

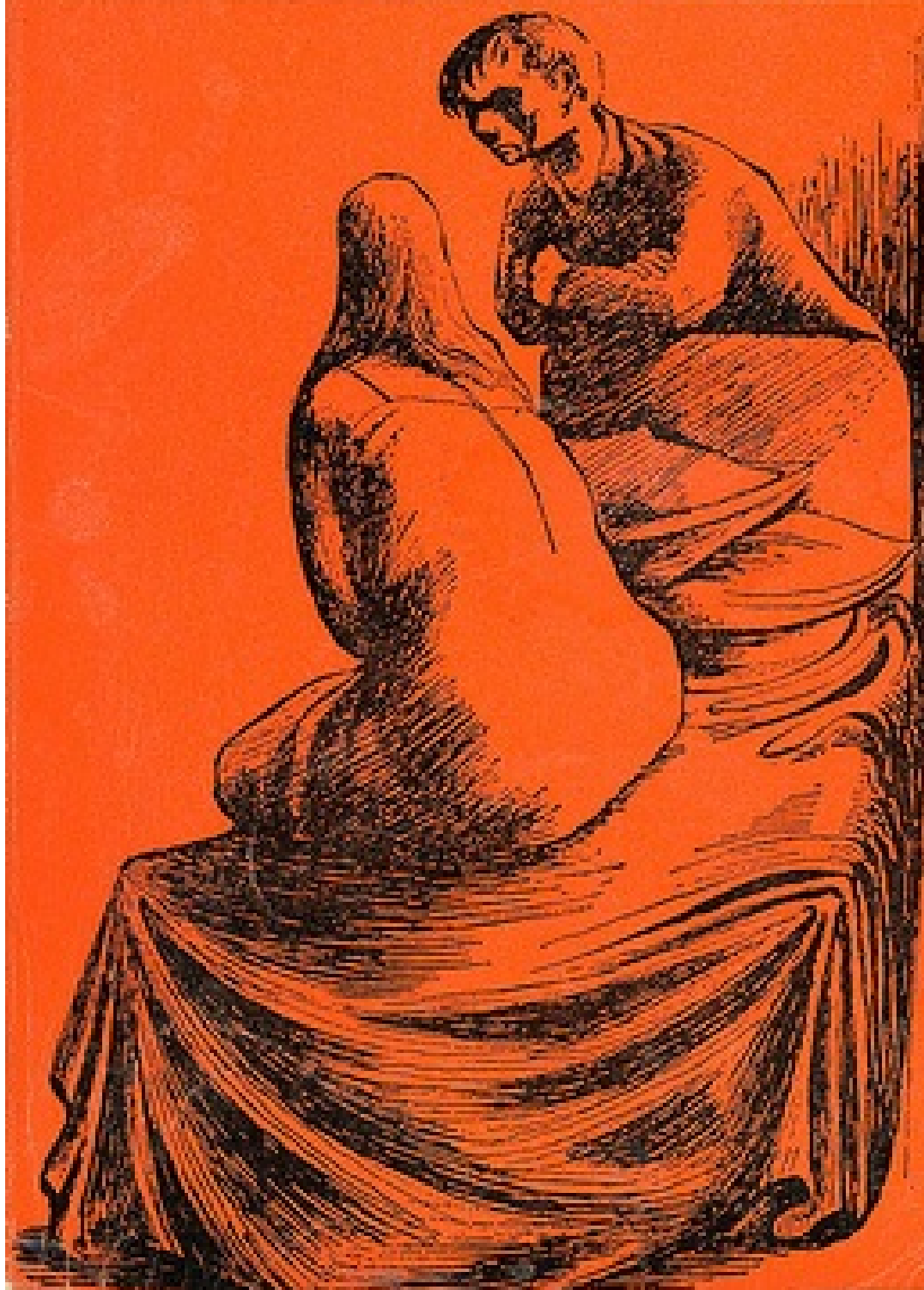


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The Age of Reason

Jean-Paul Sartre



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Book I of The Roads to Freedom trilogy

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CHAPTER 1

HALF-WAY down the Rue Vercingétorix, a tall man seized Mathieu by the arm; a policeman was patrolling the opposite pavement.

‘Can you spare me a franc or two? I’m hungry.’

His eyes were close-set, his lips were thick, and he smelt of drink.

‘You mean you’re thirsty?’ asked Mathieu.

‘No: I’m hungry, and that’s God’s truth.’

Mathieu found a five-franc piece in his pocket.

‘I don’t care which you are; it’s none of my business,’ he said: and gave him the five francs.

‘You’re a good sort,’ said the man, leaning against the wall ‘And now I’d like to wish you something in return. Something you’ll be really glad to have. What shall it be?’

They both pondered; then Mathieu said: ‘Whatever you like.’

‘Well, I wish you good luck. There!’

He laughed triumphantly. Mathieu observed the policeman strolling towards them, and felt sorry for the man.

‘Right,’ said he. ‘So long.’

He was about to pass on, when the man clutched him: ‘Good luck isn’t enough,’ he said in a sodden voice; ‘not nearly enough.’

‘Well, what then?’

‘I’d like to give you something...’

‘I’ll have you locked up for begging,’ said the policeman. He was a fresh-faced, youthful officer and he tried to assume a stern demeanour.

‘You’ve been pestering the passers-by for the last half-hour,’ he added, but there was no menace in his voice.

‘He wasn’t begging,’ said Mathieu sharply, ‘we were having a little talk.’

The policeman shrugged his shoulders, and walked on. The man was swaying rather precariously; he did not even seem to have seen the policeman.

‘I know what I’ll give you. I’ll give you a Madrid stamp.’

He produced from his pocket a rectangular bit of green card, and handed it to Mathieu. Mathieu read: ‘C.N.T. Diario Confederal. Ejempleres 2. France. Anarcho-Syndicalist Committee, 41 Rue de Belleville, Paris II.’ Beneath the address there was a stamp. It too was green, and bore the postmark – Madrid. Mathieu reached out a hand: ‘Thanks very much.’

‘Ah, but look.’ said the man angrily. ‘It’s... it’s Madrid.’

Mathieu looked at him: the man seemed excited, and was plainly struggling to express what was in his mind. He gave it up, and merely said: ‘Madrid.’

‘Yes.’

‘I wanted to get there, and that’s the truth. But it couldn’t be fixed.’

A gloomy look came over his face, and he said: ‘Wait a moment,’ and he slid a finger over the stamp.

‘All right You can have it.’

‘Thanks.’

Mathieu began to walk on, but the man shouted after him.

‘Well?’ said Mathieu. The man was holding up the five-franc piece.

‘Some guy has just slipped me a five-franc piece. I’ll stand you a rum.’

‘Not this evening.’

Mathieu moved off with a vague sense of regret. There had been a time in his life when he had strolled about the city and haunted bars in any sort of company, with anyone who cared to ask him. Now it was all over: that game never paid. The fellow had looked decent enough. He had wanted to fight in Spain. Mathieu quickened his step, and he thought irritably: 'Anyway, we hadn't anything to talk about.' He took the green card out of his pocket. 'It comes from Madrid, but it isn't addressed to him. Somebody must have passed it on to him. He kept on fingering it before giving it to me, just because it came from Madrid.' He recalled the man's face, and the look with which he had eyed the stamp: an oddly ardent look. Mathieu in his turn eyed the stamp as he walked on, and then put the block of cardboard back in his pocket. A railway engine whistled, and Mathieu thought: 'I'm getting old.'

It was twenty-five minutes past ten: Mathieu was before his time. Without stopping, without even turning his head he passed the little blue house. But he looked at it out of the corner of his eye. All the windows were dark except in Madame Duffet's room. Marcelle hadn't yet had time to open the outside door: she was leaning over her mother, and those masculine hands of hers were tucking her up into the great tester bed. Mathieu still felt gloomy, the thought in his mind was: 'Five hundred francs until the 29th — thirty francs a day, or rather less. How shall I manage?' He swung round and retraced his steps.

The light had gone out in Madame Duffet's room. In a moment or two the light went up in Marcelle's window. Mathieu crossed the road, and slipped past the grocer's shop, trying to prevent his new shoes from squeaking. The door was ajar: he pushed it very gently and it creaked. 'I'll bring more oil on Wednesday and drop a little oil into the hinges.' He went in, closed the door, and took his shoes off in the darkness. The stairs creaked faintly: Mathieu walked cautiously upstairs, shoes in hand, testing each step with his toe before putting his foot down. 'What a game,' he thought.

Marcelle opened her door before he had reached the landing. A pink iris-scented haze from her room pervaded the staircase. She was wearing her green chemise. Through it Mathieu could see the soft rich curve of her hips. He went in: he always felt as though he were entering a huge sea-shell. Marcelle locked the door. Mathieu made his way to the large wall cupboard, opened it, and put his shoes inside; then he looked at Marcelle and saw that there was something the matter.

