

Jean Bédard

The Woman's Choice
(Novel)

Translator : Richard W. Clark

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*To my son,
the man who plants trees
while crossing deserts*

Plotinus says: *"If the wicked are in power, it is because of the cowardice of their subjects: this is justice, and the contrary would be unjust. Yes, Providence should not act in such a way that we are nothing. If Providence were everything, there would be nothing to do. The property of the wise is to know how to make use of evil."* So, Mary Magdalen had two loves: Pilate and Jesus, Rome and what Rome scorned.

CHAPTER 1;

A Dragon on the Sea

*-God divided fire from water. Do we have
the right to make them work together?*

VICTOR HUGO

An orphan girl was seen on the docks of Liverpool. She wasn't even thirteen. Seated on a crate, she was singing an especially merry French song. When Mr. Liberty's steward tried to approach her, she bounded like a cat and ended up perched atop a winch for loading grain.

Even so, they captured her. This time, it wasn't to take her back to the bordello, but to bring her to the philanthropist himself, Mr. Liberty. This rich London merchant [was more commonly referred to as "Mess," though not, as one could well imagine, to his face]. Mess Liberty's governess succeeded in washing, delousing and taming the poor girl. But no one could touch her black notebook. It was the only thing she had. She claimed to have gotten it from her mother, a French tutor who had died of a broken heart. That was what she said. One had to believe her. No one knew anything about this mother.

She didn't read this notebook, for the strange tales in French it contained had frightened her as a child, though her mother found them marvelous. Even so, she was never without it. It was covered with soft Moroccan leather and tied to her stomach by four leather laces. She could not remember ever having held anything else in her arms.

Surrounding this was one huge abyss.

The orphan may well have wished to have found in this abyss something like a name, two or three fixed and stable syllables relating to herself. She only had nicknames. Martha, her older sister, called her "Snoops" most of the time, because she was curious, or "Catscratch" because it was best not to touch her. She had other names also: "Bowl-licker," "Smarty," "Sly One." She deserved them all, for she knew how to take care of herself.

So the steward caught this little fox. The governess taught her as much as she wanted to learn, which was a lot. So much that she became the chambermaid, the companion and the friend of Miss Margaret, Mess Liberty's only daughter.

Fat and round, narrow at the leg and shoulder, Mess Liberty had something of the comical about him when he turned red in the face. His visit in the spring of 1851 to the Universal Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace left him far from indifferent. Mess Liberty believed in America. He talked about it all the time. He was looking for a way to draw the new money of New York toward himself. Because it had no roots, America was going to rise like a balloon, and from that balloon a lot of money was going to drop. And he would put himself in the right place, at the right time.

And truly, the Universal Exhibition did show some inventions, clever and dangerous collusions between water, iron and fire that might make the balloon ascend. Things against nature that rolled, walked, and ran. The infernal noise of steam engines split eardrums. The smell made stomachs turn. The frenzied dance of steel elbows and nickel knees terrified those who saw it. Nonetheless, these monsters intoxicated Mess Liberty. His eyes sparkled as he explained his feeling of triumph to his daughter and her chambermaid, the Foundling. The two adolescents tried hard to be serious.

- From now on, we'll no longer be struggling against nature barehanded; our force will equal hers. From the energies in her womb, from the laws of her intelligence we will draw the weapons that will make her give way. We have shortened by half the ladder that separates us from the Almighty. This is my conclusion: reason and labor are stronger than prayer. Once we get to work, we will race over the oceans as if they were puddles, and we will make America yield profits as if it were a garden.

His feet no longer touched the ground. The chambermaid whispered something in Miss Liberty's ear, and the two girls burst out laughing.

- Don't laugh, I'm serious - and what were you saying to my daughter?

While addressing the servant, he directed his smoke-reddened eyes straight into hers. She kept silent; wide-eyed Miss Liberty held back a giggle.

-Speak, daughter!

He fulminated. The maiden searched for the appropriate lie. Lacking imagination, she repeated word for word what the servant said, adding to the intonation an extra dramatic touch that was entirely unnecessary.

She said: "Mercy, the good man is about to fall back to earth. That's going to hurt."

The man turned back to the servant:

-Little wretch, don't you laugh at the charity that brought you out of misery! You just might go back to it!

The matter was closed. This is how the greatest prophecies are received!

The remainder of the Exhibition erased the last traces of the inopportune laugh. As a matter of fact, there were inventions and wonders there worthy of the gods: the telegraph, the flush toilet, the built-in bathtub, the gas stove; machines that wove, knitted, chiseled, wrote, printed, added, and crushed stone; hydraulic presses, locomotives, steamboats, steel cannons, tooth powder, rifles, pistols and false teeth. All that was needed to confront nature on equal terms.

Mess Liberty was sparkling as he left the palace. Taking a deep breath and swelling out his chest, he seemed to become a mountain. His hair touched the clouds, his feet sank down to the deepest mines of Africa. He had the means to achieve every goal. Because of this, every purpose became equal in his eyes, and every desire, legitimate.

The two girls looked at him, astonished. He no longer heard their whispers. He was meditating. From Adam to the Renaissance, he told himself, men have sought the heights, but now they must gain in breadth, grow on all sides simultaneously, satisfy every need, fill up every gap - in a word - expand.

He kissed the earth. The earth was within him, almost miniscule. It just went to show that, to become a giant, to shrink the world is all that is required. This was surely what he felt. Something had intensified his feeling of power, he was going to take possession of the world.

His world was right there. He called it "the world" and this world fitted in his hand. The smaller his house is, the bigger the man is in his own eyes, and the more dangerous. Empires measure their grandeur by the smallness of their vision. And you ask yourself, Mr. Giant, why you are suffocating; why, in your chest, there is no longer any place for your heart, why nothing satisfies you! And you, young orphan, go and plunge your mischievous heart in the dawn, for tomorrow this giant will collapse into your arms like a child emerging from a nightmare.

To complete his extraordinary metamorphosis, Mess Liberty decided to embark on one of those Liverpool-to-New York steamboats that were creating such a sensation. These demonstration voyages took less than a month round-trip. They had become so popular with high society that he had to wait until October to sail. A blessing! For all summer the wind had not stopped battling with the ocean, and the passengers had suffered a great deal from seasickness. In autumn the wind seemed exhausted.

Mess Liberty dreamed of investing in steam. He spoke about, read about nothing anymore but America and the way to profit from it. Neither his lady nor any member of his household wanted to go aboard the iron demon so late in the season. The fair weather itself seemed to them suspicious. Only his daughter and her servant consented, joyfully, to the voyage. It pleased them, all the more so since several gentlemen's sons would be sharing with them a deck not much larger than a dance floor.

The ocean-machine had nothing of the elegance of the English schooners or the New England Yankee Clippers. Her midsection, misshapen by the large side-wheels, made her look like a toad; she did not glide, she paddled. Soot ran down her chimneys, wood conspired with metal to make some strange arrangements. But for the teenage girls, the important thing was that the beast's back would, in the evening, serve as a dance floor and a place to walk - while the deafening noise of the motor covered the gallant whisperings they hoped to hear.

Mess Liberty didn't recognize the ugliness of the steamship either. He saw only a goal; a profit; getting bigger, swelling, piling up. The savings, expenses, and risks... He was not at sea, but down to earth, and in business.

As for the girls, they were dreaming. The evenings came one after another, milder and warmer. To regain its strength before winter, no doubt, the sea had relaxed. It was thinking. It softly rippled like a silk sheet. With a blue pencil, it underlined its pink cheeks; and covered with green ointment its mauve eyes. It used its water colors on a thousand faces. It enthralled its lovers. It was romantic.

The machine slapped the water at high speed, letting her black smoke sink behind her, touching lightly the white lips of the foam. A funny kind of insect on a beautiful silk gown. For the two girls, there was something masculine about the spectacle.

The weather was dangerously hypnotic, in brief. The sea, as is well-known, obeys the wind, but the wind wasn't saying a thing. The lack of movement gave free rein to every dream. It was a strange calm, propitious for inner unrest. The demon's speed made the only breeze that might blow off a hat. It intoxicated Mess Liberty. There was no obstacle to his calculations. He felt the strength of the motor in the calm waters as if it were his own muscles. He was swimming toward great plans that the ocean seemed to reveal to him. Consequently the two girls walked on the bridge without too much surveillance.

Despite the fact that her face had limited charm, Miss Margaret had hit pay dirt on the third evening. She had a talent for compliments and naive laughter. She was, in all things, likeable. She knew how to excite a man's ambition so well that he saw himself borne upwards to the heights. In his balloon, big deals were being made ...

For her part, the servant, who many people were already calling in French "Petite Liberté," avoided the sailors and valets, aspiring to a loftier breed of bird. This ambition was not altogether impossible. Certainly, she dragged along with her a past of poverty and shame, but no one saw this past. She made no use of it. She had hidden it under the myriad good manners of the bourgeoisie. In a pretty crinoline dress, with a collar of pearls and a feathered coiffure, she would have assuredly been taken to be a young lady.

Memory, however, is not silenced quite that easily, and from time to time a recollection does burst out. The day before, as she was watching the undulations of the sea in its silk skirts, with no warning at all, here she was walking in a dark alley, searching for garbage to eat. Her mother had eaten nothing for two days. She was dying. A blackguard leaped out of a courtyard an axe in his hand, looking upon her as if she were meat... The image dissolved in the sea. A bitter and bilious taste stayed with her, though. She had been prey, she had been trash.

To have a past like that, trailing behind one like the soot from the Devil Boat, gives the heart a special impetus. It grabs on to the future like a desperate man. Never again! Those alleys and that shame, never again! Hunger and thirst, never again! Fear and scorn, never again! Lightness becomes a ladder leading toward an emergency exit. One science is essential: that of flight.

For want of a reputation, the young servant brought with her the gaiety, the rejoicing that come straight out of despair. But who, among these bourgeois people, could have guessed what lay beneath? Dark complexion, light eyes and golden hair; the surface seemed so ingenuous. Even she herself trampled underfoot this bankrupt and disreputable existence that dragged along like a sewer beneath the joyous city of her sly and laughing eyes.

Something Mess Liberty said, though, was always in her mind: "Nobility is won by conquest and lost by menial labor." She must abandon her servile condition, then, if she wished to conquer society. She wanted nothing more to do with the lower class of people.

She thought about God as little as possible, and misunderstood herself. Her adolescent reason knitted some dangerous embroidery. In fact, she was floating on her body's electricity, entirely given over to her genius for music.

Since coming to Mess Liberty's house, she would sometimes be dressed up as a middle-class young lady and set down in front of the piano. To tell the truth, she did not play like a young lady in a sitting room, but tore out of the instrument emotions of a totally different depth. She said that her mother had taught music in the very best schools and that that was how one ought to play. No one obviously could speak for her mother. Immediately they asked her for a waltz or a quadrille... But something always gave her away. She was destined for the tragic, her childhood had thrust the pen in the inkwell and her life would trace one of the veins of the story. She felt it as much as she denied it. So she ran away from it. She was not going to do anything else but climb the social ladder - and she was not relying on music to climb it. She was betting on something more sure, something that glittered every second of her existence and made every line of perspective curve inward toward herself. It was this - she was beautiful. Dangerously beautiful.

Every evening, after dressing Miss Liberty, the young servant strolled along the promenade deck. She captured glances, sabotaged dreams, and threw every male down the bottleneck of insomnia. She was going to land the highest of these gentlemen, the richest, the most powerful.

However, there always came a moment, totally unexpected, when one of these gentlemen approached, and she brusquely turned and walked, no ran, to the rear of the deck, where nobody went because of the smoke. She leaned against the rail and let herself be hypnotized by the water's eddies. She was abandoning the world, she was going into the desert. To drown what is intolerable in life in the improbability of dreams an infinity of water is as good as an infinity of sand. And that is better than nothing.

We forget the captivating force of waves, the power of undulation, the shimmering ripples in the half-moon's light. It was in this that she bathed her spirit. It is sometimes said that dreams impede lucidity and misdirect us toward a kind of flight. We forget that civilizations, from cathedrals down to the Devil Boat itself, from civil laws to democratic dogmas, everything that exists today in metal, in cement, in textiles or drawn on legal paper, that all of this was, to start with, the daydreaming of an adolescent.

Dream is the place of causes. What we so pretentiously call "reality" is only the place of effects. On the rear deck, the young girl was literally transported by a call, an appeal that came from every part of her body. She longed for her feet to leave the ground, to fulfill her body's need and void her childhood's shame in one fell swoop.

Her lucky day appeared. It was the ninth day of the voyage. In the afternoon a great pearly dome had risen up over the Devil Boat. The summer heat had drawn everyone on to the deck. This led Petite Liberté to go down to the cabins.

She was alone in her mistress's cabin. She looked at the hairbrush, the make-up, the ribbons, the ointments, the colors, all the arsenal of a young lady. The night would be lightened by a rising moon, Mess Liberty would be intoxicated with his plans, Miss Margaret would dance, and they wouldn't mind ...

She took off her shoes, her dress and all her undergarments and quietly turned in front of the mirror. It was the first time she had dared to do that. She heard a clink. She gave a start. An earring had fallen off the commode. She replaced the earring, untied the precious block notebook attached to her stomach, placed it on a bench close by, and turned once more in front of the large mirror. Nothing happened. It was just a body. She needed to look at herself through a young man's eyes. She tried. Once again, it was nothing more than a body.

Often, in the morning, on just emerging from her dreams, she had been surprised to find herself in a thing so strange as a body. She looked at her hands then as enigmatic paws, her nails as bizarre claws, the lines in her palms as mysterious roads. As an experiment, she imagined a movement, decided to make it, and was astonished at the obedience of that strange paraphernalia. One time, she cut her arm to analyze what was under the skin. It was disgusting. And yet, the whole thing was appealing from a certain point of view. She knew it. That perspective did exist. She wanted it.

In front of the mirror, she turned and turned again. Then a memory burst out. A man had come into the bordello... It was a trivial image. But that man hadn't looked at her sister in the same way. Martha had danced for him on top of a bench. The man's face had not wrinkled, on the contrary it became smooth and shone like a lighthouse. It was that man who was looking at her here and now, at her, Petite Liberté. In the mirror, her body with its silky curves was illuminating him, that one. She was no longer a thing, but music, a sea, a cradle for his heart. The man began to weep and left without touching even so much as a hair of Martha's. Petite Liberté wanted to be loved: like Cinderella to be pulled up out of the gutter.

"If a waltz can lift a skirt," she told herself, "I can make a man drunk with love. If a machine made of iron can run on the water, it is possible for a butterfly like me to cross over mountains. If something invisible like steam can make steel obey, this little bosom can take me away from poverty forever..." It was then that she decided, frankly and clearly, to use to advantage her body's most delicate components.

She had never looked at herself from every angle without being reminded of the bordello and its shame. But this one memory - the memory of that man - had caused a pleasure to appear that drove out all the rest. Shame was transformed into pride. She had never possessed either the confidence or the audacity necessary to feel her beauty's power. From the slag of her past, buds were beginning to open out. She was sixteen, and examining the woman that was piercing through the child. This woman would be beautiful, she had been given to understand, but no one had seen her as she truly was, as God sees.

What was most striking was the luminosity of her skin. Light did more than just reflect itself off it. It seemed to burrow into it, and when it came out again it is as if it were excited in some way. She looked at herself from the side, from the front, from top to bottom, from bottom to top, scrutinizing the attractive points, estimating the proportions, making her satin skin tingle with the hairbrush's sliding electric touch. She finally bowed to the evidence.

- This is the glorious body of a resurrected woman.

She burst out laughing. Another of her mother's stories, as powerless against poverty as manual labor. Even so, it wasn't as wrong as all that, a film of light did glide over her pink flesh, the harmony was perfect, the color warm, like shimmering velvet. Her pointed nipples gleamed like red lights, and her mount of Venus was splendid, with down the color of wheat. She was something to look at, drink in, bite. She was armed to sink whomever she wanted. This body could take revenge on destiny, reincarnate her miserable childhood in Miss Margaret's luxurious youth.

She decided to settle in to this body, honor the lease, and draw from it the maximum of interest. She whispered to the mirror's ear:

- I swear to earn three hundred talents for the one that you have given me.

She felt herself delivered, suddenly at ease in this body, no longer material but of fire. She explored it a little more, this time with her hands. It dawned on her that this sensation could melt the stone that had been embedded in her chest forever.

The day her mother had died and entrusted to her the black notebook - this day was not a memory, but a burden, with all the characteristics of a burden: heavy as a sack of coal, invisible, because it hung upon her back, pushing her forward. All the same, every lump penetrated a muscle. What we don't see enters within us and ends up by bursting, catching on fire and lighting up the cavern for a moment. All kinds of debris from childhood appear. And amidst this debris, a terrifying center, choking the throat, burning the stomach: "My little girl, too little - I'm going away - so I must plant the thorn, the harpoon that will tear your heart - that way the Fisherman will pull gently, sometimes hard, and you will come to Him..." But there was no harpoon, for she opened her eyes, her mouth began to tremble and she expired. There was only just a weight: Jesus - her mother's secret Lover - the damned notebook with its stories about good women that the child didn't want to hear. Jesus, she didn't give a damn about him, he hadn't even lifted his little finger to make a mouthful of bread appear. And her Mama is dead and so is her big sister. No! the daughter certainly won't croak like her mother because of a tale about resurrection.

She pulled herself together, strapped on the black notebook, and put her underwear on. Reaching in to Miss Margaret's make-up case, she added to her face the nuances of color appropriate for an evening under a half-moon. She had had a lot of practice on Miss Margaret's angular features. On her slim face, it didn't take much. She put her hair up in a chignon. Adorned with ribbons, it was worthy of the wealthiest young ladies. She slipped into one of her mistress's loveliest silk dresses, but one without crinoline, for she wanted to keep all her agility. She didn't take any jewelry. That would have been stealing. She left several buttons of her bodice open; that would be more effective.

She was checking herself one last time when she noticed a thin shaft of light that enveloped her. It was something like a phosphorescent film, with a brilliance like an electric arc. She looked at her hand: it was as if she were wearing a glove of liquid light. The down on her arm stood up like so many slender incandescent needles. This royal jelly coated every object.

The motor had stopped its throbbing. The music had ceased. The boat was stuck in a silence like the end of the world. Through the porthole, she saw the sun's last tears spread like a

metallic film across the sea. It struck her as supernatural, this silver-plated glass which broke up all the rainbow's colors. The sea had slipped out of her dress, taking her turn at displaying her glorious body. It was no longer water, but a strange metal secreting a polychrome light. The sea, you could feel it, might explode at any moment.

A whistle blew, then silence, and finally, a cry:

- Release the lifeboats.

But nobody made a move. And then, all of a piece, everyone poured off the bridge and headed for the cabins. The girl dashed into the corridor. Struggling against the flow, she passed Miss Margaret on the stairs. Terrified, the young lady took no notice of how her maid was dressed.

- What's happening?, Petite Liberté asked.

- A hurricane might hit us. We need to prepare for the worst, get some warm clothing and our jewelry, and go back on deck.

Mess Liberty, who wasn't far behind, tried to calm the two girls:

- Don't be afraid. Hurricanes strike the coast and we're still a long way from New York. The captain is just being careful.

What he didn't know was that sometimes, out of pure caprice, one of these monsters bounces off Florida or the Carolinas and drives straight out to sea.

Forcing her way up the stairs, Petite Liberté with some difficulty tore herself away from the crowd and finally stepped outside. Her dress was torn, her face was red, and her hairdo was undone. She opened her eyes wide. Panic had emptied the bridge, only two or three sailors were looking straight to the south. In front of them, the sea was no longer the sea, but a sheet of steel beneath a crystal sky. The electrical charge was palpable.

Suddenly, a tremendous flash of lightning tore the sky in two. You would have said that a volcano had exploded in the depths of the sea. The ship trembled, shook. A shivering made all the ocean look like gooseflesh. And then, once more, the steel extended its smooth skin out to meet the thunder.

In the distance, to the southwest, the horizon seemed to rise up like a wall of dark stones. A line of indentations lifted out of the sea. A fortress emerging from the depths, it might have been said. Along that wall, something black was forming, something like a mucous membrane, something like coal smoke. The dense cloud advanced toward the ship like a shroud. Closer up, it was no longer a cloud, but a raging herd of buffaloes. The winds ripped up the sea-spray and charged straight toward the silent, helpless, horrified Devil Boat. They spit in her face. The firmament trembled a moment, as if it were made of rock.

Above the terrified faces, something like a mass of blackness heaped the frightened clouds together. It was a dragon overhead. With a crash the mass split up. Fissures showed the electricity. One might have said that the boat was about to be lifted up by magnetic forces. But then blades of fire smashed against the sea of steel. The noise shattered eardrums, the light blinded eyes. Stricken, the Devil Boat settled down in its watery armchair. Suddenly it seemed loaded with lead.

Sky and sea were like two planets staring at each other, with monstrous winds hurling themselves between. The mast snapped, borne away in their wild ride. The sea barely had time to tremble. In the distance, a white foam was forming on the surface of the ocean. It raced toward the crippled ship. Not a person moved, except for one sailor who cautiously entered a lifeboat.

Waves tall as cathedrals advanced, turrets crested with snow. Petite Liberté's heart was seized by terror. She cried out:

- God have mercy!

It was her first true prayer. Petite Liberté was vomited out of her body. It no longer was a body, but a muscular soul. The fear acted directly, body to body. Nothing resisted any more. The girl advanced, literally lifted off the ground by the terrifying percussion from the heavens. The thunder spurred on the raging waters.

Freed from all thought, the young woman now was guided by her instinct and reflexes. She ran toward the lifeboat the sailor had crept into. He hadn't undone the tarpaulin that protected it from the rain, but simply slid under the canvas. Busy as he was hiding something under the rear seat, he did not see the girl. He extended an arm to untie the moorings. While Petite Liberté crawled into the front, under the canvas, he came out of the back with the two oars. Silently, he moved the boat away.

The captain cried:

- Halt, you rascal! Come back or I'll kill you.

The captain seized his rifle, took aim, and fired. The seaman tumbled into the ocean with the two oars. The girl curled up under one of the boat's seats.

The waves came, mountains suddenly freed from the spell that had frozen them. It was horrible. They did not roll, they did not break, instead they resembled bulls butting against every obstacle. They climbed, arched and collapsed like avalanches. Everything on the sea rose up like a feather and fell down again like lead. All at once the steamboat broke into a thousand pieces.

Those who were small and light had a better chance. Of those who had grabbed hold of something or reached a lifeboat, some were still swimming. But then the hurricane unleashed its demons. Rollers rushed ahead with open jaws, devouring all that still clung to the surface, flotsam and jetsam of wood, of men, of women, children, human krill.

Clinging here and there to planks and beams, arms and heads still stuck out of the water. Horror was written on their faces. Another storm was doing its work within this livid flesh. Fear. It tightened its vise, impeding respiration, crushing the heart, making the bowels explode. What the outer hurricane spared, the inner one finished off.

Soon, chaos no longer had occupants; panic had expelled the spirit. Dread has this as a characteristic - it catapults reason like a cork. The soul then finds itself in a strange beatitude. While the body is marked by the dogs of animal fear, the soul serenely enters the tunnel of peace. And suddenly, nothing is more beautiful than the grandeur of storms, a grandeur that laughs at humans and their sorrows. We belong to it. We smile at our own death. We look back down with a touch of mockery. We don't remember any longer why we were so attached to that misery.

Only one person escaped from that ascending of delivered souls. One lifeboat was lighter than the others and was enclosed with a tarpaulin that held. The girl who had hidden in it had struck her head against the hull and was having the most beautiful dream of her life.

CHAPTER II

The First Desert

*There is an intimate correspondence between
the exterior desert, terrestrial and geographic,
and that other, psychic, desert within us.*

GEORGE HALDAS

The sea was sated. Long humps undulated on its surface. Its great grey skin was tickled from time to time by little breezes. It wrinkled a moment but quickly regained its smooth form. Petite Liberté heard the breeze rub against the tarpaulin. An icy caress, a distant sound. Cold salt water covered all of the lifeboat's floor, and like snow had penetrated her porous body. She felt as if she were liquid. She couldn't seem to get her solid nature back. Nevertheless a body was forming in the lifeboat: a huddled mass, blue and frozen ...

She lifted an eyelid and saw in front of her an inert, frozen hand. She imagined a movement and decided to make it, but the hand didn't budge. What a relief! The hand was open. Three lines crossed it like miniature brooks. There was a whole geography there. She imagined that she was moving along on one of those miniature brooks... And nothing could stop the little craft from following its destiny. All her life was written there on that hand, an indecipherable hand ... And the hand slept immobile, so immobile that the three little rivers appeared to be frozen ...

She did not intend to enter that hand, to enter that inert and cadaverous body. She searched for the end of her dream. Her head was so numb. It could not complete any image. She didn't have the strength to get back. She sank down in the heaviness of things. Like an exhausted bird that alights on the nearest island, even if it is only a narrow reef, she landed on her body, she washed up in the wreck.

The cold and a thousand bruises bit her. Her nose smelled the varnish of the tarpaulin, her ears heard the lapping of the waves, her tongue tasted salt, her eyes freed themselves from the fog. She made out the ribs of the boat and its lining, the seats and the shreds of canvas. She was alone. She sensed that the hull was hemmed in by infinity. Her heart no longer dared to let its blood flow. It did it anyway, and her consciousness entered into horror.

She lifted the tarpaulin up. At the foot of the crystal-clear sky, the horizon traced a circular silk thread, three hundred sixty degrees without interruption. Not the smallest spot to give the illusion of land, or a boat. No clouds, no birds, no wind, no north, no south, no drinking water, no food, no blankets, no fire, no tools, no neighbors, no animals, no plants - an infinite desert. With arms wide open, death awaited ...

She rolled up the tarpaulin and placed it on the front seat. In the back, the seat formed a chest. She lifted up the lid. Wodner of wonders! A jug of water, a bottle of wine, some salt fish in a jar. Saved! She felt her stomach and took her notebook out of its case. It was intact. She

ate a mouthful of fish and drank a little water. She wrapped the fish in a piece of the tarpaulin. With the jar, she bailed out the boat. She carefully put the fish back in the jar and counted out the rations. Five days. This number seemed to warm her heart.

She took off her dress and all her clothes, spreading them out over the seats in the sun. It must have been close to noon. The light chafed her skin like a wool blanket. She savored the sensation for a moment. She took another look in the compartment: wrapped in a rag pouch was a gold-plated jewel box adorned with precious stones. In the box were necklaces, earrings and jewels, a fortune - - the looter! She noticed two gold earrings. She had seen them before, but where? On whose ears? She realized that large fragments of memory had left her.

Her eyes looked around the horizon again. She did this as painstakingly as if she were running her finger along the brim of a vast silver cauldron. Nothing, not the slightest irregularity, not a cloud, not even a bird. Transparency as far as the eye could see.

The hurricane had passed. The sea was resting. Even from the height of the little lifeboat, visibility stretched for miles. A sailor on watch, perched at the top of a whaler's mast - how many miles could his piercing eye extend? What she didn't see could see her. The desert is that also.

People would worry about the steamboat. Help would be dispatched. They're coming, they're about to arrive. "I'm here." And then, there were the other boats, the schooners, the freighters, the slave-ships, the trawlers, the sardine-boats, the coal-boats, the ocean liners, the sloops, the brigs ... A bit of luck in these five quiet days and someone will surely end up casting eyes on the lifeboat.

Her clothes were dry. She put her dress on and wrapped herself in the tarpaulin. She looked around the horizon again. Nothing. She began to daydream. She was landing in America. She was spending her treasure. She was buying furs. She was marrying a very rich man ...

In the afternoon, the sea awoke. The swells rose up in great blue hills, lifting and lowering the little wooden shell. The water rising around it hid the lifeboat. It climbed up on a summit and went down again. Added to the small size of the craft was the intermittent nature of its appearances. Who would see this sporadic point on the lacework of the waves? Who would believe that the point was a boat and that this boat was a girl?

Little by little, Petite Liberté began to feel a hunger she had never known: the hunger to be seen. The least little look would have sufficed. Nothing. Her soul was losing its form. In a desert, the first point consists of assuring yourself that you really exist, and that is no easy task. Without a look, you dissolve like salt in water. To exist suddenly appeared like a colossal effort.

Sinister questionings hovered near. Cold reason undid each of the chimeras she constructed. It was becoming dangerous to think.

The chill of evening gradually surrounded the lifeboat. The girl leaned her head against the palms of her two hands. They felt cold against her cheeks. She ought to have listened to her

mother and learned to tell the future by reading palms. Learned to free herself. But what she hadn't learned she could learn now by herself, perhaps. She thought she heard her hands whisper the future in her ears. But the lapping of the water masked the murmuring ...

Whenever a swell lifted the lifeboat, she looked off in the distance. Nothing appeared but waves that were all too vague. Sometimes irregularities formed. A ship? A reflection? A shadow? An illusion? No one could tell the difference. The more you looked toward the horizon, the more these hypotheses blended together. Petite Liberté no longer made any distinction between desires and things. On the whaling-ships, the foretopmen look for the spouts of whales. If, in the distance, they saw a girl in a boat, they wouldn't say anything for fear of being laughed at.

Moreover, she was no longer certain that she was a visible object. And what if she were dead! If at this very moment she were only acting as the curtain fell on her final expiration? And why? Because she was called back by some seaman? Seamen dream, quite often even. Perhaps she was in some seaman's dream. He had seen her stark naked. He had shivered. He was gradually waking up. She was falling apart. When someone does not dream, she is being dreamed. The desire of the one makes the other exist ...

The ocean filled her thoughts ...

After five days and five nights, there was no longer any drinking water, any fish, or any illusions. She had become like a statue, and the tarpaulin around her, transformed into a robe of bronze. Held up by this dress turned solid was a marble face. If Mess Liberty, by shrinking the world, had felt immense, in the immensity, Petite Liberté perceived her infinite smallness.

When the crystal palace collapses, when the Devil Boat sinks, scales fall from the eyes, the ears are unstopped, and you find yourself in the middle of the desert. Deserted in the desert. Nothing but wind wearing down stone. When hope and lucidity have destroyed each other, there is the desert, infinite. Sand and salt water are the same: they kill.

What is a desert? An expanse where, right away, you recognize yourself. You see yourself in a mirror: naked, vast, and terrifying, terrifying because of the length, the breadth, the depth of the uncertainty of what you are. No guidelines, no desires, nothing to distinguish your particular existence. There are no lines in your hand. Destiny is frozen by terror.

The thing - the unnameable - is there, raw and scornful, placid, indifferent, lugubrious. The grandiose wing of the vulture hovers. Digestion is already taking place. You don't get out of the desert alive. You are peeled down to the bone like a mouse in the gastric acid of a serpent.

The desert is the opposite of the world. In the world, you know the means but ignore the ends. In the desert, you know nothing about the means, but the end is there, palpable.

The desert's weapons? A bit of everything: a breeze, some drops of salt water, a little ice -- It makes no difference! The executioner? Let us name him: "suspension." On the menu? Everything: the sea, the fish, whales weighing several tons, mollusks, seaweed, salt, octopuses, clouds, stars, clouds of stars, a firmament, billions of miles of everything. Everything, absolutely

everything is there. And you die of thirst and hunger. Everything is moving. And you remain immobile.

In the desert, there is no enemy, nothing to hate. The judge is bored. Suddenly he looks on us as prey. In the desert, the soul looks at its soul up and down. The desert never tires. The torturer is us.

Something in her took pleasure in inventing seamen, jars of water and meals fit for a king. Something in her enjoyed making these things disappear. She played inside her agony like a baby in its bath.

The desert was there, and she inhabited the desert. She was there, and the desert inhabited her. Like the hurricane, it could easily work on both sides of existence. With its two files, it wore away at the partition that separates the interior from the exterior abyss. The edge was growing thinner. The two oceans threatened to merge one into the other.

The monsters were freed - the very efficient executive powers of the digestive tract. Fear was what they obeyed. She saw them: the sharks' fins, the sperm whales' gaping maws, the esophagi, the stomachs, the viscera, the inexpressible digestion of the dragon.

But the supreme enemy is above, the angel who inflates balloons. The boats, the rescuers, the islands overflowing with fruits, she saw them all. The sky was covered with migratory angels who were laying their mirages everywhere. And above this, very high, the saints, and higher still, the thrones, and higher yet, the Emperor and in his eyes, at the very back, the Balance of injustice. On one pan, the weight of His power, on the other, Petite Liberté, ridiculous and ephemeral.

In the desert, the wind has no obstacles other than itself. Wandering unravels the most distinct memories thread by thread. Memory frays on the crystalline heavens. The desert is the Sun King's chalet. Having devoured every form in a soul, he comes to sleep in its grand and beautiful emptiness. That is why all religions are born in a desert. But as for religion, Petite Liberté despised it because it had been her mother's executioner. She despised it, but knew it by heart. Every evening, a little bit of the Gospel. A prayer. And a comfy sleeptime on an empty stomach ...

Petite Liberté looked at the expanse, lost herself in the expanse. The sea-swell softened her, rocked her, made her giddy. The silky surfaces of the swaying shadows on the waves, the spots of color waltzing on their fabric, the vertical hail of star-beams piercing through their skin, all the plenitude of emptiness dissolved her. Death awaiting, life extending, the ocean's vastness, the smallness of the trembling bones, all, was dissolving and was dissolving itself.

Nature was there in all the purity of its spectacle. Nothing is comprehensible and yet everything is directly intelligible. The soul lightly touches all, but lays hold on nothing. She had no hold and she could not lose hold. She was not living and she was not dying. She was not hoping and she was not despairing. She was not sleeping and she was not waking. She was cradled, and pierced.

Death was awaiting. No! Death has neither past nor future, it is always here and now, dispersed.

She knew that she was nothing, just a chamber-maid. Not even that! A streetwalker. Not that either! That was her sister, Martha. But she, she was nothing. She could not recall ever being something in somebody's arms. She did have this black notebook. An inedible inheritance. And her sister's stories about Maman, the concerts, the trips, the rich and cultured lovers ... Marvelous possible fathers ... You had to believe it. And believing her big sister wasn't easy. Sometime, she did remember her Maman, but wasn't able to distinguish the true memories from the memories Martha recounted. Martha added, embroidered, enriched, embellished. She even lied with her body, that was her profession. So ...

Petite Liberté had nothing to prove her mother's existence, no way to claim her. She had lived by imagination, in fantasized adventures with fathers who were as marvelous as they were non-existent Fathers in the image of God, of Jesus Lovers who saved her from despair. On this lifeboat, there was no one to imagine. Consequently, she was what she was: nothing.

She pressed the little black notebook against her heart. Its contents she despised, but the book itself entranced her. When she sniffed its scent, a memory sometimes took shape. She took a sniff, and tried to form an image of her mother's face ... It wasn't a memory, just the result of her imagination. The one thing she knew with certainty was that one day, she didn't know which, she had lost the ability to weep. She was detached. She was hanging on the edge of life like an old orange peel.

The frightening thing about a desert is the freedom of its prisoners. Here, on the surface, is the absolute lack of hindrances, the radical absence of all obstacles, and the absolute uselessness of all resistance. The desert is pure possibility, flat, even and uniform extension.

Wasn't she herself, at this moment, the perfect example of this freedom? A statue enveloped by a complete absence of constraints, not even the bother of the least obligation to live or to dream. Before her, the raw truth of absolute space, infinite liberty.

But pain arrived and stuffed her too-infinite soul back into the icy statue which now would become her tomb. She was no longer a wanderer, but a body, burning by day, freezing at night. It was too small in place of too great, too rough in place of too tender, too heavy in place of too light. Everything hurt, her toes pricked with needles, her feet glued to the hull, her legs on fire, her head crowned with thorns, her organs devoured by nothingness, and above all, the thirst with the taste of salt.

This thirst riddled with spines those millions of twisted square inches that made up her body. The intestines, the stomach, the liver, the spleen, the gall-bladder, the lungs, the nerves, the numberless cells, all were dying of thirst. This pain brought time to a halt. The sun no longer budged.

- Finish me off, she murmured.

But the sun knew no pity. It is the desert's psychopath.

Solitude became the ultimate tyrant. It infiltrated everywhere. A body is large, maybe as large as an ocean. If you stretch out the skin and the filiform layers of all the organs, if, in brief, you place all the cells one next to the other, you would have a tissue wide enough to cover all the sea. There wasn't one fiber of this tissue that hadn't been burned raw on the sun side and frozen to death on the sea side. The soul becomes a prisoner of its pain.

One feeling was screwed cell by cell to that pain: abandonment. No mama, no papa, no sister, no brother, no god. It was then that, instinctively, the image of the Rebel pierced through to her bones.

- Have pity, Satan, have pity, she burst out.

The pact was signed. She collapsed in the bottom of the lifeboat. The sun at last continued its way. Day sank down to the west. Sleep arrived with its healing bands, its oil and its perfumes...

She opened her eyes in surprise. It was dark. There! a lantern was swinging. Finally! a boat was approaching. It was a flat-bottomed fishing boat like those she had seen on the coast of England between Dover and Eastbourne, with the sail furled and the dragnet behind.

-Hello! Anybody there? the fisherman asked.

She stood up straight as an arrow. She had regained her strength.

- I'm here, she cried, surprised at the power of her voice.

The man came alongside and handed her a large jug of water. Of this water, it could be said that it was like a river stretching across an arid plain, percolating through the smallest canals, irrigating, fertilizing, intoxicating. But the soil was insatiable. She drank again and again. The water awakened hunger. He gave her some bread. Then it was like rain on warm ground, everything began to turn green, with the result that all the pores of her skin wanted to talk at the same time.

Say thank you, say hello, tell about the adventure, bring the story to a final stop ... begin at the beginning, reach an end, that's fine. Tear her story loose from eternity, place it between two precise points of space and time, that's happiness. But everything was getting mixed up ...

- I am Miss Liberty, daughter of Mr. Liberty, we were on ...you know, one of those steamboats ... and the hurricane

- Are you speaking of Mr. Liberty, the London banker?

-Yes, him, he wanted to invest in steam. We embarked on a prototype ... the Devil Boat ... do you know it?

-You are his daughter.

- Yes! Look! I had dressed for a ball on the deck...

