that rubbed against the edge of his collar: but we felt that he was shaping thoughts of crab or lobster in his head. And that terrified us, the fact that one could conjure thoughts of lobsters on the sentry-box, on our hoops, on the bushes.

Is that what awaits me then? For the first time I am disturbed at being alone. I would like to tell someone what is happening to me before it is too late and before I start frightening little boys. I wish Anny were here.

This is odd : I have just filled up ten pages and I haven't told the truth—at least, not the whole truth. I was writing " Nothing new " with a bad conscience : as a matter of fact I boggled at bringing out a quite harmless little incident. " Nothing new." I admire the way we can lie, putting reason on our side. Evidently, nothing new has happened, if you care to put it that way : this morning at eight-fifteen, just as I was leaving the Hotel Printania to go to the library, I wanted to and could not pick up a paper lying on the ground. This is all and it is not even an event. Yes—but, to tell the whole truth, I was deeply impressed by it: I felt I was no longer free. I tried unsuccessfully to get rid of this idea at the library. I wanted to escape from it at the Café Mably. I hoped it would disappear in the bright light. But it stayed there, like a dead weight inside me. It is responsible for the preceding pages.

Why didn't I mention it ? It must be out of pride, and then, too, a little out of awkwardness. I am not in the habit of telling myself what happens to me, so I cannot quite recapture the succession of events, I cannot distinguish what is important. But now it is finished : I have re-read what I wrote in the Café Mably and I am ashamed ; I want no secrets or soul-states, nothing ineffable ; I am neither virgin nor priest enough to play with the inner life.

There is nothing much to say : I could not pick up the paper, that's all.

I very much like to pick up chestnuts, old rags and especially papers. It is pleasant to me to pick them up, to close my hand on them ; with a little encouragement I would carry them to my mouth the way children do. Anny went into a white rage when I picked up the corners of heavy, sumptuous papers, probably soiled by excrement. In summer or the beginning of autumn, you can find remnants of sun-baked newspapers in gardens, dry and fragile as dead leaves, so yellow you might

think they had been washed with picric acid. In winter, some pages are pounded to pulp; crushed, stained, they return to the earth. Others quite new when covered with ice, all white, all throbbing, are like swans about to fly, but the earth has already caught them from below. They twist and tear themselves from the mud, only to be finally flattened out a little further on. It is good to pick up all that. Sometimes I simply feel them, looking at them closely ; other times I tear them to hear their drawn-out crackling, or, if they are damp, I light them, not without difficulty ; then I wipe my muddy hands on a wall or tree trunk.

So, today, I was watching the riding boots of a cavalry officer who was leaving his barracks. As I followed them with my eyes, I saw a piece of paper lying beside a puddle. I thought the officer was going to crush the paper into the mud with his heel, but no : he straddled paper and puddle in a single step. I went up to it : it was a lined page, undoubtedly torn from a school notebook. The rain had drenched and twisted it, it was covered with blisters and swellings like a burned hand. The red line of the margin was smeared into a pink splotch ; the ink had run in places. The bottom of the page disappeared beneath a crust of mud. I bent down, already rejoicing at the touch of this pulp, fresh and tender, which I should roll in my fingers into greyish balls . . . I was unable.

I stayed bent down for a second, I read " Dictation : The White Owl ", then I straightened up, empty-handed. I am no longer free, I can no longer do what I will.

Objects should not *touch* because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them : they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts.

Now I see : I recall better what I felt the other day at the seashore when I held the pebble. It was a sort of sweetish

sickness. How unpleasant it was! It came from the stone, I'm sure of it, it passed from the stone to my hand. Yes, that's it, that's just it—a sort of nausea in the hands.

Thursday morning in the library:

A little while ago, going down the hotel stairs, I heard Lucie, who, for the hundredth time, was complaining to the landlady, while polishing the steps. The proprietress spoke with difficulty, using short sentences, because she had not put in her false teeth; she was almost naked, in a pink dressing-gown and Turkish slippers. Lucy was dirty, as usual; from time to time she stopped rubbing and straightened up on her knees to look at the proprietress. She spoke without pausing, reasonably:

"I'd like it a hundred times better if he went with other women," she said, "it wouldn't make the slightest difference to me, so long as it didn't do him any harm."

She was talking about her husband: at forty this swarthy little woman had offered herself and her savings to a handsome young man, a fitter in the Usines Lecointe. She has an unhappy home life. Her husband does not beat her, is not unfaithful to her, but he drinks, he comes home drunk every evening. He's burning his candle at both ends; in three months I have seen him turn yellow and melt away. Lucie thinks it is drink. I believe he is tubercular.

"You have to take the upper hand," Lucie said.

It gnaws at her, I'm sure of it, but slowly, patiently: she takes the upper hand, she is able neither to console herself nor abandon herself to her suffering. She thinks about it a little bit, a very little bit, now and again she passes it on. Especially when she is with people, because they console her and also because it comforts her a little to talk about it with poise, with an air of giving advice. When she is alone in the rooms I hear her

they do not seem to be about the same person. And yet other historians work from the same sources of information. How do they do it? Am I more scrupulous or less intelligent? In any case, the question leaves me completely cold. In truth, what am I looking for? I don't know. For a long time, Rollebon the man has interested me more than the book to be written. But now, the man . . . the man begins to bore me. It is the book which attracts me. I feel more and more need to write—in the same proportion as I grow old, you might say.

Evidently it must be admitted that Rollebon took an active part in the assassination of Paul I, that he then accepted an extremely important espionage mission to the Orient from the Czar and constantly betrayed Alexander to the advantage of Napoleon. At the same time he was able to carry on an active correspondence with the Comte d'Artois and send him unimportant information in order to convince him of his fidelity: none of all that is improbable; Fouché, at the same time, was playing a comedy much more dangerous and complex. Perhaps the Marquis also carried on a rifle-supplying business with the Asiatic principalities for his own profit.

Well, yes: he could have done all that, but it is not proved: I am beginning to believe that nothing can ever be proved. These are honest hypotheses which take the facts into account: but I sense so definitely that they come from me, and that they are simply a way of unifying my own knowledge. Not a glimmer comes from Rollebon's side. Slow, lazy, sulky, the facts adapt themselves to the rigour of the order I wish to give them; but it remains outside of them. I have the feeling of doing a work of pure imagination. And I am certain that the characters in a novel would have a more genuine appearance, or, in any case, would be more agreeable.

he bored me beyond all possible limits. He spoke a little in the way Abbé Mably used to write."

And this is the man who, by his talent for mimicry? . . . But then how was he able to charm women? Then there is this curious story Ségur reports and which seems true to me.

"In 1787, at an inn near Moulins, an old man was dying, a friend of Diderot, trained by the philosophers. The priests of the neighbourhood were nonplussed: they had tried everything in vain; the good man would have no last rites, he was a pantheist. M. de Rollebon, who was passing by and who believed in nothing, bet the Curé of Moulins that he would need less than two hours to bring the sick man back to Christian sentiments. The Curé took the bet and lost: Rollebon began at three in the morning, the sick man confessed at five and died at seven. "Are you so forceful in argument?" asked the Curé, "You outdo even us." "I did not argue," answered M. de Rollebon, "I made him fear Hell."

How did he take an effective part in the assassination? That evening, one of his officer friends conducted him to his door. If he had gone out again, how could he have crossed St. Petersberg without trouble? Paul, half-insane, had given the order that after nine o'clock at night, all passers except mid-wives and doctors were to be arrested. Can we believe the absurd legend that Rollebon disguised himself as a midwife to get as far as the palace? After all, he was quite capable of it. In any case, he was not at home on the night of the assassination, that seems proved. Alexander must have suspected him strongly, since one of his official acts was to send the Marquis away on the vague pretext of a mission to the Far East.

M. de Rollebon bores me to tears. I get up. I move through this pale light; I see it change beneath my hands and on the sleeves of my coat: I cannot describe how much it disgusts me. I yawn. I light the lamp on the table: perhaps its light will

he shaved himself, not being at all expert. It was his custom to wash his face with white lead, in the manner of Grimm. M. de Dangeville said that with all this white and all this blue he looked like a Roquefort cheese".

It seems to me he must have been quite pleasing. But, after all, this is not the way he appeared to Mme de Charrières. I believe she found him rather worn. Perhaps it is impossible to understand one's own face. Or perhaps it is because I am a single man? People who live in society have learned how to see themselves in mirrors as they appear to their friends. I have no friends. Is that why my flesh is so naked? You might say—yes you might say, nature without humanity.

I have no taste for work any longer, I can do nothing more except wait for night.

5.30:

Things are bad! Things are very bad: I have it, the filth, the Nausea. And this time it is new: it caught me in a café. Until now cafés were my only refuge because they were full of people and well lighted: now there won't even be that any more; when I am run to earth in my room, I shan't know where to go.

I was coming to make love but no sooner had I opened the door than Madeleine, the waitress, called to me:

"The patronne isn't here, she's in town shopping."

I felt a sharp disappointment in the sexual parts, a long, disagreeable tickling. At the same time I felt my shirt rubbing against my breasts and I was surrounded, seized by a slow, coloured mist, and a whirlpool of lights in the smoke, in the mirrors, in the booths glowing at the back of the café, and I couldn't see why it was there or why it was like that. I was on the doorstep, I hesitated to go in and then there was a

The cousin has got up, and taken a few steps, put his hands behind his back, smiling, raising his head and leaning back on his heels. He goes to sleep in this position. He is there, oscillating, always smiling: his cheeks tremble. He is going to fall. He bends backwards, bends, bends, the face turned completely up to the ceiling, then just as he is about to fall, he catches himself adroitly on the ledge of the bar and regains his balance. After which, he starts again. I have enough, I call the waitress:

"Madeleine, if you please, play something on the phonograph. The one I like, you know: *Some of these days.*"

"Yes, but maybe that'll bother these gentlemen; these gentlemen don't like music when they're playing. But I'll ask them."

I make a great effort and turn my head. There are four of them. She bends over a congested old man who wears black-rimmed eyeglasses on the end of his nose. He hides his cards against his chest and glances at me from under the glasses.

"Go ahead, Monsieur."

Smiles. His teeth are rotten. The red hand does not belong to him, it is his neighbour's, a fellow with a black moustache. This fellow with the moustache has enormous nostrils that could pump air for a whole family and that eat up half his face, but in spite of that, he breathes through his mouth, gasping a little. With them there is also a young man with a face like a dog. I cannot make out the fourth player.

The cards fall on the woollen cloth, spinning. Then hands with ringed fingers come and pick them up, scratching the cloth with their nails. The hands make white splotches on the cloth, they look puffed up and dusty. Other cards fall, the hands go and come. What an odd occupation: it doesn't look like a game or a rite, or a habit. I think they do it to pass the time, nothing more. But time is too large, it can't be filled up. Everything you plunge into it is stretched and disintegrates. That gesture,

" Monsieur Randu plays hearts . . . and you place the shackle."

The voice dies away and disappears. Nothing bites on the ribbon of steel, neither the opening door, nor the breath of cold air flowing over my knees, nor the arrival of the veterinary surgeon and his little girl : the music transpierces these vague figures and passes through them. Barely seated, the girl has been seized by it : she holds herself stiffly, her eyes wide open ; she listens, rubbing the table with her fist.

A few seconds more and the negress will sing. It seems inevitable, so strong is the necessity of this music : nothing can interrupt it, nothing which comes from this time in which the world has fallen ; it will stop of itself, as if by order. If I love this beautiful voice it is especially because of that : it is neither for its fulness nor its sadness, rather because it is the event for which so many notes have been preparing, from so far away, dying that it might be born. And yet I am troubled ; it would take so little to make the record stop : a broken spring, the whim of Cousin Adolphe. How strange it is, how moving, that this hardness should be so fragile. Nothing can interrupt it yet all can break it.

The last chord has died away. In the brief silence which follows I feel strongly that there it is, that *something has happened.*

Silence.

Some of these days
You'll miss me honey

What has just happened is that the Nausea has disappeared. When the voice was heard in the silence, I felt my body harden and the Nausea vanish. Suddenly : it was almost unbearable to become so hard, so brilliant. At the same time the music was drawn out, dilated, swelled like a waterspout. It filled the room with its metallic transparency, crushing our miserable time against the walls. I am *in* the music. Globes of fire turn in the

Yes, it's Lucie. But transfigured, beside herself, suffering with a frenzied generosity. I envy her. There she is, standing straight, holding out her arms as if awaiting the stigmata ; she opens her mouth, she is suffocating. I feel as though the walls have grown higher, on each side of the street, that they have come closer together, that she is at the bottom of a well. I wait a few moments : I am afraid she will fall : she is too sickly to stand this unwonted sorrow. But she does not move, she seems turned to stone, like everything around her. One moment I wonder if I have not been mistaken about her, if this is not her true nature which has suddenly been revealed to me.

Lucie gives a little groan. Her hand goes to her throat and she opens wide, astonished eyes. No, it is not from herself that she draws strength to suffer. It comes to her from the outside . . . from the boulevard. She should be taken by the arm, led back to the lights, in the midst of people, into quiet, pink streets : down there one cannot suffer so acutely ; she would be mollified, she would find her positive look again and the usual level of her sufferings.

I turn my back on her. After all, she is lucky. I have been much too calm these past three years. I can receive nothing more from these tragic solitudes than a little empty purity. I leave.

Thursday, 11.30

I have worked two hours in the reading-room. I went down to the Cour des Hypothèques to smoke a pipe. A square paved with pinkish bricks. The people of Bouville are proud of it because it dates from the eighteenth century. At the entrance to the Rue Chamade and the Rue Suspedard, old chains bar the way to vehicles. Women in black who come to exercise their dogs glide beneath the arcades, along the walls. They rarely come out into the full light, but they cast ingénue glances from

a delicate touch of horror. It comes from that fellow up there on his pedestal. When they cast this scholar in bronze they also turned out a sorcerer.

I look at Impétraz full in the face. He has no eyes, hardly any nose, and beard eaten away by that strange leprosy which sometimes descends, like an epidemic, on all the statues in one neighbourhood. He bows; on the left hand side near his heart his waistcoat is soiled with a light green stain. He looks. He does not live, but neither is he inanimate. A mute power emanates from him: like a wind driving me backwards: Impétraz would like to chase me out of the Cour des Hypothèques. But I shall not leave before I finish this pipe.

A great, gaunt shadow suddenly springs up behind me. I jump.

"Excuse me, Monsieur, I didn't mean to disturb you. I saw your lips moving. You were undoubtedly repeating passages from your book." He laughs. "You were hunting Alexandrines."

I look at the Self-Taught Man with stupor. But he seems surprised at my surprise:

"Should we not, Monsieur, carefully avoid Alexandrines in prose?"

I have been slightly lowered in his estimation. I ask him what he's doing here at this hour. He explains that his boss has given him the day off and he came straight to the library; that he is not going to eat lunch, that he is going to read till closing time. I am not listening to him any more, but he must have strayed from his original subject because I suddenly hear:

"... to have, as you, the good fortune of writing a book."

I have to say something.

"Good fortune" I say, dubiously.

He mistakes the sense of my answer and rapidly corrects himself:

" Monsieur, I should have said : ' merit '."

We go up the steps. I don't feel like working. Someone has left *Eugénie Grandet* on the table, the book is open at page 27. I pick it up, mechanically, and begin to read page 27, then page 28 : I haven't the courage to begin at the beginning. The Self-Taught Man has gone quickly to the shelves along the wall ; he brings back two books which he places on the table, looking like a dog who has found a bone.

" What are you reading ? "

He sees reluctant to tell me : he hesitates, rolls his great, roving eyes, then stiffly holds out the books. *Peat-Mosses and Where to Find Them* by Larbalétrier, and *Hitopadesa, or, Useful Instruction* by Lastex. So ? I don't know what's bothering him : the books are definitely decent. Out of conscience I thumb through *Hitopadesa* and see nothing but the highest types of sentiment.

3.00 *p.m.*

I have given up *Eugénie Grandet* and begun work without any heart in it. The Self-Taught Man, seeing that I am writing, observes me with respectful lust. From time to time I raise my head a little and see the immense, stiff collar and the chicken-like neck coming out of it. His clothes are shabby but his shirt is dazzling white. He has just taken another book from the same shelf, I can make out the title upside-down : *The Arrow of Caudebec, A Norman Chronicle* by Mlle Julie Lavergne. The Self-Taught Man's choice of reading always disconcerts me.

Suddenly the names of the authors he last read come back to my mind : Lambert, Langlois, Larbalétrier, Lastex, Lavergne. It is a revelation ; I have understood the Self-Taught Man's method ; he teaches himself alphabetically.

I study him with a sort of admiration. What will-power he

must have to carry through, slowly, obstinately, a plan on such a vast scale. One day, seven years ago (he told me he had been a student for seven years) he came pompously into this reading-room. He scanned the innumerable books which lined the walls and he must have said, something like Rastignac," Science! It is up to us." Then he went and took the first book from the first shelf on the far right ; he opened to the first page, with a feeling of respect and fear mixed with an unshakable decision. Today he has reached " L "—" K " after " J ", " L " after " K ". He has passed brutally from the study of coleopterae to the quantum theory, from a work on Tamerlaine to a Catholic pamphlet against Darwinism, he has never been disconcerted for an instant. He has read everything ; he has stored up in his head most of what anyone knows about parthenogenesis, and half the arguments against vivisection. There is a universe behind and before him. And the day is approaching when closing the last book on the last shelf on the far left : he will say to himself, " Now what ? "

This is his lunch time ; innocently he eats a slice of bread and a bar of Gala Peter. His eyes are lowered and I can study at leisure his fine, curved lashes, like a woman's. When he breathes he gives off an aroma of old tobacco mixed with the sweet scent of chocolate.

Friday, 3.00 *p.m.*

A little more and I would have fallen into the lure of the mirror. I avoid it only to fall into that of the window : indolent, arms dangling, I go to the window. The Building Yard, the Fence, the Old Station—the Old Station, the Fence, the Building Yard. I give such a big yawn that tears come into my eyes. I hold my pipe in my right hand and my tobacco in my left. I should fill this pipe. But I don't have the heart to do it. My arms

hang loosely, I lean my forehead against the windowpane. That old woman annoys me. She trots along obstinately, with unseeing eyes. Sometimes she stops, frightened, as if an invisible fear had brushed against her. There she is under my window, the wind blows her skirts against her knees. She stops, straightens her kerchief. Her hands tremble. She is off again: now I can see her from the back. Old wood louse! I suppose she's going to turn right, into the Boulevard Victor-Noir. That gives her a hundred yards to go: it will take her ten minutes at the rate she's going, ten minutes during which time I shall stay like this, watching her, my forehead glued against the window. She is going to stop twenty times, start again, stop again . . .

I *see* the future. It is there, poised over the street, hardly more dim than the present. What advantage will accrue from its realisation? The old woman stumps further and further away, she stops, pulls at a grey lock of hair which escapes from her kerchief. She walks, she was there, now she is here . . . I don't know where I am any more: do I *see* her motions, or do I *foresee* them? I can no longer distinguish present from future and yet it lasts, it happens little by little; the old woman advances in the deserted street, shuffling her heavy, mannish brogues. This is time, time laid bare, coming slowly into existence, keeping us waiting, and when it does come making us sick because we realise it's been there for a long time. The old woman reaches the corner of the street, no more than a bundle of black clothes. All right then, it's new, she wasn't there a little while ago. But it's a tarnished deflowered newness, which can never surprise. She is going to turn the corner, she turns—during an eternity.

I tear myself from the window and stumble across the room; I glue myself against the looking glass. I stare at myself, I disgust myself: one more eternity. Finally I flee from my image and fall on the bed. I watch the ceiling, I'd like to sleep.

Calm. Calm. I can no longer feel the slipping, the rustling of time. I see pictures on the ceiling. First rings of light, then crosses. They flutter. And now another picture is forming, at the bottom of my eyes this time. It is a great, kneeling animal. I see its front paws and pack saddle. The rest is in fog. But I recognize it: it is a camel I saw at Marrakesh, tethered to a stone. He knelt and stood up six times running; the urchins laughed and shouted at him.

It was wonderful two year ago: all I had to do was close to my eyes and my head would start buzzing like a bee-hive: I could conjure faces, trees, houses, a Japanese girl in Kamaishiki washing herself naked in a wooden tub, a dead Russian, emptied of blood by a great, gaping wound, all his blood in a pool beside him. I could recapture the taste of kouskouss, the smell of olive oil which fills the streets of Burgos at noon, the scent of fennel floating through the Tetuan streets, the piping of Greek shepherds; I was touched. This joy was used up a long time ago. Will it be reborn today?

A torrid sun moves stiffly in my head like a magic lantern slide. A fragment of blue sky follows; after a few jolts it becomes motionless. I am all golden within. From what Moroccan (or Algerian or Syrian) day did this flash suddenly detach itself? I let myself flow into the past.

Meknes. What was that man from the hills like—the one who frightened us in the narrow street between the Berdaine mosque and that charming square shaded by a mulberry tree? He came towards us, Anny was on my right. Or on my left?

