

off his cassock, he dressed himself as a layman. He locked the church and he went away.

That happened to my friend fifteen years ago. Since then, he has been in many places.

You asked me to find out why they would not receive Marie-Louise in the town hospital. You will excuse me for not telling you why before this. You will excuse me especially for having thought that that might prevent you from doing what you have done for her. I cannot forgive myself for having thought this now that I know what you are. When I went to see the mayor, he told me that the hospital was run by the good Sisters, that Marie-Louise was tattooed all over, and that it was not a spectacle for the good Sisters. He told me that Marie-Louise had a serpent tattooed on one leg; that it wound around her thigh and that it plunged its head higher up, in the obvious place. Excuse me, that is what he told me, and it was true.

Thank you again, Monsieur. I shall never forget what you did for her, for the sound of your voice when you talked to her, and that you kissed her twice, once when she was alive, and once when she was dead.



CHAPTER VII

WITH THE end of spring, we had a new guest. He arrived at Massor's house one evening. He gently greeted us at the threshold.

"Is this Monsieur Massor's house?"

"Yes."

"Monsieur Jean sent me."

"Come in."

He entered. He moved very quietly. Over the sound of his living rose the loud buzzing of the gaddies and wasps in the flowering honeysuckle.

It was the dark man.

Outside, the great heat had already eaten the whole surface of the earth to the depth of a hand's breadth and the wind was clad in a thick, heavy, woolly dust that swept through the trees with the roar of fire.

The man looked as if he had just come through a long rain. His hat hung about his head as if it were soaked, and when he removed it, his thin, limp hair drooped over his forehead. He was afraid of bothering people.

"I am in your way," he would say, starting up from his chair.

"Stay where you are," said Madame Massot.

And then Massot, who was paring an ax handle with his knife, stopped and looked up.

"You aren't in anybody's way," he said. "That's just a habit you have of saying that, and it gives a bad impression. There is room for everybody here. If there isn't room, I say, 'Sit outside.' I told you to come in. That was to make you welcome inside. You will see. Take off your coat, roll up your shirt sleeves and come with me. I've been wanting to move the bread trough, and since you are here. . . ."

They placed themselves one at each end of the trough.

"Take care," said Massot, "it is heavy. I have been waiting for a man to come along. Have you got it?"

He took hold of it. He put all his strength into it. His arms trembled like ropes.

"A little more," said Massot.

Then:

"A little to the right."

Then:

"Close to the wall. Nearer. Lift it just a little. There."

He rubbed his hands.

"You see, that is better there. I have been wanting to move that for a long time. But I needed a man."

"Yes," said the man.

And he gently rubbed his hands, then he ran his fingers through his hair.

He had walked the fifteen kilometers to get here and he was white with dust to his waist. A bed had been set up

for him in the loft, between two walls of hay; but a real bed with springs, mattress, those good, heavy sheets from the wardrobe and then the blue spread with the bluebells on it.

Madame Massot showed him up.

"Look out, there is the ladder."

"Thank you."

She raised the trap door.

"You have to push it hard, the hay makes it swing back."

"Thank you."

I could hear them walking overhead in the loft, and the man saying, "You ought not to have gone to so much trouble."

Massot was smoking his pipe. Madame Massot came down.

"He's a polite one, he is," she said.

"I heard you," said Massot. "As far as politeness goes, he is that, but that does not bother me. The rest smells worse."

"What rest?" said Madame Massot.

"That's so," said Massot, "you have only one eye."

With the stem of his pipe he pointed to the heavy bread trough they had moved.

"That," he said.

Now the trough was too near the cupboard; the doors could not be opened wide.

"When one is good for something, one is happy," said Massot; "when one is useless, one is in the way."

"It isn't convenient where it is now," said Madame Massot.

"No, but that is my way of being polite. Some other day, I'll say I've changed my mind and we'll put it back. It will do twice."

Usually I fell asleep as a stone drops into the water. That night there were many new crickets in the ashes, and a crazy wasp was still flying about in the honeysuckle in spite of the darkness. It seemed to me that there was some secret between my father and Massot regarding the dark man. I had seen him only two Saturdays in town and then my father had said to the shepherd, "You come in and tell him."

And at eleven o'clock, Massot came in and said, "Well, is the lesson coming on all right?"

"It looks like it," my father had said.

The dark man was holding the book in his hands and the words "magnificent ewes" were still on his lips. (He was reading about all that wild dance of Ulysses and the Cyclops in a round, mellow voice that deepened into sparkling echoes on the word "cavern," that flowed and dripped in milk and wine and swept like the wind and foam over the sails, the oars, the sea.)

"The trouble is," said Massot, "that I am not going to be able to bring him to you on Saturday. I have ewes in salt. I have some that have lambed. I have some about to lamb. That makes three lots. I'd like the boy to look after the ones with lambs for me. They are calmed, their behinds still ache. They think of nothing but nursing their lambs, lying down, sighing like the grass. And they are easy to manage. I'd like to give him this job."

"Ah!" said my father.

"Yes," said Massot.

And so the dark man had come into this good country home. The whole hill could be heard purring, brushing the village with its foxes, its buzzards, its screech owls, its hoot owls, its weasels, its boars, and its rats that hunted the little frogs beneath the bushes. The moon quivered in the darkness like a reflection in a fountain.

We were steadily moving closer to the sun.

The days received heavy blasts of heat that spattered everything with dust to the very heavens. Under the gray shade of the thyme, exhausted larks crouched with eyes closed, their feathers fluffed out, panting from their flight high up in the sky. All day long beneath the sun's fire they sprang like sparks, fused, whistling, to the bed of the blue sky where there still flowed a slender thread of coolness. Their sparkle vanished and they fell back, gray and weary. The magpies and crows kept watch near the wells. As soon as they heard the creak of the chain, they appeared. They would call to the woman who was drawing water. They came to drink at the puddles of water. They would suddenly take flight. A fox was coming out of the brush, running head down toward the bucket. He saw the woman, leaped backward and returned to the hills. He barked up at the sun. The nights were illumined with the bluish reflection of the earth. Daylight lingered on the horizon. Only in the middle of the sky was there night, a gray night, crackling, split with long, silent flashes of lightning. We were steadily moving closer to the sun.

The women talked together a little in the morning.