- You were going up to the ball!

- That's right. To the ball.

And she began to cry. These were her first tears. They were so sweet. He touched her hand.

- So, I have the honor of speaking with a lady.

- Yes, to a lady...

And she threw herself in his arms like a child on its papa. He hugged her for a moment, a long moment, a moment he would have liked to have lasted forever. For the man was tenderhearted.

Taking her by the shoulders, he pulled her away a little. She looked at him. What a strange face this seaman had. It was like stone that expressed tenderness. A face tanned by the sun and worked over by the waves. He wore large glasses, pierced by steely eyes. He was homely, yet handsome. Huge shoulders on a stocky body, hands that were too large on the ends of two knotted forearms. In his coarse wool pea jacket and tarred leggings, he exuded an incomparable nobility. Standing straight in a boat that smelled of fish, he inspired nothing other than security. The nightmare was over.

- We aren't very far from the coast, he told her. You've got to keep on having faith...

- But I do have faith, she replied.

- If you have faith, then the details don't matter.

- I don't care about the details. I just want to get ashore.

- Then I'll attach your lifeboat.

- Yes, attach the lifeboat.

Which is what he did. He raised the sail. And she went to sleep, wrapped in the tarpaulin in the bottom of the lifeboat which had almost become her tomb.

The sun warmed her body. It was daylight ... In front of her she saw her little hand ... lividdead. She saw her mother's face. Finally, a memory that was crystal-clear. It was some time before her death. A straight nose, fine lips, eyes as grey as the horizon at sea. " What are you doing, Maman? - I'm knitting some mittens. - For me? - For you."

She wanted to read her hand like her mother did. "Tell me, Maman, how big my happiness will be." - "As big as the ocean." She was right, Maman. She was always right. ...It's just that the happiness she saw, we didn't see it, we saw only poverty, violence, death ...

She wanted to move her hand, have done with the outburst of memories. The hand moved. And pain leapt onto Petite Liberté like a pack of lions. Thirst had transformed her body into a desert. It was heavy sand, welded to centuries of solitude.

She managed to lift her head. The knot had untied. The fisherman's boat had disappeared. She got up staggering. No! She saw the sail far ahead, heaving up on the swell, disappearing, reappearing. You had to believe it. The sea is a liar. You don't know. She wanted to yell. Nothing came out of her mouth. She collapsed in despair. Sleep knocked her out once again ...

- Madame, wake up.

He tapped her on the shoulder. She was numb. He touched her legs, her stomach. She was icy cold. He listened to her heart... She was going to die. So he undertook to rub her vigorously while smearing her with a camphorated balm. He began with the feet. It was a burning vapor that penetrated all the body. He was bringing her back to life.

He bundled up the young woman's legs in heavy wool blankets. He massaged her hands, her arms, and her shoulders, then immediately wrapped them in wool. Covering her with both arms, he turned her over onto her chest and slid his wide fingers between her fragile muscles. His hands penetrated like a nourishment. He spread her out on a big fur coat, unbuttoned her wet blouse, spread his burning palms on her cold chest. He delicately covered her with all of his warm body. She was no longer on the sea, but lying on a meadow. It was summer. Like a field of wheat, her skin swallowed up the sun. She went to sleep in another body, a living body.

She awoke to a seagull's cry. She was once again walled in to the silent stone of her body, spread out on the tarpaulin on the bottom of the lifeboat. She could not raise her head. The boat that was pulling the lifeboat ought to be there, just ahead. She had to believe it. But she saw neither the boat nor its mast. She wanted to call the fisherman, tell him not to worry, that she understood what he did, that she wasn't offended, that, maybe, she would marry him. That she didn't give a damn that he was a seaman and she, a lady! That there was a treasure under the lifeboat's seat ... But her mouth remained paralyzed.

Gulls jabbered over her head. She managed to drag herself to the front of the lifeboat and raise her head. The fishing boat had disappeared. She plunged back down into the shadows.

Satan had used her. Knowing that to be the case, she said this prayer in her heart: "I don't want Heaven, I don't want Hell. I no longer want the arrogance of the immortals. If I get out of this tomb alive, I swear to be a woman in every cell of my skin. I make a promise to leave no thirst without water, no hunger without meat, no heartbeat without love. I want to grab hold of something, bite something solid. I don't want to float like a cloud anymore. I prefer to live

completely in a single blade of grass rather than dwell with the gods ... I appeal to death, have pity!"

CHAPTER III

The Uprooting

It is those able to give refuge to the strongest demons who will one day receive the greatest graces ...

RAYMOND ABELLO

She died in the war, in one of the wind's angry outbursts. She died in the desert, dessicated slowly by the cold. It was completely ordinary. Her grave had wandered for a time. And then her spirit foundered.

A boat had been found. A girl was dying in it. No audible respiration, no pulse, not a single reflex, and yet they didn't throw her body into the sea. Fate had decided otherwise.

One dies, another lives, two opposing stories. The stories of this world, however, are not always separated. Petite Liberté is no more, but another awakens. In truth, what is a person? A succession of characters who are looking for each other but never really recognize each other!

For a very long time, the unknown survivor remained suspended in the fog her mind created. In the beginning it was lifeless, monotonous, colorless, odorless, soundproof and painless. Then there were pools of gouaches that crossed each other without mixing, like jellyfish. Yellows, reds, phosphorescent greens. Flowers that undulated, but lacking their shape. Each color kept its odor: cinnamon, bergamot, lemon, jasmine ... It was a sort of painted garden without drawing, too lively, too mobile to support any forms. She swam in them.

Little by little, she began to hear buzzing and ringing noises.

Could she fashion anything from these opaque colored oils that rang? Could she bring lines into them -- ovals, spirals, stems, needles, sensations? Could she form images in that dispersion? She didn't know. She wasn't able to desire anything.

Even so, a design came. A presence. On the horizon, in the marvelous distance, a face formed, long brown hair, a little white corset, a young woman with a blue apron.

The servant cried out:

- She's opening her eyes, she's waking up, come, see, it's a miracle.

Her inert body was lying on a feather bed, in satin sheets with embroidered borders, under a blanket of finely hemmed wool. The furniture was Victorian and the vaulted ceiling was decorated with painted vines. A fire crackled in a marble fireplace. She was in heaven ...

A man entered and approached. He was somewhat stout, and wore a monocle on his right eye. With two fingers, he widened the revived woman's eyelids and examined attentively the opening of the pupil. He placed his ear on her chest. He sounded the arteries in her neck. He took a flask from his pocket, opened it, and passed it under her nose. A peppery odor wafted up. She coughed.

- Young lady, you are returning from afar, said the man.

"Young lady, " the words seemed incongruous to her. Her eyes turned away. The servant who had called for the doctor to come stood discreetly at a distance. There was something familiar about her. But what? Everything was so vague. Some people had arrived and formed a half-circle around the bed. There they were, silent, astonished, and marveling. The doctor took her hand.

- You were picked up by some fishermen here. They believed that you were dead. But American medicine has made progress, young lady, giant leaps. I nearly brought you back from the dead, dear Miss, whose name I do not know.

Those in attendance applauded. The doctor removed his monocle and gave a slight smile. The survivor said nothing; her eyes were still dull.

- You'll get your spirits back, young lady. Everything is proceeding normally. Don't worry. Eliza, your chambermaid, will explain the details of your adventure, he concluded as he left the room.

"Your chambermaid," these words seemed so familiar to her and yet so unexpected. All the household followed the doctor, except the servant who remained standing a few steps away, her head down, awaiting an order.

- Come closer, the survivor said. Her voice quavered.

Eliza approached and resumed her position, standing straight with head inclined.

- Go on, tell me.

- Well, here it is. Miss, you are now in New England, at Mr. Hunter's home, Mr. Constantine Hunter ...

She had pronounced the word, "Mister," twice, each time with an emphasis equally grandiloquent. Since the arrival of steel, steam and motors, the title of "Mister" trumped any other title for the Anglo-Saxons and it was pronounced with a solemnity proportionate to the amplitude of its holder's capital. This was such a commonplace knowledge that the word itself seemed to impose admiration. Thus the survivor was overcome by respect, but didn't know why ...

- Mr. Hunter's personal physician has been taking care of you, the chambermaid continued. We are happy that you're coming back to life with us.

The convalescent silently repeated the young woman's words: "We are happy .. Mister..." They were like velvet.

- As far as we know, you are the sole survivor of a shipwreck. A hurricane mowed down everything.

- Where is the man who saved me?

- There were three boats and a dozen fishermen. Oh! They almost threw you back into the ocean. But to make an impression, they towed the lifeboat right in front of the house, in procession, as if it were a casket. A good thing! For if they had found the treasure themselves, they would probably be in New York right now, and you would be on the bottom of the ocean ...

The young survivor looked at her, terrified.

- Excuse me, young lady. I didn't wish to ...

Suddenly, Eliza's words let images escape - the lifeboat, the looter, the steamer ...

- Keep on, she said, in a voice barely audible.

- Mr. Hunter had a discussion with the doctor in front of the house. He's a very learned man, he is. He examined you a long time. Then someone lifted the seat up. Everybody understood who you were then.

The young servant stopped short. She was probably waiting for the young survivor to ask to have Mr. Hunter (who was in Boston) come so that she could tell him in her own words her name, her family, her origin, and her gratitude, for the treasure was no small thing.

- I'm exhausted. Let me be, the survivor concluded instead.

And she sank into a kind of half-dream. She heard the ocean, the waves, the rain. The cold entered through all her pores. She was going to drown in the gouaches of her mind once again. But this time, something in her resisted. New veins and fresh arteries were being formed, conveying an energy she didn't understand. The words "young lady" made bells ring within her, and those bells awakened powers ...

Even so, other memories came, but these were charged with anxiety. She would have none of them. And then, behind them, an obscure argument began to form: " After all, even if I get my memory back ... Who can prove anything? Who can vouch for anything? No one, not even me. The nature of a poor girl is such that she cannot prove herself. It was a handicap, it is an advantage ..." She did not construct this monologue; it unrolled by itself, following its own sequence.

All she had heard from the lips of Mess Liberty about America, wealth, fashion, and the future organized itself in her mind, driving away her childhood, whatever remained of it. He, Mess Liberty had known how to actualize those dreams that banish poverty.

He had spoken about Negroes snatched from Africa, cut off from their roots and transplanted here, in America, with their heads in the ground and their feet in religion. And it worked like a miracle! The Americans with their war against England, their war against their own origin, that had succeeded perfectly for them. They had even managed to eradicate almost all the Indians who, for their part, had plenty of roots ... So, roots are just excess weight ... And now, I must learn how to take advantage of this fresh air ...

But for Petite Liberté, there were more urgent, deeper problems. The train of progress leaves behind a muck, a residue, an excrement, odors, people who move about restlessly but do not exist, unknown to justice, law, or even hope. Superfluous people. And there are those poor girls starving to death, sent under contract to America. In exchange for the voyage, they become the property for five, ten, or fifteen years, of a master who always finds a way to prolong the contract. As Adam said in Genesis: "Woman is the flesh of my flesh." These poor women are that flesh.

Once you hang on to your existence only by the thin skin of your obedience, you are never far from a fall into the gutter. This she knew by instinct, she felt it like a shiver. Everyone knows that America absorbs the excess population of Europe and the blood of Africa. America drinks, that's what she does. Consequently, there is such an abundance of labor that wages tumble below the level of the pittance paid to slaves ... If she were driven out of this house, she would find herself in a mill in Lowell or an alley in New York. Those are some facts that make you think ...

She didn't know where it came from, this duty to save herself. She didn't remember ever having felt anything like it. She didn't understand its origin. It was in her own hands, like the duty to exist. Something had happened. She was discovering within herself a sort of foundation-stone that willed it, a little as if she were precious, respectable, and worthy of walking in a garden between the trees. She wanted to award herself a name, and rights.

She raised herself on her pillow. There was an oval mirror placed on the commode next to the bed. Taking it, she looked at herself. The face was emaciated, angular, pale, with dark circles around the eyes. But it was possible to do something with it. A kind of plan was being woven in the shadows.

She put the mirror down. Under a thick Bible, a corner of her black notebook showed. Her heart shrank, and cold sweat appeared on her forehead. Her name was in it, and her mother's, the shame, the stories, the twaddle about the good women Ah! yes, the notebook belonged to her servant. There it is! She didn't know about the book herself, it was nothing, the caprice of a little nobody of a servant ... It was there by accident ...

No! It was better to say nothing. A total amnesia is more credible than a selective memory. She took a deep breath and rang the bell. Eliza entered and curtseyed graciously:

- The young lady called?

- When will Mr. Hunter return?

- The messenger left this very day. Mr. Hunter may be here tomorrow toward the end of the day.

- As soon as that!

- It's because we are not that many miles north of Boston.

- But I'm not presentable!

She dismissed the servant with a wave of her hand. She was terribly heavy. The exhaustion was returning. She had struggled with death too much. She felt herself slide into a deep and devastating sleep. She resisted, but her body weighed a ton If I wake up in the lifeboat, she thought, I'll throw myself in the ocean.

She did awaken in the lifeboat, transfixed by thirst. The wind whistled. The night was indescribable, without a moon, without stars.

She didn't have the strength to throw herself in the ocean. She couldn't even manage to budge the smallest part of her body. Something had entered her mind, an obvious fact that, it seemed, nothing could brush aside. Miss Nobody was immortal. She would always be in this icy desert, dreaming sometimes of nice things, sometimes of cruel things, but nothing would be as horrifying as this pure reality of the infinite.

Forever and forever she wanders on this ocean. Never, never again could the basis of her being escape the desert. The proof is obvious and sufficient: as soon as someone lacks the strength to give birth to illusion, she is lost in the infinite. Feeling a visceral need to contradict this fact only adds to the proof.

She looked at her hand, livid and dead. In the palm, the three little rivers were disappearing. And then she heard some sounds. She gave a start, but then relaxed. To disappear in a desert or follow such a small stream to the falls, what difference did it make! It's true, there is the black notebook and that strange idea of her mother's: "Follow the lines of the hand or follow the lines of the notebook, that is the choice. be manipulated or be liberated The horizontal road or the high road ... Will you be a fish? Will you be a bird? This notebook can deliver you from your fate ... - "But you, Maman, the notebook didn't deliver you from poverty!"

All that no longer had any importance. All that was disappearing in the sea of gouaches...

Mr. Hunter was detained by much urgent business and could not get away immediately. Fall is an important season for a shipowner of his kind. The change of season meant a change of itinerary for his transatlantic four-master. And the change of itinerary was also a change in

commerce. Other merchandise, merchandise coming from other continents more to the east, more to the south, were needed to bring in more profits, for if his business didn't grow bigger, he would be swallowed up.

Consequently, he needed to persuade his friend the banker, a prudent Jew who did not like taking chances, to loan him a large sum. He also needed to negotiate the increasingly exorbitant salary of the captain, an Arab unparalleled at sea, but - and that was the rub - equally unparalleled at making demands. Then too, there were the textile mills of Boston, but especially those in Lowell. The female workers were discontented and striking on a rotating basis. Some businesses in Germany and certain others in India were also threatened by a spirit of revolt which seemed as though it wanted to inflame the entire world. Consequently, the naval shipyard and the fishery at Little All Cove had to wait. For the magnate, these were small things, no more than his winter vacation.

Some time after having received the doctor's message telling him that the survivor was out of danger, he was informed that she continued to suffer from amnesia. So no one knew anything about her family. This was unfortunate. Certainly there was the jewel-box, but the family's gratitude might prove - shall we say, generous. The financing was lacking for a deal he was dreaming about ...

Eliza was just as good as the doctor. This young servant shone with an unequaled grace and culture. Her mother had been a governess in a rich family of Yarmouth. Her father she never spoke of. For reasons that were unclear, and which she tried to explain, she ran away from home. She worked for a while in a textile mill in Boston, and then was hired as a servant by the steward at Little All.

The young chambermaid had become attached to the survivor-girl. She didn't know why, but she was very much attracted by the mystery of this stranger that she called sometimes Miss Seabreeze, sometimes Miss Secrecy. She fed her with frequent little meals and served her as much cool water as she wanted, which was a lot. Besides this, she read her the latest poems of Emerson, Longfellow and Whittier. These verses seemed so familiar to the young lady that sometimes she finished them on her own. This struck Eliza as marvelous.

The servant helped her make her first steps around her bed, slip into the hot water in the bathtub, and sit down next to the fire. But the biggest remedy was laughter. There was something so ingenuous and innocent in that young woman that in her presence it was impossible to stay upset very long.

Miss Amnesia was gaining strength. One day, the moment came to open the double door leading to the second story porch of the manor, so that she could be shown the landscape.

The sumptuous manor, called "The White House" by the people of Little All, really was white. It overhung a hill nestled in a small valley stretching north as far as the White Oak forest. The balcony opened out onto the south side. From there one could see a long arm of small flat rocks advancing into the water and protecting the cove. At the end of this arm there was a lighthouse and beyond that a point and a reef, the Diefull. The arm had been solidly reinforced with stones as far as the reef, so as to effectively encircle the cove and protect the naval shipyard.

This was an open-air shipyard where different types of smaller craft were built - large rowboats, flat-bottomed boats, barges, and sailing yachts. Inside the cove, at the bottom of the hill and at the foot of the White House, lay the workers' village, about thirty brightly colored houses, a little schoolhouse and a Quaker church, a rarity in this Methodist country.

Toward the south, the cove formed a gravelly beach in the shape of a hook. At the point of this hook was a breathtakingly high cape mounted by a mossy black boulder, the Hellrock. This wide promontory prevented the eye from seeing further in that direction. On the east side of the cape, facing the sea, caves were faintly visible. These were called the Skulls because they were shaped like two large eye-sockets with, a little below them, the cavity of a nose. They were the nesting-places of numbers of squawking birds. When the wind rushed into the Skulls, it was said that the Hellrock was moaning and speaking.

An isolated house built of badly fitted stones clung to the rather steep slope leading from the cape to the village. It was here that the new pastor lived, an unusual character. Between this house and the workers' village was a hodge-podge of minuscule shacks, the fishermen's muddy hamlet. Between these two settlements a river called Capsize rushed down toward the sea. A wooden bridge connected the two shores.

She had seen this landscape through the bay window of her room. She had looked at it the way you look at a beautiful painting hung on a papered wall. But to confront it was something else. It was not so easy to go out. In general, you don't look landscapes in the eye, but treat them as harmless decorations. But Miss No-Name had touched the desert ...

She went out onto the balcony. The first snow had softened the contrast of colors between the shore and the sea. This veiling calmed her. The pale and pinkish greyness of the coast rose toward the sky in diaphonous strands. This came from a fog which filtered the light and added weight to forms. In this fog, spots stood up, bushes, cabins. The sea was covered by a veil.

Eliza spread out a nicely warmed eiderdown on a chair. Her mistress didn't wish to sit down. The sea was there, mute, subdued and innocent behind the fog. She sensed it. It was a truce.

The shipyard murmured. She could hear children playing. She could almost distinguish the conversations. The sound traveled as if through water. A slight smell of seaweed gave substance to the breeze.

- Eliza, go fetch another chair, the young lady commanded.

The young servant was surprised, but obeyed.

- Sit down.

- Young lady! Don't even think about it. People might see me doing nothing ...

Miss No-Name didn't finish.

- Sit down beside me.

There was something solemn in her voice. Eliza helped her mistress sit down, wrapped her in the eiderdown and sat down near her. She couldn't hold back a nervous giggle. A dog lying curled up on the front doorstep raised an ear.

- That one there is Cheyenne. He reports everything to his master.

Both of them burst out laughing, then let the silence renew the solemnity of the moment. The young survivor took Eliza's hand and looked at her a moment before turning back to the landscape.

The air was mild, and the land stretched pale into the distance. A majestic softness hovered. The two young women were there side by side, in the mumbling of sounds from the village. They felt as if they were living in the same world and dreaming of the same things.

Little by little, the sun swept the fog away. The snow sparkled, almost blindingly bright, the sea turned blue as a slate, and the cottages, in their bright colors, seemed to celebrate. The air gave off an animal odor. The wind came from the coast, warm, laden with the manure of autumn, smelling like cows.

Eliza seemed to understand what was going on in her mistress's mind. Neither of the two dared say a word. The village chirped, the fishermen's hamlet buzzed, the cascade hummed. Not to be alone anymore on the ocean It was so nice.

In the distance, gulls and cormorants hurled themselves off the Skulls and dived in the wind. A fishing-boat rowed back into the cove. And then, a great white egret leapt off Diefull, made a long loop around the cove and passed over their heads. They heard the whistling of its immense wings. It was intoxicating, to fly amidst this grandeur. To feel the air under its pinions, stiffen its feathers; tense its muscles, make the weight of the air itself the means of its evasion. At this moment there was no longer anything more in this world but spaces within spaces. No time, no little rivers in the lines of the hand.

Where do the birds go, and the clouds, and the waves and the seas? The answer was obvious: there was nowhere to go. There was no target and no arrow, no ladder, no summit, and no center. You do not leave, you do not arrive. You do not enter, you do not go out. Our house is here, but it has neither wall nor ceiling.

- You never leave the desert. You never leave the ocean, Miss Survivor whispered.

These words thrilled Eliza, but, little by little, anguish entered her mistress's heart. An anguish such that she thought she understood, vaguely, why Mother Eve ate the apple. How delightful it is to be banished from the infinite! To have barbaric fire in the heart and the ferocious taste of desire, to will something other than this pile of sea and earth with its trees and birds, to touch a pleasure, escape from it, and touch it once again. This alternation, that is what salvation is. She understood, vaguely probably, but irremediably all the same, why it was

necessary to totally destroy all her soul's peace, why it was necessary to unite with a fragile body and force it into effort. And above all, why it was necessary to exhaust one by one the possibilities of evil. Something within her grasped the contradiction of the world.

- Thank you, Eliza, she sighed, thank you for everything, thank you for this moment.

- It's a beautiful afternoon, Eliza admitted.

A strong gust of wind passed. Eliza drew her shawl around herself.

- Oh! You don't have a blanket, Miss observed. Take one of mine.

"One of mine:" this little lie produced a terrible effect. She had never felt so strongly the devastating effect of a lie.

- Where did that egret go? Miss asked in order to escape her anxiety.

- Probably to Raising Marsh, a little more than a mile inland, Eliza answered.

The word "marsh" began to keep returning to Miss's mind. And then she thought of the steps which, in a marsh, leave no trace, of the benefits of amnesia, of the water no one can write her life on, of the happiness of never having to answer for the past...

And then came this question from Eliza:

- Miss, that notebook that you pressed so hard against your chest ...

- What notebook?

- Yes, you were holding on to a little black notebook as if it were the most precious thing in the world. It is on your desk.

- Ah! the notebook under the Bible. I was just asking myself what it was.

The trembling tone of her voice had given her away. That was it. Like a dish that slips out of your hand, that you can't catch in time ... You see it fall, your heart stops, your eyes are riveted on the spot where it falls

- I will go and get it. If I read you a page or two, that might help you.

Aware that she could not refuse, she swallowed hard. Eliza went to get the notebook. The young survivor regained control of herself:

- Choose a page in the middle, Miss demanded. Eliza opened the notebook.

- Read me a passage.

- I can't, Eliza answered. I don't read French.

- Go a little further on.

- It's still French.

- Show it to me.

Eliza handed her back the notebook. Miss No-Name opened it in several places, including the first page.

- It's not French, it's Chinese, she said, laughing nervously.

She rolled the notebook in her hand. The sensation was violent. She demanded to go back to bed. Getting back in the bed, she concluded as naturally as she could:

- This notebook doubtless belonged to my chambermaid. I wanted to keep it as a souvenir. A servant can become a friend. It's not impossible.

And she gave out her best laugh. This time she had spoken naturally and confidently, looking Eliza straight in the eye. Maybe she had caught the dish ... But the dish had shattered against her heart as if upon a marble tile ... The anxiety was coming in.

When Eliza left the room, Miss No-Name tore out the first page of the notebook, went to the fireplace, and threw it in the flames. The paper caught fire and the flame threw off black flakes. She felt herself give way.

She opened the notebook. She could read. She could make out the French perfectly, the more so since her mother had read these stories to her a thousand times, as if they were fairy tales ... Tales to frighten children. She had sworn never to open it, except to smell once again its perfume ...

Exhausted, she dragged herself laboriously to the bathtub and slid into it as if into a boat. The infinite surrounded her. The solitude was of lead. The cold, of ice.

CHAPTER IV

The Pastor

He participated in the elements of our nature so as to reunite it with his roots.

THE GOSPEL OF MYRIAM OF MAGDALA

Jesse Truth, the new pastor of Little All, was a mystery, that is to say, a man of unverifiable rumors. It was said that he was the son of an Indian princess and a very wealthy English merchant. He was supposed to have passed his childhood in India in a palace with a thousand servants.

At the age of twelve, it was said that in a fit of rage he smashed everything he could in his father's palace, renounced all the gods who reign over the earth, and swore to love nothing but the salt that is tread upon. They said that he was shut up in his room, but disappeared: Several years later, he was rumored to have reappeared in the port of Kakinada. From there, he was supposed to have sailed on a brigantine as an ordinary seaman. It was said that he provoked a mutiny. As punishment he was, it was said, marooned on a tiny island off Bermuda. He survived there for two years, so the story said.

This fable made him smile. As for him, he told a different story. He said he came from Pennsylvania. He let it be understood that his grandfather had participated in the "Holy Experiment" with William Penn himself. This made everybody laugh. First of all, it was chronologically impossible. Then, too, tolerance, nonconformity, sympathy for the French revolutionaries, compassion for the Negroes and the Savages, social justice, all the utopian gibberish of the "Holy Experiment," all this was the opposite of Little All.

Several points in common stood out from these two stories. He had run away and not kept any contact with his family. He was said to have survived on an island. This was the only thing he related without laughing. He was supposed to have told a fisherman in the village that he had two daughters by the most beautiful woman on earth. One of his daughters was dead, and the other, no one knew. No one believed him, for, frankly, he was ugly, too square in the face, too soft in the eyes, and with hands that were too big.

However it may be, the man did live for sometime in a village on Cape Cod, quite close to Yarmouth Port. From there on in, witnesses could be cited. The people in that place said that he was the best of the fishermen. They named him pastor because he had taught a deaf and almost blind child to read and speak. Legends had been told on this subject. Yet, he never talked about this village and this event.

The only thing he did confirm were the years of solitude on an island in the high seas. It was there that he learned to fish. The pastor wasn't anything else, in fact, but an exceptional seaman.

Constantine Hunter had agreed to take him under his wing for that principal reason. No one else would have wanted him as a pastor, because he never preached. This was a good thing, for every time he did preach, it was so unusual and maladroit that everyone was dumbfounded by it. At the church, he made do with reading short passages of the Gospel. The Quakers had, moreover, relieved him of his office. This made little difference to the master of Little All, who preferred to have a man who gives an example rather than a man who cites examples.

Once, he did talk and it wasn't at the church, but in the middle of the night, during a village festival when he was three-quarters drunk. He had opened his heart like an abscess. The people spoken to were drunk and didn't remember anything. But the woman who served them wasn't drunk. That woman, named Martha Cody, reported the conversation as if it were inscribed on the vault of her skull.

'You have no idea, Joseph, what I did. (Joseph was the only one of the drunks still capable of looking at him from time to time.) You have no idea! She was the most beautiful of women. I'm telling you that. And me, I was in her lantern like a tiny, tiny little flame. It's hard to be ugly in something so beautiful. You're fragile. You're afraid. The lantern can go out. I didn't want to die. You understand that, Joseph. I didn't want to die in her heart. So you have to protect the lantern. One little puff of air and pfft!, it's finished.

"Have you seen the mother birds in the Skulls. They don't make their nests on the edge, but in back where it's sheltered. When I held her in my arms, it was as if I was holding the woman I could be born from. Do you understand that, Joseph? I was in her mind like an embryo in a womb. One distraction and, whoops!, she'd abort me. I wouldn't exist any more. She needed to carry me for years, because me, I'm not an easy birth.

"It's terrible to live suspended in the fancies of a heart. A distraction, that's not rare! And me, Joseph, look at me, I'm as easy to forget as a toad. I stood for nothing in her heart. I was an illusion. If she saw me there, like you see me, I would be dead. Would you love me, Joseph? Look, would you love me?"

While spitting up the beer he had just swallowed, Joseph had choked. This didn't stop the pastor from continuing.

"You don't know how bad it is! You want to protect the little flower, you want to surround it with your hands, you want to just barely touch its skin to make satin out of it, but while you're making yourself into a gardener, down in your bowels a bear is getting fat. Do you know the law of opposites?"

"Listen to me! What I'm saying I will never say again. So! You're listening. Here's my example. You want to talk. You say to yourself that talking is better than killing. You just want to tell her that you love her and that it hurts you to see her look at the foreman. So you get your speech ready. You polish it, you soften it, you work on it so that it makes music. While you're arranging your speech, a bear is growing in your insides. At the end of a month, you finally say the speech, but your fist smashes the table. That was me. A crying shame.

"Never marry a beautiful woman, Joseph. Don't even look at her.

"Do you see my hand? It's a vise. Do you see my fist? It's a hammer. But the head of the machine is a coward. Yes, me, the one who's talking to you, I was the worst of cowards. There's no greater cowardice than a man who hates himself in the woman he loves.

- If you're a coward, then I'm a pastor," Joseph had managed to retort.

- It's because I left before I killed somebody that I can fish in peace with fellows like you today. I looked all up and down the coast for a good boss fisherman, someone who wanted a lot and hit hard. Submission, Joseph, is a balm. To give in, to say "Yes, master," to work yourself to death for someone, that's a relief. The problem, though, was that the boss hit other people, too. That I couldn't take. My fist let loose. I was going to kill him, oh! I was going to kill him. I ran away to an island. I lived there for two years, an animal against animals.

"I wanted to receive truth right in the eye. Nothing is easier, Joseph. You just have to look straight ahead, and there it is, within your grasp. It is so much there that if you aren't on an island and you haven't burned your boat, you run like a rat toward the mud."

A deathly silence had paralyzed the whole room. He had stopped short, left his beer, and gone out into the darkness.

This Jesse Truth, the new pastor of a tiny village, had stationed himself in the little stone house on the side of Hellrock. He arose with the fishermen, spent the day as they did, ate their food and blessed their marriages. On Friday, however, he went to the naval shipyard. He knew how to bend the planks, drive in the pegs, and caulk.

This man, who read the Beatitudes almost every Saturday, who lived the life of a poor man as if it were a treasure, who loved the village as if it were a woman, who was respected as the sea is respected, who grasped the oars with iron hands, this man who was hardly a pastor gave to the village an extraordinary efficiency, and this made Mr. Hunter very happy.

There was, to be sure, his strange wintertime behaviour. From December to March, Jesse Truth settled down in his house, heated up his stove and played host to all the children who came. He called it his "Poor School," and it was a school of games and play, a kind of carnival. Through all the little valley, the laughter of children was heard, and that of their teacher, too.

To be sure, the shipyard village sent its children to the official school maintained by a certified teacher, unmarried and of a good reputation. But the cost of enrollment in this school could only be paid by the shipyard workers. The fishermen, paid in scrip, had scarcely enough to eat. The children were cold, and they went to the pastor's school to get warm. In the midst of this little piled-together pack were several Negroes, from among those who lived by the marsh. They gave off odors. But this was accepted. Mr. Hunter liked tolerance. It was profitable.

Miss Survivor was never seen to leave the Manor, but made news every day. This Saturday, however, she walked down to the church accompanied by her chambermaid. She was

going to receive a name from the pastor. Through an intermediary, she had proposed the names, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Clothilda, Clara ... But had never received any answer

Her coat of white fox which allowed her pink dress to appear, her porpoise-skin boots, her hat of otter fur, her face like a princess: everything about her glowed as if the sun were shining for her alone. She was innocence itself ... a child in a woman's skin, it might be said. She had been washed clean of her past, of her memory, and was coming to her baptism. The incorruptible in human nature surfaced in her eyes. Touch became a sacred act. Clara would be the perfect name. She bore it already in her head. Clara, that was for her..

Nothing gives as much joy to a poor community as to see a lovely princess adorn it. It is like opening on Sunday the case of a gold ring never worn because it is too precious, but shown off to everyone from time to time. Miss Miraculous was the jewel of the village and everyone felt a little bit as if he or she owned her.

But above all, nothing gives as much joy to a fishing community as maintaining such a beauty in the midst of its misery. Miss Survivor was the best in every person projected on to a face capable of welcoming it.

She knew how to lend herself to this admiration with a charm and a simplicity that demonstrated her nobility better than a great name could have done. No one, that day, could have doubted that this young lady was worth a thousand times more than the treasure found in the lifeboat. This delightful girl, emerging miraculously from the sea, had put a stop to boredom. People no longer even had the time to gossip about their neighbors. She smiled and it was always springtime.

If there were two kinds of gods, those who descend from heaven and those who rise from the earth, Miss Survivor came from heaven and Jesse the pastor came out of the earth.

As was the custom, the ceremony did not take long. After having the Beatitudes read by a little girl from his school, the pastor opened his Gospel at random and read: "Mary of Magdala arrived in the morning at the sepulchre while it was still dark and she saw the stone of the sepulchre rolled aside. She ran and returned to Simon Peter and the other disciple, and said to them, "They have taken away the stone and we don't know where the Lord is."

"Peter went out with the other disciple and they went to the sepulchre. They ran but the other disciple arrived first. Bending down to look into the sepulchre, he saw the linen cloths on the ground. Simon Peter arrived. He entered and he too saw the cloths and the shroud folded and lying to one side. And they returned to their own place.

"However, Mary of Magdala remained outside, next to the sepulchre, and wept. As she wept, she leaned toward the sepulchre. She saw two angels dressed in white. They said to her: 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them: 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they put him.'

"Having said this, she turned and saw Jesus there. But she didn't recognize him. Jesus said to her: 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?' She, thinking he was the

gardener, said to him: 'Man, if it is you who have taken him away, tell me where you have put him.' Jesus said to her: 'Mary!' She, having turned, recognized him."

After this short reading, Jesse asked:

- Do you know who this Mary of Magdala was?

No one answered.

- It's Mary Magdalene, the woman out of whom Jesus cast seven demons.

Those who were still listening shrugged. He wanted to finish:

- We don't see the gardener anymore. Why? Because everyone is looking for lords to obey. No one bends down low enough to see the gardener.

Everyone stared.

- Good, we are here to celebrate our own Mary Magdalene.

The audience relaxed. It was very easy to understand why everyone was satisfied that the pastor did not preach.

There was fresh bread, salt fish, lard, blueberries in maple syrup and numerous bottles of good cider. The princess shook everyone's hand. A small children's choir began to sing under the direction of the schoolteacher. People ate and celebrated. They forgot that the point of it all was to give a name to the village queen. She herself no longer thought of it.

Eliza wanted to introduce her mistress to the pastor. But the foreman's wife didn't cease pouring out compliments about the young lady's toilette. And then there was another and another one after that.

Ever since her arrival at the church, the young princess had been so touched by the interest shown her that she hadn't paid any attention to the pastor who, as always, had removed his big glasses to read the Gospel by heart. But here, at the dinner, this stocky back that she didn't even see attracted her like the earth attracts the moon. Eliza was the only one who noticed as her mistress slowly approached the pastor.

She finally reached his massive back. Eliza gave a little cough to attract the pastor's attention, as he was discussing with the fishermen new nets for smelt. He turned around.

The young survivor recognized him instantly. It was him. Glasses that could not be mistaken, a unique face, shoulders wide enough for two men ... She looked at his broad hands ... the hands that had reassured her, the hands that had warmed her. She felt herself blush, then weaken. She regained control of herself.

- Thank you, she murmured, so low that only he could hear.

The pastor observed her with piercing eyes and questioning eyebrows. There was a long silence between the two. He looked at her, a look that riveted her to him. Everyone was having a good time. No one, except for Eliza, realized what was going on.

- Marie, he said to her.

He had used the French name. That was her name exactly, the one that her mother had written in the little black notebook, the one nobody had ever used, the one she had forgotten ...

- It's a name that suits you very well, responded Eliza.

Had Eliza read it? And the pastor, too? Frantic, she struggled against the memories mounting to the surface. Her mother's face was there, in front of her ... her warmth, her tenderness. Never before had the face risen as clearly from the grave. Clenching her fists, she succeeded in sealing the leak. A lady who had overheard the conversation called for silence and solemnly announced:

- The name of our princess is Mary, Mary the Survivor.

The affair was settled. Mr. Hunter wouldn't change it at all when he landed, the next day, on the Little All wharf. In Boston, in the Massachusetts archives, you can find this name, with a fictitious date of birth added that ascribes to the young woman an age of approximately twenty years. The surname was, to be sure, temporary, since the young woman was of marriageable age.

Such procedure was far from rare along the coast. Ships full of immigrants arrived in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. They came from everywhere. Sometimes there were shipwrecks. Names and personal histories were of no concern. Good luck alone made the difference. America had the power of beginnings.

Mary agreed, the name wasn't very important after all. That the pastor or Eliza knew or didn't know her real name and her shameful origins was no great tragedy. They would keep quiet about it. They didn't have any proof. The essential question was this: was Constantine Hunter going to treat her like his daughter or send her away? He could: she was back on her feet and in good health. He even had the right to keep the jewels and their case to compensate for all the medicines he had paid for. No family would file a complaint. In brief, what happened next would depend on his mood.

Eliza wished to escort the pastor home. She wanted to speak with him about a young man in the village. This boy was courting her and her heart was leaning toward him, but she didn't want to go any further without the pastor's permission. Mary was not reluctant about a possible engagement, but only on condition that Eliza stay on for five more years as her chambermaid.

While walking back up to the White House, Mary turned around. Eliza had taken the pastor's hand. She was walking next to him like a little girl. This image caused an ageless resentment to arise in Mary's heart

CHAPTER V

Mr. President

He was in the habit of shutting himself up with a society of adepts in a dark laboratory where, following an infinite number of formulas, he accomplished the transformation of opposites.