'What's wrong?' he asked, in a low tone.

'Nothing,' said Marcelle under her breath. 'Are you all right, old boy?'

'I'm broke: otherwise all right.'

He kissed her on the neck and on the lips. Her neck smelt of ambergris, her mouth smelt of cheap cigarettes. Marcelle sat down on the edge of the bed, and gazed at her legs while Mathieu undressed.

'What's that?' asked Mathieu.

There was an unfamiliar photograph on the mantelpiece. He went up to look at it and saw a angular girl, wearing her hair cut like a boy's, and a hard, nervous smile. She was dressed in a man's jacket, and flat-heeled shoes.

'It's me,' said Marcelle, without raising her head.

Mathieu turned round: Marcelle had pulled her vest up over her fleshy thighs: she was leaning forward and beneath her vest Mathieu caught the soft outlines of her rounded breasts.

'Where did you find it?'

'In an album. It was taken in 1928.'

Mathieu carefully folded up his jacket and put it in the cupboard beside his shoes. Then he asked: 'Do you still look at family albums?'

'No, but I had a sort of feeling today that I'd like to remind myself of those times, and see what it was like before I knew you, and when I was always well. Bring it here.'

Mathieu brought it to her, and she snatched it out of his hands. He sat down beside her. She shivered and drew back, eyeing the photograph with a vague smile, 'I was a scream in those days.' she

said.

The girl was standing stiffly upright, leaning against a garden railing. Her mouth was open: she was just about to say: 'It's a scream,' with the pert assurance of the Marcelle of today. But she was young and slim. Marcelle shook her head.

'Such a scream. It was taken in the Luxemburg by a chemistry student. You see the blouse I'm wearing? I'd bought it that very day, for a trip to Fontainebleau we had fixed for the following Sunday. Good Lord...!'

There was certainly something wrong: her gestures had never been so brusque, nor her voice so curt and masculine. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, blankly naked and defenceless, like a green porcelain vase in that dim pink room, and it was almost painful to hear her speak in that masculine voice, and smell the dark, strong odour of her body. Mathieu grasped her shoulders and drew her towards him. 'Do you regret those days?'

'No,' replied Marcelle acidly: 'but I regret the life I might have had.'

She had begun to study chemistry, and had to give it up owing to illness. 'One would think she bears me a grudge for it,' thought Mathieu. He opened his mouth to ask her some more questions, but caught her expression and was silent. She was gazing at the photograph with a sad, intense expression.

'I've got fatter, haven't I?'

'Yes.'

She shrugged her shoulders and flung the photograph on to the bed. 'It's true,' thought Mathieu: 'she's had a rather rotten life.' He tried to kiss her on the cheek, but she drew back, quite gently. She laughed nervously, and said: 'That's ten years ago.'

And Mathieu thought: 'I give her nothing.' He came to see her four nights a week; he told her all his doings in minutest detail. She gave him advice, in a grave and slightly maternal tone. She often used to say: 'I live by proxy.'

'What did you do yesterday?' he asked her. 'Did you go out?' Marcelle waved her hand wearily and answered: 'No, I was tired. I read for a bit, but Mother kept on interrupting me about the shop.'

'And today?'

'I did go out today,' said she, gloomily, 'I felt I ought to get some air and see some people in the street. So I walked down as far as the Rue de la Gaité, and enjoyed it; and I wanted to see Andrée.'

'And did you?'

'Yes, for five minutes. Just as I was leaving her, it began to rain: it's a funny sort of day for June, and besides the people looked so hideous. So I took a taxi and came home. What did you do?' she asked nonchalantly.

Mathieu didn't want to tell her. 'Yesterday,' he said. 'I took my last classes at the school. I dined with Jacques, which was as boring as usual. This morning I went to the bursar's office to see if they couldn't advance me something: but apparently it's not done. When I was at Beauvais I always managed to fix it with the bursar. Then I saw Ivich.'

Marcelle raised her eyebrows and looked at him. He didn't like talking to her about Ivich. 'She's a bit under the weather just now.'

'Why?'

Marcelle's voice was steadier, and a sage, masculine sort of look had come into her face. He said with lips half-closed: 'She'll be ploughed in her exam.'

'But you told me she'd been working hard.'

'Well — I daresay she has, in her own way — that is, she no doubt sits for hours over a book. But you know what she's like. She has visions, almost like a lunatic. In October, she was well up in botany, and the examiner was quite satisfied: and then she suddenly saw herself opposite a bald character who was talking about *coelenterata*. This seemed to her just funny, and she thought: "I don't give

curse for *coelenterata*," and the chap couldn't get another word out of her.'

'What an odd little creature she must be,' said Marcelle dreamily.

'Anyway,' said Mathieu. 'I'm afraid she may do it again, or get some fantastic idea into her head.'

His tone, which suggested a sort of protective detachment, was surely intended to mislead. Everything that could be expressed in words, he said. 'But what are words?'

He paused, then hung his head despondently. Marcelle was well aware of his affection for Ivich: she would not in fact have minded if he had been her lover. On one thing only she insisted — that he should talk about Ivich in just that tone. Mathieu had kept on stroking Marcelle's back and her eyelids began to droop; she liked having her back stroked, particularly at the level of her hips and between the shoulder-blades. But she suddenly drew back, and her face hardened, as Mathieu said: 'Look here, Marcelle, I don't care if Ivich is ploughed, she isn't suited to be a doctor any more than I am. In any case, even if she passed the P. C. B., her first dissection would so revolt her that she would never set foot in the place again. But if it doesn't come off this time, she'll do something silly. If she fails, her family won't let her start again.'

'What exact kind of silly thing do you mean?' asked Marcelle in a precise tone.

'I don't know,' he replied, rather crestfallen.

'Ah, I know you only too well, my poor boy. You daren't admit it, but you're afraid that she'll put a bullet through her skin. And the creature pretends to loathe anything romantic. One really might suppose you'd never seen that skin of hers. I wouldn't dare touch it, for fear of scratching it. A doctor with a skin like that isn't going to mess it up with a revolver shot. I can quite well picture her prostrated on a chair with her hair all over her face glaring at a neat little Browning in front of her, in the best Russian manner. But anything more — not on your life! Revolvers are meant for crocodile-skins like ours.'

She laid her arms against Mathieu's. He had a whiter skin than hers.

'Just look, darling — especially at mine, it's like morocco leather.' And she began to laugh. 'It would puncture rather well, don't you think? I can picture a nice little round hole under my left breast with neat, clean, red edges. It wouldn't be at all disfiguring.'

She was still laughing. Mathieu laid a hand over her mouth. 'Be quiet, you'll waken the old lady.'

She was silent, and he said: 'How nervy you are!'

She did not answer. Mathieu laid a hand on Marcelle's leg and stroked it gently. He loved that soft and buttery skin, its silky down that sent a thousand delicate tremors through his fingers. Marcelle did not move: she looked at Mathieu's hand. And after a while Mathieu took his hand away.

'Look at me,' said he.

For an instant he saw her circled eyes, and in them a flash of haughty desperation.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing,' she said, turning her head away.

It was always like that with her: she was emotionally constricted. The moment would come when she couldn't contain herself: then she would blurt it out. One could do nothing but mark time until that moment did come. Mathieu dreaded those noiseless explosions: the whispered caution with which his passion had to be expressed in that sea-shell room, in order not to awaken Mme Duffet, had always revolted him. Mathieu got up, walked to the cupboard, and took the square of cardboard out of his jacket pocket 'Look at this.'

'What is it?'

'A fellow gave it to me in the street not long ago. He looked a decent sort, and I gave him a little money.'

Marcelle took the card with an indifferent air. Mathieu felt a tie of something like complicity between himself and the fellow in the street. And he added: 'It meant something to him, you know.'

‘Was he an anarchist?’

‘I don’t know. He wanted to stand me a drink.’

‘Did you refuse it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’ asked Marcelle casually. ‘You might have found him amusing.’

‘Pah!’ said Mathieu.

Marcelle raised her head, and peered at the clock with a half smile.

‘It’s curious,’ she said, ‘but I hate you to tell me things like that: and God knows there are enough of them at the moment. Your life is full of missed opportunities.’

‘You call that a missed opportunity.’

‘Yes. There was a time when you would go out of your way to meet such people.’

‘I dare say I’ve changed a bit,’ said Mathieu, good-humouredly. ‘What do you think? Am I getting old?’

‘You’re thirty-four,’ said Marcelle soberly. Thirty-four. Mathieu thought of Ivich, and was conscious of a slight shock of annoyance.

‘Yes... But I don’t think it’s age: it’s a sort of fastidiousness. I wouldn’t have been in the mood.’

‘You very seldom are, nowadays,’ said Marcelle.