There were no men in the village now. The women took their pitchers, they went to the wells. After that there was silence, and one could hear the roar of the baker's oven and the wooden shovel striking against the stones. People had to step over the sleeping dogs. Every Monday morning the church was cleaned. The great doors were opened and two women began to polish the floor with chamois skins. As soon as the church was opened, the old men came to sit in the cool shade filled with busy sounds. They would sit there smoking their pipes and spitting between their feet.

The clock in the belfry alone was alive, just enough to say, "Closer, closer, noon, noon."

Everyone was conscious of it. They recognized the fact by the silence.

It was hard to eat. The wasps slept with outspread wings, borne aloft by the sticky waves of heat like seeds.

About four o'clock, the men returned from the fields. It took a moment to recognize them. They made straight for the tobacco shop. They would set their spades outside the door, or they would cry "Whoa!" to the horse. They would stop the roller in the middle of the street and go in to get fresh tobacco. You must never carry tobacco in your pocket. It would be like coffee grounds.

Lunch was always ready at one end of the table. The man would come and he would drink. After that, he would take half of a cheese, a slice of bread, and begin to munch, elbows on knees, back rounded, eyes on the ground, gradually regaining life in the shade.

"Closer," said the belfry. "Seven o'clock. The sun does not want to set. Tomorrow it will be closer."

The man said nothing. He only munched, looking at his feet and hands.

The sun was dropping behind the hill. Then in the silence rose the sound of the earth whirling dizzily toward the fire.

The curé passed so quickly that one had time to catch only a glimpse of his cassock and the swiftly bent sandal.

"Where's he going?"

Fat Berthe ran by. A door began to bang. Men walked past. They had laid Bernard on a ladder, and four of them were carrying him. Bernard's head had slipped through two of the rungs and was hanging, bobbing up and down, and purple in color. His tongue was protruding and frothing.

"No one must go out now in the middle of the day."

"Closer," said the belfry.

They got the barns ready. They went at night to gather heather to make brooms and they began to sweep the loft floors.

Jerome Barrière leveled his barn floor with a great flat stone that had for a handle the trunk of a small oak. He packed the soil down. He wanted neither hollows nor cracks before emptying his grain out. Massot sharpened his scythes with a hammer. Martial sharpened his sickles on a stone. César filed the teeth of his mowing machine. Turcan turned his grindstone. As it was slightly lopsided the sandstone wheel also thumped in the stable. On the one hand there were these hammer blows, these grinding sounds, these dull thuds of a whole village in preparation,

and on the other hand, outdoors, the long wailing of the earth as it was being swept toward the sun.

"What is that smell?" said Massot.

He sniffed. In the sticky heat there was a terrible odor, sweet and bitter.

"Something is rotting," said the dark man.

They went out. No one was outdoors.

"It seems to be coming from the stable."

They followed the shade along the walls. Massot opened the door of the sheep fold. It was there.

All the ewes were crowded into one corner. They were all huddled against one another so that the stable seemed deserted, and there in the very middle of the floor lay a dead ewe, rotting. Beside her, her little lamb was still trying to feed at the violet belly.

Toward the beginning of July a mysterious order went from house to house.

The belfry still sang, "Closer, closer."

"Do we attack tomorrow?" said the men in the houses. "Are you ready?"

The women replied, "Yes, we are ready."

"Then, it's tomorrow?"

No. The next day a storm swept up from the sea. At dawn it was already there, having passed over the plateau. From the east and the south it blew dark and damp like a cave; only a tiny blue window lighted the earth from the north, and toward it fled a whole family of falcons. The storm advanced. It rose higher, grew blacker, making no sound; on the contrary, it stifled all sounds, it laid a hush over the world.

César stepped out into the middle of the square. He looked to the right and to the left and he drank in the air. His shirt sleeves were rolled up so you could see his big brown bare arms covered with hair tightly curled by the sun. He shook his fist at the sky.

"You good-for-nothing," he said, his thick lips protruding in disgust.

"Come in, César," cried his wife.

He walked slowly back to his house. From the door he looked once more at the sky. He was talking to himself, mouthing the silent words like bubbles. He shut his door.

A flock of titmice took shelter in the belfry. The nightjars flew under the ridgepoles for shelter. They dug their claws into the plaster of the wall and let their wings hang like iris leaves. Marie Turcan's goat came home by itself. It had torn up its stake. It pushed open the stable door with its head and entered. The dogs were curled up under the mantelpieces, their muzzles in the ashes. Nightingales came in beneath the roof of the washing pool. They stayed there a moment in quiet. They were nightingales from the tall hills and they were still in the throes of mating. They paired off, male and female, under the rafters and began to sing softly in their low, deep, somber voices like forest sounds. From time to time they would stop to listen. But the thick silence still reigned.

"Closer," cried the belfry. "Noon!"

Madame Massot lighted the candle: it was impossible to see the bread on the table.

"I'm going to bed," said Massot, closing his clasp-knife. The dark man was washing the dishes. He went to the

window as he wiped the plates and he tried to look at the sky through the honeysuckle.

"Don't go out," Madame Massot told me. "You may go to bed, too, if you like."

"Read," said the dark man.

He gave me the *Iliad*.

I went and sat down on the doorsill.

The nightingales in the washing pool were still singing. Now the storm held the whole circle of the heavens.

The whole day passed in silence; the whole night. The following day, the sky was free and clear. The men and women went out to the attack.

I read the *Iliad* amidst the ripened wheat. They were mowing throughout the countryside. The heavy fields rustled like cuirasses. The roads were filled with men with scythes. Shouts rose from the fields where they were calling the women. The women ran through the stubble. They bent down over the sheaves; they lifted them in their arms, and they could be heard groaning or singing. They loaded the carts. The young men lifted the sheaves with their iron forks and slung them up. The carts disappeared down the sunken roads. The horses shook their collars, neighed, pawed the ground. The empty carts returned at a gallop, driven by men standing upright in them as they whipped the animals and held the reins in a firm right hand. In the shadow of the bushes men lay stretched out flat on the ground, their arms limp, their eyes shut; and beside them the abandoned sickles gleamed in the grass.

We were going up to tend the sheep. The hill beloved of these animals was just above the harvest. The dark man

lay down in the warm shade of the junipers; I stretched out beside him. We lay there a moment panting and blinking our eyes. The road up the hill with its round stones shone a long time, twisting and sparkling before my closed eyes.