GOETHE

The White House estate extended over hundreds of acres of forests, pastures, grain fields, and kitchen gardens. The whole society of people who lived there were called by many Sunday Paradise on account of the happiness that was found there. The large gardens that bordered the lane leading to the manor, their flowers, their fragrance, the sound of the fountains, the red maples, the giant pines - all of this lifted us up from the earth. Those who lived there lived out of this world, outside of time, forgetting poverty and toil, allowing themselves to be caressed by the fingers of paradise. It was, for the new young lady, not only a place of convalescence, but a reversal of perspective, a kind of resurrection.

In truth, how else could one imagine resurrection? After the nightmare of indigence, shame and the desert, to finally awaken in softness, silk and marble. To lose even the memory of the filth, the struggle for survival and the heaviness of this terrestrial world. To stretch out one's arms in the warmth of a feather bed. To ring a bell to call your maid and ask her for juice, some fruit, a smile. To hear the birds, to have nothing else to do but savor ... she had crossed the passage from the world of beasts to the world of gods.

Nothing is more natural for human societies than to elevate such places, surround them, protect them and make them a pasture for charming human beings. When people are crushed by toil, stinking of sweat, and chained to cold and hunger, it is a delight to spare a few from these trials, place them gently beneath a glass bell, and gaze at them, so clean and so light, as they peck and cluck in the sunshine.

These elect are installed in a collective dream, edged with gold, with draperies and the most beautiful works of art. All that is asked of them is that they be happy. People want them to float above human misery like a medicine. People want them to dance in the music of flowers without worrying about those who toil. And to top it all off, so that they never have to be ashamed of their dependence, people make them believe that the world depends on them.

Nothing is more pleasant than talking about these artificial beings. People are entertained by their darling little mishaps. With a little effort and imagination, a human can complain even in the most luxurious of these aquariums. Smiling, they tell about how the lady moaned about the mosquito that dared to bite her shoulder. They imitate the master's grumbling when a drop of his

coffee took it into its head to stain him. With them, it is either too hot or too cold; too sunny or too cloudy. They are dissatisfied, they are puny. It is a relief to see that unhappiness can depend upon so little.

In the castles where they are sheltered, they even manage to manufacture worry. It is because they have turned everything around. While in reality they are dependent upon everyone, they believe that they direct the world. They are convinced that they, the decorations, support the building, and that the roof holds up the foundation.

Their bad temper is amusing because they are floating on the clouds, far, very far, from the vale of tears where the common people move about. But their tongues are poisonous. If people didn't take them seriously, everything would go along pretty well on this earth. Alas! Their paranoia is contagious. Obeying them leads to calamity, for they don't know anything about the things of this earth. Nothing is more dangerous than to let them wander out of their bowl.

Miss Mary was satisfied with the bowl and played along with the game. She had been a chambermaid, so she knew what was expected of a mistress: a joyous exterior. So, she beamed and people liked her, especially her young servant Eliza.

Winter had arrived. This had in no way diminished the charm which made the estate so enchanting. Nothing, not even an orchid garden, is more beautiful than a lane of trees where the snow spreads out its silver hems on lacy fire. People think that snow is white. But that is because they are going somewhere in a hurry. They don't look. Mary wasn't going anywhere. She saw. Shimmerings of pink, of delicate green and silky mauve danced in all their tones. Nature seemed to shed her corsets, to bathe in colors particularly soft.

There was some uncertainty, however. Paradise was not sealed. Mary had entered this palace without a family pedigree. She hadn't pretended to be anything: it was fate itself that had placed her there. She had died, and was brought back to life. All religions preach the poor people's right to an affluent life, provided that it happens after death. She had paid the price in suffering, in despair, in agony and she had a right to heaven. She repeated this to herself.

Even so, would what was just in her own eyes be true in the master's eyes? She knew from the outset that he would come to inspect the treasure he had found. He would arrive unexpectedly, and he would judge. She was well prepared. Thanks to Eliza's care and attention and to her own talents, her curly tresses, her skin's sweet complexion, the fineness of her eyebrows, the thickness of her long lashes, the red of her lips and the pink of her cheeks gave her an air of high society. All of her body had been examined with a magnifying glass, no more blackheads or spots, not a single little pimple, only peach and velvet. This beauty was her only capital, and she knew it.

But however beautiful the instrument, it is in movement that it pleases. She had practiced walking, climbing stairs and coming down them, using her arms, her hands and fingers like a young lady. Grace comes from something that makes fun of gravity. Mary moved like a doe. A woman's body is her politics; she would make use of it.

In addition, she had a culture more than sufficient to prove her bourgeois origin. She had spent hours at the piano in the house and gave to the instrument an unequaled depth and lightness. To tell the truth, she didn't practice as much as persuade herself. This talent removed all her doubts. All she needed to do was act, and she would be Miss Mary. She aspired now to become Miss Hunter, by adoption or by marriage, depending on the man who would be in front of her.

The one who leaped from the yacht onto the wharf, whom she saw at first from a distance, seemed livelier and more robust than the crewmen themselves. Agility more than strength was the thing that characterized him. With his perfectly fitted frock coat, top hat and boots of a gentleman, he moved like an acrobat but commanded like a president. Moreover, he was nicknamed "Mr. President."

The man was a born leader. His orders were so natural that those who followed them felt motivated from within and, taken over by a new life, they aspired to be useful. Whoever heard this man lost any desire to rehash his old misfortunes, turned toward the future, and willed to serve, to build and to construct the edifice of progress.

Mary, who was observing him from a distance, squeezed Eliza's hand. She was waiting for the right moment. Finally she took a deep breath, left her servant, and walked cheerfully down to the wharf. She was ready. The breeze lifted her hair and caressed the back of her neck. She called out to him:

- Mr. Hunter.

She had positioned herself several feet away from him. He was leaning over a package, examining it. He turned and stared at her, startled, almost frozen.

The man was more handsome than any in her dreams. A high and gentle forehead, firm eyebrows, eyes like two coals, a straight nose, the face of an angel, a child's clear complexion, a matchless vitality of expression. His age must be a slander. This man surely couldn't be fifty, as it was said. The fine wrinkles framing his smile added to his attractiveness. The traces of grey in his curly black hair added gravity to the vivacity he exuded.

The words of thanks she had prepared vanished into thin air. Her mind was lost in a fog. Her heart was breathless. Something like a voluptuous hand was gliding already along her stomach. The cold wind seemed burning hot. Not a single word left her mouth. She didn't understand anything about what was happening to her: all the screws were loosened, the scenarios fell away, the armor lay on the ground. What she displayed was a child's face ... gracious, candid, innocent: a beauty without its veil.

Love at first sight, and a first love at that, is something inexplicable. Suddenly you sense a truth no one has prepared you for. You are flung all at once to the hundred-and-fiftieth page of a novel whose beginning you will never read. It is as violent as a shipwreck but in the opposite sense.

She was an adolescent. She didn't know anything about her body's new weather forecast. The tensions she had always carried didn't exist any longer. Others were there in their place. She thought she was entering another body. What was too empty was suddenly becoming too full. She was a child who had found her father, she was a daughter who had met her prince, she was a woman who was greeting her husband. She didn't know. It was too much. In fact, she was completely mixed up.

She looked at him a long time. He seemed to pass progressively from surprise to enchantment. He remained enigmatic, however: there was some speculation going on in the back of his mind. Doubtless he, too, was weighing his heart. He was in the habit of this kind of accounting but here the additions were marching past too quickly ... A smile widened on his face. He saw a profit that wasn't yet there, but he saw her too. She was beautiful, as he had been told, but he hadn't expected this much.

For a moment, all the hubbub of the little wharf stopped. People looked at the space between the two ... as if something were going to appear. On the contrary, after that moment the hubbub resumed louder than before. The gulls themselves participated in this halo of sounds enveloping the silence of their mutual gaze.

This had happened rapidly and as if behind a curtain. They didn't know themselves what had occurred. This was a part of behind-the-scenes history, the kind that is admitted, in general, only when it is too late.

He was the first to break the silence:

- Miss, I didn't expect to see you so well recovered.

The naturalness of his courtesy led Mary to play along:

- I owe it entirely to you.

- Did my doctor, my household, and my servants take good care of you? Are you satisfied?

- It's like I'm in Heaven. I only missed you. I couldn't wait to thank you in person.

He took her in his carriage and they went up to the manor by the longest route possible. Mr. Hunter was in no hurry. They became quite talkative. Constantine didn't speak about his business, but about his plans for the winter. The sluggishness of his businesses, from Christmas to the beginning of April, gave him the opportunity for a freedom that he always took charge of with the greatest seriousness. Nothing is more important than to build back one's strength. He would go to his hunting camp, open new trails to the north of White Oak, clear land, increase his acreage, breathe deeply She listened to him. She felt herself live, and said to herself: "This is it, the real life. I didn't know that it felt so good to be alive."

At their approach, the big yellow dog on the balcony came running, jumping, and barking. This dog, which had been only a kind of fur-piece abandoned on the corner of the porch, had suddenly come to life.

- Cheyenne! his master cried.

The dog ran in circles around their carriage. Constantine stood up and looked out at his vast estate. He jumped down from the buggy, patted the dog, took the young lady's hand, and climbed with her the great flight of steps lined by two rows of servants. The doors were opened and their coats and hats removed. The house came to life.

It might be said that a new oxygen had entered and warmed everyone up. Each one had a thousand things to do. They bustled about, dusting, lighting lamps, kindling fires for heat. The house which had only had a half-existence lit up room by room. Steward, valets, maintenance men; cooks, servants of every function hurried about. The grandfather clock resumed its humming. A will, a direction, and goals had arrived in the estate.

This man did not command, he awakened, he inspired, he breathed into people the will to act. He was like steam in a machine. They burnished the silverware, polished the woodwork, put a shine on the vases and statues, and spread the tablecloths. They smiled, they whistled, they hummed.

Even in the smallest of ways, day after day, Mr. Hunter treated Miss Mary as his daughter. He legitimized her status. She was to be obeyed as a mistress. He didn't say it, he didn't need to say it: it was obvious.

They had treated the survivor as a guest, but now she was one of the family. She felt each one's joy in saving her. Finally! She had arrived, this daughter that the master had never had. And the sadness was gone. She would be there when he was no more, it was she who would be master of the house. She must not be disappointed. The servants' smiles reflected her happiness.

She felt this happiness like a new blood coming into her, adding power to her life, adding on a new body. And what a body! She was the torso, the servants were her limbs. To have a hundred arms, a hundred legs, become immense, be a house in movement and all an estate ... to water the flowers, plant trees, trim hedges, clean vegetables, weave, sew, knit, hitch up horses, cut down trees, - even to speak of it, it was just about the same as being God. She believed it.

Everyone profited from it, everyone became more than her or himself, and it wasn't impersonal like a machine, no, it had a face, in fact two faces: his and hers. He was the tree, she was the graft. And that was something. The manor, the shipyards, the farmland, the forests ... all this was under this man's authority ... And this was only one island, what she saw. This island depended on the trade, the businesses, the powers of a whole little empire with branches extending to Europe and Africa. A formidable energy ascended from the humblest servants up to the summit, passing through the managers, stewards and foremen. She knew nothing of that. But she sensed it. It was like a wine. You don't know all the surface, depth, and density of the soil, the hours of sunshine or the ripening, but still, it gets you drunk.

To tell the truth, she was under the impression that her nature had changed, that she had passed from the human race to one that was divine; from being a simple mortal, she had become immortal; not immortal like nothingness, but immortal like money. She had a name, she had a family, she had power. And everything defended this name and this power: the law, religion, government, the army, the police. Everything that was against her before now was in her favor. And these institutions ensured the immortality of this power. And respect for these institutions, that was what America was all about.

In other places, there had been revolutions. Where there hadn't been any, you could see them coming. But here in America, you are sheltered. The unique characteristic of America, its essence, is knowing how to transmute revolutionary energy into mercenary energy. She was sheltered ...

All this hung on a thread, however, a thread between her and Mr. Hunter, a thread which wove itself at first sight and solidified day by day. She was working on it.

She learned how to coordinate herself with him. She guessed what he wanted, ordered the servants and got them moving. It was as if she had always known, as if she had been formed for this role. In reality, for these two roles, for weren't the two of them like a widower and his daughter? Because of this, shouldn't she act toward her servants as if she were both the lady of the house and that lady's daughter? She found out from Mr. Hunter what he wanted, what he anticipated, expected, and desired. She then went to the kitchen, to the laundry, to the upstairs rooms, to the attic to the stable, to the workshops, and everything got done ... And the steward let her do it. He was more relieved than offended. Moreover, he took a great deal of pleasure in advising, informing, and assisting her in her new occupation. He had more time afterwards to run off to the naval shipyard and play cards with the foreman.

Mr. Hunter acted as if she were his daughter, but looked at her in a different way. She acted like his daughter, but smiled at him in another manner. This ambiguity troubled the distance that remained between them. In this unease a game began. And in this game, ropes began to knot like a fisherman's net. All this happened at the speed of a factory loom, and her heart could scarcely keep up. Nevertheless, it did.

One lovely evening a few days before Christmas, in the ballroom where the piano was, Mary decided to assert herself as a lady straight out and clearly and show him her soul. She sat down on the bench. Constantine seated himself in an armchair alone in the middle of the room.

She began a long ballad. Talent, grace and a kind of truth assisted her. Some of the household staff arrived and remained standing on either side of the great doors.

She continued with a serenade. The serenade caused the fog that was on the great sea within her to lift. Long rollers raised her boat. It was gentle, serene, and peaceful. Constantine was dazzled.

Reassured, she undertook a kind of mass in a minor key, grandiose, shadowy, and tempestuous. She heard the orchestra, the choir, the sea, the swells, the breakers, the whistling of the wind, the deep descents, the dizzying elevations. She wasn't there anymore, she was lost at

sea, in the desert, in the only truth that holds. The superficial tinsel disappeared, immensity alone remained.

Water came to her eyes, then dried in place. She was alone in the infinite. It wasn't terror, though, that filled her heart; on the contrary, a grand peace played in all the storm. Life's fury provided her strange delights.

There, on that day, at that hour, despite the thirst, despite death that waited with open arms, she wouldn't have wanted a crystal palace. At that moment and in that instant, the worst truths seemed delectable, the most beautiful lies, revolting.

A breath came into her bones as if they were organ pipes. All her body was uplifted. Her arms, her hands, her fingers danced like gypsies. Her fingers galloped, struck, dodged, and fell again like hammers. Mary's requiem became terrible. It was impossible to imagine so much strength in such slender fingers. The piano trembled. She should have been at the organ, in a great granite cathedral. The room was too small, the ears too profane. At Sunday Paradise, on Mr. President's artificial island, it would have been better to keep to the ballads and serenades.

She looked around her: the marbled walls, the bucolic paintings, the costly vases, Mr. Hunter's astonished face, the servants' silence ... a shrill luxury, money's jangling, a whited sepulchre, a pure lie. She was there in the middle of this lie. It was as if she were a wild white horse, suddenly encircled by the cavalry. The space had become too small. The horse panics, gets worked up and excited. Its heart is ready to burst. To relieve it, a man slides his knife along a swollen vein in the neck. The blood flows. The horse quiets down for a moment. Then it is lassoed. They twist its head against its back. It falls. Exhausted, it finally lets itself be saddled and bridled. And then they ride it to death. It was this, precisely this that the life-line wrote in the center of Mary's hand.

Terror seized her by the throat, grasped her wrists. She looked at the manor's glistening walls, the furniture, the statues, the paintings, the servants, the wealth, and she had the feeling she had lost everything. Her fingers began to flounder and the music became confused. Mr President rose and applauded to put an end to the tragedy. He detested tragedy. The servants imitated him. Eliza, who was with them, left the room immediately, wiping away tears.

- You play very well, Constantine declared, but put that melancholy aside. It doesn't suit you.

- Forgive me, she answered.

An opaque silence paralyzed their gaze... The next morning she was once again light, gay, and carefree, the way he liked her.

Christmas was the incarnation of beauty, but even more, of innocence. Nothing seemed more important to Mr. President than to sing, celebrate, and glorify the birth of the baby Jesus in a humble manger. He squandered a small fortune on it. He brought up from Boston a pastor of great renown, a choir,

an orchestra, a theater company and all sorts of acrobats. All this for her and for him and his two friends: his banker, Hanne Yent, and his captain, Djib Tam.

Religion was a big deal for Mr. Hunter. You can very well assemble gears, wheels, pistons, coal, women and men, but if there is nothing to bind them, it won't work. Human existence needs ends like steam needs conduits. If the rich lost the support symbols provide, if someone went so far as to separate greatness from force, if all at once goodness - but above all, good things - no longer descended from on high, if everything began to be held from the bottom, the kingdom of the powerful would collapse. So, long live the religions where the gods resemble kings!

It is no laughing matter what happened to the Christian religion three centuries after Jesus, and up until our time. Nothing is more charming than the Most High sending his servant to the lowest depths to boost the strength of those who hold up the pyramid. What magnanimity in this Father who commands, what humility in this servant who obeys! The entire trajectory of the empire is summarized there, between the star over Bethlehem and the baby laid in the manger. Empire, imperium, that is to say, absolute domination.

The Nativity play was the culminating point of this day consecrated to leaving the ordinary behind. What dignity in Joseph, what simplicity in Mary, what pathos in the shepherds, what majesty in the Magi. Sincere actors, true tears, the naked baby in the straw, the children's emotion, it was marvelous ...

Whoever attended this play left reassured, contented, and pacified, no longer wanting to change anything in this world, accepting everything. This day was printed on the eternal scroll. There was no greater happiness than to fall on one's knees and say: "All this is good, the shepherds are happy, the kings are generous."

The President was moved. He wanted the play to be presented in the village free of charge. Even the most destitute fishermen in the hamlet ought to see this living nativity. They would serve goose and turkey, pork pie, and maple candy. The entire household would devote itself to the banquet to take place the next day, Christmas Day itself. They were ready for action ... every man and woman at their station. To relieve the stress on the staff so that they could more easily devote themselves to their task, Mr. Hunter would leave for his hunting camp with a few valets.

After the living nativity, a Christmas service was celebrated with grand pomp in the manor's chapel. Miss Mary had never seen a man so serious, meditative, and attentive to the sermon and the readings. Nothing seemed to distract him. On the contrary, everything brought him back within himself. The choir especially. He allowed this childlike music to work in his soul; the serenity of his face left no doubt about their master's honesty.

She was flabbergasted. She had never seen anything like it. A man who doesn't play at being great, but who is noble by nature. No question arose to weaken his certainties. No doubt showed itself on his forehead, only honest thoughts, smooth as marble, stable as the law, serene as a garden walk. Nothing in him dissipated energy. He went straight ahead.

How handsome he was! She too wanted to put up dams and dikes to hold the surplus, consolidate the funds, arrive at results. She didn't want to wander and drift anymore, lose her way in doubts, waste herself in worries, go on like a storm. Innocence and simplicity was this: accept things as they are, fulfill her function, run like steam through the pipes, make progress advance, spread wealth and comfort, live as a human being, live at a human scale, be done with the deserts and oceans, arrive at something.

Not only had she found a father, not only had she found a man, she had found a country. Countries come from distant pasts; they are made of mountains, rocks, and trees, but above all of solid habits, morals, institutions, organizations, order, and permanence. She told herself: "I have arrived. Here I am in my place, in my kingdom. I have a function. I have dignity. I am somebody."

After this long interval of meditation in the chapel, after everyone else had left, he took her by the hand. They remained side by side in silence. Fibers, roots, nerves and veins were forming between them, in spite of themselves. Both of them felt it. It brought with it energies they could only with difficulty contain. Their two hearts raced, their muscles expanded, their cells vibrated, as if driven by a metamorphosis.

This was all behind the scenes. He didn't know much of it, for the curtain had grown heavy with the years. She didn't understand much, for it was the first time. However, she sensed it better than he. New, extraordinary, tremendous possibilities were awakening within her. She felt something like an effervescence, a bubbling up of everything she could be. She need only say yes and all her potential being would inevitably come forward and change the world.

She sensed things better than he, but he understood better than she. The purity of that love, its strength, its power ... he was seeking a purpose for these things. He was reflecting on their usefulness. He found a place and function for them ...

No word could cover the mystery being woven between them, nor could any silence. But then the words began to burst out like little children leaving school. Awkward, innocent, inadequate words. Yet what difference did that make!

- I was alone. Now I have a daughter, a jewel, a treasure.

- I love you. I don't care how. I am yours.

- I don't need to know who you were, I want you with me. Do you like Little All? It's not London. It's not Boston ...

- I adore the countryside.

- You're at home here.

- I'm grateful to you for saving my life.

- Will you come to my hunting camp?

- With great pleasure.

And then still more words, some formal, some quite informal, and sighs. Their hands trembled, one in the other's. They didn't dare look at each other. What was transpiring between them surpassed their understanding. They tried to conform to an image: of a father, of a daughter. But the spider of love was coming and going between them, reinforcing its threads, widening its web ...

Mr. President knew how to celebrate as well as pray. Moderate in everything, he radiated joy all the more easily because of this. Wine made him a little foggy, but nothing more than that. He tasted it, and did not gulp it down. He laughed at everything, but not loudly. He had an irresistible charm. More than anything else, he told stories that everyone was supposed to find amusing, edifying stories that discouraged all forms of laziness, for he hated idleness, and detested inactivity.

There was a fat and lazy man. It was a long way from his house to the river. One day his wife, who went every morning to get water from the river, didn't come back. Well sir! The poor man died of thirst ... (Everyone began to laugh). I have another one ... Way out west, a financier had bought some parcels of land. He gave them away free to anyone who would farm them. Well sir! Nobody did anything. The people starved to death. So the man decided to make them pay rent. Everyone began to work. They plowed the ground and discovered gold. Today it's a prosperous city. (They turned toward him with an approving look.) The moral of these two stories: laziness causes more unhappiness, perhaps, than drought, wars and tornados.

- Think about it. Before progress, for thousands of years men had to contend with famines and epidemics. They barely survived, as wretched as animals. Everything went perfectly badly. A man arrived who knew how to organize work. Judging by appearances, industry is effort and sacrifice. But you must admit that since the coming of industry, life is better, longer, and more comfortable. The lesson is: we must accept certain hardships if we want to enjoy certain comforts.

He was the wisdom and inspiration of this celebration. That was obvious. Everyone took pleasure in serving him. He was the soul of confidence; he aroused boldness. He was certainty itself; he inspired courage and tenacity.

Mr. Constantine Hunter had studied in the best schools. Law, commerce and even biology. He had finally put his finger on the secret of nature. He was convinced of this. Nature is a crucible for selecting and shaping the strong. Nature produces the strong like a steel mill produces steel. Nature destroys the weak like a foundry rejects slag. With his two friends, the banker and the captain, he could go on nature's turf and wrest well-being from her for all human beings. He had found his calling.

The President knew how to be a team-player: neither a braggart nor egocentric, he wanted what was best. On this Christmas Day, this day of celebration, he didn't hog the limelight. Hanne, too, told some harmless stories. He made fun of messiahs, reformers, unionists, and socialists who do the best they can to resemble the bosses they curse. He found equality very funny. He called it envy.

Djib's humor was more biting. He liked to laugh at Blacks. Omitting "r's," he told stories about the South.

- Stick an alphabet in a Negro's ears and you lose all your capital. A Colt puts more sense in a Negro's skull than all the school books from here to Michigan.

Everyone burst out laughing. Mr. Hunter let them do it. All three of them were abolitionists, after all. A salary seemed more effective to them than a whip. Mr. Hunter was tolerant of everything and that tolerance was contagious. The banker and the captain accepted each other. They were two solid experts, very admirable men, upright and firm. Supported by such pillars, the President's empire appeared as solid as rock. And, Mr. Hunter much appreciated the fact that Mary appeared so affable with his two friends.

The celebration lasted all night. The next day, the banker and the captain returned to Boston. With his dog and a few valets, Mr. Hunter and his adopted daughter left for the hunting camp.

CHAPTER VI

The Net

*And then it was there interposed a fly -
With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -*

EMILY DICKINSON

To the north of Little All, a little inland, a solitary little lake lay hidden, surrounded by hills and mountains. It was on a slight promontory on the west side of this lake that Mr. Constantine had his hunting camp constructed. This log camp, as large as an inn, enjoyed a maximum exposure to winter's slanting sunlight.

On the north side, sheer cliffs dropped off into the lake. On the side of these escarpments stone faces grimaced, with beetling brows. Facing the camp on the other side of the lake round and gentle hills, worn down by the ages and laden with snow, allowed the morning light to enter with its rosy fingers. To the south, the hills bristled with dense spruce. The location was marvelous, well sheltered, ideal for the winter season.

On the frozen, snow-covered lake, ice-fishermen had installed their brightly painted little shacks. The first week, he brought her every day to fish in one of these huts. Cheyenne accompanied them, skipping around the shack, running as fast as his legs would carry him, coming back, and lying down next to the door.

She was so young and, not knowing the country at all, found everything marvelous. It was a great pleasure for Constantine to help her discover a thousand little things about nature. He taught her how to bait a hook, lower the line to the depth desired, wait, watch and unhook ... Above all, he told her about his love for the North.

- The North is rough and unforgiving, he said. The animals are tough, sly, active and shrewd. People think that nature is cruel, but it's only because they resist its plan.

He admired Nature's art, sculpting life with wind, cold, scarcity, and hardness. Heightening the force of his words with silences, he went even further:

- The revolver allows us men to dominate as the Bible commands. So, for an American, the revolver is a sacred object. It opens the way.

Additional silences.

- "Blessed be the Eternal, the God of Shem, and may Canaan be His slave!" Genesis affirms.

And the Word did its work.

- Progress is our first duty ...

- I'm with you, Mary answered him. And he continued again:

- To progress is to conquer. Man is an animal. We have tamed dogs, horses, and elephants, physical and chemical forces. We are going to tame Man.

He spoke with enthusiasm and serenity. He intoxicated her, seduced her. Mary told herself: this man doesn't play around with the laws; he accepts the facts.

He went out of the camp early the next morning. Bareheaded, he faced the sun's first pale and icy rays. He was handsome. He was strong. He had found the right direction. He knew. He opened his arms as if embracing the sky and took deep breaths. He returned to the camp, ate some lard and thoroughly checked his revolver. Then he led his grown-up daughter out to discover the wonders of this world.

They had the sleigh hitched up and went around the lake. Cheyenne jumped and played in the flying snow. Here and there, they stopped. Constantine climbed up on knolls, stumps, and overhangs. He gazed into the distance; the mountains and the forests, all this belonged to him. He looked down at her, so tiny and fragile, slightly melancholy in her white furs. And he laughed. All this was his.

As for him, he knew the science of happiness, the joy of possessing, the pride of being a man. He shone. He was a torch, a sun, a king, it might be said.

He chose one of the little fish-houses and fished, telling about what he had seen in the world, and about the world he would create. She cast out her ballast, cut her moorings, and penetrated into his dreams, his possessions, his cheerfulness, his bliss. She lost all doubt. She felt sheltered. She left the desert behind.

She had chosen to be his daughter. The matter was clear now in her mind. He could never look at her as a woman. Constantine found her naivete, her ignorance, and her inexperience amusing. He took too much pleasure in instructing her, advising her, and lifting her spirits. He viewed her as a child, as his child.

She had tried to find out why he had never married. Such a handsome man, so rich, so charming, and so honest.... Every day, she did find reasons. No woman could feel she was at his level. Doubtless some elegant ladies had approached him, in make-up and rouge and fancy gowns. They had flirted with him. And each one had discretely withdrawn, telling herself that such a man was not for her. It was possible to be beneath him. To be at his side was impossible.

This man had a resoluteness, a moral force, a flame which imposed respect. Who was capable of counseling, supporting, or even understanding him? The women who kept company with him inevitably ended up not loving, but admiring him.

Yes, she could be his daughter. He so much liked showing her, down to the smallest details, all the concrete facts he knew about this nature that surrounded them: the deer, the caribou, the wolves, the foxes, the bears. She drank in his words.

But he didn't talk just about nature, he spoke about culture also, cities and fashion. He spent a whole day telling her how the girls of Boston lived: their reading, their music, their leisure activities, the way they dressed and walked ... He went so far as to describe their preferences in undergarments. He hadn't blushed. He was the father and she had no mother, so it was incumbent upon him to educate her. Things in America weren't done quite like they were in England. It was neither pointless nor inappropriate to speak of these intimate details. He described the hooked bodices, the slips with plunging necklines, the removal of hair from the armpits ... She had blushed. He liked her embarrassed look.

In the days that followed, in the fish-shack, he stood very close to her to reassure her, warm her up, and raise her spirits, while the dog slept outside. He resumed the conversation, talking now about even more intimate details ... And she felt electrified.

The second week, he brought her out to visit the logging cuts he was making for the naval shipyard. It was more than four miles to the west. There was a wide valley there, and warm and humid winds came down it. Elms grew there, and white and red pines of great diameter. Tamaracks thrust upwards, very tall and very straight. Miss Mary looked around her like a child who suddenly stepped into a fairy tale.

The undergrowth had been cleared away to give the giant trees fresh air. They heard in the distance the blows of axes, reverberating tree-trunks, strident cries. The sled advanced, bumping against stumps. Cheyenne ran everywhere, sniffing the snow.

A clearing opened up. Around them, loggers, standing on beams placed at the base of the trunks, swung their axes in rhythm. The chips flew. Other men labored with two-man saws, while still others drove in wedges to make room for these immense blades.

The men greeted their big boss, adding force and precision to their blows, proudly displaying their skill. Only those who had reached the summit of their art could work in so highly respected a lumber camp. Constantine stopped the sled, chatted with a foreman, and then climbed up on a stump. The whole crew stopped.

- It's good work you guys are doing, he shouted, something to be proud of. You'll have coffee tonight, and whisky.

Constantine didn't look down on anyone. Those who worked for him expressed their gratitude by all kinds of little favors. Without him and his fortune, where would those ten valuable dollars come from that each one sent to his family week after week? Everyone was grateful to him for it. And as for him, he kept on being his generous self.

There was a kind of virility about the concert of thudding axes, swishing saws, and clamoring workers that haunted the woods. Hearty and vigorous men were there, their shirts

open and covered with sweat you could smell in the foggy air. Some of them weren't much older than Mary. Agile, they shinnied up the biggest trees with the help of a wide strap. As they climbed, they delimbed the trees with axes. They were going to the very top to cut off the crowns. Aware of being looked at by a pretty young lady, they competed with each other, climbing nimbly, pruning with the left hand as well as the right.

One of these young men, perched on the top of an ash, pointed out to the big boss a spot where one of the tallest pines in the region was about to fall. They went to it. The tree was there, with the crown removed and the limbs taken off, straight, dark, and stoic. At its base a huge two-man saw had already cut well past the heart of the colossus. The foreman yelled. A crack, a final blow, and the great body fell, passionless, lugubrious, mute it sank into the snow, raising a cloud which fell over it like a shroud.

They chained it to four horses, dragged it to the foot of the hill, and laid it down beside a pile of logs. Mr. Hunter's sled followed. Constantine got off and, counting his steps, walked beside the tree. The base of the trunk was taller than his shoulders. He was returning to the sled when the foreman joined his hands to help him climb onto the enormous log. He stepped up with agility, scaled the pile, stood up on the summit, raised his arms like a conqueror, placed his hand on his pistol and looked at her, his daughter.

In her head, she hammered this home! this man is my father. She felt so happy. He would be her lord. She had left at last the world of the weak and the timid, the servants and slaves. He had reached the top. She held on to his ankle. She saw with his eyes. She felt power in her body. Down there, hundreds of workers were adding to this body, adding to this force. In the middle of this great male organism, she was the only woman. Something virile rose in her body: the pleasure of power.

To live sheltered under a temple's columns, to no longer fear the hurricane, no longer be afraid of storms, no longer tremble in front of any person, to have the strongest with you: she savored the security. Something emerged from within her: a new grace, a new light, a happiness she had never known. And nothing was more beautiful than this purity of force.

They had supper that evening in the loggers' shanty. There was a wretched old upright piano there, rather out of tune. She played two or three English songs on it. They requested some Irish refrains. She knew several of them.

Music was her only memory. A very dangerous memory! A terrible scene unfolded in front of her. Not yet twelve years old, she was playing in a Liverpool tavern. Martha worked there as a prostitute. She banged out on the piano some boisterous old standards, telling herself she would never do what her older sister was doing, never. She would marry an honest and sturdy worker and be respected. To play was her salvation, to play without stopping, so as not to see, so as not to smell the odors, so as not to feel the hands, the shame ... She stopped short, turned around, avoided the shantymen's eyes and fixed her smile on Constantine.

As they returned to the hunting camp, the darkness was total and the air damp and cold. He took her in his arms to warm her. She said to herself: "It's finished, I have a father, and my

father is not just anybody." It was like a refrain she couldn't stop, a noise to make the silence silent.

She fell asleep in his arms as if they were a Daddy's. When they arrived at the camp, she was so relaxed that he had to take her up to her room, put her to bed, and tuck her in. Cheyenne came in, climbed on her bed, and curled up at her side. She didn't push him away.

When she woke up, the dog was no longer there. She got up. No one was there, except for the old cook who hummed around his pots and pans. Constantine had left to go hunting with the others. She settled down in front of one of the paned windows that looked out over the lake. Here and there the wind whipped up little swirls of snow. She watched them play with each other.

Toward noon she noticed, next to a tree beside the lake, a red fox running and sticking its muzzle in the snow. It went toward a fish-shack and sat down. It flopped its ears like two weathervanes independent of each other. It froze for a moment, ran, dived into the snow, and came back up with a mouse in its mouth. It bit into it, swallowed, and continued on its way.

She imagined for a moment that she was in a mouse's skin. She was so small. She scratched the snow with her two paws. The weather was cold. The lake was in front of her, immense. An ocean of snow. She went ahead. Her ears were on the lookout. It was crazy how these mouse ears heard everything! the friction of the snow, the distant panting, the humming, the growling and the yapping came intermingled and terrifying. The nose wriggles with the scents it has to decipher. And everything has a scent: the twigs, the holes, even the snowflakes. Everything holds fear.

Nevertheless, she advanced across the lake by digging a tunnel in the snow, several inches beneath the prowling wind. This wasn't wise. She sank down even deeper. The light crumbled into a thousand dark and crimson-colored spots. The sound of her paws masked the silence. Now, silence is the essential knowledge for a mouse.

Driven by instinct, she advanced. But where? She didn't know. Why? She didn't know. The sole and unique certainty was that at an unexpected moment she would enter jaws that would crush her ...

Mary heard Cheyenne's barking. The men were arriving. They hadn't gotten anything, except for some hares that they threw onto the table.

For a second night, the dog came to sleep on her bed. From time to time he groaned. His pungent odor swept through the air. The darkness was like coal, opaque and rigid. Mary didn't sleep, she kept watch. In the corridor, steps approached, went away, came again ...

In the morning, the silence was total. She burrowed into her blankets. She caressed her body to comfort herself. But rather than relaxing, it awoke, shivered, and called out. She would have preferred to disappear in a tunnel of pleasure. But forces rose up like storms. There were foxes' jaws, teeth, tongues, animal saliva. Daggers fell from the sky. The fate of a little mouse in a desert of snow is terrible.

She got up abruptly. Asked the old cook to fill her bath. Let her nightgown slide to the floor, plunged into the warm water

- Wash my back, she ordered the old Irishman, who had turned around so he wouldn't see her.

- But, Miss ... he stammered without moving.

- That's an order.

He rubbed her back. She felt his fear. That was good. That relieved her. She took his hand, the one that was holding the sponge, and brought it to her chest. She felt the cook shudder. His eyes were closed. He was ugly.

- Get out of here, old pig! she yelled at him.

He rushed out, slamming the door behind him. It was sweet, this fear on someone else's face. To let a little of this bitter acid flow, this rage against everything, this rage so old, so distant, it was sweet. But for so short a time. And the fire started up again, stronger, fiercer, guiltier.

She stayed in the bath and slid beneath the water. The silence resounded like a bell struck by thunder. It was centuries ago ... A woman in a homespun dress was running toward a church. A horse's galloping was muffled in the mud. An odor of roses saturated the fog. The young woman held a white shroud. For a moment, for scarcely a second, she viewed her mother's religion with respect. During that so brief moment, the acid had suddenly departed from all of her stomach, all her blood. To lose for one little second a sickness she had had since childhood relieved her, yet made her anxious. It was so ridiculous. She knew it, that story about the shroud, her mother's favorite story, the last one in the notebook, the most terrifying, and the most stupid.

She arose from her bath, put on her dressing gown, and went down to the camp's dining room, in front of the paned windows. The white lake didn't budge. The fox didn't come. And the snow erased the hunters' tracks.

The days of the hunt resumed, but the men once more brought almost nothing back. She no longer counted the days. Anxiety had shattered time.

And then, late one afternoon, as the sun was warming her face through the glass, she heard them returning, singing like revellers. A horse was dragging a large animal behind them.. Constantine yelled as he entered.

- I killed.

He was trembling with joy.

- But what, Mr. Hunter? the old cook asked.

- A bull! Six feet of antlers, I swear.

He was talking about an enormous moose with antlers as wide as a man is tall.

- Get dressed, Mary, you'll never see a sight like this again.

He was jubilant as he told the story.

- He was in front of me. Magnificent. He looked at me stupidly, like a calf. I shouldered my rifle. He didn't budge. The idiot. He died. You should have seen it. Guys, you should have seen it.

Everyone applauded.

- No, but it wasn't that easy. Follow the tracks with the wind in your face, smell, listen. I have a pretty good nose. But look at that animal! It's not pretty!

They had already stretched the animal out between two big maples. The rear hooves of the creature, spread widely apart, stood very tall. Its genital organs hung in front of Mary. The body stretched under the weight of the dorsal hump. The enormous head sank into the blood-soaked snow.

- It's the biggest bull in the past ten years! Constantine exclaimed.

He ordered that a bench be placed for Mary just in front of the beast. Cheyenne sat beside her panting, mouth open, tongue hanging out, dripping saliva.

- You do the honors, sir! one of the men declared, handing him a knife he had just sharpened.

Two men raised him up on their shoulders. Constantine thrust the knife under the male organs, split the skin up to the sternum, plunged his hand into the viscera so as to remove the liver. They called out "Bravo!" and "Hurrah!" He sat down on the bench afterwards, beside Mary, his eyes riveted on the spectacle, smiling, lit up like a lantern, his hands full of blood.