‘And he wouldn’t have been either,’ added Mathieu briskly. ‘When a man gets drunk he gets sentimental. That’s what I wanted to avoid.’

And he thought to himself: ‘That isn’t altogether true. I didn’t really look at it like that.’ He wanted to make an effort to be sincere. Mathieu and Marcelle had agreed that they would always tell each other everything. ‘The fact is —’ he began.

But Marcelle had begun to laugh: a low, rich, cooing laugh, as though she were stroking his hair and saying: ‘Poor old boy.’ But she did not look at all affectionate.

‘That’s very like you,’ said she. ‘You’re so afraid of anything sentimental! Supposing you had got a little sentimental with that poor lad, would it have mattered?’

‘Well, it wouldn’t have done me any good.’

He was trying to defend himself against himself.

Marcelle smiled a frosty smile. ‘She wants to draw me,’ thought Mathieu, rather disconcerted. He was feeling peaceably inclined, and puzzled: he was in fact in a good temper, and didn’t want an argument.

‘Look here,’ said he. ‘You’re quite wrong to catch me up like this. In the first place, I hadn’t the time. I was on my way here.’

‘You’re quite right,’ said Marcelle. ‘It’s nothing. Absolutely nothing, really: not enough to get a car into trouble... But all the same it’s symptomatic.’

Mathieu started: if only she wouldn’t use such tiresome words.

‘Really, really,’ he said. ‘I can’t imagine why it should interest you.’

‘Well, it’s that same frankness you fuss about so much. You’re so absurdly scared of being your own dupe, my poor boy, that you would back out of the finest adventure in the world rather than risk telling yourself a lie.’

‘Quite true, and you know it,’ said Mathieu. ‘But that’s an old story.’

He thought her unfair. ‘Frankness’ — he detested the word, but Marcelle had acquired it some while back. The winter before, it had been ‘urgency’ (words did not last her for much more than a season), they had grown into the habit of it together, they felt mutually responsible for maintaining — indeed it was, actually, the inner meaning of their love. When Mathieu had pledged himself to Marcelle, he had forever renounced all thoughts of solitude, those cool thoughts, a little shadowy and timorous, that used to dart into his mind with the furtive vivacity of fish. He could not love Marcelle

save in complete frankness: she was his frankness embodied, his comrade, his witness, his counsellor and his critic.

‘If I lied to myself,’ said he, ‘I should have the feeling I was lying to you as well. And I couldn’t bear that.’

‘Yes,’ said Marcelle; but she did not look as if she believed him.

‘You don’t look as if you believed me?’

‘Oh yes I do,’ she said, nonchalantly.

‘You think I’m lying to myself?’

‘No — anyway, one can’t ever know. But I don’t think so. Still, do you know what I do believe? That you are beginning to sterilize yourself a little. I thought that today. Everything is so neat and tidy in your mind: it smells of clean linen: it’s as though you had just come out of a drying-cupboard. But there’s a want of shade. There’s nothing useless, nor hesitant, nor underhand about you now. It’s a high noon. And don’t tell me this is all for my benefit. You’re moving down your own incline: you’ve acquired the taste for self-analysis.’

Mathieu was disconcerted. Marcelle was often rather hard: she remained always on guard, a little aggressive, a little suspicious, and if Mathieu didn’t agree with her, she often thought he was trying to dominate her. But he had rarely met her in such a resolve to be disagreeable. And then there was the photo on the bed. He eyed Marcelle: the moment had not yet come when she could be induced to speak.

‘I’m not so much interested in myself as all that,’ he said simply.

‘I know,’ said Marcelle. ‘It isn’t an aim, it’s a means. It helps you to get rid of yourself; to contemplate and criticize yourself: that’s the attitude you prefer. When you look at yourself, you imagine you aren’t what you see, you imagine you are nothing. That is your ideal: you want to be nothing.’

‘To be nothing?’ repeated Mathieu slowly. ‘No, it isn’t. Listen. I... I recognize no allegiance except to myself.’

‘Yes — you want to be free. Absolutely free. It’s your vice.’

‘It’s not a vice,’ said Mathieu. ‘It’s... what else can a man do?’

He was annoyed: he had explained all this to Marcelle a hundred times before, and she knew it well what he had most at heart.

‘If... if I didn’t try to get my life moving on my own account, I should think it just absurd to go on living.’

A look of smiling obstinacy had come into Marcelle’s face.

‘Yes, yes — it’s your vice.’

‘It’s not a vice. It’s how I’m *made*.’

‘Why aren’t other people made like that, if it isn’t a vice?’

‘They are, only they don’t know it.’

Marcelle had stopped smiling, and a hard, grim line appeared at the corner of her lips.

‘Well, I don’t feel such a need to be free.’

Mathieu eyed her bent neck, and felt troubled: it was always this sense of remorse, absurd remorse that haunted him in her company. He realized that he would never be able to put himself in Marcelle’s place. ‘The freedom I talk about is the freedom of a sound and healthy man.’ He laid a hand on her neck, and gently squeezed the luscious but no longer youthful flesh.

‘Marcelle, are you feeling bored with life?’

She looked at him with faintly troubled eyes. ‘No.’

Silence fell. Mathieu felt a thrill at the tips of his fingers. Just at the tips of his fingers. He passed his hand slowly down Marcelle’s back, and Marcelle’s eyelids drooped: he could see her long black

lashes. He drew her towards him. He had no actual desire for her at that moment, it was rather longing to see that stubborn, angular spirit melt like an icicle in the sunshine. Marcelle let her head fall on to Mathieu's shoulder, and he could see only too clearly her brown skin, and the bluish, veined curves beneath her eyes. And he thought to himself: 'Good Lord, she's getting old.' And he reflected too, that he was old. He leaned over her with a feeling of uneasiness: he wished he could forgive himself, and her. But time had passed since he forgot himself when making love to her. He kissed her on the lips: she had fine lips, firm and sharply cut. She slid gently backwards and lay on the bed with eyes closed, limp and prostrate. Mathieu got up, took off his trousers and his shirt, folded them up and placed them at the foot of the bed, and then lay down beside her. But he noticed that her eyes were wide and set, she was staring at the ceiling with her hands clasped beneath her head.

'Marcelle,' said he.

She did not answer: there was a hard look in her eyes: and then she sat up abruptly. He sat down once more on the edge of the bed, irked by his own nakedness.

'You must now tell me what's the matter.'

'There's nothing the matter,' she said, in a toneless voice.

'Yes, there is,' he said affectionately. 'There's something on your mind. Marcelle, didn't we agree to be quite frank with each other?'

'You can't do anything about it, and it will only upset you.'

He stroked her hair lightly. 'Never mind, tell me all the same.' 'Well, it's happened.'

'What's happened?'

'It has happened.'

Mathieu made a wry face.

'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure. You know I never get the wind up: I'm two months late.'

'Hell!' said Mathieu.

And he thought: 'She ought to have told me at least three weeks ago.' He felt he must do something with his hands — fill his pipe, for instance: but his pipe was in the cupboard with his jacket. He took a cigarette from the night-table and put it down again.

'There, now you know what's the matter,' said Marcelle. 'And what's to be done?'

'Well — I suppose one gets rid of it, eh?'

'Right. I've got an address,' said Marcelle.

'Who gave it to you?'

'Andrée. She's been there.'

'That's the old woman who messed her up last year, isn't it? Why, it was six months before she was well again. I won't allow that.'

'So you want to be a father?'

She drew back, and sat down a little way off Mathieu. There was a hard look in her eyes, but it wasn't a masculine look. She had laid her hands flat on her thighs, her arms looked like the two handles of an earthenware jar. Mathieu noticed that her face had grown grey. The air was pink and sickly — it smelt and tasted pink: her face was grey and set, and she looked as though she were trying to stifle a cough.

'Wait,' said Mathieu, 'you've rather sprung this on me: we must think.'

Marcelle's hands began to quiver: and she said with sudden vehemence: 'I don't want you to think — it's not for you to think.'

She had turned her head towards him and was looking at him. She looked at Mathieu's neck, shoulders, and hips, and then lower down, with an air of astonishment. Mathieu blushed violently and set his legs together.

‘You can’t do anything,’ repeated Marcelle. And she added with painful irony: ‘It’s a woman’s business now.’

Her mouth snapped out the last words: a varnished mauve-tinted mouth, like a crimson insect intent upon devouring that ashen visage. ‘She’s feeling humiliated,’ thought Mathieu, ‘she hates me.’ He felt sick. The room seemed suddenly cleared of its pink haze: there were great blank spaces between the objects it contained. And Mathieu thought: ‘It is I who have done *this* to her!’ The lamp, the mirror with its leaden reflections, the clock on the mantelpiece, the armchair, the half-opened wardrobe suddenly appeared to him like pitiless mechanisms, adrift and pursuing their tenuous existences in the void, rigidly insistent, like the underside of a gramophone record obstinately grinding out its tune. Mathieu shook himself, but could not detach himself from that sinister, raucous world. Marcelle had not moved, she was still looking at Mathieu’s naked body, and the guilty flower that lay so delicately on his thighs with a bland air of innocence. He knew she wanted to scream and sob but she would not for fear of waking Mme Duffet. He gripped Marcelle round the waist and drew her towards him. She collapsed on to his shoulder, sobbed a little, but she did not cry. It was all that she could allow herself in a rainless storm.