"And the book?"

"Here it is."

He looked into the bag. The *Iliad* was there, stuck to a piece of white cheese.

The battle, the boxing dance where great fists flew like whip cracks, the spears, the swords, the arrows, the sabers, the shouts, the flights and attacks, and the women's dresses floating toward the fallen sheaves. I was in the thick of the *Iliad*.

The man explained in a voice that penetrated deep within me. Since spring, I bore a strange new thing. At first it had been inside me like a slight taste of green and bitter coolness. The young April almond. It had grown and hardened. It was now exactly like an almond, white, firm flesh, always cold in the midst of my warm flesh and every time my body touched this cold almond with its warmth, long liquid shivers swept throughout my being.

I could smell the odor of women. It was a very special odor. Madame Massot did not have it. Aurélie, the baker's wife, did. Anne did not have the odor, or sometimes only when she did not look at me with her deep, milky eyes. Then she smelled like the rest. And it was at such times that I put out my finger to touch her lips. She looked at me and it was gone, no odor. I would ask, "Did I hurt you?"

"How?"

I did not dare to say.

Margu rite had the odor. She smelled the strongest. She was bigger than I, and bare armed. She perspired as she ran. Then we would hide in the straw. There were three separate odors: the straw, the perspiration, and then the odor. I smelled all three and I wanted to say, "Let's lie down."

We would lie down. Margu rite would hug me tight. We entwined our limbs and lay thus suffering from a dull burning for which we knew no healing oil. The voice of the dark man had the same quality for me as the odor of women. It penetrated me to the almond. He had a special skill in reading—I know today what it was—he entered sensually into the text. He had such a feeling for the form, the color, the weight of words, that his voice impressed me, not like a sound, but like some mysterious life that was being created before my eyes. I could shut my eyes, the voice would penetrate me. It was within me that Antilochus cast the spear. It was within me that Achilles stamped back and forth in his tent, with the wrath of his heavy tread. It was within me that Patroclus bled. It was within me that the wind of the sea broke over the prows.

I know that I am a sensualist.

If I have such love for the memory of my father, if I can never separate myself from his image, if time cannot cut the thread, it is because in the experiences of every single day I realize all that he has done for me. He was the first to recognize my sensuousness. He was the first to see, with his gray eyes, that sensuousness that made me touch a wall and imagine the roughness like porous skin. That

sensuousness that prevented me from learning music, putting a higher price on the intoxication of listening than on the joy of being skilful, that sensuousness that made me like a drop of water pierced by the sun, pierced by the shapes and colors in the world, bearing in truth, like a drop of water, the form, the color, the sound, the sensation, physically in my flesh.

He had taught himself to read and to write. He was not obliged to know how pure sensuousness really is. He had all about him, he saw all about *me*, that slime of spittle, pus, and bloody glair that is usually called sensuality. He was not forced to make the right distinction. And if he had not done so, he could not be blamed. It would have been only natural.

He broke nothing, tore nothing in me, stifled nothing, effaced nothing with his moistened finger. With the prescience of an insect he gave the remedies to the little larva that I was: one day this, the next day that; he weighted me with plants, trees, earth, men, hills, women, grief, goodness, pride, all these as remedies, all these as provision, in provision of what might be a running sore, but which, thanks to him, became an immense sun within me.

If one has the humility to call upon one's instinct, upon the elemental, there is in sensuousness a kind of cosmic joy.

My primitive nature prevented me from knowing woman early. I knew intuitively that her gestures were beautiful and natural and that nothing in these gestures was forbidden; that the whole round world, from my feet to the stars, and beyond the stars; all, all the fruits of moons and

suns, were borne in the branches of clasped arms, of mouth joined to mouth, of bodies pressed close. I understood all the simple beauty of this, and that it was right and good. Everything about it. Everything connected with it. But I also knew that the gestures that were so natural and simple for me were ugly, hypocritical, weighted with a sort of black slime for others.

It sufficed me to be touched by the opaque glance of Anne-the-gentle to no longer smell the odor of women.

"She would think it was ugly."

Elusive Anne, Margu rite who burned me, and the baker's wife with her odor. . . .

The world exists.

The dark man was lying in the grass. With the coming of the summer evening, when all the leaves, gorged and drunk with sunshine, were giving off their fragrance, he was there with his books. He talked first with his voice and his hand to point out forms and life all about me. He passed on to me the conviction that all this was not only an image perceived by our senses, but an existence, a pasture for our senses, something solid and strong which had no need of us for its existence, which had existed before us and would continue to exist after we were gone. A fountain. A fountain beside our road. He who did not drink would thirst eternally. He who drank would have accomplished his work.

The harvest was all about us. In the evening, things were more active, they went faster. C sar wanted to get done. He went into his wheat: his thighs were like the hub of a wheel; the scythe made almost a full sweep around him.

Massot, with his broad hat and his red-brown shirt, could be seen far off. He had loaded his cart. Madame Massot was holding the horse by the nose and fanning him with a cabbage leaf.

The ewes slept in the thyme. Sometimes, without opening their eyes, they would open their lips, bite a tuft of blossoms and begin to chew from right to left, dripping a little purple foam. The lambs stood up uncertainly on their long legs.

"Hey, stream! You over by the stream!" cried the women from below. They lowered the pitch of their voices so they would carry far over this stubble and the untouched fields.

"Ho, we are coming home!" replied the men. The women piled huge sheaves of wheat on their heads and went off down the white road, their whole bodies tense and erect between the weight of the sheaves and the earth.

The men called to each other from one field to another.

Stubborn C sar was still wheeling in his field of grain. He was there all alone. Only his movement and the little flash of his scythe remained in the gathering darkness. The carts creaked along the roads. I knew them, C sar's, Massot's, by their sound alone. Girls began to sing. The first smoke rose from the village. Night was gently rustling among the leaves and arousing the owls.

Everything had its weight of blood, of substance, of taste, of odor, of sound.