This sun and blue sky were only a snare. This is the hundredth time I've let myself be caught. My memories are like coins in the devil's purse: when you open it you find only dead leaves.

Now I can only see the great, empty eye socket of the hill tribesman. Is this eye really his? The doctor at Baku who explained the principle of state abortions to me was also blind

of one eye, and the white empty socket appears every time I want to remember his face. Like the Norns these two men have only one eye between them with which they take turns.

As for the square at Meknes, where I used to go every day, it's even simpler: I do not see it at all any more. All that remains is the vague feeling that it was charming, and these five words are indivisibly bound together: a charming square at Meknes. Undoubtedly, if I close my eyes or stare vaguely at the ceiling I can re-create the scene: a tree in the distance, a short dingy figure run towards me. But I am inventing all this to make out a case. That Moroccan was big and weather-beaten, besides, I only saw him after he had touched me. So I *still* know he was big and weather-beaten: certain details, somewhat curtailed, live in my memory. But I don't *see* anything any more: I can search the past in vain, I can only find these scraps of images and I am not sure what they represent, whether they are memories or just fiction.

There are many cases where even these scraps have disappeared: nothing is left but words: I could still tell stories, tell them too well (as far as anecdotes are concerned, I can stand up to anyone except ship's officers and professional people) but these are only the skeletons. There's the story of a person who does this, does that, but it isn't I, I have nothing in common with him. He travels through countries I know no more about than if I had never been there. Sometimes, in my story, it happens that I pronounce these fine names you read in atlases, Aranjuez or Canterbury. New images are born in me, images such as people create from books who have never travelled. My words are dreams, that is all.

For a hundred dead stories there still remain one or two living ones. I evoke these with caution, occasionally, not too often, for fear of wearing them out, I fish one out, again I see the scenery, the characters, the attitudes. I stop suddenly: there is

a flaw, I have seen a word pierce through the web of sensations. I suppose that this word will soon take the place of several images I love. I must stop quickly and think of something else; I don't want to tire my memories. In vain; the next time I evoke them a good part will be congealed.

I make a pretence of getting up, going to look for my photos of Meknes in the chest I pushed under my table. What good would it do? These aphrodisiacs scarcely affect my memory any more. I found a faded little photo under my blotter the other day. A woman was smiling, near a tank. I studied this person for a moment without recognizing her. Then on the other side I read, "Anny, Portsmouth, April 7, '27".

I have never before had such a strong feeling that I was devoid of secret dimensions, confined within the limits of my body, from which airy thoughts float up like bubbles. I build memories with my present self. I am cast out, forsaken in the present: I vainly try to rejoin the past: I cannot escape.

Someone knocks. It's the Self-Taught Man: I had forgotten him. I had promised to show him the photographs of my travels. He can go to Hell.

He sits down on a chair; his extended buttocks touch the back of it and his stiff torso leans forward. I jump from the end of my bed and turn on the light.

"Oh, do we really need that? We were quite comfortable."

"Not for looking at pictures. . . ."

I relieve him of his hat.

"True, Monsieur? Do you really want to show me your pictures?"

"Of course."

This is a plot: I hope he will keep quiet while he looks at them. I dive under the table and push the chest against his patent leather shoes, I put an armload of post cards and photos on his lap: Spain and Spanish Morocco.

like to make some new acquaintances," he says unctuously. "To speak frankly, I would also like something unexpected to happen to me, something new, adventures."

He has lowered his voice and his face has taken on a roguish look.

"What sort of adventures?" I ask him, astonished.

"All sorts, Monsieur. Getting on the wrong train. Stopping in an unknown city. Losing your briefcase, being arrested by mistake, spending the night in prison. Monsieur, I believed the word adventure could be defined: an event out of the ordinary without being necessarily extraordinary. People speak of the magic of adventures. Does this expression seem correct to you? I would like to ask you a question, Monsieur."

"What is it?"

He blushes and smiles.

"Possibly it is indiscreet!"

"Ask me, anyway."

He leans towards me, his eyes half-closed, and asks:

"Have you had many adventures, Monsieur?"

"A few," I answer mechanically, throwing myself back to avoid his tainted breath. Yes. I said that mechanically, without thinking. In fact, I am generally proud of having had so many adventures. But today, I had barely pronounced the words than I was seized with contrition; it seems as though I am lying, that I have never had the slightest adventure in my life, or rather, that I don't even know what the word means any more. At the same time, I am weighed down by the same discouragement I had in Hanoi—four years ago when Mercier pressed me to join him and I stared at a Khmer statuette without answering. And the IDEA is there, this great white mass which so disgusted me then: I hadn't seen it for four years.

"Could I ask you . . ." the Self-Taught Man begins . . .

By Jove! To tell him one of those famous tales. But I won't say another word on the subject.

"There," I say, bending down over his narrow shoulders, putting my finger on a photograph, "there, that's Santillana, the prettiest town in Spain."

"The Santillana of Gil Blas? I didn't believe it existed. Ah, Monsieur, how profitable your conversation is. One can tell you've travelled."

I put out the Self-Taught Man after filling his pockets with post cards, prints and photos. He left enchanted and I switched off the light. I am alone now. Not quite alone. Hovering in front of me is still this idea. It has rolled itself into a ball, it stays there like a large cat; it explains nothing, it does not move, and contents itself with saying no. No, I haven't had any adventures.

I fill my pipe, light it and stretch out on the bed, throwing a coat over my legs. What astonishes me is to feel so sad and exhausted. Even if it were true—that I never had any adventures—what difference would that make to me? First, it seems to be a pure question of words. This business at Meknes, for example, I was thinking about a little while ago: a Moroccan jumped on me and wanted to stab me with an enormous knife. But I hit him just below the temple . . . then he began shouting in Arabic and a swarm of lousy beggars came up and chased us all the way to Souk Attarin. Well, you can call that by any name you like, in any case, it was an event which *happened to* ME.

It is completely dark and I can't tell whether my pipe is lit. A trolley passes: red light on the ceiling. Then a heavy truck which makes the house tremble. It must be six o'clock.

I have never had adventures. Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But no adventures. It isn't a question of words; I am beginning to understand. There is something to which I clung more than all the rest—without completely realizing it. It wasn't love. Heaven forbid, not glory,

not money. It was . . . I had imagined that at certain times my life could take on a rare and precious quality. There was no need for extraordinary circumstances: all I asked for was a little precision. There is nothing brilliant about my life now: but from time to time, for example, when they play music in the cafés, I look back and tell myself: in old days, in London, Meknes, Tokyo, I have known great moments, I have had adventures. Now I am deprived of this. I have suddenly learned, without any apparent reason, that I have been lying to myself for ten years. And naturally, everything they tell about in books can happen in real life, but not in the same way. It is to this way of happening that I clung so tightly.

The beginnings would have had to be real beginnings. Alas! Now I see so clearly what I wanted. Real beginnings are like a fanfare of trumpets, like the first notes of a jazz tune, cutting short tedium, making for continuity: then you say about these evenings within evenings: "I was out for a walk, it was an evening in May." You walk, the moon has just risen, you feel lazy, vacant, a little empty. And then suddenly you think: "Something has happened." No matter what: a slight rustling in the shadow, a thin silhouette crossing the street. But this paltry event is not like the others: suddenly you see that it is the beginning of a great shape whose outlines are lost in mist and you tell yourself, "Something is beginning."

Something is beginning in order to end: adventure does not let itself be drawn out; it only makes sense when dead. I am drawn, irrevocably, towards this death which is perhaps mine as well. Each instant appears only as part of a sequence. I cling to each instant with all my heart: I know that it is unique, irreplaceable—and yet I would not raise a finger to stop it from being annihilated. This last moment I am spending—in Berlin, in London—in the arms of a woman casually met two days ago—moment I love passionately, woman I may adore—

all is going to end, I know it. Soon I shall leave for another country. I shall never rediscover either this woman or this night. I grasp at each second, trying to suck it dry: nothing happens which I do not seize, which I do not fix forever in myself, nothing, neither the fugitive tenderness of those lovely eyes, nor the noises of the street, nor the false dawn of early morning: and even so the minute passes and I do not hold it back, I like to see it pass.

All of a sudden something breaks off sharply. The adventure is over, time resumes its daily routine. I turn; behind me, this beautiful melodious form sinks entirely into the past. It grows smaller, contracts as it declines, and now the end makes one with the beginning. Following this gold spot with my eyes I think I would accept—even if I had to risk death, lose a fortune, a friend—to live it all over again, in the same circumstances, from end to end. But an adventure never returns nor is prolonged.

Yes, it's what I wanted—what I still want. I am so happy when a negress sings: what summits would I not reach if *my own life* made the subject of the melody.

The idea is still there, unnameable. It waits, peacefully. Now it seems to say:

"Yes? Is *that* what you wanted? Well, that's exactly what you've never had (remember you fooled yourself with words, you called the glitter of travel, the love of women, quarrels, and trinkets adventure) and this is what you'll never have—and no one other than yourself."

But Why? WHY?

Saturday noon:

The Self-Taught Man did not see me come into the reading-room. He was sitting at the end of a table in the back; he had

set his book down in front of him but he was not reading. He was smiling at a seedy-looking student who often comes to the library. The student allowed himself to be looked at for a moment, then suddenly stuck his tongue out and made a horrible face. The Self-Taught Man blushed, hurriedly plunged his nose into his book and became absorbed by his reading.

I have reconsidered my thoughts of yesterday. I was completely dry: it made no difference to me whether there had been no adventures. I was only curious to know whether there could *never be any*.

This is what I thought: for the most banal even to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story.

But you have to choose: live or tell. For example, when I was in Hamburg, with that Erna girl I didn't trust and who was afraid of me, I led a funny sort of life. But I was in the middle of it, I didn't think about it. And then one evening, in a little café in San Pauli, she left me to go to the ladies' room. I stayed alone, there was a phonograph playing "Blue Skies". I began to tell myself what had happened since I landed. I told myself, "The third evening, as I was going into a dance hall called *La Grotte Bleue*, I noticed a large woman, half seas over. And that woman is the one I am waiting for now, listening to 'Blue Skies', the woman who is going to come back and sit down at my right and put her arms around my neck." Then I felt violently that I was having an adventure. But Erna came back and sat down beside me, she wound her arms around my neck and I hated her without knowing why. I understand now: one had to begin living again and the adventure was fading out.

Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition. From time to time you make a semi-total: you say: I've been travelling for three years, I've been in Bouville for three years. Neither is there any end: you never leave a woman, a friend, a city in one go. And then everything looks alike: Shanghai, Moscow, Algiers, everything is the same after two weeks. There are moments—rarely—when you make a landmark, you realize that you're going with a woman, in some messy business. The time of a flash. After that, the procession starts again, you begin to add up hours and days: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. April, May, June. 1924, 1925, 1926.

That's living. But everything changes when you tell about life; it's a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense. You seem to start at the beginning: "It was a fine autumn evening in 1922. I was a notary's clerk in Marommes." And in reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, it is the one which gives to words the pomp and value of a beginning. "I was out walking, I had left the town without realizing it, I was thinking about my money troubles." This sentence, taken simply for what it is, means that the man was absorbed, morose, a hundred leagues from an adventure, exactly in the mood to let things happen without noticing them. But the end is there, transforming everything. For us, the man is already the hero of the story. His moroseness, his money troubles are much more precious than ours, they are all gilded by the light of future passions. And the story goes on in the reverse: instants have stopped piling themselves in a lighthearted way one on top of the other, they are snapped up

I turn left and, through the Rue des Voiliers, rejoin the Little Prado. The iron shutters have been lowered on all the shop windows. The Rue Tournebride is light but deserted, it has lost its brief glory of the morning; nothing distinguishes it any longer from the neighbouring streets. A fairly strong wind has come up. I hear the archbishop's metal hat creaking.

I am alone, most of the people have gone back home, they are reading the evening paper, listening to the radio. Sunday has left them with a taste of ashes and their thoughts are already turning towards Monday. But for me there is neither Monday nor Sunday: there are days which pass in disorder, and then, sudden lightning like this one.

Nothing has changed and yet everything is different. I can't describe it; it's like the Nausea and yet it's just the opposite: at last an adventure happens to me and when I question myself I see that it happens *that I am myself and that I am here*; I am the one who splits the night, I am as happy as the hero of a novel.

Something is going to happen: something is waiting for me in the shadow of the Rue Basse-de-Vieille, it is over there, just at the corner of this calm street that my life is going to begin. I see myself advancing with a sense of fatality. There is a sort of white milestone at the corner of the street. From far away, it seemed black and, at each stride, it takes on a whiter colour. This dark body which grows lighter little by little makes an extraordinary impression on me: when it becomes entirely clear, entirely white, I shall stop just beside it and the adventure will begin. It is so close now, this white beacon which comes out of the shadows, that I am almost afraid: for a moment I think of turning back. But it is impossible to break the spell. I advance, I stretch out my hand and touch the stone.

Here is the Rue Basse-de-Vieille and the enormous mass of Sainte-Cécile crouching in the shadow, its windows glowing.

The Place Ducoton is empty. Am I mistaken? I don't think I could stand it. Will nothing really happen? I go towards the lights of the Café Mably. I am lost, I don't know whether I'm going in: I glance through the large, steamed windows.

The place is full. The air is blue with cigarette smoke and steam rising from damp clothing. The cashier is at her counter. I know her well: she's red haired, as I am; she has some sort of stomach trouble. She is rotting quietly under her skirts with a melancholy smile, like the odour of violets given off by a decomposing body. A shudder goes through me: she . . . she is the one who was waiting for me. She was there, standing erect above the counter, smiling. From the far end of the café something returns which helps to link the scattered moments of that Sunday and solder them together and which gives them a meaning. I have spent the whole day only to end there, with my nose glued against the window, to gaze at this delicate face blossoming against the red curtain. All has stopped; my life has stopped: this wide window, this heavy air, blue as water, this fleshy white plant at the bottom of the water, and I myself, we form a complete and static whole: I am happy.

When I found myself on the Boulevard de la Redoute again nothing was left but bitter regret. I said to myself: Perhaps there is nothing in the world I cling to as much as this feeling of adventure; but it comes when it pleases; it is gone so quickly and how empty I am once it has left. Does it, ironically, pay me these short visits in order to show me that I have wasted my life?

Behind me, in the town, along the great, straight streets lit up by the cold reflection from the lamp posts, a formidable social event was dissolving. Sunday was at an end.

Monday:

How could I have written that pompous, absurd sentence yesterday:

"I was alone but I marched like a regiment descending on a city."

I do not need to make phrases. I write to bring certain circumstances to light. Beware of literature. I must follow the pen, without looking for words.

At heart, what disgusts me is having been so sublime last evening. When I was twenty I used to get drunk and then explain that I was a fellow in the style of Descartes. I knew I was inflating myself with heroism, but I let myself go, it pleased me. After that, the next morning I felt as sick as if I had awakened in a bed full of vomit. I never vomit when I'm drunk but that would really be better. Yesterday I didn't even have the excuse of drunkenness. I got excited like an imbecile. I must wash myself clean with abstract thoughts, transparent as water.

This feeling of adventure definitely does not come from events: I have proved it. It's rather the way in which the moments are linked together. I think this is what happens: you suddenly feel that time is passing, that each instant leads to another, this one to another one, and so on; that each instant is annihilated, and that it isn't worth while to hold it back, etc., etc. And then you attribute this property to events which appear to you *in* the instants; what belongs to the form you carry over to the content. You talk a lot about this amazing flow of time but you hardly see it. You see a woman, you think that one day she'll be old, only you don't see her grow old. But there are moments when you think you *see* her grow old and feel yourself growing old with her: this is the feeling of adventure.

If I remember correctly, they call that the irreversibility of time. The feeling of adventure would simply be that of the irreversibility of time. But why don't we always have it? Is it that time is not always irreversible? There are moments when you have the impression that you can do what you want, go forward or backward, that it has no importance; and then other times when you might say that the links have been tightened and, in that case, it's not a question of missing your turn because you could never start again.

Anny made the most of time. When she was in Djibouti and I was in Aden, and I used to go and see her for twenty-four hours, she managed to multiply the misunderstandings between us until there were only exactly sixty minutes before I had to leave; sixty minutes, just long enough to make you feel the seconds passing one by one. I remember one of those terrible evenings. I was supposed to leave at midnight. We went to an open-air movie; we were desperate, she as much as I. Only she led the game. At eleven o'clock, at the beginning of the main picture, she took my hand and held it in hers without a word. I was flooded with a bitter joy and I understood, without having to look at my watch, that it was eleven o'clock. From that time on we began to feel the minutes passing. That time we were leaving each other for three months. At one moment they threw a completely blank image on the screen, the darkness lifted, and I saw Anny was crying. Then, at midnight, she let go of my hand, after pressing it violently; I got up and left without saying a word to her. That was a good job.

7.00 p.m.

Work today. It didn't go too badly; I wrote six pages with a certain amount of pleasure. The more so since it was a question of abstract considerations on the reign of Paul I. After last

slice of toast, the kind you put under roast pigeons; they walked sideways with legs like a crab. The larger leaves were black with beasts. Behind the cactus and the Barbary fig trees, the Velleda of the public park pointed a finger at her sex. "This park smells of vomit," I shouted.

"I didn't want to wake you up," the woman said, "but the sheet got folded under my back and besides I have to go down and look after the customers from the Paris train."

Shrove Tuesday:

I gave Maurice Barrès a spanking. We were three soldiers and one of us had a hole in the middle of his face. Maurice Barrès came up to us and said, "That's fine!" and he gave each one of us a small bouquet of violets. "I don't know where to put them," said the soldier with the hole in his head. Then Maurice Barrès said, "Put them in the hole you have in your head." The soldier answered, "I'm going to stick them up your ass." And we turned over Maurice Barrès and took his pants off. He had a cardinal's red robe on under his trousers. We lifted up the robe and Maurice Barrès began to shout: "Look out! I've got on trousers with foot-straps." But we spanked him until he bled and then we took the petals of violets and drew the face of Déroulède on his backside.

For some time now I have been remembering my dreams much too often. Moreover, I must toss quite a bit because every morning I find the blankets on the floor. Today is Shrove Tuesday but that means very little in Bouville; in the whole town there are hardly a hundred people to dress up.

As I was going down the stairs the landlady called me:

"There's a letter for you."

A letter: the last one I got was from the curator of the Rouen public library, last May. The landlady leads me to her office and holds out a long thick yellow envelope: Anny had

even now they have the power to give us joy and pain. Not a memory: an implacable, torrid love, without shadow, without escape, without shelter. Three years rolled into one. That is why we parted: we did not have enough strength to bear this burden. And then, when Anny left me, all of a sudden, all at once, the three years crumbled into the past. I didn't even suffer, I felt emptied out. Then time began to flow again and the emptiness grew larger. Then, in Saïgon when I decided to go back to France, all that was still left—strange faces, places, quays on the banks of long rivers—all was wiped out. Now my past is nothing more than an enormous vacuum. My present: this waitress in the black blouse dreaming near the counter, this man. It seems as though I have learned all I know of life in books. The palaces of Benares, the terrace of the Leper King, the temples of Java with their great broken steps, are reflected in my eyes for an instant, but they have remained there, on the spot. The tramway that passes in front of the Hotel Printania in the evening does not catch the reflection of the neon sign-board; it flames up for an instant, then goes on with black windows.

This little man has not stopped looking at me: he bothers me. He tries to give himself importance. The waitress has finally decided to serve him. She raises her great black arm lazily, reaches the bottle, and brings it to him with a glass.

"Here you are, Monsieur."

"Monsieur Achille," he says with urbanity.

She pours without answering; all of a sudden he takes his finger from his nose, places both hands flat on the table. He throws his head back and his eyes shine. He says in a cold voice:

"Poor girl."

The waitress gives a start and I start too: he has an indefinable expression, perhaps one of amazement, as if it were

stuffs, old clothes, newspapers; they have kept everything The past is a landlord's luxury.

Where shall I keep mine? You don't put your past in your pocket; you have to have a house. I have only my body: a man entirely alone, with his lonely body, cannot indulge in memories; they pass through him. I shouldn't complain: all I wanted was to be free.

The little man stirs and sighs. He is all wrapped in his overcoat but from time to time he straightens up and puts on a haughty look. He has no past either. Looking closely, you would undoubtedly find in a cousin's house a photograph showing him at a wedding, with a wing collar, stiff shirt and a slight, young man's moustache. Of myself I don't think that even that is left.

Here he is looking at me again. This time he's going to speak to me, and I feel all taut inside. There is no sympathy between us: we are alike, that's all. He is alone, as I am, but more sunken into solitude than I. He must be waiting for his own Nausea or something of that sort. Now there are still people who *recognize* me, who see me and think: "He's one of us." So? What does he want? He must know that we can do nothing for one another. The families are in their houses, in the midst of their memories. And here we are, two wanderers, without memory. If he were suddenly to stand up and speak to me, I'd jump into the air.

The door opens with a great to-do: it is Doctor Rogé.

"Good day everybody."

He comes in, ferocious and suspicious, swaying, swaying a little on his long legs which can barely support his body. I see him often, on Sundays, at the Brasserie Vezelise, but he doesn't know me. He is built like the old monitors at Joinville, arms like thighs, a chest measurement of 110, and he can't stand up straight.