When she raised her head, she was calmer. And she said, in an emphatic tone: ‘Forgive me, darling. I needed to explode. I’ve been holding myself in all day. I’m not blaming you, of course.’

‘Quite natural,’ said Mathieu. ‘I feel bad about this. It’s the first time... O Lord, what a mess. I’ve done this deed, and it’s you that have to pay. Well, it’s happened, and that’s that. Look here, who is this old woman, and where does she live?’

‘Twenty-four Rue Morère. I’m told she’s an odd old party.’

‘I believe you. Are you going to say that Andrée sent you?’

‘Yes. She only charges four hundred francs. I’m told that’s absurdly cheap,’ said Marcelle, in a suddenly even tone.

‘Yes, I realize that,’ said Mathieu bitterly. ‘In short it’s a bargain.’

He felt as awkward as a newly accepted suitor. A tall awkward fellow, completely naked, who had done something he should not, and was smiling amiably, in the hope he might be overlooked. But it wasn’t possible; she saw his white, sinewy, stocky thighs, his complacent and uncompromising nudity. It was a grotesque nightmare. ‘If I were her, I should want to get my nails into all that meat.’ And he said: ‘That’s just exactly what worries me: she doesn’t charge enough.’

‘My dear,’ said Marcelle, ‘it’s lucky she asks so little: as it happens, I’ve got the four hundred francs. They were earmarked for my dressmaker, but she’ll wait. And,’ she went on emphatically, ‘I’m perfectly certain I shall be looked after just as well as in one of those discreet clinics where they charge you four thousand francs as soon as look at you. Anyhow, we can’t help ourselves.’

‘No, we can’t help ourselves,’ repeated Mathieu. ‘When will you go?’

‘Tomorrow, about midnight. I gather she only sees people at night. Rather a scream, isn’t it? I think she’s a bit cracked myself, but it suits me all right, on Mother’s account. She keeps a draper’s shop in the daytime: and she hardly ever sleeps. You go in by a yard, and you see a light under a door — that’s where it is.’

‘Right,’ said Mathieu. ‘I’ll go.’

Marcelle eyed him in amazement.

‘Are you crazy? She’ll shut the door in your face, she’ll take you for a policeman.’

‘I shall go,’ repeated Mathieu.

‘But why? What will you say to her?’

‘I want to get a notion of what sort of place it is. If I don’t like it, you shan’t go. I won’t have you messed up by some old harridan. I’ll say that I’ve come from Andrée, that I’ve got a girl friend who is in trouble, but down with influenza at the moment — something of that kind.’

‘But where shall I go if it won’t do?’

~~‘We’ve got a few days to turn round in, haven’t we? I’ll go and see Sarah tomorrow, she’s sure to know somebody. They didn’t want any children at first, you remember.’~~

Marcelle’s excitement subsided a little, and she stroked his neck.

‘You’re being very nice to me, darling. I’m not quite sure what you’re up to, but I understand that you want to do something: perhaps you’d like her to operate on you instead of me?’ She clasped her lovely arms round his neck, and added in a tone of comic resignation: ‘Anyone recommended by Sarah is sure to be a Yid.’

Mathieu kissed her, and she dimpled all over.

‘Darling,’ she said. ‘O darling!’

‘Take off your vest’

She obeyed, he tipped her backwards on to the bed, and began to caress her breasts. He loved the taut, leathery nipples, each in its ring of raised, red flesh. Marcelle sighed, with eyes closed, passionate and eager. But her eyelids were contracted. The dread thing lingered, laid like a damp hand on Mathieu. Then, suddenly, the thought came into Mathieu’s mind: ‘She’s pregnant.’ He sat up, his head still buzzing with a shrill refrain.

‘Look here, Marcelle, it’s no good today. We’re both of us too nervy. I’m sorry.’

Marcelle uttered a sleepy little grunt, then got up abruptly and began to rumple her hair with both hands.

‘Just as you like,’ she said coldly. Then she added, more amiably: ‘As a matter of fact you’re right, we’re too nervy. I wanted you to love me, but I was a bit frightened.’

‘Alas,’ said Mathieu, ‘the deed is done, we have nothing more to fear.’

‘I know, but I wasn’t thinking sensibly. I don’t know how to tell you: but I’m rather afraid of you, darling.’

Mathieu got up.

‘Good. Well then, I’ll go and see this old woman.’

‘Yes. And you might telephone me tomorrow and tell me what you thought of her.’

‘Can’t I see you tomorrow evening? That would be simpler.’

‘No, not tomorrow evening. The day after, if you like.’

Mathieu had put on his shirt and trousers. He kissed Marcelle on the eyes.

‘You aren’t angry with me?’

‘It isn’t your fault. It’s the first time in seven years, you needn’t blame yourself. And you aren’t sick of me, I hope?’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘Well, I’m getting rather sick of myself, to tell the truth; I feel like a great heap of dough.’

‘My darling,’ said Mathieu, ‘my poor darling. It will all be put right in a week, I promise you.’

He opened the door noiselessly, and glided out, holding his shoes in his hand. On the landing he turned. Marcelle was still sitting on the bed. She smiled at him, but Mathieu had the feeling that she bore him a grudge.

The tension in his set eyes was now released, and they revolved with normal ease and freedom in their orbits: she was no longer looking at him, and he owed her no account of his expressions. Concealed by his dark garments and the night, his guilty flesh had found its needed shelter, it was gradually recovering its native warmth and innocence, and began to expand beneath its covering fabrics; — the oilcan, how on earth was he going to remember to bring the oilcan the day after tomorrow? He was alone.

He stopped, transfixed: it wasn’t true, he wasn’t alone. Marcelle had not let him go: she was thinking of him, and this was what she thought: ‘The dirty dog, he’s let me down.’ It was no use

striding along the dark, deserted street, anonymous, enveloped in his garments — he could not escape her. Marcelle's consciousness remained, full of woe and lamentation, and Mathieu had not left her: he was there, in the pink room, naked and defenceless against that crass transparency, so much more baffling than a look. 'Only once,' he said savagely to himself, and he repeated in an undertone, to convince Marcelle: 'once in seven years.' Marcelle refused to be convinced; she remained in the room, and was thinking of Mathieu. It was intolerable to be judged, and hated, away back in that room and in silence. Without power to defend himself, or even to hide his belly with his hands. If only, in the same second, he had been able to exist for others with the same intensity... But Jacques and Odette were asleep. Daniel was drunk or in a stupor. Ivich never remembered people when they were not there. Boris perhaps... But Boris's consciousness was no more than a dim flicker, it could not contend against that savage, stark lucidity that fascinated Mathieu from a distance. Night had engulfed most human consciousnesses: Mathieu was alone with Marcelle in the night, just the two of them.

There was a light at Camus's place. The landlord was stacking the chairs: the waitress was fixing a wooden shutter against one side of the double door. Mathieu pushed open the other side and went in. He felt the need of being seen. Just to be seen. He planted his elbows on the counter.

'Good evening, everybody.'

The landlord saw him. There was also a bus-conductor, drinking an absinthe, his cap pulled down over his eyes. Two kindly, casual consciousnesses. The conductor jerked his cap back, and looked at Mathieu. Marcelle's consciousness released him, and dissolved into the night.

'Give me a beer.'

'You're quite a stranger,' said the landlord.

'It isn't for want of being thirsty.'

'Yes, it's thirsty weather,' said the bus-conductor. 'It might be mid-summer.'

They fell silent. The landlord went on rinsing glasses, the conductor whistled to himself. Mathieu felt at ease because they looked at him from time to time. He saw his head in the glass, a ghastly globe emerging from a sea of silver: at Camus's, one always had the feeling that it was four in the morning, which was an effect of the light, a silvered haze that strained the eyes, and bleached the drinkers' faces, hands, and thoughts. He drank: and he thought: 'She's pregnant. It's fantastic. I can't feel it true.' It seemed to him shocking and grotesque, like the sight of an old man kissing an old woman on the lips: after seven years that sort of thing shouldn't happen; 'She's pregnant' — there was a little vitreous tide within her, slowly swelling into the semblance of an eye. 'It's opening out among all that muck inside her belly, it's alive.' He saw a long pin moving hesitantly forward in the half-darkness: there was a muffled sound, the eye cracked and burst: nothing was left but an opaque, dry membrane. 'She'll go to that old woman: she'll get herself messed up.' He felt venomous. 'All right, let her go.' He shook himself: these were bleak thoughts, the thoughts of four o'clock in the morning.