They were burning dry heather in the fireplaces, because it flames up hotter than slow wood. The smell that came up to our hill was filled with the gestures of women over

the soup pot, with the sounds that soup makes when it is on the point of boiling and is seething at the assault of a hot young fire. Shutters slammed against walls. The bedrooms were being opened to the cool air. The housewife listened to the clock. It is still running. We'll wind it tomorrow. Far away in the woods, boxwood swished under the trot of the foxes. The stones of the old wall stirred gently. The big snake must be turning around in his hole, rubbing his neck against the edge of a stone to loosen the old scales. A big mound of ants, glistening and growling like an angry cat, flowed slowly toward its subterranean dwelling. The roots of the trees were resting. There was no wind now; only the evening calm. The roots eased their grip on the rock. The whole hill could be felt curling up, and the trees became more related to the air. One felt that they were a little more defenseless, like creatures at a waterhole. The resin flowed down the pine trunks. The little honey-colored drop, as it emerged from the wound in the bark, hissed slightly like a drop of water falling on a hot iron. What pressed it out was the great force of the evening, a force that touched the very heart of the granite rock; little worms as slender as hairs were called up from deep in the stones, and they began their journey toward the moon, through the sponge of what seemed to be impermeable. The sap came up from the root hairs and pushed through the trees to the very tips of the leaves. It passed between the claws of the roosting birds. The bark of the tree, the scale of the foot, that was all there was between the blood of bird and tree. There were only these barriers of skin between. We were all like sacks of blood one touch-

ing the other. We were the world. I was against the earth with my whole body, the palms of my hands. The sky was pressing on my back, it was touching the birds that were touching the trees; the sap came from the rocks; the big snake yonder in the wall was rubbing against the stones. The foxes were touching the earth; the sky was pressing on their fur. The wind, the birds, the swarming air currents, the swarming ants in the earth, the villages, the families of trees, the forests, the flocks, we were all pressed, atom against atom, as in an enormous pomegranate, thick with our juice.

The baker's wife ran off with the shepherd of Les Conches. This baker had come from one of the valley towns to replace the one who had hanged himself. He was a skinny, redheaded little man. He had tended the breast-high oven fire too long and he was twisted like green wood. He always wore sailor jerseys, white with blue stripes. He could never get one small enough. They were all mansized with a bulge where the chest ought to be. This fellow had a hollow at that point and his sweater hung like the loose skin under his chin. For this reason he had the habit of tugging at the hem of his sweater and he pulled it down in front until it hung below his belly.

"You are a pitiful sight," his wife said to him.

She, on the other hand, was always spic and span, with hair so black that it made a hole in the sky behind her head. She drew it back tightly, smoothed it with oil on the palm of her hand, and twisted it into a knot at the nape of her neck without using hairpins. No matter how much she

shook her head, the knot never came undone. When the sun struck it, the knot had purple lights in it like a plum. In the morning she would dip her fingers in the flour and rub her cheeks. She perfumed herself with violet or lavender. As she sat in front of the shop door, she bent her head over her lace-making and all the time she was biting her lips. As soon as she heard a man's steps she moistened her lips with her tongue, she held them in a moment so they would be swollen, red, shining, and just as the man passed her, she would raise her eyes.

It was soon done. Eyes like that could not be left wandering for long.

"Hello, César."

"Hello, Aurélie."

Her voice touched a man in every part of him, from his head to his feet.

The shepherd was a man as translucent as the day. More a child than anything else. I knew him well. He could make whistles out of the seed of any fruit. Once he made a kite with a newspaper, some bird lime, and two sticks. He had come to our little encampment.

"Come on up with me," he had said, "we'll fly it."

His sheep were on the north slope where the grass was green and lush.

"When the wind will bear it, I will let go."

He stood a long time on top of a wall and with arm upraised, holding the little bird-like object with two fingers.

The wind came along.

"Let it go," said the dark man.

The shepherd winked. "I know the wind."

He released the kite at a moment when everything seemed to be asleep; not a thing was stirring, not even the slenderest leaf tips.

The kite left his fingers and began to glide straight away through the still air without rising or falling.

It went sailing over the threshing floors; the hens bristled as they crouched over their chicks and the roosters cried their warning against the falcon.

It came to earth over beyond the poplars.

"You see, that's the wind," said the shepherd. He tapped his forehead with his finger and began to laugh.

Every Sunday morning he came to get the bread for the farm. He would tie his horse to the church door. He hung the reins over the doorknob and with a twist of his hand he made a knot that could not come untied.

He inspected the saddle. He slapped the horse on his rump.

"If he's in your way, give him a push," he said to the women who wanted to go into the church.

He gave his trousers a hitch and came over to the bakery.

The bread for Les Conches was a forty-pound sack. At first it was always ready in advance, and had only to be loaded on the horse. But Aurélie had all week long to plan, to bite her lips, to sharpen her desire. Now, when the shepherd came, the sack had to be filled.

"You hold one side," she said.

He held one side of the sack, Aurélie held it, too, with one hand, and with the other hand she placed the loaves in the sack. She did not throw them in, she placed them in the bottom of the sack. She stooped down and straightened

up with each loaf, and in that way she displayed her breasts more than a hundred times; more than a hundred times she passed her proffered face close to the shepherd's; and there he stood, dazzled by it all and by the pungent female odor that floated before him in the bright Sunday morning light.

"I'll help you."

She had suddenly used the familiar *tu* in addressing him.

"I can load it myself."

Now it was his turn to show off. To come on horseback, he always wore a pair of slim trousers of white duck, tightly fastened at his waist by his leather belt. He wore a shirt of rather stiff white linen of such coarse thread that it seemed starched. He did not button it; it was open like the shell of a ripe almond and within the shepherd's whole body was revealed, slender of waist, broad of shoulder, deep of chest, brown as a loaf and all shaggy with fine black hair as curly as young plantain.

He bent down over the sack. He seized it in his fine strong hands; his arms taut. In one deliberate motion he lifted the weight with the sureness that lay in his shoulders; he gave a gentle twist of his whole magnificent torso, and the sack was on his back.

That was all that was necessary. It said: What I do, I do slowly and well.

Then he went out to his horse. With his two hands he squeezed the sack in the middle to give it a waist and slung it like an almspurse over the saddlebow. He unfastened the

reins and while the horse was turning, without using the stirrup, and with a very precise little spring, he leaped into the saddle.

And that was that!

"She didn't take a thing with her," said the baker, "nothing to put around her or anything."

It was a terrible catastrophe. You could walk right into the bakery, which was wide open. The baker exhibited everything. You could even go into the bedroom, back behind the oven. The closet was not disturbed; the chest of drawers was locked. She had left her little key ring on the marble top. It was bright and shining like silver.