"He's crazy as a loon, that's that."

He doesn't even take the trouble to let on that he's joking. He knows that the loony won't be angry, that he's going to smile. And there it is: the man smiles with humility. A crazy loon: he relaxes, he feels protected against himself: nothing will happen to him today. I am reassured too. A crazy old loon: so that was it, so that was all.

The doctor laughs, he gives me an engaging, conspiratorial glance: because of my size, undoubtedly—and besides, I have a clean shirt on—he wants to let me in on his joke.

I do not laugh, I do not respond to his advances: then, without stopping to laugh, he turns the terrible fire of his eyes on me. We look at each other in silence for several seconds: he sizes me up, looking at me with half-closed eyes, up and down he places me. In the crazy loon category? In the tramp category?

Still, he is the one who turns his face away: allows himself to deflate before one lone wretch, without social importance, it isn't worth talking about—you can forget it right away. He rolls a cigarette and lights it, then stays motionless with his eyes hard and staring like an old man's.

The fine wrinkles; he has all of them: horizontal ones running across his forehead, crow's feet, bitter lines at each corner of the mouth, without counting the yellow cords depending from his chin. There's a lucky man: as soon as you perceive him, you can tell he must have suffered, that he is someone who has lived. He deserves his face for he has never, for one instant, lost an occasion of utilizing his past to the best of his ability: he has stuffed it full, used his experience on women and children, exploited them.

M. Achille is probably happier than he has ever been. He is agape with admiration; he drinks his Byrrh in small mouthfuls and swells his cheeks out with it. The doctor knew how to

squat to pass water; instead of ergot, Hindu midwives use ground glass in cow dung; in Borneo when a woman has her period she spends three days and nights on the roof of her house. In Venice I saw burials in gondolas, Holy Week festivals in Seville, I saw the Passion Play at Oberammergau. Naturally, that's just a small sample of all I know: I could lean back in a chair and begin with amusement:

"Do you know Jihlava, Madame? It's a curious little town in Moravia where I stayed in 1924."

And the judge who has seen so many cases would add at the end of my story:

"How true it is, Monsieur, how human it is. I had a case just like that at the beginning of my career. It was in 1902. I was deputy judge in Limoges . . ."

But I was bothered too much by that when I was young. Yet I didn't belong to a professional family. There are also amateurs. These are secretaries, office workers, shopkeepers, people who listen to others in cafés: around forty they feel swollen, with an experience they can't get rid of. Luckily they've made children on whom they can pass it off. They would like to make us believe that their past is not lost, that their memories are condensed, gently transformed into Wisdom. Convenient past! Past handed out of a pocket! little gilt books full of fine sayings. "Believe me, I'm telling you from experience, all I know I've learned from life." Has life taken charge of their thoughts? They explain the new by the old—and the old they explain by the older still, like those historians who turn a Lenin into a Russian Robespierre, and a Robespierre into a French Cromwell: when all is said and done, they have never understood anything at all. . . . You can imagine a morose idleness behind their importance: they see the long parade of pretences, they yawn, they think there's nothing new under the sun. "Crazy as a loon"—and Doctor Rogé vaguely recalls

other crazy loons, not remembering any one of them in particular. Now, nothing M. Achille can do will surprise us: *because* he's a crazy loon!

He is not one: he is afraid. What is he afraid of? When you want to understand something you stand in front of it, alone, without help: all the past in the world is of no use. Then it disappears and what you wanted to understand disappears with it.

General ideas are more flattering. And then professionals and even amateurs always end up by being right. Their wisdom prompts them to make the least possible noise, to live as little as possible, to let themselves be forgotten. Their best stories are about the rash and the original, who were chastised. Yes, that's how it happens and no one will say the contrary. Perhaps M. Achille's conscience is not easy. Perhaps he tells himself he wouldn't be there if he had heeded his father's advice or his elder sister's. The doctor has the right to speak: he has not wasted his life; he has known how to make himself useful. He rises calm and powerful, above this flotsam and jetsam; he is a rock.

Doctor Rogé has finished his calvados. His great body relaxes and his eyelids droop heavily. For the first time I see his face without the eyes: like a cardboard mask, the kind they're selling in the shops today. His cheeks have a horrid pink colour. . . . The truth stares me in the face: this man is going to die soon. He surely knows; he need only look in the glass: each day he looks a little more like the corpse he will become. That's what their experience leads to, that's why I tell myself so often that they smell of death: it is their last defence. The doctor would like to believe, he would like to hide out the stark reality; that he is alone, without gain, without a past, with an intelligence which is clouded, a body which is disintegrating. For this reason he has carefully built up,

furnished, and padded his nightmare compensation: he says he is making progress. Has he vacuums in his thoughts, moments when everything spins round in his head? It's because his judgment no longer has the impulse of youth. He no longer understands what he reads in books? It's because he's so far away from books now. He can't make love any more? But he has made love in the past. Having made love is much better than still making it: looking back, he compares, ponders. And this terrible corpse's face! To be able to stand the sight of it in the glass he makes himself believe that the lessons of experience are graven on it.

The doctor turns his head a little. His eyelids are half-open and he watches me with the red eyes of sleep. I smile at him. I would like this smile to reveal all that he is trying to hide from himself. That would give him a jolt if he could say to himself: "There's someone who *knows* I'm going to die!" But his eyelids droop: he sleeps. I leave, letting M. Achille watch over his slumber.

The rain has stopped, the air is mild, the sky slowly rolls up fine black images: it is more than enough to frame a perfect moment; to reflect these images, Anny would cause dark little tides to be born in our hearts. I don't know how to take advantage of the occasion: I walk at random, calm and empty, under this wasted sky.

Wednesday:

I must not be afraid.

Thursday:

Four pages written. Then a long moment of happiness. Must not think too much about the value of History. You run the

When I entered the reading-room, the Self-Taught Man was just coming out. He threw himself on me:

"I have to thank you, Monsieur. Your photographs have allowed me to spend many unforgettable hours."

I had a ray of hope when I saw him; it might be easier to get through this day together. But, with the Self-Taught Man, you only appear to be two.

He rapped on an in-quarto volume. It was a History of Religion.

"Monsieur, no one was better qualified than Nouçapié to attempt this vast synthesis. Isn't that true?"

He seemed weary and his hands were trembling.

"You look ill," I said.

"Ah, Monsieur, I should think so! Something abominable has happened to me."

The guardian came towards us: a peevish little Corsican with moustaches like a drum major. He walks for whole hours among the tables, clacking his heels. In winter he spits in his handkerchiefs then dries them on the stove.

The Self-Taught Man came close enough to breathe in my face.

"I won't tell you anything in front of this man," he said in confidence. "If you would, Monsieur . . ."

"Would what?"

He blushed and his lips swayed gracefully.

"Monsieur, ah, Monsieur: all right, I'll lay my cards on the table. Will you do me the honour of lunching with me on Wednesday?"

"With pleasure."

I had as much desire to eat with him as I had to hang myself.

"I'm so glad," the Self-Taught Man said. He added rapidly, "I'll pick you up at your hotel, if you like," then disappeared,

he floats ten inches above the floor, his bleeding neck will be just at the level of the third shelf of books. Thus these objects serve at least to fix the limits of probability.

Today they fixed nothing at all: it seemed that their very existence was subject to doubt, that they had the greatest difficulty in passing from one instant to the next. I held the book I was reading tightly in my hands: but the most violent sensations went dead. Nothing seemed true; I felt surrounded by cardboard scenery which could quickly be removed. The world was waiting, holding its breath, making itself small—it was waiting for its convulsion, its Nausea, just like M. Achille the other day.

I got up. I could no longer keep my place in the midst of these unnatural objects. I went to the window and glanced out at the skull of Impétraz. I murmured: *Anything* can happen, *anything*. But evidently, it would be nothing horrible, such as humans might invent. Impétraz was not going to start dancing on his pedestal: it would be something else entirely.

Frightened, I looked at these unstable beings which, in an hour, in a minute, were perhaps going to crumble: yes, I was there, living in the midst of these books full of knowledge describing the immutable forms of the animal species, explaining that the right quantity of energy is kept integral in the universe; I was there, standing in front of a window whose panes had a definite refraction index. But what feeble barriers! I suppose it is out of laziness that the world is the same day after day. Today it seemed to want to change. And then, *anything*, *anything* could happen.

I had no time to lose: the Café Mably affair was at the root of this uneasiness. I must go back there, see M. Fasquelle alive, touch his beard or his hands if need be. Then, perhaps, I would be free.

I seized my overcoat and threw it round my shoulders; I fled. Crossing the Public Gardens I saw once more the man in the blue cape. He had the same ghastly white face with two scarlet ears sticking out on either side.

The Café Mably sparkled in the distance: this time the twelve lights must have been lit. I hurried: I had to get it over. First I glanced in through the big window, the place was deserted. The cashier was not there, nor the waiter—nor M. Fasquelle.

I had to make a great effort to go in; I did not sit down. I shouted "Waiter!" No one answered. An empty cup on a table. A lump of sugar on the saucer.

"Anyone here?"

An overcoat hung from a peg. Magazines were piled up in black cardboard boxes on a low table. I was on the alert for the slightest sound, holding my breath. The private stairway creaked slightly. I heard a foghorn outside. I walked out backwards, my eyes never leaving the stairway.

I know: customers are rare at two in the afternoon. M. Fasquelle had influenza; he must have sent the waiter out on an errand—maybe to get a doctor. Yes, but I needed to see M. Fasquelle. At the Rue Tournebride I turned back, I studied the garish, deserted café with disgust. The blinds on the second floor were drawn.

A real panic took hold of me. I didn't know where I was going. I ran along the docks, turned into the deserted streets in the Beauvoisis district; the houses watched my flight with their mournful eyes. I repeated with anguish: Where shall I go? where shall I go? *Anything* can happen. Sometimes, my heart pounding, I made a sudden right-about-turn: what was happening behind my back? Maybe it would start behind me and when I would turn around, suddenly, it would be too late. As long as I could stare at things nothing would happen:

But suddenly freed, the little girl shook her head and began to run. The man in the cloak had seen me: that was what stopped him. For a second he stayed motionless in the middle of the path, then went off, his back hunched. The cloak flapped against his calves.

I pushed open the gate and was next to him in one bound.

"Hey!" I shouted.

He began to tremble.

"A great menace weighs over the city," I said politely, and went on.

I went into the reading-room and took the *Chartreuse de Parme* from a table. I tried to absorb myself in reading, to find a refuge in the lucid Italy of Stendhal. Sometimes I succeeded, in spurts, in short hallucinations, then fell back again into this day of menace; opposite an old man who was clearing his throat, a young man, dreaming, leaning back in his chair.

Hours passed, the windows had turned black. There were four of us, not counting the Corsican who was in the office, stamping the latest acquisitions of the library. There was the little old man, the blond young man, a girl working for her degree—and I. From time to time one of us would look up, glance rapidly and scornfully at the other three as if he were afraid of them. Once the old man started to laugh: I saw the girl tremble from head to foot. But I had deciphered from upside down the title of the book she was reading: it was a light novel.

Ten minutes to seven. I suddenly realized that the library closed at seven. Once again I was going to be cast out into the town. Where would I go? What would I do?

The old man had finished his book. But he did not leave. He tapped his finger on the table with sharp, regular beats.

"Closing time soon," the Corsican said.

Saturday morning:

A charming sun with a light mist which promises a clear day. I had breakfast at the Café Mably.

Mme Florent, the cashier, smiled graciously at me. I called to her from my table:

"Is M. Fasquelle sick?"

"Yes; a bad go of flu: he'll have to stay in bed a few days. His daughter came from Dunkirk this morning. She's going to stay here and take care of him."

For the first time since I got her letter I am definitely happy at the idea of seeing Anny again. What has she been doing for six years? Shall we feel strange when we see each other? Anny doesn't know what it is to feel awkward. She'll greet me as if I had left her yesterday. I hope I shan't make a fool of myself, and put her off at the beginning. I must remember not to offer her my hand when I get there: she hates that.

How many days shall we stay together? Perhaps I could bring her back to Bouville. It would be enough if she would live here only for a few hours; if she would sleep at the Hotel Printania for one night. It would never be the same after that; I shouldn't be afraid any more.

Afternoon:

When I paid my first visit to the Bouville museum last year I was struck by the portrait of Olivier Blévigne. Faulty proportion? Perspective? I couldn't tell, but something bothered me: this deputy didn't seem plumb on his canvas.

I have gone back several times since then. But my worry persisted. I didn't want to admit that Bordurin, Prix de Rome, had made a mistake in his drawing.

But this afternoon, turning the pages of an old collection of

the *Satirique Bouvillois*, a blackmail-sheet whose owner was accused of high treason during the war, I caught a glimpse of the truth. I went to the museum as soon as I left the library.

I crossed the shadow of the vestibule quickly. My steps made no sound on the black and white tiles. A whole race of plaster folk twisted their arms. In passing I glanced, through two great openings, and saw cracked vases, plates, and a blue and yellow satyr on a pedestal. It was the Bernard Palissy Room, devoted to ceramics and minor arts. But ceramics do not amuse me. A lady and gentleman in mourning were respectfully contemplating the baked objects.

Above the entrance to the main hall—the Salon Bordurin-Renaudas—someone had hung, undoubtedly only a little while ago, a large canvas which I did not recognize. It was signed by Richard Séverand and entitled "The Bachelor's Death." It was a gift of the State.

Naked to the waist, his body a little green, like that of a dead man, the bachelor was lying on an unmade bed. The disorder of sheets and blankets attested to a long death agony. I smiled, thinking about M. Fasquelle. But he wasn't alone: his daughter was taking care of him. On the canvas, the maid, his mistress, her features marked by vice, had already opened a bureau drawer and was counting the money. An open door disclosed a man in a cap, a cigarette stuck to his lower lip, waiting in the shadows. Near the wall a cat lapped milk indifferently.

This man had lived only for himself. By a harsh and well-deserved punishment, no one had come to his bedside to close his eyes. This painting gave me a last warning: there was still time, I could retrace my steps. But if I were to turn a deaf ear, I had been forewarned: more than a hundred and fifty portraits were hanging on the wall of the room I was about to enter; with the exception of a few young people, prematurely taken

from their families, and the Mother Superior of a boarding school, none of those painted had died a bachelor, none of them had died childless or intestate, none without the last rites. Their souls at peace that day as on other days, with God and the world, these men had slipped quietly into death, to claim their share of eternal life to which they had a right.

For they had a right to everything: to life, to work, to wealth, to command, to respect, and, finally, to immortality.

I took a moment to compose myself and entered. A guardian was sleeping near the window. A pale light, falling from the windows, made flecks on the paintings. Nothing alive in this great rectangular room, except a cat who was frightened at my approach and fled. But I felt the looks of a hundred and fifty pairs of eyes on me.

All who belonged to the Bouville élite between 1875 and 1910 were there, men and women, scrupulously painted by Renaudas and Bordurin.

The men had built Sainte-Cecile-de-la-Mer. In 1882, they founded the Federation of Shipowners and Merchants of Bouville " to group in one powerful entity all men of good will, to co-operate in national recovery and to hold in check the parties of disorder. . . ." They made Bouville the best equipped port in France for unloading coal and wood. The lengthening and widening of the quays were their work. They extended the Marine Terminal and, by constant dredging, brought the low-tide depth of anchorage to 10.7 meters. In twenty years, the catch of the fishing fleet which was 5,000 barrels in 1869, rose, thanks to them, to 18,000 barrels. Stopping at no sacrifice to assist the improvement of the best elements in the working-class, they created, on their own initiative, various centres for technical and professional study which prospered under their lofty protection. They broke the famous shipping strike in 1898 and gave their sons to their country in 1914.

The women, worthy helpmates of these strugglers, founded most of the town's charitable and philanthropic organizations. But above all, they were wives and mothers. They raised fine children, taught them rights and duties, religion, and a respect for the traditions which made France great.

The general complexion of these portraits bordered on dark brown. Lively colours had been banished, out of decency. However, in the portraits of Renaudas, who showed a partiality towards old men, the snowy hair and sidewhiskers showed up well against deep black backgrounds; he excelled in painting hands. Bordurin, who was a little weak on theory, sacrificed the hands somewhat but the collars shone like white marble.

It was very hot; the guardian was snoring gently. I glanced around the walls: I saw hands and eyes; here and there a spot of light obliterated a face. As I began walking towards the portrait of Olivier Blévigne, something held me back: from the moulding, Pacôme, the merchant, cast a bright look down on me.

He was standing there, his head thrown slightly back; in one hand he held a top hat and gloves against his pearl-grey trousers. I could not keep myself from a certain admiration: I saw nothing mediocre in him, nothing which allowed of criticism: small feet, slender hands, wide wrestler's shoulders, a hint of whimsy. He courteously offered visitors the unwrinkled purity of his face; the shadow of a smile played on the lips. But his grey eyes were not smiling. He must have been about fifty: but he was as young and fresh as a man of thirty. He was beautiful.

I gave up finding fault with him. But he did not let go of me. I read a calm and implacable judgment in his eyes.

Then I realized what separated us: what I thought about him could not reach him; it was psychology, the kind they write about in books. But his judgment went through me like a sword and questioned my very right to exist. And it was true,

had always realized it; I hadn't the right to exist. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant or a microbe. My life put out feelers towards small pleasures in every direction. Sometimes it sent out vague signals; at other times I felt nothing more than a harmless buzzing.

But for this handsome, faultless man, now dead, for Jean Pacôme, son of the Pacôme of the Défence Nationale, it had been an entirely different matter: the beating of his heart and the mute rumblings of his organs, in his case, assumed the form of rights to be instantly obeyed. For sixty years, without a halt, he had used his right to live. The slightest doubt had never crossed those magnificent grey eyes. Pacôme had never made a mistake. He had always done his duty, all his duty, his duty as son, husband, father, leader. He had never weakened in his demands for his due: as a child, the right to be well brought up, in a united family, the right to inherit a spotless name, a prosperous business; as a husband, the right to be cared for, surrounded with tender affection; as a father, the right to be venerated; as a leader, the right to be obeyed without a murmur. For a right is nothing more than the other aspect of duty. His extraordinary success (today the Pacômes are the richest family in Bouville) could never have surprised him. He never told himself he was happy, and while he was enjoying himself he must have done so with moderation, saying: "This is my refreshment." Thus pleasure itself, also becoming a right, lost its aggressive futility. On the left, a little above his bluish-grey hair, I noticed a shelf of books. The bindings were handsome; they were surely classics. Every evening before going to sleep, Pacôme undoubtedly read over a few pages of "his old Montaigne" or one of Horace's odes in the Latin text. Sometimes, too, he must have read a contemporary work to keep up to date. Thus he knew Barrès and Bourget. He would put his book down after a moment. He

would smile. His look, losing its admirable circumspection, became almost dreamy. He would say: "How easy and how difficult it is to do one's duty."

He had never looked any further into himself: he was a leader.

There were other leaders on the walls: nothing but leaders. He was a leader—this tall, *ver-de-gris* man in his armchair. His white waistcoat was a happy reminder of his silver hair. (Attention to artistry was not excluded from these portraits, which were above all painted for moral edification, and exactitude was pushed to the furthest limit of scruple.) His long, slender hand was placed on the head of a small boy. An open book rested on his knees which were covered by a rug. But his look had strayed into the distance. He was seeing all those things which are invisible to young people. His name was written on a plaque of gilded wood below his portrait: his name must have been Pacôme or Parrottin, or Chaigneau. I had not thought of looking: for his close relatives, for this child, for himself, he was simply the grandfather; soon, if he deemed the time fitting to instruct his grandson about the scope of his future duties, he would speak of himself in the third person:

"You're going to promise your grandfather to be good, my boy, to work hard next year. Perhaps Grandfather won't be here any more next year."

In the evening of his life, he scattered his indulgent goodness over everyone. Even if he were to see me—though to him I was transparent—I would find grace in his eyes: he would think that I, too, had grandparents once. He demanded nothing: one has no more desires at that age. Nothing except for people to lower their voices slightly when he entered, nothing except a touch of tenderness and smiling respect when he passed, nothing except for his daughter-in-law to say sometimes:

"Father is amazing; he's younger than all of us"; nothing except to be the only one able to calm the temper of his grandson by putting his hands on the boy's head and saying: "Grandfather knows how to take care of all those troubles"; nothing except for his son, several times a year, to come asking his advice on delicate matters, finally, nothing more than to feel himself serene, appeased, and infinitely wise. The old gentleman's hand barely weighed on his grandson's curls: it was almost a benediction. What could he be thinking of? Of his honourable past which conferred on him the right to speak on everything and to have the last word on everything. I had not gone far enough the other day: experience was much more than a defence against death; it was a right; the right of old men.

General Aubry, hanging against the moulding, with his great sabre, was a leader. Another leader: President Hébert, well read, friend of Impétraz. His face was long and symmetrical with an interminable chin, punctuated, just under the lip, by a goatee: he thrust out his jaw slightly, with the amused air of being distinguished, of rolling out an objection on principles like a faint belch. He dreamed, he held a quill pen: he was taking his relaxation too, by Heaven, and it was writing verses. But he had the eagle eye of a leader.