'Good night.'

He paid and went.

'What did I do?' He walked slowly, trying to remember. 'Two months ago...' He couldn't remember anything. 'Yes, it must have been the day after the Easter holidays. He had taken Marcelle in his arms, as usual, in affection no doubt, rather than with any feeling of desire; and now... he'd gotten stung. A baby. I meant to give her pleasure, and I've given her a baby. I didn't understand what I was doing. Neither in destroying nor in creating life did I know what I was doing.' He laughed a short, dry laugh. 'And what about the others? Those who have solemnly decided to become fathers, and feel progenitively inclined when they look at their wives' bodies — do they understand any more than I do? They go blindly on — three flicks of a duck's tail. What follows is a gelatinous job done in a dark room, like photography. They have no part in it.' He entered a yard and saw a light under a door. 'It's here.' He felt ashamed.

Mathieu knocked.

‘What is it?’ said a voice.

‘I want to speak to you.’

‘This isn’t a time to visit people.’

‘I have a message from Andrée Besnier.’

The door opened slightly. Mathieu saw a wisp of yellow hair and a large nose.

‘What do you want? Don’t try to pull any police stuff on me, it’s no good, everything’s in order here. I can have the light on all night if I like. If you’re an inspector, show me your card.’

‘I’m not from the police,’ said Mathieu. ‘I’m in a fix. And I was given your name.’

‘Come in.’

Mathieu went in. The old woman was wearing trousers, and a blouse with a zip fastener. She was very thin, and her eyes were set and hard.

‘You know Andrée Besnier?’

She eyed him grimly.

‘Yes,’ said Mathieu. ‘She came to see you last year about Christmas-time because she was in trouble: she was rather ill, and you came four times to give her treatment.’

‘Well?’

Mathieu looked at the old woman’s hands. They were a man’s hands, a strangler’s hands: furrowed, cracked, with broken nails, and black with scars and gashes. On the first joint of the left thumb, there were some purple warts, and a large black scab. Mathieu shuddered as he thought of Marcelle’s soiled brown flesh.

‘I’ve not come on her account,’ he said. ‘I’ve come for one of her friends.’

The old woman laughed drily: ‘It’s the first time that a man has had the cheek to turn up on my doorstep. I won’t have any dealings with men, let me tell you that.’

The room was dirty and in disorder. There were boxes everywhere, and straw on the tiled floor. On a table Mathieu noticed a bottle of rum and a half-filled glass.

‘I’ve come because my friend sent me. She can’t come today, and she asked me to fix up a date.’

At the other end of the room a door stood half open. Mathieu could have sworn there was someone behind that door.

‘Poor kids,’ said the old woman. ‘They’re too silly. I’ve only got to look at you to see that you’re born unlucky — you’re the sort that upsets glasses, and smashes mirrors. And women trust you. Well, they get what they deserve.’

Mathieu remained polite.

‘I should have liked to see where you operate.’

The old woman flung him a baleful and suspicious look.

‘Look here! Who told you that I operate? What are you talking about? Mind your own business. If your friend wants to see me, let her come herself. I won’t deal with anyone else. You want to make inquiries, do you? Did she make any inquiries before she got into your grip? You’ve had an accident. All right. Then let us hope I shall be better at my job than you were at yours — and that’s all I have to say. Good night.’

‘Good night, Madame,’ said Mathieu.

He went out with a sense of deliverance. He turned and walked slowly towards the Avenue d’Orléans: for the first time since he had left her, he could think of Marcelle without pain, without horror, and with a sort of tender melancholy: ‘I’ll go and see Sarah tomorrow,’ he said to himself.

CHAPTER 2

BORIS eyed the red-checked table-cloth, and thought of Mathieu Delarue. 'A good chap that.' The orchestra was silent, the air was blue, and there was a buzz of talk. Boris knew everybody in the narrow little room: they weren't people who came for a good time: they came along together after their jobs were done, quietly and in need of food. The Negro opposite Lola was the singer from the Paradise: the six fellows at the far end with their girls were the band from the Nénette. Something had certainly happened to them, they had had a bit of unexpected luck, perhaps an engagement for the summer (they had been talking vaguely the evening before last about a cabaret at Constantinople) because they had ordered champagne, and they were usually pretty careful. Boris also noticed the fair-haired girl who danced in sailor's costume at the Java. The tall emaciated man in spectacles smoking a cigar, was the manager of a cabaret in the Rue Tholozé which had just been shut by the police. He said it would soon be reopened, as he had influence in high places. Boris bitterly regretted never having been there, he would certainly go if it reopened. The man was with a pansy who looked rather attractive from a distance, a fair-haired lad with delicate features, devoid of the usual mincing air and not without charm. Boris hadn't much use for homosexuals because they always were pursuing him, but Ivich rather liked them: she said: 'Well, at any rate they've got the courage not to be like everybody else.' Boris had great respect for his sister's opinions, and he made the most conscientious efforts to think well of such people. The Negro was eating a dish of sauerkraut: and Boris reflected that he didn't like sauerkraut. He wished he knew the name of the dish which had just been brought to the dancer from the Java: a brown mess that looked good. There was a stain of red wine on the table-cloth. An elegant stain, which gave the cloth a satiny sheen in just that place. Lola had spread a little salt on the stain, being a careful woman. The salt was pink. It isn't true that the salt soaks up stains. He ought to tell Lola that it didn't. But he would have had to speak: and Boris felt he could not speak. Lola was beside him, soft and very warm, and Boris could not bring himself to utter the slightest word, his voice was dead. 'Just as though I were dumb.' It was delicious, his voice was floating at the far end of his throat, soft as cotton, and could not emerge, for it was dead. 'I like Delarue,' thought Boris, and felt glad. He would have been even more glad if he had not been conscious, all down his right side, from head to hip, that Lola was looking at him. It would certainly be a passionate look, for Lola could scarcely look at him in any other way. It was rather annoying, for passionate looks demand the acknowledgement of a friendly gesture, or a smile: and Boris couldn't have made the slightest movement. He was paralysed. But it didn't really matter: he couldn't be supposed to have noticed Lola's look: he guessed it, but that was his affair. Sitting sideways, with his hair in his eyes, he couldn't see a glimpse of Lola, he could perfectly well suppose that she was looking at the room and at the people. Boris didn't feel sleepy, indeed he was in an excellent humour, as he knew everybody in the room: he noticed the Negro's pink tongue: Boris had a high opinion of that Negro: on one occasion the Negro had taken his boots off, picked up a box of matches with his toes, opened it, extracted a match, and lit it, all with his toes. 'He's a grand chap,' thought Boris with admiration. 'Everybody ought to be able to use his feet just like his hands.' He had a pain in his right side as a consequence of being looked at: he knew that the moment was near when Lola would ask him what he was thinking about. It was absolutely impossible to delay that question, it didn't depend on him: Lola would ask in due time, with a kind of fatality. Boris felt as though he had at his disposal a small but infinitely precious fraction of time. As a matter of fact it was rather a pleasant sensation. Boris saw the table-cloth he saw Lola's glass (Lola had had supper: she never dined before her singing act). She had drunk some Château Gruau, she did herself well, and indulged in a few caprices because she was so terrified of growing old. There was still a little wine in the glass, which looked like dusty blood. The jazz-band

began to play: *The Moon is Turning Green* and Boris found himself wondering if he could sing the song. He fancied himself strolling down the Rue Pigalle in the moonlight, whistling a little tune. Delarue had told him that he whistled like a pig. Boris began to laugh silently, and thought: 'Blast the fellow!' He was brimming with affection for Mathieu. He peered out of the corner of his eye, without turning round, and he saw Lola's heavy eyes beneath a luxurious tress of auburn hair. As a matter of fact it was quite easy to withstand a look. The trouble was to get used to that special sort of ardent emanation that sets your face aflame when someone is watching you with passion in her eyes. Boris submissively yielded to Lola's observing eyes — his body, his slim neck, and the half-profile that she loved so much: this done, he could take refuge in the depths of his own self and savour the agreeable little thoughts that came into his mind. 'What are you thinking about?' said Lola.

'Nothing.'

'One is always thinking of something.'

'I was thinking of nothing.'

'Not even that you like the tune they were playing, or that you wished you could play the castanets?'

'Yes — things like that.'

'There you are. Why don't you tell me? I want to know everything you think.'

'They're not things one can talk about, they're too trivial.'

'Trivial! One might suppose that your tongue had been given you simply to talk philosophy with your professor.'

He looked at her and smiled: 'I like her because she's got red hair and looks rather old.'

'You're a strange boy,' said Lola.