"Look. . ."

He opened the drawers.

"She didn't take any underclothes, nor her knitted shirts."

He fumbled in his wife's bureau drawer with his flour-covered hands. He even looked among the soiled linen. He pulled out one of her slips that smelled like a skunk skin.

"What did you expect?" said the women. "Anyone could see it coming."

"How?" he said.

And he looked at them with his little gray eyes under their red lids.

It was soon learned that Aurélie and the shepherd had gone off to the marshes. There was only one road up into the hills and we kept our sheep in the middle of it, the dark man and I.

They came up to ask us: "You haven't seen Aurélie go by?"

"No."

"Either in the daytime or at night?"

"Neither by day nor by night. In the daytime we do not stir from here. At night, as a matter of fact, we sleep in the path because it is warmer and that particular night we read by lantern light until dawn."

It must have been this light that made the lovers retrace their steps. They must have gone immediately up toward the hills to wait until the light went out. A sort of nest was discovered in the lavender from where we could be watched.

The shepherd knew they couldn't pass that way. On one side was the sheer peak of Crouilles, on the other the treacherous slopes toward Pierrevert.

In the afternoon four youths went up on horseback. One of them went without any great hope to Les Conches to have the haylofts searched. Another went to the station to see if any tickets had been sold. The others galloped, one toward the north, the other toward the south, along the highroad to the next railroad stations. Nobody had bought a ticket in any of the three stations. The fellow who went to Les Conches returned late and drunk as a lord.

He had related the whole story to Monsieur d'Arboise, the master of Les Conches, and then to the ladies. They all went to search the barns. Everybody laughed. Monsieur d'Arboise had told stories of the days when he was captain of the dragoons. That required drinking one bottle after another.

From having galloped thus after a woman, and rubbed elbows with the ladies of Les Conches all afternoon, the boy was flushed with more than wine.

He patted the baker on the shoulder. "I'll find her for you," he said. "I'll bring her back to you, but I'll give her a kiss for you on the way."

The baker stood there under the oil lamp. His was the only face visible because he was smaller than the rest of the people and the faces of the others were in the shadow. There he stood with his pasty cheeks and red eyes gazing off into nothing as he drummed with his fingertips on the cold bread counter.

"Yes, yes," he said.

"With this business," said César as he came away, "you'll see that we are going to lose another baker. Love is all very well, but you've got to think about eating. And now we'll have to go all the way to Sainte-Tulle for our bread. I'm not saying anything, but if she had had a head on her, she would have thought of that."

"Good night. Thank you," said the baker from his doorstep.

The next day César and Massot went off to the swamp. They stayed there all day silently wading and rummaging like rats. Finally, toward evening, they stood up on the dike and called in all directions: "Aurélie! Aurélie!"

A flock of geese rose toward the east, wheeled into the setting sun and disappeared in the glow.

César's chief worry was about the bread. What is a village without bread? It's a waste of time and a wearying of beast to go to another village to get it. And there was

more to it than that. There would be the flour of this harvest, and where would they carry their flour? With whom would they have their bread account, their stick on which each pound was marked with a notch? If the baker didn't get the better of his grief they would be forced to sell their flour to the broker and then go after their loaves with pennies in their hands.

"When a person gets messed up with love, you see what it can do; where it's going to take us."

For three days the baker did not stir from his oven. The batches rose as usual. César had lent his wife to help in the shop. She was behind the counter. There was no question of shepherd or marshes with *her*: she sat there gloomily chewing her thick moustache, and the exact weight was the exact weight. The fourth day there was no smell of warm bread in the village.

Massot opened the door a little way.

"Well, how's the baking getting on?"

"All right," said the baker.

"Is the oven hot?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Rest," said the baker. "There's still some of yesterday's bread left."

Then he went out in his slippers, his trousers all twisted, his sweater flapping. He went to the café. He sat down at a zinc-topped table, behind the hedge on the terrace. He rapped on the window:

"One absinthe."

Without that aroma of new-baked bread, and under

the burning noonday sun, the village seemed dead. The baker began to drink, then he rolled a cigarette. He laid the pack of tobacco on the table beside him, near the bottle of Pernod.

There was a slight stirring in the sky coming from the south. Over the roofs from time to time floated that light down that the wind carries along as it blows through the reeds. The clock in the belfry struck the hour. In the square little girls were playing hop-scotch and singing:

"Eleven o'clock!
As at each hour,
The infant Jesus
Is in my heart.
May he make it
His abode. . . ."

Maillefer was at his window repairing watches. He had put up his sign:

MAILLEFER, WATCHMAKER

He ought also have added: Fisherman. Unlimited patience, which is indispensable in seeking the ailment of some tiny wheel with the help of a magnifying glass, was abundant within him. People called him Maillefer-Patience. He would wait an hour, two; a day, two; a month, two. But whatever he waited for, he got.

So they called him, I-wait-I-get, to distinguish him from his brother.

"Which Maillefer?"

"Maillefer-Patience."

They were both patient.

"The I-wait-I-get one."

And so they knew which one was meant.

He was a natural born fisherman. Often, in crossing the marshes, one could see something standing there that looked like a tree trunk. It did not budge. Even in March, when a sudden gust of hail began to ring on the water, Maillefer did not move. He would come home with his baskets full of fish. Once he had a prolonged battle with a pike. Now, when anyone mentioned it, he would pat his paunch.

"He's right here," he would say.

He had thick feverish lips, red and swollen like love apples, and a blood red tongue that never wasted its time in talking. He used it only for eating, and then he made it work, especially if he were eating fish. Sometimes it could be seen emerging from his mouth to lick the drops of gravy on his moustache. He had deliberate hands, slow feet, a gaze that could remain glued to the windowpane like a fly, and a big, hard, bushy head, the exact color of box-wood.

One evening he appeared. "I have seen them," he said.

"Come quick!" said César. And he dragged him to the baker's house.

"I have seen them," repeated Maillefer.

"Where? What is she doing? How is she? Is she thinner? What did she say to you?"

"Patience," said Maillefer.

He went out. He went home. He emptied his fish basket onto the table. The baker, César, Massot, Benoit, and Le

Taulaire, they had all followed him. No one asked a question. They knew there was not any use.