They gutted the animal and carefully skinned it so as not to break the skin. A warm and nauseating odor spread out. Constantine held Cheyenne by the collar. Mary was horrified. She snuggled up under the hunter's arm. Nothing is any safer than the tracker's house.

The body of the beast was in front of her, red, veined with livid tendons, ramified with swollen blood vessels, lukewarm, immobile, raw as a truth. She shuddered as she smelled the wind passing over the body. A horrible sensation gripped her stomach. She stepped aside and vomited.

- It really is a beautiful animal. Eh, Mary?, he interjected.

They went back in for supper. She sat beside him, swearing in her own mind to be his accomplice. She recalled the pleasure of tearing the wings off a living fly. She had experienced this pleasure such a long time ago, a pure pleasure, a child's pleasure. The animal was bigger, but the enjoyment, just as innocent. She repeated this to herself. Even so, anguish tightened its knot.

She hauled herself up to her room and collapsed on her bed. She heard the men singing, joking, and laughing. The party lasted very late at night. The bleeding image of Jesus passed before her eyes. She lit the little lamp. She opened her black notebook. "Mama, Mama!" Why didn't you tell us tales about Prince Charming, instead of these horror stories: the mad emperor, Pilate, Jesus, the shroud...?" She extinguished the lamp.

She thought they had finally gone to bed, drunk and sated. The dog scratched under the door. She wanted to get up to let him in. The sound of steps approaching. The man stopped, went away, returned. The door latch moved, then came to a halt halfway. The dog wasn't scratching any longer. The man was standing motionless behind the door. She heard his breathing.

She was kneeling on her bed, frozen under her blankets, shivering with cold and covered with sweat. Her heart hurt, and was beating too fast. She wanted to whisper: "Come." She wanted to yell: "Get out!" She was paralyzed.

The latch went up. The door cracked. The latch fell down again. The man went away and the dog entered and jumped onto her bed. She took him by the neck and bit into his hair. She no longer understood her heart at all.

When she woke up the next day, toward noon, there was total silence, and the camp was completely empty. She opened the doors to every room: no shoes, no clothes, the sheets were pulled back and the beds were bare. She entered Constantine's room. His things were there. She went down into the kitchen. A fire was still burning.

All day long, she watched the fire dance. When it began to die down, and the coals began to moan, she added a log. The fire started up again, got its wind back and moved about. She was this fire.

In the middle of the day, the heat became intense. She danced in front of the fire. A furious desire grew in her like thirst in a desert. Abysses opened; she heard her body moan. And then the shame swept down on her. It had to be melted in the fire. This was the metamorphosis she wanted: never again to live in a mouse's skin and belong to the kingdom of the fox.

"Constantine wants me to be strong," she told herself, "that's why he left me by myself. I will be iron." She took a brand and brought it toward her foot. Touched her skin with the blazing branch. Studied the sensation. It was unbearable and yet she left the brand there until it went out. "There have always been warriors, and, starting from now, there'll be me." Something

entered her. It was will, its force and exquisite delight. They tattooed these words on her foot: "I will be Constantine's wife, Lady Mary Hunter."

Exhausted, she could no longer distinguish day from night, fire from frost, sleeping from waking. She fell into a terrible abyss. She heard wild laughter in the fire, saw arms outstretched toward the icy stare of the stars. They celebrated the hysteria of the universe, its will to power. Madness is a great invitation to a wedding in a yellow gown.

She wanted so much, in that place and at that very instant, to embrace the fire. But madness is a grace that is hard to tear from God's hands. Mary doubted, saw herself once again in the skin of an insignificant chambermaid washed up on American soil. She had accomplished the tour de force of attaining a young lady's rank. She was waiting for her father, a powerful, ultra-rich businessman. In reality, she was waiting for her lover. But could she lay claim to this height?

"Yes, we're from the same animal," she told herself. A dusty halo formed in front of her fire-dazzled eyes. In this halo was a little girl. On her, trying to kiss her, was one of her sister's customers. "No! I'll never be an old hog's carrion." This promise had been her will from the beginning. It was decided, she would make Constantine Hunter her husband.

She thought about Miss Margaret. She was Miss Margaret Liberty. She still possessed a middle-class virginity. A twenty-year old chambermaid, though, lost her virginity a long time ago. But she, she was a virgin. She was a young lady. That had cost her many blows, but not a single scar. Her body truly was that of a middle-class woman. After the shipwreck, lost and without hope, she had prayed, and her prayer had been answered. She had become Miss Liberty. Her body proved it. No one would touch it before a marriage in due form. No! No one, not even Constantine. This "no" came from the man within her. And it was sweet.

She would have to conquer Constantine by love. To hold her husband above her like a hat ... that is the art of the middle-class woman. The wife is under the hat, you see, and it is because she is under him that she leads him around.

She put on her longest undergarments, her firmest bodice, her loveliest dress, hooked a luxurious necklace around her neck and, in spite of the pain from the burns, thrust her feet into her red shoes. When he arrived, whether in daytime or at night, she would be dressed like a lady, would receive him with dignity, and would graciously refuse his advances.

He did arrive in fact.

- There you are, she said to him. I was waiting for you. I'll make you some coffee, good and black.

She had spoken to him like a wife and not like a daughter.

- I love you Mary and I want you, he declared straight out.

Fear gripped her, but she didn't tremble. She went to look for the coffee pot and came back toward the fire. He wanted to seize her hand, but she quickly pulled it away.

- Be gentle, she answered him as she busied herself with the kitchen utensils.

Without thinking, she had slid a little knife up her sleeve. He grabbed her wrist and turned it toward him. She glared at him. He took her by the waist. She sensed his intentions only too well.

- I want you, too, she replied. So let God bless our union. I'll be your rightful spouse.

She could not keep her voice from quavering. But her eyes expressed all her resolution. He wanted to kiss her. Quicker than him, she placed her fist between their two chests. He clutched her arm. Then it was she who pressed herself against him, violently and with the fist still vigorously inserted between them.

He felt the hilt of a knife. He retreated. Mary held the point of the knife pressed under her left breast. The weapon had pierced her dress and penetrated the flesh. Blood came through the dress. She looked him in the eyes.

Walking away a little, he studied her at length.

- You want to be my wife and you resist me!

- You can see I'd know how to resist all your rivals.

She handed him his coffee. He sipped it drop by drop. They looked daggers at each other.

- I want you, you will be my wife, he finally blurted out.

CHAPTER VI

The Fall

*And in the vibration of this body,
fragile and already withered beneath
its dazzling shroud of flesh, in
the unconscious rhythm of hands
opened and closed again, in the
restrained ardor of the shoulders
and the tireless hips, there
breathed something of the
majesty of animals.*

GEORGES BERNANOS

The wedding didn't take place in Boston, but at Little All, in the manor's unassuming chapel. Nonetheless, many guests came from Beacon Hill and the ceremony was sumptuous. February hadn't ended. The cold had confined everyone to the ballroom. Lady Mary had played some ballads and serenades. She was resplendent.

She gave herself to him and he wasn't disappointed. Lady Mary was no ignoramus. As a child alongside her sister Martha, she was an eyewitness to certain lessons, some of them from India and Japan, that were really something. He was surprised and delighted. Even so the surface of these swelling seas did more than express a movement that escaped him, something that went down to the core. An earthquake, a river, a torrent swept Mary away. She no longer thought, and remembered nothing. She had entered a current that tore her away from the shores. She was losing herself. She was entering a powerful life that wasn't her own.

So many windows opened in her body then, so many curtains tore apart, so many outlets broke through that in the end she no longer had her own body. All her senses bathed in the feverish lymph of intensities that carried her away. Every atom of this new collective body swirled in the powerful, shadowy, irascible river of animal forces. She was no longer connected to any root. She was swept away in the torrent. And what a feeling of freedom was born of this abdication!

In their bodies' violent coupling, in the blending of breath, sweat, and saliva, a sweetness passed, a flavor, a delectation which acted like a transmigration of souls. From being an individual body, she became, with him, a single flux of energy, electric and universal. To enter that flow every evening, to oscillate, to make herself liquid and be torn apart on the rocks ... this became a necessity, a revenge against finitude.

A transmutation took place there that she didn't understand and didn't want to think about. She didn't know what a man's penetration was. She felt as if she belonged to something

universal, but it was he who entered, who began to build his will in her, his power through her. He took hold, eradicating everything that resisted and sowed seed on his land.

An attachment formed between them, but they were not of equal strength. She was young, he had taken her, had exiled her from herself, had fashioned her in his image. Pleasure is a weapon no one distrusts. Spring wasn't completely over before Miss Mary had become literally Lady Constantine Hunter. She was him in actuality. She was him in operation.

When a person is ashamed of her childhood, nothing is more sought-after than this burying of the past in the ecstasies of the flesh. The heavier a girl's unhappiness weighs, the more compulsively she eradicates herself in the violence of a man. To the degree that the man is able to destroy her, she wants him.

Even so, in the spring Mr. Hunter left for Boston and Mrs. Hunter became the queen of the house. She missed him terribly, however. She felt as if she no longer existed. Her body broke against her heart. She heard the clock strike. She was afraid of turning back into herself, in the eternal lifeboat. She no longer wanted herself, she wanted him. In spite of everything, it was with courage and determination that she assumed her role. Missing him pushed her into action. She accomplished what her eminent husband willed, here at Little All.

She took his business to heart. Each day, she went down to the shipyard, talked to the foremen, and encouraged the workers. Her advice was not always irrelevant. It wasn't that she knew anything about construction, but she was not ignorant about human nature. By a process she didn't understand, she knew exactly what Constantine would have said and what he would have done. They called her Lady Hunter, they loved her, they would have done anything for her.

Sentimentality is, perhaps, only the distance that separates thought from action. She no longer had any of it. That gave her an effectiveness that surprised her. The goal was there, so clear and so distinct that she no longer had any need to plan; she directed the circumstances toward the terms that had to be met. It was strange for her to walk on so straight, so distinct, so evident a road. Ah! The joy of going blithely on the road that dissolves us.

The manor no longer experienced that strange hibernation it entered every spring for lack of a master. On the contrary, every day all the household got moving for her, for him, for his business and his enrichment. Each cell easily found its way. If Mr. Hunter were happy, Mrs. Hunter smiled and everyone was happy. Mr. Hunter's wealth was their wealth. They belonged to him and nothing is sweeter to a wandering soul than to belong to someone who is sure of himself.

From the great house down to the shipyard, she was the blood, she transported the oxygen; she was the nerves, she transmitted the orders; she was delight, she radiated beauty. Nothing was any more pleasant to see than this woman with her elegant dresses and charming manners. She lived everywhere, for she traveled through every conversation.

To be sure, she never crossed the Capsize Bridge; she wasn't about to dirty her boots where the wooden sidewalks stopped. She didn't even look. She didn't pay any more attention to these poverty-stricken fishermen than she did to her own miserable childhood. She couldn't look

there, because had she seen that poverty, she would have seen herself in that unhappy past that had nothing to do with her present existence. America's happiness is to deny unhappiness.

However, nothing is that easy in the business world, particularly in the country of the sharks. Either capital expands, or it is swept away by the competition. To eat or be eaten, such is the law of the fish. In this context, what was the Hunters' problem?

In America, thanks to questionable speculations and a conniving government, a handful of families had succeeded in taking possession of almost all the land in the West and the South that was grabbed from the Indians by extermination or taken away from the Mexicans by the recent war. The thing was easy enough. The army razed all the buildings. Then they let just anybody buy the land cheap (*démocratie oblige*). To help the buyer, they lent him money. He needed a steel plow, a McCormick reaper, nails, clothing, everything. They lent him more. Then they watched him go under. They seized his land and possessions. Now he worked as a tenant for his creditor. Civilization advanced, in brief.

The Indians, what was left of them, were exterminated, the trees were cut down, and the buffalo -- there weren't any more of those any more. So they put cattle out to graze and made deserts appear. Nothing is more pleasing to an investor than when the desert forces unfortunate people into the cities, where they are ready to work like a dog for soup and a crust of bread.

It was simple, but it was slow. Certain farmers didn't take their death-pangs easily. It was sometimes preferable to draw directly from the source, that is, the government. Expansion was the key. They sent the poor and the debtors to get themselves killed in some war. They took territory. They distributed it to those who had financed the war. This was justice itself.

Fortunes arose. They controlled everything. The Rensselaers, for example, owned more than eight thousand tenant farms rented for a large amount. In a short time, they had accumulated forty-one million dollars. In Boston only, fifteen families possessed almost the totality of Massachusetts.

In the West, they had recourse to more than three million slaves. Officially, the trade was forbidden. So much the better! That kept the price high. The more so since after 1850, there was the Fugitive Slave Act, which made it possible to sell the same slave two or three times. In the East, there were the Irish and other immigrants who arrived in the millions. That, too, was a very good deal, since it made wages fall.

In brief, promoting peace while practicing war, being abolitionist while trading slaves, immigrant-friendly while exploiting labor, Christian while massacring the Indian, protectionist while plundering just about everywhere else, free to restrict the freedom of others, this was America.

There was one drawback: the little guys were putting up a fuss. To tell the truth, in that year of 1860, the machine was falling apart. Just about everywhere, revolts arose against rents and property seizures. The militias could no longer stem them. The Federal government sent soldiers and this justified enlarging the army. Now the labor movement was becoming dangerous, especially since a certain Seth Luther and a certain Thomas Dorr were demanding a

right to vote independent of fortune. A people's parliament had been convoked. People were hoping for a true republic in America. The land of plundering and genocides wanted more justice!

Fortunately, under Jackson, they had succeeded in installing the marvelous bipartisan system. By minor concessions to smaller and smaller landowners, the electorate was enlarged, but the top was reduced once and for all to the lowest common denominator. The choice was between a Tweedledee and a Tweedledum president, both just as rich, influential, and warlike as could be. All they had to do was to display a well-made populist mask.

In the West, slavery had increased the productivity of the cotton fields. In the East, technical progress and immigration had increased tenfold the productivity of the textile mills, including Mr. Hunter's. America was exporting at a price that not even India could compete with anymore. Constantine's four-masters didn't lack for business. But all this was fragile. Nothing is any more fragile than money, for money is obedience, and obedience is the slumber of the human being. And when the flesh is stepped on just a bit too much, sometimes the man wakes up.

Pockets of poverty were opening everywhere. Cholera and dysentery were killing the workers, men, women and children. In the West, the abolitionists organized slave escapes, taking as a pretext the deterioration of their living conditions. The Underground Railroad, a network of liberators, operated with impunity. This destabilized production. In 1837, a serious depression had shaken all of New England, and another, even more disastrous one was looming. Now, in a crisis fortunes can change hands. It was a threat, but also an opportunity.

Speculation had started up again. The Lacrosse and Milwaukee railroad was offered a million acres of land. This had cost them less than a million in shares distributed to members of the State legislature, to thirteen senators and the governor.

On the other side, left-wing movements were taking shape. A feminine socialist movement was formed with Frances Wright, Eliza Hemingway, and many others. The female workers organized strikes in the textile mills and, in order to crush them, a militia had to be paid for. In Boston and at Lynn, shoemakers were talking like Karl Marx. They refused to transform human beings into appendages to machines, they aroused class consciousness. Riots broke out.

Revolution was a serious threat, in brief. It was essential to increase capital, and not just a little. Constantine had his plan. Mary was part of this plan. They had, among other things, to convince Hanne Yent to make them an unsecured loan of three million in a transaction that must remain secret and for a purpose he didn't need to know - and that she didn't know either.

Mr. Hunter had succeeded in persuading his banker to take a few days of vacation at his manor at Little All. They had welcomed him like a prince. But a man of such integrity, so upright, so religious - how could they make him fall for their proposal?

Mary had tasted psalms and prayers with her mother's milk. And, until her last breath, her sister had read her the Bible. Religion had been like poverty's featherbed. She knew its effectiveness. Poor people made use of it to justify their submission, and the rich, to justify their domination. Without her knowing it, she had become a master of religion, just as a tradesman's

son becomes, in spite of himself, a master of bargaining. For this occasion, this was no small advantage.

She took an interest in Hanne Yent. She had set up a kosher supper and asked Eliza to serve it, as the young domestic had some knowledge of how to serve Jews. Madame had put on a black dress daintily trimmed with lace, kept her eyes lowered, and contributed her share of little questions she meant to appear naive. A rabbi and his daughter, it might be said. Besides, something in her really did want to understand. What is this religion of the desert, of memory and collective deliverance? It was strange all the same, a people chosen to carry at one and the same time misfortune, vengeance and hope!

He smiled at these questions, joked, but did put forward some ideas.

- No! No! You don't understand. It's not a question of individual salvation, but of the salvation of a people, more precisely, of its liberation. The mission of Judaism is to liberate ...

- But then, why such a fate? The Exile, the Diaspora, torture, massacres ...

- Sin.

- Sin is individual.

- That is the paradox. A few are enough to break the Covenant.

This seemed to her suddenly a dangerous mixture: a finicky law, impossible to abide by, an inevitable guilt that passes from one generation to the next, a submissive attitude, something that attracts hate, a victim's resentment that grows like a sickness, an appeal to a messiah who is never the right one, the certainty of superiority, a great love of hating enemies ... To be chosen, abandoned, chastised and condemned to dominate ... To have the conviction that your enemies are God's enemies and that your sin deserves punishment. The list of contradictions got longer.

Nonetheless the conversation continued. He spoke of a Zionist movement led by the rabbis Yehuda Alkalaï and Zvi Kalisher. These two hoped that the progressive granting of individual liberties would culminate in the definition of a collective law for peoples. This could include, for the Jews, a right to the territory of Palestine.

- So everything is in the law, then, Mary exclaimed.

- The foundation of all is the Covenant. The foundation of the Covenant is the Law. The Law supports rights. Rights have only one opposite: war.

- But aren't rights based on force, then, on real or potential war?

He was surprised by her question. He pondered for a moment and quietly answered her:

- No, war on the contrary, is a sign that rights are injured. May the right of the Jewish people be respected and Palestine be given us without war. Rights come from God, but God lends force if this is necessary.

- God is not the same thing as force?

He stopped talking. She understood that he didn't like to speak with a woman in that way. She had gone beyond the pale. She asked Eliza to go bring more wine. The banker followed the servant with his eyes. Mary noticed this. She turned the conversation to all sorts of details about life in Boston. She expressed surprise at each of his answers about fashions and habits. This pleased him.

The significance of Jewish banks consisted, then, in their financing of Zionism. It wasn't just a matter of regaining the position they had before Rome: it was a question of reestablishing an order based on rights. The Empire had driven them out, the Empire should finance their return, and the Empire was becoming their instrument. The Empire was progress, industry, the enslavement of nature by Man ...Decidedly, Hanne and Constantine were solidly bound together. But could Constantine confide in Hanne? In fact, who was he, this Hanne?

She went at it by a guessing game. He didn't resist much. He was married but didn't have any children. This was a great affliction for a man whose hope rested on the act of generation. Only rarely did he go home.. Business took up all his time. He was always thinking of the long term. He was convinced that something must happen, or else the revolts would end up by driving out capital. He even thought that a civil war was brewing. He was a pessimist. He needed fresh air in his life.

The wine made him more and more joyful and confident, and his eyes followed Eliza more and more. She was dazzlingly beautiful in her pink dress and white apron. The more he looked at her, however, the more cold she was in serving him, avoiding his eyes and scarcely smiling. He wasn't offended by this.

Mary waited a few days, multiplying the opportunities, provoking encounters. Eliza didn't appear receptive, far from it. Then Madame had her come:

- Good, I understand. You don't need to lay it on any thicker.

- But Madame, if he took me as a servant, that would be ...

- ... to beget a child. And where is the dishonor in that? In any case, that would be better than ... than the sewers of New York.

Mary's smile was unequivocal. The young servant looked at her and was terrified.

- You aren't thinking of ... she stammered.

- Do I look like I'm joking? Mary shot back.

- And my fiancé! Eliza said before breaking out in sobs.
- Your fiancé? It's a guarantee of poverty for the rest of your days, Mary retorted ...
- You're forgetting, you're forgetting ...

She stopped there, driving her threatening eyes into Mary's impassive gaze. Mary stared at her for a long time. Did she know? If so, what could she do? "Nothing, absolutely nothing," Mary told herself. "A girl who's nothing can do nothing."

Eliza served under contract and over five years remained in this contract. The transaction was perfectly legal, then. The banker wouldn't want a melancholy and whining servant. She would have to, then, take away from Eliza any kind of choice. When a road has no junctions and the country behind slides into the grave, a person goes resolutely forward.

Eliza saw her employer's determination. Mary ducked the look of despair that appeared in the eyes of the one who had cared for her so well. She continued her calculation. The young servant was virtuous and religious, so she wouldn't give in to suicide. She would understand that the child of their union would be privileged more than any of the children she could have hoped for up to now. And then, the man was pleasant. He would treat her as well as Abraham took care of Hagar ... This final thought made Mary smile.

With consummate tact, she concluded the transaction. The banker left with Eliza in exchange for an enormous loan. This seemed unbelievable to Mary. She was truly proud of having reached her goal. She was jubilant. Obviously, she didn't know the other merchandise that had placed in the banker's balance. She didn't know what Hanne had really come to do at Little All. But what difference do the details make when the goal intoxicates us!

The most difficult mission was still to come, however. A secret cargo of very high value would be embarking from Amsterdam, then pass in transit through Dakar to be delivered at Norfolk. This dangerous voyage required a captain solidly linked to the family. At sea, Djib Tam was indisputably the right man for the job. Nevertheless, there was a kind of independence about him that made Mr. Constantine very nervous. They would need to know the man better and above all, make him adhere to his contract as firmly as a shipwrecked sailor to an island ... or a criminal to a refuge.

The captain arrived at Little All to ensure the three escort boats were ready and well-armed. He was accommodated in the manor in a room prepared for him, with a prayer mat oriented toward Mecca.

From the first day, Mary and he studied each other. He seemed to have immediately sensed the lady's intentions. Besides, it was impossible for him to imagine the relationship between men and women as anything other than a kind of hurt. He maneuvered with a consummate charm and an obvious pleasure, especially since it was out of the question for him to fall into the trap and sleep with his boss's wife.

The man wasn't breakable. It wasn't that he was without passion, but he had religion. The difficulty with his religion was that his creator God, master of the universe, Force from on high, had no intermediary. This God had, consequently, an absolute grip on his subject. This God had as a weapon a horrible Hell and for reward a delightful Heaven. His Law was simple and peremptory. One could do nothing other than bow down before Him. Alas! The Muslim bowed down only before Him. For everything else, it was the others who had to bend.

What God is for the Muslim, the Muslim is for the infidel. Consequently, he looked at Mary like a kind of nice, pleasant toy. Pleasant to the degree that she gave in with enough resistance to interest him.

The Prophet is the final seal, after him, nothing will ever be new, and before him the texts are doubtful. He is the turning point between the two faces of Error: the world before the Prophet and the world after the Prophet. Without error, the world would not exist; it is Islam that exists. The truth has been given to the world in black and white, clearer than the Constitution of the United States of America. Whoever does not perceive it is blind. Consequently a woman, an infidel, is nothing. Certainly he treated her like his boss's lady, but that only made his scorn more evident.

She would have liked to have played the role of a proselyte and have been instructed by him as she had been with Hanne. But he didn't wish to purr a single surah in an ear that insincere. This was because of his intuition. He was a master of theater. He would direct the play, or nothing doing. If she wanted to lead, he would escape from her.. If she wanted to overcome him she would first have to be overcome by him.

To have a Law above all laws, to be accountable only to a Being very high above human beings, to have as mission to accept the faithful and reject the infidel -- this renders a man dangerous, very dangerous. It was on just this danger that she wanted to place her bets.

It is said that each religion has its virtues. There is not any doubt about that. She understood quickly enough that each religion also possesses its own vices. A religion that favors chastity nourishes perversion. She thought of the Catholics. A religion which appeals to freedom of conscience silently encourages domination. She thought of the Protestants. A religion that favors the Law loves trickery. She thought of Judaism. As for Islam, it is a public religion of the sun and the daytime. Consequently, it loves to crush in private. And Woman is exactly the private par excellence.

It is at night that Satan works and the two guardian angels grow drowsy. It is then that one sins. At night, passion overwhelms us. Who resists? The Muslim cannot erase sin, but he can add regrets and compensations to the other pan of the scales. This is the normal vacillation of human nature. It is at night that religion releases its vices. It is in the daytime that she hides them.

The religions make codes that are impossible to obey. Sin is sooner or later inevitable. Guilt, subjugated. Infidelity makes one faithful. Djib could not fall through lust alone, but he could fall through scorn. Mary hatched a diabolic plan.

He wasn't indifferent to her. He might laugh, he might have a good time, but he was the cat and she, the mouse. Who had the power? The cat, you say. Yes, he can bite, he can kill. But who is it that captivates, who leads the cat where she wants? Who makes him run? And if the mouse escapes to be eaten better ... what can the poor cat do?

She made herself act a little colder, a little more haughty and, in her low-cut dresses, almost insulting. She made herself more explicitly annoying, walking around at night almost naked, noisy, agitated by insomnia.

Except on jihad, no Muslim is required to be a hero. One day, Djib Tam appeared in the doorway of her room. She cried out in fear. None of the servants awoke. This was an order. Total silence continued. He approached. She flashed him a look of utter dismay and huddled under the covers. He tore them off her. She trembled with fear, and grabbed a lamp to defend herself. He shattered it in pieces. She rolled herself into a ball. He threw himself on her. She scratched him.

- My filthy bitch! he cried.

A man came running toward the room. Djib didn't care. He had lost control of himself, and didn't hear anything. The man finally entered; it was Hanne the banker.

- What are you doing there?

The two men had spoken at the same time, one just as astonished as the other. Djib sobered up. Little by little, he was waking up. Mary had organized her own rape, and had invited Hanne to be a witness. Djib was branded with iron like a convict, like a slave.

- Get out, Mary cried angrily, pulling the featherbed over her.

"Mission accomplished," Mary said to herself. "Mission accomplished," she repeated. "I've succeeded. I've won." She created a cacophony in her spirit. She nailed lying signboards on all her body's walls. To make herself deaf, she yelled into her own ears, at the top of her lungs, "Congratulations!"

She no longer stayed put in one place. She wanted to leave for Boston, to meet her husband and accomplice. But an order had been given to the entire household never to let Madame pass the limits of Little All. It was there that she was queen, not anywhere else. "Bravo! I love you. But you are essential to Little All," her husband had written her, "for the shipyard absolutely must deliver the escort boats on time."

She went there every day. She questioned, measured, calculated, verified, and pestered them with questions. The days began early and ended late. Something wasn't going right. Day by day the delay widened. It was always a problem of supplies.

The four-master would arrive in the harbor in two weeks at the very latest and at least two of the escorts wouldn't be ready. They lacked several small cannons, some iron straps, planks, two masts, canvas, capstans, barrels, provisions, everything.

It was becoming more and more obvious that a considerable part of these deliveries were disappearing between Boston and Little All. This could only be with the complicity of several persons. Threats, blackmail, bribes, nothing worked. A code of silence was respected with unflinching rigor. No link showed the slightest weakness. It was impossible to determine who was for her and who was against her. Not a single conspirator could be identified with certainty. It was almost uncanny.

She had won two battles, but she was going to lose the war. She made use of all her charms, put forward every threat. She only made the situation worse. She didn't sleep any more, she spied on everybody, she ran, she cried, she raged.

One evening, she finally sat down. Lady Mary Hunter was on the large balcony of her room, exhausted and tormented. The sun was slipping behind the mountains, the shadows were lengthening on the village in front of her, on the bay and on the sea. The workers' houses shone. The water in the cove gleamed. The wharf and the workshops hummed with activity. Everything was bustling.

Alone in the shadows the hollow where the fishermen's hamlet slept was the only place silent. Not a sound, not one lamp. There was no light either at the poor school. This was not unusual: these people got up well before dawn and went to sleep with the setting of the sun. She didn't look: this didn't exist. It was darkness, nothing more.

No one crossed the little bridge at Capsize. No one went there. Even the sidewalks didn't go that far. People avoided the smells. They didn't have any business there. The fish ended up in Boston by itself! The rents arrived at the manor by themselves! This hamlet was only a spot to make you avert your eyes.

It was before her marriage, the first day she had gone out on the balcony of her room ... she had scarcely turned her eyes toward Hellrock, than she had felt a terrible chill in passing the hamlet, that spot ... Eliza was standing beside her ... a large egret had passed over their heads.

This image made her tremble. She felt a presence behind her. She turned around: the door was open, and the wind was moving the curtains. She wanted to get up out of her chair. Impossible. Fear prevented her. She had the curious certainty that the slightest of her movements would cause a demon to appear. She stayed motionless, as if her salvation depended on it.

Her body was compacted by the pressure of the air. She felt herself descend to a depth where Jules Verne's submarine would have exploded. She was suffocating. This cast an astonishing insight into her mind.

The answer to the whole enigma was to be found in the sordid fishermen's settlement. Not only the enigma of the disappearing supplies, but even her whole life's enigma. Nothing appeared any more obvious, and yet it was totally idiotic.

Her black notebook, Eliza, the Quaker pastor and the fishermen's settlement formed a single knot in her mind, one that she could not untangle. There was, however, nothing in common between the delays at the shipyard, her childhood, an unfortunate pastor, and a nobody of a servant, and yet all this formed a ball, opaque, hard, and terrifyingly real, that rolled along behind her. It was one and the same presence, the sort of presence, that can take many forms but always produces precisely the same effect. That presence was there on the balcony, in the discreet form, for the moment, of a gentle evening breeze, warm, drifting, disquieting, and more real than the ocean. So real that she no longer remembered so well the goal she had to pursue. This goal appeared completely unreal, insipid, and evanescent.

It was this presence that was spiriting the materials away, that was paralyzing her at this very moment, but could surround her, save her, dissolve her, cure her. It was the shadow on the desert ...

And then, suddenly, this certainty took shape in her mind: that presence there, so strange, so mysterious, so powerful, it's me ...

She was in such a state of shock, frozen, like a block of dried-up clay ... She was so full of that clay, so opaque. And the ocean in her threatened to burst. Anxiety seized her by the gut. She couldn't breathe anymore. An atrocious nausea rose within her. She thought her body would suddenly come apart like mud.

CHAPTER VIII

The Tale of "The Perverted Emperor"

Two directing forces come at the conclusion: the powerful, which represents the law of precarious existence; the maternal womb, which represents perpetual creation. Both of them return at the end of a great cycle.

I CHING

She was still rigid on the balcony of her room. Before her, the twilight was turning to stone. The last emerald ray arose in the blackening embers. Fear thrust its blade into her chest. Pierced by its green flame, the red eye of the lion closed on the horizon. An infinite solitude pressed in on the young lady. She could no longer budge. She waited for the wind to rise, strike the beach and erase a print she saw on the sand. But no wind came, scarcely a breeze descended languorously from the hill to the sea.

A lamp had been lit in her room. It had been placed on the commode by someone unknown. Its light reached its arm out to Mary, as if to call her. Mary let it happen, let herself be taken. She went ahead in the halo, and focused on the third drawer. Her legs weakened and she sat down on the bed. She opened the drawer and touched, by instinct, the black notebook. She felt something like a burning.

Without thinking, she opened the notebook. Women's voices passed, as loud as locomotives. And then silence. The lamp had flickered. The smell of kerosene entered her nostrils. A wisp of smoke rose from the flame. She felt a blade pierce her neck. She adjusted the wick, opened the notebook and read several paragraphs. She closed it again. It was one of those strange apocryphas, exactly the one she didn't want to hear.

In the palace of Trier, in the throne room, a terrible judgement took place ...

From the first words she was no longer reading, but hearing. Her Maman's voice continued. It was so clear a memory.

This judgement took place in 310 after Christ, in the time of the emperor Flavius Valerius Constantinus, before his conversion. Seated on his golden throne in the form of a she-wolf, the emperor did not intervene, but remained motionless, his eyes protruding and immobile. A tetrarch took care of the matter.

Attached to the palace was a tower of interrogation for the criminals. The Christians didn't much sacrifice to the Caesars. They put in peril the pontifical treasury and the political unity of the empire. In this dark room, attached to a column, an unclothed girl swore against

Christ and cried out to make her oath of allegiance. Her baby was sleeping in a basket placed in the straw. In front of her was the person least expected to be in such a place: the Emperor's concubine. That woman, called Claris, had discussed the affair at length.

Two days before the vernal equinox, a Jewish shepherd girl scarcely thirteen years old had given birth to a boy, perfectly blond, with sky-blue eyes and a spot of wine between the eyebrows. The girl's mother was Christian and did not want to make her oath of allegiance to the Emperor. They sent her to the amphiteater for the pleasure of the games. But it was her daughter that attracted Claris's attention. The girl had succeeded in escaping the guards' surveillance and had leaped into the arena to save her mother by directing the lion's attacks to herself. A euphoric joy was on her face; she seemed to float in the air. Finally it was the mother who saved the daughter by throwing stones at the animal.

The girl was beautiful and not yet completely a woman. Everything that the Emperor liked. And the plan began to form in Claris's mind.

But there it is, the monarch was at Trier, the ceremony was ready and the girl was yelling, saying that she wanted to deny Christ.

- You are a Christian, Claris insisted, we have proofs.

- I have no other God but Caesar, the terrified orphan repeated.

The leather whip didn't do a thing. And it was forbidden to scar her back, much less mark her face. The case seemed desperate.

Claris withdrew for a moment. Her garment brushed against the basket where the baby was resting. He didn't awaken. Then Claris came up with the idea of an ultimate weapon.

- Let's start again from the beginning, if you like. You know Christ, don't you?

Beads of sweat were running into the young girl's eyes.

- Jesus then, you know him... The one who had no house, no stone beneath his head, only one robe, bare feet, a beggar, a nobody ... the poor people's comfort ...

Claris wiped the girl's eyelids. This gesture produced a nervous smile.

- You see, you do know him. He put his hand on your shoulder. At this very moment, he is taking care of you. He is living, he is whispering in your ear: "Don't deny me."

The smile on the girl's face widened. And her whole face changed. Her gaze became very clear. Claris turned her eyes toward the baby and continued:

- Good, I'm going to tell you what we'll do. You confess and they'll free you. You keep on lying and they'll cut the head off your baby right in front of you, as quiet as can be.

The young Jew stared at Claris. A perfectly calm gaze, serene even.

- Did you understand what I said? Claris demanded, disconcerted by this attitude.

- Yes, the other answered.

- So you are Christian, Claris pointed out in a trembling voice.

The young mother continued to nod, "Yes." The notary recorded the statement.

- I have brought a nurse here. Your child will be treated like a king.

- Claris made a sign to the guard. A woman entered and approached the baby who was still sleeping in his basket. She took the child. Tears spurted out of the young Jew's eyes.

The teenage mother regained her calm.

- That's fine, said Claris. Good! Let's hurry, the sun is going down.

They dressed the adolescent in a vestal's tunic on which the monogram of Christ had been embroidered in gold thread. Then they carefully did up the "virgin's" hair. Claris gestured to a guard. A boy in his early teens entered.

- All you have to do is hold this boy's hand, he'll direct you.

The orphan nodded her head in agreement.

She was led to the antechamber of the palace. The two colossal doors were swivelled open. An immense hall opened up before the young shepherdess, packed with people who turned toward her. For a shepherd girl who had only known solitude, all these looks were oppressive. Even so, her face seemed transfigured, her body lightened. She appeared to float in the air. Behind her, the sun reddened, a crushing, flamboyant sun that hauled its yellow rays like blades of fire. She slowly advanced. Trumpets resounded from each side of the walk, and young people threw flower petals on the Christian vestal virgin. The Emperor watched the girl come forward. The burning sun sank little by little behind a hill striped with vineyards. The Christian woman formed a silhouette which stood out against the sun.

Everyone examined the victim's long exposed neck. Without any doubt, the adolescent had carried a pitcher of water for several years. She advanced with a rare grace. Arriving in front of the Emperor, she stopped, then looked at the man with her astonishingly quiet eyes. The Emperor couldn't completely conceal his attraction. His moistened lips trembled.

Two soldiers approached, sword in hand. At the Emperor's left, the pontiff made a sign to the soldiers. They drew their weapons. Between the two swords raised over her, the adolescent remained serene and immobile, as if made of plaster. The crowd held its breath. The pontiff hesitated, awaiting a sign from the Emperor. But the Emperor was as still as marble, his eyes fixed on the child.

The pontiff seemed to notice something unusual at the base of the vestal's neck. He stared at the space between the collarbone with a surprised look, his mouth half open. He got up from his armchair. The silence was total. He approached the still-immobile adolescent and placed a finger on her carotid artery: the virgin was dead. One of the soldiers dropped his sword and the adolescent toppled like a stone column on the ceramic floor. A horrifying noise resounded ...

Mary couldn't go on reading the rest of the story. The feeling took shape in her that the notebook described her fate, but described it in order for her to free herself from it. She knew the remainder of the story by heart. Some days later, the Roman emperor was converted, or more precisely he converted Christianity to make it his weapon. That is what Claris wanted, for she had sensed the weapon's power.

As Mary closed the notebook her hands trembled, her legs trembled, and so did her whole body. She sensed a terrifying presence, not like a ghost, a demon or a monster, but like an odor, enveloping, clinging, nauseating, encircling her like a lethal gas. She didn't know where she was any longer, in what space, in what time.

She had shut herself off from her mother's religion. She had simply kept only the worst of it: the spirit of submission. And the essence, she had never even tasted it.

The lamp smelled of kerosene. A black smoke twisted over the feeble light. A foul odor encircled it, smothered it like the breath of a decomposing animal. Her belly wanted to tear itself open and her heart extricate itself from her body. Had there been a place in the world where Nothingness would have opened its arms to her, she would have been engulfed.