Boris blinked and assumed a pleading air. He didn't like people talking about himself: it was always so complicated, and he became bewildered. Lola looked as if she was angry, but it was simply because she loved him passionately and tormented herself about him. There were moments when she was more than she could bear, she would lose her temper for no reason, and glare at Boris, not knowing how to take him, and her hands began to quiver. All this used to surprise Boris, but he was quite accustomed to it by this time. Lola laid her hand on Boris's head: 'I wonder what's inside it,' she said. 'I feel quite frightened sometimes.'

'You needn't: all quite harmless, I assure you,' said Boris, laughing.

'Yes, those thoughts of yours are just so many ways of getting away from me.' And she ruffled her hair.

'Don't,' said Boris. 'Please don't uncover my forehead.'

He took her hand, stroked it for a minute or two, and laid it back on the table.

'You are there, and quite affectionate,' said Lola. 'I begin to think you're really fond of me, and then — suddenly — no one's there at all, and I wonder where you've gone.'

'I'm here.'

Lola eyed him narrowly. Her pallid face was marred by the sort of dewy, sentimental expression she assumed when singing *Les Écorchés*. She thrust out her lips, those large drooping lips that he had at first loved so much. Since he had felt them on his mouth, they gave him the sense of a clammy, feverish nakedness set in the centre of a plaster mask. At present he preferred Lola's skin, so white that it did not look real.

'You — you aren't fed up with me?'

'I'm never fed up.'

Lola sighed, and Boris thought with satisfaction: 'It's fantastic how old she looks, she doesn't tell her age, but she must be well over forty.' He preferred that people who liked him should look old, he found it reassuring. Added to which it gave them a sort of awesomely fragile air, not apparent at the

first encounter, because they all had leathery skins. He felt an impulse to kiss Lola's puzzled face, but he said to himself that her day was done, that she had thrown away her life, and was now alone, even more so perhaps since she had fallen in love with him. 'I can't do anything for her,' he thought with resignation. And he found her, in that thought, irresistibly attractive.

'I'm ashamed,' said Lola.

Her voice was heavy and sombre, like a red velvet curtain.

'Why?'

'Because you're such a kid.'

'I like to hear you say the word — kid,' said he. 'It suits your voice. You say it twice in the *Écorchés* song, and I'd go and hear you just for that. Were there a lot of people tonight?'

'A mouldy crowd. I don't know where they came from — they just sat and chattered. And they hadn't got any use for me at all. Sarrunyan had to ask them to keep quiet: it got on my nerves, I felt I was getting in wrong. They cheered when I came in, though.'

'They'd always do that'

'Well, I'm fed up,' said Lola. 'I loathe singing for ticks of that kind. They were the sort who came there because they've got to return a family invitation. I wish you could see them come in together, all over smiles. They bow, and they hold the good lady's chair while she sits down. So really you're interrupting them, and they just glare at you when you come in. Boris —' said Lola abruptly: 'I sing for my living.'

'That's so.'

'If I'd thought I should finish like that, I would never have started.'

'Well, but however you look at it, when you sang at music halls, you earned your living by singing.'

'That wasn't the same.'

After a short silence, Lola added hurriedly: 'By the way, this evening I talked to the new little chap who sings next after me. He's a very decent fellow, but he's no more Russian than I am.'

'She thinks she's annoying me,' thought Boris. And he resolved to tell her once and for all that she never could annoy him. Not today — but later on.

'Perhaps he has learnt Russian.'

'But you ought to be able to tell me if he has a good accent.'

'My parents left Russia in '17 when I was three months old.'

'It's funny that you shouldn't know Russian,' observed Lola with a pensive air.

'She's fantastic,' thought Boris. 'She's ashamed of being in love with me because she's older than I am. It seems perfectly natural to me — after all one party must be older than the other.' Above all, it was more moral: Boris wouldn't have known how to treat a girl of his own age. If both parties are young, they don't know how to behave, they get across each other, and the whole thing feels like a doll's dinner-party. With older people, it's quite different. They're reliable, they show you what to do, and there's solidity in their affection. When Boris was with Lola, he had the approval of his conscience, he felt himself justified. Of course he preferred Mathieu's company because Mathieu wasn't a girl: a man was more intriguing all the time. Besides Mathieu taught him all sorts of dodges. But Boris often found himself wondering whether Mathieu had any real regard for him. Mathieu was casual and brusque, and of course it was right that people of their sort shouldn't be sentimental when they were together, but there were all sorts of ways in which a fellow could show he liked someone, and Boris felt that Mathieu might well have shown his affection by a word or a gesture now and again. With Ivich, Mathieu was quite different. Boris suddenly recalled Mathieu's face one day when he was helping Ivich put on her overcoat; and he felt an unpleasant shrinking at the heart. Mathieu's smile: of those sardonic lips that Boris loved so much, that strange, appealing, and affectionate smile. But Boris's head soon filled with smoke, and he thought of nothing at all.

‘He’s off again,’ said Lola.

She eyed him anxiously. ‘What were you thinking about?’

‘I was thinking of Delarue,’ said Boris regretfully.

Lola smiled sadly.

‘Couldn’t you think of me too sometimes?’

‘I don’t need to think of you, since you are there.’

‘Why are you always thinking of Delarue? Do you wish you were with him?’

‘I’m quite glad to be here.’

‘Do you mean that you’re glad to be here, or glad to be with me?’

‘It’s the same thing.’

‘It’s the same thing for you. Not for me. When I’m with you, I don’t care where I am. Besides. I’m never glad to be with you.’

‘Aren’t you?’ asked Boris with some surprise.

‘No, not glad. Don’t pretend to be stupid, you know just what I mean: I’ve seen you with Delarue, you’re all of a twitter when he’s there.’

‘That’s quite different’

Lola set her lovely, ravaged face quite close to his: there was an imploring expression in her eyes.

‘Look at me, you little stiff, and tell me why you like him so much.’

‘I don’t know. I don’t like him as much as all that. He’s a good chap. Lola, I hate talking to you about him, because you told me you couldn’t stand him.’

Lola smiled with a rather embarrassed air.

‘Now you’re twisting. Bless the little creature, I didn’t tell you I couldn’t stand him. It was simply that I couldn’t understand what you found in him. I wish you would explain. I want to understand.’

And Boris thought: ‘It isn’t true — she’d start yawning before I’d said three words.’

‘I find him sympathetic,’ said he sedately.

‘That’s what you always say. It isn’t precisely the word that I should choose. Tell me he is intelligent, well-read, and I’ll agree: but not sympathetic. Look here, I’ll tell you what I think of him: sympathetic is a word I should use about somebody like Maurice, a straight sort of fellow — but Mathieu makes everyone uncomfortable because he isn’t fish nor flesh, you don’t know how to talk to him. Look at his hands, for instance.’

‘What’s the matter with his hands? I like them.’

‘They’re workmen’s hands. They’re always quivering a little, as though he’d just finished some heavy job of work.’

‘Well, why not?’

‘Yes, but the point is he’s not a workman. When I see his great paw gripping a glass of whisky, he looks like a man who means to enjoy life, and I don’t think the worse of him for that: but take care not to watch him drinking, with that odd mouth of his — why, it’s a parson’s mouth. I can’t explain it, but I get the feeling he’s austere, and then if you look at his eyes, you can see he knows too much, he’s the sort of fellow who can’t enjoy anything in a simple way, neither eating, nor drinking, nor sleeping with women: he has to think about everything, it’s like that voice of his, the cutting voice of a gentleman who is never wrong — I know it goes with the job of having to explain things to small boys. I had a teacher who talked like him, but I’m not at school any more, and I find it tiresome: I can’t understand a man being completely one thing or the other, a genial brute, or the intellectual type, a schoolmaster or a parson, but not both at the same time. I don’t know if there are women who like that sort of thing — I suppose there are, but I tell you frankly, I couldn’t bear a fellow like that to touch me, I shouldn’t like to feel those ruffianly hands on me while he soused me with his icy look.’

Lola paused to get her breath. ‘She *has* got a down on him,’ thought Boris. But he remained

unruffled. The people who liked him were not obliged to like each other, and Boris thought it quite natural that each of them should try to get across the others.

‘I understand you quite well,’ said Lola with a conciliatory air: ‘You don’t see him with the same eyes as mine, because he has been your master and you’re prejudiced: I can see that from all sorts of little tricks: for instance, you’re always so critical of the way people dress, you never think them smart enough, whereas he is always got up like a scarecrow, he wears ties that my hotel waiter wouldn’t look at — but you don’t mind.’

But Boris was not to be roused: ‘It doesn’t matter,’ he explained, ‘if a man is badly dressed when he doesn’t bother about his clothes at all. What is rotten is to try to make a splash, and not pull it off.’

‘Well, you don’t do that, my little tyke.’