He emptied his fish basket onto the table. There was swamp grass and there were fourteen big fish. He counted them. He turned them over. He examined them. He looked through the grass. He fumbled in his basket. Finally he drew out a tiny steel-blue fish with a yellow head and rust-colored back.

"A *caprille*," he said. "Put it on the grill for me, and do not clean it, is a water thrush."

He turned to the others.

"Well?" he said.

"Well! Tell us!" said César.

He related how, as he was planted in the swamp as usual, and just as he spied his *caprille*—a rare fish, which makes holes through the reeds to go into the hidden reaches, and leaps in the grass like a grasshopper, and travels along the roads like men to reach fresh water—in short, just as he spied this *caprille*, he heard a series of odd little sounds that seemed to come out of the air.

"'Ducks?' I said to myself. No, not ducks. 'Rails?' I said. It was shrill and it rolled like a rail's call. No, no rails, Catfish? . . ."

"Was she singing?" said the baker.

"Patience," said Maillefer, "you're in a mighty big hurry!"

Yes, he had heard singing. After all, you might say it was singing. There was a deep silence over the whole swamp. No living thing could be in the marshes at this time of the day except the fish, the summer breeze, and the tiny ripples

on the water. Aurélie was singing. Maillefer caught the *caprille* with a special twist of his wrist; cast, twist, pull. Twice, three times, he imitated the motion before the baker's frantic eyes.

After that, Maillefer moved. The air vibrated to Aurélie's song. He began to track it as he would the shiver of a sleeping trout whose belly is being stroked by the roots of the cress. One step, two; there is no splash under Maillefer's tread, he has the knack of lifting his legs and he knows how to plant his foot, toe first. The water parts noiselessly like grease. It takes a long time but it is sure.

First he found a plover's nest. The mother bird was on the eggs. She did not fly off, she did not so much as move a feather. She looked at Maillefer and clucked softly. He next found a herring's hole. The females were in the hole with their white bellies swollen with eggs, and they illumined the water like crescent moons.

He walked around the hole without disturbing a single herring.

Now he could plainly hear the singing, and from time to time the shepherd, who was saying, "Rélie!"

And after that there was silence. Maillefer stood still. After a time, the voice began once more and Maillefer continued to advance across the marsh.

"It's an island," he said.

"An island?" said César.

"Yes, an island."

"Where?" said Massot.

"In the middle of the river, just opposite Vinon."

The shepherd had constructed a hut with bundles of

reeds. Aurélie was lying naked in the sun on the stretch of grass.

"Naked?" said the baker.

Maillefer scratched his head. He looked at his dead fish on the table. One was a female pike. She must have struggled against death with every part of her being. On the ridge of her belly, between her belly and the gulf of her tail, her little vent was open and the lamp light illumined the tiny red hole.

"She was drying her clothes," said Maillefer, as if to excuse her.

The baker was all for going at once. It was César, Massot, and the others who prevented him. Nothing could hold him, the water holes, the night, the pitfalls.

"If you go, you'll never come back."

"It's all the same to me."

"What good will it do you?"

"I don't care, I'm going."

"It'll be a miracle if you get back."

"What of it?"

"You don't know where it is."

Finally César said, "Besides, it isn't your place."

Here was a reason. The baker began to weaken in their hands and they arrived at a plan. They would send the curé and the schoolmaster, both of them together. The curé was old, but the schoolmaster was young, and besides he had oiled boots. He could simply carry the curé on his back to the little promontory of solid ground just beyond the dike. From there a voice would carry, especially the curé's voice.

"He is used to talking, he is."

The schoolmaster would go to the hut. But in a way not to offend them. He must make Aurélie understand that it was all very fine . . .

"Love is all very fine," said César, "but people have got to eat."

. . . that it was all very fine but that there was the counter, there was bread to be weighed, flour to be put on account, and then, a man. . . .

In short, César added, looking at the baker, if the schoolmaster could not manage alone, he was to whistle and from back on terra firma the curé would take up the argument. By raising his voice he could do his part without wetting his feet.

The next day, the curé and the schoolmaster set out on one horse.

At nightfall the schoolmaster returned. Everybody was enjoying the cool air from the doorways.

"Go indoors," he said, "and shut everything. In the first place, it is ten o'clock, and whether it is early or late, you have had enough fresh air. And besides, the curé is down there at the stone cross with Aurélie. She won't come back as long as there is anyone in the street. The curé took nothing to put around him. It is getting cold out there, and besides he got wet. I am going to get into some dry clothes. Go along, go inside and shut your doors."

Toward midnight, the baker knocked at Madame Massot's door.

"You don't happen to have a little four-flower tea, do you?"

"Yes, I do. I'll be right down."

She gave him the four-flowers. She added a handful of linden.

"Put that in, too," she said; "it will make her sleep."

The rest was all planned behind closed shutters in every house.

Catherine was the first to come, at daybreak. She scuffed her shoes along the ground because her varicose veins made her clumsy. She was to remember that Aurélie did not have varicose veins. Barielle watched his wife, Catherine, from his doorsill. She turned and looked at him before entering the bakery. He stood with his hands behind his back, but it was plain that he was firmly grasping a pick handle.

"Hello, Aurélie."

"Hello, Catherine."

"Give me six kilos."

Aurélie weighed the bread in silence.

"I'll sit down," said Catherine. "My varicose veins hurt. How lucky you are not to have them."

Next came Massot's wife.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes."

"That's plain to be seen. Your eyes sparkle like claret."

Next, Alphonsine and Mariette.

"Show us how you make that knot."

"Only, a person has to have hair like yours."

"Feel how heavy it is, Alphonsine!"

"I should say it is! With hair like that you don't need hairpins."

About ten o'clock Aurélie had not yet come to her door-

step. She stayed back in the dim part of the shop. Then César walked past the bakery. He thought he was ready, but he wasn't. He did not stop. He walked around the church, around the washing pool, and once more past the shop. He stopped.

"Oh, Aurélie!"

"Hello, César."

"What are you doing inside there? Come out and get a little air."

She came to the door. Her eyes were all red. She had let down her hair so Alphonsine and Mariette could feel its weight. Her lovely lips drooped as if they had been tasting too many sweets.

"What fine weather we're having!" said César.

"Yes."

They looked up at the sky.