And soldiers? I was in the centre of the room, the cynosure of all these grave eyes. I was neither father nor grandfather, not even a husband. I did not have a vote, I hardly paid any taxes: I could not boast of being a taxpayer, an elector, nor even of having the humble right to honour which twenty years of obedience confers on an employee. My existence began to worry me seriously. Was I not a simple spectre? "Hey!" I suddenly told myself, "*I* am the soldier!" It really made me laugh.

A portly quinquagenarian politely returned a handsome

smile. Renaudas had painted him with loving care, no touch was too tender for those fleshy, finely-chiselled little ears, especially for the hands, long, nervous, with loose fingers: the hands of a real savant or artist. His face was unknown to me: I must have passed before the canvas often without noticing it. I went up to it and read: *Rémy Parrottin, born in Bouville in* 1849, *Professor at the Ecole de Médecine, Paris.*

Parrottin: Doctor Wakefield had spoken to me of him: "Once in my life I met a great man, Rémy Parrottin. I took courses under him during the winter of 1904 (you know I spent two years in Paris studying obstetrics). He made me realize what it was to be a leader. He had it in him, I swear he did. He electrified us, he could have led us to the ends of the earth. And with all that he was a gentleman: he had an immense fortune—gave a good part of it to help poor students."

This is how this prince of science, the first time I heard him spoken of, inspired strong feelings in me. Now I stood before him and he was smiling at me. What intelligence and affability in his smile! His plump body rested leisurely in the hollow of a great leather armchair. This unpretentious wise man put people at their ease immediately. If it hadn't been for the spirit in his look you would have taken him for just anybody.

It did not take long to guess the reason for his prestige: he was loved because he understood everything; you could tell him anything. He looked a little like Renan, all in all, with more distinction. He was one of those who say:

"Socialists? Well, I go further than they do!" When you followed him down this perilous road you were soon to leave behind, not without a shiver, family, country, private property rights, and the most sacred values. You even doubted for a second the right of the bourgeois élite to command. Another step and suddenly everything was re-established, miraculously founded on solid reason, good old reasons. You turned around

and saw the Socialists, already far behind you, all tiny, waving their handkerchiefs and shouting: "Wait for us!"

Through Wakefield I knew that the Master liked, as he himself said with a smile, "to deliver souls." To prolong his own, he surrounded himself with youth: he often received young men of good family who were studying medicine. Wakefield had often been to his house for luncheon. After the meal they retired to the smoking-room. The Master treated these students who were at their first cigarettes like men: he offered them cigars. He stretched out on a divan and discoursed at great length, his eyes half-closed, surrounded by an eager crowd of disciples. He evoked memories, told stories, drawing a sharp and profound moral from each. And if there were among those well-bred young men one who seemed especially headstrong, Parrottin would take a special interest in him. He made him speak, listened to him attentively, gave him ideas and subjects for meditation. It usually happened that one day the young man, full of generous ideas, excited by the hostility of his parents, weary of thinking alone, his hand against every man, asked to visit the Master privately, and, stammering with shyness, confided in him his most intimate thoughts, his indignations, his hopes. Parrottin embraced him. He said: "I understand you. I understood you from the first day." They talked on. Parrottin went far, still farther, so far that the young man followed him with great difficulty. After a few conversations of this sort one could detect a favourable change in the young rebel. He saw clearly within himself, he learned to know the deep bonds which attached him to his family, to his environment; at last he understood the admirable role of the élite. And finally, as if by magic, found himself once again, enlightened, repentant. "He cured more souls," concluded Wakefield, "than I've cured bodies."

Rémy Parrottin smiled affably at me. He hesitated, tried to

understand my position, to turn gently and lead me back to the fold. But I wasn't afraid of him: I was no lamb. I looked at his fine forehead, calm and unwrinkled, his small belly, his hand set flat against his knee. I returned his smile and left.

Jean Parrottin, his brother, president of the S.A.B., leaned both hands on the edge of a table loaded with papers; his whole attitude signified to the visitor that the audience was over. His look was extraordinary; although abstracted yet shining with high endeavour. His dazzling eyes devoured his whole face. Behind this glow I noticed the thin, tight lips of a mystic. "It's odd," I said, "he looks like Rémy Parrottin." I turned to the Great Master: examining him in the light of this resemblance, a sense of aridity and desolation, a family resemblance took possession of his face. I went back to Jean Parrottin.

This man was one-ideaed. Nothing more was left in him but bones, dead flesh and Pure Right. A real case of possession, I thought. Once Right has taken hold of a man exorcism cannot drive it out; Jean Parrottin had consecrated his whole life to thinking about his Right: nothing else. Instead of the slight headache I feel coming on each time I visit a museum, he would have felt the painful right of having his temples cared for. It never did to make him think too much, or attract his attention to unpleasant realities, to his possible death, to the sufferings of others. Undoubtedly, on his death bed, at that moment when, ever since Socrates, it has been proper to pronounce certain elevated words, he told his wife, as one of my uncles told his, who had watched beside him for twelve nights, "I do not thank you, Therèse; you have only done your duty." When a man gets that far, you have to take your hat off to him.

His eyes, which I stared at in wonderment, indicated that I must leave. I did not leave. I was resolutely indiscreet. I knew,

as a result of studying at great length a certain portrait of Philip II in the library of the Escurial, that when one is confronted with a face sparkling with righteousness, after a moment this sparkle dies away, and only an ashy residue remains: this residue interested me.

Parrottin put up a good fight. But suddenly his look burned out, the picture grew dim. What was left? Blind eyes, the thin mouth of a dead snake, and cheeks. The pale, round cheeks of a child: they spread over the canvas. The employees of the S.A.B. never suspected it: they never stayed in Parrottin's office long enough. When they went in, they came up against that terrible look like a wall. From behind it, the cheeks were in shelter, white and flabby. How long did it take his wife to notice them? Two years? Five years? One day, I imagine, as her husband was sleeping, on his side with a ray of light caressing his nose, or else on a hot day, while he was having trouble with his digestion, sunk into an armchair, his eyes half-closed, with a splash of sunlight on his chin, she dared to look him in the face: all this flesh appeared to her defenceless, bloated, slobbering, vaguely obscene. From that day on, Mme Parrottin undoubtedly took command.

I took a few steps backward and in one glance covered all these great personages: Pacôme, President Hébert, both Parrottins, and General Aubry. They had worn top hats; every Sunday on the Rue Tournebride they met Mme Gratien, the mayor's wife, who saw Sainte Cécile in a dream. They greeted her with great ceremonious salutes, the secret of which is now lost.

They had been painted very minutely; yet, under the brush, their countenances had been stripped of the mysterious weakness of men's faces. Their faces, even the least powerful, were clear as porcelain: in vain I looked for some relation they could bear to trees and animals, to thoughts of earth or water. In

life they evidently did not require it. But, at the moment of passing on to posterity, they had confided themselves to a renowned painter in order that he should discreetly carry out on their faces the system of dredgings, drillings, and irrigations by which, all around Bouville, they had transformed the sea and the land. Thus, with the help of Renaudas and Bordurin, they had enslaved Nature: without themselves and within themselves. What these sombre canvases offered to me was man reconsidered by man, with, as sole adornment, the finest conquest of man: a bouquet of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Without mental reservation, I admired the reign of man.

A woman and a man came in. They were dressed in black and tried to make themselves inconspicuous. They stopped, enchanted, on the doorstep and the man automatically took off his hat.

"Ah!" the lady said, deeply touched.

The gentleman quickly regained his sang-froid. He said respectfully:

"It's a whole era!"

"Yes," the lady said, "this is in the time of my grandmother."

They took a few steps and met the look of Jean Parrottin. The woman stood gaping, but the man was not proud: he looked humble, he must have known intimidating looks and brief interviews well. He tugged gently at the woman's arm.

"Look at that one," he said.

Rémy Parrottin's smile had always put the humble at ease. The woman went forward and read studiously:

"Portrait of Rémy Parrottin, born in Bouville in 1849. Professor of the Ecole de Médecine, Paris, by Renaudas."

"Parrottin, of the Académy of Science," her husband said, "by Renaudas of the Institute. That's History!"

The lady nodded, then looked at the Great Master.

"How handsome he is," she said, "how intelligent he looks!"

The husband made an expansive gesture.

"They're the ones who made Bouville what it is," he said with simplicity.

"It's right to have had them put here, all together," the woman said tenderly.

We were three soldiers manœuvring in this immense hall. The husband who laughed with respect, silently, shot me a troubled glance and suddenly stopped laughing. A sweet joy flooded over me: well, I was right! It was really too funny.

The woman came near me.

"Gaston," she said, suddenly bold, "come here!"

The husband came towards us.

"Look," she went on, "he has a street named after him: Olivier Blévigne. You know, the little street that goes up the Coteau Vert just before you get to Jouxtebouville."

After an instant, she added:

"He doesn't look exactly easy."

"No. Some people must have found him a pretty awkward customer."

These words were addressed to me. The man, watching me out of the corner of his eye, began to laugh softly, this time with a conceited air, a busy-body, as if he were Olivier Blévigne himself.

Olivier Blévigne did not laugh. He thrust his compact jaw towards us and his Adam's apple jutted out.

There was a moment of ecstatic silence.

"You'd think he was going to move," the lady said.

The husband explained obligingly:

"He was a great cotton merchant. Then he went into politics; he was a deputy."

I knew it. Two years ago I had looked him up in the *Petit*

Dictionnaire des Grands Hommes de Bouville by Abbé Morellet. I copied the article.

"*Blévigne, Olivier-Martial, son of the late Olivier-Martial Blévigne, born and died in Bouville* (1849–1908), *studied law in Paris, passed Bar examinations in* 1872. *Deeply impressed by the Commune insurrection, which forced him, as it did so many other Parisians, to take refuge in Versailles under the protection of the National Assembly, he swore, at an age when young men think only of pleasure,* 'to consecrate his life to the re-establishment of order.' *He kept his word: immediately after his return to our city, he founded the famous Club de l'Ordre which every evening for many years united the principal businessmen and shipowners of Bouville. This aristocratic circle, which one might jokingly describe as being more restricted than the Jockey Club, exerted, until* 1908, *a salutary influence on the destiny of our great commercial port. In* 1880, *Olivier Blévigne married Marie-Louise Pacôme, younger daughter of Charles Pacôme, businessman* (*see Pacôme*), *and at the death of the latter, founded the company of Pacôme-Blévigne & Son. Shortly thereafter he entered actively into politics and placed his candidature before the deputation.*

"'*The country,*' *he said in a celebrated speech,* '*is suffering from a most serious malady: the ruling class no longer wants to rule. And who then shall rule, gentlemen, if those who, by their heredity, their education, their experience, have been rendered most fit for the exercising of power, turn from it in resignation or weariness? I have often said: to rule is not a right of the élite; it is a primary duty of the élite. Gentlemen, I beg of you: let us restore the principle of authority!*'

"*Elected first on October* 4, 1885, *he was constantly re-elected thereafter. Of an energetic and virile eloquence, he delivered many brilliant speeches. He was in Paris in* 1898 *when the terrible strike broke out. He returned to Bouville immediately and became the guiding spirit of the resistance. He took the initiative of negotiating*

Louse." Everything was explained from the first page on: Olivier Blévigne was only five feet tall. They mocked his small stature and squeaking voice which more than once threw the whole Chamber into hysterics. They accused him of putting rubber lifts in his shoes. On the other hand, Mme Blévigne, née Pacôme, was a horse. "Here we can well say," the paper added, "that his other half is his double."

Five feet tall! Yes, Bordurin, with jealous care, had surrounded him with objects which ran no risk of diminishing him; a hassock, a low armchair, a shelf with a few little books, a small Persian table. Only he had given him the same stature as his neighbour Jean Parrottin and both canvases had the same dimensions. The result was that the small table, in one picture, was almost as large as the immense table in the other, and that the hassock would have almost reached Parrottin's shoulder. The eye instinctively made a comparison between the two: my discomfort had come from that.

Now I wanted to laugh. Five feet tall! If I had wanted to talk to Blévigne I would have had to lean over or bend my knees. I was no longer surprised that he held up his nose so impetuously: the destiny of these small men is always working itself out a few inches above their head.

Admirable power of art. From this shrill-voiced mannikin, nothing would pass on to posterity save a threatening face, a superb gesture and the bloodshot eyes of a bull. The student terrorised by the Commune, the deputy, a bad-tempered midget; that was what death had taken. But, thanks to Bordurin, the President of the Club de l'Ordre, the orator of "Forces Morales," was immortal.

"Oh, poor little Pipo!"

The woman gave a stifled cry: under the portrait of Octave Blévigne "son of the late . . ." a pious hand had traced these words:

unceasingly of her suffering. But this pious woman had never said : " It hurts." She took the upper hand : she made up bills of fare and presided over welfare societies. Sometimes, she would slowly close her eyes in the middle of a sentence and all traces of life would leave her face. This fainting spell lasted hardly more than a second ; shortly afterward, Mme Théréson would re-open her eyes and finish her sentence. And in the work room they whispered : " Poor Mme Théréson! She never complains."

I had crossed the whole length of the salon Bordurin-Renaudas. I turned back. Farewell, beautiful lilies, elegant in your painted little sanctuaries, good-bye, lovely lilies, our pride and reason for existing, good-bye you bastards!

Monday:

I'm not writing my book on Rollebon any more ; it's finished, I *can't* write any more of it. What am I going to do with my life ?

It was three o'clock. I was sitting at my table ; I had set beside me the file of letters I stole in Moscow ; I was writing :

" Care had been taken to spread the most sinister rumours. M. de Rollebon must have let himself be taken in by this manœuvre since he wrote to his nephew on the 13th of September that he had just made his will."

The Marquis was there : waiting for the moment when I should have definitively installed him in a niche in history, I had loaned him my life. I felt him like a glow in the pit of my stomach.

I suddenly realized an objection someone might raise : Rollebon was far from being frank with his nephew, whom he wanted to use, if the plot failed, as his defence witness with Paul I. It was only too possible that he had made up the story of the will to make himself appear completely innocent.

This was a minor objection; it wouldn't hold water. But it was enough to plunge me into a brown study. Suddenly I saw the fat waitress at "Camille's" again, the haggard face of M. Achille, the room in which I had so clearly felt I was forgotten, forsaken in the present. Wearily I told myself:

How can I, who have not the strength to hold to my own past, hope to save the past of someone else?

I picked up my pen and tried to get back to work; I was up to my neck in these reflections on the past, the present, the world. I asked only one thing: to be allowed to finish my book in peace.

But as my eyes fell on the pad of white sheets, I was struck by its look and I stayed, pen raised, studying this dazzling paper: so hard and far seeing, so present. The letters I had just inscribed on it were not even dry yet and already they belonged to the past.

"Care had been taken to spread the most sinister rumours..."

I had thought out this sentence, at first it had been a small part of myself. Now it was inscribed on the paper, it took sides against me. I didn't recognize it any more. I couldn't conceive it again. It was there, in front of me; in vain for me to trace some sign of its origin. Anyone could have written it. But *I*... *I* wasn't sure I wrote it. The letters glistened no longer, they were dry. That had disappeared too; nothing was left but their ephemeral spark.

I looked anxiously around me: the present, nothing but the present. Furniture light and solid, rooted in its present, a table, a bed, a closet with a mirror—and me. The true nature of the present revealed itself: it was what exists, and all that was not present did not exist. The past did not exist. Not at all. Not in things, not even in my thoughts. It is true that I had realized a long time ago that mine had escaped me. But until then I believed that it had simply gone out of my range. For me the

past was only a pensioning off: it was another way of existing, a state of vacation and inaction; each event, when it had played its part, put itself politely into a box and became an honorary event: we have so much difficulty imagining nothingness. Now I knew: things are entirely what they appear to be—and behind them... there is nothing.

This thought absorbed me a few minutes longer. Then I violently moved my shoulders to free myself and pulled the pad of paper towards me.

"... that he had just made his will."

An immense sickness flooded over me suddenly and the pen fell from my hand, spluttering ink. What happened? Did I have the Nausea? No, it wasn't that, the room had its paternal, everyday look. The table hardly seemed heavier and more solid to me, nor my pen more compact. Only M. de Rollebon had just died for the second time.

He was still there inside me a little while ago, quiet and warm, and I could feel him stir from time to time. He was quite alive, more alive to me than the Self-Taught Man or the woman at the "Railwaymen's Rendezvous." He undoubtedly had his whims, he could stay several days without showing himself; but often, on a mysteriously fine day, like a weather prophet, he put his nose out and I could see his pale face and bluish cheeks. And even when he didn't show himself, he was a weight on my heart and I felt full up.

Nothing more was left now. No more than, on these traces of dry ink, is left the memory of their freshness. It was my fault: I had spoken the only words I should not have said: I had said that the past did not exist. And suddenly, noiseless, M. de Rollebon had returned to his nothingness.

I held his letters in my hands, felt them with a kind of despair:

He is the one, I said, he is the one who made these marks, one by one. He leaned on this paper, he put his hand

again on this page already started. Never again, following the Rue des Mutilés and the Boulevard de la Redoute, shall I turn into the library to look through their archives.

I want to get up and go out, do anything—no matter what—to stupefy myself. But if I move one finger, if I don't stay absolutely still, I know what will happen. I don't *want* that to happen to me yet. It will happen too soon as it is. I don't move; mechanically I read the paragraph I left unfinished on the pad of paper:

"Care had been taken to spread the most sinister rumours. M. de Rollebon must have let himself be caught by this manœuvre since he wrote to his nephew on the 13th of September that he had just made his will."

The great Rollebon affair was over, like a great passion. I must find something else. A few years ago, in Shanghai, in Mercier's office, I suddenly woke from a dream. Then I had another dream, I lived in the Tsar's court, in old palaces so cold that the icicles formed above the doors in winter. Today I wake up in front of a pad of white paper. The torches, the ice carnivals, the uniforms, the lovely cool shoulders have disappeared. *Something* has stayed behind in this warm room, something I don't want to see.

M. de Rollebon was my partner; he needed me in order to exist and I needed him so as not to feel my existence. I furnished the raw material, the material I had to re-sell, which I didn't know what to do with: existence, *my* existence. His part was to have an imposing appearance. He stood in front of me, took up my life to *lay bare* his own to me. I did not notice that I existed any more, I no longer existed in myself, but in him; I ate for him, breathed for him, each of my movements had its sense outside, there, just in front of me, in him; I no longer saw my hand writing letters on the paper, not even the sentence I had written—but behind, beyond the paper, I saw the Marquis

who had claimed the gesture as his own, the gesture which prolonged, consolidated his existence. I was only a means of making him live, he was my reason for living, he had delivered me from myself. What shall I do now?

Above all, not move, *not move* . . . Ah!

I could not prevent this movement of the shoulders . . .

The thing which was waiting was on the alert, it has pounced on me, it flows through me, I am filled with it. It's nothing: I am the Thing. Existence, liberated, detached, floods over me. I exist.

I exist. It's sweet, so sweet, so slow. And light: you'd think it floated all by itself. It stirs. It brushes by me, melts and vanishes. Gently, gently. There is bubbling water in my mouth. I swallow. It slides down my throat, it caresses me—and now it comes up again into my mouth. For ever I shall have a little pool of whitish water in my mouth—lying low—grazing my tongue. And this pool is still me. And the tongue. And the throat is me.

I see my hand spread out on the table. It lives—it is me. It opens, the fingers open and point. It is lying on its back. It shows me its fat belly. It looks like an animal turned upside down. The fingers are the paws. I amuse myself by moving them very rapidly, like the claws of a crab which has fallen on its back.

The crab is dead: the claws draw up and close over the belly of my hand. I see the nails—the only part of me that doesn't live. And once more. My hand turns over, spreads out flat on its stomach, offers me the sight of its back. A silvery back, shining a little—like a fish except for the red hairs on the knuckles. I feel my hand. I am these two beasts struggling at the end of my arms. My hand scratches one of its paws with the nail of the other paw; I feel its weight on the table which is not me. It's long, long, this impression of weight, it doesn't

pass. There is no reason for it to pass. It becomes intolerable . . . I draw back my hand and put it in my pocket; but immediately I feel the warmth of my thigh through the stuff. I pull my hand out of my pocket and let it hang against the back of the chair. Now I feel a weight at the end of my arm. It pulls a little, softly, insinuatingly it exists. I don't insist: no matter where I put it it will go on existing; I can't suppress it, nor can I suppress the rest of my body, the sweaty warmth which soils my shirt, nor all this warm obesity which turns lazily, as if someone were stirring it with a spoon, nor all the sensations going on inside, going, coming, mounting from my side to my armpit or quietly vegetating from morning to night, in their usual corner.