‘I know what suits me,’ said Boris modestly. He reflected that he was wearing a blue-ribbed sweater, and was glad: it was a handsome sweater. Lola had taken his hand and was tossing it up and down between her own. Boris watched his hand rise and fall, and he thought: ‘It doesn’t belong to me, it’s a sort of pancake.’ It had in fact grown numb: this amused him, and he twitched a finger to bring it back to life. The finger touched the palm of Lola’s hand, and Lola flung him a grateful look. ‘That’s what makes me nervous,’ thought Boris irritably. He told himself that he would certainly have found it easier to show affection if Lola hadn’t fallen so often into these appealing, melting moods. He didn’t in the least mind letting his hands be played with in public by an ageing woman. He had long thought that this was rather in his line: even when he was alone, in the metro, people looked at him rather quizzically, and the little shop girls on their way home laughed in his face.

‘You still haven’t told me why you think him such a fine fellow.’

She was like that, she could never stop once she had begun. Boris was sure that she was hurting her own feelings, but she enjoyed that. He looked at her: the air around her was blue, and her face was whitish blue. But the eyes were feverish and hard. ‘Why? — tell me.’

‘Because he is a fine fellow,’ groaned Boris. ‘Oh, dear, how you do pester me. He doesn’t care about anything.’

‘Well, does that make a fine fellow? You don’t care about anything, do you?’

‘No.’

‘But you do care a little about me, don’t you?’

‘Yes, I care about you.’

Lola looked unhappy, and Boris turned his head away. Anyhow, he didn’t much like looking at Lola when she put on that expression. She was upset: he thought it silly of her, but he couldn’t do anything about it. He did everything expected of him. He was faithful to Lola, he telephoned to her often, he went to call for her three times a week when she came out of the Sumatra, and on those evenings he slept in her flat. For the rest, it was a question of character, probably. A question of age, too — older people grow embittered, and behave as though their lives were at stake. Once, when Boris was a little boy, he had dropped his spoon: on being told to pick it up, he had refused, and flown into a passion. Then his father had said, in an unforgettably majestic tone: ‘Very well, then, I will pick it up.’ Boris had seen a tall body stiffly bending down, and a bald cranium, he heard sundry creaking sounds — the whole thing was an intolerable sacrilege, and he burst out sobbing. Since then Boris had regarded grown-ups as bulky and impotent divinities. If they bent down, they looked as though they were going to break: if they slipped and fell, the effect they produced in the onlooker was a desire to laugh and a sense of awe-stricken abhorrence. And if the tears came into their eyes, as into Lola’s at that moment, one was simply at a loss. Grown-up people’s tears were a mystical catastrophe, the sort of tears God sheds over the wickedness of mankind. From another point of view, of course, he respected Lola for being so passionate. Mathieu had explained to him that a human being ought to have passions, and Descartes had said so too.

‘Delarue has his passions,’ he said, pursuing his reflections aloud: ‘but that doesn’t prevent his caring for nothing. He is free.’

‘By that token I’m free too. I care for nothing but you.’

Boris did not answer.

‘Aren’t I free?’ asked Lola.

‘That’s not the same thing.’

Too difficult to explain. Lola was a victim, she had no luck, and she appealed too much to the emotions. Which was not in her favour. Besides, she took heroin. That wasn’t a bad thing, in one sense: indeed it was quite a good thing, in principle: Boris had talked to Ivich about it, and they had both agreed that it was a good thing. But there were ways of doing it: if one took it to destroy oneself either in despair or by way of emphasizing one’s freedom, that was entirely commendable. But Lola took it with greedy abandonment, it was her form of relaxation. It didn’t even intoxicate her.

‘You make me laugh,’ said Lola in a dry voice. ‘It’s a habit of yours to put Delarue above everybody else, as a matter of principle. Because you know, between ourselves, which is the freer, he or I: he has a home of his own, a fixed salary, and a definite pension: he lives like a petty official. And then, into the bargain, there’s that affair of his you told me about, that female who never goes out — what more does he want? No one could be freer than that. As for me, I’ve just a few old frocks, I’m alone, I live in an hotel, and I don’t even know whether I shall have a job for the summer.’

‘That’s different,’ repeated Boris.

He was annoyed. Lola didn’t bother about freedom. She was getting excited about it that evening because she wanted to defeat Mathieu on his own ground.

‘I could skin you, you little beast, when you’re like that. What’s different, eh?’

‘Well, you’re free without wanting to be,’ he explained, ‘it just happens so, that’s all. But Mathieu’s freedom is based on reason.’

‘I still don’t understand,’ said Lola, shaking her head.

‘Well, he doesn’t care a curse about his apartment: he lives there just as he would live anywhere else, and I’ve got the feeling that he doesn’t care much about his girl. He stays with her because he must sleep with someone. His freedom isn’t visible, it’s inside him.’

Lola had an absent air, he felt he must hurt her a bit just to jostle her around, and he went on: ‘Look here, you’re too fond of me: he would never let himself get caught like that’

‘Oho!’ cried Lola indignantly. ‘I’m too fond of you, am I? — you little toad. And don’t you think he’s a bit too fond of your sister, eh? You’d only got to watch him the other night at the Sumatra.’

‘Of Ivich? You make me sick.’

Lola flung him a sneering grin, and the smoke suddenly went to Boris’s head. A moment passed and then the band happened to launch into the *St James’s Infirmary*, and Boris wanted to dance.

‘Shall we dance this?’

They danced. Lola had closed her eyes, and he could hear her quick breathing. The little pansy had got up and went across to ask the dancer from the Java for a dance. Boris reflected that he would soon see him from near-by and was pleased. Lola was heavy in his arms: she danced well, and she smelled nice, but she was too heavy. Boris thought that he would sooner dance with Ivich. Ivich danced magnificently: and he told himself that Ivich ought to learn the castanets. After which, Lola’s scent and smell banished all further thought. He pressed her to him, and breathed hard. She opened her eyes and looked at him intently.

‘Do you love me?’

‘Yes,’ said Boris, making a face.

‘Why do you make a face like that?’

‘Because — Oh, you annoy me.’

‘Why? It isn’t true that you love me?’

‘Yes it is.’

‘Why don’t you ever tell me so yourself? I always have to ask you.’

‘Because I don’t feel like it. It’s all rot: it’s the sort of thing that people don’t say.’

‘Does it annoy you when I say I love you?’

‘No, you can say it if you like. But you oughtn’t to ask me if I love you.’

‘It’s very seldom I ask you anything, darling. It’s usually enough for me to look at you and feel I love you. But there are moments when I wish I could get at your own real feelings.’

‘I understand,’ said Boris seriously, ‘but you ought to wait till I feel like it. If it doesn’t come naturally, there’s no sense in it.’

‘But, you little fool, you yourself say you never do feel that way unless somebody asks you.’

Boris began to laugh.

‘It’s true,’ he said, ‘you put me off. But one can feel affection for somebody, and not want to say so.’

Lola did not answer. They stopped, applauded, and the band began again. Boris was glad to observe that the pansy-lad was dancing towards them: but when he eyed him from near-by, he got a nasty shock: the creature was quite forty years old. His face retained the sheen of youth, but underneath it looked aged. He had large doll-like blue eyes, and a boyish mouth, but there were pouches under his porcelain eyes, and wrinkles round his mouth, his nostrils were pinched like those of a dying man, and his hair, which looked from a distance like a golden haze, scarcely covered his cranium. Boris looked with horror at this elderly, shaven child. ‘He was once young,’ thought he. There were fellows who seemed created to be thirty-five — Mathieu, for instance — because they had never known youth. But when a chap had really been young, he bore the marks of it for the rest of his life. It might last till twenty-five. After that — it was horrible. He set himself to look at Lola and said abruptly: ‘Lola, look at me, I love you.’

Lola’s eyes grew pink, and she stepped on Boris’s foot. She merely said: ‘Darling!’

He felt like exclaiming — Clasp me tighter, make me feel I love you. But Lola said nothing, she was on her turn was alone, the moment had indeed come. There was a vague smile on her face, her eyelids were drooping, her face had again shut down upon her happiness. It was a calm, forlorn face. Boris felt desolate, and the thought — the grinding thought, suddenly came upon him: I won’t, I won’t grow old. Last year he had been quite unperturbed, he had never thought about that sort of thing: and now — it was rather ominous that he should so constantly feel that his youth was slipping between his fingers. Until twenty-five. ‘I’ve got five years yet,’ thought Boris; ‘and after that I’ll blow my brains out.’ He could no longer endure the noise of the band, and the sense of all these people around him.

‘Shall we go?’ said he.

‘At once, my lovely!’

They returned to their table. Lola called the waiter, paid the bill, and flung her velvet cloak over her shoulders.

‘Come along,’ she said.