CHAPTER IX

Second Desert

*WHAT IS BETRAYAL? A WAY
OF SAVORING, BAUDELAIRE SAYS,
"THE SPLENDID, DAZZLING RAYS
OF THE DELIGHTFUL LATENT
LUCIFER WHO IS INSTALLED IN
EVERY HUMAN HEART."*

Mary slid the notebook into its case and attached it to her stomach. The image of the Jewish girl who died before her execution beat down upon her heart. It was like a fist lifted up above her and held back for so long that it pierced right through her stomach. She couldn't fight this image. But what remained was not the girl's illuminated face, but that of the Emperor, a face swollen and disfigured by his disgusting desire. A nausea rose out of her stomach. She ran to the balcony to vomit. A taste of salt and kelp remained. She had betrayed herself for the Emperor.

No, that was ridiculous. There was no other choice: either you are on the side of the strong, or you are on the side of the weak. Anything else is just romanticising poverty. She regained her spirits. Repressed the avalanche of memories rushing at her. Settled down once again in Mary's skin.

- Oh yes! The escort boats, the delays, the stolen shipments ... the fishermen's settlement ... It was them. The poor and the wretched, it was them. It could only be them ...

She went back into the room and, next to the bed, took the little knife she brought back from the hunting camp and placed on the commode every night. She went down the stairs, left the manor, and, barefoot, rushed down the hill to the bridge over the Capsize River. The rocks tore her feet. She didn't feel anything.

The tide was going out, uncovering the long flats used by the fishermen. The beach smelled of rotting seaweed. The stars glistened on the tangled kelp that littered the shore. Fish heads protruded from the muddy sand ...

Someone was approaching. She sensed the presence softly descending toward her, the presence that had taken form in her room, before she read the morbid story. An obscure mass, striking like a waterspout of sewer muck, a lukewarm magma exhaling a putrid perspiration ...

She hadn't brought the lamp. The light of the stars played in the darkness. Indolently, he was coming down toward her. He seemed completely casual, as quiet as a cat stalking a prey that was already surrounded. The landscape formed an effective funnel, with the sea in front, the mountain in back, and a paralyzing fear ... The mouse couldn't escape. So, why hurry?

She was trapped. In the middle, there was that young Jewish girl with the look of a child. Further off, there was that sort of garbage emperor approaching. He liked nothing better than to soil a remnant of innocence cowering inside a fear. For him it was an extreme pleasure. Fear, she was fear. She didn't know why, she understood nothing, but she felt as if he could not touch the young Jew without passing through her. It was impossible to flee. She was forever between him and the Jew, forever linked with their story, as bound to them as to the lines on her own hand ... Lines that she ought to have examined in detail. A notebook that she ought to have read attentively ...

She heard him sniffing in a clump of trees. For the moment, she preferred the smell of seaweed. He walked toward her on the beach, and stood still for a moment. He turned around. He scented something female and animal somewhere in the middle. She felt him linked to the Jewish girl by an olfactory bond. And the Jewish girl was inside her. It was as if Mary were her skin. Fear adds a smell to sweat that was, for him, delightful. She realized, vaguely, that he was drawing his existence from that fear and this only added to her anxiety. Her body was growing numb and paralyzed. She managed to free herself from this stranglehold, crossed the bridge, ran along the settlement's muddy alleys, and began to climb as fast as she could toward Hellrock.

She could no longer see anything. She charged through the trees, tripped on a rock, got up, and ran, climbing toward the cape. He was coming from the side, in fact, from two sides at once. She rushed once again into a thorny bush, fell, got up, started off again ... And she found herself helpless on the Capsize bridge. He was blocking the way to the manor. She didn't want to return there, for her it was a cage, a dump, a sewer.

She jumped down off the little bridge, and climbed back up toward the west, directly in the river bed. He was waiting for her, seated on the ramp of the bridge. He was smiling. She found a small road leading south in the direction of Hellrock and turned into it. It was barely a path, a deer run that the foxes liked to use. The trail rose steeply. She smashed a toe, suppressed a cry, got up, continued ... Once again he was in front of her, seated on a boulder.

She crouched in the bushes, stayed perfectly still and held her breath. He sniffed at her, drew nearer, and stretched out his arms and legs on every side of the bushes. He was going to encircle her. Leaping out of the thicket, she succeeded in reaching the main trail leading to Hellrock. Again he blocked the route. She detoured around him, ran and ran and ... once more found herself on the Capsize bridge. He was in front of her on the beach. She was at a loss. A horrible disgust rose in her. For a moment she wanted to give up. Let there be an end to it!

- Take me! she cried, but not the Jew ...

It was ridiculous ... The whole thing was so ridiculous ... He had disappeared. She regained hope, and climbed from bush to bush toward Hellrock. She wanted to reach the poor school. She told herself that there she would be at peace. It was a crazy idea, but she didn't have time to think. While climbing the path she saw, a few steps in front of her, a teenage girl who was also going up the Hellrock road toward the poor school. She caught up with her.

- Girl, she requested as naturally as she could, go with me to the pastor's.

The teenager gave a start.

- Lady Hunter, it's you!

The girl, who had doubtless attended Mary's wedding, was so surprised not so much by the late hour as by the place: the fishermen's settlement, the Hellrock path!

- Go back to the manor, Lady Hunter, it's dangerous ...

- And you, you aren't afraid?

- I'm as poor as they are ...

- Then you'll accompany me?

- If you insist, Lady Hunter.

- And where are you going?

- I'm going to see the pastor.

- People go to see him, just like that, at any hour?

- ... The pastor doesn't sleep much. Everybody goes to see him, for no matter what, at no matter what time. Look, I'm going because I met a boy and my father doesn't like it.

- You're lucky to have a father who worries.

- He doesn't need to. It's a young man who has a future, Robin, the steward's son, do you know him? We aren't doing anything wrong.

- Your father is simply being careful. If Robin loves you, he will wait. You seem so young.

- And you, you sure hit the jackpot. The President. Just think! Everybody envies you.

- I have some doubts.

The young girl stopped and turned toward Mary.

- Doubts! I am going to tell you something, we won't have time for doubts ...

- It's not that simple ...

- Well, me, I'm fifteen and I've seen some things. In real life, there are winners and losers. One thing for sure: you're a winner. Everybody will tell you that.

- And you?

- I'm going to be one, too. I'll have my Robin.

These words, so serene and natural, far from reassuring Mary, brought back her anxiety. The trouble in her stomach returned. She took a deep breath - What do they say about me? Mary asked.

The girl looked her straight in the eye.

- Do you want the truth?

- Certainly.

- You have won your handsome husband. You deserve what you have ... Lady Hunter ...

She hesitated, reluctant to continue ...

- Tell me, tell me, Mary insisted.

- You are a lady ...

- Yes I am!

- You are really lucky then, because you can do something ...

- What do you want?

- The poor people in the settlement ... they need to have the value of the coupons increased. Things are going pretty well at the shipyard, but the poor people in the settlement ...

The girl pointed to the manor, fifty feet in front of them.

- Here you are, Lady Hunter, beautiful lady, don't forget that if you stop being a lady, you can't help anybody anymore. So, don't ever deny what you are. A poor person is no use to the poor.

And the girl ran to the bridge, crossed it and disappeared in the darkness. Mary had been so absorbed that she hadn't even noticed that the girl had in fact led her back to the manor.

Cheyenne was sleeping on the downstairs balcony. He woke up, barked two or three times and lay back down. Behind her, on the path leading down from the manor, the shadow returned. It was happy.

The manor sparkled with whiteness, like a moon. She climbed two or three steps. A deathly sadness struck her. She would have liked to collapse under the weight of the lie on her

head. But it wasn't a lie, it was the pure truth. The universe is a tragic inequality. And you can't do anything if you aren't on top.

She sat down on a step. Looking at the grass, she noticed a pin that had no doubt fallen from the girl's dress. She picked it up: engraved upon a silver disc was a little cross.

Mary got up, yelled, and raced to the Capsize bridge as fast as her legs could carry her. She rushed toward the bridge by instinct and too quick to make a decision, with the result that she passed right through him, the emperor of the sewers. But he came back behind her. The odor he gave off made her sick to her stomach. She took a deep breath and ran straight ahead.

In a moment she had climbed almost all the trail to Hellrock. But the effort had been enormous, and she suddenly felt exhausted and trembling with fever. She collapsed on a pile of shavings, beside the poor school. The smell of sawdust covered her like a refuge. He wouldn't come here. In her confusion, she had the impression, the conviction, even though it was a harebrained idea, that he and the fresh smell of wood were incompatible. He didn't like sap.

The sea in the distance murmured through the caves. Mary fell asleep with the odor of iodine.

In the lifeboat half-full of water, the young girl drifted on a stormy sea. She had awoken nearly drowned and spitting water. She got hold of herself and bailed out the boat, all the while vomiting salt water. The Devil Boat had sunk. All that was left was debris. Corpses floated around the lifeboat.

In the evening, the sun exploded on the sea. The ocean was nothing more than a waterfall of blood. The sea and the night were one. The White House had only been a dream, simply a dream, a nightmare, perhaps! But what is a nightmare when you are lost on a boat in infinite space.

She awoke, something was rotting in the sawdust beside the poor school. The odor was unbearable. She heard the sniffing of the shadow. He was approachng, slowly coming toward the poor school. It wasn't the Jewish girl that attracted him any longer, but the body decomposing in the pile of shavings. That corpse was what he wanted.

Terror pounced upon her once again. Her whole body shook and arched, run through by a lightning bolt of fear. But the bite was nothing in comparison with the disgust the odor induced. He and the corpse, it was too much ... and yet, he and the corpse, it was her.

A terrible nausea crept into her throat and seemed as if it would tear out her guts. Her entire body wanted to vomit it out. Mary was like an alien body in her own flesh.

Nothing seemed to her more healthy, more pure than this body that no longer wanted anything about her. Nothing seemed as revolting to her as this Lady Constantine Hunter that she wanted to throw up. To expel this lie would be the most beautiful truth in the world.

On the desert of the ocean, the strange pastor had come with a lantern in his hand. He had touched her as one would touch a holy vessel. And Miss Mary had spoiled everything. There was in that Mary a need for vengeance that could not be appeased. Vengeance for what? She didn't know, really. There, crouching beside the poor school in the solitude of the night, she thought it boiled down to a visceral repulsion for certain odors. In the bordello where she lived with her sister the filth of poverty, the beggars, the sores, the chamber pots, the stench of sweat ... To take revenge on poverty, hide beneath a gold and marble tombstone, make misery disappear with cannon balls ... Kill the poor girl she used to be to avenge the poverty that she endured ... That hate, that was her, Lady Mary Hunter ...

Th ideas that penetrated her violent feelings were always vague, but they did rise to the level of her consciousness. She felt, vaguely, indifference separate itself from innocence. Bur for the moment, it was only a physical sensation. Her body wanted to purge itself of Lady Constantine Hunter.

Mary climbed the trail all the way to the top of the cliff. It was dark and the stars had disappeared behind the clouds. Down there, the sea cried out and called. A cold wind rose up from there. She only had to walk ahead, if she wished to fall forever. It calmed her to touch that refuge, to have that possibility of death beside her. She fell to her knees and slept ...

CHAPTER X

The Dawn, the Tree, and the Bark

*When I leave the villages and
approach the woods, I listen
from time to time, to hear the
hounds of Silence bay at the moon,
and know that they are on the track
of a prey.*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

A bee buzzed. The sky was brown. The first pinkish light slipped over the horizon. The sunbeam filtered into the mists. Mary opened her eyes and saw her hand. It was a very lovely hand, with long fine fingers and a palm with three nearly parallel lines. Consciousness returned. She was there in this pure body which had not been purified ... But all was quiet now. A morning of respite ...

She heard the ocean. She stretched her neck and raised her head. The sun was sliding its yellow tentacles on the water. The colors of the sea lit up one after the other. She got up on her knees. The precipice was there, two steps away. She lay down on her stomach and crawled to the edge of the cape. An impressive cliff, yet the grass leaned nonchalantly toward the abyss. Some buttercups looked down without the slightest sign of fear. Nothing is more courageous than a blade of grass.

Seagulls took off from the Skulls and threw themselves into the void. She saw them open their wings and float on the winds. Others returned. There were cormorants too, and puffins farther down. She heard the peeping of the baby birds demanding a mouthful from Mama.

Beneath the gulls' dance, waves were breaking on the reefs. On a sandbank, oystercatchers pecked, with other sharp-beaked birds. On the rocks, green tufts trembled in the wind. The grass sees all, while men imagine.

She realized that her body too could see. It hadn't broken the link. Like the grass, it drank the sun, listened to the wind, the sea, the rustlings and the murmurings. It was at home, as tranquil as a flower, and as happy to belong to what is so immense.

If she could have doubled herself and retreated several steps, she would have seen that young woman lying on her stomach on the grass. And she wouldn't have seen that great a difference between that girl and a little clump of daisies. Like the grass, her hair rippled toward the east. Her golden dress shook with the meadow's rhythm. Her legs followed the movement of the stems. The morning chill made her skin break out in goosebumps. In this field, she was one element among the others.

It was in that state that she descended the slope and headed toward the village. She neither saw nor heard the man waving his hand and yelling on the balcony of the great White House. She was absorbed by the laughter that came from the fishermen's settlement. Two little boys were making faces at her behind a window. Further on, the stream of a chamber pot poured out of a door. A couple were arguing.

She walked in the mud and smelled the seaweed. The feeling of disgust had left her. She went on as if bewitched. Something rose out of the earth and pacified her. She went according to her body and didn't hesitate at obedience.

The settlement was almost deserted. She noticed a path. A human odor was still perceptible. The path disappeared into a fir grove. She turned into it. The trail was muddy in many places and she could see there fresh prints of bare feet. Blackbirds and goldfinches wandered from branch to branch. A turtle crossed in front of her. She heard a loon in the distance.

She arrived at the edge of a marsh, no doubt the Raising marsh Eliza spoke of. The path came out on a side trail that probably went around the marsh. The fresh tracks went toward the south, and she followed them.

Water squirted out of the moss under the pressure of her feet. An acrid odor arose from the swamp. A hare ran between the branches. Two partridges beat a noisy retreat.

Hearing voices, she slowed her pace. A clearing was about to open up in front of her. She noticed it because of the way the light changed as it passed through the increasingly sparse foliage. As she approached the human voices, she slipped cautiously behind some bushes. Through the leaves, she caught sight of a large gathering, with many women, some children, and a group of men, the great majority of whom were black. On a wooden platform, a formidable mulatto was swallowing a pitcher of water.

- Hell and damnation, with Jesus Christ you aren't going to change things. According to Barker the boat is ready. We can go.

- We're with you, cried several men around the rostrum.

- That's not the reason we built the trawler, a white man from the shipyard protested. We'll do what we planned, go down to Pamlico Bay and look for more fugitive slaves. We'll keep on with the Underground Railroad ...

- You're crazy, Barker exclaimed. You're forgetting some things. First of all, we already have here one hundred and sixty-two families of fugitives that aren't easy to feed. Secondly, we have some guys who aren't too squeamish. They've already set fire to some warehouses in Boston to protest the price of wheat. In a week, we'll be welcoming strikers from all over Massachusetts, around thirty, maybe. We can't build a country in a swamp, goddamit! Thirdly, in the Hudson valley there are some jobless men and some Irish revolutionaries who want us to join them. Around New York, 25,000 farmers are angry and well organized. Railroad men all over the country are ready for a general walkout. In Philadelphia, fifty professional organizations

will take up the strike. Right now as I am speaking, riots are taking place in all the big cities of America, and I'm forgetting the petitionists in New Hampshire.

- And the women, a tall brunette cried.

- Yes! It's true, the women are involved, Barker continued. There are forty-three women who have stirred up strikes in Lowell. Their names are on the blacklist all over New England. The socialist women and the abolitionists are appealing to us ... Where was I? Oh yes! Fourthly, the revolution is worldwide. Since 1848, in Paris, in Milan, in Venice, in Parma, in Pressburg, in Prague, in Breda, in Hesse, in Frankfurt, in Bavaria, in Saxony, in Berlin, it's the Springtime of the peoples. They thought they had crushed it in Hungary, but it's spreading like water underground. The Republic of those who feed and manufacture is possible. The courageous masses are launched into the assault against the bourgeois citadel. In Boston, we have 10,000 men ready to act ..

- That's fine, this poor people's revolution, but what do we do? asked a black, doubtless a former slave.

- In a few days, in two weeks at the most, the President will send his four-master to Amsterdam to pick up the steel cannons from Essen. After that, Captain Djib will bring the four-master to Dakar to fill it with slaves. He says he will return to Norfolk, but in fact he is going to deliver everything to Jacksonville. We will need to seize the boat between Amsterdam and Dakar. If we don't do it, its cannons will be turned against us; if we succeed, we will liberate the slaves and we will have the best cannons in the world on our side..

- And the plan? a fisherman interrupted.

- Do you think I am going to tell you? The volunteers will learn it on the way. We have built an exact replica of the escort boats. We have men somewhere on the Straits of Dover. We are capable of seizing the four-master, mounting cannons on its bridge, bombarding the slavers' camp, and returning to Boston to support the revolution.

- It's too risky, cried a black who was standing fairly close to Mary. We built the boat for the Underground Railroad, and we'll continue as planned. A lot of people here will be leaving for Canada in the fall.

- We can't live in hiding another year, Barker replied. It's a miracle that the President hasn't discovered the secret.

- He has other irons in the fire: the slave trade, the arms traffic, controlling the newspapers, greasing the politicians' palms ... There is never anybody at Little All ... We have it to ourselves.

- You're behind on the news, Barker contradicted. Eliza has been sold and Mister has a whore now at the manor all year long ... We have one less spy and he has his whore's eyes on top of that.

Mary took this like a punch in the face. The nausea returned. But fear kept her from vomiting.

- Me, I want to hear the pastor, a black put in. Tall and strong, he held a baby in his arms.

Then came a long silence. Even the children were hushed. The pastor took a long time to stand up. Mary sought him with her eyes. She noticed a nursing infant asleep on its mother's breast. A little girl squeezed her father's hand. Finally, she saw him emerge from a group of former slaves. He stood up on a stump. Except for Barker, the crowd sat down on the ground. Jesse was deep in thought. Sadness passed over his face. He removed his glasses, scratched his nose, and put them back on:

- Tell us your opinion, Mr. Truth, Barker demanded.

- You won't like what I am going to say.

He took off his hat and, holding it in both hands, fidgeted with it.

- Speak, Barker insisted.

- Do you really want me to tell you what I think?

- Certainly, Barker affirmed.

- Yes, for sure, added a group near the rostrum.

Everyone indicated that they wanted to hear it.

- So, I'll start. I have been here several years. Every day the good Lord gives me, I have had to intervene to settle quarrels, stop fistfights, and sometimes even pitched battles. Many husbands don't respect their wives, many wives enjoy humiliating their husbands, and most of the whites here aren't capable of approaching a black without turning up their noses. By what miracle can someone who is contaminated succeed in curing another? You haven't understood anything about the Beatitudes that I have a child read to you every week. Those who are blessed even in poverty, there's the cure, riches will never reduce them to slavery. Those who are blessed even in thirst, there's the water that we need. Those who no longer believe in the miracle of a messiah or a revolution capable of making the world conform to their desires, there's the salt that Jesus speaks of.

- Yes, but during that same time, the rich are putting it to the pretty girls while we starve to death.

- The desire to resemble those we despise is the worst of enemies. If you want to be like them, it's because deep down you admire them. You hate, then, what you admire. Don't ever forget this: a man always accomplishes what he wants deep down, and not what he expresses on the surface. Our compatriots Emerson and Thoreau invite us to eat our fill of the very substance of truth by learning first how to live independently. May those who are happy here and now go

and share their happiness. The others: let us learn first of all to live in peace with ourselves and each other. Let us end, first of all, this inner warfare.

He stopped talking. Everyone looked at him. No one asked any questions.

- The pastor has spoken, Barker resumed. It is time to vote, then ...

The noise returned. Children woke up, some people debated, while others quarreled, raising their fists ... Mary took advantage of this opportunity to slip off into the forest. A terrible silence took shape in her mind. In this silence, some words cried out: "Mister's whore..." The pain in her heart had returned. It was the middle of the day, and everything became confused.

She was no longer able to reconstitute a single thread of her existence. Shooting pains ran through her head, as if she had suffered an accident; she barely remembered the manor, the satin sheets, Mr. Hunter, and the orgasms of their lovemaking. There was the sea. That was all. It was the only certainty. Oceans in oceans, that was all.

Mary began to pick at her memory, always at the same spot: at her sin, at her betrayal. And she still hadn't answered the question: why is it so good to give yourself to Satan? But there everything was bitter and the salt water rose in her throat.

She walked through the dense forest, scratched by the branches and plagued by the mosquitoes. She would have liked the sun to burn her, a mountain to fall down on her, and the rocks to skin her alive. She walked ahead with jerky steps. The distant murmur of the sea was her only guide. She heard Eliza's voice, gentle, without reproach. Nothing was more trying than that voice.

She climbed a woods road that led to the cuttings at White Oak. Instinctively, she followed a principle. At every fork, she took the road which ascended rather than the one that descended, but she always kept the sea on her right. Why? She didn't know.

Despite the uniform principle of her flight, by the middle of the afternoon she was completely lost. The wind in the leaves covered the sound of the sea. The sun was hidden in the trees. She could no longer distinguish anything. She knew that the lichen on the tree-trunks usually pointed north, but she no longer had the desire to arrive anywhere.

She struck a rock and fell to her knees. She no longer wanted to go on, no longer even wanted to exist. There are certain shafts of light on summer afternoons that break the bells and shatter the cathedrals, and no one wants to rebuild them anymore. The wind has rolled the sand over our deepest pathways, and there are no more tracks, no possible return. All memories are erased in the wind that shakes us. Truth is naked in the cutting.

She no longer had the strength to struggle. She didn't even have the strength to walk. She fell to her knees, somewhere on a not-too-high mountain to the northwest of Little All, in the White Oak, near a forester's cabin.

She recognized the turning point: either she returned to Constantine or she took refuge with the rebels in the marsh. But the poor people didn't want her and she didn't want any more of Constantine.

Everything was racing around in her mind. Constantine was right after all ... the law of the strongest But there, she saw he had no strength. He repeats the law of the strongest to whoever is willing to listen, but he is not the strongest. Take him, put him somewhere among the soldiers, and he would be one of the weakest. Lead him to the thinkers, and he would be one of the least intelligent. Among the home-builders, he would be the clumsiest. Among the artists, he would be incapable. In reality, he is a mythical being. Like all the gods, if the poor people stopped believing in him, he would disappear. And the poor, who are they? They are tied to each other in a fabric of fear. By themselves, they don't will anything. They prostrate themselves. They slake the thirst of the force that turns against them.

Mary didn't know where to go. Lifting her head and looking around her, she became aware, once and for all, that she could not choose. Strangely, this relieved her. It was enough to wait. Night would work its way under the bark and make her freeze to death. She put her hands on her stomach and felt her black notebook.

A few steps away, in a cabin she didn't see, a man had just arrived and was waiting for the morning. Mary untied her black notebook and opened it with trembling hands. The acid in her stomach diminished, her anger cooled, her hatred disappeared. She wanted to read, to hear her mother's voice reverberate in the silence.

CHAPTER XI

The Tale of the Two Majesties

*Another evening she told me:
"You will see that there are
still so many dresses to undo
to get to the transparency of
women."*

TANIA LANGLAIS

It was the tale about judgment. She no longer wanted her own life. She wanted to completely transport her existence into the black notebook. To no longer tell anything about herself, to disappear into her mother's gospel. It was the tale about judgment. The only thing she wanted now. She would read it slowly and never see Little All again. She needed this new shipwreck.

The Antonia consisted of a proud square fortress rising up in the face of the Temple of Jerusalem. The fortress was flanked by four turrets the tallest of which, insultingly, was higher than the Temple. On the top of this tower a man was seated, tired, sleepless, motionless in his white toga. He was seeking out a little coolness there. Below the tower an unexpected odor of roses circulated between the pretorium's curtains. Blended with that aroma were the smells of sheep and goats ...

As soon as the first yellowish sunlight gleamed on the courtyard's pillars, the man descended from the tower. His steps were nervous, his respiration, shallow. For three days, he had had to contend with a recurrence of nausea. For three days he had eaten nothing, scarcely slept, and, in his mouth, every drink tasted like salt water. Despite his fatigue, the man descending from the tower had something supple and elastic about him. He was a procurator. His name was Pilate.

The day would be a long one for him. Passover was approaching and a number of cases had to be terminated before the end of the day. The procurator was tired already. In the middle of the interior courtyard of the palace there stood a beautiful fountain which made the water rise up in the form of a crown. As they fell, the drops absorbed some of the odors. Pilate sat down on the edge of the fountain. He searched through his memories for the angelic face, the sensual body of his young mistress. But the image didn't take shape.

From the backrooms where the Fulmina legion was quartered came an aroma of cooking, greasy, oppressive, atrocious.

- O gods, give me the courage to hold on just until noon, he sighed.

At noon, he had planned a bath with his sweetheart, his favorite, the girl from Magdala, by far the most beautiful and, in love, the most skilled, his sole consolation in this city he

detested. "Miriam!" He repeated the name like a prayer. He plunged his gaze into the fountain's water.

Memories crowded his mind. He should never have accepted this nomination. Tiberius had made a fool of him. There was nothing you could understand about this people. Several years earlier, he had just taken possession of his title -- he had wanted to bring the city into conformity with the Empire; he had brought into Jerusalem ensigns adorned with Tiberius' image ... En masse, all the priests went out of the Temple, tore their garments, and presented their bare chests to the soldiers ... Every one was ready to die. He had had to give in. He hated giving in. Another time, he had suspended gilded shields on the walls of the Temple. That was discreet. And there was a revolt, a battle to the death. Retreat was not an option ... Tiberius himself ordered the removal of the shields. Pilate had lost face ...

Here, he had to navigate. He was no longer able to negotiate. How can you subjugate a people who take their religion more seriously than they do their own lives? These Jews undermine all political power. For them, death should be made illegal!

The chair for the hearing had already been brought forward on the mosaic floor. He resigned himself to leaving the fountain, and cast an absent-minded eye over the court roll. Dismas, Hestas, Barabbas, Jesus ... cases of rebellion, still more cases of rebellion ...

At the foot of Mount Zion, the sun extended its first rays. The day would be burning hot. And that smell! They brought him water. He drank a whole pitcher of it.

- Bring me the first prisoner, he told his secretary.

The complaint came from the Sanhedrin. A case of religion. For the cases of religion, the Sanhedrin's judgment was sufficient. They submitted the verdict for his approval. This would lead to a public stoning in accordance with the Jewish customs. But on the eve of Passover, a stoning would remain a dead letter most of the time, and the accused would get off with a few lumps.

"A case of fanatical hatred that, at all costs, they don't want to get away, Pilate thought. A triple advantage for them: they make Rome bear the opprobrium of the condemnation; their hatred is satisfied; and the spectacle of a crucifixion is rather ... provocative! They aren't bringing me a case of rebellion, they are bringing me a cause for a rebellion. There is one thing about them, they don't lack shrewdness ... They are saying to themselves that a mosquito gorged with blood sleeps better. Look, there's a fourth advantage"

He had a virulent urge to vomit. They gave him a large handkerchief, and he spat a little of the water he had swallowed. It was as if his head were caught in a vise.

"They've made me sick. I need fresh air ... this afternoon." He forced himself to revive the image of his young mistress ...

- Bring me the prisoner, Pilate called.

Two soldiers pushed a man in front of them. He didn't need to be shoved.

- Let him come forward, Pilate cried. He is not a cripple.

The man was visibly fatigued, but he approached with a calm and sure step and looked Pilate straight in the eye. An amazing look, like that of a man who had come to meet a friend.

Pilate looked at the scroll of accusation he had been given. "Nazareth," "worker," "healer," "sabbath," "transgression," "anger," "violence," "merchants" ... The words came loose, but he wasn't able to put the sentences together. Everything was mixed up. A bitterness rose in his throat and every heartbeat wanted to make his head explode.

- Where are the accusers? Pilate asked. He was visibly ill.

A big, strapping man came forward, holding his helmet against his leather breastplate. Two golden lions shone on the breastplate. He, the legate commanding the legion of the guard, was the person responsible for the hearings.

- They can't enter ... he reminded the procurator.

Obviously! The priests didn't want to contract an impurity.

- So, what are they saying? Pilate asked impatiently.

- It is written

- I know how to read, but I want to know what they told you ... word for word.

- "If he weren't an evildoer, we wouldn't be bringing him."

Pilate shrugged. The everlasting rhetoric of these fanatics! The idea occurred to him to send the man back with this one answer: "Judge him according to your Law since you have gotten your Law from Heaven." But he thought about the consequences ... His stomach tightened. He vomited a little bile into his handkerchief. Without raising his head from the scroll he was holding, he addressed the accused.

- It is written in the complaint that you turn the people away from obedience and that you advise them to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. As if the authority of Rome were only a matter of tax collection ... Rome has conquered Judea, believe it or not. They also say that you pretend to be the king of the Jews ... Pay attention to your answer. Don't forget that your judge is in front of you. So then, what do you have to say for yourself?

- If I were a king, I would have, like you, soldiers and powers. The peace I speak of does not come from the ability to make afraid, but from the ability to no longer be afraid. I tell them not to expect any good from those who make afraid, but to love the one who lives in truth ...

- The truth! What is truth?

His stomach tensed, the acidity rose again in his throat. He rose and went to sit down on the edge of the fountain. A feverish shiver shook him. "The truth, the truth" the word was repeated. The truth is what is imposed ... There, that's all there is! Drops bounced on the water's surface.

The Galilean faced him, but looked toward one of the arched doors leading to the garden. A smile passed over his face, his eyes were staring at something. The procurator turned around. A tiny finch had entered and was playing in the leaves of a lemon-tree, a branch of which extended into the courtyard. The finch approached the fountain, caught a drop of water in flight and nimbly returned to the lemon tree.

The procurator suddenly arose and went out into the square. An immense crowd was there. To his great surprise, it was an ovation. Pilate turned toward his legate, who shrugged. Pilate took one step toward the crowd. The crowd fell silent. The procurator hesitated.

- I find no fault in this man, he dared to declare.

A priest cried out in the crowd:

- Watch your back, Pilate. This man seems innocent and naive. That is his weapon. He draws crowds. He stirs up the people. He puts the peace of Rome in danger.

Pilate couldn't discern the priest hidden in the crowd.

- Does anyone have anything good to say, one word in favor of the accused?

No one spoke. This allowed Pilate to retort:

- So then, if the people are with him, why are those who are here, so many on this beautiful morning, why are they all against him?

The nausea had started again. Without hearing their answer, he returned to his chair. "Bribe a whole crowd, he said to himself ... For misers of their kind ... They really are afraid ..."

He threw a glance at the accused. A philosopher lost in a people of fanatics, there, that was the whole story. This obvious fact relieved Pilate. He got up and circled the Galilean.

- So, you always tell the truth, do you? You are proposing a way of life independent of kings and priests, of forces ... You want to live according to another law. You are admired by the populace because you do what they don't have the courage to do ... You are detested by the people of influence for the same reason You say that you don't impose fear, you say that you remove fear. You have completely failed to pull it off. Listen to them, they are terrified of you ... You have succeeded in terrorizing everybody ... Good! I would really like to get you out of this. What do you propose?

- I came of my own accord, and I will leave here of my own accord.

- Then these chains don't bind you, these soldiers don't lead you, and me, I am nothing.

- Pilate, you know very well that nothing required me to come to Jerusalem. I came on my own initiative.

- You're really lucky. And why did you come?

- Don't you see the misery of this world? I came here to say that we must not fear God, nor those who use God, nor those who take themselves for God.

- Then, according to you, power comes from fear ... And me, I suppose that I'm afraid of you and that's why I'll throw you to the dogs who are there outside.

- No, Pilate, you aren't afraid of me. You don't even see me. You're afraid of yourself, of your cowardice, of your impotence, of your poverty.

- Me, poor ...

- No! But what you are escapes you and what you are not imprisons you. Why don't you get out of this prison?

Jesus stared at him ... A look he didn't remember ever having seen before. A strange memory arose ... So unexpected at this time, at this place: his mother's smile.

The legate approached and whispered in the procurator's ear.

- He is from Galilee. It's there that everything began ... with miracles ...

Two good reasons to send him to Herod, that collector of oddities. Pilate imagined for a moment Herod in front of this carpenter from Galilee more or less off his rocker ... "No, Herod, you aren't afraid of me. You're afraid of your impotence ..." That made him smile. "If the Galilean ever comes out of Herod's palace alive, then we could talk about a miracle! From now till then, I'll have the time to dispose of the cases of three other rebels ..."

So Jesus was conducted to the former palace of the Hasmoneans, where Herod was staying for the festival. This palace was also close to the Temple, but on the other side of the Tyropeon, near the bridge which connected the Xyste square with the porch of the Gentiles.

Pilate received the three rebels accused of murders at the same time. He ratified the judgements. He postponed the other cases, drank a little water, and went away into the garden. Already, the sun was blazing straight down. He looked for the finch, but didn't see it. He returned to the fountain and plunged his face into the water for a minute.

The doctor's diagnosis was definite: the liver wouldn't last much longer. "One fine afternoon, it will burst. I will have scarcely a few hours to say my goodbyes..." He wasn't afraid. The agony, though, the agony had always been gnawing at him.

As for Jesus, for an hour he remained motionless and totally silent in the portico of Herod's palace. The latter sent him his astrologer, who got nothing out of him. The doctor arrived. Nothing. They brought a sick person. Nothing. Seeing that they wouldn't obtain anything, to mock him, the soldiers covered him with a scarlet chlamys, gave him a stick in place of a scepter and asked him to prophesy about the fate of Rome. Not one word.

Herod dismissed him. On the road back, the guards stopped on the bridge because there were three good-looking prostitutes there and one of the soldiers wanted to make an assignation. The sky was unusually clear for that season. The sun was dazzling. The prisoner spoke for a moment with one of the girls that the soldiers weren't looking at. She was, however, the most beautiful by far. Jesus seemed to know her. That girl, who wasn't twenty yet, came to the Antonine very often. Jesus told her a story about a woman who had lost a gold coin and who, since then, searched everywhere in her house to find it. When they parted, the girl was crying.

On Jesus' return, Pilate seemed strangely satisfied to see the prisoner once again.

- So, Herod didn't want you.

He didn't seem to notice the chlamys; nor the scepter he was holding, and offered him a large glass of water. Seeing that Jesus was hesitating, he took his stick and gave him the pitcher. Jesus drank. Pilate then placed the stick on the edge of the fountain and sat down in silence next to the accused. He looked at Jesus hard for a moment, then arose nervously and presented himself once again on the square. He received a long ovation.

- You have brought this man to me on the pretext of rebellion, but he is just a philosopher. Herod doesn't condemn him either.

- He says he is king of the Jews, cried a priest.

- But you have seen him! You can clearly see that he is not to be taken seriously.

The nausea suddenly recurred. This time with great violence; he barely had time to turn around and vomit. All that left his mouth was a little bitter water. He returned to the fountain. The stick was still there, but the red chlamys had fallen from Jesus' shoulders.

Looking at the cloak on the ground, Pilate remembered that it was customary in Palestine to believe that a king possessed a magical power and that, to feel a benefit, it sufficed to touch him. All the kings held magical powers. But it was the first time that a little nobody of a worker healed, one who was not even from Jerusalem. No doubt the tendency to consider him king came from this. It was a common association of ideas for them, a superstition.

He looked at the Galilean. Something emanated from that man that went straight to the heart. It was not surprising that the populace took him for a prophet.

- How do you see the future of your people? Pilate asked him.

- Pilate, your future is right here in front of you. What do you choose?

Jesus stared at him. Pilate shrugged.

- My future, I suppose, is you!

- You don't have much time, Pilate. Let us leave here.

- What are you saying?

- All of your life, your miserable life, is calling out for fresh water. If a tree grows, lifts up its branches, and opens its leaves, this proves the sun's existence. Your thirst, Pilate, proves my existence. That is why I am here. So let us leave.

Pilate stared at him wide-eyed, incapable of reacting. Through the depths of his soul passed a strange need to speak, to plunge into this man's madness. He realized that he had never spoken, never truly spoken. Never. This word was deadening. Never. He thought of the girl from Magdala. For a very brief moment, he saw himself crying on the prostitute's shoulder. He, Pilate, the procurator of Judea, crying on the neck of a Jewish woman ...

He promptly got up, and went out on the great square. The crowd cried out in chorus:

- Finally, what have you said to these people to make them hate you this much?

Pilate suddenly realized that he had gotten on familiar terms with a miserable lunatic. And time was passing rapidly. What he needed now was to dispose of this grotesque affair, and leave Jerusalem. That idea calmed him. All he had to do was to send this wretch to Corinth or Athens where he would pass unnoticed among the other philosophers of his kind. And then, walk outside the city, in his villa's gardens, in the shade. Myriam was probably already on her way ...

He got up and went out on the square.

- It is the custom to liberate one condemned man. I liberate your Jesus.

Liberate a condemned man. Eagerness had made him say something stupid. Jesus was actually not yet condemned. He had just condemned Jesus by a simple slip of the tongue.

- So I chastise him and I liberate him.

Another blunder. The bile rose again in his throat. Cramps forced him to hold on to the parapet with both hands. His head wanted to explode. He, Pilate was not free to leave the palace before the end of this masquerade. He had to endure it all. A kind of disgust rose in his throat. He went in. Sat down. The legate approached and whispered to him:

- The best thing is to chastise him severely. That will satisfy their hate and establish your authority.

The procurator winked and dismissed him with the back of his hand.

- You will have him whipped? the legate asked.

Pilate's right hand turned down.

- With the scourge? the legate inquired.

Again, Pilate's right hand granted the request.

- Forty blows? the legate specified.

Pilate's head nodded.

So Jesus was chained to a short column provided for that purpose in the soldiers' quarters. According to the sun, it was about ten o'clock. The oppressive heat gave the odors new vigor. A drop of blood slid down the procurator's throat as he swallowed his saliva.

The thoughts haunting Pilate were transient, bizarre, and insane. "We are lost. We will exhaust every level of cruelty in vain. This Galilean will win, in the end ... Because such a man exists, Rome will fall. It's simply a matter of time." He shivered, and his blood ran cold. He wanted to get up, but he was riveted to his seat, petrified with fear. A cold sweat slid down his chest.