I jump up: it would be much better if I could only stop thinking. Thoughts are the dullest things. Duller than flesh. They stretch out and there's no end to them and they leave a funny taste in the mouth. Then there are words, inside the thoughts, unfinished words, a sketchy sentence which constantly returns: "I have to fi. . . I ex. . . Dead . . . M. de Roll is dead . . . I am not . . . I ex. . ." It goes, it goes . . . and there's no end to it. It's worse than the rest because I feel responsible and have complicity in it. For example, this sort of painful rumination: *I exist*, I am the one who keeps it up. I. The body lives by itself once it has begun. But thought—*I* am the one who continues it, unrolls it. I exist. How serpentine is this feeling of existing—I unwind it, slowly. . . . If I could keep myself from thinking! I try, and succeed: my head seems to fill with smoke . . . and then it starts again: "Smoke . . . not to think . . . don't want to think . . . I think I don't want to think. I mustn't think that I don't want to think. Because that's still a thought." Will there never be an end to it?

My thought is *me*: that's why I can't stop. I exist because I think . . . and I can't stop myself from thinking. At this very

moment—it's frightful—if I exist, it is because I am horrified at existing. *I am the one* who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire: the hatred, the disgust of existing, there are as many ways to *make* myself exist, to thrust myself into existence. Thoughts are born at the back of me, like sudden giddiness, I feel them being born behind my head . . . if I yield, they're going to come round in front of me, between my eyes—and I always yield, the thought grows and grows and there it is, immense, filling me completely and renewing my existence.

My saliva is sugary, my body warm: I feel neutral. My knife is on the table. I open it. Why not? It would be a change in any case. I put my left hand on the pad and stab the knife into the palm. The movement was too nervous; the blade slipped, the wound is superficial. It bleeds. Then what? What has changed? Still, I watch with satisfaction, on the white paper, across the lines I wrote a little while ago, this tiny pool of blood which has at last stopped being me. Four lines on a white paper, a spot of blood, that makes a beautiful memory. I must write beneath it: "Today I gave up writing my book on the Marquis de Rollebon."

Am I going to take care of my hand? I wonder. I watch the small, monotonous trickle of blood. Now it is coagulating. It's over. My skin looks rusty around the cut. Under the skin, the only thing left is a small sensation exactly like the others, perhaps even more insipid.

Half-past five strikes. I get up, my cold shirt sticks to my flesh. I go out. Why? Well, because I have no reason not to. Even if I stay, even if I crouch silently in a corner, I shall not forget myself. I will be there, my weight on the floor. I am.

I buy a newspaper along my way. Sensational news. Little Lucienne's body has been found! Smell of ink, the paper crumples between my fingers. The criminal has fled. The child

was raped. They found her body, the fingers clawing at the mud. I roll the paper into a ball, my fingers clutching at the paper; smell of ink; my God how strongly things exist today. Little Lucienne was raped. Strangled. Her body still exists, her flesh bleeding. *She* no longer exists. Her hands. She no longer exists. The houses. I walk between the houses, I am between the houses, on the pavement; the pavement under my feet exists, the houses close around me, as the water closes over me, on the paper the shape of a swan. I am. I am, I exist, I think, therefore I am; I am because I think, why do I think? I don't want to think any more, I am because I think that I don't want to be, I think that I . . . because . . . ugh! I flee. The criminal has fled, the violated body. She felt this other flesh pushing into her own. I . . . there I . . . Raped. A soft, criminal desire to rape catches me from behind, gently behind the ears, the ears race behind me, the red hair, it is red on my head, the wet grass, red grass, is it still I? Hold the paper, existence against existence, things exist one against the other, I drop the paper. The house springs up, it exists; in front of me, along the wall I am passing, along the wall I exist, in front of the wall, one step, the wall exists in front of me, one, two, behind me, a finger scratching at my pants, scratches, scratches and pulls at the little finger soiled with mud, mud on my finger which came from the muddy gutter and falls back slowly, softly, softening, scratching less strongly than the fingers of the little girl the criminal strangled, scratching the mud, the earth less strong, the finger slides slowly, the head falls first and rolling embraces my thigh; existence is soft, and rolls and tosses, I toss between the houses, I am, I exist, I think therefore I toss, I am, existence is a fallen chute, will not fall, will fall, the finger scratches at the window, existence is an imperfection. The gentleman. The handsome gentleman exists. The gentleman feels that he exists. No, the handsome gentleman who passes, proud and gentle

as a convolvulus, does not feel that he exists. To expand ; my cut hand hurts, exist, exist, exist. The handsome gentleman exists, the Legion of Honour, the moustache exists, it is all ; how happy one must be to be nothing more than a Legion of Honour and a moustache and no one sees the rest, he sees the two pointed ends of his moustache on both sides of the nose ; I do not think, therefore I am a moustache. He sees neither his gaunt body nor his big feet, if you looked in the crotch of the trousers you would surely discover a pair of little balls. He has the Legion of Honour, the bastards have the right to exist : "I exist because it is my right," I have the right to exist, therefore I have the right not to think : the finger is raised. Am I going to . . . caress in the opening of white sheets the white ecstatic flesh which falls back gently, touch the blossoming moisture of armpits, the elixirs and cordials and florescence of flesh, enter into the existence of another, into the red mucus with the heavy, sweet, sweet odour of existence, feel myself exist between these soft, wet lips, the lips red with pale blood, throbbing lips yawning, all wet with existence, all wet with clear pus, between the wet sugary lips weeping like eyes ? My body of living flesh which murmurs and turns gently, liquors which turn to cream, the flesh which turns, turns, the sweet sugary water of my flesh, the blood on my hand. I suffer in my wounded flesh which turns, walks, I walk, I flee, I am a criminal with bleeding flesh, bleeding with existence to these walls. I am cold, I take a step, I am cold, a step, I turn left, he turns left, he thinks he turns left, mad, am I mad ? He says he is afraid of going mad, existence, do you see into existence, he stops, the body stops, he thinks he stops, where does he come from ? What is he doing ? He starts off, he is afraid, terribly afraid, the criminal, desire like a fog, desire, disgust, he says he is disgusted with existence, is he disgusted, weary of being disgusted with existence ? He runs. What does he hope

for ? He runs to flee to throw himself into the lake ? He runs, the heart, the heart beats, it's a holiday, the heart exists, the legs exist, the breath exists, they exist running, breathing, beating, all soft, all gently breathless, leaving me breathless, he says he's breathless ; existence takes my thoughts from behind and gently expands them *from behind* ; someone takes me from behind, they force me to think from behind, therefore to be something, behind me, breathing in light bubbles of existence, he is a bubble of fog and desire, he is pale as death in the glass, Rollebon is dead, Antoine Roquentin is not dead, I'm fainting : he says he would like to faint, he runs, he runs like a ferret, " from behind " from behind *from behind*, little Lucienne assaulted from behind, violated by existence from behind, he begs for mercy, he is ashamed of begging for mercy, pity, help, help therefore I exist, he goes into the Bar de la Marine, the little mirrors of the little brothel, he is pale in the little mirrors of the little brothel the big redhead who drops onto a bench, the gramophone plays, exists, all spins, the gramophone exists, the heart beats : spin, spin, liquors of life, spin, jellies, sweet sirops of my flesh, sweetness, the gramophone :

When that yellow moon begins to beam
Every night I dream my little dream.

The voice, deep and hoarse, suddenly appears and the world vanishes, the world of existence. A woman in the flesh had this voice, she sang in front of a record, in her finest get up, and they recorded her voice. The woman : bah! she existed like me, like Rollebon, I don't want to know her. But there it is. You can't say it exists. The turning record exists, the air struck by the voice which vibrates, exists, the voice which made an impression on the record existed. I who listen, I exist. All is full, existence everywhere, dense, heavy and sweet. But, beyond

all this sweetness, inaccessible, near and so far, young, merciless and serene, there is this . . . this rigour.

Tuesday:

Nothing. Existed.

Wednesday:

There is a sunbeam on the paper napkin. In the sunbeam there is a fly, dragging himself along, stupefied, sunning himself and rubbing his antennæ one against the other. I am going to do him the favour of squashing him. He does not see this giant finger advancing with the gold hairs shining in the sun.

"Don't kill it, Monsieur!" the Self-Taught Man shouted.

"I did it a favour."

Why am I here?—and why shouldn't I be here? It is noon, I am waiting for it to be time to sleep. (Fortunately sleep has not fled from me.) In four days I shall see Anny again: for the moment, my sole reason for living. And afterwards? When Anny leaves me? I know what I surreptitiously hope for: I hope she will never leave me. Yet I should know that Anny would never agree to grow old in front of me. I am weak and lonely, I need her. I would have liked to see her again in my strength: Anny is without pity for strayed sheep.

"Are you well, Monsieur? Do you feel all right?"

The Self-Taught Man looks at me out of the corner of his eyes, laughing. He pants a little, his mouth open, like a dog. I admit: this morning I was almost glad to see him, I needed to talk.

"How glad I am to have you at my table," he says. "If you're cold, we could go and sit next to the stove. These gentlemen are leaving soon, they've asked for the bill."

The Self-Taught Man puts down the menu, breaks his bread into small bits and rubs his knife and fork with his napkin. He glances at the white-haired man reading the paper, then smiles at me:

"I usually come here with a book, even though it's against doctor's orders: one eats too quickly and doesn't chew. But I have a stomach like an ostrich, I can swallow anything. During the winter of 1917, when I was a prisoner, the food was so bad that everyone got ill. Naturally, I went on the sick list like everybody else: but nothing was the matter."

He had been a prisoner of war. . . . This is the first time he mentioned it to me; I can't get over it: I can't picture him as anything other than the Self-Taught Man.

"Where were you a prisoner?"

He doesn't answer. He puts down his fork and looks at me with prodigious intensity. He is going to tell me his troubles: now I remember he said something was wrong, in the library. I am all ears: I am only too glad to feel pity for other people's troubles, that will make a change. I have no troubles, I have money like a capitalist, no boss, no wife, no children; I exist, that's all. And that trouble is so vague, so metaphysical that I am ashamed of it.

The Self-Taught Man doesn't seem to want to talk. What a curious look he gives me. It isn't a casual glance, but heart searching. The soul of the Self-Taught Man is in his eyes, his magnificent, blindman's eyes, where it blooms. Let mine do the same, let it come and stick its nose against the windows: they could exchange greetings.

I don't want any communion of souls, I haven't fallen so low. I draw back. But the Self-Taught Man throws his chest out above the table, his eyes never leaving mine. Fortunately the waitress brings him his radishes. He drops back in his chair, his soul leaves his eyes, and he docilely begins to eat.

zip. The waitress, a little disappointed, turns to the young woman. But once more he is ahead of her and helps the girl out of her coat with gentle, precise movements. They sit near us, one against the other. They don't look as if they'd known each other very long. The young woman has a weary face, pure and a little sullen. She suddenly takes off her hat, shakes her black hair and smiles.

The Self-Taught Man studies them at great length, with a kindly eye; then he turns to me and winks tenderly as if to say: "How wonderful they are!"

They are not ugly. They are quiet, happy at being together, happy at being seen together. Sometimes when Anny and I went into a restaurant in Piccadilly we felt ourselves the objects of admiring attention. It annoyed Anny, but I must confess that I was somewhat proud. Above all, amazed; I never had the clean-cut look that goes so well with that young man and no one could even say that my ugliness was touching. Only we were young: now, I am at the age to be touched by the youth of others. But I am not touched. The woman has dark, gentle eyes; the young man's skin has an orange hue, a little leathery, and a charming, small, obstinate chin. They are touching, but they also make me a little sick. I feel them so far from me: the warmth makes them languid, they pursue the same dream in their hearts, so low, so feeble. They are comfortable, they look with assurance at the yellow walls, the people, and they find the world pleasant as it is just as it is, and each one of them, temporarily, draws life from the life of the other. Soon the two of them will make a single life, a slow, tepid life which will have no sense at all—but they won't notice it.

They look as though they frighten each other. Finally, the young man, awkward and resolute, takes the girl's hand with the tips of his fingers. She breathes heavily and together they lean over the menu. Yes, they're happy. So what.

"You must have confidence in life," the young man says; "the way you are this moment isn't living."

She sighs:

"I know!"

"Look at Jeannette."

"Yes," she says, making a little grimace.

"Well, I think what she did was splendid. She had courage."

"You know," the young woman says, "she rather jumped at the opportunity. You must know that if I'd wanted, I could have had a hundred opportunities like that. I preferred to wait."

"You were right," he says, tenderly, "you were right in waiting for me."

She laughs in turn:

"Great stupid! I didn't say that."

I don't listen to them any more: they annoy me. They're going to sleep together. They know it. Each one knows that the other knows it. But since they are young, chaste and decent, since each one wants to keep his self-respect and that of the other, since love is a great poetic thing which you must not frighten away, several times a week they go to dances and restaurants, offering the spectacle of their ritual, mechanical dances. . . .

After all, you have to kill time. They are young and well built, they have enough to last them another thirty years. So they're in no hurry, they delay and they are not wrong. Once they have slept together they will have to find something else to veil the enormous absurdity of their existence. Still . . . is it absolutely necessary to lie?

I glance around the room. What a comedy! All these people sitting there, looking serious, eating. No, they aren't eating: they are recuperating in order to successfully finish their tasks. Each one of them has his little personal difficulty which keeps him from noticing that he exists; there isn't one of them who believes himself indispensable to something or someone. Didn't

the Self-Taught Man tell me the other day: "No one better qualified than Nouçapié to undertake this vast synthesis?" Each one of them does one small thing and no one is better qualified than he to do it. No one is better qualified than the commercial traveller over there to sell Swan Toothpaste. No one is better qualified than that interesting young man to put his hand under his girl friend's skirts. And I am among them and if they look at me they must think that no one is better qualified than I to do what I'm doing. But *I know*. I don't look like much, but I know I exist and that they exist. And if I knew how to convince people I'd go and sit down next to that handsome white-haired gentleman and explain to him just what existence means. I burst out laughing at the thought of the face he would make. The Self-Taught Man looks at me with surprise. I'd like to stop but I can't; I laugh until I cry.

"You are gay, Monsieur," the Self-Taught Man says to me circumspectly.

"I was just thinking," I tell him, laughing, "that here we sit, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence and really there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing."

The Self-Taught Man becomes serious, he makes an effort to understand me. I laughed too loud: I saw several faces turn towards me. Then I regretted having said so much. After all, that's nobody's business.

He repeats slowly:

"No reason for existing. . . . You undoubtedly mean, Monsieur, that life is without a goal? Isn't that what one might call pessimism?"

He thinks for an instant, then says gently:

"A few years ago I read a book by an American author. It was called *Is Life Worth Living?* Isn't that the question you are asking yourself?"

Certainly not, that is not the question I am asking myself. But I have no desire to explain.

"His conclusion," the Self-Taught Man says, consolingly, "is in favour of voluntary optimism. Life has a meaning if we choose to give it one. One must first act, throw one's self into some enterprise. Then, if one reflects, the die is already cast, one is pledged. I don't know what you think about that, Monsieur?"

"Nothing," I say.

Rather I think that that is precisely the sort of lie that the commercial traveller, the two young people and the man with white hair tell themselves.

The Self-Taught Man smiles with a little malice and much solemnity.

"Neither is it my opinion. I do not think we need look so far to know the direction our life should take."

"Ah?"

"There is a goal, Monsieur, there is a goal . . . there is humanity."

That's right: I forgot he was a humanist. He remains silent for a moment, long enough to make most of his spiced beef and a whole slice of bread disappear cleanly and inexorably. "There are people . . ." He has just painted a whole picture of himself, this philanthropist. Yes, but he doesn't know how to express himself. His soul is in his eyes, unquestionably, but soul is not enough. Before, when I used to hang around some Parisian humanists, I would hear them say a hundred times: "there are people," and it was quite another thing. Virgan was without equal. He would take off his spectacles, as if to show himself naked in his man's flesh, and stare at me with eloquent eyes, with a weary, insistent look which seemed to undress me, and drag out my human essence, then he would murmur melodiously: "There are people, old man, there are

"A little while ago I spoke of my captivity in Germany. It all started there. Before the War I was lonely and didn't realize it; I lived with my parents, good people, but I didn't get on with them. When I think of those years. . . . How could I have lived that way? I was dead, Monsieur, and I didn't know it; I had a collection of postage stamps."

He looks at me and interrupts himself:

"Monsieur, you are pale, you look fatigued. I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"You interest me greatly."

"Then the War came and I enlisted without knowing why. I spent two years without understanding, because life at the front left little time for thought and besides, the soldiers were too common. I was taken prisoner at the end of 1917. Since then I have been told that many soldiers recovered their childhood faith while they were prisoners. Monsieur," the Self-Taught Man says, lowering his eyelids over bloodshot eyes, "I do not believe in God; His existence is belied by science. But, in the internment camp, I learned to believe in men."

"They bore their fate with courage?"

"Yes," he says vaguely, "there was that, too. Besides, we were well treated. But I wanted to speak of something else; the last months of the War, they hardly gave us any work to do. When it rained they made us go into a big wooden shed, about two hundred of us altogether, jammed in tightly. They closed the door and left us there, pressed one against the other, in almost total darkness."

He hesitated an instant.

"I don't know how to explain it, Monsieur. All those men were there, you could hardly see them but you could feel them against you, you could hear the sound of their breathing. . . . One of the first times they locked us in the shed, the crush was so great that at first I thought I was going to suffocate,

then, suddenly, an overwhelming joy came over me, I almost fainted: then I felt that I loved these men like brothers, I wanted to embrace all of them. Each time I went back there I felt the same joy."

I have to eat my chicken which by now must be cold. The Self-Taught Man has been silent for a long time and the waitress is waiting to change the plates.

"That shed took on a sacred character in my eyes. Sometimes I managed to escape the watchfulness of my guards, I slipped into it all alone and there, in the shadow, the memory of the joys I had known, filled me with a sort of ecstasy. Hours passed and I did not notice them. Sometimes I wept."

I must be sick: there is no other way of explaining this terrible rage which suddenly overwhelms me. Yes, the rage of a sick man: my hands were shaking, the blood had rushed to my face, and finally my lips began to tremble. All that simply because the chicken was cold. I was cold too and that was the worst: I mean that inside me I was cold, freezing, and had been like that for thirty-six hours. Anger passed through me like a whirlwind, my conscience, effort to react, to fight against this lowered temperature caused something like a tremor to pass through me. Vain effort: undoubtedly, for nothing. I would have rained down blows and curses on the Self-Taught Man or the waitress. But I should not have been in the spirit of it. My rage and fury struggled to the surface and, for a moment, I had the terrible impression of being turned into a block of ice enveloped in fire, a kind of "omelette surprise." This momentary agitation vanished and I heard the Self-Taught Man say:

"Every Sunday I used to go to Mass. Monsieur, I have never been a believer. But couldn't one say that the real mystery of the Mass is the communion of souls? A French chaplain, who had only one arm, celebrated the Mass. We had a harmonium. We listened, standing, our heads bare, and as the

sounds of the harmonium carried me away, I felt myself at one with all the men surrounding me. Ah, Monsieur, how I loved those Masses. Even now, in memory of them, I sometimes go to church on Sunday morning. We have a remarkable organist at Sainte-Cécile."

"You must have often missed that life?"

"Yes, Monsieur, in 1919, the year of my liberation, I spent many miserable months. I didn't know what to do with myself, I was wasting away. Whenever I saw men together I would insert myself into their group. It has happened to me," he added, smiling, "to follow the funeral procession of a stranger. One day, in despair, I threw my stamp collection in the fire. . . . But I found my vocation."

"Really?"

"Someone advised me . . . Monsieur, I know that I can count on your discretion. I am—perhaps these are not your ideas, but you are so broad-minded—I am a Socialist."

He lowered his eyes and his long lashes trembled:

"I have been a registered member of the Socialist Party, S.F.I.O., since the month of September 1921. That is what I wanted to tell you."

He is radiant with pride. He gazes at me, his head thrown back, his eyes half-closed, mouth open, looking like a martyr.

"That's very fine," I say, "that's very fine."

"Monsieur, I knew that you would commend me. And how could you blame someone who comes and tells you: I have spent my life in such and such a way, I am perfectly happy?"

He spreads his arms and presents his open palms to me, the fingers pointing to the ground, as if he were about to receive the stigmata. His eyes are glassy, I see a dark pink mass rolling in his mouth.

"Ah," I say, "as long as you're happy. . . ."

"Happy?" His look is disconcerting, he has raised his

eyelids and stares harshly at me. "You will be able to judge, Monsieur. Before taking this decision I felt myself in a solitude so frightful that I contemplated suicide. What held me back was the idea that no one, absolutely no one, would be moved by my death, that I would be even more alone in death than in life."

He straightens himself, his cheeks swell.

"I am no longer lonely, Monsieur. I shall never be so."

"Ah, you know a lot of people?" I ask.

He smiles and I immediately realize my mistake.

"I mean that I no longer *feel* alone. But naturally, Monsieur, it is not necessary for me to be with anyone."

"But," I say, "what about the Socialist section. . . ."

"Ah! I know everybody there. But most of them only by name. Monsieur," he says mischievously, "is one obliged to choose his friends so narrowly? All men are my friends. When I go to the office in the morning, in front of me, behind me, there are other men going to work. I see them, if I dared I would smile at them, I think that I am a Socialist, that all of them are my life's goal, the goal of my efforts and that they don't know it yet. It's a holiday for me, Monsieur."