They went out. Boris was no longer thinking of anything very definite, but there was a sense of something fateful in his mind. The Rue Blanche was crowded with random people, all looking hard and old. They met the Maestro Piranese from the Puss in Boots, and greeted him: his little legs pattered along beneath his enormous belly. ‘Perhaps,’ thought Boris, ‘I too shall grow a paunch.’ What would it be like never to be able to look at oneself in a glass, nor to feel the crisp, wooden snap of one’s joints...And every instant that passed, every instant, consumed a little more of his youth. ‘If only I could save myself up, live very quietly, at a slower pace, I should perhaps gain a few years. But to do that, I oughtn’t to make a habit of going to bed at 2.0 a.m.’ He eyed Lola with detestation. ‘She

killing me.'

'What's the matter?' asked Lola.

'Nothing.'

Lola lived in a hotel in the Rue Navarin. She took her key off the board, and they walked silent upstairs. The room was bare, there was a trunk covered with labels in one corner, and on the farth wall a photograph of Boris stuck on it with drawing-pins. It was an identity-photograph which Lo had had enlarged. 'Ah,' thought Boris, 'that will remain when I'm a wreck; in that I shall always loo young.' He felt an impulse to tear it up.

'There's something odd about you,' said Lola: 'what's the matter?'

'I'm all in,' said Boris. 'I've got a pain in the top of my head.'

Lola looked anxious. 'You aren't ill, dear? Would like a cachet?'

'No, it's nothing, I shall soon feel better.'

Lola took his chin and raised his head.

'You look as if you were angry with me. You aren't, are you? Yes, you are. What have I done?'

She looked distraught.

'I'm not angry with you — don't be silly,' protested Boris feebly.

'You are, but what have I done to you? You'd much better tell me, because then I shall be able to explain. It's sure to be some misunderstanding. It can't be anything serious. Boris, I do implore you tell me what's the matter.'

'But there's nothing.'

He put his arms round Lola's neck and kissed her on the lips. Lola quivered. Boris inhaled perfumed breath, and felt against his mouth the moist nakedness of her lips. His senses thrilled. Lo covered his face with kisses: she began to pant a little.

Boris realized that he desired Lola, and was glad: desire absorbed his black ideas, as it did ideas of any other kind. His head began to whirl, its contents sped upwards and were scattered. He had laid his hand on Lola's hip, he touched her flesh through the silken dress: he was, indeed, no more than a hand outstretched upon that silken flesh. He curved his hand slightly, and the stuff slipped between his fingers, like an exquisite skin, delicate and dead: below lay the real skin, resistant, elastic, and glossy as a kid glove. Lola tipped her cloak on to the bed, flung out two bare arms and clasped them round Boris's neck; she smelt delicious. Boris could see her shaven arm-pits, powdered with bluish black dots, minute but clearly visible, like the heads of splinters thrust deep into the skin. Boris and Lola remained standing, on the very spot where desire had come upon them, because they had no longer strength to move. Lola's legs began to tremble, and Boris wondered whether they would not both just sink down on to the carpet. He pressed Lola to him, and felt the rich softness of her breasts.

'Ah,' murmured Lola.

She was leaning backwards, and he was fascinated by that pale head and swollen lips, a veritable Medusa's head. And he thought to himself: 'These are her last good days.' And he held her yet more tightly. 'One of these mornings she will suddenly collapse.' He detested her: he felt his body again hers, hard and gaunt and muscular, he clasped her in his arms and defended her against the years. Then there came upon him a moment of bewilderment and drowsiness: he looked at Lola's arms, white as an old woman's hair, it seemed to him that he held old age between his hands, and that he must clasp it close and strangle it.

'Don't hold me so tight,' murmured Lola happily. 'You're hurting me. I want you.'

Boris released her; he was a little shocked.

'Give me my pyjamas: I'll go and undress in the bathroom.'

He went into the bathroom, and locked the door: he hated Lola to come in while he was undressing. He washed his face and his feet, and amused himself by dusting talcum powder on his legs. He ha

quite recovered his composure, and he thought to himself: 'It's fantastic.' His head was vague and heavy, and he hardly knew what he was thinking about. 'I must talk to Delarue about it,' he decided. Beyond the door she awaited him, she was certain to be undressed by now. But he did not feel inclined to hurry. A naked body, full of naked odours, was something rather overwhelming, which was what Lola would not understand. He was now about to be engulfed into an enveloping and strong-savouring sensuality. Once in it, all would be well, but *before* — well, a fellow couldn't help feeling a bit nervous. 'In any case,' he reflected with annoyance, 'I don't intend to get involved like I did the other time.' He combed his hair carefully over the basin, to see whether it was falling out. But not one hair dropped on to the white porcelain. When he had put on his pyjamas, he opened the door and went back into the bedroom.

Lola was outstretched on the bed, completely naked. It was another Lola, sluggish and menacing, watching him from beneath her eyelids. Her body, on the blue counterpane, was silvery-white, like the belly of a fish, and on it a triangular tuft of reddish hair. She was beautiful. Boris approached the bed and eyed her with an eagerness not unmingled with disgust. She stretched out her arms.

'Wait,' said Boris.

He switched off the light and the room was promptly filled with a red glow: at the third storey of the building opposite, an illuminated sign had been recently installed. Boris lay down beside Lola, and began to stroke her shoulders and her breasts. Her skin was so soft that it felt exactly as though she had kept her silk wrap on. Her breasts were slackening, but Boris liked that; they were the breasts of a woman who has lived. It was in vain that he had turned out the light, he could still see, in the glare from the electric wall sign, Lola's face, pale in the red glow, and black-lipped: she looked as though she was in pain, and her eyes were hard. Boris felt oppressed with the sense of tragedy to come, just as he had done at Nîmes, when the first bull bounded into the arena: something was going to happen, something inevitable, awesome, and yet rather tedious, like the bull's ensanguined death.

'Take off your pyjamas,' pleaded Lola.

'No,' said Boris.

This was a ritual. Every time Lola asked him to take off his pyjamas, and Boris was obliged to refuse, Lola's hands slipped under his jacket, and caressed him gently. Boris began to laugh.

'You're tickling me.'

They kissed. A moment passed, Lola took Boris's hand and laid it on her body, against the tuft of reddish hair: she always had odd caprices, and Boris had to protect himself sometimes. For an instant or two he let his hand hang inert against Lola's thighs, and then slid it gently upwards to her shoulders.

'Come,' said Lola, pulling him on to her, 'come, I adore you — come, come!'

She was beginning to moan, and Boris thought, 'Now I'm for it.' A clammy thrill ran up his body from waist to neck. 'I won't,' said Boris, and he clenched his teeth. But then he had a sudden sense of being picked up by the neck, like a rabbit, and he sunk upon Lola's body, lost in a red, voluptuous dazzlement of passion.

'Darling.'

She let him gently slip aside, and got out of bed. Boris remained prostrate, his head on the pillow. He heard Lola open the bathroom door, and he thought: 'When this is over, I don't want any more affairs. I loathe making love. No — to be honest, that isn't what I loathe most, it's the entanglement of it all, the sense of domination; and besides, what's the point of choosing a girl friend, it would be just the same with anyone, it's physiological.' And he repeated with disgust 'physiological'. Lola was getting ready for the night. The water ran into the basin with a pleasant, limpid gurgle which Boris rather enjoyed. Men suffering from the hallucinations of thirst, in the desert, heard just such sounds: the sound of running water. Boris tried to imagine that he was under a hallucination. The room, the re-

light, the splashes, these were hallucinations, he would soon find himself in the middle of the desert lying on the sand with a cork helmet over his eyes. Mathieu's face suddenly appeared to him: 'It's fantastic,' he thought: 'I like men better than girls. When I'm with a girl I'm not half as happy as with a man. And yet I wouldn't dream of going to bed with a man.' He cheered himself with the thought: 'A monk, that's what I'll be when I've left Lola.' He felt arid and austere. Lola jumped into the bed and took him in her arms.

'My dear,' she said. 'My dear.'

She stroked his hair, and there was a long moment of silence. Boris could already see stars circling when Lola began to speak. Her voice sounded unfamiliar in that crimson night.

'Boris, I've got no one but you, I'm alone in the world, you must love me, I can't think of anyone but you. If I think of my life, I want to throw myself into the river, I have to think of you all day long. Don't be a beast, darling, you must never hurt me, you're all I have left I'm in your hands, darling, don't hurt me: don't ever hurt me — I'm all alone.'

Boris awoke with a start, and surveyed the situation with precision.

'If you are alone, it's because you like to be so,' he said, speaking in a clear voice, 'it's because you're proud. Otherwise you would love an older man than me. I'm too young, I can't prevent you from being alone. I believe you chose me for that reason.'

'I don't know,' said Lola. 'I love you to distraction — that's all I know.'

She flung her arms wildly round him. Boris heard her once more saying, 'I adore you,' and then he fell fast asleep.

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