"Just a touch of the sea wind. You ought to come over to our house," said César. "The wife would like to give you a piece of boar meat."

At noon the baker filled his oven with well-seasoned oak fagots. There was no wind. The air was as still as a stone; the black smoke settled back on the village with its aroma of earth, peace, and victory.

On Sunday, at about ten o'clock, the sun was blazing so fiercely that the road, the walls, trees, and the sky began to quiver like white grease. In the midst of all that, the shepherd arrived.

He came at a long ambling gait. He was riding the piebald horse that belonged to Monsieur d'Arboise himself. It

had an Arabian saddle that shot flames from every nail. The shepherd was still barefooted, dressed in his white trousers, his coarse linen shirt, but in this glare it was perfect. He leaped from the saddle. He tied the horse to the church door.

César came out from the shade.

"Where are you going?"

César was already dressed in his Sunday clothes: his peasant Sunday get-up with the blue woolen sash, a good shave and a fine twist to his moustache.

"For the bread."

"You tell your master to send someone else."

"Mind your own business."

The shepherd raised his arm and took a step forward. César seized the shepherd by his shoulder.

For a second they eyed each other. The shepherd gave his shoulder a jerk. César gripped him more firmly. The shepherd took one step backward; his shirt was slightly pulled from his trousers. The shepherd struck first. His fist grazed César's chin. César put up his broad open hand. He did not intend to strike but to hold and squeeze. The shepherd struck him full on the cheek. César recoiled with closed eyes. The shepherd struck him on the nose. César lowered his head and leaped forward. He butted his head into the shepherd's chin. The shepherd's head flew back, his arms hung limp. César struck with his fist, deliberately and straight at the shepherd's liver. The shepherd leaned against the wall; his head rang against the stones. César struck again at the shepherd's belt. The shepherd opened his mouth; he shot a fist that passed above César's shoulder.

César stepped back. The shepherd took two or three steps forward, fell to his knees, bowed his head, and lay still on the ground.

They had fought silently, without a shout, in a little space beside the church. Nobody had seen them. César came out alone. He twisted the ends of his moustache, and went and got a drink of absinthe.

The horse was still standing there tied to the church door. The heat was softly and unceasingly moaning in the sky. Then the shepherd emerged, untied the bridle, got into the saddle, still with his accustomed leap, and turned toward Les Conches.

César drank his absinthe as usual, played his game of bezique, won, and went home to dinner.

In the afternoon, when it was time for the dancing to begin, five fellows from Les Conches came galloping up. The shepherd came first, still on his Arabian horse. He got to the café before the others and he reined in short. The horse began to neigh and dance, striking the box hedge with his long tail. The four others came up just behind and as one man, five legs were flung from the saddle. Without stopping to hitch their horses, the five pushed open the door. Inside, everybody was in the midst of a waltz and no one heard the horses gallop up. With a wrench of the arm, the shepherd separated Antoinette from her partner, pushed the man aside, held the woman tightly in his arms and began to waltz. Three others did the same with Marie, José, and Félice, and Costelet's Germaine rose ecstatically from her bench to press tightly against the fourth. The orchestra had seen nothing of all this; it went on playing the

"Blue Danube." For an instant Marius did not realize what had happened. He saw Antoinette dancing with the shepherd. It is true she was protesting, but he held her close, and when she recoiled, he pressed forward so that their bodies were always touching.

"Stop!" yelled Marius.

And Georges and Ivan and Médéric and Clotaire began pushing everybody to regain their partners. The women got up on the benches. The orchestra stopped playing.

"What's the matter? Why, it's those Les Conches fellows!"

"Music!" the shepherd shouted.

Marius tried to reach him but everyone crowded in close

"Music!" cried the shepherd.

He did not release Antoinette.

"Go to bed!" cried Marius.

"With your sister," said the shepherd.

"My sister's churning . . ." said Marius.

The shepherd let go of Antoinette.

"Move aside," he said.

There was immediately a space around him.

"Come here and say that."

Marius stepped forward.

The shepherd still had that clear eye of a man who knows the wind; only, he also had a look of contempt about his mouth.

Marius took off his coat.

"What do you want?" he said.

"That," said the shepherd.

And thereupon he raised his arm, putting into it all the

weight of his shoulders, and emitting a panting sound as when a man splits wood. Marius took the blow square on his nostrils. He shook his head. Blood spattered all about him. With his big innocent blue and white eyes he gazed at his bloody hands.

The girls began to scream.

The shepherd struck twice more with all his might, and with well-timed blows, and the second time, he struck him under the chin. Marius opened his arms like one crucified and fell to the floor.

The girls had pushed a bench under the window. They climbed up and jumped out. Antoinette was holding her blood-spattered dress in both hands and was weeping. She raised her dress. She revealed her calves and the lace of her drawers. Marius did not stir; the blood was bubbling out of his nose.

The women were shrieking. One of them ran across the dance floor holding her little boy close to her. She jostled the shepherd.

"Pardon," he said.

He stood there, his arms hanging at his sides. He had not unclenched his fists. He was looking at the prone man. There was a stir among the orchestra. Zani, the trombone player, had stepped down. The youths from Les Conches made a wall in front of the shepherd. Then they, too, began to hit out.

Zani snatched up a beer bottle by the neck but he got a kick in the stomach, and dropping the bottle he doubled up and rolled under the platform. Ivan had grabbed the youngest of the Les Conches boys over by the counter,

and he was hammering him with whirling fists. The biggest Les Conches fellow picked up a chair and broke it over Ivan's head. Only the back remained in his hands. Ivan leaned against the counter. The youngest butted him in the chest and he fell like a sack of meal. Under the platform Zani could be heard shouting and kicking the floor. The two other fellows from Les Conches had laid out Barnabé and Georges. The shepherd had two fellows hanging onto him like dogs. He slung one to the ground and crushed his hand with his foot. He twisted the arm of the other man. The one on the ground bit the calf of his leg. The shepherd gave him such a kick in his face that his head rang against the edge of the table. He twisted the arm completely around. He pressed and pressed with all his strength. The other howled and fell. The shepherd crushed **first one hand** and then the other.

Some of the women ran out into the street. Georges got up.

"The gun! The gun!" he shouted.

"*Haro!*" yelled the big fellow from Les Conches.