His eyes question me; I nod approval, but I feel he is a little disappointed, that he would like more enthusiasm. What can I do? Is it my fault if, in all he tells me, I recognize the lack of the genuine article? Is it my fault if, as he speaks, I see all the humanists I have known rise up? I've known so many of them! The radical humanist is the particular friend of officials. The so-called "left" humanist's main worry is keeping human values; he belongs to no party because he does not want to betray the human, but his sympathies go towards the humble; he consecrates his beautiful classic culture to the humble. He is generally a widower with a fine eye always clouded with tears: he weeps at anniversaries. He also loves cats, dogs, and

all the higher mammals. The Communist writer has been loving men since the second Five-Year Plan; he punishes because he loves. Modest as all strong men, he knows how to hide his feelings, but he also knows, by a look, an inflection of his voice, how to recognize, behind his rough and ready justicial utterances, his passion for his brethren. The Catholic humanist, the late-comer, the Benjamin, speaks of men with a marvellous air. What a beautiful fairy tale, says he, is the humble life of a London dockhand, the girl in the shoe factory! He has chosen the humanism of the angels; he writes, for their edification, long, sad and beautiful novels which frequently win the Prix Femina.

Those are the principal rôles. But there are others, a swarm of others: the humanist philosopher who bends over his brothers like a wise elder brother who has a sense of his responsibilities; the humanist who loves men as they are, the humanist who loves men as they ought to be, the one who wants to save them with their consent and the one who will save them in spite of themselves, the one who wants to create new myths, and the one who is satisfied with the old ones, the one who loves death in man, the one who loves life in man, the happy humanist who always has the right word to make people laugh, the sober humanist whom you meet especially at funerals or wakes. They all hate each other: as individuals, naturally not as men. But the Self-Taught Man doesn't know it: he has locked them up inside himself like cats in a bag and they are tearing each other in pieces without his noticing it.

He is already looking at me with less confidence.

"Don't you feel as I do, Monsieur?"

"Gracious . . ."

Under his troubled, somewhat spiteful glance, I regret disappointing him for a second. But he continues amiably:

"I know: you have your research, your books, you serve the same cause in your own way."

My books, *my* research: the imbecile. He couldn't have made a worse howler.

"That's not why I'm writing."

At that instant the face of the Self-Taught Man is transformed: as if he had scented the enemy. I had never seen that expression on his face before. Something has died between us.

Feigning surprise, he asks:

"But . . . if I'm not being indiscreet, why do you write, Monsieur?"

"I don't know: just to write."

He smiles, he thinks he has put me out:

"Would you write on a desert island? Doesn't one always write to be read?"

He gave this sentence his usual interrogative turn. In reality, he is affirming. His veneer of gentleness and timidity has peeled off; I don't recognize him any more. His features assume an air of heavy obstinacy; a wall of sufficiency. I still haven't got over my astonishment when I hear him say:

"If someone tells me: I write for a certain social class, for a group of friends. Good luck to them. Perhaps you write for posterity. . . . But, Monsieur, in spite of yourself, you write for someone."

He waits for an answer. When it doesn't come, he smiles feebly.

"Perhaps you are a misanthrope?"

I know what this fallacious effort at conciliation hides. He asks little from me: simply to accept a label. But it is a trap: if I consent, the Self-Taught Man wins, I am immediately turned round, reconstituted, overtaken, for humanism takes possession and melts all human attitudes into one. If you oppose him head on, you play his game; he lives off his opponents. There is a race of beings, limited and headstrong, who lose to him every time: he digests all their violences and worst excesses.

he makes a white, frothy lymph of them. He has digested anti-intellectualism, manicheism, mysticism, pessimism, anarchy and egotism: they are nothing more than stages, unfinished thoughts which find their justification only in him. Misanthropy also has its place in the concert: it is only a dissonance necessary to the harmony of the whole. The misanthrope is a man: therefore the humanist must be misanthropic to a certain extent. But he must be a scientist as well to have learned how to water down his hatred, and hate men only to love them better afterwards.

I don't want to be integrated, I don't want my good red blood to go and fatten this lymphatic beast: I will not be fool enough to call myself "anti-humanist." I *am not* a humanist, that's all there is to it.

"I believe," I tell the Self-Taught Man, "that one cannot hate a man more than one can love him."

The Self-Taught Man looks at me pityingly and aloof. He murmurs, as though he were paying no attention to his words:

"You must love them, you must love them. . . ."

"Whom must you love? The people here?"

"They too. All."

He turns towards the radiant young couple: that's what you must love. For a moment he contemplates the man with white hair. Then his look returns to me: I read a mute question on his face. I shake my head: "No." He seems to pity me.

"You don't either," I tell him, annoyed, "you don't love them."

"Really, Monsieur? Would you allow me to differ?"

He has become respectful again, respectful to the tip of his toes, but in his eyes he has the ironic look of someone who is amusing himself enormously. He hates me. I should have been wrong to have any feeling for this maniac. I question him in my turn.

"So, those two young people behind you—you love them?"

He looks at them again, ponders:

"You want to make me say," he begins, suspiciously, "that I love them without knowing them. Well, Monsieur, I confess, I don't know them. . . . Unless love is knowing," he adds with a foolish laugh.

"But what do you love?"

"I see they are young and I love the youth in them. Among other things, Monsieur."

He interrupts himself and listens:

"Do you understand what they're saying?"

Do I understand? The young man, emboldened by the sympathy which surrounds him, tells, in a loud voice, about a football game his team won against a club from Le Havre last year.

"He's telling a story," I say to the Self-Taught Man.

"Ah! I can't hear them very well. But I hear the voices, the soft voice, the grave voice: they alternate. It's . . . it's so sympathetic."

"Only I also hear what they're saying, unfortunately."

"Well?"

"They're playing a comedy."

"Really? The comedy of youth, perhaps?" he asks ironically. "Allow me, Monsieur, to find that quite profitable. Is playing it enough to make one young again?"

I stay deaf to his irony; I continue:

"You turn your back on them, what they say escapes you. . . . What colour is the woman's hair?"

He is worried:

"Well, I . . ." He glances quickly at the young couple an regains his assurance. "Black!"

"So you see!"

"See what?"

"You see that you don't love them. You wouldn't recognize them in the street. They're only symbols in your eyes. You are not at all touched by them: you're touched by the Youth of the Man, the Love of Man and Woman, the Human Voice."

"Well? Doesn't that exist?"

"Certainly not, it doesn't exist! Neither Youth nor Maturity nor Old Age nor Death. . . ."

The face of the Self-Taught Man, hard and yellow as a quince, has stiffened into a reproachful lockjaw. Nevertheless, I keep on:

"Just like that old man drinking Vichy water there behind you. I suppose you love the Mature Man in him: Mature Man going courageously towards his decline and who takes care of himself because he doesn't want to let himself go?"

"Exactly," he says definitely.

"And you don't think he's a bastard?"

He laughs, he finds me frivolous, he glances quickly at the handsome face framed in white hair:

"But Monsieur, admitting that he seems to be what you say, how can you judge a man by his face? A face, Monsieur, tells nothing when it is at rest."

Blind humanists! This face is so outspoken, so frank—but their tender, abstract soul will never let itself be touched by the sense of a face.

"How can you," the Self-Taught Man says, "*stop* a man, say he *is* this or that? Who can empty a man! Who can know the resources of a man?"

Empty a man! I salute, in passing, the Catholic humanism from which the Self-Taught Man borrowed this formula without realizing it.

"I know," I tell him, "I know that all men are admirable. You are admirable. I am admirable. In as far as we are creations of God, naturally."

happy all the week imagining this luncheon, where he could share his love of men with another man. He has so rarely the opportunity to speak. And now I have spoiled his pleasure. At heart he is as lonely as I am : no one cares about him. Only he doesn't realize his solitude. Well, yes : but it wasn't up to me to open his eyes. I feel very ill at ease : I'm furious, but not against him, against Virgan and the others, all the ones who have poisoned this poor brain. If I could have them here in front of me I would have much to say to them. I shall say nothing to the Self-Taught Man, I have only sympathy for him : he is someone like M. Achille, someone on my side, but who has been betrayed by ignorance and good will!

A burst of laughter from the Self-Taught Man pulls me out of my sad reflections.

" You will excuse me, but when I think of the depth of my love for people, of the force which impels me towards them and when I see us here, reasoning, arguing . . . it makes me want to laugh."

I keep quiet, I smile constrainedly. The waitress puts a plate of chalky Camembert in front of me. I glance around the room and a violent disgust floods me. What am I doing here ? Why did I have to get mixed up in a discussion on humanism ? Why are these people here ? Why are they eating ? It's true they don't know they exist. I want to leave, go to some place where I will be really in my own niche, where I will fit in. . . . But my place is nowhere ; I am unwanted, de trop.

The Self-Taught Man grows softer. He expected more resistance on my part. He is ready to pass a sponge over all I have said. He leans towards me confidentially :

" You love them at heart, Monsieur, you love them as I do : we are separated by words."

I can't speak any more, I bow my head. The Self-Taught Man's face is close to mine. He smiles foolishly, all the while

close to my face, like a nightmare. With difficulty I chew a piece of bread which I can't make up my mind to swallow. People. You must love people. Men are admirable. I want to vomit—and suddenly, there it is : the Nausea.

A fine climax : it shakes me from top to bottom. I saw it coming more than an hour ago, only I didn't want to admit it. This taste of cheese in my mouth. . . . The Self-Taught Man is babbling and his voice buzzes gently in my ears. But I don't know what he's talking about. I nod my head mechanically. My hand is clutching the handle of the dessert knife. I *feel* this black wooden handle. My hand holds it. My hand. Personally, I would rather let this knife alone : what good is it to be always touching something ? Objects are not made to be touched. It is better to slip between them, avoiding them as much as possible. Sometimes you take one of them in your hand and you have to drop it quickly. The knife falls on the plate. The white-haired man starts and looks at me. I pick up the knife again, I rest the blade against the table and bend it.

So this is Nausea : this blinding evidence ? I have scratched my head over it! I've written about it. Now I know : I exist—the world exists—and I know that the world exists. That's all. It makes no difference to me. It's strange that everything makes so little difference to me : it frightens me. Ever since the day I wanted to play ducks and drakes. I was going to throw that pebble, I looked at it and then it all began : I felt that it *existed.* Then after that there were other Nauseas ; from time to time objects start existing in your hand. There was the Nausea of the "Railwaymen's Rendezvous" and then another, before that, the night I was looking out the window ; then another in the park, one Sunday, then others. But it had never been as strong as today.

" . . . Of ancient Rome, Monsieur ? "

They don't answer. I leave. Now the colour will come back to their cheeks, they'll begin to jabber.

I don't know where to go, I stay planted in front of the cardboard chef. I don't need to turn around to know they are watching me through the windows: they are watching my back with surprise and disgust; they thought I was like them, that I was a man, and I deceived them. I suddenly lost the appearance of a man and they saw a crab running backwards out of this human room. Now the unmasked intruder has fled: the show goes on. It annoys me to feel on my back this stirring of eyes and frightened thoughts. I cross the street. The other pavement runs along the beach and the bath houses.

Many people are walking along the shore, turning poetic springtime faces towards the sea; they're having a holiday because of the sun. There are lightly dressed women who have put on last spring's outfit; they pass, long and white as kid gloves; there are also big boys who go to high school and the School of Commerce, old men with medals. They don't know each other but they look at each other with an air of connivance because it's such a fine day and they are men. Strangers embrace each other when war is declared; they smile at each other every spring. A priest advances slowly, reading his breviary. Now and then he raises his head and looks at the sea approvingly:—the sea is also a breviary, it speaks of God. Delicate colours, delicate perfumes, souls of spring. "What a lovely day, the sea is green, I like this dry cold better than the damp." Poets! If I grabbed one of them by the back of the coat, if I told him: "Come, help me," he'd think, "What's this crab doing here?" and would run off, leaving his coat in my hands.

I turn back, lean both hands on the balustrade. The *true* sea is cold and black, full of animals; it crawls under this thin green film made to deceive human beings. The sylphs all round

me have let themselves be taken in: they only see the thin film, which proves the existence of God. I see beneath it! The veneer melts, the shining velvety scales, the scales of God's catch explode everywhere at my look, they split and gape. Here is the Saint-Elémir tramway, I turn round and the objects turn with me, pale and green as oysters.

Useless, it was useless to get in since I don't want to go anywhere.

Bluish objects pass the windows. In jerks all stiff and brittle; people, walls; a house offers me its black heart through open windows; and the windows pale, all that is black becomes blue, blue this great yellow brick house advancing uncertainly, trembling, suddenly stopping and taking a nose dive. A man gets on and sits down opposite to me. The yellow house starts up again, it leaps against the windows, it is so close that you can only see part of it, it is obscured. The windows rattle. It rises, crushing, higher than you can see, with hundreds of windows opened on black hearts; it slides along the car brushing past it; night has come between the rattling windows. It slides interminably, yellow as mud, and the windows are sky blue. Suddenly it is no longer there, it has stayed behind, a sharp, grey illumination fills the car and spreads everywhere with inexorable justice: it is the sky; through the windows you can still see layer on layer of sky because we're going up Eliphar Hill and you can see clearly between the two slopes, on the right as far as the sea, on the left as far as the airfield. No smoking—not even a *gitane*.

I lean my hand on the seat but pull it back hurriedly: it exists. This thing I'm sitting on, leaning my hand on, is called a seat. They made it purposely for people to sit on, they took leather, springs and cloth, they went to work with the idea of making a seat and when they finished, *that* was what they had made. They carried it here, into this car and the car is now

rolling and jolting with its rattling windows, carrying this red thing in its bosom. I murmur: "It's a seat," a little like an exorcism. But the word stays on my lips: it refuses to go and put itself on the thing. It stays what it is, with its red plush, thousands of little red paws in the air, all still, little dead paws. This enormous belly turned upward, bleeding, inflated—bloated with all its dead paws, this belly floating in this car, in this grey sky, is not a seat. It could just as well be a dead donkey tossed about in the water, floating with the current, belly in the air in a great grey river, a river of floods; and I could be sitting on the donkey's belly, my feet dangling in the clear water. Things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenceless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me. They demand nothing, they don't impose themselves: they are there. Under the cushion on the seat there is a thin line of shadow, a thin black line running along the seat, mysteriously and mischievously, almost a smile. I know very well that it isn't a smile and yet it exists, it runs under the whitish windows, under the jangle of glass, obstinately, obstinately behind the blue images which pass in a throng, like the inexact memory of a smile, like a half forgotten word of which you can only remember the first syllable and the best thing you can do is turn your eyes away and think about something else, about that man half-lying down on the seat opposite me, there. His blue-eyed, terra cotta face. The whole right side of his body has sunk, the right arm is stuck to the body, the right side barely lives, it lives with difficulty, with avarice, as if it were paralysed. But on the whole left side there is a little parasitic existence, which proliferates; a chancre: the arm begins to tremble and then is raised up and the hand at the end is stiff. Then the hand

begins to tremble too and when it reaches the height of the skull, a finger stretches out and begins scratching the scalp with a nail. A sort of voluptuous grimace comes to inhabit the right side of the mouth and the left side stays dead. The windows rattle, the arm shakes, the nail scratches, scratches, the mouth smiles under the staring eyes and the man tolerates, hardly noticing it, this tiny existence which swells his right side, which has borrowed his right arm and right cheek to bring itself into being. The conductor blocks my path.

"Wait until the car stops."

But I push him aside and jump out of the tramway. I couldn't stand any more. I could no longer stand things being so close. I push open a gate, go in, airy creatures are bounding and leaping and perching on the peaks. Now I recognize myself, I know where I am: I'm in the park. I drop onto a bench between great black tree-trunks, between the black, knotty hands reaching towards the sky. A tree scrapes at the earth under my feet with a black nail. I would so like to let myself go, forget myself, sleep. But I can't, I'm suffocating: existence penetrates me everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth. . . .

And suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have *seen*.

6.00 *p.m.*

I can't say I feel relieved or satisfied; just the opposite, I am crushed. Only my goal is reached: I know what I wanted to know; I have understood all that has happened to me since January. The Nausea has not left me and I don't believe it will leave me so soon; but I no longer have to bear it, it is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is I.

So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn't

remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me. Then I had this vision.

It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of "existence." I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, all dressed in their spring finery. I said, like them, "The ocean *is* green; that white speck up there *is* a seagull," but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an "existing seagull"; usually existence hides itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is *us*, you can't say two words without mentioning it, but you can never touch it. When I believed I was thinking about it, I must believe that I was thinking nothing, my head was empty, or there was just one word in my head, the word "to be." Or else I was thinking . . . how can I explain it? I was thinking of *belonging*, I was telling myself that the sea belonged to the class of green objects, or that the green was a part of the quality of the sea. Even when I looked at things, I was miles from dreaming that they existed: they looked like scenery to me. I picked them up in my hands, they served me as tools, I foresaw their resistance. But that all happened on the surface. If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This

veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness.

I kept myself from making the slightest movement, but I didn't need to move in order to see, behind the trees, the blue columns and the lamp-posts of the bandstand and the Velleda, in the midst of a mountain of laurel. All these objects . . . how can I explain? They inconvenienced me; I would have liked them to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve. The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green rust covered it half-way up; the bark, black and swollen, looked like boiled leather. The sound of the water in the Masqueret Fountain sounded in my ears, made a nest there, filled them with signs; my nostrils overflowed with a green, putrid odour. All things, gently, tenderly, were letting themselves drift into existence like those relaxed women who burst out laughing and say: "It's good to laugh," in a wet voice; they were parading, one in front of the other, exchanging abject secrets about their existence. I realized that there was no half-way house between non-existence and this flaunting abundance. If you existed, you had to *exist all the way*, as far as mouldiness, bloatedness, obscenity were concerned. In another world, circles, bars of music keep their pure and rigid lines. But existence is a deflection. Trees, night-blue pillars, the happy bubbling of a fountain, vital smells, little heat-mists floating in the cold air, a red-haired man digesting on a bench: all this somnolence, all these meals digested together, had its comic side.... Comic... no: it didn't go as far as that, nothing that exists can be comic; it was like a floating analogy, almost entirely elusive, with certain aspects of vaudeville. We were a heap of living creatures, irritated, embarrassed at ourselves, we hadn't the slightest reason to be there, none of us, each one, confused, vaguely alarmed, felt in the way in relation to the others. *In the way:* it was the only relationship I could establish

between these trees, these gates, these stones. In vain I tried to *count* the chestnut trees, to *locate* them by their relationship to the Velleda, to compare their height with the height of the plane trees: each of them escaped the relationship in which I tried to enclose it, isolated itself, and overflowed. Of these relations (which I insisted on maintaining in order to delay the crumbling of the human world, measures, quantities, and directions)—I felt myself to be the arbitrator; they no longer had their teeth into things. *In the way*, the chestnut tree there, opposite me, a little to the left. *In the way*, the Velleda. . . .

And I—soft, weak, obscene, digesting, juggling with dismal thoughts—I, too, was *In the way*. Fortunately, I didn't feel it, although I realized it, but I was uncomfortable because I was afraid of feeling it (even now I am afraid—afraid that it might catch me behind my head and lift me up like a wave). I dreamed vaguely of killing myself to wipe out at least one of these superfluous lives. But even my death would have been *In the way*. *In the way*, my corpse, my blood on these stones, between these plants, at the back of this smiling garden. And the decomposed flesh would have been *In the way* in the earth which would receive my bones, at last, cleaned, stripped, peeled, proper and clean as teeth, it would have been *In the way*: I was *In the way* for eternity.

The word absurdity is coming to life under my pen; a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn't find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn't need it: I thought without words, *on* things, *with* things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice, only this long serpent dead at my feet, this wooden serpent. Serpent or claw or root or vulture's talon, what difference does it make. And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nauseas, to my own life. In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental absurdity.

Absurdity: another word; I struggle against words; down there I touched the thing. But I wanted to fix the absolute character of this absurdity here. A movement, an event in the tiny coloured world of men is only relatively absurd: by relation to the accompanying circumstances. A madman's ravings, for example, are absurd in relation to the situation in which he finds himself, but not in relation to his delirium. But a little while ago I made an experiment with the absolute or the absurd. This root—there was nothing in relation to which it was absurd. Oh, how can I put it in words? Absurd: in relation to the stones, the tufts of yellow grass, the dry mud, the tree, the sky, the green benches. Absurd, irreducible; nothing—not even a profound, secret upheaval of nature—could explain it. Evidently I did not know everything, I had not seen the seeds sprout, or the tree grow. But faced with this great wrinkled paw, neither ignorance nor knowledge was important: the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence. A circle is not absurd, it is clearly explained by the rotation of a straight segment around one of its extremities. But neither does a circle exist. This root, on the other hand, existed in such a way that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, brought me back unceasingly to its own existence. In vain to repeat: "This is a root"—it didn't work any more. I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a breathing pump, *to that*, to this hard and compact skin of a sea lion, to this oily, callous, headstrong look. The function explained nothing: it allowed you to understand generally that it was a root, but not *that one* at all. This root, with its colour, shape, its congealed movement, was . . . below all explanation. Each of its qualities escaped it a little, flowed out of it, half solidified, almost became a thing; each one was *in the way* in the root and the whole stump now gave me the impression of un-

winding itself a little, denying its existence to lose itself in a frenzied excess. I scraped my heel against this black claw: I wanted to peel off some of the bark. For no reason at all, out of defiance, to make the bare pink appear absurd on the tanned leather: to *play* with the absurdity of the world. But, when I drew my heel back, I saw that the bark was still black.