They brought in Jesus. He staggered, his torso bare, his back shredded. A crown of thorns pierced his forehead. He held himself erect, though tottering, with the nobility of those great trees whose shade cools wells. He plunged his eyes, as soon as he could, into the eyes of Pilate. This seemed to soothe the condemned man's pains, but revived the procurator's. Jesus found in his judge a cooling water and a secret salve. The procurator was petrified. He felt Jesus drink in him a tenderness he had never found in himself.

Little by little, as the agony departed, the Roman's throat relaxed. Air passed into his lungs. Blood rose again to his head. The vise gave way. The nausea left him. Jesus had dived deeply into him and diminished his own suffering by curing him, he, Pilate, of all people.

The legate led the condemned man out onto the platform. Jesus turned, hoping to look Pilate in the face. But the procurator turned away.

The sun was blazing. Through Jesus' wounds the bare bone of his ribs was visible. The condemned man tottered and leaned on the legate for a moment. The latter helped him to climb the steps to the platform. A clamor arose.

- Give us Barabbas and crucify Jesus, since he's almost dead already.

The legate was disconcerted. They were right. He went to get the chlamys and the scepter. He laid the garment on Jesus and gave him the stick.

Pilate remained seated, unable to move. The legate left the condemned man on the platform and went in to get Pilate. He had to support the procurator all the way to the curial chair. From the crowd, Pilate's pale face was barely visible. A deathly silence lay over the whole assembly. The legate brought a ewer full of water. Pilate plunged his hands into it.

Jesus stood and looked to the crowd the same way he had looked at Pilate. Myriam, the young prostitute from Magdala who had cried on the bridge, came into the square. Jesus looked at her. His eyes dove into hers. He quenched his thirst in them. This man seemed to travel from one heart to another, as a desert bird flies from one fountain to the next. The young woman remained motionless.

Pilate's hands were still in the ewer. That water was so cool. It seemed to enter his pores and ripple through him, taking with it all the bile in his blood.

Jesus, his face covered with blood, was looking straight ahead, still deep in the young prostitute's tear-filled eyes. His gaze left hers and wandered over the crowd. An infinite sadness blended water and blood -- tears and wounds.

Myriam gazed at him. Gradually she recognized who he was. He was the water and she, the thirst. Her heart swelled with an immense kind of hope.

Mary closed the notebook, managed to walk to a little brook and slip into the water. She wanted to die in the arms of her mother's Jesus. It wasn't funny.

CHAPTER XII

With Him on the Mountain

*Babel had to fall
in order for people
to talk to each other.*

CLAUDE SCHWAB

What she saw, when she opened her eyes, was a strange little ceiling covered with soot. Rafters filled in with laths held badly joined shingles. The sky showed through the gaps, the light burst through in flakes that fell like snow. Moisture, adhering to the gable's surfaces, slid downward like sweat. The air coagulated around every object. Everything appeared immobile.

There was, in that cabin, only a single pane of glass. The sun grew feverish in crossing it. When it reached her, it was as moist as the breath of some wild animal. And yet, she felt so light, relieved of every fear. Everything was beginning a second time in a world that was new and without danger. She was amazed at the honey that now held things together. The light formed an ochre jelly around her. It was so sweet to open her eyes in it. She would have liked to stay there in that gelatin, between the inner and the outer nightmares, sheltered in the world of in-between, in the world of her mother's stories. But the drama about her mother's stories was that, if you stopped reading, you fell back into your own existence. Jesus she would never see. He was just an extravagant idea about love.

She was lying on a narrow bed that smelled of straw. A deal table occupied nearly all the remaining space. A large wardrobe had opened slightly; the heat of the day had caused the room to swell progressively. The sun's rays gleamed like silver blades in a transparent oil. A smell of flour floated in the air. A truly beautiful day was opening its womb. And this peace flowing over her like an anointing -- She didn't want to sleep any more, and she didn't want to wake up.

But where was she? What was she doing in this cabin? Once again, she had lost the thread

She heard someone splitting wood outside. Folding back the wool blanket that covered her, she quietly got up. Who had put this dress on her, though? Miss Margaret's dress! No! not exactly. All the buttons were there, not a single tear, not the slightest rip, not even a trace of any mending ... The dress was the way she wore it before she left the cabin on the Devil Boat, when the storm's electricity clothed everything in liquid light.

In reality, this dress only looked like the other, but in her surprise, Mary didn't see the differences. It was like returning to the sea, before the storm, in the desire that had preceded the storm.

She glanced through the window. Jesse Truth was gathering up the wood scattered around him and throwing it toward a clay bread oven not far away. The logs struck against each

other: the slamming sounded clean and sharp. The man was whistling. What a strange guy this pastor was! Something about him was lighthearted, even slightly comical. A sense of celebration seemed to be in the air.

The scene brought images back to life in Mary's head ... The marsh ... The slaves ... The gathering ... Jesse had spoken ... She had been reading in the notebook ... The thread between these things came back to her. But it wasn't a thread; it was a knot -- the refugees in danger, Barker's suicidal plan, Jesus before Pilate and now Jesse throwing chunks of wood.

Small twisted conifers clung to the rocks; bushes showed their claws; thorns everywhere, except in a pool in the rocks full of grayish moss ... and him, he was singing ... He opened the oven door, spread a layer of bark over the slab, carefully placed the chunks of wood; he seemed like an impresario, preparing the wood for a dance extravaganza.

When he had finished, he walked away and remained seated for a long time on a round rock, gazing at the pond. She would have liked to have seen his face, but he didn't turn around. She saw him from the back. He held a cherry branch which he threw boldly into the pool.

For a moment she asked herself whether two stories as far removed as hers and Myriam of Magdala's could intertwine like logs in a fire. In her mind, the image was quite vague, but the logs were a kind of memory. Constantine had shown her the concentric rings in a log: the climatic variations, the storms, the efforts, everything had left its trace. And, in catching fire, these pasts were going to intertwine. What was true for the wood could be so for her, for the young Jewish girl, for Myriam of Magdala, for Jesus, for Jesse ... The fire entangles the stories. That's what love is, that's what hate is, that's what fear is, too. It's the usual thing, the ordinary stuff of life, even: make knots in stories, entangle the spaces and the times.

Jesse looked at the pool as if hypnotized, immobilized in the landscape. He saw tiny swimming insects there, floating twigs, and even the carcass of a bird. Jesse seemed to read the pool like a shaman consults the entrails of an animal .

He knocked on the door.

- Marie, get up, if you haven't already.

She gave a start. Unable to speak, she went to the door and asked herself what had made her so absentminded. Why hadn't she seen Jesse get up and come to the cabin? She had always leaped like that from one moment to the other, losing an enormous amount of baggage in between. She tried to imagine what the life of a person who paid attention would be like ...

The door was open behind her. But nobody was there anymore. Jesse was behind her. She turned around and saw him rummaging through the big wardrobe.

- Did you sleep well?

He had spread a little flour on the table.

It's my day to bake bread. Do you want to help me? Come, take that pail there and get me some water.

She hesitated. He handed her the pail.

- Go on, run down quick-quick to the brook.

He looked at her with a funny face and crinkled eyes.

- But I don't know where the brook is.

- That's easy, brooks are always at the end of a path.

She went out. Not seeing any path, she returned to the cabin.

- There isn't any path! she exclaimed. We're on a granite cape.

- Yes, I know that. But that doesn't stop there always being a path between an old cabin like this one and a mountain brook like the one you're going to see.

She went out again. She noticed a narrow smooth strip on the stone. She followed this trail, asking herself who had worn away the stone ... She walked. The cabin was in front of her and the pail was full. She entered the cabin.

- There was where I found you, Jesse declared. You were sleeping so deeply.

He was concentrating completely on his kneading, carefully impregnating the flour with oil, throwing a little salt into the mixture. She placed the pail next to the table and sat down on a bench beside the window. She savored the light playing in his hair ...

- In any case, when you sleep, you really sleep, Jesse remarked, throwing a little flour into the dough.

She couldn't take her eyes off the dance of his hands in the dough ...

- This is my mountain cabin. I come here rather often, especially when I'm at my wit's end. I have to think things over. You are going to help me. You already are helping me. I'm forgetting that darned village a little. In order to think, it's important to forget.

She didn't say anything. But an idea was taking shape. If the knot got bigger in proportion to how time mixed everything up, that meant that going in the opposite direction would undo the knot ... Forgetting was that way, precisely. Forgetting wasn't just anything. It was returning ... Jesse continued:

- Men undoubtedly love war a lot. There must come a day when we succeed in tolerating one another. It must be ...

She was no longer listening. She put her hand on the windowpane. She looked at her hand. It was a pretty little white hand with long fingers. What an adventure that hand was!

She blinked, turned her head, and stared again at Jesse's hands in the dough. From the very first glance, she had loved Jesse; from the very first glance, she had loved Constantine, and yet, there, at that moment, these two loves seemed to her so contrary and yet so necessary at the same time. Constantine had caressed all of her body and never really entered anywhere. Jesse had only to stand there to penetrate her depths, down to those places she didn't know herself.

Jesse suddenly stopped kneading, rubbed his hands to remove the dough, and looked her straight in the eyes:

- Marie, you'll have to stop worrying. Listen to me carefully. I have to leave tomorrow, or maybe the day after tomorrow, but not for long. I'll be back. Keep that dress, it suits you perfectly.

A hot flash ran over her face. He plunged his hands into the dough once again. For a brief moment, she tried to imagine him looking at her when he undressed her, then dressed her again. But she couldn't manage to imagine it. She was incapable of doing it. All she could do was imagine impossible actions, his hands plunging into her body as if it were dough, his face entering her face as if it were a river, his feet sinking into her heart as if it were moss ...

- The Ancients say that the body is the lamp of the spirit.

He had uttered that sentence without even looking at her, staring at his dough, the most precious thing in the world, it seemed. She placed her hands on her stomach. The black notebook was there. Had he read it? Eliza had led her to believe ... Eliza ... She had sold Eliza ... Her notebook ... She had betrayed her notebook. A horrible disgust mounted in her ...

- Marie! Marie! Jesse exclaimed.

Throughout her childhood, she had been faithful; rebellious, but faithful. And then, she had sullied everything. Martha had, in her whore's cheap bar, remained as pure as crystal. One day, when her tuberculosis was finishing its work, Martha had told her before dying, "Little sister, leave, go on the dock, someone will come and get you." What price had Martha paid? Martha, vein of gold in a mine of soot. Mary, a trace of soot, just a trace of soot ...

And Jesse, by what miracle did he know, so intimately and irrevocably, that evil occurs only on the side of existence that is subject to corruption? By what mystery did he see only beauty?

- Why didn't you let me die in the brook?

- Marie, you aren't big enough for your sin. You aren't twenty yet and you aren't capable of walking three steps in the same direction .. The bread is going to rise, let's go outside. I have something to say to you.

He took her by the hand and led her into the shade of a large white pine. This tree had something like a hip. She sat down on it. Jesse walked a few steps, then settled down a little further off, on a stump, facing the pool of water.

- I have many questions for you, he began. Why did you come here, to Little All? And why by sea? Why did you come to meet me in my boat, three nautical miles out to sea, and after that at the village church, finally at the poor school, and then here today, at my cabin where nobody comes? And every time not to say anything?

What were these questions? As if it were she who had organized everything! He added:

- It's not for nothing that we come and we go. The roads never go nowhere. All of them run up against steel blades, and the blades divide them. One part dies so that the other can live. One part makes the mud, the other, the tree. Root by root, life connects what descends to what climbs. There is only one way to die: stifle the roots. Why do you want to die so much?

The questions were there, in the silence. They were working. It was as if a glass of water clouded by too long a journey were now resting motionless on the table: the ooze would sink to the bottom, and the water would clear. This silence didn't have any precise length. There came a moment when everything was back in place. Her story was there, in the right spot, like a landscape.

Her Maman was a weight. And now this burden was lying on the ground and a strange joy was rising. Her Maman had been freed from her, the soil was growing warmer, the branches wanted to stretch out into space, beneath the feet of the birds. Everything, by itself, had regained its place. Roots connected the mud that descended to the sap which was rising. Her memory took the form of a consistent landscape.

Yes, there was an assassin in her. He wanted to kill the little girl who had abandoned her mother, the one who hadn't been up to the task. So the assassin had delivered her to the villain, to Constantine. Everything had become dirty and ugly. In consequence, then, Eliza's angelic face had turned to poison. It became necessary to sell her, to soil her in a moneymaker's filth ...

This misery littered the ground. Marie sprang out of this death. The Jewish girl in the notebook, Myriam of Magdala, she was both of these. She could, then, begin the story starting from now, because memory, delivered from its guilt, cannot help but yield its fruit.

Jesse's eyes slipped toward her. He didn't stare at her. He seemed to be continuing his meditation. The trees are only colossal stories. The confused heap of what she was was taking the form of a tree tearing itself out of chaos.

Jesse had gotten up, had walked to the cabin, had kneaded the dough and turned it over so that it would rise a second time. He had returned to sit down in front of her, a few feet away from the pool, a few inches away from her.

- What's going to happen? Mary asked.

It wasn't the past any more that worried her, it was the future.

I don't know, he answered. I'm waiting. What I do know, though, is that everything ought to gradually be born out of beatitude. When something comes out of beatitude, an embellishment takes place. When something originates from a simple reaction, from a revolt, from hate, man goes from bad to worse. Marie! I forgive you for everything.

He burst out laughing. She blushed. And then everything grew calm. A calm she had never known. A calm such that the words written on the soul would never again be erased, and the sound of things, suddenly retained, became intelligible. Between herself and Jesse, a feeling was being plaited, like the awakening of a new body.

The mountain they were on didn't rise very high; nevertheless it dominated the surrounding hills. The weather was especially clear and it was possible to look over enormous spaces. The sun blazed, but they were in the shade and nothing dazzled their eyes, so that they finally saw that tremendous thing that arises out of nothingness, a landscape that comes to us.

In the distance, to the east, the coast stretched away in a filigree of hills, cliffs, and beaches. The horizon, illuminated by the light, had disappeared. Mary barely distinguished the white lines of the rollers in the rising tide. On the other side, to the west, a featherbed of little mountains went off to a range that was higher, yet rounded nonetheless. Her gaze wandered like an arm, like a hand, and caressed a great circle of things.

What she had so much missed was granite, the bone of the earth. For the time being, she felt secure on the rock. Without her knowing why, this brought her back to childhood and she began to talk.

- You understand, Jesse, yes, you do understand. We had to find something to eat. Maman was dying and we weren't able to feed her. It's a burden, a mother who is dying. For two little girls, it's a burden. I wandered from alley to alley, from trashcan to trashcan. My big sister wasn't even ten, and she was begging in the financial district. They didn't give her anything for nothing ...

The rest was told all alone, and without saying a word. She had sensed that this was a sacred story that words could only profane. This story should be poured from her soul into Jesse's without any kind of utensil. Nothing was pure enough to touch that suffering, but today it was blossoming like a cotton field.

She knew that he understood her story. That story was as natural as a falling stone, as the accumulation of silt in a delta, as anything that floods and fertilizes. It had been a monstrous flood. And now the water had withdrawn, the earth was showing its belly, tufts of grass were appearing, flowers were opening.

That the soil is beneath and the grass is above, all this seemed so simple to her at that moment. It was the natural order. It is inside our seemingly disgusting intestines that the blood is nourished and life is renewed. The things that descend make other things rise ... The world is like that. The poor and the needy hold men of porcelain on their solid backs; and only those

beings who have fallen to the lowest degree of humiliation approach the truth. If they reach it, the rich man falls on his own humanity.

This is precisely what had happened on the fateful day when her mother had breathed her last. It was late in the evening. Martha hadn't returned. Marie remained alone with her dying mother. A mother who was no longer anything more than a skull with chalky hair, barely covered by a waxy skin. The eyes shone in their caverns. And then the lips, thin as parchment, began to tremble. A smile took shape, and was graven forever in her memory. The hand had moved; she had taken a small black notebook out from under the covers.

And then she had spoken: "My little one, beauty is everywhere. My heart is melting for you. A Source is crying out in my heart. I am entering the place where you will come. Take this notebook, it is the notebook of some acts of love. There is no other hope. I am with you always." Mary had carried this memory in her belly like a stone; it was an ovum.

The child had cried out in horror: she hadn't found enough food. She had been too squeamish to accept the offer of a certain gentleman who would have paid her well. That morning, she had found a piece of cake, but had gulped it down in a single mouthful. And her mother was dying ...

Jesse took in her story and everything grew calm. Jesse was like that, he arranged stories vertically. A tree is a collection of tiny brooks that rise and descend so as to observe the beauty of rivers from above. A tree is the truth of a river. This sentiment was unknown to her. By itself, truth produces confidence, and confidence dismantles fear. Without fear, Constantine no longer had any hold.

The proof that truth exists is that lies are everywhere. That's the way it is! Does life arrive on a planet by making flowers first? No, it comes by breaking rock, by throwing out rain in torrents, by stoning the globe with meteors and all kinds of fiery objects. It works by deluges, by eruptions, by earthquakes. It crushes things for centuries to arrive at a single little plant. After that is the apotheosis, the delirium of inventions ...

- It's time to separate the dough. Come, Jesse said.

He took her into the cabin. He cut the dough and made loaves from it by folding it over itself.

- Let's go out, it's really too hot in here. Let's go to the river.

She felt light. She seemed to have known him forever, to have grown up with him. He was a friend, a companion in the desert, a companion on the ocean. She had come home. Everywhere, she had been a stranger. Now she lived by his mountain, his cabin, his brook, his country, she was at home, she was with him. They ran to the river.

It was definitely very hot. He sat down in the water, then lay down on a long flat stone. Two hems of foam covered his shoulders. She imitated him. The coldness rippling through their clothing was good. Side by side, they looked at the glossy sky.

- Will I go to heaven or go pick raspberries? he wondered.

- I prefer the raspberries, she answered.

- Go for the raspberries.

She took his hand. He pressed her hand. That coincidence of raspberries and heaven, that was so, so true. He continued:

- I'm going to keep you. Oh, yes! I'm going to keep you, my big girl. Before this day is over I will have printed you forever on my heart. The sky is too beautiful; the trees, too magnificent; my cabin, too hot; my bread, too good. I'm staying here with the raspberry bushes that lean out over the brook. I'm staying here with you.

For a long few moments he let the river laugh about all that, then added:

- I didn't think I'd ever play host to such an angel. Definitely, all the angels don't descend from Heaven, the most beautiful rise up from the earth. You are beautiful, Marie, as beautiful as a raspberry.

The equality of people and raspberries, that was so, so true ...

- Marie, I love you more than you think. That love is planted in my heart now, with iron hooks. Stay with me.

- I'll never leave.

- Yes! You will leave. They all leave. But only for a while. Betrayal is our lot. That all of evil's horrors be used up, it just has to be. So, everything depends on the art of extracting the good from what is not. If there is one truth to bear in mind, it is that good by itself has never done much good, while good within evil produces the sublime.

- I don't understand anything of what you are saying, but I won't go away. I love you too much. You'll never get rid of me. You have a bloodsucker on your back.

She laughed along with the river. He let the water talk for a moment, and said with sadness:

- Soon, I'll be a memory for you, and then a distant dream, and then a dull heartache. At night, you'll wonder if you ever did experience this day. You'll tell everyone that it was a dream. You'll say it was just something somebody might imagine. And you won't know anymore that the pure truth is found in what you can imagine. It is at that moment that you will have to appeal to the deepest source.

He left the task of continuing to the river. The water was cold, really very cold, the more so because on the horizon, clouds were rising.

- It's time for the fire, he said.

He got up, took her hand, and led her to the oven. He opened the door and set fire to the wood. The sun was sinking slightly; it was around three o'clock. She was cold. He took her in his arms. The fire was good, the fire was beautiful: it danced and crackled. It was a play of every heat and color. Their clothes dried on their bodies, making their skins tingle. She leaned against his chest.

- All the good things of this world are poured out, he said. Fire pours out into cold. Light pours out into darkness. Stories pour out, one into the other. Let one thing pour out into another, and there you have pleasure ...

And he sank into a deep meditation. He had known many kinds of love, but this one was new. Since he had left his island, compassion took all the space in his heart. The only happiness that he knew was the happiness of worries.

The first time he had seen slaves -- it was in Carolina -- he had fallen on his knees. Since then, he had never stopped organizing escapes. Nothing hurts a free man as much as the servants that a golden calf produces. They wouldn't think their gods so great if they weren't lying flat on their stomachs. It was then that he thought of raising them up, educating them so that they would stop producing princes who destroy everything. But who wants to stand up?

His heart grew sad. All his soul was filled with solitude. The night before, as he was ridding himself little by little of the worries his village brought him, a frozen zone had emerged in his heart. Something was absent. A crucial piece was lacking. An empty space for a unique and irreplaceable being. It wasn't some vague lack, it was the lack of a woman, and not just any woman ... It was Marie that he lacked.

Nothing was connected to this lack. It was a pure lack, isolated from the other lacks. Not connected to his mother or his father, nor to the women he had loved long ago or to any dead person. No, all those were somewhere else, on the other side of the mountain, on the inland side, on the side of memory. The lack of Mary, though, came from the sea, from the future, from what still doesn't completely exist and cries with all its strength for existence. Without fully being aware of it, he was searching for her.

It was at that very moment that he had seen her in the moonlight. She was lying in the brook, and seemed to be dead. Leaning over her, he had listened to her heart beat haltingly, passionately at times, imperceptibly at others. Yet she remained sunk in a kind of coma. He had carried her to his cabin, removed her dripping clothes, and listened to her heart again. It was beating quietly. Suddenly, he was no longer worried. He had already been given one or two certainties in his life. Here was a new one. She had come for him; she was precisely what he was lacking. It was like that. Every emptiness has its compensation somewhere and, one day, the universe will be joined from one end to the other.

He had searched through his old clothes for something warm, and he had found a dress. Sarah, he had said to himself, this is another one of your tricks! Sarah was a woman from the

settlement who liked him a lot and took care of him in all sorts of little ways, for she knew he was absentminded. She often played tricks on him by adding her own clothes to his things. In reality, she wanted to attract his attention, for she was secretly in love with him. But that robe, Sarah had sewn it herself and had never worn it. He only knew that he had trembled when he saw that dress on Marie's body for the first time...

So, he had found the one he was waiting for at the brook. He had tenderly laid her down on his bed and sat down next to her. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't get a handle on the feeling coming over him. Something wasn't right. This certainly was the woman he was waiting for. But there was a mistake in the chronology. She was a girl and he, a man who had seen better days.

Nevertheless, in the morning he had prepared the wood for the fire. He was happy. This love was good. He didn't know anything else and it was this above all that made him happy. Not to know anything adds so much flavor. Now, she was seated in front of him, leaning on his chest. The bread oven was swelling with heat and Jesse was beginning to realize the terrible significance of that error in chronology.

- Wait for me here.

He went to the cabin and returned with the loaves of dough. With the aid of a pallet, he slid the loaves into the oven and closed it. He sat down behind her again, taking her in his arms. They both drank in the smell of the baking bread. They hadn't eaten since morning and the sun showed it was about six o'clock.

They removed the table from the cabin, and placed two big logs next to it, to serve as benches. Jesse took the bread out of the oven and deposited it on the table. Facing each other, they gazed at the seven big round, still steaming loaves.

- I'm as hungry as a bear, Jesse admitted.

He broke a loaf in two, and gave her half. They ate. The sun set between two hills. The forest seemed to catch on fire. In the distance, a flock of geese flew up like a stream of sparks. The breeze suddenly stopped. Even the smallest leaf no longer trembled. Marie couldn't help saying:

- This is a magic moment. When I get to be wise, I'll marry you.

And she burst out laughing.

- I've never heard such a beautiful laugh, Marie. But listen to me carefully. I'm going to leave for Canada with a group of slaves.

- I'll leave with you.

- No! You must stay. You have got to find some way to divert Mr. Hunter's attention.

- Never! I will never go back to him.

- For three days, for just three days, then you can come join us.

- I don't even know where you are going.

- You will know it. But keep me, Marie, keep me in your heart. As long as a compass needle stays hooked to the center, it shows the way.

She stared at him. Her fiery eyes cried out: "I will never return to the White House!"

- Don't be afraid, Jesse continued. Eat.

He took another big mouthful. He got up, went to the cabin, and came out with a partly empty bottle of wine. He opened it, took a large swig and handed it to her. She drank.

- Listen, nothing can separate us. But we must save the poor people. Do you want to help me?

- Yes, she conceded, tears in her eyes.

A terrible foreboding had poked its nose into her mind. Something like a hurricane would happen. Already, she felt the earth shake under her feet.

- I'm afraid, she confessed through her tears. I don't want ... I don't want you to leave.

- Marie, this cabin will always be there in your heart, it's a boat on the ocean. I'll be there

...

He wrapped the six remaining loaves in the tablecloth.

- You will take the bread to Sarah. Hers is the only red house in the fishermen's settlement.

Jesse's face grew somber. She felt him capsize into anxiety. Beads of cold sweat stood out on his forehead.

- They are coming to crush the seed. But this will help it enter the ground. Don't despair, Marie. In the worst moments, don't despair.

The sweat streamed on his face. He continued with difficulty"

- I am sad unto death.

Clouds covered all the firmament. It was as black as tar.

CHAPTER XIII

The Seduction

Because this war is the ultimate
*war, a horrible thing, it will
produce neither victor nor
vanquished. No cities will
survive, no villages, no
grass, no trees. There will
be no more water in the wells,
and the sky will be without
birds.*

ANDREI TARKOVSKY

Following Jesse's order, Mary left well before dawn for the fishermen's settlement. It wasn't five o'clock when she knocked at the door of the little red house. A tall, good-looking mixed-race woman opened it, a person of mature years, with lively eyes, who had probably just gotten up, but who was dressed already in her brown dress and white apron.

- Sarah? Mary asked.

- Mrs. Hunter!

The woman glanced surreptitiously at the dress Mary was wearing and returned into the shadows to hide her annoyance.

- Come in, she said rather crisply.

A breakfast was on the table.

- What is it, Mama? a little girl asked. She was just waking up and rubbing her eyes.

A younger boy emerged from the covers.

- Mrs. Hunter is bringing the bread, the mother answered.

- The bread for Sunday? the little girl asked.

- The bread for Sunday, the mother assented.

Mary had put the bag of bread on the table and sat down on a bench.

- Get up, children, we're going to have breakfast with Mrs. Hunter.

- With Mrs. Hunter! the little boy exclaimed, with a touch of disdain in his tone and a grimace on his face.

- Whoa! What did the pastor say! The lady of the big house is not so bad, she's just a lost child.

The little girl came near, touched Mary's dress and looked at her mother with astonishment. Sarah motioned to the little girl to sit down and not ask any questions.

- Mrs.

The two women had spoken at the same time. Mary felt Sarah's eyes like flashes of lightning held back in a dark cloud. Shame entered her blood like a poison. She was coming back down to earth. Her heart raced. She tried to regain her composure.

- Go on, Mrs. Hunter, speak, Sarah demanded.

- I am coming back from the mountain ...

- I'd guessed that much, Sarah interrupted, looking at Mary's dress, the dress she had sewn.

- I'm afraid! Mary exclaimed, raising her eyes toward Sarah.

- Afraid! For him or for you? Sarah inquired.

- For him, for me, for the settlement, for the people at the marsh.

- You don't know anything about us, you don't know anything about Jesse, and you probably don't know anything about yourself ... But I know that he loves you... He really does love everyone.

- Tell me about him, Mary pleaded, looking hard at Sarah.

- So that you can denounce him!

- In all due respect, I already know about the marsh and the plot. I was there, at the last meeting, when Barker spoke and Jesse clearly expressed his opinion. I won't denounce you. I love Jesse ...

Sarah averted her eyes.

- Look at me! Mary continued, taking Sarah's arm. He's a man and I'm still a stupid little girl. (Sarah couldn't help agreeing by nodding her head.) But that's not the question. It won't be long before Constantine knows everything about the plot ...
If he doesn't know already. I suspect that he's been following the situation from the beginning. You see, he can receive up to a hundred dollars for every slave he returns to his master and one

hundred other dollars for denouncing each white man who participates in the escapes. I believe he's just waiting for the net to be full. He himself subsidizes the Underground Railroad. He facilitates the escapes with an eye to making a profit. He surely has spies ...

Sarah got up, went to the small window over the washtub, and looked out for a moment. The dust was dancing in the rosy gray of early morning. Without turning around, she replied.

- Barker got his way. The volunteers are leaving soon.

- With all due respect, Jesse wants you and the children to join him on the mountain. He gave me this list, for you.

- The names of those ...

- Yes, of those who will be leaving for Canada. We must act fast.

- And you? Sarah asked.

- I'm going to try to gain some time.

- Mrs. Hunter, I'm afraid, too. In all my life, I've never met a man like him ... He's made me feel like a person ... Make sure nothing bad happens to him. I beg of you, keep your husband under control.

She wheeled around in Mary's direction. The morning light glided like liquid silver on her woolly hair. Her dark face shone. Her eyes were piercing. "A person," the word resounded in Mary's head, but she didn't understand it.

- Explain it to me, Mary asked.

- About what a person is?

- There's something I don't understand.

- Everything is what you don't understand. You're simply a character in a fairy tale you're telling yourself to put yourself to sleep. Jesse knows everything about you, the dirty trick, everything ...

Mary swallowed her saliva.

- Don't worry. He and I and Eliza are the only ones to know.

- Eliza!

- God! Wake up. Eliza is ...

She opened the door. They could hear the ocean. A sea breeze came in.

- Where are you going, Mama? the little girl asked.

Sarah closed the door, came up to Mary, and looked her straight in the eye.

- I don't understand. He forgave you. I don't understand. Nothing justifies what you have done. Nothing.

Mary, who had been staring at the floor, raised her questioning eyes. Sarah was the same, with mouth half-open and hateful eyes ... Mary understood ... Sarah nodded affirmatively. The betrayer broke down in tears, her face against the table.

She had sold Jesse's daughter! Eliza was his daughter. It was so very obvious now. A sledgehammer slammed down on her. But worse than her fault, more crushingly heavy, was this opaque and elusive mystery ... He hadn't said anything? He had treated her with goodness and, even more, with love ...

That love overwhelmed her now. She had lost it. He could love her out of charity, but never truly. No pardon could go that far. That, too, was a millstone around her neck, for she couldn't find anything in herself that could approach, even a little, Jesse's feelings. If Jesse was human, then she was inhuman. The abyss where that millstone was dragging her seemed bottomless. Marie had disappeared. There only remained Lady Constantine Hunter, Mary, a perfidious character in a novel about Satan. The person, if there was a person anywhere in her, was crushed under the mountain of her fault.

- Eliza got away, Sarah allowed. Don't be afraid for her. Now, listen to me. I, too, have known sorrow. We come out of it twisted, almost always.

Mary was still overcome. Sarah put a hand on her shoulder.

- At one time or another, we are someone else's sorrow. We butt up one against the other. We are in people's way.

She sat down beside Mary.

- The sorrow that wounds us most deeply is the sorrow we make ourselves. It's just a ball that bounces back that we aren't able to catch.

Mary was no longer listening. She was lost at sea.

- We don't have much time, Sarah concluded. Give us three days and we'll be far away, and we'll be safe. Three days ...

Mary hugged Sarah and went out. On reaching the Capsize bridge, she turned around. The settlement was back in the fog. The tide crashed as it roared in, the gulls quarreled, the wind rushed into the Skulls, and a sinister howling drove the mists away. Mary fell on her knees.

- My God! Give me the strength ... Three days...

For a long time she lay stretched out on the footbridge. Blessed is she who can blame another for her sorrows! Mary, on the other hand, blamed herself for the unhappiness of others. This poison passed into her like an obsession. The burden of bearing a conscience is such that it is impossible to have one without immediately finding oneself responsible for all the sorrows of the world. The fishermen's settlement was poverty she had not relieved, worse: poverty from which she had profited.

This implacable logic hit like a sledge-hammer. The material weight of a planet rests entirely on a minuscule point in the middle, and she was that atom. There was something infinite about her sadness. The rich, those who distribute salaries and do works of charity, think they are responsible for something good even as they bring misfortune to the world. Whoever draws near to his own conscience sees himself responsible for every misfortune, and yet he begins to do good. The man who is damned can be recognized by this: he is certain that he is doing good. All others doubt this.

She heard distant shots. She opened her eyes. The fog was dispersing. Two boats were moored at the dock: Constantine's yacht and the boat surreptitiously built by the Union rebels. In the harbor, sheltered from the reefs of Diefull, the four-master and the three escort boats waited.

More shots -- closer -- She turned around. A long black column was descending from the mountain. On both sides, horsemen were firing into the air. Men, women, children ... approaching like a lava flow. Bowed heads, bare bodies, bloodied shoulders, eyes beholding terror.

Two men, yelling, tried to flee. They were shot instantly. A woman ran toward one of the two men. She collapsed on him, moaning. He gave the death-rattle. A horseman approached, dismounted, pulled out his whip, spat in his hands and struck her so violently that she was unable to rise. He drew his revolver, twirled the cylinder, and fired a bullet into her head.

The troop must have included over three hundred blacks, doubtless all the black families of the marsh. Not one white, though. An old man intoned a psalm, and his trembling voice spread like a fire. Children's crying blended with the chant. It was a strange music, something Mary had never heard, a kind of moaning that aroused an incomprehensible hope.

They passed in front of her, faces in death's light. A woman was nursing her baby. Gazing at him, she sang. A man was holding a little boy. He was searching around him, as if a window could open along the invisible corridor imprisoning them. Many had a cut ear, a split lip, sword-wounds on the arms. On their horses, the militiamen kept watch over their herd, smiles on their lips, thinking of the good jokes they would tell their comrades ...

Paralyzed on the little bridge, Mary looked on. Her eyes formed huge doors, a taste of blood settled on her tongue. The chant moved her soul. These men, these women entered the escort boat they themselves had secretly built. She could no longer see the end. It was a human column that came from Cain, the subjugated, the slaves of Babylon and of Egypt, the

untouchables of India, the serfs of the whole world, the lowly and the ugly, the destitute, the workers in the mines, the women in the textile mills, the shovelers of coal, the blood of the exploited, the human petroleum, the humiliated, those who do not stand up again, those whose life has been stolen.

Incapable of moving, incapable of running toward them, she looked at them, nailed by fear, and saw that fear as the cause of this misfortune. Yes, the cause was there, under her own skin, under that trembling skin: it was that fear and the entire arsenal of its justifications. These people were going to die without her making the smallest gesture. She looked at them, and the image appeared distant, dull, and too violent to be true.

She was guilty of this misfortune. Her paralysis proved it, her soul's stupor proved it. The living source was shining and she hid it, with one single opaque cloud. If at this hour and this moment, she had lifted the weight of this sort of fear, she would have become Moses, her light would have joined with their light, the musical strings of the entire firmament would have stretched, fingers would have touched the cosmic piano, the lawmen would have fallen off their horses and the slaves would have fled into the woods. There would have been a banquet to attend. But, no, Mrs. Hunter had been afraid! So the lawmen kept watch on their big horses and the slaves dragged themselves along toward death.

To know that one woman would be enough to overturn things were she to arrive at her original purity, to know this was a weight she could not bear. And this woman, it could only be she, because she was in that terrified skin and not in another. She would have so much liked to not have obstructed that light which came from the origins and would remake the world...

Blood and sweat flowed in front of her, but it was as if it were behind a screen. Her brain set up a thousand justifications to clothe her fear. The darkness of her soul was the cause of all this misfortune. Such was the obsession that drove her to the brink of despair,

And despite this despair, she wasn't able to shut her eyes or stop her ears. Cries of panic had replaced the chant. The federal militia was driving these poor people with blows of rifle butts and piling them all into the hold of a single boat. As the hold filled up, they nailed the hatches shut. She could hear their stifled lamentations.

For her it was the opposite of Noah's ark. Instead of saving the righteous, the ark was going to drown them. The criminals alone stayed in safety. All of history was like that: the absolute opposite of hope. Only the hard, the crafty, the malicious and the pitiless survive, the others are fuel or rubbish. This is the law of Satan.

And her stupor constituted the sole and unique instrument Satan had at his disposition. Without that fear, the cannons, the rifles, the rewards are as ineffective as inkblots on a paper.

Nothing needed to be vomited more than this fear. Fear and her disgust at the fear knocked against each other. There was silence. The tide was full, the wind turned toward the west. They cut the moorings. The boat slipped slowly out to sea. The captain left the wheelhouse, lowered the one lifeboat and reached the four-master ... The ark of the righteous was set adrift...

The atrocity of the scene awakened her. Mary came out of her torpor. There was nothing anymore, now, that bound her to this life. She had lost on every front. She had betrayed her mother, sold Eliza, prostituted herself with Satan and was waking up too late ... She was a spot, a bit of filth beneath the sun. There was only one thing left to do, try at least to save the lives of Jesse and his associates. After that, all that needed to be done was to throw this spot into a lifeboat and let it go out to sea until the sun had cleaned its bones.

She found Constantine in the grand hall. He was upset.

- Here you are at last my darling. I was worried. All those militiamen ...

- That you ordered?

- What do you mean?

- Don't act like a hypocrite!

- You don't think even so that I had anything to do with this massacre, after all. It wasn't me who voted for the Fugitive Slave Law. Far from it, I took some slaves back to Africa. But who was the idiot who gathered them here? For months, for years around a marsh less than two miles from an estate that lawmen often come to. He would have sent them to death if he hadn't been caught another way!

- And you, you let the boat leave, overloaded with three hundred poor souls who will certainly perish at sea.

- But what do you think? I don't have an army behind me. It's the federal militia that's here, my girl. Those people are not to be laughed at. Wake up, for God's sake! We're on the verge of civil war. The Fugitive Slave Law is a concession to the Southern planters. Without that concession, the country would tear itself apart. Jesse Truth ought to know that well. He knew that the government wouldn't scrimp on ways to demonstrate its good faith in regard to the West...

- So, why did they set them adrift ...

- How would I know? They came here like madmen. If you'd only seen them yesterday ... If you had stayed here, perhaps you could have reasoned with them.

- And you, what was your reward for informing?