In a thrice the five were outside. The horses were waiting, nibbling at the green box hedge. The shepherd made his Arabian rear at the women. They scattered. With a leap he was in the square in front of the bakery. He unfastened from his saddle a huge bouquet of marsh flowers and threw it on the sidewalk in front of the door. Then all five galloped out of the village down the meadow road.

That Sunday night Massot was to come up to take our place so we could change our linen. As he did not come up, we went over the hill to the cliff that looks down over the

village. There were so many stars in the heavens that below us it was like pitch. One could discern the village only by the pallor of the houses. After a moment we heard a woman moaning, and then a window lighted up. The moaning was as regular as a song. As we stood there looking and listening, wondering what could have thus darkened and wounded the village, a fire was lighted in the square. It must have been a fire of dried heather for the flames leaped suddenly above the branches of the trees. The huge crouched form of the church was now visible, then, beyond in the background, the flat face of a house which breathed through its open mouth the shadows of men advancing toward the fire. The moaning was louder, for in spite of the crackling of the bonfire and the murmuring of men's voices its singing was still heard.

Another fire was lighted on the threshing floors.

Suddenly a hot wind touched our skin at the back of our necks. We turned our heads. A great light was glowing in the west. Against this reddish light, swirling with long tresses of smoke, the outline of the hills and the mounds of Scotch broom were visible. We had to make a slight detour to reach the other slope. Down in the other valley an enormous fire had been lighted in front of Les Conches. The great body of the house, broad and bare, with every window alight, sent all its glow into the sky. The whinnying of the horses could be heard. The fire down there was so big and so well built of fine slow-burning wood that it dribbled a sort of thick smoke along the ground. We could not see very much, but we heard horses galloping and shots and singing.

"Ha, ho, iron, oh! Ha, ho, iron, oh!"

A light wind flowed through the valley as it did every night and the smoke rose. Then we could see that riders were galloping around the fire. They waved their long sashes. Sometimes one of these horsemen broke from the circle, took a run, and charged at full speed toward the flames. At the edge of the fire, the horse rose like a bird and leaped the flames, with neighing of beast and shouting of man. Tables must have been set up under the trees. Jugs and pitchers gleamed. Ceaselessly the circle of riders turned around the fire and the twinkling of the sparks rose in the night to the stars. High up a little wind wafted the sparks toward the sea.

We turned and looked down over the village. This time all was dark, but the moaning continued through the night.

At the first hour of daylight the dark man said to me, "What was going on last night?"

"I don't know."

My head was filled with the death of Patroclus, and with Briseis, the horse dealer's daughter.

Two riders from the valley appeared over the crest of the hill. We called to the sheep that were in the path. But suddenly the two riders reined in and dismounted.

It was a man and a woman. Not peasants. The man wore soft polished boots that could be heard creaking from a distance. The woman, in spite of her skirts, rode astride, her feet free of the stirrups and her legs bent. They came up to us. It was Monsieur d'Arboise and that Rachel, who, like the other two girls up there, was called Madame d'Arboise.

The gentleman was corpulent to the point of being heavy. His trousers molded his thighs. As he walked he leaned heavily on his legs and bent his knees so that his boots creaked.

"Well," he said.

The woman who was coming along behind him called, "Agénoir!"

Her skirt was caught in ten places by a bramble bush that she had tried to step over.

"My dove," said the gentleman. And he turned to free the woman.

One felt him to be heavy and sly, and his "my dove" did not have a very frank sound.

At last they came forward together.

"Do you happen to have any cheese?" asked the lady.

Her head was small and round like a bowling ball, but not fat. Her mouth was wide and curving, and her eyes shadowy. A little veil stopped at the tip of her nose.

"No, Madame," I said, "we just take enough milk for us."

Monsieur d'Arboise wore a hunting jacket which revealed a breadth of shoulder that could support his little paunch. He was chewing a daisy. His lips were as black as coal and slightly glistening. He was close-shaven, with little gray tufts of side whiskers and a beautiful silky moustache as yellow as gold. What struck one was the black mouth, his way of chewing on the daisy, and under the brim of his bowler tilted to the left, his left eye closed and his right eye open.

He continually creaked his boots.

"Have you any milk left?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Ewe milk?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Will you give me some?"

"Yes," said the dark man.

She turned toward me.

"The boy will give it to me," she said. "In your glass," she added, looking me through and through with her violet eyes.

They were violet. That was evident when she came nearer.

"It has got you all excited," said Monsieur d'Arboise.

She looked at him without releasing my hand. She had taken my hand, not the glass.

"You had nothing to complain of last night," she said.

She let go of my hand.

"Give me the milk, sweetheart."

I held out the glass.

"Hold it for me."

She knelt down in the grass, for she was taller than I.

Her woman's odor was strong. Beneath her coat she wore a little blouse of thin silk, transparent and tinted by her breast underneath.

She opened her mouth. I held the glass to the edge of her lips. She drank the milk, then pressed her lips on the glass to make me lower my hand, and she lapped it with the tip of her tongue pointed like a needle.

She stood up, "Good-by, sweetheart," she said.

She held out her hand. I looked at that hand.

"Kiss it."

I shook my head.

"Jealous?" she said. "That will keep you company. Come, Baron."

They were both laughing as they went back to their horses. They mounted. She gripped the horse with her bare thighs.

Monsieur d'Arboise wanted to go down to the village.

"Let's go see if he is dead." And he started forward.

She cried, "No! I tell you no, now!"

She galloped toward the valley. The man wheeled and followed her.

She had left a great daub of red on the edge of my glass.



CHAPTER VIII

THE DAY came when I was to return to school. My father had written: "I shall come for him on Saturday."

It was the end of the vintage. The ewes, now healed, were ready for the rams. Restless and longing, they called sadly toward the village. Massot came to tell us to bring them down. By this time the lambs had good legs; they bounded ahead of us like spray on the water. The ewes followed.

"They are all in heat," Massot had said. "We'll put them in the stable by the fig tree or else my rams will kill themselves."

With their thick muddy wool they flowed down from the hill, without a halt, without touching their lips to the thyme or the lush tufts of periwinkles; they were bleating toward the stables. And we, the dark man and I, we rolled along behind the flock like trees uprooted: he like an old oak, I like a little poplar. The hill had become our dwelling place.

The village smelled of new wine casks and crushed wood.