Black? I felt the word deflating, emptied of meaning with extraordinary rapidity. Black? The root *was not* black, there was no black on this piece of wood—there was . . . something else: black, like the circle, did not exist. I looked at the root: was it *more than* black or *almost* black? But I soon stopped questioning myself because I had the feeling of knowing where I was. Yes, I had already scrutinized innumerable objects, with deep uneasiness. I had already tried—vainly—to think something *about* them: and I had already felt their cold, inert qualities elude me, slip through my fingers. Adolphe's suspenders, the other evening in the "Railwaymen's Rendezvous." They *were not* purple. I saw the two inexplicable stains on the shirt. And the stone—the well-known stone, the origin of this whole business: it was not . . . I can't remember exactly just what it was that the stone refused to be. But I had not forgotten its passive resistance. And the hand of the Self-Taught Man; I held it and shook it one day in the library and then I had the feeling that it wasn't quite a hand. I had thought of a great white worm, but that wasn't it either. And the suspicious transparency of the glass of beer in the Café Mably. Suspicious: that's what they were, the sounds, the smells, the tastes. When they ran quickly under your nose like startled hares and you didn't pay too much attention, you might believe them to be simple and reassuring, you might believe that there was real blue in the world, real red, a real perfume of almonds or violets. But as soon as you held on to them for an instant, this feeling of comfort and security gave way to a deep uneasiness: colours,

tastes, and smells were never real, never themselves and nothing but themselves. The simplest, most indefinable quality had too much content, in relation to itself, in its heart. That black against my foot, it didn't look like black, but rather the confused effort to imagine black by someone who had never seen black and who wouldn't know how to stop, who would have imagined an ambiguous being beyond colours. It *looked* like a colour, but also . . . like a bruise or a secretion, like an oozing—and something else, an odour, for example, it melted into the odour of wet earth, warm, moist wood, into a black odour that spread like varnish over this sensitive wood, in a flavour of chewed, sweet fibre. I did not simply *see* this black : sight is an abstract invention, a simplified idea, one of man's ideas. That black, amorphous, weakly presence, far surpassed sight, smell and taste. But this richness was lost in confusion and finally was no more because it was too much.

This moment was extraordinary. I was there, motionless and icy, plunged in a horrible ecstasy. But something fresh had just appeared in the very heart of this ecstasy ; I understood the Nausea, I possessed it. To tell the truth, I did not formulate my discoveries to myself. But I think it would be easy for me to put them in words now. The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is simply *to be there* ; those who exist let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce anything from them. I believe there are people who have understood this. Only they tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence : contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated ; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift. All is free, this park, this city and myself. When you realize that, it turns your heart upside down and everything begins to float, as the other evening at the " Railwaymen's

Rendezvous" : here is Nausea ; here there is what those bastards —the ones on the Coteau Vert and others—try to hide from themselves with their idea of their rights. But what a poor lie : no one has any rights ; they are entirely free, like other men, they cannot succeed in not feeling superfluous. And in themselves, secretly, they are *superfluous*, that is to say, amorphous, vague, and sad.

How long will this fascination last ? I *was* the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was entirely conscious of its existence. Still detached from it—since I was conscious of it—yet lost in it, nothing but it. An uneasy conscience which, notwithstanding, let itself fall with all its weight on this piece of dead wood. Time had stopped : a small black pool at my feet ; it was impossible for something to come *after* that moment. I would have liked to tear myself from that atrocious joy, but I did not even imagine it would be possible ; I was inside ; the black stump did *not move*, it stayed there, in my eyes, as a lump of food sticks in the windpipe. I could neither accept nor refuse it. At what a cost did I raise my eyes ? Did I raise them ? Rather did I not obliterate myself for an instant in order to be reborn in the following instant with my head thrown back and my eyes raised upward ? In fact, I was not even conscious of the transformation. But suddenly it became impossible for me to think of the existence of the root. It was wiped out, I could repeat in vain : it exists, it is still there, under the bench, against my right foot, it no longer meant anything. Existence is not something which lets itself be thought of from a distance ; it must invade you suddenly, master you, weigh heavily on your heart like a great motionless beast—or else there is nothing more at all.

There was nothing more, my eyes were empty and I was spellbound by my deliverance. Then suddenly it began to move before my eyes in light, uncertain motions : the wind was shaking the top of the tree.

It did not displease me to see a movement, it was a change from these motionless beings who watched me like staring eyes. I told myself, as I followed the swinging of the branches: movements never quite exist, they are passages, intermediaries between two existences, moments of weakness, I expected to see them come out of nothingness, progressively ripen, blossom: I was finally going to surprise beings in the process of being born.

No more than three seconds, and all my hopes were swept away. I could not attribute the passage of time to these branches groping around like blind men. This idea of passage was still an invention of man. The idea was too transparent. All these paltry agitations, drew in on themselves, isolated. They overflowed the leaves and branches everywhere. They whirled about these empty hands, enveloped them with tiny whirlwinds. Of course a movement was something different from a tree. But it was still an absolute. A thing. My eyes only encountered completion. The tips of the branches rustled with existence which unceasingly renewed itself and which was never born. The existing wind rested on the tree like a great bluebottle, and the tree shuddered. But the shudder was not a nascent quality, a passing from power to action; it was a thing; a shudder-thing flowed into the tree, took possession of it, shook it and suddenly abandoned it, going further on to spin about itself. All was fullness and all was active, there was no weakness in time, all, even the least perceptible stirring, was made of existence. And all these existents which bustled about this tree came from nowhere and were going nowhere. Suddenly they existed, then suddenly they existed no longer: existence is without memory; of the vanished it retains nothing —not even a memory. Existence everywhere, infinitely, in excess, for ever and everywhere; existence—which is limited only by existence. I sank down on the bench, stupefied, stunned

by this profusion of beings without origin: everywhere blossomings, hatchings out, my ears buzzed with existence, my very flesh throbbed and opened, abandoned itself to the universal burgeoning. It was repugnant. But why, I thought, why so many existences, since they all look alike? What good are so many duplicates of trees? So many existences missed, obstinately begun again and again missed—like the awkward efforts of an insect fallen on its back? (I was one of those efforts.) That abundance did not give the effect of generosity, just the opposite. It was dismal, ailing, embarrassed at itself. Those trees, those great clumsy bodies. . . . I began to laugh because I suddenly thought of the formidable springs described in books, full of crackings, burstings, gigantic explosions. There were those idiots who came to tell you about will-power and struggle for life. Hadn't they ever seen a beast or a tree? This plane-tree with its scaling bark, this half-rotten oak, they wanted me to take them for rugged youthful endeavour surging towards the sky. And that root? I would have undoubtedly had to represent it as a voracious claw tearing at the earth, devouring its food?

Impossible to see things that way. Weaknesses, frailties, yes. The trees floated. Gushing towards the sky? Or rather a collapse; at any instant I expected to see the tree-trunks shrivel like weary wands, crumple up, fall on the ground in a soft, folded, black heap. *They did not want* to exist, only they could not help themselves. So they quietly minded their own business; the sap rose up slowly through the structure, half reluctant, and the roots sank slowly into the earth. But at each instant they seemed on the verge of leaving everything there and obliterating themselves. Tired and old, they kept on existing, against the grain, simply because they were too weak to die, because death could only come to them from the outside: strains of music alone can proudly carry their own death within

themselves like an internal necessity: only they don't exist. Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance. I leaned back and closed my eyes. But the images, forewarned, immediately leaped up and filled my closed eyes with existences: existence is a fullness which man can never abandon.

Strange images. They represented a multitude of things. Not real things, other things which looked like them. Wooden objects which looked like chairs, shoes, other objects which looked like plants. And then two faces: the couple who were eating opposite to me last Sunday in the Brasserie Vezelize. Fat, hot, sensual, absurd, with red ears. I could see the woman's neck and shoulders. Nude existence. Those two—it suddenly gave me a turn—those two were still existing somewhere in Bouville; somewhere—in the midst of smells?—this soft throat rubbing up luxuriously against smooth stuffs, nestling in lace; and the woman picturing her bosom under her blouse, thinking: "My titties, my lovely fruits," smiling mysteriously, attentive to the swelling of her breasts which tickled . . . then I shouted and found myself with my eyes wide open.

Had I dreamed of this enormous presence? It was there, in the garden, toppled down into the trees, all soft, sticky, soiling everything, all thick, à jelly. And I was inside, I with the garden. I was frightened, furious, I thought it was so stupid, so out of place, I hated this ignoble mess. Mounting up, mounting up as high as the sky, spilling over, filling everything with its gelatinous slither, and I could see depths upon depths of it reaching far beyond the limits of the garden, the houses, and Bouville, as far as the eye could reach. I was no longer in Bouville, I was nowhere, I was floating. I was not surprised, I knew it was the World, the naked World suddenly revealing itself, and I choked with rage at this gross, absurd being. You couldn't even wonder where all that sprang from,

or how it was that a world came into existence, rather than nothingness. It didn't make sense, the World was everywhere, in front, behind. There had been nothing *before* it. Nothing. There had never been a moment in which it could not have existed. That was what worried me: of course there was no *reason* for this flowing larva to exist. *But it was impossible* for it not to exist. It was unthinkable: to imagine nothingness you had to be there already, in the midst of the World, eyes wide open and alive; nothingness was only an idea in my head, an existing idea floating in this immensity: this nothingness had not come *before* existence, it was an existence like any other and appeared after many others. I shouted "filth! what rotten filth!" and shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth, but it held fast and there was so much, tons and tons of existence, endless: I stifled at the depths of this immense weariness. And then suddenly the park emptied as through a great hole, the World disappeared as it had come, or else I woke up—in any case, I saw no more of it; nothing was left but the yellow earth around me, out of which dead branches rose upward.

I got up and went out. Once at the gate, I turned back. Then the garden smiled at me. I leaned against the gate and watched for a long time. The smile of the trees, of the laurel, *meant* something; that was the real secret of existence. I remembered one Sunday, not more than three weeks ago, I had already detected everywhere a sort of conspiratorial air. Was it in my intention? I felt with boredom that I had no way of understanding. No way. Yet it was there, waiting, looking at one. It was there on the trunk of the chestnut tree . . . it was *the* chestnut tree. Things—you might have called them thoughts—which stopped halfway, which were forgotten, which forgot what they wanted to think and which stayed like that, hanging about with an odd little sense which was beyond them. That little sense annoyed me: I *could not* understand it, even if I

could have stayed leaning against the gate for a century; I had learned all I could know about existence. I left, I went back to the hotel and I wrote.

Night:

I have made my decision: I have no more reason for staying in Bouville since I'm not writing my book any more; I'm going to live in Paris, I'll take the five o'clock train, on Saturday I'll see Anny; I think we'll spend a few days together. Then I'll come back here to settle my accounts and pack my trunks. By March 1, at the latest, I will be definitely installed in Paris.

Friday:

In the "Railwaymen's Rendezvous." My train leaves in twenty minutes. The gramophone. Strong feeling of adventure.

Saturday:

Anny opens to me in a long black dress. Naturally, she does not put out her hand, she doesn't say hello. Sullenly and quickly, to get the formalities over with, she says:

"Come in and sit down anywhere—except on the armchair near the window."

It's really she. She lets her arms hang, she has the morose face which made her look like an awkward adolescent girl. But she doesn't look like a little girl any more. She is fat, her breasts are heavy.

She closes the door, and says meditatively to herself:

"I don't know whether I'm going to sit on the bed. . . ."

Finally she drops on to a sort of chest covered with a carpet. Her walk is no longer the same: she moves with a majestic

" That's where you're mistaken."

" Not I. Anyhow, it doesn't matter. I'm glad to know that it exists, that it measures the exact ten-millionth part of a quarter of a meridian. I think about it every time they start taking measurements in an apartment or when people sell me cloth by the yard."

" Is that so ? " I say coldly.

" But you know, I could very well think of you only as an abstract virtue, a sort of limit. You should be grateful to me for remembering your face each time."

Here we are back to these alexandrine discussions I had to go through before when in my heart I had the simplest, commonest desires, such as telling her I loved her, taking her in my arms. Today I have no such desire. Except perhaps a desire to be quiet and to look at her, to realize in silence all the importance of this extraordinary event : the presence of Anny opposite me. Is this day like any other day for her ? Her hands are not trembling. She must have had something to tell me the day she wrote—or perhaps it was only a whim. Now there has been no question of it for a long time.

Anny suddenly smiles at me with a tenderness so apparent that tears come to my eyes.

" I've thought about you much more often than that yard of platinum. There hasn't been a day when I haven't thought of you. And I remembered exactly what you looked like—every detail."

She gets up, comes and rests her arms on my shoulders.

" You complain about me, but you daren't pretend you remembered my face."

" That's not fair," I say, " you know I have a bad memory."

" You admit it : you'd forgotten me completely. Would you have known me in the street ? "

" Naturally. It's not a question of that."

past resentments fully alive. Just the opposite for me, all is drowned in poetic impression; I am ready for all concessions.

Suddenly she says in a toneless voice:

"You see, I'm getting fat, I'm getting old. I have to take care of myself."

Yes. And how weary she looks! Just as I am about to speak, she adds:

"I was in the theatre in London."

"With Candler?"

"No, of course not with Candler. How like you! You had it in your head that I was going to act with Candler. How many times must I tell you that Candler is the orchestra leader? No, in a little theatre, in Soho Square. We played *The Emperor Jones*, some Synge and O'Casey, and *Britannicus*."

"*Britannicus*?" I say, amazed.

"Yes, *Britannicus*. I quit because of that. I was the one who gave them the idea of putting on *Britannicus* and they wanted to make me play Junie."

"Really?"

"Well, naturally I could only play Agrippine."

"And now what are you doing?"

I was wrong in asking that. Life fades entirely from her face. Still she answers at once:

"I'm not acting any more. I travel. I'm being kept."

She smiles:

"Oh, don't look at me in that solicitous way. I always told you it didn't make any difference to me, being kept. Besides, he's an old man, he isn't any trouble."

"English?"

"What does it matter to you?" she says, irritated. "We're not going to talk about him. He has no importance whatsoever for you or me. Do you want some tea?"

She goes into the bathroom. I hear her moving around, rattling

my shoulders, your mania for talking to yourself. You're still reading Michelet's *History*. And a lot of other things. . . ."

This profound interest which she brings to my eternal essence and her total indifference to all that can happen to me in this life—and then this curious affectation, at once charming and pedantic—and this way of suppressing from the very outset all the mechanical formulas of politeness, friendship, all that makes relationships between people easier, forever obliging her partners to invent a rôle.

She shrugs:

"Yes, I have changed," she says dryly, "I have changed in every way. I'm not the same person any more. I thought you'd notice it as soon as you saw me. Instead you talk to me about Michelet's *History*."

She comes and stands in front of me.

"We'll see whether this man is as strong as he pretends. Guess: how have I changed?"

I hesitate; she taps her foot, still smiling, but sincerely annoyed.

"There was something that tormented you before. Or at least you pretended it did. And now it's gone, disappeared. You should notice it. Don't you feel more comfortable?"

I dare only to answer no: I am, just as before, sitting on the edge of the chair, careful to avoid ambushes, ready to conjure away inexplicable rages.

She sits down again.

"Well," she says, nodding her head with conviction, "if you don't understand, it's because you've forgotten things. More than I thought. Come on, don't you remember your misdeeds any more? You came, you spoke, you went: all contrarily. Supposing nothing had changed: you would have come in, there'd have been masks and shawls on the wall, I'd have been sitting on the bed and I'd have said (she throws her

"Oh," she says with crushing scorn, "intellectual changes! I've changed to the very whites of my eyes."

To the very whites of her eyes. . . . What startles me about her voice? Anyhow, I suddenly give a jump. I stop looking for an Anny who isn't there. This is the girl, here, this fat girl with a ruined look who touches me and whom I love.

"I have a sort of . . . physical certainty. I feel there are no more perfect moments. I feel it in my legs when I walk. I feel it all the time, even when I sleep. I can't forget it. There has never been anything like a revelation; I can't say: starting on such and such a day, at such a time, my life has been transformed. But now I always feel a bit as if I'd suddenly seen it yesterday. I'm dazzled, uncomfortable, I can't get used to it."

She says these words in a calm voice with a touch of pride at having changed. She balances herself on the chest with extraordinary grace. Not once since I came has she more strongly resembled the Anny of before, the Anny of Marseilles. She has caught me again, once more I have plunged into her strange universe, beyond ridicule, affectation, subtlety. I have even recovered the little fever that always stirred in me when I was with her, and this bitter taste in the back of my mouth.

Anny unclasps her hands and drops her knee. She is silent. A concerted silence, as when, at the Opera, the stage is empty for exactly seven measures of music. She drinks her tea. Then she puts down her cup and holds herself stiffly, leaning her clasped hands on the back of the chest.

Suddenly she puts on her superb look of Medusa, which I loved so much, all swollen with hate, twisted, venomous. Anny hardly changes expression; she changes faces; as the actors of antiquity changed masks: suddenly. And each one of the masks is destined to create atmosphere, to give tone to what follows. It appears and stays without modification as she speaks. Then it falls, detached from her.

She stares at me without seeming to see me. She is going to speak. I expect a tragic speech, heightened to the dignity of her mask, a funeral oration.

She does not say a single word.

"I outlive myself."

The tone does not correspond in any way to her face. It is not tragic, it is . . . horrible: it expresses a dry despair, without tears, without pity. Yes, something in her has irremediably dried out.

The masks falls, she smiles.

"I'm not at all sad. I am often amazed at it, but I was wrong: why should I be sad? I used to be capable of rather splendid passions. I hated my mother passionately. And you," she says defiantly, "I loved you passionately."

She waits for an answer. I say nothing.

"All that is over, of course."

"How can you tell?"

"I know. I know that I shall never again meet anything or anybody who will inspire me with passion. You know, it's quite a job starting to love somebody. You have to have energy, generosity, blindness. There is even a moment, in the very beginning, when you have to jump across a precipice: if you think about it you don't do it. I know I'll never jump again."

"Why?"

She looks at me ironically and does not answer.

"Now," she says, "I live surrounded with my dead passions. I try to recapture the fine fury that threw me off the fourth floor, when I was twelve, the day my mother whipped me."

She adds with apparent inconsequence, and a far-away look:

"It isn't good for me to stare at things too long. I look at them to find out what they are, then I have to turn my eyes away quickly."

"Why?"

"They disgust me."

It would almost seem . . . There are surely similarities, in any case. It happened once in London, we had separately thought the same things about the same subjects, almost at the same time. I'd like so much to . . . But Anny's mind takes many turnings, you can never be sure you've understood her completely. I must get to the heart of it.

"Listen, I want to tell you something: you know, I never quite knew what perfect moments were; you never explained them to me."

"Yes, I know. You made absolutely no effort. You sat beside me like a lump on a log."

"I know what it cost me."

"You deserved everything that happened to you, you were very wicked; you annoyed me with your stolid look. You seemed to say: I'm normal; and you practically breathed health, you dripped with moral well-being."

"Still, I must have asked you a hundred times at least what a . . ."

"Yes, but in what a tone of voice," she says, angrily; "you condescended to inform yourself, and that's the whole truth. You were kindly and *distrait*, like the old ladies who used to ask me what I was playing when I was little. At heart," she says dreamily, "I wonder if you weren't the one I hated most."

She makes a great effort to collect herself and smiles, her cheeks still flaming. She is very beautiful.

"I want to explain what they are. I'm old enough now to talk calmly to old women like you about my childhood games. Go ahead, talk, what do you want to know?"

"What they were."

"I told you about the privileged situations?"

"I don't think so."

"Yes," she says with assurance. "It was in Aix, in that square, I don't remember the name any more. We were in the courtyard of a café, in the sun, under orange parasols. You don't remember: we drank lemonade and I found a dead fly in the powdered sugar."

"Ah yes, maybe . . ."

"Well, I talked to you about that in the café. I talked to you about it à propos of the big edition of Michelet's *History*, the one I had when I was little. It was a lot bigger than this one and the pages were livid, like the inside of a mushroom. When my father died, my Uncle Joseph got his hands on it and took away all the volumes. That was the day I called him a dirty pig and my mother whipped me and I jumped out the window."

"Yes, yes . . . you must have told me about that *History of France*. . . . Didn't you read it in the attic? You see, I remember. You see, you were unjust when you accused me of forgetting everything a little while ago."

"Be quiet. Yes, as you remember so well, I carried those enormous books to the attic. There were very few pictures in them, maybe three or four in each volume. But each one had a big page all to itself, and the other side of the page was blank. That had much more effect on me than the other pages where they'd arranged the text in two columns to save space. I had an extraordinary love for those pictures; I knew them all by heart, and whenever I read one of Michelet's books, I'd wait for them fifty pages in advance; it always seemed a miracle to find them again. And then there was something better: the scene they showed never had any relation to the text on the next page, you had to go looking for the event thirty pages farther on."