- What informing? There was no need to do any informing. The rumor was running all over Boston for months. They sent spies. All they had to do was follow you, believe it or not! But they would have surely found out some other way. You just made things go faster. Truth brought them together and you, you guided the militia right up to the marsh ...

- Just in time to see your four-master from the pirates, I presume ...

- That was the only good news of the day ...

- That was a plot organized by the people in the Union. Jesse was opposed.

- They know that Jesse didn't want to go that far, but what does that change?

- Barker and his accomplices ...

- I succeeded in getting them released. I negotiated all night long. The Union people are returning to Boston. they are going to encourage the strikers to return to work. In exchange for that, I won't bring charges. So you see, I'm the only one who did anything good in this whole business ...

- And the women in the mills ...

- I'm going to finance their union, believe it or not ...

- That works out well for you.

- Not at all.

- Yes, that does work out for you. Bravo for the unions; they're the perfect expression of the lust for wealth. In fact, they preach your system of values: money comes first. And that lust for money, that's your fuel.

- Why not? To transform envy and hate even into power to work, that's better after all than pillaging cities. These workers increase the wealth of the whole country.

- And especially your own.

- I think you've understood. Listen to me carefully. We aren't in Heaven here, nor on the Moon, nor on Mars, but on Earth. The Earth is branded by the thirst for power. That can be seen at first glance. Men are like wolves. Since the beginning, it's been war for the survival of the strongest. A law of nature or a punishment of God? I don't know! But it's a fact. Mary, open your eyes, have the courage to accept reality. The good will not descend from Heaven by some miracle. You must have power if you want to do good. In Boston, I'm the one who offers the best working conditions. I would do better, if I could. But I'm in competition and if I don't win in this competition, I disappear. And if I disappear, how could I do good?

- Jesse says ...

- Jesse is being held prisoner on the mountain. His cabin is surrounded. He is going to confess everything for sure, and give the names of those involved in the Underground Railroad. Jesse is a dead man. Worse, because of him, many others will be hanged. Dead men, my beauty, don't do much for humanity.

- And you, you take care of humanity.

- You may laugh, but that's all that I do.

- No! You only think about getting rich.

- Damn it, what good can you do without money? I provide work for thousands of people, I produce wealth, I make technology go forward, and technology betters the world's condition in a concrete way. I invest in the fields of health, education and housing. I make use of the contradiction to undo the contradiction ...

- Poverty is everywhere ...

- Poverty has been there since the beginning of the world. But with the advent of industry, it is diminishing. It is because men like me are able to save, work day and night, hire engineers, and find solutions, that poverty is diminishing. It is through our discipline, our ingenuity and our sacrifices that the world is getting better. It's true that we're in ferocious competition and that this keeps wages too low. But it wasn't me who invented the law of the jungle. And when the State wants to regulate everything, it's worse. So, I try hard to win. It's the best way to get ahead of my competitors. And thanks to my getting ahead, I can improve my people's working conditions, produce more, and do more good.

- And you're using me!

- You don't know what you're saying! It wasn't me who encouraged you to exchange your servant for a bank loan. It wasn't me who slept with Captain Djib Tam. You acted like a debutante, and now you come preaching at me.

- I didn't want to.

He poured himself a brandy, succeeded in calming himself, and sat down on a love seat. He looked at her for a long time. His eyes filled with tears.

- I forgive you, Mary. It was my fault, a little bit. You were too young for the responsibility I put on your shoulders.

She approached, staggered, and fell on her knees at his feet.

- I've been stupid, terribly stupid.

He placed his hand in her hair.

- What's done is done, he told her, in order to console her ... I'm going to see what I can do to save the pastor. If the judge accepts exile as a sentence ... I could hire him for my Caribbean fleet ... He's an excellent sailor ... terribly stupid once he sets foot on dry land.

- I'm sure I can persuade him to accept a compromise.

So, I'll tell the captain of the militia to take you to the cabin tomorrow.

He took her hand and invited her to sit down right next to him. Looking her straight in the eye, he continued:

- Are you with me, Mary? Do you want to help me build that economic empire that really will improve the condition of the world? Have you finally understood that all the utopians who who want the good so much undoubtedly do a lot of evil? Don't you see, they are looking for magic and heavenly solutions, they are dreaming, they act as if good ideas produce good actions and good actions bring good results. It's not so simple. We often have to have the courage to do something which looks evil in order for something good to follow. Doesn't a surgeon cut off an infected arm to save the whole body?

- Even so ... I have a doubt...

- Go on, Mary, ask your question. I've got nothing to hide.

- You sell cannons to the Southern planters, the finest cannons in the world. What good can that do?

- Mary, you can't put coal in a kettle without getting dirty. I don't wash my hands like Pilate. Be as cunning as serpents, the Gospel says. By slavery, the planters are abusing labor, and they're putting the whole country in danger by their threats of secession. They need a little lesson. Thanks to my transaction, they will have less money to finance their war and some beautiful cannons that will blow up in their faces.

- What do you mean?

- A little sabotage operation between Amsterdam and Dakar.

His smile was contagious. She recognized the sly little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes that gave him so much charm. The sea within her calmed down. She felt as though she were coming down to earth. Constantine was right.

- And the slaves you're bringing back from Dakar? she asked him, to remove any lingering doubts.

- Some blacks, yes! But not slaves. Picked men who will be trained on the four-master for infiltration and espionage operations.

He took her by the shoulders.

- Mary, you are young but you're the woman I need. Do you want to be my companion? Do you want to help me? We are going to improve the condition of the world in practical ways. My capital has already generated more well-being and progress than thousands of years of speeches about the good.

She looked him straight in the eye. The spark she had seen on the first day appeared: an unconditional sincerity, a courageous realism, a vibrant strength, a determination, a capacity for self-denial, a certitude, a virility ... How could she have turned away from something so sure, clear, obvious and strong?

She threw herself into his arms. She had found her husband again. He had forgiven her. She was so sorry. She forgot all the stupid dreams she had had up there on the mountain.

Everything would resume its course. At a quiet and confident pace, as if drawn by sturdy horses, they would open the furrow of earthly bliss. With the light of practical reason in front, the comfort of earthly life behind, and their work between the two. They would act like wolves in front so as to give more to humanity behind. This was perhaps the ultimate sacrifice, the abandoning of a sentimentalism and an idealism that go nowhere.

He lifted her up like his little princess and carried her into his room. The warm bath was already prepared. He undressed her slowly, let her little black notebook fall on the floor, and lathered her with soap like some precious object. He wiped her, laid her down on the bed and made love to her all morning.

Mary's body opened like a fruit. All the daylight entered into her flesh. She reflected the happiness of the world. The pleasure that rocked her no longer had an end. The evil memories of shame, humiliation, and the fate of the poor -- all these were dissipated. She was once again Mrs. Constantine Hunter, and for good this time.

She had been the victim of an attack of madness, thanks to the influence of Jesse and Sarah, but now this had gone away, erased from her cruel memory. She could no longer even reconstruct the line of obscurities that had led her to this hysteria: to believe that she was responsible for the world's misery! Here and now, in pleasure, she was taking on the energy necessary to construct, in practical terms, a better world.

CHAPTER XIV

The Stake

*It should be noted that,
at the foot of the Cross,
with the exception of Saint
John, we find only women.*

FERDINAND PRAT

The militia captain, Lane, appeared in front of the great house at the appointed time. He did not dismount. He spat out the end of his cigar and extended his hand:

- Mrs. Hunter.

She took his hand, placed her foot in the stirrup and mounted behind him. They galloped along the White Oak road, then, after a few acres, headed toward the Mountain. The trail climbed abruptly, and Lane slowed the pace.

- I hope that you will know how to convince him, Mrs. Hunter.

She didn't reply. She was concentrating on the only task that seemed to her imperative at this moment: not to touch him. She clung firmly, then, to the back of the saddle and concentrated on the movements of the horse ... Lane continued:

- If we could give them a good list of names and routes, we might avoid war, maybe.

The trail became narrower and narrower and the branches, rough. She protected her eyes and held on to her hat. She should definitely not have worn such a cumbersome dress.

- Let me get down, I want to continue on foot, she demanded.

- As you wish, madam.

Taking her roughly by the arm, he set her down on the ground, then spurred his horse, climbed a knoll, and turned:

- Don't delay, madam, they won't wait much longer.

She merely motioned to him to go on. He didn't budge a hair, stared at her as he chewed his tobacco, spat and added:

- Maybe you will find him a little ... softened up, your gigolo, but he doesn't spill the beans easily. You'll have to get him to open up for us ...

He turned, whipped his horse and galloped to the top of the mountain. Mary felt ridiculous with her narrow shoes and her stupid crinoline. Her dress got caught on the raspberry bushes. She went along at a good clip all the same. It wasn't ten o'clock and the sun was beating down. The day would be roastingly hot.

Arriving at the summit out of breath, she looked at the little cabin. Lane was leaning against a poplar next to the bread oven. He was cleaning one of his revolvers and smoking a big cigar. Four men stood guard and, from high on their horses, eyed the woman who advanced with a determined step as she adjusted her hat. One of the militamen could not keep from smiling as he fixed his eyes on the bottom of her ragged dress.

- It's not quite the place for a lady here. It's dangerous, there are wolves.

She paid no attention to it. She was staring at the cabin. Jesse must understand: we live on earth. Men are not ready. Slowly and carefully, the work of education must be continued. If men arrive at a little more comfort, they will be less warlike ...She went over the arguments in her head.

She heard a crackling noise. Two women were standing at the edge of the woods. She recognized them mostly by instinct, because the sun blinded her. It was Sarah and Eliza. Mary looked away and entered the cabin.

His face between his knees, Jesse was doubled up on the mattress spotted with blood. He remained motionless. His bare back was covered with black scabs and deep lacerations. She drew near him and sat on a log that was there. Jesse's crushed hand hung in front of her, almost separated from his wrist. The man's respiration was sibilant. He remained curled up, then slowly raised his swollen face toward her and faintly and painfully smiled.

- Marie!

For one moment, she held his gaze. She didn't see the slightest reproach in it. She turned and went to the window. That naïve goodness was stupid; those martyr's ways were stupid; that utopian dream of equality for all was stupid. The result of it would always be a thousand and one misfortunes. All the stories of these idiotic saints ended, without exception, with a monumental failure, a terrible bloodbath.

- They are going to kill you, she told him.

She came back and sat down in front of him and stared at the ground in order to stay focused, anchored in the earth, anchored in reality.

- You must understand, Jesse ...

- What happened to the refugees?

He had interrupted her.

- They have been shipped away ...

- God, what a shame! They're going to take them back to hell. On what boat?

- The four-master ... Mary lied.

- The holds, the cages, the chains Victoria who is six months pregnant, Virginia with her baby, Hugo, the young cripple, they're going to throw him overboard, that's for sure -- Varina -- Bull Ron -- Buck Denman -- Buck won't stand it. Dana -- Old Thomas -- They didn't take old Thomas. They threw him into the marsh -- That's for certain ...

Jesse's eyes filled with tears.

- You can still save them! Mary exclaimed.

- Shush! he scolded her.

He wanted to see them all, one by one. He whispered their names. After a long pause:

- And the union people?

- Released.

- Not without conditions!

- You must talk, if not, they're going to interrogate every one of your friends in the Underground ...

He stared at her. She didn't raise her face.

- And you, Marie, what are you becoming?

- Constantine is ready to do all he can ...

- Why are you lying to me?

She forced herself to endure his gaze.

- It's true: their lives depend on you.

- Marie!

- Jesse, you must get out of here, you must get them out. I have a proposition ...

- You don't understand, Marie. Mary!

Turning his face away from her, he added:

- I'm losing you -- So, the wretchedness of humans has no limits. At the first trap, they fall. They have all the facts and all the proofs at their disposal. And still, hope alone demands that we go against these facts and against these proofs.

- I have come to set you free, Jesse.

- But Marie, I'm not a prisoner. This cabin is without a doubt one of the only places in the world where you can find a free man. The prison is outside. They are stealing the land, the labor, time, beauty, the body, the mind, nature, truth. They are wasting, they are devastating. And you think that something good can come out of this crime!

- Wake up, Jesse. You said it; we are wolves, and among the wolves, only the strong and the powerful can do anything ...

- Yes, I'm insane. Marie, man is not a wolf; wolves don't go insane. Man does go insane. It's only fanatics who think they are free of illusions. It's not a question of leaving madness behind, but of choosing your madness.

- But Jesse, look at the situation as it really is ...

- The situation ... What situation? The one you are telling me about, your lie, your dream, your madness, Constantine's madness ...The collective madness that is leading us to disaster ...

He stopped. He looked at her for a moment. Then the pain seized him once more, and his body began to shiver. He hid his face against his knees. His crushed hand quivered.

Mary went out and headed for the captain.

- He needs water.

- Listen, madam, you see the sun. It's noon. I give you until two o'clock to provide me with a list.

She saw Sarah making signs. Their eyes met for a second, then Mary picked up the pail next to the oven and ran to the river. She returned to the cabin, rummaged through the big wardrobe, and found a small jar of oil and some linen.

She gave him a large tumbler of water and helped him stretch out. She tore a linen sheet in strips and soaked them in the oil. With trembling hands she closed and bound up the huge cuts all across Jesse's body. She sponged his back.

- I'm going to get you out of here, I swear it. They're going to know what my name is ...

Jesse raised himself with difficulty and got back on his knees, because this was the only position he could endure.

- Stop it, Marie!

Convulsions prevented him from speaking. There are times when it requires all there is in a man simply to reflect the pain of the world. He was at that point. His strength was falling to pieces. He was collapsing into the depths. The solitude was immense. Lost in the infinite, man is a wretch. Everywhere the spaces sink into darkness. Night is the only absolute, even the stars are ephemeral. And what is man? A consciousness that opens out on this, a collection of nerves that twists around this. Man is truly a miserable animal. He devours his own flesh like a horrified child who, with his own teeth, mutilates himself. Jesse was this, a body convulsed with pain, emptying itself of every kind of idea. He was pain. He was humanity.

If Mary could have looked at him, seen him for one moment, she would have seen the desert in fleshly form, and she would have recognized herself. She would have said to him: "Here is what I am. You are me. You carry me." But in fact, she wasn't there and he was alone. This solitude also, he reflected with all his body.

His body was the truth, and he knew it. Moreover, it could only be that: the human truth. His body had taken the world blow by blow. His body transformed hate into suffering. And now, each minute was a body in pain. This pain had welded his soul to his body; between them there was no longer the slightest distance. Minute by minute it took the man into its naked truth. It drank the man second after second, and the man didn't see that he was this suffering body. The man didn't want to see his misery. But his misery was looking at him, for Jesse was looking at Marie.

We can say, oh yes: at any moment there are millions of bodies that bear all sorts of pains, thirsts, hungers, illnesses, treacheries and abuses. But we say that when pain does not contract all the mind around the body. It takes only a strong cramp or an overwhelming migraine, and we are all the pain in the world, for pain has the property of paralyzing our powers of disassociation. It unites us all in one single flesh.

Jesse was that flesh. Bodily, he was conscious man in the infinity of darkness, man experiencing solitude, man bathing in his misery. He was not the unhappy man who transmutes his suffering into hate and war: that man is the emperor. He went in the opposite direction: he was the man who transmutes hatred back into pain. That is what torture is. That's what it is, being tortured: to end up in hate's way, when hate, in the form of blows, comes back to you, to be crushed by the return of the fearful man, to accept that your body takes back the pain he has expelled in the form of hate. There is nothing individual about this. A single body suffices. By itself, it is universal and can take all the hate.

Jesse was doing nothing else but bearing man. It was all he could do. His body was universal, for it was bearing a hate that came from Cain. And Mary was busily dashing to and fro around him, imagining, no doubt, that her agitation could dilute that truth ... And then a quiet minute arrived when he could once more speak her name:

- Marie!

Cool water touched his tongue. A wave against the stiffness of his broken body. He realized that at certain moments, when pain relaxed its grip a bit, words had the power to push away a little of his suffering. He gathered up his strength, looked her straight in the eye and said:

- Marie, would you pray with me?

She nodded and knelt on the bed in front of him. He leaned his head on her shoulder, for he lacked strength. Straining and whispering in her ear, he began:

- Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who suffer, for their hearts are living. Blessed are those who feel the world. Blessed is the peacemaker, for he has found peace. Happy are the trees that wave in the wind, the birds, the mountains and you, the sea, who have rocked me so much ... Blessed the love that is making its home within me. I want to become the bread of the poor. I pity the hearts of stone, they don't know the world's sorrow. Blessed are those who know the world's thirst ... Because they can feel the rain that is coming ...

For a long while he kept silent. His muscles relaxed one by one. Mary felt her head grow heavy on his shoulder. She would have liked to caress him, soothe him, but there was no place to lay her hand, his whole body was nothing but wounds.

Leaning his good hand on Mary's shoulder, Jesse raised his head and looked at her. She could not dodge that look.

- Marie, he pronounced with difficulty, listen to me carefully, I'm not going out of this cabin ...

- I don't understand.

- It's the end.

- No, not at all. Constantine will arrange everything ...

- Listen to me, don't lose hope. I beg of you, don't lose hope. We always betray those we love, it's the ultimate effort of the final flight.

These words struck her in the stomach like a fist. She went out and ran toward the captain.

- Let him leave.

Lane blew on his revolver. A smile lit up his face.

- I swear to you that if you don't let him leave ...

- Give me the list, Lane demanded in a quiet voice.

- I don't have a list and the governor doesn't want a list. It's you who want a list. And the governor is my husband's friend. So let him go.

- Oh yes! The governor of Massachusetts is your husband's friend and he doesn't want a list? he repeated so that his men could hear.

And the four others guffawed.

- So no list, he said.

- No need for a list, Mary confirmed.

- Agreed, we'll let him go.

He slowly got up, glanced at the militiamen closest to the cabin, and walked up to the door.

- Come out, reverend, you're free. The North doesn't want a list.

He didn't come out.

- He's in too much pain, Mary cried, I'll go and get him.

She went in. He had fainted. She managed to sit him up on the bed, slid her shoulder under his armpit, and tried to lift him, but to no avail. Eliza, who had been observing the scene from a distance, ran toward the cabin. Sarah followed her. A militiaman fired into the air. Another, who had already lit a torch, threatened to throw it on the cabin.

- Papa! Papa! Eliza cried.

Assisted by Mary, Jesse managed to get out.

- Eliza, he moaned faintly.

He came toward her.

- Daughter, my little girl ...

He was only a few steps from her. Lane fired a shot, breaking his right leg. Hopping on his other leg, Jesse continued to advance. The captain fired again and broke his left leg. Jesse collapsed.

- Attempted escape, Lane said. It's serious.

And he fired a bullet into his lung.

- Guys, there's nothing more to do here, they're waiting for us in Richmond.

The torch was thrown onto the cabin roof and the bastards cleared out.

Eliza and Sarah fell on their knees beside the dying man. Mary remained at a distance.

- Eliza, my little girl ...

- Papa!

She broke down in tears. He took her arm ...

- Daughter, listen ...

His voice was very weak. The cabin was engulfed in flames. Eliza succeeded in holding back her tears and brought her ear up to his face.

- Look at me ...

She showed him her tear-soaked face.

- You haven't lost anything, daughter.

- But he violated me, Papa, I'm bearing his child ...

- Look at me Do you trust me?

- You have never lied to me.

- So I'm telling you that, I'm telling you that because I see you, you're as clear as the river and your child is, too ... I have something more to say. Tell Marie to come closer.

Sarah, who had heard this, motioned to Mary. She hesitated.

- Come closer, he demanded.

She fell on her knees beside Eliza.

- I have something to say to you ... to all three of you.

His lungs were filling up with blood. Sarah turned his head so that he could get rid of it. The cabin crackled as it burned. The sun was blinding.

- I hear the brook.

- It's the fire, Father.

Eliza could no longer restrain her moaning.

- Don't cry, daughter. It's a beautiful day.

- Papa, I don't want this.

- Daughter, my big girl, forgive these blind men. My three loves ... you are the salt of this world ...

Jesse knew at this moment why all those who had escaped the spiral of fear, power and hate have always met with failure, died or been killed amid the utter downfall of their works. And the more the person had of intensity in his love of renouncing power, the more flagrant was the failure, even to the point of creating a doctrine that inverted the work. The radically emancipated man must always see, before dying, his work collapse, his friends betray him, and violence sprout in the inmost parts of his heritage. Each time, for each one, it was the same thing: everything must be consumed in the most literal sense of the word. Nothing visible must remain of the good that they brought.

That is what happened. The shacks in the marsh were torn down. The fugitive slaves were going to be drowned, his friends in the unions were preparing to sell, one by one, the collaborators of the Underground Railroad, and all the abolitionist and anti-abolitionist forces were being converted into energy for war. And he, with his own still living eyes, must see all his work reverse itself, feed the beast, and furnish it with blood. Worse than that, he must abandon his daughter, the baby she was carrying, Sarah, and Marie to this twilight world plunging into the abyss.

Ever since Jesus, each saint has led the world a little further into horror. Each saint has, in spite of himself, precipitated the catastrophe. Nothing remained anymore but these three women, and the weakest of them would doubtless betray him one or two more times. Christianity had produced its opposite. And he, Jesse, had come to see his last shreds of hope collapse at the end.

From now on, war, that civil war that was beginning, would sow its rage throughout the world. The dragon was unchained. It was in America that anti-Christianity had accomplished the greatest genocide, and it was starting from this crucible that it would contaminate the world. Between now and then, a fratricidal war. Accelerated by this civil war, the tornado would infect everything, absorbing every fuel: wood, coal, oil, human blood. No part of the planet would be spared. The hurricane would carry all away.

And yet Jesse smiled. A flame burned in his eyes. It was because he knew, or perceived, that everything that happens in the theater of this world, all the evil and the suffering, unburdens the powerful of their power. On the contrary, the spiral of desire and love, because it is emptied, crushed, and ground into the dust, gains in intensity. Jesse entered that intensity. He felt it in his whole body, and it grew calm. He was sinking into the collective of saints. He was received, absorbed, integrated into that contracted energy which intensifies with each liberating act smashed against a gun.

It was solemn indeed to enter this underground river, be part of its fertilizing power. The burning cabin crackled like a river. There was a metamorphosis of colors. A bluish breeze slipped its fingers through the low grass. He saw for a brief moment the transfiguration of things. He blended the world of the living. The skin of the stones seemed to shiver. He touched nature's rejoicing. He understood that the landscape united everything in itself, the worst and the best, the living and the deceased, the past and the future. The landscape is everything. He gathered his strength for one last word:

- Marie, don't lose hope for yourself.

He drew each syllable out of the silence as if he were lifting a ball of iron.

- I'm thirsty, he exclaimed.

Mary got up and looked to the right and to the left. The cabin was sending up immense flames which, as they separated, spat out sparks. There was nothing to put water in. The heat was intense. The three of them lifted Jesse by the shoulders to pull him away. A stream of blood spurted from his mouth. His glassy eyes gazed at the fire.

- Sarah, he murmured, I want to go out in my boat ... I want to return to the sea ...

One by one, the wrinkles of his face disappeared. A serenity emerged like the immensity of the sea. He held Eliza's hand. The cabin fell in. A flock of birds flew away calling. He had stopped breathing in.

Sarah began singing the dying psalm:

- "Into thine hand I commit my spirit." (Psalm 31:5)

"For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the Lord; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him." (Psalm 12:5)

Mary looked at the sea from the balcony of the great White House. Cheyenne was lying at her feet. The sun had sunk into the shadows. At the zenith, the darkness of the heavens was something like coal. A purple stain still lingered on the ocean. Twilight was slow to come. The horizon was illuminated as if an incandescent blade were slowly sinking into the water. The red line tore the eyes. Mary remained motionless facing the ocean. Her heart fell to pieces like drops of water on a red-hot iron.

To destroy everything, no more than a couple of hours had been sufficient. The final ray of light had drained away for her. Hope had deserted this world. There was nothing anymore but a body in front of a landscape, an emptied body, an emptied landscape. Nothing remained but that vision of the final moment.

A fisherman came to get the body. No one in the settlement had a horse. Consequently, it had not been easy to bring the cart down from the mountain to the sea. Mary stayed behind, however. She wasn't welcome. She gazed at the bouncing body, the bluish flesh, the drying

blood. She didn't turn her eyes away for a moment. They arrived at the settlement. Few people left their houses.

The fisherman, Sarah and Eliza put to sea in a rowboat with the corpse. A dozen people had gathered on the beach. Their looks had kept Mary at a distance, then chased her away toward the great house. The boat, with its four occupants, had followed the ebbing tide. It had stopped somewhere at the foot of the Skulls. It had turned slowly on itself. Gannets dove around it, and gulls cried. The sun was slowly kneeling on the horizon.

Sarah and the fisherman had tipped the body over into the sea. The boat remained motionless, as if it were at anchor. Seagulls wheeled and turned, as if it were a ball. Rigid as bronze, Eliza watched the body sink.

The mind can never get used to the idea of death. It sees the corpse and the corpse is dissociated from memory. And yet the fact is there in front of him indisputable, intolerable. The man she had loved so much was no longer that thing destined to be torn to pieces at the bottom of the sea. And that cries, that shouts what we are: a shiver in the face of absurdity, an instant of desperate resistance.

On the large balcony of the White House, Mary watched the horizon fray in the final glow of twilight. In the distance, the heads of Sarah and Eliza were still tied to the last rope of light. Then the darkness was complete and Mary found her way in it.

She could no longer justify the world. Without a doubt it is because the facts of existence are unjustifiable that human beings are justified in their madness, she told herself. If the life in front of us is like that, then conscience is superfluous.

She felt stripped of everything, even her crimes. Yes, she had entered the spiral of madness, but it was predictable, even inevitable. She could have chosen the minority madness of saints. But what would that have changed? When you get right down to it, no one gets out of here alive and each one is guilty of his crime.

The spirit blows its dreams into the flesh like a balloon. But the swollen and suffering flesh rebels and wounds all those around it. Then, seeing the unhappiness it has produced, the spirit retires. Deflated and turned inside out, the flesh moans. A taste of death occupied every cell of Mary's body. Now she wanted to share this death.

CHAPTER XV

The Third Desert

*Brothers in literature,
Listen to me, all of you!
He (Satan) has come!
If we don't catch him
quickly, he will be the
cause of indescribable
misfortune.*

MIKHAIŁ BULGAKOV

Mary tied Cheyenne to the front step post. She entered the great house and headed toward the salon, because that was the only place with light. There are absences that act on us even though we are not immediately aware of them. No lamp had been lit in the hall, on the stairs, or anywhere else. No sound came from the rooms, nor from any place where the last servants might have ordinarily been at work at this hour.... The two watchmen were not there, neither the one in the small room adjacent to the hall, nor the one on the chair next to the grand staircase. All the light and sound came from the salon alone. Everything else was plunged in the most complete silence and darkness.

Attracted by this light, she appeared in the shadow of the double glass door which stood ajar.

- Here you are at last, my love! Constantine exclaimed. Come in.

She opened the door. He was surrounded by Hanne, Captain Djib, and a young servant who stood next to the door leading to the kitchen. She did not respond, but remained motionless under the lintel.

- Listen, I spent more than five hundred dollars in bribes ... It was the Southern people.

- Yes, I know, Mary sighed. The South!

- Have a cognac, we were just discussing the final preparations. Tomorrow, the four-master gets under way.

- I'm tired, I'm going to go to bed.

- See you in a little while, then!

She took a small candlestick, lit the candle and went up to her room. She closed the door behind her, opened the drawer ... There it was. She removed her ragged dress and attached the

case to her stomach. "How could I have forgotten my notebook! she thought. If I had only had my notebook!"

She realized that her notebook was the central point of all the surrounding space. Even in the darkness, especially in the darkness, space envelops us like a magnetic field whose focal point has something maternal about it. Children playing take far more chances knowing that their mother is there even when she does not see them. This is the fundamental contradiction. The more the mother inspires confidence, the more the children explore the limits of the possible. Mary had wagered all of her heedless confidence.

She felt a force. Candle in hand, she went to the wardrobe. She put on a shirt, knickers, and a thick wool sweater. She silently went down the stairs, taking care never to place her feet outside the halo of light. She sat down on a small chair not very far from the entrance to the salon. She felt a terrible need to listen to them. She told herself that at the end they would never speak again, she would blow out the candle and no one would see anything any more. The night would be forever.

- ... I've checked the briefcase. All the papers are in order, Djib asserted.

- In Amsterdam, Constantine informed him, the man to contact is named Willem Crabeth ...

- He's the one, Hanne continued, who will lead you to Lord Lautanschlager. It is to him and to him alone that you will give the money order.

- An excellent transaction! Let's drink to that, then, Constantine proposed, congratulating himself.

A smell of cigar-smoke reached her. She began to feel nauseous. She had a terrible need to be sick, to feel her mind drown in a physical disorder. Constantine asked:

- Hanne, do you know if ...

- Absolutely! he answered. It's done. It was already clear in June. If Lincoln is elected, the South will secede. It's taken for granted. So Lincoln is our man. Almost all the bankers in Boston and New York have lined up behind him ...

- I'll be having a meeting with my three newspapers next week, Constantine added. We're going to get public opinion ready ...

- Bravo! Djib exclaimed. War is the health of nations ...

- Got you! Constantine interjected. Nothing can rally a divided nation as much as the idea of union ... Work or war, that's precisely the type of choice that's useful. That will calm our professional crybabies down ...

- And that will lower the price of raw cotton while raising the price of cloth, Hanne added. Exactly what is necessary.

- Two birds with one stone, Constantine observed, it cools the planters off and disarms the abolitionists, the socialists, the anarchists ...

- We'll make scads of money, Hanne added. We have the contract for shoes, we will have the one for caps, and maybe for all the uniforms.

- Damned good whiskey! Djib exclaimed.

The three men drank a toast. No doubt the warmth of the alcohol was somehow involved. Constantine began to expatiate.

- We must prepare ourselves. It's now or never. We need to create in America a security zone against class conflict. By war after war, we will build a community of interest between rich and poor. (He couldn't help laughing.) If the word democracy begins to mean the union of capital and labor, that kicks the hell out of all the socialist rhetoric. America becomes a territory protected against government intervention. Capital will flow like brooks into a pond and we'll be in a position to crush all of Europe commercially.

Viva! Viva, Constantine! Djib exclaimed.

The cigar smoke had done its work. Her stomach upset, her head buzzing, Mary went back upstairs, entered Constantine's room, lit an oil lamp and drank a large glass of whisky. She was no longer able to think and hold her mechanical being and her lucid being together. She felt as if she were split in two. She no longer had any desire to hold her mechanical double in check. All she did was observe it from a safe place. It was sweet, losing power over yourself to enter into a greater power.

Her double crept into the captain's room. Fear followed with silent steps. A power had taken possession of this strange thing that walked, moved, and acted with the precision of a watch. Fear did not touch her. In fact, the human form that she was responded to a principle, more precisely, to a law. A logic she didn't understand had taken possession of her and unleashed its cold, sure, and indisputable chain of events.

The briefcase was on the bed. She opened it and easily discovered the money order. She sat down quietly at a small table and quickly wrote a facsimile. It was satisfactory, though somewhat rudimentary. She slipped it into the briefcase, tore up the original and threw the pieces out the window. It was lovely to see them fly away like moths in the night.

As she was about to leave, her eyes settled on a half-open wardrobe. With one finger, she swung the door wide open. Two revolvers were there, their barrels crossed, shiny, tempting. She seized them. Her muscles stiffened, electrified. The effect was intoxicating. She turned the cylinders. The click, so precise, tight, and discrete, produced a delightful thrill. All the bullets were present. She slid one of the barrels on her lips, put it into her mouth, and lightly pressed the

trigger. To have such a key as that in her hand would drive fear away for good. In a few hours, all would be finished.

She could not, obviously, hold the two revolvers and the lamp at the same time. She abandoned the lamp, stepped out of the halo and, strangely, avoided every obstacle with the precision of a sleepwalker. Not the slightest crack, not the smallest sound.

Holding the revolvers straight ahead of her, she went down the stairs. At each step, the revolvers possessed her a little more, reassured her a little more, spoke a little louder. "These scoundrels are thieves," said the revolver on the right. "Thieves like that should be executed," added the revolver on the left.

Images returned. Liverpool, London, the children in the mines, the women in the textile mills, the coal miners ... starving children, broken women, old men at thirty ... All this blood drained to fabricate these three monsters who were playing God in the salon. Beings of porcelain, glossy as tombs, sumptuous, irreproachable ... "They are predators and assassins," decreed the revolver on the right. "They kill more women and men than all the criminals in the world together. It's justice," the revolver on the left continued. The logic of the revolvers was impeccable, implacable.

She saw the alleys once again in her mind. The pale girls in the bordello, the babies in the trashcans, the destitute dying on cardboard boxes. The memory returned like an obsession. She thought especially of the children It was crystal-clear: these three gods, who were discussing the human condition as if they knew something about it, killed. And she, Mary, had the weapon of justice in her hands.

Her veins hardened, became metal. She advanced in the mechanism of justice, intoxicated by it, chained to it. Her head weighed as much as a ball of lead, and her body functioned as if she were an infantryman at the front. The logic was all too evident: if one day you have the unique opportunity to approach a tyrant who plunders the poorest and lays waste everything, it is your duty to execute the sentence; the salvation of man depends on it: if you do not do it, you will answer for your cowardice.

She descended step after step. All her childhood passed before her. It was a torrent loaded with mud. She saw Martha again, and the other whores. What she didn't see, she smelled. The odor of human wrecks who came to run aground on them ...

And then, at the last step, her Maman appeared. She was stretched out on her deathbed. She, too, was an ocean of suffering: the suffering of her mother's mother, of her father's father, back to the first Abel reduced to slavery by the head of a clan. All this gathered suffering pointed in the direction of these three gentlemen who were carrying on a discussion comfortably seated in their armchairs. And she, Mary the whore, would pierce the sac ... For once it would be a woman who would enter a man. All of her body shivered with pleasure.

"Ever since they came into the world," the revolvers related in chorus, "for the great majority of men and women, to live consists of sliding in their sewers. They built the pipes, the junctions, the gradients. They suck everything into their one big mouth. Put holes in all three of

them, and everyone will be relieved. Your duty accomplished, we can kiss and absolve you at last ..."

So she appeared in the doorway once again. They hadn't seen her. That was unfortunate! She pressed the trigger and fired straight ahead. Bang! They stood up all at once, motionless, their eyes almost out of their sockets.

- That's better, that's much better, she said. I like you like that. It's fun to be afraid, isn't it? It wakes you up!

- Mary, put those revolvers down immediately, Constantine shouted, with an air of authority.

She fired and struck his hand. It was, for her, as delectable as honey.

- Dirty bitch! Constantine yelled.

She fired at his tibia. He sank down in the armchair.

- Day of judgement, day of execution, she slowly pronounced.

These words made Constantine stare wide-eyed, and produced in Mary a kind of pleasure like none she had ever experienced.

- Execution, what a beautiful word! she went on to say.

It was as sweet as a hand caressing a belly. The three men were petrified. She no longer felt hurried at all. To have someone's future in your hands, to dispose of his time, is to transcend time. The revolver has the marvelous power of transforming time into trajectory, into a very straight line between a man and his end. It is no longer time, but a flat little space. And she held this space. This was what it is to be God, and it was terribly delightful. To be more at ease, she spread her legs slightly. The servant relaxed and smiled at her.

- Who should I start with? Mary asked. Hanne! Yes! Hanne, I'll begin with you, my hot and handsome sweetie. Take your clothes off!

He stared at her ... She blew off his foot. He too sank down on his armchair.

- Take your clothes off, I tell you.

He removed his garments one by one.

- Your name? she asked the young servant. I don't remember seeing you ...

- Ferdinand, he answered. This is not my usual posting, I'm replacing ...

- Go in the kitchen and bring back the roll of butcher's rope and some linen bands to bind and gag my three pals.

He did this.

- You won't get away, Mary, Djib threatened.

- Ferdinand, begin by gagging them all, securely.

Which is what Ferdinand did with thoroughness. He filled their mouths with pieces of rags before gagging them. She felt more at ease, more in control:

- Tie up this pretty piggy.

She pointed in Hanne's direction. Ferdinand was in no hurry either. He tied each leg securely to a leg of the armchair. And, after that, the wrists behind the back of the chair. An additional rope attached the hands to the chair's rear legs. He examined his work. He added a little rope to the right hand. It was more symmetrical!

- Now, you Djib. Take your clothes off.

Trembling, he obeyed. It was like a warm wine in Mary's mouth. Ferdinand tied him a little more securely than Hanne. Even so, he moved. So she fired a bullet through his shoulder. She turned toward Constantine.

- So, I'm going to begin by killing you, my all clean and handsome husband.

She gazed at him steadily, and raised her arm to better aim.

- Madam, Ferdinand said, it would be better to tie him up first. If he moves, you risk only grazing him, and that would be too bad.

Ferdinand was smiling. A flame shone in his eyes. He seemed to be watching the tragedy from another point of view.

- Good idea! tie him up.

He tied him up with great care and even added another rope which bound his hair to a lamp just over his head. This made him look grotesque, to say the least.

- You will have to come closer, Madam, and aim the two revolvers at this point, there, just between the eyebrows.

Ferdinand opened a window. Fresh air came in.

- That cigar smell, he said, it's putrid.

She went ahead and pressed the two barrels against Constantine's forehead. The gag was so effective that the poor man was having trouble breathing. Sweat was pouring all over his face. He tensed his forehead, closed his eyes, and trembled. The silence was absolute. Ferdinand looked on, relaxed, attentive.

- Take your time, madam. You might also begin by practicing on one leg and going up higher in stages.

Ferdinand removed his glasses and cleaned them. She hadn't noticed that he wore glasses, rather thick ones at that. Without his glasses, he appeared younger and even more at ease. It gave a rare softness to his dark-skinned face. He was a truly handsome man.

- No, I don't want him to suffer. He isn't worthy of suffering.

- So, it's fine as it is, then, Ferdinand acquiesced. You aim at the right spot, there, and I am going to count to ten. Is ten long enough? Too long perhaps. Three is good also.

- No, ten is fine.