"I beg you, tell me about the perfect moments."

"I'm talking about privileged situations. They were the ones the pictures told about. I called them privileged, I told myself they must have been terribly important to be made the

"So you realized that there were always women in tears, or a red-headed man, or something else to spoil your effects?"

"Yes, naturally," she answers without enthusiasm.

"Isn't that it?"

"Oh, you know, I might have resigned myself in the end to the clumsiness of a red-headed man. After all, I was always interested in the way other people played their parts . . . no, it's that . . ."

"That there are no more privileged situations?"

"That's it. I used to think that hate or love or death descended on us like tongues of fire on Good Friday. I thought one could radiate hate or death. What a mistake! Yes, I really thought that 'Hate' existed, that it came over people and raised them above themselves. Naturally, I am the only one, I am the one who hates, who loves. But it's always the same thing, a piece of dough that gets longer and longer . . . everything looks so much alike that you wonder how people got the idea of inventing names, to make distinctions."

She thinks as I do. It seems as though I had never left her.

"Listen carefully," I say, "for the past moment I've been thinking of something that pleases me much more than the rôle of a milestone you generously gave me to play: it's that we've changed together and in the same way. I like that better, you know, than to see you going farther and farther away and being condemned to mark your point of departure forever. All that you've told me—I came to tell you the same thing—though with other words, of course. We meet at the arrival. I can't tell you how pleased I am."

"Yes?" she says gently, but with an obstinate look. "Well, I'd still have liked it better if you hadn't changed; it was more convenient. I'm not like you, it rather displeases me to know that someone has thought the same things I have. Besides, you must be mistaken."

I tell her my adventures, I tell her about existence—perhaps at too great length. She listens carefully, her eyes wide open and her eyebrows raised.

When I finish, she looks soothed.

"Well, you're not thinking like me at all. You complain because things don't arrange themselves around you like a bouquet of flowers, without your taking the slightest trouble to do anything. But I have never asked as much: I wanted action. You know, when we played adventurer and adventuress: you were the one who had adventures, I was the one who made them happen. I said: I'm a man of action. Remember? Well, now I simply say: one can't be a man of action."

I couldn't have looked convinced because she became animated and began again, with more energy:

"Then there's a heap of things I haven't told you, because it would take too long to explain. For example, I had to be able to tell myself at the very moment I took action that what I was doing would have . . . fatal results. I can't explain that to you very well. . . ."

"It's quite useless," I say, somewhat pedantically, "I've thought that too."

She looks at me with scorn.

"You'd like me to believe you've thought exactly the same way I have: you really amaze me."

I can't convince her, all I do is irritate her. I keep quiet. I want to take her in my arms.

Suddenly she looks at me anxiously:

"Well, if you've thought about all that, what can you do?"

I bow my head.

"I . . . I outlive myself," she repeats heavily.

What can I tell her? Do I know any reasons for living? I'm not as desperate as she is because I didn't expect much.

you rarely come across anything more than minerals, the least frightening of all existants.

I am going back to Bouville. The vegetation has only surrounded three sides of it. On the fourth side there is a great hole full of black water which moves all by itself. The wind whistles between the houses. The odours stay less time there than anywhere : chased out to sea by the wind, they race along the surface of the black water like playful mists. It rains. They let plants grow between the gratings. Castrated, domesticated, so fat that they are harmless. They have enormous, whitish leaves which hang like ears. When you touch them it feels like cartilage, everything is fat and white in Bouville because of all the water that falls from the sky. I am going back to Bouville. How horrible!

I wake up with a start. It is midnight. Anny left Paris six hours ago. The boat is already at sea. She is sleeping in a cabin and, up on deck, the handsome bronze man is smoking cigarettes.

Tuesday, in Bouville:

Is that what freedom is ? Below me, the gardens go limply down towards the city, and a house rises up from each garden. I see the ocean, heavy, motionless, I see Bouville. It is a lovely day.

I am free : there is absolutely no more reason for living, all the ones I have tried have given way and I can't imagine any more of them. I am still fairly young, I still have enough strength to start again. But do I have to start again ? How much, in the strongest of my terrors, my disgusts, I had counted on Anny to save me I realized only now. My past is dead. The Marquis de Rollebon is dead, Anny came back only to take all hope away. I am alone in this white, garden-rimmed street. Alone and free. But this freedom is rather like death.

Today my life is ending. By tomorrow I will have left this town which spreads out at my feet, where I have lived so long. It will be nothing more than a name, squat, bourgeois, quite French, a name in my memory, not as rich as the names of Florence or Bagdad. A time will come when I shall wonder: whatever could I have done all day long when I was in Bouville? Nothing will be left of this sunlight, this afternoon, not even a memory.

My whole life is behind me. I see it completely, I see its shape and the slow movements which have brought me this far. There is little to say about it: a lost game, that's all. Three years ago I came solemnly to Bouville. I had lost the first round. I wanted to play the second and I lost again: I lost the whole game. At the same time, I learned that you always lose. Only the rascals think they win. Now I am going to be like Anny, I am going to outlive myself. Eat, sleep, sleep, eat. Exist slowly, softly, like these trees, like a puddle of water, like the red bench in the streetcar.

The Nausea has given me a short breathing spell. But I know it will come back again: it is my normal state. Only today my body is too exhausted to stand it. Invalids also have happy moments of weakness which take away the consciousness of their illness for a few hours. I am bored, that's all. From time to time I yawn so widely that tears roll down my cheek. It is a profound boredom, profound, the profound heart of existence, the very matter I am made of. I do not neglect myself, quite the contrary: this morning I took a bath and shaved. Only when I think back over those careful little actions, I cannot understand how I was able to make them: they are so vain. Habit, no doubt, made them for me. They aren't dead, they keep on busying themselves, gently, insidiously weaving their webs, they wash me, dry me, dress me, like nurses. Did they also lead me to this hill? I can't remember how I came any

their disposal and every morning it comes back exactly the same. They scarcely doll it up a bit on Sundays. Idiots. It is repugnant to me to think that I am going to see their thick, self-satisfied faces. They make laws, they write popular novels, they get married, they are fools enough to have children. And all this time, great, vague nature has slipped into their city, it has infiltrated everywhere, in their house, in their office, in themselves. It doesn't move, it stays quietly and they are full of it inside, they breathe it, and they don't see it, they imagine it to be outside, twenty miles from the city. I *see* it, I *see* this nature . . . I know that its obedience is idleness, I know it has no laws: what they take for constancy is only habit and it can change tomorrow.

What if something were to happen? What if something suddenly started throbbing? Then they would notice it was there and they'd think their hearts were going to burst. Then what good would their dykes, bulwarks, power houses, furnaces and pile drivers be to them? It can happen any time, perhaps right now: the omens are present. For example, the father of a family might go out for a walk, and, across the street, he'll see something like a red rag, blown towards him by the wind. And when the rag has gotten close to him he'll see that it is a side of rotten meat, grimy with dust, dragging itself along by crawling, skipping, a piece of writhing flesh rolling in the gutter, spasmodically shooting out spurts of blood. Or a mother might look at her child's cheek and ask him: "What's that—a pimple?" and see the flesh puff out a little, split, open, and at the bottom of the split an eye, a laughing eye might appear. Or they might feel things gently brushing against their bodies, like the caresses of reeds to swimmers in a river. And they will realize that their clothing has become living things. And someone else might feel something scratching in his mouth. He goes to the mirror, opens his mouth: and his tongue

is an enormous, live centipede, rubbing its legs together and scraping his palate. He'd like to spit it out, but the centipede is a part of him and he will have to tear it out with his own hands. And a crowd of things will appear for which people will have to find new names—stone-eye, great three-cornered arm, toe-crutch, spider-jaw. And someone might be sleeping in his comfortable bed, in his quiet, warm room, and wake up naked on a bluish earth, in a forest of rustling birch trees, rising red and white towards the sky like the smokestacks of Jouxte-bouville, with big bumps half-way out of the ground, hairy and bulbous like onions. And birds will fly around these birch trees and pick at them with their beaks and make them bleed. Sperm will flow slowly, gently, from these wounds, sperm mixed with blood, warm and glassy with little bubbles. Or else nothing like that will happen, there will be no appreciable change, but one morning people will open their blinds and be surprised by a sort of frightful sixth sense, brooding heavily over things and seeming to pause. Nothing more than that: but for the little time it lasts, there will be hundreds of suicides. Yes! Let it change just a little, just to see, I don't ask for anything better. Then you will see other people, suddenly plunged into solitude. Men all alone, completely alone with horrible monstrosities, will run through the streets, pass heavily in front of me, their eyes staring, fleeing their ills yet carrying them with them, open-mouthed, with their insect-tongue flapping its wings. Then I'll burst out laughing even though my body may be covered with filthy, infected scabs which blossom into flowers of flesh, violets, buttercups. I'll lean against a wall and when they go by I'll shout: "What's the matter with your science? What have you done with your humanism? Where is your dignity?" I will not be afraid—or at least no more than now. Will it not still be existence, variations on existence? All these eyes which will slowly devour a face—they will undoubtedly be too much,

it hardly existed and that the Nausea had spared it. I went and sat down near the stove. The *Journal de Bouville* was lying on the table. I reached out and took it.

"*Saved by His Dog.*"

"*Yesterday evening, M. Dubosc of Remiredon, was bicycling home from the Naugis Fair . . .*"

A fat woman sat down at my right. She put her felt hat beside her. Her nose was planted on her face like a knife in an apple. Under the nose, a small, obscene hole wrinkled disdainfully. She took a bound book from her bag, leaned her elbows on the table, resting her face against her fat hands. An old man was sleeping opposite me. I knew him: he was in the library the evening I was so frightened. I think he was afraid too. I thought: how far away all that is.

At four-fifteen the Self-Taught Man came in. I would have liked to shake hands and say good-bye to him. But I thought our last meeting must have left him with unpleasant memories: he nodded distantly to me and, far enough away, he set down a small white package which probably contained, as usual, a slice of bread and a piece of chocolate. After a moment, he came back with an illustrated book which he placed near his package. I thought: I am seeing him for the last time. Tomorrow evening, the evening after tomorrow, and all the following evenings, he will return to read at this table, eating his bread and chocolate, he will patiently keep on with his rat's nibbling, he will read the works of Nabaud, Naudeau, Nodier, Nys, interrupting himself from time to time to jot down a maxim in his notebook. And I will be walking in Paris, in Paris streets, I will be seeing new faces. What could happen to me while he would still be here, with the lamp lighting up his heavy pondering face. I felt myself drifting back to the mirage

my eye: it was a hand, the small white hand which slid along the table a little while ago. Now it was resting on its back, relaxed, soft and sensual, it had the indolent nudity of a woman sunning herself after bathing. A brown hairy object approached it, hesitant. It was a thick finger, yellowed by tobacco; inside this hand it had all the grossness of a male sex organ. It stopped for an instant, rigid, pointing at the fragile palm, then suddenly, it timidly began to stroke it. I was not surprised, I was only furious at the Self-Taught Man; couldn't he hold himself back, the fool, didn't he realize the risk he was running? He still had a chance, a small chance: if he were to put both hands on the table, on either side of the book, if he stayed absolutely still, perhaps he might be able to escape his destiny this time. But I *knew* he was going to miss his chance: the finger passed slowly, humbly, over the inert flesh, barely grazing it, without daring to put any weight on it: you might have thought it was conscious of its ugliness. I raised my head brusquely, I couldn't stand this obstinate little back-and-forth movement any more: I tried to catch the Self-Taught Man's eye and I coughed loudly to warn him. But he closed his eyes, he was smiling. His other hand had disappeared under the table. The boys were not laughing any more, they had both turned pale. The brown-haired one pinched his lips, he was afraid, he looked as though what was happening had gone beyond his control. But he did not draw his hand away, he left it on the table, motionless, a little curled. His friend's mouth was open in a stupid, horrified look.

Then the Corsican began to shout. He had come up without anyone hearing him and placed himself behind the Self-Taught Man's chair. He was crimson and looked as though he were going to laugh, but his eyes were flashing. I started up from my chair, but I felt almost relieved: the waiting was too unbearable. I wanted it to be over as soon as possible. I wanted

herself. Even if she loved him with all her heart, it would still be the love of a dead woman. I had her last living love. But there is still something he can give her: pleasure. And if she is fainting and sinking into enjoyment, there is nothing more which attaches her to me. She takes her pleasure and I am no more for her than if I had never met her; she has suddenly emptied herself of me, and all other consciousness in the world has also emptied itself of me. It seems funny. Yet I know that I exist, that *I* am here.

Now when I say "I", it seems hollow to me. I can't manage to feel myself very well, I am so forgotten. The only real thing left in me is existence which feels it exists. I yawn, lengthily. No one. Antoine Roquentin exists for no one. That amuses me. And just what is Antoine Roquentin? An abstraction. A pale reflection of myself wavers in my consciousness. Antoine Roquentin . . . and suddenly the "I" pales, pales, and fades out.

Lucid, static, forlorn, consciousness is walled-up; it perpetuates itself. Nobody lives there any more. A little while ago someone said "me," said *my* consciousness. Who? Outside there were streets, alive with known smells and colours. Now nothing is left but anonymous walls, anonymous consciousness. This is what there is: walls, and between the walls, a small transparency, alive and impersonal. Consciousness exists as a tree, as a blade of grass. It slumbers, it grows bored. Small fugitive presences populate it like birds in the branches. Populate it and disappear. Consciousness forgotten, forsaken between these walls, under this grey sky. And here is the sense of its existence: it is conscious of being superfluous. It dilutes, scatters itself, tries to lose itself on the brown wall, along the lamp-post or down there in the evening mist. But it *never* forgets itself. That is its lot. There is a stifled voice which tells it: "The train leaves in two hours," and there is

I count my money to pass the time.

Twelve hundred francs a month isn't enormous. But if I hold myself back a little it should be enough. A room for 300 francs, 15 francs a day for food: that leaves 450 francs for petty cash, laundry, and movies. I won't need underwear or clothes for a long while. Both my suits are clean, even though they shine at the elbows a little: they'll last me three or four years if I take care of them.

Good God! Is it *I* who is going to lead this mushroom existence? What will I do all day long? I'll take walks. I'll sit on a folding chair in the Tuileries—or rather on a bench, out of economy. I'll read in the libraries. And then what? A movie once a week. And then what? Can I smoke a Voltigeur on Sunday? Shall I play croquet with the retired old men in the Luxembourg? Thirty years old! I pity myself. There are times when I wonder if it wouldn't be better to spend all my 300,000 francs in one year—and after that... But what good would that do me? New clothes? Women? Travel? I've had all that and now it's over, I don't feel like it any more: for what I'd get out of it! A year from now I'd find myself as empty as I am today, without even a memory, and a coward facing death.

Thirty years! And 14,400 francs in the bank. Coupons to cash every month. Yet I'm not an old man! Let them give me something to do, no matter what . . . I'd better think about something else, because I'm playing a comedy now. I know very well that I don't want to do anything: to do something is to create existence—and there's quite enough existence as it is.

The truth is that I can't put down my pen: I think I'm going to have the Nausea and I feel as though I'm delaying it while writing. So I write whatever comes into my mind.

Madeleine, who wants to please me, calls to me from the distance, holding up a record:

" Your record, Monsieur Antoine, the one you like, do you want to hear it for the last time ? "

" Please."

I said that out of politeness, but I don't feel too well disposed to listen to jazz. Still, I'm going to pay attention because, as Madeleine says, I'm hearing it for the last time : it is very old, even too old for the provinces ; I will look for it in vain in Paris. Madeleine goes and sets it on the gramophone, it is going to spin ; in the grooves, the steel needle is going to start jumping and grinding and when the grooves will have spiralled it into the centre of the disc it will be finished and the hoarse voice singing " Some of these days " will be silent forever.

It begins.

To think that there are idiots who get consolation from the fine arts. Like my Aunt Bigeois : " Chopin's Preludes were such a help to me when your poor uncle died." And the concert halls overflow with humiliated, outraged people who close their eyes and try to turn their pale faces into receiving antennæ. They imagine that the sounds flow into them, sweet, nourishing, and that their sufferings become music, like Werther ; they think that beauty is compassionate to them. Mugs.

I'd like them to tell me whether they find this music compassionate. A while ago I was certainly far from swimming in beatitudes. On the surface I was counting my money, mechanically. Underneath stagnated all those unpleasant thoughts which took the form of unformulated questions, mute astonishments and which leave me neither day nor night. Thoughts of Anny, of my wasted life. And then, still further down, Nausea, timid as dawn. But there was no music then, I was morose and calm. All the things around me were made of the same material as I, a sort of messy suffering. The world was so ugly, outside of me, these dirty glasses on the table were so ugly, and the brown stains on the mirror and Madeleine's apron and the

And I, too, wanted to *be*. That is all I wanted; this is the last word. At the bottom of all these attempts which seemed without bonds, I find the same desire again: to drive existence out of me, to rid the passing moments of their fat, to twist them, dry them, purify myself, harden myself, to give back at last the sharp, precise sound of a saxophone note. That could even make an apologue: there was a poor man who got in the wrong world. He existed, like other people, in a world of public parks, bistros, commercial cities and he wanted to persuade himself that he was living somewhere else, behind the canvas of paintings, with the doges of Tintoretto, with Gozzoli's Florentines, behind the pages of books, with Fabrico del Dongo and Julien Sorel, behind the phonograph records, with the long dry laments of jazz. And then, after making a complete fool of himself, he understood, he opened his eyes, he saw that it was a misdeal: he was in a bistro, just in front of a glass of warm beer. He stayed overwhelmed on the bench; he thought: I am a fool. And at that very moment, on the other side of existence, in this other world which you can see in the distance, but without ever approaching it, a little melody began to sing and dance: "You must be like me; you must suffer in rhythm."

The voice sings:

Some of these days
You'll miss me, honey

Someone must have scratched the record at that spot because it makes an odd noise. And there is something that clutches the heart: the melody is absolutely untouched by this tiny coughing of the needle on the record. It is so far—so far behind. I understand that too: the disc is scratched and is wearing out, perhaps the singer is dead; I'm going to leave, I'm going to take my train. But behind the existence which falls from one present to

drowned in existence. Yet no one could think of me as I think of them, with such gentleness. No one, not even Anny. They are a little like dead people for me, a little like the heroes of a novel; they have washed themselves of the sin of existing. Not completely, of course, but as much as any man can. This idea suddenly knocks me over, because I was not even hoping for that any more. I feel something brush against me lightly and I dare not move because I am afraid it will go away. Something I didn't know any more: a sort of joy.

The negress sings. Can you justify your existence then? Just a little? I feel extraordinarily intimidated. It isn't because I have much hope. But I am like a man completely frozen after a trek through the snow and who suddenly comes into a warm room. I think he would stay motionless near the door, still cold, and that slow shudders would go right through him.

Some of these days
You'll miss me, honey

Couldn't I try. . . . Naturally, it wouldn't be a question of a tune . . . but couldn't I, in another medium? . . . It would have to be a book: I don't know how to do anything else. But not a history book: history talks about what has existed—an existant can never justify the existence of another existant. My error, I wanted to resuscitate the Marquis de Rollebon. Another type of book. I don't quite know which kind—but you would have to guess, behind the printed words, behind the pages, at something which would not exist, which would be above existence. A story, for example, something that could never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence.

I must leave, I am vacillating. I dare not make a decision. If I were sure I had talent. . . . But I have never—never written anything of that sort. Historical articles, yes—lots of them. A

book. A novel. And there would be people who would read this book and say: "Antoine Roquentin wrote it, a red-headed man who hung around cafés," and they would think about my life as I think about the negress's: as something precious and almost legendary. A book. Naturally, at first it would only be a troublesome, tiring work, it wouldn't stop me from existing or feeling that I exist. But a time would come when the book would be written, when it would be behind me, and I think that a little of its clarity might fall over my past. Then, perhaps, because of it, I could remember my life without repugnance. Perhaps one day, thinking precisely of this hour, of this gloomy hour in which I wait, stooping, for it to be time to get on the train, perhaps I shall feel my heart beat faster and say to myself: "That was the day, that was the hour, when it all started." And I might succeed—in the past, nothing but the past—in accepting myself.

Night falls. On the second floor of the Hotel Printania two windows have just lighted up. The building-yard of the New Station smells strongly of damp wood: tomorrow it will rain in Bouville.

15f In loneliness all the plausibilities dissolve.

To look in the mirror:
29 nature without humanity.
32 the real flesh —

88 emptiness - past an enormous vacuum
91 Solitude - Nausea
self-taught man - 164
95 past - understanding | memories 91
106 anything can happen among
110 these "unstable beings" |

131: Nothing - only appearances

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54 Something is happening, its beginning

56 Stories - 57 meaninglessness without stories

76: Opposite of nausea is abandonment an knowledge of sterility

86 Bad faith - 119 | 154: Is it absolutely necessary
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cogito ergo sum = sum quia cogito
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