He counted softly. She was still trembling a little. The servant placed himself behind her, holding up her arms to help her.

- When you want to do something, it is better to be fully aware when you do it, Ferdinand added, hoping to encourage her.

He counted slowly and confidently. There wasn't the shadow of a doubt that at the end of ten seconds, Constantine's brain would explode. It was as sure as the fact that the grandfather clock would strike at midnight. That certitude and the concentration on a single goal brought Mary so great an enjoyment that a luminous cloud formed in front of her eyes, the sort that shines at the moment of orgasm. The death of Constantine was in a manner of speaking already accomplished. He no longer existed. A little pressure of the finger separated him from that marvelous instant: an insignificant motion, a handful of millimeters.

At that very moment, the observer entered the room and saw her double ready to kill. She understood that she could do nothing. She was totally powerless. She was possessed by time, then, taken in hand by what was going to occur. She was dependent on everything. She had no power. The absolute zero of power -- this gives the lucidity of crystal. Mary, on the contrary, was concentrating on this goal that she controlled, that she possessed. Nothing could influence her, for she had the means to accomplish her goal. Because of this, she didn't see anything more than this rope stretched to the breaking point that linked her to a future she already had in hand.

But time is an egg endowed with an unequaled fertility. Nothing can sterilize it, certainly not a revolver. Neither the observer nor the executioner saw this egg, nor did they hear the mockery in its ticking. This egg was all the bigger, all the more cheerful because the link between Mary's will and its goal was now so close. The clock struck four minutes before the hour. The hammer on the clock caught Mary's attention for an instant. The sensation of a warm and unctuous liquid spread through the air. The liquid slid on her skin. She felt as if her body

were in the midst of changing its nature. It was becoming light, and slightly electric, then everything relaxed.

It was the hate that had just left her. As a result, she felt her naked and shivering human substance, so fragile, so vulnerable, so open. In the observer, Mary rediscovered something of herself. And she saw the child, and around the child, immensity. She didn't know where to go, nor what to do, nor what to say. Nothing seemed more fragile than this little girl, too small within infinity.

She understood the aspects of this logic that had led her here, to Little All, which had thrown her into the arms of the murderer who was going to explode in front of her soon, like a rotten fruit; that logic that had driven her into selling Eliza, that had led her to arrange for her own rape -- a logic of prostitution, a logic of subordination. We only have power when we are prisoners of an obsession and no longer perceive anything of the grandeur of the things that surround us. If all of a sudden we no longer see the landscape, it is proof that we are blinded by an obsession.

Now, she could answer the fateful question Jesse had asked her: "Why did you come here, to Little All? And why by sea? Why did you come to meet me in my boat, three nautical miles out to sea and still not say anything?" It was this logic that had worked, that had made her work. And it was this logic that had made her take the revolvers and continued its programming.

- Six, seven, Ferdinand pronounced.

And they, these three high-level gangsters, they were the mechanism. A mechanism linked together with forces like greed, covetousness and all the other forms of terror. That mechanism was inscribed in the constitution of the country, in its laws, in its habits, in the most secret recesses of its thought. Destroy one of these gears, and a hundred would take its place. Their characteristic is to never become a person: consequently they can never be killed. They are who knows what, a soot that forms its own pipes. The more they die here, the better they reappear there.

- Eight ...

"Satan is a spirit without a body of his own, eight said. He is the God of pure spirit made by human beings. If you enjoy shedding his blood, it is because he is already penetrating you, raping you, soiling you ... The only way to kill a mechanism is to breathe life into it. There is no other way."

- Nine ...

"If you exercise the power of justice, nine said, it possesses you. The life of a man or woman begins with the abandoning of power, for the abandoning of power allows us to finally take power over power."

The following second stretched on. Mary pondered. She felt that it was Satan who held the revolvers and that the pleasure she felt was his.

- Ten, said Ferdinand.

Then, she fell on her knees as if she were in a pond of light. And from the bottom of herself she spoke out of her destitution:

- I pity you, Constantine. I pity you. Don't you see where this is leading us? "Satan wants us to eat his excrements with delight." (Goethe, Faust) That is precisely what we are doing. Our silken clothes, our jewels, our carpets, are human blood. Comfort will only be sweet when every human being eats his fill.

The three men remained motionless. Djib had regained his coolheadedness, however. He had gotten hold of a part of the rope and was trying to fray it by rubbing it against the corner of the wooden chair leg. Mary still had the revolvers in her hands. She continued:

- We're insane. We tremble in fear of what can't hurt us, and we run with happy hearts toward what destroys us. We all make use of what we don't understand at all. And the only knowledge we do have, we bury like a corpse.

She slid her elbow onto a bench. It was the piano bench. Ferdinand helped her sit down. She handed him the revolvers. He took her into his arms. The weapons fell to the floor. A shot went off. They paid no attention to it. Mary no longer had any strength and nearly fainted in Ferdinand's arms.

- Marie! cried Ferdinand.

In trying to lift her up, he struck one of the revolvers with his boot. It knocked against Djib's bare and wounded feet.

- I think I know what you're talking about, Ferdinand continued. I'll listen to you.

- I feel like an animal abandoned by an evil genius on a narrow, dried-up path while on both sides the highlands overflow with green grass I've crawled to the bottom of my scars when I had wings ...

Her eyes remained dry.

- Madam, Ferdinand said, once again aloof, it's a good time to take flight, don't you think?

She looked at him for a long time. At the edge of his eyes was that glint there was no mistaking. How many times had she seen that spark spring out from a man, a child, a bird, a tree, a brook! But she had never paid attention. An insignificant question emerged: why didn't her body reflect the state of her soul? Why had this body continued to be beautiful and innocent, even as it wallowed in Satan's snare? What was it that disconnected soul and body in such a way?

He looked at her dumbfounded. He heard a click. Djib held the revolver under his big toe. Ferdinand picked up the weapon and threw it out the open window. He did the same thing with the other revolver.

- And if we run away together? he proposed to Mary.

He reached out his hand. She hesitated.

- Marie! Trust me. We had better leave.

She looked at him, searching for Jesse's face in that of Ferdinand. She didn't find it.

- Oh, yes. I recognize you now; you're the gardener?

- It's a long time since I've been one, Madam.

He stretched out his hand again. She took it. Ferdinand blew out the lamp and they left the house.

- Oh! Wait a minute, Ferdinand demanded.

He went into the house and overturned Djib's heavy armchair. Stunned by the impact, his arms crushed under his own weight, the latter was now no longer an immediate threat. They went down to the dock in total darkness. Ferdinand found his way at night with the confidence of a bat. She held his hand.

They embarked in a fisherman's dory. She heard the oars plunge into the water. A wind arose, and the small sail swelled. They heard cries in the distance. Torches climbed the hill, then a fire rose. It was so distant. It was so cold. Ferdinand placed a thick blanket on Mary's shoulders.

- Speak to me, Ferdinand, explain to me.

- These reflections on the water are beautiful, he answered.

- And what do you read in them?

- I don't know how to read the water.

The moon had broken through the clouds. It was full and glowing. Marie took out her notebook.

- Now, I'm going to read you something, The Shroud. It's a very strange tale. If, when I was a little girl, I hadn't shut my ears when Maman read me that story, everything might have been different. Everything suffers in this world for the sole reason that certain tales are not heard.

At the end of her reading, Marie closed the notebook again, looked at Ferdinand for a long time, and understood the mystery of Man. She then fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER XVI

The Eternal Hope

*...by the concentration of
"fictional" experiences it
permits, the imaginary
fact possesses a value
incomparably greater
than the real fact.*

EDMUND HUSSERL

All night, the ocean swell had knocked the boat around. In the morning, a delicate breeze caressed the sea. The sun stretched out its rays. The ocean extended everywhere without encountering the smallest obstacle. Ferdinand slept in the front of the boat. The blanket he had thrown over Mary was soaked, and the cold water froze her shivering skin.

She lifted an eyelid and saw in front of her an inert hand, frozen, and with three characteristic lines. It was a beautiful hand, delicate and feminine ... Marked by three terrible lines. She imagined a movement, commanded her hand to execute it ... The hand didn't budge. She blessed that numbness.

She searched through her mind for some remnants of the last tale in her notebook. All that remained was that sensation of milky light on the surface of her skin. The light softly penetrated and warmed her. She fell asleep again, as if drunk.

She was swimming in cold waters through some fish, some orange, others like balls of fire; green eels, ashen rays, and white whales, enormous, quiet, and happy. The sun's rays pierced the blue water with arrows, and everything undulated, softly and without purpose.

She surfaced again, emerging from the wet blanket. A limpid sky, without a bird, without a cloud, widened the water's circle. Not the littlest island, not the smallest boat. How could they have drifted so far! And Ferdinand was still sleeping. She looked at him for quite a while. His childlike face seemed to sum up everything, bring peace to everything. She must not trouble him. He held her black notebook with both hands against his chest. She went to sleep.

She awoke vigorously, too vigorously. Ferdinand had disappeared. At the back of the boat the seat formed a chest. She dragged herself there and raised the cover. A jug of water, a bottle of wine, some salt fish in a jar, the jewel box and the jewels! This treasure killed her. Everything had only been a confused series of dreams! She woke up lost at sea! In the entire universe, there were only oceans in oceans, then ... Anxiety seized her by the throat, the solitude seemed to her infinite. Stunned, she fell asleep again.

She woke up with a start. Ferdinand, lying in the front of the boat, was looking at her. She would have liked to have cried out and gotten up. She didn't have the strength; she was shaking with fear. He came to her, and covering her with his coat, whispered in her ear:

- Don't worry, they'll come to look for us.

She felt warm and peaceful. Everything came from that sea, ceaselessly rippling, erasing memories, wearing out hopes.

She smelled a scent of roses, just a hint, scarcely perceptible. She straightened up. Her eyes ran around the horizon one more time. This time slowly, as if she were sliding her finger along the edge of a vast cauldron. Everything was so quiet. She fell again into an anxious sleep. And once again a touch of roses penetrated her nostrils. It was night. There, in the distance, was a lantern. A boat was approaching.

- Hello, is there anyone there? a voice cried out.

She knew that voice. Marie stood up. The boat almost capsized.

- Is that you, Jesse? I'm here.

- Marie! the voice answered.

It was him: his tanned face weathered by the waves, his steely eyes piercing his big glasses, the strength of his shoulders on his solid body, his two immense hands. He was looking at her. She examined the coarse wool pea jacket he wore for fishing, and his tarred leggings. It truly was him. Laughing, he drew alongside.

- What are you doing in a rowboat in the middle of nowhere again?

She touched her soaked clothing.

- But, Jesse. Did I dream or what? They shot you, right in the lung.

He rummaged through the chest in his boat and took hold of a large jar ...

- You don't seem certain of what you're seeing. Drink, it will wake you up a little.

The water awakened her hunger. So then he gave her some bread. She ate large mouthfuls. It certainly was him. He was there, as strong as a tiger.

- But what happened, she asked him.

- Marie, do I seem like a ghost?

He touched her. It was electric. She suddenly felt so alive ... Every cell in her body wanted to talk, with the result that she said nothing. She threw herself at him. He hugged her in

his two muscular arms. She looked at him. Everything was so clear, so precise. She looked around her, the water, the wind, the stars, everything was staring her in the face.

- Constantine, Eliza, Sarah, the Jewish girl, Jesus, Ferdinand, you ... everything is so true! she exclaimed.

He burst out laughing.

- Marie, how do you think you can reach any shore at all when at every moment you change direction? Your thirst is proof of water, your eye is proof of light, your ear, of sound, your nose, of odor. So drink, Marie, look, listen, feel ...

- Jesse, today, at this moment, I know that the sea and all these stories had only one purpose, to shape my heart to you.

And she began to weep. He removed his glasses and took her by the shoulders:

- So do you love me, then?

- You know very well that I love you.

- In that case, you are going to help me.

With the tips of his fingers, he circled her wet face:

- But you don't need anything, Jesse. You're as solid as rock. You aren't even able to die like everyone else ...

- You're wrong Marie, I depend on you.

- I never understand anything of what you're saying.

- Marie, do you love me?

- Jesse, don't leave me anymore.

- So we're going there.

- But where are we going?

- We aren't very far. Keep having faith ...

- But I have faith.

- I'll tie your boat, then.

- Oh no! not this time. I'm sailing away with you.

And Marie woke up suddenly. "I'm sailing away with you." The sentence still resounded. It was still night. She was lying on a bench. The steam engine was pounding away loudly and yet everything seemed to stand still. The sea glittered like a mirror. Behind the ship, a line of black smoke slipped between the blue lips of the foam. For a moment she believed that it was the Devil Boat and that everything had only been a succession of dreams. But the man who was lying in front of her on a bench on the bridge turned. She recognized him.

- Ferdinand!

He didn't wake up. She didn't dare to insist. She looked at him. The thread of the whole story reestablished itself with the clarity of an afternoon landscape. Some time after they had fled Little All, the moon had come out of the clouds. The sea was calm. Impelled by who knows what imperative, she had read aloud *The Shroud*, a tale in her notebook. Fascinated, Ferdinand had allowed the boat to drift. A steamboat had seen them and rescued them. She was so exhausted that she barely awoke, only to fall asleep again more deeply.

They were safe and sound. Everything was perfectly true. The dreams had been dreams. The facts had been facts. The tales in her notebook had been tales. The desert is universal and a boat links all the worlds. Facts, dreams, tales had fulfilled their function. She really had passed through them in a singular, an extraordinary arrangement ... And someone else had passed through them also ... Someone who had changed names, but never loves ...

Once again, she looked at Ferdinand for a long time. Fists drawn up against his chest, completely abandoned, he slept. The little boy remained in the man. No one could have guessed his age. He opened his eyes, gazed at Marie for a moment, then sank back into his heavy slumber.

She got up and walked slowly toward the bow of the boat. Some thin clouds covered the stars, but a diffuse light sparkled. Was it twilight or the first sign of dawn? She didn't know. And yet nothing seemed as familiar as that greyish pink gliding on the water.

She took a few steps on the bridge. The air was mild. She felt separated from the steamboat by some requirement she did not understand. Everything had quieted down. The bridge seemed deserted. The presence of things was disturbing ...

She turned back toward Ferdinand. He awoke, straightened up, and removed his hat. She approached and sat down beside him. A malaise locked them in silence. Ferdinand got up and went toward the rail of the bridge. He looked at a distant little hump shining on the sea.

- Look, it's Halifax.

She went up to him and she in turn gazed at the little shining hump that was a city. Little by little, everything grew clearer. The thread of her life, the facts, the dreams, the tales had a motor.

- I haven't felt the love I received, but the love I haven't received, I've never stopped feeling, she whispered.

Ferdinand remained silent, sensing that she was talking to herself.

Both of them looked at the immensity. The city bristled its grey teeth. Smoke-plumes slowly swirled in the blue sky. On the other side of the steamboat, the sea expanded like a great lake without shores. The sky reflected itself in it, multiplied its colors, and played in the water. Nothing was too grand for her heart.

As Meister Eckhart said in his eighty-sixth sermon: "She stood on things, not in things ... Wherever this condition is found, it unites as much as all the joy of Mary Magdalen in the desert."

CHAPTER XVII

The Tale of The Shroud

*The heart of the saint
(Teresa of Avila), remaining
incorrupt up to the
present, shows a long
and deep wound.*

EDITH STEIN

Antioch in Syria, the year of our lord 1098. The Crusaders had finally entered, the Sultan was defeated, and supplies were on the way. The Christians, those who hadn't apostasized, those who had survived, slept, exhausted, in the remnants of anxiety.

"Sleep, tomorrow you will go and bathe in the Orontes, tomorrow you will eat lamb and drink wine. Take advantage of the reprieve, it won't be long before the Turks return."

"Who cares about the Turks, we were like hanged men, the rope has been cut, the blood rises back to our brains, it is the supreme moment of lucidity."

Total silence, it was night. On the walls, the guards listened to the desert. A soft background of lamentation; the enemy was wailing in his blood. In the shadows, the carrion-eaters encircled their future meal. The stars sparkled in a perfectly translucent firmament and if there had been at that moment, at that hour, an astrologer on the wall or high up in a tower, he would have prostrated himself flat on the ground: on the horizon, a star exploded, ejecting a blood-red cloud veined with blue.

There are moments when everything expands, and time stretches like a giant coming out of his cave. This is what happens when a besieged city is suddenly liberated. It is the state of a condemned man when the rope is cut at the last moment. The last moment slackens in fact and the horror of the end suddenly takes the form of an immense lake of an unheard-of transparency. All of life is there, visible. It is no longer a history engraved by a burin on a copper plaque, but a state of depth in which consciousness plunges its torches.

The very essence of unhappiness is to have to wait for some accidental paroxysm to finally see into life's inner organs. Lucidity is a victory over duration. Hope for the end and terror of the end go back a long time on two separate but parallel roads; suddenly, they touch. Time explodes. The lake is there. Everything is visible. Who can remain in that instant? That one masters joy, even within his suffering. But no one is able to settle on that high divide.

The admirable paradox of consciousness is that it disappears at the height of its lucidity. It dissolves in transforming itself. Fortunately there are strange passages between the stories, through which consciousness can leap from one life to another, from one apotheosis to another.

Fortunately, it is not condemned to die just once, at the end of a single story. When, at the moment of its bursting, a soul succeeds in making the diagonal leap of love, it goes from one mortal to another like a skating insect on the waves of a wilderness pool. These are the great traveling souls. One of these souls lived in Antioch during and after the removal of the Turks.

To everyone's amazement, the Crusaders had suddenly appeared out of the desert and after a long siege had delivered the city. And the city luxuriated in the sleep of a state of grace close to a coma. Everyone slept -- or almost everyone.

Far from the streets of marble columns and porticos, in the sinister neighborhood of Daphne, murmurs could be heard issuing from a hut. Two knights had just come out of it and were waiting in a shadowy corner. What were those crusaders doing there? Two armored and polished champions standing at attention next to a hut that wasn't worth as much as their helmets! And that wasn't everything. A priest had come this morning, then it had been the turn of a duke, after that of a bishop, and finally the apostolic nuncio himself, the Pope's emissary -- in Daphne! With poor people who had nothing! And that smell of roses, where did it come from? In that place, in that season, after so trying a siege ...

On the table, a shroud of rare quality was unfolded: a Tarsus linen bleached with chloride of lime; pure linen, conforming in every way to the Jewish law of shatnez, without a trace of a single animal fiber; a cloth already a thousand years old and impeccable even so. It had been found among the Sultan's treasures. It was still rolled up, untouched for a thousand years with an inscription of the maker identifying the date, the place, and the quality of the product. A cloth four cubits wide. The length had been measured that very afternoon. This cloth of one piece rested now on the table of that hovel. It is there that he will be laid. They would stretch him out on one half, and cover him with the other half. Then, meticulously, they would wrap him around with bands so that the cloth would press regularly on all his body in a perfectly homogeneous manner.

The mystery didn't stop there. What was even more intriguing was the subtle odor of a species of rose which no longer existed and that had been cultivated only in the garden of Jerusalem, in the time when Tiberius reigned over Rome. He, the man who inhabited the hovel gazed at the garment, intoxicated by the odor. She, the girl who was his fiancée, stared at him in turn. He hoped for the end. She feared it.

The man was tall and well-built, with clearly Semitic features. He was caressing the linen as if it were the body of his beloved. She was a young Turkish convert, so beautiful she would damn a bishop on the spot. She was sitting on a straw mat, leaning against the wall, and she was nursing her illegitimate baby.

She finally tore herself away from the spell of the winding sheet, looked down at her baby for a moment, then, raising her eyes toward the father, her fiancé, broke out in sobs:

- I need you, Joshua, mule-head, don't abandon us ...

- You didn't understand what they said. You will be lodged in Rome, in an episcopal palace. You will be fed like a princess and our little Emmanuella will be educated better than a young lady ... Here, we live in poverty ...

- You're crazy, Joshua Stauris. It's you that I want and not gold and not promises. I love you.

- That's just it. If you love me, you will let me leave for hope and for truth ...

- Truth! What is that truth? It's plotting against God. You have no idea. They're going to crucify you to make a false ... It's absolutely the worst lie possible.

- A falsehood that will become a truth. The Pope is right ...

- The Pope must be the very incarnation of Satan to think up a scheme like that ...

- Marie, Marie, if only you would listen to me a moment, just one moment ...

She could no longer restrain her moanings, and her tears poured down on her baby. He approached her. The little one at her breast was sleeping, her hunger satisfied. He took the infant, looked at her a long time, then laid her down in her basket. He returned and knelt on the mat in front of his fiancée. He clasped his hands over hers, and prayed silently for a time.

He opened his eyes and looked at her, looked at her with too much love. He exploded, hit her as hard as he could and, sobbing, threw himself on her. The small lamp on the table flickered. The woman's face flickered, her eyelids trembled, her lips shuddered, her face crumpled. Never had he seen such a face, so beautiful, so pure ... bear a drama, a tragedy so terrifying. One might have thought that all the world's unhappiness was concentrated there, on this perfect face: the world seemed to have waited for the extreme of beauty in order to cast into it the extreme of horror.

The afternoon when she heard him pronounce his "yes" her heart suddenly stopped in her chest, and pain emptied her spirit. Time began to stamp up and down on that pain, smashing in the most dangerous scars of her existence. There and now in his arms, she felt the waves of the Mediterranean again. No, he wouldn't leave. All that was only a nightmare. A man, a woman, a happiness - This was so rare that no one could leave a circle like this to dive knowingly into Hell. Seeing that she had calmed down, he got up the courage to speak to her.

- Marie, it's not the Pope, it's not the Nuncio, nor anybody else, nor any promise of money for you, my family and your family, it's not that ... I was born for this day. I have felt it since I was a little boy. It's my destiny. If I were to look behind me and that apogee didn't exist, my life would be nothing. An artist sketches and sketches, and then suddenly, with one stroke of the brush, the painting takes on all its meaning. They came, they talked, and suddenly the smallest details of my life shone like diamonds. I was made to open this door ...

- You don't know what you're saying, Joshua Stauris, you just have a head like a mule ...

- Marie, listen to me a moment. I don't have much more time ... All this misery of humanity, this despair which drives it to so much cruelty, ever since I was twelve years old, I have seen them. I had climbed the north hill with my sheep. The Orontes glided slowly through the desert. Everything was so beautiful. I could have wished that nothing existed but desert, this green hill, and this blue river. But in the east, two armies emerged from a cloud of dust and there was a battle. Wild animals, and since that time, that war has never ended. Everywhere Man flees his despair by creating a curse. Only a few stars shine. So few! How many women or men have been captivated by the beauty of the desert? How many men see the dawn in the end? And you want me to refuse! Marie, all men await salvation from on high and make war here below. I alone struggle against the gods on high and wish for peace down here. The story of my soul is not in me. The story of my soul is in them. I am their suffering and their misery.

He stopped.

- Keep on speaking, Joshua, speak, your words are killing me. Put an end to my suffering.

- Wouldn't you give your life to save our little Emmanuella from a despair that would drive her to suicide?

- You're saying just anything. You take the general for the particular. You're acting as if all the women and all the men were, each of them, your own child.

- That's my path.

- Then you really are crazy. Tons of saints have given their lives, and that hasn't changed anything. Men are like wild animals, the blood of the martyrs has only added to their rage ...

- You're right ...

- So you must flee, Joshua. Flee and leave this cursed shroud here ...

- On the contrary, we must stop fleeing. What did we come here to do, in this cavern too vast and too obscure for our miserable brains? We came to make the past the way they make a pedestal ...

- And so that one day they can say: "It's false, that story about the resurrection is a made-up fraud? Is that what you want? To destroy the last hope.

- Marie, they're going to let the dragon loose. One day, they're going to let him loose. Since the beginning, men, in spite of all their rage and resentment, have kept the demon in check with several cubits of good solid chain. The damage is already terrible. They will let him loose. Famine, plague, war, all the riders of the apocalypse will be released. It has to be that, in the greatest depths of this night, somewhere in a little church or in a simple den of thieves, a shroud must show love's face.

She got free of him. Her eyes wandered over his face as if it were a house without a door. He continued:

- I was a helpless mother. I couldn't do anything for the agony of my child. Then they came. And everything is different now. The shroud of Christ has disappeared. There's no longer any witness of his love. The life of Jesus is nothing more, from now on, than a pretty story to put children to sleep. There's no longer anyone to struggle against the gods.

- But that would be a counterfeit, Joshua, a counterfeit of your own blood. How can falseness produce truth?

- So, Marie, you don't understand either. This pity that dwells in me and is tearing my heart, is it false? Love is consuming me, Marie. It's the only true thing that I know. I don't know anything else. I am like a mother who has been watching the agony of her child for forty thousand years, an agony that never ends. Every night, I lie awake with my eyes plunged into humanity and my heart breaks. I have the opportunity to engrave this face on a linen cloth that will pass through time, and you want me to give it up! It is inevitable that the maximum of truth be inscribed on the maximum of falsehood ...

- But what will a shroud covered with your blood change? ...

- They will see with their own eyes what the human soul feels in the face of itself. It will be a pure mirror.

- So, Joshua, you aren't Christian, you are pride itself. You think you are Jesus ...

- They have had Christ since the beginning, and they don't see him. But me, I see him, so I am doing what he did. He has to have a body, and I will be that body. They will turn toward the shroud. They will examine it, they will analyze it in every way and they will see that a man died out of love for them. What could a date change about that? Man can love man. That hope is the beginning of every path ...

- While driving us to despair, me and your baby ...

- Marie, look into the depths of this outline of truth that you call a lie. If I do nothing, you and our little daughter will experience the same eternal story of a lost humanity ...

- You don't see anything at all. My milk will dry up. She will die of hunger and I, of sorrow. That's what you're doing ...

- You won't die of sorrow, Marie, I swear it. Your sorrow will be changed into joy. You have no idea how I love you. I don't know how, I don't know the mystery and its meanders, but the love that is in me is at the point of bursting like the dawn. Marie, look at me, give me just your face. Offer me your body one last time.

He slowly undid her blouse.

- Stop, Joshua, it is Satan himself who is pushing you into this horrible plot.

- Marie, we have raised up Satan higher than ourselves. Trickery is his profession. He has goals, and he pursues them. Today it is Pope Urban II, it will be the emperor, after that, I don't know. Even so, there is nothing corruptible under the sun that can't serve to prepare the banquet. In Urban II's false shroud, they will see the true face of love. On a shroud prepared by Satan, they will see an image of Jesus.

- He took her in his arms, rocked her, and she went to sleep ...

When Emmanuella's crying awakened her mother, the shroud was no longer on the table and it was broad daylight. The young woman picked up the little one and ran to the palace. Daphne is separated from the heart of Antioch by six kilometers. Marie never stopped running completely, but sometimes, her brain lacked air and she plunged into memories so clear that she seemed to be hurtling down the tumultuous river of her childhood once again.

The Orontes, the "rebellious river," begins in Lebanon, the "Blue Spring." One night, guided by an imperative she dared not admit, she had decided to leave home. She wasn't even twelve years old. She had followed the river out of fear and instinct. The Orontes crosses rocky plateaus, drains ancient basins, falls in a succession of gorges, then takes its time on a gentle slope, fills marshes, and pours itself out into the lake of Homs. She had followed this landscape, point to point as far as Antioch, where she had converted to Christianity.

She had fled to save her body, already promised to an old man. She was the river. Once it has arrived in Syria, the Orontes, walled in by basalt gorges, makes a large detour toward the east and carves a wide valley in the chalk. Turned away from the west by the obstacle of a jebel, it emerges into the gap of Ghab, where it has carved a steep gorge in the limestone. There it spreads out in marshes again. But it doesn't stop. It clears the ridge of Karkor in a series of rapids, worms its way between the mountains, and slides into the depression of the Amik. Then, it changes direction radically, turns toward the southeast, swallows the waters of a mossy lake and crosses Antioch. It is there that the Orontes is soiled, clouds over, and loses its depths and its innocence. But it continues to the Mediterranean. It only has to cross the small jebel Semaan by one last gorge. A final gorge.

This river was the line in her hand. So, Joshua was not dead. Her heart filled with hope and oxygen. So many miracles had occurred between Lebanon and Antioch! So, he is alive. Tears ran down her cheeks. "He's waiting for me. I will die with him. I will marry his suffering. I will be the good thief ..."

She arrived at the palace, pushed her way past the guards, and found herself in the great hall. The nuncio, dressed in a robe embroidered with gold and a cross of precious stones, received her with a smile she would never forget.

- All is finished, madam.

She fell to her knees and gazed at him, incredulous.

- Joshua was a true man of God. I didn't think that a man could be so patient in suffering, so tenacious under torture, so abandoned to his choice. A grace from God accompanied him. He is resting in peace among the greatest saints. His last words were for you: "You will tell Marie that I am with her always ..."

She was no longer listening. Horrible visions passed through her mind. A long time ago, she had visited the palace dungeons and the torture room ... This sinister place was with her now, living in her memory in all its details. The short column where they had flagellated him, no doubt. The bench where they had sat him down to drive in the crown of thorns with mallet blows. The uneven stone floor where he must have been crushed under the weight of the beam. The nails, the raising of the crosspieces, the enormous spike piercing his two joined feet, the interminable agony, the suffocation, the death, the lance ...

- I want to take him in my arms, she cried in desperation.

- Impossible, madam. He has just been wrapped in the shroud. It is necessary to wait three days. No one must touch him. After that, the body will be taken away and buried right here, in the palace courtyard.

- You don't have the right. He is my fiancé.

- He belongs to the Church, madam. He donated himself by contract to the Church.

Emmanuella was crying so hard she stopped breathing.

- You must take care of your child, the nuncio advised.

Two servants led her in to a luxurious room in the palace. She threw herself on the bed, weeping. She couldn't manage to get control of herself. The pain was so great that she was suffocating. She could no longer breathe, she no longer wanted to breathe. At that moment Emmanuella, who was crying even louder than she was, fell silent and stiffened, her face blue, her eyes already glassy.

The river stopped abruptly. The Mediterranean. The love of herself that had made her run all this time, that had driven her through so many gorges, cascades, ravines and marshes, the love that carried her, she was plunged within it. She was that love. No more was she the skiff; she was the water. And that water flowed from her two nipples. Emmanuella also grew calm, turned, grasped the breast, and the transmutation took place. Marie understood then what Joshua had done. The milk was as abundant as the tears, and the tears no longer tore her face like claws, but streamed like life. Joshua was transmuted into humankind.

The little one fell sound asleep. This mystery was too heavy, too raw and too violent. The silence sealed up again and all the water became lead. Marie was crushed in the middle, unable to move, to think, to breathe. The entire universe was nothing but bronze, and her pain began to resonate in this bronze. To pour out one's being into humankind. What a stupid man's idea!

At that moment, at that hour, no one detested Christ as much as she. This God who comes in, who gives the taste of happiness and then goes away to die in Jerusalem ... She would have strangled him with her own hands. Why did he deliver himself to Satan? Why that subordination and that sacrifice? And then to leave. He should have left humanity to its despair. Humanity loves despair. It finds in it its pleasure, its greatness, and its power. Humanity wants to know nothing of pity, of love, of breaches in the night. It cultivates in fact the feeling of its own divinity in the murder of all the gods, even the gods of love.

So was it necessary to present it with the face of this kind of love? A sacrificial love like that is nauseating. It drives humans even further into guilt and the most insane will want to follow his example. Ever since Jesus died willingly on that cross, humanity, already so ashamed, can no longer tolerate itself. And Joshua adds to this.

She imagined herself sinking her claws into Christ on the cross. She was beside herself with anger, and then, suddenly, with no warning, her anger burst like an old abscess. Once more the Mediterranean spread out like a respiration. Marie was floating over it. Not a particle of her being shuddered. Everything was as insensible as the Hill of the Skull that had borne the cross. And she gazed at humanity, smiling. Of all the animals, it was the most enigmatic, the most capable of making the most eroded mountains in the desert smile.

If we give cold lucidity full freedom, if we don't restrain it from one disastrous tumble to another, it leads us to astounding hidden corners. Marie was motionless, frozen before the image of the cross. She hadn't seen, as a matter of fact, that it had to do with death. All the gods, even that of love, must die one after the other to call the subject forth, to make the blue spring emerge. The face of love is exactly this -- to know how to disappear at the right moment, at the moment when the divine can emerge from within, at the moment when the rope is finishing off the hanged man, at the moment when the vise is about to transmute the opaque carbon into sparkling diamond. And that is what happened.

As when, in the middle of the night, she was awakened by the call of menstruation, she felt, from the depths of her woman's body, her inner organs longing to be filled by him. At the moment when her body hurt with desire and its demand was imperative, at that precise moment, the river turned radically and ran toward the sea. Marie began to want her fiancé as she had never wanted him. And this pain was nothing compared with the pain in her soul. It was an imperious need that could have led her to walk on burning coals. She was quite simply devoured by a physical love that was completely irrelevant in these circumstances.

Like a cat that had lost its kittens, Marie walked round and round the large and luxurious room. She hadn't seen anyone enter. The torches were lit, however, and a meal was spread out on the table. She moved restlessly about in the middle of a kind of cyclone. The eye of the cyclone moves. So, in order to avoid the debris revolving at furious speed, you must remain at the center. You follow a kind of survival instinct.

She opened the door. The guards had withdrawn to discuss what had happened. She descended the stairs. She encountered some guards in a panic who paid her no attention. Everyone was going up with torches, running, crying out, and jostling one another. She alone

went down. When she arrived at the cells, there was no one. The silence and the darkness were absolute, or so it appeared to her.

She advanced toward a cell with a light coming from it. The door was ajar. She froze suddenly, petrified. She wanted to take him in her arms, dissolve in tears over him, caress his hair ... Yes! But to discover a puffed-up face, flesh turned inside out, a cold cadaver ... No! Ambivalence prevented her from making any move. The hope of being done with it, the terror of the end of it advanced on different roads ...

She stared at the half-open door. In her panic, she wasn't able to grasp that there was something strange. The light that flooded the cell resembled a late morning fog, soft, lit from the interior white as milk. She put out her hand and felt this light. The light penetrated her hand like warmth. The sensation on her hand was so caressing that she couldn't keep herself from putting in her arm, and all her body.

It was like a sap. She had always inhabited a body that was desiccated, scarcely living, numbed within fear. This sap crossed all her skin's pores, and her body became more sensitive than a newborn's lips. The slightest tremblings of the air caressed her, the scent seeped in from everywhere. It was a perfume of roses, an anointing, the water of a mountain stream.

She slipped into the light and found herself in the cell. On a large stone the shroud was spread out, intact. Except at the head, the linen bands had not been undone. Brownish spots of blood passed through the cloth. The body was no longer there. Evaporated. Why had they taken it away ahead of time, before the end of the third day? The years would pass, the ages would succeed each other, someone would realize that the body had not remained in the shroud for three days, but only a few hours ... Why such a risk? Everything had been agreed upon in the contract ...

These reflections were unable to ripen and fell back without fruit into the chaos of her mind. Nonetheless, one certainly did emerge: the nuncio had not ordered such a foolish thing. That wasn't possible. She slid a trembling hand over the cloth. She opened a corner of the shroud slightly. An idea electrified her: if she opened it more, she might discover a hair, one of his hairs. One hair is not much for two arms to hug, but she could take it, and die in its odor. She closed the cloth immediately. No, nothing must appear now or ever. No profanation. The sacrifice had been too great.

Nevertheless, she half-opened the same corner of the shroud again, enlarging the triangle. The blood from the forehead lacerated by the thorns was there, dried, but not a single hair. She opened it further to the point where she could see all the forehead. Not the slightest trace of a single hair, not the slightest shred of torn skin, not a single little particle of his body. What could they have done to free the body in this way? She gently closed the cloth again. This reflection, scarcely begun, was aborted in the disorder of her mind.

She slid her hand over the linen bands. He was not there. She would have nothing to touch, to grasp, to hold tight in her arms. Not even a hair. She burst out in tears, and plunged into the greatest of confusions. "They have taken him away." She felt a pain throughout her body. They had torn from her grasp the slightest trace of the one who kept her alive. Now she

fell to pieces in an infinite desolation. The river cut itself to pieces and disappeared in the plain, while her heart, impassive, slowly arose over the misfortune.

She left the cell. She would search every inch of the castle until she found his remains. She swore to! You can't dematerialize people like that by some alchemical formula. He was somewhere. She sensed it. She was no longer afraid of seeing the butchered body, the reminder of an atrocious suffering, nor the abyss of eyes emptied of their life. On the contrary, she felt a need, more visceral than ever, to slide her hands over his wounds, to wrap herself around him, to warm him, to embrace him one last time, and then, guided by the cold of the cadaver, to slide with him to the other side of the world. She had been buoyed up by the milky light that filled the cell, and that energy would allow her to accomplish this final act.

She got up again, wandered in the corridor, and noticed a light in the distance, and in this light a human form. A guard. He would lead her.

- Where have they put his body? she asked him.

The man remained motionless and silent, seemingly dumbfounded by a vision.

- Tell me where they put him.

She approached. The man didn't have the slightest reaction.

- Don't you understand? He's my fiancé. They killed him and I want to join him ...

She sobbed and couldn't say anything more.

- Why are you weeping? the man asked her.

She fell to pieces, carried away by the torrent of her tears. It was a dissolving. Not the smallest fiber resisted. She was devoured by her pain. What she wanted happened: she was disappearing. She also would leave her clothing intact. You can just as well die emptied of your tears as emptied of your blood. The result is the same: nothing any more. Ah! how this final word sweetly resonated in her soul! Nothing: the final consolation.

- Marie the man said to her.

She heard nothing.

- Marie, he repeated.

She didn't notice anything. Then he touched her, took her hand, and lifted her face upwards.

- Joshua, she cried.

That light, that sweetness, that tranquillity. For her it was like emerging from a marsh of heavy muck. She felt as light as a bird. Everything was limpid and transparent.

- Marie, if you only knew what happened to me, Joshua stammered. He didn't know either what had taken place.

She wanted to throw herself in his arms, but something held her back.

- Marie, listen to me, I can't stay here very long. But I will wait for you on the boat.

He opened his arms. She went toward him. The body she embraced melted into her like a new life. And then a music enveloped her, like a soft and warm garment.